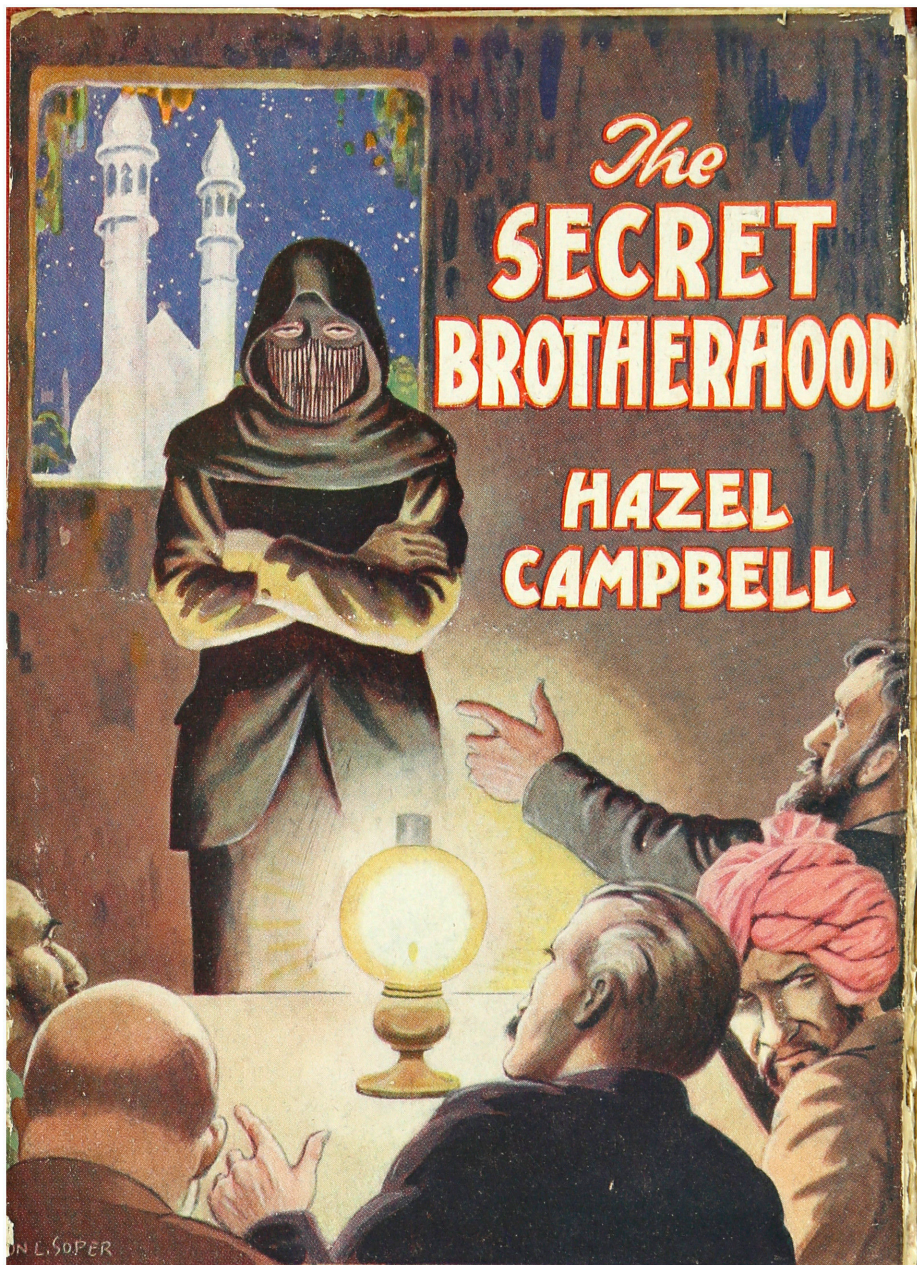


The
**SECRET
BROTHERHOOD**

**HAZEL
CAMPBELL**



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By
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INDIA, THE SUN-GOD'S BRIDE

A tired, veiled woman with her arms thrown wide
And head pearl-crowned by Himalaya's height
She lies asleep ; her soul is drugged with light
And ease ; round her crossed feet there rolls the tide
Of tropic seas where trading vessels ride.
She heeds them little, wrapped in slumbrous night
Of dreams, while through the ages races fight
To own the body of the Sun-God's bride.

Her limbs are bound by bands of caste and creed,
Yet through her lips, when drowsily they part—
Lips that are stained by cruelty and greed—
There speaks at times a strangely child-like heart.

A child's heart ? Nay, it needeth more than this
To heal a soul drugged by the Sun-God's kiss !

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

"KIM watched the stars as they rose," read Father Xavier in a gentle, rapid monotone, unconsciously imparting to the text a few variations which had escaped even Mr. Kipling's mastery of our 'whole' language.

The young missionary was alone in his sedate peregrination of the dusty college compound, but he read aloud because he believed that by so doing he would improve his English. He read "Kim" in preference to a more devotional work, not only for the same reason, but because it was, as yet, little more than six months since he had sailed from Belgium to begin his work among the heathen, and he strove to assimilate the atmosphere of the land he had chosen for his labours.

His eyes wandered presently from the printed to the living pages about him. The suffocating heat of an October evening in the Punjab lay on the land. Not a leaf stirred of the dusty grey trees, and beneath his feet the withered grass crisped as he walked. A sultry, sulphurous sunset had turned the west into a sea of molten gold, and in the east a huge moon was rising in ghostly pallor above the bulbous dome of a mosque. To his right, parallel with the compound wall, ran

the Mall—a trim, select thoroughfare, so characteristic of its kind that, could it by some stupendous miracle have been transported to any other of the cantonments which dot the Punjab like the knots in a vast network, the miracle would have remained unrecorded, because unperceived. The evening clubward migration had begun. A procession of riders and dog-carts, of motor-cycles, ‘push’-bikes, and rattle-trap cars swept past, all bound in the same direction, and the staccato hoot of horns, the sound of laughing greetings, floated to him above the droning of a water-wheel near by.

Ahead, cutting at right-angles across the trim aristocracy of the Mall, ran a thoroughfare of a different order—one in which the heart of Kim would have delighted—a dusty, disreputable highway, which lapsed unashamedly into the unmetalled softness of the virgin plain and wandered at its will, its course demarcated solely by the huddle of houses in the native quarter to which it led. Father Xavier paused to survey it, for it might well have been the living presentment of the pages in his hand. There, surely, for all the world to see, rode Mahbub Ali, and yonder beneath the pink oleander bush stood the Sikh farmer, his child in his arms, talking to the old ressalder. There was no red-turbaned lama, but instead, beneath the college wall, an old native beggar-woman, veiled in the shroud-like garment of feminine Mahommedanism. The grey-white of the smothering, shapeless folds, the sightless darkness of the embroidered eye-holes seemed wraith-like in the eerie twilight, and the high-piping treble of her begging cry almost the wailing of a tormented banshee.

The young missionary shivered involuntarily, despite the heat, and there rushed over him, unheralded, a sudden fever of home-sickness, almost physical in its intensity. A vision of his tiny Flemish home-town swam before his eyes so vividly that he seemed to see the bright lights from the shop-windows gleaming through the long twilight, and the softer amber glow from homesteads ; to feel the nip of the October air as the wind blew keenly round unexpected corners ; to hear the crisp clatter of clogs on cobbles in the poorer quarter, the blithe patter of heels on pavements in the more modern streets ; to see again the comfortable figures, complacent smiles and sedate comportment of the bourgeoisie, and, over all, the rain-washed sky of autumn blue, with cumulus clouds blooming in each narrow street-end like pink tulips in a purple vase.

The priest drew in his breath sharply, and his brow grew moist as he stood lost to all sense of his surroundings. The intensity of that agony of home-sickness must be experienced to be realised.

It was the sight of a familiar figure which brought him presently out of his reverie. A stout, bearded priest, in flowing brown cotton habit and damaged solar topi, was perspiringly propelling a bicycle through the soft dust of the bazaar road. This was the Guardian of the college, Father Theodor Hellenhinde, whose second name may be said to have fulfilled the promise of his first, for to hot and homesick Tommies it came as a veritable gift from heaven. " Oh, 'ell in India, ain't it just ? " was a catchword with which every barrack-room in the Punjab was familiar. At the moment Father Theodor seemed to be living up to his

reputation, for, as the younger priest idly watched him, he stopped opposite the wraith-like beggar-woman, hesitated for a moment, then with a sudden dive forward took a firm grasp of her eerie draperies. There was a scuffle, a chorus of shrieks, half excited, half expostulatory, from interested onlookers, and Father Xavier, startled out of his home-sick day-dream, gasped, as from beneath the grey-white folds protruded a pair of stout boots and thin legs encased in khaki puttees. With a dexterous movement Father Theodor stripped off the smothering garment and revealed to the astonished world a hot and discomfited college pupil, from whose lips poured a string of vernacular invective of which even Kim in his more expansive moments might have been justly proud. The noise of the scuffle had brought two masters out of the college building, and delivering the delinquent into their hands with a few curt words of command, the Guardian, breathing rather heavily, retrieved his fallen cycle from the dust and made his way into the compound.

"Ach, it is varm," he exclaimed, pausing by Father Xavier and wiping the back of his neck with a voluminous handkerchief. "Yet one bers-bires not in this so unsalubrious dryness."

The younger man's answer was indeterminate—perhaps he was too polite to contradict his superior. The German leant his cycle against the wall.

"There is one," he said, indicating by an expressive gesture the vanished 'Kim,' "who assuredly for ever will damned be."

He made the remark dispassionately, as one who states a regrettable but incontrovertible fact. The Belgian smiled faintly.

"What is his name?" he asked. He had as yet not worked among the boys, and his acquaintance with them was slight. The guardian explained.

"Ivan—as one would say John, but of that name are there many. His mother we have been told a Russian was, a maid maybe at the Embassy. Of his father . . ." The gesture with which Father Theodor finished his sentence was expressive. "Of no badness is he incapable, but especially a hundred faces will he wear. For him all afternoon the bazaar I search, and by one boot protruding only I find him. At other times"—he flicked his fingers—"by one so small mark alone is he known."

He mopped his brow and neck again, as though even the memory of his search engendered heat.

"Doubtless," remarked the Belgian interestedly, "he will one day be a policeman, or maybe like Keem——" He did not finish his sentence, for he had not as yet quite fathomed Kim's vocation. Father Theodor gestured negatively.

"Boliceman? Nein!" he exclaimed, his accent more guttural with the strength of his dissent. "For him one day boliceman look, but to find him, ach, that a different story is."

He took his bicycle from its place against the wall, and removing his topi to serve as a fan, made his way up towards the college, while Father Xavier returned to his study of Mr. Kipling. The dusk had deepened now, and a faintly cool breeze stirred with a sudden shivering sound through the dusty trees.

"'A Cause,'" he read, the print close to his eyes in the failing light, "'was put out into the

world'—but it is troublesome, this English. Should one then say 'kose' or 'kowse'? The latter is convenient. 'A Kowse was poot out'——"

A voice hailed him suddenly through the dusk, and turning he saw Ivan's head silhouetted against a lamplit upper window.

"Ho, Padre-ji," the hail came again in the vernacular.

Father Xavier continued his reading without appearing to hear. Then suddenly Ivan began to sing. It was the strangest song the young priest had ever heard and, as he listened, he paused involuntarily in his patient pacing. Wild, wailful, alluring, indefinably evil, the eerie chant rose and fell, with a haunting rhythm that broke sometimes meaninglessly, wavered, fell, then soared again as though in mocking triumph, and while he sang, Ivan's hands beat a tattoo on the wooden window-sill in perfect imitation of a tom-tom accompaniment. The priest listened, spellbound, against his will. For the moment the prosaic details of the dusty compound had vanished, and it seemed that the voice, the very soul of India sang through the lips of this lanky, half-grown lad.

The song ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and once again Ivan hailed him.

"Ho, Padre-ji, I tell thee my secret. Dost understand? But to-day have I learnt it; but to-day did the great vision come. One day I shall be king—king of all India. Oh, this terrible land, this beautiful land! One day it shall be mine. But thou dost not know—listen, I tell thee . . ."

Again the song rose, but this time with the addition of words that brought the blood flooding to Father Xavier's cheeks, for he knew more Urdu than English. Still he stood as though riveted to the spot, and as the weird chant soared and fell, he too seemed to see a vision—but a vision so evil that his soul reeled before it.

"Art thou a devil, then?" he exclaimed as the song ceased; and his voice was hoarse.

The answer came, pat and pert, in English:

"Oah, noh! I am boyscout!"

There was a squeal of delighted laughter from the bazaar road, where a group of interested passers-by had gathered, listening to the song, and with a sudden abrupt gesture the priest turned and hurried into the college building.

He was trembling when he reached the tiny hot room beneath the roof that served as his cell. His head swam and his hands felt strangely dry and burning. Before his mind floated a picture—not the ghastly vision of painted paganism provoked by Ivan's song, but, once again, the trim and circumspect picture of his native town. For a few moments he stood, motionless, in the centre of the room. Then with sudden resolution, moving over to a small table, he picked up his pen and sat down to write. . . .

Night fell, the glamorous Indian night, trailing her mantle of coolness over the heat-weary plains. The strains of the club band had ceased; the last car had rattled its way homeward along the tidy Mall, and, beneath shrouding white mosquito-netting, the world of the West slept in a hundred moon-drenched compounds. On the roof of the college Father Xavier, tossing

restlessly in his first bout of malaria, dreamt intermittently of a purple "Kowse" in boots and a damaged topi, that mocked him with an evil song, while Ivan, lying wakeful and motionless through the long hot hours, stared with glittering eyes into the darkness.

Behind the college the bazaar lay wrapped in that impenetrable mystery that cloaks all Eastern towns at nightfall. Only faintly, through the stillness, a tom-tom throbbed like a weary heart. India slept through the silvered night as through a myriad others, dreaming her sun-drugged dreams, unwitting that that day a Cause had gone forth that should threaten her age-long slumber with the awakening of a blood-red dawn.

CHAPTER I

"HAVE you ever," enquired Captain Cameron as he dexterously piloted his partner across the crowded floor, "seen an Indianologist?"

The girl nodded without replying immediately. They were in the throes of a somewhat complicated manœuvre, and she waited until it was successfully completed.

"There was one on my bedpost in Bombay," she said, when at last they swung into a restful glide that made no demands on her concentration. "Bright green, with its front feet—or are they feelers?—held up in the air, praying."

She felt a slight quiver run through his shoulder, and looked up quickly to meet a pair of laughing grey eyes.

"Isn't that the right answer?" she demanded, while the smile spread to her own eyes. Despite his nationality, his sense of humour was no surprise to her, for she too came from north of the Tweed.

"Not quite," he replied, "though the description is graphic. I gather you refer to a praying mantis. The creature I mean is different. It's probably rather green, but I shouldn't think it prays."

Margaret Fraser did not answer, for the music had trailed to inaudibility, and the general exodus in search of cooler air had begun. She waited until they were comfortably ensconced in two basket chairs in the starlit compound before re-opening the subject.

"What insect did you mean?" she asked, with characteristic directness.

He smiled at her in contented appreciation. Almost every other girl of his acquaintance would have continued to banter, persisting in sounding the personal note, and it was just this quality of quick, impersonal interest in any and every subject that had first attracted him to Margaret Fraser. He found it, curiously, both restful and stimulating. There was a certain poise about the girl that went oddly with her brief nineteen years, and which had led some unkindly critics to remark that she took her position as Commissioner's daughter with unnecessary seriousness. But Donald Cameron had appraised her more truly, realising the lack of self-consciousness, the genuine humour and love of fun that lurked beneath her air of aloofness, and he had come to love the quaint dignity with which she played hostess in her father's house.

Margaret had landed in India just six months before, with her mother, Lady Fraser, and almost immediately on their arrival the latter had been recalled to England to the bedside of her own mother, who was seriously ill. The girl had remained on in her father's charge, taking her part in the social life of Sukurpur, and it was here that Donald had met her. The friendship had grown apace, though their actual meetings were inter-

mittent, for he himself belonged to the Survey of India, which meant that he spent three weeks out of each month in the wilds, only returning to his headquarters in Sukurpur for a brief ten days to wrestle with accounts and pay bills.

"You've heard of an Egyptologist, I expect?" he said, in answer to her question.

She nodded.

"People who dig up mummies, aren't they?" she answered a trifle vaguely.

"Occasionally—yes. Well, the—er—insect I mentioned is the Indian variety of the species."

"Oh!" The girl sat forward in her chair with a little gurgle of laughter. "I know what you mean now," she said. "You're talking of the discoveries in Sind."

"Exactly," he agreed, "I am talking of the discoveries in Sind. I don't think I heard any capital letter in your reference to them, which argues a regrettable degree of flippancy."

The girl laughed again, leaning further forward with her elbow on her knee, her chin in her hand.

"Tell me about them," she commanded; "everything. I'm always hearing people talk of them, and I don't understand."

He settled himself back in his chair, at an angle from which he could see her profile cut with cameo-like delicacy against the dark background of trees. Margaret had nothing of the showy prettiness of the modern girl, yet, in a crowd, she seemed to stand apart in somewhat the same way that a work of art will stand out amid gaudy imitations. There was about her a fineness and purity of line, a perfection of detail that told of breeding. At

the moment her rather pale, delicately modelled face, touched to a wistful spirituality by the kindly starlight, came near to genuine beauty.

"At school," began Donald, with an assumption of an avuncular manner, "I take it you learnt geography?"

She nodded gravely.

"I seem to remember learning that Sind is a desert region situated somewhere in the north-west of the Indian peninsula," she admitted demurely.

"Great Scott! The higher education for women must be making strides! Well, at the present time, Sind is not altogether a beauty spot. I once spent nearly six months surveying it, and you can take my word for it, its best friend couldn't call it spectacular. I don't know whether it's more like a hole in the ether, or an aberration in the mind, but it's something between the two—a kind of blank space without any stop-press. However, there's no accounting for tastes. A few thousand years or so ago, it seems, Sind was a hub of the universe. People spoke of it with bated breath. Learned men dreamed that they might see it and die—and they generally did. In fact, they all died some time or other. But to cut a long story short, Sind was the London, New York and Paris of those days rolled into one. That was all before what is generally called the 'dawn of history.' I suppose directly there was some sort of dawn people saw the kind of place it was and quit. Since then, though its glory has departed, it has played a not unimportant part in the history of India. I have myself written a summary of this during my work in the

desert. It is brief and easily memorised, running thus :

“ ‘ Men came on their camels to conquer Hind,
And died in the red-hot desert of Sind.’ ”

There you have a complete résumé of the whole of Indian history. I am thinking of publishing it.”

The girl gave another gurgle of laughter as he paused momentarily for breath.

“ You’re being perfectly ridiculous,” she exclaimed, “ and not very instructive, because I know all about Sind and the discoveries made there. What I really don’t understand is why people are talking of them as though they had been near here. We’re hundreds of miles from Sind.”

“ I’m coming to that,” he answered, as he took his cigarette case from his pocket, and rather absently held it out to her. “ It’s what is known as the ‘ confusion of proximity.’ A mere paltry hundred miles or so means nothing to the popular mind, and all I have been telling you applies equally to the whole of this part of the world. They’ve taken to using Sind as a kind of general name. As you may have perceived, we have quite a useful thing in deserts round us here. The only difference between us and Sind proper in that respect is that, while they specialise in sand, we have the monopoly of dust. Their landscape is a greyish-yellow, while ours is yellowish-grey. Also, we have three more bushes to the square mile; but that, I think, is the only difference. Well, an Indianologist, by name Oswald Madderson (they often have pretty names like that)

suddenly got the brain-wave of prospecting in the Sukurpur district. He sent a long screed to the Government about a buried temple or something, and asked permission to dig up Nana Sarai—a place not thirty miles from here. It was a hot day in June when the Government read the screed. The thermometer in Sukurpur stood at 120. Of course they nearly screamed themselves into a fit laughing, but as it seemed silly to tell him to go anywhere hotter, they gave permission. After all, the place is as safe as an asylum and a good deal cheaper. Well, then the old boy disappeared into the desert for several months. People forgot all about him until last January, when we heard that he had discovered his buried temple all right. The Press was rather politely bored. After all, it's no doubt interesting to know that the ancient civilisation of Sind extended as far as Sukurpur, but it didn't seem to make much difference to our daily lives. Then, just about a month ago, a rather curious fact got about."

Donald paused and flicked the ash from his cigarette absently. The banter had suddenly died out of his voice, and his keen, boyish face was alive with interest. Despite his sturdy common-sense he had all the mystic imagination of the Celt.

"This is where the exciting part begins," he went on as the girl did not speak. "It began to be suspected that the chiselled inscriptions on the stones were prophetic in character."

Margaret leant forward in quickened interest.

"Prophetic?" she exclaimed. "But how? What do you mean?"

He did not answer immediately, but seemed to be choosing his words. His rather flippant manner

had only been assumed to hide a typically British embarrassment in dealing with a serious subject, and now that he had dropped it he seemed at a loss.

“ You know, of course,” he said at last, “ that while we count our dates from the beginning of the Christian era, the Mahommedans count theirs from the time of Mahommed. That makes a difference of several hundred years, and the Hindus too have their own computation—a complicated affair which, I am afraid, I don’t know much about. Well—on one of those stones which were first dug up, someone discovered that a set of figures of some sort, which preceded what was undoubtedly a symbol denoting war, could be made to mean the number 1914. That was, of course, rather odd, but still it might very well have been a coincidence. People were interested but rather sceptical until a few weeks later someone else discovered that two other sets of figures near by, which up till then no one had bothered about, gave the corresponding year in the Mahomedan and the Hindu computations ! Then there really was a good deal of excitement, not only in our own but in the Vernacular Press. Experts got to work over the figures and, of course, there were divided opinions, but in the end it seemed to be pretty firmly established that the figures did correspond to those dates. Interest ran high for several months and people lived in momentary expectation of new discoveries. But nothing further that was decipherable came to light, and the thing had begun to die out rather, when one day, only a few weeks ago, another stone was dug up which had the same, or, rather, very

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similar sets of figures on it, and the experts got to work again."

Donald paused to throw away the stub of his cigarette. Margaret leant forward watching him as he took out his case and extracted another. She was conscious that her breath was coming fast, and it seemed to her that his fingers were not quite steady.

"Well? What date did they give?" she exclaimed at last, as he did not speak.

He lighted his cigarette before replying, and threw the burnt match into a bush.

"They gave the present year of grace," he said at last, quietly.

The girl sat back abruptly in her chair, and there came upon her that pringling of the skin, that genuine thrill which we sometimes seek to capture by the telling of eerie tales with lowered lights. The sense of uncanniness oppressed her and, despite the suffocating heat of the April evening, she felt suddenly cold. It was a relief when the band broke into a curdling whine of noise that preluded another dance. The blaring syncopation of the jazz melody which followed seemed to act as a sedative to her nerves, putting her into relation with the commonplace life of every day once more. But she was conscious that her voice was not quite natural when she spoke.

"And what symbol followed?" she asked, with an attempt at lightness. "What are we to expect—another world-war?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing so alarming," he said. "Only a world teacher."

"A . . ." Margaret frowned slightly, as she sat forward in her chair once more. "I don't understand," she exclaimed.

Donald did not answer immediately, and his eyes were fixed absently on the club verandah, beyond which the dancers still swayed energetically in the ballroom.

"Who's that man?" he asked irrelevantly, nodding to a figure which was only vaguely discernible in the gloom of the verandah.

The girl turned and peered through shadows.

"Latif Khan, I think," she said at last; "yes, it is. He's a Zemindar from near here, and he's come in to see daddy on business."

"A polo player, isn't he?"

Margaret nodded.

"I believe so," she said with a faint suggestion of impatience. "But I want to hear about the teacher, Don."

He turned and looked at her, and once more he seemed to be choosing his words with difficulty.

"It's a bit complicated, but I'll try and explain," he said. "The dates were followed by a whole heap of letters which were blurred and more or less undecipherable. What could be made out of them seemed to be titles or fragments of titles. The 'Coming One' and 'The Ancient and Young' were two of them, and then there followed, quite clear and distinct, the form of a flying horse, and it was this which caused the excitement in the Vernacular Press."

"But why?" exclaimed the girl, as he paused.

"I don't quite understand," he answered,

"don't know enough about these things, but for some reason it seems to be taken as the sign of a new Avatar, that is Incarnation, and also, oddly enough, there were already rumours going about which spoke of a mysterious horse."

"But . . ." the girl frowned perplexedly. She was conscious of a vague disappointment. The sense of uncanniness had gone, and the story seemed to have descended to the level of a fairy tale. "I don't understand," she said. "That part seems nonsense, and the rumours probably got about after the discoveries had been made. Don't you think so?"

He nodded slowly.

"Of course," he agreed, "it is the obvious solution, only . . ." He paused again, and seemed, for a moment, to be following out a private train of thought, then abruptly resumed his narrative. "Anyway, as I said, it raised a storm of excitement in the native Press, and then, close on the heels of that, came the last discovery of all: a large stone in an almost perfect state of repair, and with lettering which, when deciphered, seemed to be a prophecy that the stone in question should lie buried in the sand for ages, and when it was discovered the Teacher would be—would be at the door, so to speak."

"What?" Margaret peered up at him, startled out of the vague scepticism into which she had relapsed. Again he nodded.

"It's certainly queer," he said. "Someone translated the prophecy from the original Sanscrit. It reads rather like bad blank verse, but it is certainly queer."

"Can you remember it?"

He hesitated for a moment, held by a characteristic shyness, then taking courage from the darkness, he began to quote softly :

“ ‘ In the hour of thine unveiling
From the sands that engulf thee,
A myriad moons shall they engulf thee
To reveal thee in the daybreak.
When the stars are faint with expectation,
A white sword of fire from the darkness
He comes and his light is on the hill tops.
He has heeded the cry of the aged,
Of the young lovers in captivity ;
He is aflame for the weariness of the stars.
In the hour of thine unveiling
His feet have troubled the quiet waters,
His breath is upon the wilderness,
His hands are shaking the portals of the morning . . . ’ ”

Donald's voice rang clear and unselfconscious on the last word, and for a moment, as he ceased speaking, there was silence. Margaret lay back in her chair, and once more the sense of uncanniness rushed over her. She looked from the gay, unconscious dancers, whirling past the open doors of the ballroom, out to the desert which billowed beyond the compound wall, and it seemed to her as though a ghostly hand, dead three thousand years and more, had pointed invisible fingers through the ages. A wind stirred suddenly, blowing a few grains of sand into her face, and, despite the heat, she shivered. Donald's voice broke in on her reverie, strangely echoing her thoughts.

“ Queer to think of it—us all here, dancing—and that stone—thousands of years ago—— ”

With a sudden, abrupt gesture, the girl stood up.

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"Don't!" she exclaimed. "It's creepy, Don. It frightens me. I don't understand, and I don't think I want to. Anyway, that part about the horse was nonsense. Let's—let's go and do something energetic."

He had risen to his feet, and now he linked his arm in hers, turning towards the brightly-lighted ballroom.

"Do you think the floor looks nice, or would you like an ice?" he asked, chiming in instantly with her mood; indeed, he more than half shared it.

"A lemonade," she corrected, "but not just at once. Let's stand on the verandah and watch. It's too hot to dance."

They took up their position not far from the entrance porch, and idly watched the couples drift by. This was the last dance of the season, which was probably the reason that so much energy was displayed, in spite of the heat. Within a few weeks the feminine exodus to the hills would begin, and the little cantonment would be left desolate for five burning months among the dust of the desert.

"Is that Latif Khan talking to your revered parent?" asked Donald, indicating by a jerk of the head a group on the edge of the ballroom, where the Commissioner, a distinguished figure with his white hair and well-bred face, stood talking to an Indian.

The girl nodded.

"Yes," she said, "but I don't know who the other man is."

"That's John Bolney, our new policeman here. Haven't you met him? He's a marvel, born and

bred in the country, and knows it like the palm of his hand. Hallo! there's old Patent Medicine."

A somewhat opulent-looking couple had approached the Commissioner, apparently with the intention of taking their leave, and Margaret craned forward to watch them.

"Don't be irreverent," she admonished. "Remember, Sir Tisra Kruton is a millionaire."

"Well, it hasn't altered his name," Donald objected. "They don't seem to like our simple festivities, since they leave them so early."

A leviathan of a car had drawn up under the porch, and the two watched while the millionaire and his wife descended the steps with stately precision and became engulfed in its luxurious depths. Donald caught the gleam of a pale, Semitic silhouette as the monster purred past into the darkness.

"Gee!" he exclaimed flippantly, striking an attitude on the steps, "what a sight for a hungry Mahommedan on an April evening.

" 'Low lies within his Rolls saloon
The knighted Englishman;
His nose shows like the welcome moon
That closes Ramazan.'

If he takes the bazaar road you'll hear the tomtoms proclaiming the glad tidings."

Margaret gave a little gurgle of laughter. Her nerves had recovered.

"I think that's rather vulgar," she said. "Where did you read it?"

"Nowhere," he protested in tones of injury. "'A poor thing, but mine own.' I have a fatal gift for verse-making, didn't you know? But for that I might have been Laureate. Come—let's stroll down and have another look at the jolly old desert. It's cooler now."

They sauntered down the dusty drive, coming to rest eventually by the mud wall of the compound. Before them the starlit plain loomed grey and mysterious, clothed in a beauty that daylight would sadly dissipate. A white, level road wound like a ribbon into the distance, and along it a solitary figure was trudging.

"Beastly place," said Donald unromantically. "Looks all right in this light, but it's the limit in the daytime. Thank goodness I've only got another month there. That's more than enough even if I do meet the Indianologist."

"Are you likely to?"

"Yes, I'm working near Nana Sarai," he answered. "Hallo! there goes old Father Xavier."

"Who's he?" The girl turned in the direction he indicated without much interest.

"A Belgian padre," he explained. "Been out here umpteen years and scarcely ever goes home. He's got a parish about the size of a county and spends most of his time getting about it. No accounting for tastes!"

Margaret's eyes followed the solitary figure for a little while, then she looked once more at the desert, and suddenly, unaccountably, she shivered.

"It's no good, Don," she exclaimed, "I've

got the creeps to-night. Let's go back to the ball-room. Listen—that's a topping waltz they're playing ! ”

The seductive strains of a saxophone sobbed alluringly across the hot, still air, and with one accord, defying the heat, they turned and ran hand in hand up the dusty drive.

CHAPTER II

THE flickering flames of the oil lamps shed a yellow light on the mud-walled room. High up in one corner was a square opening, innocent of glass, through which the minaret of a mosque, silhouetted against a starlit sky, showed startlingly blue, like a scene on the stage. There was no other ventilation, and the hot, heavy atmosphere pressed suffocatingly upon the men assembled in the tiny room. There were twenty-six in all, seated on basket-work stools ranged round a bare wooden table. The lamplight was kind, yet not quite kind enough for the faces which it revealed. They were mostly fair of complexion—unexpectedly so in view of their environment. Here and there a Semitic, here and there a Mongolian cast of countenance was discernible, but for the rest Europe claimed them for her own. Beyond this there seemed little in common amongst them, unless it were a certain negative quality, a mental and spiritual lack-lustre. Cunning, greed, grossness, discontent, showed each in turn as the flickering flames lighted first one face, then another, but over all brooded the same dull, heavy inertia of the soul.

They sat strangely silent, seemingly charged

with expectancy, and so oppressive was the quiet that the ticking of a dozen watches seemed to beat across the stillness like a tumult of hammer-strokes. Of a sudden one man spoke.

"He comes not," he said.

The words were spoken in Russian. For perhaps a second no one answered; then it seemed as though a spell had been broken.

"Bah! He will come!" exclaimed another violently, pushing his chair back from the table as he spoke. "He will come with his laugh and his sneer and his air almighty. He will mock and he will gibe, question and command, and we—we shall answer and obey! Are we not his slaves? Bah!" The speaker stood up, kicking over his stool with a sweeping abruptness that seemed to characterise his movements. "Are we not his slaves?" he repeated, leaning forward with his hands on the table. "His Alphabet. The twenty-six letters of his adjectival English Alphabet! We have no names—but we have faces, and we must show them. We may not come disguised, for he must know us. But for his face—who sees it? Which of us can know *him*? The Big Brother, the Burra Bhai—who is *he*, I say?"

The speaker flung out his arms in a dramatic gesture on the last words, then with the same nervous abruptness picked up his stool and sat down once more, leaning his elbows on the table.

There was a moment's silence, each man looking fearfully at his neighbour; then another voice spoke half deprecatingly.

"Nay, gently, Brother H., gently. This much we know: he has been appointed our head. It

is he who has organised us. Moreover, he knows the country——”

“The country—bah, the country!” broke in Brother H. violently, and he added a picturesque epithet.

“Earth has a blister—we call it India,” said a third speaker, a Jew by the look of him. He giggled at his own wit, but the merriment did not spread. There was a strange, almost a sinister lack of humour in the assemblage.

“A blister?” Brother H. took up the word vigorously. “It is so, and for how long do we stay fomenting it? For how long now have we sweltered in this oven? And the result?”

There was a moment’s silence, then a gloomy voice spoke.

“There is no result—there will never be a result. The people here—they are not men, they are cattle!”

There was a chorus of assent, but Brother H. negatived the suggestion.

“Cattle? No, but devils!” he exclaimed in his forceful, dramatic style. “Listen!”

The tale which followed—one of a ryot who had double-crossed him—seemed to show the European astuteness in rather a poor light compared to the Oriental, more especially as it was difficult to believe that Brother H. had been misled by the generosity of a too trustful nature. It was the signal for a disgruntled outburst. Not a man but had something the same story to tell, though for the most part it was the apathy and indifference of the peasantry to their propaganda that formed the theme of the tale. The hubbub of discontent waxed high, and through it

all Brother H.'s voice boomed like a turbulent organ hurling invective at the Burra Bhai.

"Bah, you are fools!" he exclaimed, obtaining a hearing by sheer force of lungs, "cattle, like these unprintables of whom you speak. Who is this man, I say? Why must we be his slaves? In his power, yet we know not his identity. Bah!"

He flung out his arms in a sweeping gesture, then paused, arrested, petrified, for from the end of the room there had come a sheep-like echo of his favourite word.

"Baa."

Every head turned in the direction of the sound. So perfect had been the imitation that unconsciously their eyes were focused groundwards. But there was no animal there. In the dark shadows that lurked beyond the circle of yellow light a darker figure was standing, and so motionless did it remain that it was a full minute before they could be sure of its outlines. Then quietly, with complete nonchalance, the watcher moved forward into the light and stood at the head of the table. He was of medium height, but beyond that very little could be said, for the dark cotton suit which he wore was bazaar made, and of a fit guaranteed to disguise any figure. His hands were covered with black gloves from which long gauntlets stretched over his sleeves, and on his head was a black hood, ending in a kind of shoulder cape, rather like a monk's cowl. A black silk mask hid the upper portion of his face, and from it there hung a thick silk fringe which touched the cape of his cowl. Only his eyes, gleaming with insolent mockery through the slits in the mask, gave any note of character.

For perhaps two minutes he remained staring at the sullen, angry faces ranged round the table, then a white gleam, showing through the black fringe, proclaimed that he was smiling.

"Goats must bleat," he said suavely, his eyes fixed on Brother H., "but it is unwise when there are panthers in the jungle, even though the jungle be of mud walls. I heard the noise quite some distance away. There was a policeman there; doubtless, if I had not contrived to send him hot-foot in another direction, he would have heard it too."

His voice was rather high-pitched, but curiously toneless, and he spoke with a monotonous, sing-song inflection. The words seemed to break the strange spell which had held the discomfited men. With a muttered imprecation Brother H. got to his feet.

"How long have you been listening, you ——?" he demanded truculently.

The other disdained to reply in words. Only a slight accentuation of the white gleam told that his smile had widened.

"That was an interesting tale you had to tell, Brother Z.," he remarked, turning towards another man seated near him. "It did credit to your heart, if not to your head."

Despite the apparent pleasantness with which they were uttered, the words had, somehow, a sinister ring, and the man to whom they were addressed fidgeted uncomfortably. All round the table were sullen scowls and suppressed mutterings, yet none spoke until Brother H. broke out again.

"Take off that mask!" he cried violently,

and the words were the signal for an outburst. From every side the slogan was taken up by angry voices, interspersed with cries of :

“ Let us see your —— face ! ”

“ No more mystery ! ”

“ Are we your slaves ? ”

Yet, all through the hubbub, the man in black remained standing calmly at the end of the table, smiling mockingly through the baffling fringe of his mask. And strangely, though there were violent gestures, scufflings of feet, scrapings of stools over the mud floor, not a man of the heated, angry assembly but kept his place. The mysterious power which we call personality seemed to radiate from the dark, unperturbed figure, and backing it was the almost superstitious awe and dread with which this man had become invested in their eyes. His cat-like faculty for coming and going unperceived, his contempt of danger, above all, his uncanny knowledge of the country, had made him seem to them something superhuman, for they were, after all, strangers in a strange land.

For perhaps ten minutes the tumult lasted, and the Burra Bhai spoke little. Never once did he attempt to make his voice heard above the din, but during a slight pause he would slip in a remark, taunting them with their failure, mocking them for their cowardice, lashing them, it seemed deliberately, to fury, yet all the while dominating them with his superior will.

It was only when the storm had spent itself, dying away to a sullen, impotent silence, that he leant forward with his hands on the table, and spoke with an abrupt change of tone which instantly riveted the attention of his audience.

"Yet, after all, it is true, my Brothers. We make no progress. Why? It is on that very point I come to speak."

There was dead silence as he paused, and every eye was fixed on him. The angry mutterings had ceased.

"We are come," the Burra Bhai began once again, "from Holy Russia, the Pioneer of the New Age, to spread the gospel of liberty by fanning that flame of divine discontent which smoulders in the darkened soul of a downtrodden people. We have money, we have organisation, we have knowledge, yet for months now we have laboured fruitlessly. Why? What is the cause of our failure? Simply, my Brothers, that there is no divine discontent! No revolution is accomplished bloodlessly. Before the soul of a people can enter upon the higher life of liberty, it must be plunged in the waters of re-birth. A cleansing, crimson tide must flow over the land. Yet consider this—such is the deadly apathy of the human race that, before a man will face that dread cleansing, to gain the glorious liberty we promise him, his old life must be to him not only burdensome, but unbearable. So long as there is sun to warm him, water to quench his thirst, a patch of earth to grow him bread, a thatch of leaves to roof him and his family, just so long will he love life for himself better than liberty—for his grandson!"

The speaker paused, while a rather restive stir passed round his audience. Here and there was a mutter, and men looked furtively, half fearfully at their neighbours. Their less nimble minds had followed him only haltingly, yet to each there had come the suggestion—a vague smell,

it seemed—of heresy. Beneath the more concrete and complex features of their Economic Gospel lay the simple fundamental dogma: "The poor groan in chains; the rich crush them beneath the wheels of their cars." The speaker's words had seemed to depict a dangerous degree of contentment at variance with their creed. Characteristically, it was Brother H. who spoke.

"Bah!" he exclaimed forcibly, "we waste our time. This land—it is no country; it is an (unmentionable) continent. And we—we are as three fleas on an elephant! The peasantry are cattle, as he"—he jerked his thumb in the direction of the Burra Bhai—"has shown; and in the towns what do we accomplish? A riot here, which looks good—until the police fire their (malodorous) guns. A rail strike there which dislocates, until the (unblessed) bullock-carts get through! Bah!" He flung out his arms violently, "we waste our (ruby) time!" he concluded with an air of finality.

There was a chorus of approval, then the Burra Bhai's strange toneless voice spoke once more.

"Brother H. has a picturesque vocabulary; he has expressed all our difficulties very aptly. Firstly, a peasantry too primitive for discontent, which means that the towns are our only fruitful ground for labour. Secondly, a vast continent, with these same towns widely separated. Thirdly, a country still primitive, and therefore with a machinery less easily dislocated than that of a more highly civilised land. But I can add other difficulties. We are too small in numbers; it is emphatically necessary that we should grow before we can accomplish anything, and here at

once we come up against the greatest difficulty of them all, the difficulty of disunion. We have a continent in which there are not only languages, but races, differing as widely as Swede and Spaniard, Dane and Dago. But with that we can cope. Worse than all this is the disunity of caste and of creed. How are we to unite, not only Brahmin and Outcaste, but Moslem and Hindu, Jain and Sikh, Animist and Agnostic? How are we to overcome these age-long prejudices, bring together these ancient enemies, and weld them in a common work? That, my Brothers, is the very root and core of our difficulties. For the bovine peasants"—he flicked his fingers contemptuously—"they do not matter. There is still a hopeful flame of discontent which we can fan into a blaze. It smoulders, not among the labourers and peasants, not in the deadened heart of the cowed underdogs, but in the souls of those who have risen in the scale. Among the partially educated babus, the petty shopkeepers, may be heard hopeful murmurings of discontent. It is these we must enrol beneath the glorious red banner of the New Age. Once let our numbers increase"—he flung out his hands in a sudden, though restrained gesture, almost the first he had made. "Well, my Brothers, these English have a proverb, 'Nothing succeeds like success.' Once let our army grow, and the dull peasantry will awaken from its lethargy. For the present we can neglect it. It is amongst these others we must find our recruits!"

He stopped speaking rather abruptly, and stepped back a little from the table. The baffling mask gave no clue to his thoughts, but in the eyes

that gleamed through the holes there seemed to shine a curious, half-mocking light. The faces round the table remained sullen and discontented, though perhaps not divinely so. Indeed, his speech had seemed to do little but emphasise their difficulties. For once, it was not Brother H. who spoke, but another man, the Jew who had essayed the witty sally.

"Could we but grow in numbers, the first part of the battle would be won," he said. "So much is plain."

Brother H. interjected that it was adverbially plain, and a disgruntled chorus broke out once again.

"But first we must grow," added the Jew brilliantly.

The white gleam showed suddenly through the black fringe of the leader's mask, and he leaned forward on the table once more.

"As Brother K. so profoundly observes," he remarked, "first we must grow!"

Brother H. swept to his feet with the force of one about to cry "Fire."

"Grow? But how?" he demanded. "Have we not still"—he produced a not unworthy imitation of the Burra Bhai's voice—"to unite Brahmin and Outcaste, Moslem and Hindu? Have we not still an (ensanguined) continent to cover?"

The leader bowed his head slightly in agreement, while the white gleam showed once more through the baffling black fringe.

"We have," he concurred; "and there is, moreover, the factor of caution. All men desire more than they have got, but few will jeopardise

the little to gain the more. Still less will they risk life itself. What then are we to do ? ”

He paused, but only momentarily. It was obvious that he had led up to this point, deliberately provoking their pessimism. Now it was to their curiosity that he appealed, as he stood gazing at each in turn through the expressionless black silk. Suddenly he stood back, and with one of his rare gestures pointed to the mask.

“ Why do I wear it ? ” he cried, and all could see the white gleam flashing. “ To safeguard my life ? Perhaps. Certainly to safeguard my prestige. A man is known by the company he keeps ! ” The gleam widened, and a low mocking laugh came from behind the fringe at the sight of the resentful scowls which greeted this sally. But almost immediately he continued.

“ Till now you have come here undisguised, because I must see you. But now it is no longer necessary. I know you—every one. There is no disguise could hide you from me. Remember that ! And for the rest—listen ! ”

He leant further forward with his hands on the table, holding their gaze, and, speaking in a low, even voice, he outlined his scheme. A fraternity, each member sworn severally not to reveal his identity, none ever seeing another's face, meeting masked and disguised—would not this get round their difficulties ? It would give security, for there would be then neither Brahmin nor Outcaste, neither Moslem nor Hindu, only “ Secret Brothers,” in dark suits and baffling masks.

Little by little as he spoke the sullen frowns relaxed. Against their will, almost, a faint

enthusiasm began to stir through the audience. The scheme was complete to the last detail, even to the manner of acquiring the clothes. The suits must be of ordinary but dark material, and of the common bazaar make. There must be nothing to distinguish them, so that they could be purchased anywhere without suspicion. For the rest, a yard or two of black material such as anyone might possess, or which could be dyed in the back compound—who could detect a Brother by such means? The enthusiasm grew. Only one mildly dissentient voice was raised.

“But—the police?” suggested the deprecating little man who had first endeavoured to placate Brother H.

The Burra Bhai threw back his head and laughed. His whole demeanour seemed charged with exaltation.

“I will make the police themselves our postmen!” he cried boastfully.

There was a murmur of approbation, but the last word seemed to suggest a new train of thought to Brother H.

“Postmen?” he exclaimed. “That is yet another point. We have still the (unsanctified) continent. How do we communicate?”

A sudden, rather crestfallen, silence fell on the room, but the Brother Bhai seemed prepared for the question.

“Of that I shall now speak,” he said readily. “To-night I was at the club dance, talking amongst others with the Commissioner, and I did much good business. Listen!”

Once more he leant forward on the table, and for perhaps a quarter of an hour he spoke in the

quiet, level voice he had used before, and again; as he spoke, enthusiasm dawned on the faces of his audience. When the first glow of dawn showed like a golden fan in the east, the company rose from its night-long sitting, and, joining hands across the table, swore fealty to the Secret Brotherhood.

CHAPTER III

HOPE CHESNEY leant back in her chair and let her eyes wander to the limitless, level plain which stretched around them. It was a breathlessly hot night, and the dinner-table had been set well away from the dâk bungalow and its sheltering trees, on the very edge of the desert. The soft, loose sand had already given off the heat it had absorbed from the sun, and a faint coolness breathed from the open space, but she could feel the closer-fibred trees behind her still glowing like hot stove-pipes. A few moths and beetles fluttered and flopped round the golden glow of the lantern, which the white radiance of moonlight pouring down upon the party rendered almost unnecessary. This was the last night of the Deputy Commissioner's monthly tour, and the last tour of the season. Hope was conscious of an unusual relief at the thought, but she refused to probe the cause of the inward uneasiness from which it rose.

The party was an unusually large one for a camp dinner. There were not only both the Maddersons, who, in fact, had been touring with them most of the month, but John Bolney and Donald Cameron, both of whom had had business with the D.C., and Father Xavier, whose wide

parochial orbit they had crossed that day. Hope brought her eyes and wandering thoughts back from the desert and listened rather listlessly to the conversation, which had turned upon the discoveries at Nana Sarai. The Indianologist had, in fact, only rejoined the party that evening, after an absence of several days, and Donald Cameron had been tactfully angling for the information which he was now being given in a dry, thin, utterly unemotional voice. A sense of unreality seized upon Hope as she listened, and she glanced across at her husband as if for reassurance. Ted Chesney had been D.C. of the Sukurpur District for over four years. This was their fifth camping season, and Hope knew the district like the palm of her hand. Yet, as she listened to Professor Madderson's detailed description of the ancient Aryan civilisation, a cloak of unfamiliarity seemed to descend on the well-known names and places. He had the topography of these prehistoric cities at his finger-tips, and mapped it on the tablecloth with a few crumbs in a way that moved the Survey Officer to admiration.

"Nana Sarai was the heart," he said, placing a white, delicately-pointed digit on a pile of rather larger crumbs. "It was the seat of learning, the holy of holies. It is easy to understand why. Even to-day, as we see it, it strikes us instantly—the one hill amidst this dead level plain, not high perhaps, but rising with the abruptness of a wall. What—in the days of a genuine civilisation which had not descended to the invention of howitzers and air bombs—what a fortress! It was in this light that it struck the Aryan people—a place of refuge, a citadel at first,

and afterwards the shrine of all that was venerated and sacred among them. It was there that their temple must stand dominating the plain."

"And it was there, I suppose," said Donald Cameron, "that they chiselled those prophecies on the stones——"

The Professor made a sudden noise indicative of irritation.

"I am not interested in the prophecies," he exclaimed. "I have too much respect for the Aryan people to suppose that they attempted anything so fantastic. It is the historic side which interests me. I like to picture, by means of the indelible footprints they have left, the life of a people of lofty intellectual attainment. I like to realise the splendid liberty they must have enjoyed before their social order had crystallised into the tyranny of caste, their aspiring philosophies into the superstitious bondage of religious dogmatism."

He paused suddenly as though dimly aware that there might be a certain tactlessness in his remarks.

"Dogmatism always creeps in, Father Xavier," he said apologetically.

"But of course," agreed the Padre readily. He wore a somewhat abstracted look, and did not appear to have been attending to the conversation very closely. "We must have dogma or—dog-fight, *hein*? It is not a wassis perfect world."

Hope smiled faintly. She had met Father Xavier once or twice before, and on each occasion the etymology of the word "wassis" had intrigued her. She gathered that it was a contraction of "what's this?" and was thrown in when the

Padre was at a loss for the correct word, but she wondered if it might not be used to cover embarrassment rising from other causes. At the moment she felt grateful to him. The rough, ringing timbre of his voice had effectually dissipated the rather eerie sensation which had been creeping upon her, and she listened, almost with a sense of relief, as he continued the conversation.

"But of caste—that is a different question. It is an abomination, no? Without it we convert India! With it—poof!—we go like snails to a funeral. Yet what else have you to counter the climate, to hold Hinduism together? The Mahommedan, the Sikh—they have their religion. The Hindu—he has a wassis hotch-potch of superstition, a few philosophies, and caste! We remove caste before his soul awakes; that is to send him back to barbarism, to remove all fabric of his social order. It must go away, yes—but it must *grow* away, no?"

The Professor was too aloof from the present to reply to this somewhat confusing question, but Bolney countered the argument strongly, and for a moment or two the discussion ran high. Then Hope slid in a question.

"You have been in India a long time, Father Xavier?"

He smiled as he turned towards her, and she saw the abstracted look return to his face.

"Just twenty-five years to-night," he said.

There was a murmur of surprise and vague congratulation round the table. Even the Professor looked across in mild interest as though the Padre had almost attained sufficient antiquity to be worthy of note. Then the talk slid to other

topics. Hope looked in surprise at Donald Cameron. He had been silent for some moments and seemed wrapped in contemplation of the stars.

"Studying astronomy?" she asked him, and he came back to earth with a jerk.

"Not exactly," he answered, smiling with faint embarrassment, "but it's a queer thought, isn't it? I was just thinking, if someone on one of those bright spots up there—the requisite distance away—could look down here through a telescope, they would see, not our interesting selves sitting round a table in the desert, but the ancient Aryans all bustling about their business, living and loving, fighting probably, dying——"

The remark commanded instant attention. All looked up at the stars which blazed like crystal lamps overhead, in spite of the brilliant moonlight. Ted Chesney embarked on a complicated calculation of what the necessary distance would be, which, since he could not remember with any certainty the rate of the transmission of light through the ether, did not seem to promise any great accuracy of result. Nor did a remark by Mae Madderson, made apparently under the impression that he was speaking of the anæsthetic, greatly elucidate matters. Donald brought the discussion back to a more philosophic basis by observing that, postulating 'Someone' capable of seeing from all points of space simultaneously, the Aryans and themselves were equally visible and present on the same spot. Time ceased to exist.

"Or doesn't it?" he added, in sudden confusion at the depth to which his speculations had run.

None of the party seemed able to answer the

question, but Hope's imagination took wing as she looked out over the moonlit plain, picturing that ancient forgotten people and their lives. They had survived to history as a 'civilisation,' known only by fragmentary relics and ruins, pictured always through the medium of what was known of their philosophy and social system. Yet they had been human beings, with hopes, aspirations, passions, likes and dislikes. The most pitifully trivial things, maybe, had swayed their lives, looming, to them, more vital than the mighty irrigation works which still survived in faint tracings on the plain. Was 'Someone' watching them still, there on that very spot, tenderly indulgent of their childishness? Was 'Someone' watching her, and all of them round the table, watching them eternally? They were people of a 'civilisation,' living, if they were to believe all that was said, in times heavy with portent. Yet what were the things which swayed their lives? She looked round the table—at her husband, the D.C. with a promising career before him. What was the really potent factor in his life? At the moment, it seemed to be the image of himself in the mirror of Mae Madderson's temperament. The two of them had been carrying on a *sotto voce* conversation during most of the meal, and as this fact swam up from Hope's subconsciousness, she realised that she had probed the cause of the inward uneasiness that had made her welcome the advent of the hot weather. She examined Mae more closely. The girl—she was little more in years—was pretty in a commonplace way. She had light chestnut hair, which in her teens had doubtless been golden, and grey

eyes. She was short and very slenderly built, with a tiny face and features to match, but in spite of their minuteness there was about them a certain carelessness and coarseness of moulding, like that of a statue in cheap plaster. Despite, too, the fairness of her colouring, there was a suspicious duskiness beneath the eyelids which betrayed a strain of the East, as did also the fact that her bloom had gone, though as yet she could not be twenty-five. Temperamentally, she belonged to what Hope termed the 'looking-glass' genus, born, apparently, to provide (perhaps unconsciously) all with whom she came in contact with a pleasing reflection of themselves to admire. She had quick wits which masked an absence of brain, and a talent, amounting almost to genius, of agreeing with a proposition as though it had just voiced her own thoughts. Looking at the pretty, rather common little face, with its tell-tale mouth, Hope decided that the vital factors in Mae Madderson's life were too obvious to need comment. Almost unconsciously she glanced across at the Professor, wondering what strange mental aberration had caused him to marry the girl, then remembering that Mae had been his secretary she felt a sudden sympathy for the man. He had, so obviously, been led blindfold and unprotesting to the altar. In one thing at least he resembled his wife—he was as single-minded as she, indeed even more so, with heart, soul and even body immersed in his work and discoveries.

Hope wrenched her thoughts rather deliberately away from the Maddersons and turned to a contemplation of John Bolney, but he did not delay her long. A lean, dark man obviously

'of the country,' he was probably mainly intent on concealing his amazing knowledge of India and the Indians, and posing as an 'imported' European. Donald Cameron was even more transparent. Work, sport, a few soldierly ideals, a dream-home in the future, and occasionally a vein of poetic vision, which lifted him into a wider sphere—the plan of his life stood out, clean, sane and wholesome for all to read. Hope looked rather longer at Father Xavier. On the few occasions that she had met him he had impressed her as belonging to a comfortable, middle-class Flemish family, and she found herself at a loss to define the vital factor in his life. What possible motive could keep such a man toiling for twenty-five years in the dust and heat of the desert, on work which, as he had expressed it, went 'like snails to a funeral'? She gave up the problem and turned to contemplate herself, only to be again baffled. What really was the most potent force in her life? She found herself totally unable to answer the question and, feeling vaguely irritated, she brought her thoughts back to the conversation going on around her. It had quitted the heights to which it had soared and had turned, she gathered, on revolution. The priest's strident voice was holding forth didactically.

"But no, I say, you will not get it in India! Riots—yes. Revolution—no. For revolution there must be great grievance—oppression. Without that men will not risk their wassis lives."

Donald interrupted quickly. "A great many men died in the war who had never known oppression," he exclaimed.

"Oh," Father Xavier gestured from his wrist

expressively. "I do not speak of men who fight for a cause," he said. "That all will do. I speak of a mob uprising—risking all. For that there must first be tyranny."

Neither Donald nor Chesney seemed inclined to argue the point further, but the Professor slid an unexpected oar into the conversation.

"A rather sweeping assertion, I think," he said in his mild, thin voice. "Has not religious fanaticism often proved a potent factor in producing revolutions?"

"But certainly," agreed the other readily. "That is history. But for that there must first be unity, *hein*? In India how many religions are there? Moslem, Hindu, Sikh, Jain—how then can there be a religious rising? No, no, again I say it—riots, yes. Revolution—no!"

There was silence for a moment, then Ted Chesney switched the talk into another channel.

"Well, anyway," he remarked, "if there is to be a rising, I hope the risers will postpone the event until after the royal visit!"

The words had something the effect of an electric shock. All eyes were turned on the D.C. Bolney, Hope noticed, looked startled.

"Is there to be one?" he ejaculated.

Chesney nodded.

"It has only just been officially announced," he said. "An Occidental Potentate will visit us next fall. Among his more arduous duties will be that of opening the dam at Sukurpur."

"I always thought," commented Hope lightly, "that the main function of a dam was to be closed."

She nodded to Mae and rose from the table as

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she spoke. The dessert had been finished long since, and there seemed no reason to linger longer ; but later, when she found herself alone with the younger woman, ensconced in two deck chairs beneath a row of mango trees, Hope regretted that she had not stayed where the conversation was at least varied. Mae might be an amusing companion at a jazz party, but for an evening in the desert she lacked inspiration. Moreover there was a feeling of constraint between them.

It was a perfect night. Hope leaned back in her chair, her hands folded behind her head, and gazed round on the dusty compound which the white moonlight had touched to an unearthly beauty. From near by there came the sleepy droning of a water wheel, and she could hear the lap and gurgle of the water as it flowed past her feet in its narrow channel. Beyond the dark silhouette of the trees the desert loomed in a vast expanse of ethereal blue, and, as she watched, her eyes made out a line of faint white, dim and distant, inconceivably high and remote.

" Oh, look ! " she breathed, forgetful to whom she spoke. " Those are the snows." Very softly, she quoted Flecker :

" ' And all around the snowy mountains swim
Like mighty swans afloat in Heaven's pool.' "

" Yes, I love those lines," said Mae, who had heard them that moment for the first time. " You read a lot of poetry, don't you ? " she added.

But Hope did not answer her. Once again that soaring imagination of hers had taken wing. Looking across the wide plains, she had visualised

the immense triangular expanse of the Peninsula spread out map-wise, beneath a burning sun, and the strange fantastic fancy had come to her of a vast, veiled woman lying asleep, with crossed feet, wide-flung arms, and head pearl-diademed, cradled upon the heights—the Sun-God's bride, sleeping through the ages, her soul drugged and deadened by the fiery ardour of his caresses. Some day, maybe, she would wake—and then ?

Hope came to herself with a sudden shiver, though whether of cold, of fear, or of superstition, she could not have said.

"It's growing chilly," she said, then stopped, realising that she was addressing the air.

Mae was gone.

CHAPTER IV

LATER that same evening, Ted Chesney wandered through the moonlit compound. He strolled with apparent aimlessness, but almost unconsciously his steps were bent in the direction of the pipul-tree, near which he had caught the gleam of a white dress. Father Xavier had gone home, or rather to the waiting-room of the station, a mile away across the desert, where a bed had been made up for him for the night, and Madderson had returned to his work indoors. Cameron and Bolney were, Ted considered, sufficient company for Hope, and in view of Mae's absence from the gathering, that white gleam near the pipul-tree needed no explanation.

She was standing half hidden in the dense shadow as he approached, and but for the glint of her shoe-buckles he would scarcely have seen her.

"Seeking solitude?" he demanded.

She moved quickly. Her eyes had been fixed on him unwinkingly since the moment he had left the others, but she conveyed the impression of being startled.

"No," she answered, "not solitude—I don't know what I'm seeking. Coolness, I think."

"It's not to be found under a tree," he said.

"Better try the open." But neither of them made any movement to leave the shadow. Instead, he made a step forward, then paused, arrested.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "look at that!"

She came out to his side, then caught her breath in wonder. Above them towered the gigantic pipul, and of each of its myriad sticky-bright leaves the moonlight had made a star. It seemed as though the very heavens had come down to cluster in a white galaxy about their heads.

"It's wonderful," exclaimed Mae. "This place in the moonlight is like fairyland, but in the daytime——"

She shuddered without finishing her sentence, and drew her wrap about her almost as though she were cold.

"You don't like the desert?" he said, more as a statement of fact than a question.

"I hate it!" she exclaimed with a vehemence which staggered him. He had not supposed her capable of such a depth of feeling.

"In spite of our company?" he exclaimed, smiling at her teasingly. "A bit too high-brow for you at dinner, weren't we?"

She looked up at him without answering in words, pouting at this reference to her *faux pas*. The moonlight was kind to her rather avid little face, and the tell-tale mouth at the moment looked only childishly mutinous.

"I wonder how you came into it all," he said suddenly, as a mental picture of the Indianologist rose before him. "Tell me about it."

Very frankly she gave him the story of her life. Her father had been in the Forest Department. Her mother had been born and bred in

India, and she herself had remained in the country the whole of her childhood, getting what little education she had in patches. They had gone to England on her father's retirement, and shortly after he had died. Quite simply she described her life as a typist ; her hatred of the drudgery ; her longing for pleasure ; of the means of escape marriage had offered.

"And he's kind to me," she finished jerkily. "He knows, of course, I've never—really—cared. He doesn't expect it. He told me he would never stand in my way if—if I met anyone else. It's just—a convenient arrangement. After all, we've only one life to live."

She glanced up at him swiftly, as if to see how he had taken her story. She looked strangely small and pathetic, standing in the white moonlight, silhouetted against the black shadow of the tree.

"Poor little kid," he exclaimed, and almost involuntarily he laid his hand on her shoulder. He felt her quiver beneath his touch, but she did not look up at him again.

"We've only one life to live," she repeated. "People seem to waste their time on fancies and theories. It's queer—the cleverest people don't seem to know how to live, to know what's *real*. I've no brains, but I could live——"

She twisted her hands together, then flung them outwards in a sudden gesture, while he stared down at her amazed. The unexpected shrewdness of her philosophy came to him almost in the light of a revelation. It seemed to shed a new light, not only on the Professor, but on Hope—on half his world.

"Poor little kid," he murmured again, unconsciously drawing her closer to him. "I know what you mean. It's lonely. I've felt the same. Even Hope, you know—she's rather—out of touch with realities——"

"Oh yes!"

The words were quietly spoken, but the tone was perfect. It conveyed that that had been Mae's exact thought. To Ted it was another staggering revelation that this girl, whom unconsciously he had classed as on a lower plane than his wife, had, in fact, summed Hope up—had seen all round her and penetrated to the flaws in her philosophy. Mae seemed to him suddenly something wonderful—a pathetic sprite, possessed of a strange worldly wisdom, whom the common herd in their blindness deemed devoid of brains. The fact that he alone had penetrated beneath the surface filled him with a splendid glow of satisfaction. He bent his head a little to look at her.

"Queer how we've met," he said, speaking in nervous, disjointed sentences. "Seems like Fate—we're both rather lonely—seem to understand each other—somehow——"

She looked up at him mutely. The incense, the subtle incense of her inferiority, mounted to his head in fumes. Almost unconsciously he bent closer to her, then, half swooning, she was in his arms, her lips lifted to his. For the second time that evening he was staggered, and his senses reeled as the fierce depth of her emotion, the completeness of her surrender, came home to him.

It was some minutes later that a faint noise

made him look up. Perhaps twenty paces away, a native was watching them. He was dressed in the ordinary, picturesque rags of a camel man, but, even in the midst of his perturbation, there was something in the man's face which struck Ted as vaguely familiar. For the space of a whole minute he remained with his arms round Mae, staring fiercely at the watcher. Then, with an insolent leer, the man moved off, vanishing among the trees. Ted and Mae drew apart awkwardly, and, as though by common consent, turned and walked back towards the bungalow in silence.

They did not see Hope, who, standing some paces behind them, had witnessed the whole incident. There had been no thought of eaves-dropping in her mind. Bolney and Cameron had left early and she had started on an aimless stroll round the compound. The soft, sandy soil had muffled her approach.

She watched them go, then she too turned towards the house, but she took a different path. Arrived in her room, she stood for a few moments in the centre of it. She was quite quiet, but her heart was beating suffocatingly, and her hands felt icy cold in spite of the heat. After a minute or two she moved over to the glass, and by the light of the petrol lamp examined her face dispassionately. She was a good-looking woman with a small, well-bred face, clear-cut features, and dark eyes set below very level brows. Like Margaret Fraser she bore the stamp of race, but it was at her hair that she looked chiefly. She had been grey since the age of twenty-eight, as were most of her family. It was beautiful hair, sweeping back from her broad forehead with a natural

wave, and shingled in a way that showed to perfection the queenly poise of her head. But it could not be denied that it aged her.

She felt curiously detached, as though what she had witnessed had been something quite apart from her own life. A sense of unreality filled her. Almost mechanically she undressed and went out to where the beds had been placed in the moonlight, well away from the hot bungalow. Lying on her back, her hands clasped behind her head, she watched the stars, striving to focus her mind on the problem which had come to her, but without much success. When Ted came out she closed her eyes and, through a fringe of lashes, watched him get into his bed. Again the sense of unreality oppressed her. She thought of the conversation at dinner and of her own meditations. How absurdly trivial seemed the incident that was filling her thoughts, yet big enough in her own life to spell either happiness or the reverse. Or was it not? Again she thought of her summary of Mae. A looking-glass! Had not Ted, after all, fallen in love simply with his own reflection? For the rest—a little moonlight, a little sob-stuff, a little *ennui*, perhaps, with life's ordinary trend—nothing more. Could it possibly last? The answer was sufficiently emphatic in the negative to be reassuring. Mae Madderson was not the type of girl for whom men risk everything, even when the 'everything' had become a little tame. Nor, incidentally, was she the type to burn her own boats except in a moment of passion. Given time for reflection, her nature was too shallow for any irrevocable step. 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may' was doubtless her motto,

and it would matter little to her whether they grew in her neighbour's garden or not, but she would always find an excuse for gathering them when her neighbour was out.

Hope turned on her side and closed her eyes once again. She was feeling sufficiently reassured to make sleep a possibility. Then, suddenly, on the still cooling air, there floated the sound of a song, dim and distant, but growing momentarily louder and nearer. A strange song it was—wild, wailful, alluring, yet fraught with an indefinable suggestion of evil and of fear. Mae heard it in her bed, on the other side of the bungalow, and sat up to listen. She was alone, for a light in the house, together with the intermittent clack of a typewriter, told where the Indianologist still worked, forgetful of the heat, indoors. Mae's heart quickened as she listened, and her pulses throbbed almost painfully. The East in her blood awoke, making the night seem full of visions. She pictured Ted lying wakeful, thinking of her, listening to the message of the song. But across the compound Ted slept peacefully, unaware of any disturbing element, while Hope, listening to the song, was conscious suddenly of a violent irritation against him and Mae and their whole outlook on life. A feeling of loneliness and desolation swept over her, bringing the tears to her eyes, but a rather contemptuous anger choked them back.

“‘A fool must follow his natural bent,’” she quoted, and fell asleep while the song still woke passionate echoes in the night.

In his tent on the plain, Donald Cameron stirred in his slumbers, muttering an imprecation on the ‘damned row’; and in the railway waiting-

room Father Xavier, waking from a vivid dream, sat up and listened, a look of puzzled wonderment on his face. Then, as the song came nearer, he slipped from his bed and, crossing the room, opened the door.

CHAPTER V

DONALD CAMERON gripped the brass pommel of the gigantic saddle unashamedly as the camel rose to its knees. Behind him he heard Margaret gasp and her hands caught him round the waist. Then, as the beast unfolded and straightened its hind legs, she swayed forward against him, righting herself with another little gasp and a gurgle of laughter as the camel completed the manoeuvre and stood up at its full height. From all sides came suppressed squeals and protests as the rest of the party were subjected to the same ordeal. Donald with the Chesneys and John Bolney had just arrived at the road-head, where the metalled highway from Sukurpur became lost in the dusty expanse of the desert, and had found Sir James Fraser and his daughter awaiting them, having arrived by car from the cantonment. It had been arranged that the party were to visit the works of the huge dam which was being constructed at a distance of about ten miles from Sukurpur, and, though the Frasers could have reached the spot more easily by taking a car to the river and ferrying across it, Margaret had decreed that they should cross the river by the bridge a mile lower down, and motor out into the desert to meet the rest of

the party, in order that she might enjoy the novelty of a camel ride.

"How do you like it?" demanded Donald, as, with some difficulty, he put the beast into the shuffling trot which alone affords a modicum of ease to those in the saddle.

The answer came over his shoulder, punctuated by gasps.

"It's thrilling. I've never ridden one except in the Zoo. But it must be tiring for a long distance."

"It is," said Donald feelingly. Camel-hacking was his main mode of locomotion in camp, and he had no curiosity left on the subject.

"Ever considered the mystery of a camel's hump?" he continued conversationally over his shoulder. "No one has ever solved it, not even Mr. Heath Robinson. Personally I am of the opinion that it is where the poor beast keeps the surplus chain for winding up the slack of its neck. Just think how tiring it must be to go about with all that extra neck drooping down in a curve!"

Margaret laughed again, but she endeavoured to make her voice sound severe.

"Have you been talking nonsense all the month?" she demanded.

"On the contrary," he replied with dignity, "I have been most erudite. You ought to have heard our conversation at dinner last night with Father Xavier. He's a wassis old bean."

"A what?"

"Wassis," repeated Donald. "I don't know what it means, but it's a word he seems fond of. I thought at first that it referred to the kind of dressing-gown he goes about in, but on mature

consideration I came to the conclusion that it was derived from the root 'what's this?'"

"Does he ride camels?" asked the girl frivolously.

"Jove, I'd like to see him," exclaimed Donald. "He'd say 'wassis' with a vengeance." He struck an attitude with his whip, and declaimed to the heavens:

"There was an old man who said 'Wassis?
I really don't know wassis hosis;
For it's neck is too slack,
And it bears on its back
A most inconvenient pro-bosis!'"

He heard her laugh again, but though he turned his head he could not see her without dislocating his neck.

"Tell me about the Indianologist," she commanded after a moment's silence.

Donald pointed with his whip.

"There he is," he said, "riding behind the camel-man. Doesn't look like a nine days' wonder, does he?"

Indeed, colourlessness was the chief impression which the professor made on the girl, as she looked in obedience to Donald's direction. His khaki topi and clothes were of a peculiarly light shade which seemed to merge into the atmosphere of the desert, and both his skin and the short scrubby beard that he wore were of a strange neutral fairness.

"Quaint old bird," commented Donald, as the girl did not speak. "In the twilight you'd see nothing but his tie and his boots."

"Is that his wife?" she asked, jerking her head in the direction of a camel some way ahead of them, on which Mae rode behind Ted Chesney.

"Yes," said Donald shortly, and there was something in his tone which made her look again at the couple, but she gained no information from her scrutiny.

Mae was, in fact, rather silent and subdued. As yet nothing had been said to break the constraint with which she and Ted had separated the night before, and she was, truth to tell, wondering what attitude he intended adopting. It was not till they were in sight of their journey's end that he spoke.

"I've been thinking," he began abruptly. "about last night . . . and Hope. . . . I don't quite like the deception."

She agreed with him swiftly; in fact, it seemed that that very point had been her own preoccupation.

"I know," she murmured unhappily. "It's hateful—having to deceive people; but what can we do? It would only hurt Hope—if she knew. She wouldn't understand. . . ."

He agreed with her without a trace of irony. He was feeling too mentally and morally confused for his sense of humour to function. The bright sunshine of the morning had seemed to cast a somewhat garish light on the incident of the night before, but Mae's attitude, subdued and retiring though it had been, had somehow made it clear that to her it was no mere 'incident.'

"No," he said, "she wouldn't understand."

There was silence for a minute, then the low-toned, pathetic voice began again, and, as it

murmured softly down the back of his neck, he seemed to glimpse vaguely the outlines of a mental attitude that verged upon the heroic. They were the victims of circumstances. Fate had brought them together—too late. It was all inevitable. They could only carry on and try to do what was kindest for everybody concerned.

"After all—Hope has her sons. She has a good deal, really. I—I haven't very much, Ted——"

He felt her hand steal under his arm, and pressed it hard against his side.

"After all," she said again, and her voice sounded perceptibly more cheerful, "it isn't as though it were just an ordinary affair."

He salved his conscience with that.

Hope, meantime, riding behind Sir James Fraser, strove to wrench her thoughts away from her husband and the problem which was weighing upon her mind. For her, too, the bright sunshine of the morning had made for sanity, and in its light the episode of the night before became dreamlike. The whole fabric of her life seemed too large and solid for her to fear disruption. There was no need to suppose that the foundations of a house were undermined because one rat had been discovered nibbling at them. True, she reminded herself, it might be wiser to kill the rat, but there remained the danger that, in the excitement of a rat-hunt, more damage might be done than would ever have been achieved by the nibbling. She knew her own and Ted's proud, rather unbending natures too well to risk a scene at this juncture. The solution did not lie in that direction.

She came to herself with a start, realising that Sir James had addressed her. He had commented on the strangeness of these level, monotonous plains having been the scene of so many stirring historical events.

"Yes," she agreed, gathering her thoughts firmly back from the lengths to which they had strayed. "But it's like life, I think," she added, with a sudden reversion to the problem that had been occupying them.

Later, arrived at the works, she saw another image of life, while she listened rather abstractedly to the technical explanations of Manton, the engineer who showed them round.

It was a strange scene, mingling inextricably the most primitive with the most advanced inventions of modern civilisation. The broad blue river lay gleaming like a twisted band of aquamarine in the midst of the grey, shimmering desert. Below, to their left, towered the huge bridge—the only one for nearly a hundred miles. A clanging din near at hand proclaimed the energy of a huge steam-shovel, and over on the right was an intricate mass of machinery which she did not attempt to understand. Her attention had been held more by the strangely primitive side of the work. Around her filed in, in endless, patient strings, women and children, men, boys, and small tired donkeys, all bearing baskets of sand which they threw down for men to pour into bags, and when these were ready, yet others were waiting to sink them in the river at the end of the spit of solid ground which their labours had already built out into the river. Other women, near at hand, were busy plaiting

large mats of the tall grass which grew on the plain, and Manton explained that these were 'mattresses' to be sunk first, before the sandbags, in order to obtain some grip on the loose, shifty river-bed. Hope's imagination soared to heights as she contemplated the proposed majestic solidity of the completed dam, and passed on to the gigantic nature of the work it was to accomplish, for it would irrigate a vast tract of the arid desert. Then, as she looked at the patient, plodding asses, the no less patient humans who toiled at their unspectacular, wearisome drudgery, she saw an image of life, where stupendous deeds lurk beneath the monotonous level surface of the daily routine.

So absorbed was she in her meditations that she came back to her surroundings with a start at the sound of Sir James Fraser's voice.

"By Jove, here's Miss Stoneham," he exclaimed. Then he turned to Hope. "I hope you don't mind, Mrs. Chesney, I told her she had better commandeer your car. She preferred to come the short way and be ferried across the river. She is a friend of yours, I understand."

"Ysobel Stoneham—of course," murmured Hope, as she turned to greet the new arrival. "I did not know she had arrived from England yet."

The girl—Hope unconsciously used the word still, though Ysobel's years equalled her own—had been a school-friend of hers, and she was, Hope knew, some sort of cousin or step-aunt to Donald Cameron. In fact, she heard him mutter "My holy aunt," as he turned in explanation to Margaret. The tone of the words was vaguely uncomplimentary, and Hope was at no difficulty

to understand the cause. It seemed inevitable that Donald's temperament and Ysobel's would not be sympathetic. For herself, she marvelled how little the years had changed her old school-friend. Ysobel was a beautiful woman. Her hair, which she wore uncut, showed in two golden knobs above her ears, gleaming in the shadow of her topi. Her skin would have advertised the most obscure of day creams, and her eyes were like a southern sea. But still, as ever, she was posing; still, as ever, arranging life, the world—all the ages, it seemed—round herself for a stage. Her philosophy seemed to be always a quest of the exception and neglect of the rule. At the moment she was rapt in attention on Oswald Madderson, hanging on every syllable he uttered as she drew him out to speak of his discoveries. Her attitude seemed to pierce even his absent-mindedness, and he grew faintly pink with pleasure as he spoke on the subject which alone seemed to have the power to stir him. It amused Hope to note this evidence of a human streak in the man whom Donald had dubbed 'the complete Indianologist,' but it was short-lived, and vanished at a remark from Bolney regarding the danger of diverting the whole current of the river through two arches of the bridge, as, Manton explained, they intended doing as soon as the monsoon floods were over.

"But what of the spring floods?" exclaimed Bolney. "I've known them come down in terrible force if the winter lingers and the snows melt suddenly."

"What would be the result?" asked Sir James, who was no engineer.

Manton explained : " The soil here is very loose and sandy—though, thank goodness, not as bad as in the Sutlej. The force of a flood going through a narrowed channel would scoop it out to below the foundations of the bridge. But there is very little danger of that ; though I can see," he added, laughing, " that the Professor is already wondering what hidden treasures might not be brought to light from such depths. There is the other dam below Bulana, about a hundred miles from here, which has been completed for many years and is strong enough to withstand even an excessive monsoon flood. It feeds a large canal system, and, in case of a spate, it would be easy to divert the flood up there into the canals, and so distribute it harmlessly over the country."

The Professor seemed interested in his explanations, and his eye followed the winding course of the river with a professional gleam. It was, he explained, along the banks of rivers that the ancient cities had been built. For the moment Ysobel was forgotten, and she turned her attention to Bolney.

" Isn't it wonderful—India ? " she exclaimed.

Hope did not hear his answer, for Donald broke in with a prosaic question as to when the dam would be finished.

- Manton shrugged his shoulders.

" We don't go as far as that," he said ; " but in October next we hope to lay the first real stone."

Bolney turned a rather startled face towards the engineer and his brow knitted. Sir James looked at him sharply. For a moment there was silence, then Ted, who had been wandering at a

distance with Mae, came up with the information that the boats were in readiness, and the party embarked, to be ferried across to their luncheon, which was being prepared on the further side of the river.

A feeling of unreality seized once more upon Hope, as, having arrived at the appointed spot, she seated herself on the steps of her own car to await the advent of lunch. It was breathlessly hot and still. A dead airlessness pressed like a tangible weight on her head, and the atmosphere seemed charged with expectancy. Her common-sense recognised it well enough, for she had experienced it many times before. Presently there would be a scurrying rush of air, and somewhere near by a dust-devil would rise like a miniature cyclone and sweep over the plain. After that there would be air to breathe. But despite her common-sense, another part of her seemed to stand apart, detached, looking on at the scene about her, even at herself. Once more her imagination ran riot. She looked across the river to where the tiny figures of the workers still moved to and fro like a swarm of gaudy-coloured ants. She looked at the huge bridge towering away on her right; at the small, industrious figure of the Indianologist, who had procured his typewriter from his servant and was busily typing some obscure calculations; at Mae and Ted, Donald and Margaret; at Sir James and Manton, earnestly discussing some technical point; lastly at Ysobel and Bolney, standing near her, talking. Ysobel was posed on a slight rise in the ground, and she carried her scarlet parasol as though it were a banner. The whole thing seemed suddenly, to

Hope, like a scene on the stage, and the figures herself included, but the players in some stupendous drama—but players who knew nothing of the plot they were destined to enact. Once again, inconsequently, the vision of the night before recurred to her mind, and she saw India, the great, veiled, weary woman, lying in her heavy, sun-drugged sleep. What if she should awake?

A rush of air, a swirl of leaves caught her suddenly, and she started to her feet, covering her face with her hands as the sand stung her. She heard shouts, and running feet, cries of protest, and the wind carried her along in a scurrying run. Then, like a microcosm of disaster, the dust-devil swept past. As she opened her eyes she saw it like a tall, white pillar, swaying far out on the plain. The servants were striving to salvage the havoc wrought in the luncheon-table; Madderson, with an air of patient exasperation, was collecting his typed notes, and, in the distance, she could see Ted chasing Mae's hat, which had blown off. Nearer at hand Bolney was doctoring Ysobel's parasol, which had turned inside out. Hope laughed suddenly, completely restored to sanity by the bathos of the incident.

"And that," said Sir James, moving over to her, "is bad luck for all of us, if we are to believe our Aryan brother. To be caught in the track of a dust-devil! We are all of us in for it, I fear."

Hope laughed again as she turned in the direction of the lunch-table.

"I'm not superstitious," she said sturdily, giving the lie to her queer fancies. "It seemed to me something quite different."

But she did not explain what she meant, nor could she foresee, for all her strange insight, how, in that half-farcical incident, India had wrought her own deliverance.

CHAPTER VI

SIR JAMES FRASER operated the siphon which had been placed, together with the whisky decanter, on a small table at his elbow.

"Say when," he commanded, looking across at Chesney.

Ted nodded absently. He was, as a matter of fact, wondering why the Commissioner had asked himself and Bolney to his bungalow for this informal meeting. It was not until the D.S.P. had also been furnished with a peg and a cigarette that Sir James opened the discussion, and his first question startled Ted.

"By the way, Chesney, have you mentioned the matter of the proposed royal visit next autumn to anyone?"

Ted stared at him in surprise.

"Why, yes, sir," he admitted readily. "I thought it was public property."

The Commissioner nodded.

"So did I," he agreed. "I'm not saying anything upon that point. But I wanted to know whom you had told."

Chesney hesitated for a moment. He felt, though he could not have said why, vaguely perturbed by the question. While he hesitated, John Bolney broke in.

"Mr. Chesney told me, among others, sir," he said quietly, "at dinner last night. I had heard nothing of it before, and for myself, I admit I should have preferred the matter kept secret a little longer, but I understood that it was public property."

Sir James nodded again, but he looked at the Policeman enquiringly.

"Why would you have preferred it kept secret?" he asked.

The question seemed to embarrass Bolney. He hesitated momentarily, and stammered slightly as he began to speak. Finally he gave a faint, characteristic shrug of the shoulders.

"I'm afraid my reasons would sound fantastic, sir," he said.

Sir James did not reply immediately. He knocked the ash off his cigarette with careful precision, took a pull at his peg, then looked across at Bolney.

"Anything to do with the Secret Brotherhood?" he asked.

A look of amazement spread over the Policeman's face, and again he stammered as he began to speak.

"I did not know," he exclaimed, "that the authorities knew about the Brotherhood—or at least that they took it seriously."

The Commissioner concurred.

"They don't," he said. "There have been wild rumours going about the bazaars—the usual sort of thing. No one has attached much importance to them. They seemed to start about a month ago with a story of a strange happening at Jellundur——"

Bolney broke in suddenly.

"It was perfectly true, sir," he exclaimed. "I was there myself at the time. There is no exaggeration in the reports."

"What happened?" demanded Ted. "I've heard nothing about it."

Bolney turned to him.

"The story was of a strange gathering of black masked figures, which took place—mark this—in the compound of the D.S.P.'s bungalow. He was out at a dance that night. It was a babu told me the story the next day. He had apparently been at the meeting. He was in a strange state of excitement—I half suspected that he was drunk, and did not pay much attention to the yarn, but . . ." Bolney's voice altered oddly, and he leant forward in his chair. "The next day his body was found in a ditch—his throat had been cut from ear to ear, and on his chest was stamped the impression of a crimson cobra about to strike."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Ted. He was genuinely taken aback by the story, though murders were not an uncommon occurrence. Bolney turned to the Commissioner.

"The Brotherhood is no myth, sir," he said, speaking with extraordinary earnestness. "It is a reality—a terrible reality—a terrible danger. We must leave no stone unturned to guard against it. It is controlled by one man who seems indeed to be something almost more than human. No one knows who he is; he is known only as the Burra Bhai—the Big, or Elder, Brother. It is he we must capture, though to find him seems almost an impossibility. But,

believe me, there is no security for any of us until he is caught."

His voice vibrated with earnestness, and there was a look of almost superstitious awe on his face as he ceased speaking. Ted asked an unexpected question.

"How do you know all about the affair at Jellundur? Your beat is, after all, miles away."

For a moment Bolney seemed faintly embarrassed.

"I—I was up there for the week-end," he said. "The D.S.P. is a friend of mine."

There was silence for a minute while Sir James sat staring frowningly in front of him. Ted suggested that the affair had some bearing on what he wished to say to them, and he appeared to come out of his meditations with a start.

"Yes," he agreed, "it was about that I wished to speak to you. I have just heard, on quite good authority, that there has been another meeting of the Brotherhood, one at which the Burra Bhai was present—at Nana Sarai!"

The words had an electric effect. Ted gave vent to an exclamation and Bolney leaped to his feet in indignant incredulity.

"Nana Sarai! But the thing's impossible," he exclaimed. "Why, I myself have just been on circuit there. We were all dining at Tuna dak bungalow last night, just five miles from Nana Sarai. Besides, owing to the excitement caused by Professor Madderson's discoveries, we've had police there guarding the stones for several weeks. It was only yesterday, when the last of the excavated stones was removed to Lahore, that the special guard was withdrawn."

Sir James nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "Yesterday morning the special guard was withdrawn—and last night the meeting took place."

"What?"

Both men stared at him incredulously. The Commissioner smiled. "Isn't it, after all, quite logical?" he asked. "It is of a piece with the meeting in the D.S.P.'s compound. Nana Sarai last night was the one spot the police could be trusted not to visit."

"But——" began Ted confusedly, voicing the problem that was in all their minds. Bolney interrupted him.

"How did the news reach you?" he demanded, almost violently, of the Commissioner.

"From Captain Cameron," replied Sir James. "One of his subordinates was working round Nana Sarai and came into Sukurpur to-day. Cameron heard the story from a chuprassi after we got back from the dam, and thought it better to tell me at once."

There was silence for a time while Bolney still stood biting his lips and frowning. He seemed extraordinarily perturbed by the news. Ted asked a question, more with the intention of easing the strain than gaining information, for he already knew the answer.

"It was on these grounds that you wished nothing to be said about the royal visit, sir?" he said.

The Commissioner assented, then explained. After telling Ted about the matter, he had heard of the Brotherhood's activities at Jellundur, and it had occurred to him that the proposed visit

might be made use of by the seditionists. He resolved to say nothing about it, anyway, until it appeared in the Press, and apparently the same idea had struck The-Powers-That-Be, for he had received an intimation that it was not to be made public at the moment.

"Knowing you were on tour, I did not bother to write you," he added. "It seemed unlikely that you would meet anyone whom you were likely to mention it to. In any case, Bolney naturally would have had to know, and, as it happens, Madderson also, for it seems that one reason for the royalty's visit is an unusual interest in his discoveries."

"Is that really so, sir?" exclaimed Ted. There was a peculiar humour in the idea of the absent-minded Indianologist provoking interest in royal circles. Sir James grimaced good-naturedly.

"We've got to get the old boy to keep us posted as to the site and significance of any new discoveries he makes," he said. "He's got a cheerful way of discovering something and keeping it to himself for a month or two, either because he forgets to tell anybody, or because he is too absorbed in the work to bother about giving interviews to the Press."

Ted laughed.

"We shall have our work cut out," he said. "To make him remember anything as prosaic and unimportant as a modern royalty it will be necessary to mention the matter to him once a week."

Sir James sighed.

"It is going to be strenuous," he agreed, "but

anyway, there is not much fear of his talking—even to his wife."

There was just a faint emphasis on the last words, and Ted took up the unspoken challenge swiftly.

"So far as the ladies of the party are concerned," he said, "I can guarantee that the matter will go no further. I will mention it, both to my wife and Mrs. Madderson——"

The Commissioner interrupted him.

"To Mrs. Chesney, certainly," he said. "One knows that to mention it is all that is necessary. But Mrs. Madderson is a different proposition. At the moment the matter is not likely to have made much impression on her mind, nor, if she were to talk about it, would anyone pay much attention. But to make a mystery of it would be to ensure her telling all her friends—in strict confidence, of course! On the whole, I think it would be better to say nothing to her at all."

Ted felt his cheeks grow hot. The implied contempt of Mae, good-natured though it was, stung him intolerably. His voice was rough, almost rude, when he spoke.

"Probably that would be the safest course in both cases," he said. "As you say, people don't pay much attention to ladies' chatter, though I suppose as Hope is a D.C.'s wife——"

"I was not thinking of her being a D.C.'s wife," interrupted Sir James quietly. "Mrs. Chesney is obviously on a different plane."

Ted felt irritated beyond all reason by the quiet rebuke, and he continued to speak rather hectoringly.

"Well, that is settled, anyway. The matter

need go no further. Besides ourselves and the ladies, there remain only Cameron and Father Xavier who know of the royal visit. Cameron has only to be told to hold his tongue."

"And what about the Padre?"

It was John Bolney who spoke, and both men turned to him, arrested by something in his tone. For a moment he returned their look significantly, but Sir James made a sudden gesture as though brushing the matter away.

"I am not worrying about either Cameron or Father Xavier," he said. "There is another and a more important personage who knows of the royal visit."

"Who is that?"

Both men interjected the query simultaneously. Sir James screwed his mouth up rather wryly.

"The Burra Bhai," he said quietly.

John Bolney leapt to his feet once more as though galvanised by an electric shock. Even Ted started forward in his chair. They gazed at him incredulously.

"But it is impossible," exclaimed Bolney.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"Nevertheless it is true," he answered. "That is why I sent for you. It seems quite certain that the Burra Bhai spoke of the projected royal visit last night. We don't know, of course, what he said, nor why the matter should interest him, but that a great personage is to visit us next cold weather and that the Burra Bhai spoke of it last night is 'gup' in the Nana Sarai bazaar to-day. You know the curious mixture of childishness and secretiveness in the native mind. They

will tell you so much, but no more. You will probably be able to elicit the 'more,' Bolney," he added, turning to the Policeman.

Bolney nodded absently. He scarcely seemed to hear, and his only comment went wide of the mark.

"But who——" he murmured helplessly.

Ted too was asking himself the same question. There had flashed across his mind a recollection of the native he had seen watching him with Mae in the garden, and with a spasm of uneasiness he strove to recall whether they had spoken of the royal visit then. But he was certain they had not. How then could the man have overheard? He tried to remember whether any of the servants had been present when the matter was discussed at dinner, but again he was almost sure there had been none. He made an effort to conjure up a picture of the dinner-table, to remember how it had stood, and whether there had been any trees or bushes near that would have afforded cover to an eavesdropper, but he could never visualise successfully, and the effort was a failure. Besides, he reflected, why in thunder should anyone wish to listen to what was, after all, only ordinary dinner-table talk? They could not have known that anything of interest would be said. The vague familiarity of the man which had struck him before, recurred to his mind, and he strove to trace it, but again he was unsuccessful. He brought his thoughts back with a jerk, realising that the Commissioner was speaking.

"For myself," Sir James said, "I do not attach any very great importance to the matter having leaked out. After all, all we want to avoid at

the moment is a premature, definite disclosure of the matter, giving names and dates. That will have to come in due course, but it is advisable that it should not come before the authorities have the matter of the Brotherhood well in hand and have a clear notion of what precautions will be necessary. It is always awkward if seditious propaganda seems to have the effect of altering any projected programme. The Government will not, of course, issue an official denial of any rumours which may arise, but the mere absence of an announcement on the subject will be sufficient to rob any such rumours of vitality. They will soon die out, and that, after all, is all that is needed."

Bolney assented, and both men half rose to take their leave, but Sir James remained seated. It was obvious that he had something further to say—something, moreover, which he found it difficult to say.

"There is one other rather curious point about the meeting last night," he said, "and that is that the Brotherhood seems to have sworn enmity, not to Madderson exactly, but to his discoveries. The fence which had been erected round the spot where his major excavations had taken place was broken down, and the crimson cobra, the Brotherhood's sign of execration, was found stamped on the stones around. Why?"

Ted ejaculated incredulously.

"Why, who on earth could take exception to a mild old bird like Madderson?" he exclaimed.

Bolney seemed more peevish than surprised.

"Things are bad enough," he said, "with the Brotherhood to cope with, and a royalty in the

offing, but life will be quite unbearable if we have to look after an absent-minded Indianologist into the bargain. Is there really any serious threat to Madderson?"

Sir James shook his head reassuringly.

"I don't for one moment think that Madderson himself is in any danger," he said. "It was, I believe, merely a symbolic action, showing the Brotherhood's attitude towards what his discoveries may mean."

"What's that?" asked Ted.

Sir James seemed rather embarrassed. This was evidently the point to which he had led up, but he found it difficult to explain.

"Ever heard of the—Teacher?" he asked at last.

Ted shook his head, then, in sudden enlightenment, added that he had heard that Madderson's discoveries were supposed to tell of such a person. The Commissioner nodded and looked enquiringly at Bolney.

"I've heard rumours, sir," the D.S.P. said in answer to the look, "but as they did not affect my district I did not bother much. After all, it is no new thing. There have been items about it in the Press for years——"

"Oh no, no," Sir James interrupted him, "that is quite a different matter. In fact, we have had many indignant disclaimers from the quarter you mention, dissociating themselves entirely from anything to do with the present 'interloper.' Either somebody has borrowed the big idea, or"—he shrugged his shoulders. "The whole thing is probably a myth," he concluded.

Ted was somewhat puzzled.

"Has somebody been trying to fulfil the supposed prophecies of Madderson's discoveries?" he asked.

Sir James shook his head.

"No, that hardly fits the facts," he said thoughtfully. For a moment or two he remained silent, then, apparently making up his mind, began speaking, though seemingly rather wide of the subject under discussion.

"Both the I.C.S. and the police are provincial services," he said, "and I often think that we miss more than we realise in the way of a broad view of various happenings. Anything important that happens in other parts of the Peninsula naturally we hear, but often quite tiny incidents are enlightening and significant. I'll give you an instance. As long ago as last November, down near Rameswaram, during a religious festival, there occurred an incident that was considered worthy of note in the Press. Shorn of embellishments, it amounted to nothing more or less than that a strange shape, described as resembling a flying horse, had emerged, seemingly from a cloud, had circled nine times over the heads of the multitude and had then vanished into a cloud once again. There were other distinctly more picturesque versions, of course, but that seemed the most credible. One thing is certain, and that is that it was looked upon as the portent of a new avatar. The whole of Rameswaram was agog with expectancy of a new Teacher whose coming was imminent. That, as I said, was last autumn, and it was the only incident of its kind reported in the Press or known to us up here. It was only to-day, in conversation with Cameron, that I

learnt the strange fact that surveyors in his department, working in areas as widely separated as Bangalore, Nagpur, Agra and Dehra Dun, had all stumbled across the same story, each time with a local setting. In one case the surveyor even claimed to have seen the 'horse,' and—here is the curious fact—all more or less simultaneously. If men working in districts as scattered as those named all heard the same story, one may take it that it was pretty widely spread. Doubtless there would be—if one sifted the evidence—some explanation; doubtless the Rameswaram story had had time to spread. Still, it is curious.

“ That was in November. In February came Madderson's discoveries. The interest taken in them was purely expert and historical—the interest he himself has in them. It was only incidentally, as it were, that the prophetic nature of the inscriptions became known. When it did, it roused a veritable storm of excitement in the Vernacular Press, *because it fitted in with the trend of the moment*. There can be no doubt about that. The idea of a coming Teacher was already in the minds of the people, and Madderson's discoveries served to confirm and elucidate it. Since then, expectancy has gone in a crescendo. The 'horse' has 'appeared' in several places, and rumours have arisen that not only it, but the Teacher himself, the Holy One, has been seen, and has even addressed the people. There are wild stories of signs and portents. Just how much substratum of truth there is in them it is impossible to say. The authorities have been in two minds whether to regard the Holy One as a

real entity or as a myth, but it would seem that the Brotherhood is in no doubt."

"But why on earth should they object to him?" exclaimed Ted, as the Commissioner paused.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"For the same reason as they object to their more constitutional brethren, I imagine," he said. "Though he talks of liberation, of the coming of the millennium, I gather that he counsels patience. All must await the fulness of time; and that, obviously, does not suit the Brotherhood's book."

"In that case it would seem," said Chesney, "that the Teacher is a man to be encouraged—he may stop recruits flocking to the Brotherhood's banner."

"Oh, undoubtedly," agreed Sir James; "we shall give him all the discreet encouragement that is in our power, but that may not amount to much."

Bolney remarked rather gloomily, as he and Chesney rose to their feet, that it seemed to be the police who needed a little encouragement. Both men took their leave shortly after, and went their homeward way in opposite directions. As Ted neared his bungalow a rider passed him, and a voice called "Good night." Turning, he just recognised the Zemindar, Latif Khan, in the dusk.

"What's he doing in Sukurpur?" he wondered, and the question suggested another to his mind: "What was Bolney doing in Jellundur?"

As he turned into his own gate, the memory of the native he had seen watching him with Mae came back to his mind, and once again a sense of

vague familiarity haunted him. A sudden idea struck him, and he stopped dead in his stride.

“Was it that?” he murmured half aloud.
“No, it couldn’t be—and yet——”

With his brow still knit in thought he walked on slowly up the drive to the house.

CHAPTER VII

YSOBEL lay back in an attitude of luxurious ease on the bed. She made a beautiful, somewhat exotic picture in the bare hotel room—like a bright jewel in a cardboard setting. Her head, with its crown of golden hair, lay cradled on the back of one tiny hand, and her wonderful blue eyes gazed at Mae with a look of inscrutable soulfulness. She was, in point of fact, wondering how long her visitor intended to remain. This was the last night in Sukurpur. To-morrow Ysobel, and indeed most of the feminine portion of the cantonment, would leave for the hills. Hope was remaining on for another week, and it had been arranged that Ysobel and Mae were to travel together. The two had become fast friends in that strange fashion which seems to be wholly independent of either mutual tastes or esteem. Their main point of contact appeared to be a mastery of the *lingua franca* of women. This had led them along the usual course, their friendship passing through the stage which concerns itself with the latest vagaries of fashion to the more confidential one in which toilet secrets are exchanged. It was now approaching the third degree of intimacy.

Mae rose restlessly and moved nearer to the open doors which gave on to the verandah.

"The last night!" she murmured. "Oh—I don't know what I shall do!"

"What is the matter?" asked Ysobel. The remark had obviously been intended to draw such a question.

Mae turned and looked at her, seemingly in doubt. Then she moved over to the bed.

"I can't tell you," she said. "At least I ought not to . . . Hope is a friend of yours. . . ."

After which it seemed futile to keep up the mystery.

"Of course I had seen it all," said Ysobel at the close of the lengthy recital. "I've been wondering how to help you. I felt, somehow, directly we met, that I was meant to help you."

Mae had a sudden spasm of amusement in the midst of her luxury of grief. The day at the dam she had overheard Donald Cameron commenting on his step-aunt to Margaret Fraser.

"If Ysobel ever made a suet pudding," he had said, "she'd believe that the cow had had some psychic prevision of the event," to which Margaret, who was not over-domesticated, had replied: "Do you get suet from cows?"

As the words flashed into her mind now, Mae recognised their truth. The focus of interest in Ysobel's world was the point where she herself appeared—seemingly heralded by Fate from all eternity. Yet the knowledge in no way deterred Mae from continuing the outpouring of her soul's secrets, for, indeed, what she craved most at the moment was an audience rather than a confidante.

It was late when she left Ysobel's room, and, as she went, the older woman rose from the bed and went over to the glass. For some moments she examined herself critically. She was in a state of seething unrest and fierce jealousy—jealousy that Mae should have a romance. Ysobel had taken the girl's measure fairly accurately on their first meeting—in fact, it had largely contributed to the swiftness of their friendship, for Ysobel was one of those who unconsciously seek their friends among their inferiors. Indeed, it was chiefly Mae's 'looking-glass' qualities which had recommended her to the older woman, and at the moment Ysobel felt rather as she would have done if the mirror in front of her had developed a romance of its own.

For a long time she remained, posing this way and that in front of the glass, trying on her jewellery, and finally draping herself in a black-and-gold embroidered shawl. She was undoubtedly a beautiful woman, and, more than that, she was both clever and talented; she had money of her own, and she had travelled widely. Yet, strangely, the one great romance, or as she would have phrased it, her destiny, had eluded her. This was her first visit to India. Would she find it here? She wondered, and even as she framed the question there floated to her, dim and distant, the notes of a song.

She stood motionless, listening. The song drew nearer imperceptibly, yet she could not locate the direction from which it came. On a sudden impulse she slipped out on to the verandah, then into the moonlit compound.

Night had thrown her veil of glamour on the

dusty land, and the garden was a study in ebony and silver. The song had ceased : she could not have told how near the singer had drawn, nor in what direction he had gone, but the magic of the night drew her out. She paused in the dense black shadow of a gigantic banyan and rested against the compound wall. To her left showed the strange, alluring silhouette of an eastern town against the sky, crowned by the triple domes of a mosque. Before her stretched the wide plain—a shimmering expanse of silver—and faint in the distance she could make out, as Hope had done a few nights before, the nebulous outline of the hills.

She drew in a deep breath of the cool night air, and the fierce unrest of her soul grew till it became almost a physical pain. She never knew how long she had stood there motionless, nor at what precise moment she realised that a figure was standing near her—had been there all the time—that two eyes were gazing into hers.

For a moment neither spoke, then very quietly the man moved over to her side.

“ You have come,” he said.

“ Who . . . are you ? ” she stammered. She felt angry with herself for the banality of the words, but no others would come to her mind.

He did not answer immediately, but stood smiling down at her. He was tall and of a strangely lithe, virile figure. He wore European clothes, but a white-and-gold turban covered his head. Of his face she could make out little because of the shadow of the tree, but she could see the white glimmer of his smile.

“ Do names matter ? ” he said at last. “ This

is not London—it is the desert. It is not the twentieth century ; it is the morning of time, and we—we are two of that ancient race who lived and loved, sorrowed and died, away out there ”—he threw his hand out towards the desert. “ Do you not think so ? ”

His English was perfect, but he spoke with just a faint trace of a foreign accent. Ysobel could not answer him immediately. Her temperament, her whole being, it seemed, had risen in tumultuous response to his words. This—this was what she had waited for all her life.

“ Do you not think so ? ” he repeated.

“ Yes, I think so,” she murmured.

He gave a laugh.

“ Ah, that old professor,” he cried, “ I met him to-day. He is going back to the desert—back to dig up some more stones. He is very important, but he does not understand. It is only such as you and I who can understand the desert ; we were there when they were chiselling those stones. Do you not think so ? ”

“ I know we were,” she cried suddenly, and he moved nearer to her.

“ Why did you not know me ? ” he asked. “ I have waited for you every night here, and you have not come. Then . . . you did not know me.”

Ysobel put up her hand as if to still the beating of her heart, for she was trembling with the violence of its throbbing.

“ I—I did know you,” she said, and she really believed that she spoke the truth. “ It was only for the moment——”

He moved away from her out into the moonlight, standing with his back turned to her.

"The desert and the hills," he said. "Can you not hear them calling? Come—let us go."

He put up his hand as though in a signal, and as she moved out to his side she started in surprise, for a huge grey car slid silently out of the shadows and drew up by them. He turned to her, laughing.

"The twentieth century—it has its uses. Come—let us go!"

Recklessly she stepped into the car and sank down in its luxurious depths. She was drugged, intoxicated with romance, caring nothing of where they went, nor of what should be the outcome of this venture. She knew only that the destiny she had sought fruitlessly had come to meet her, and that Mae would not see her at the station the next morning when the train left for the hills.

He spoke little as the car flew over the level, sandy track. She could see his face better now, but still the shadows were baffling. He lay back in his place, his head resting against the soft velvet of the upholstery, and his eyes never left her form. He had a strange trick of gazing through half-closed lids, and his thick black lashes made his eyes seem no more than narrow gleams of light. It was only as the ground began to rise beneath the car, and she could feel the hills close and green about them, that he spoke.

"You are beautiful," he murmured, "so beautiful," and bending forward, he laid his lips on hers.

The car drew to a standstill, and in a dream she descended. They were enthroned on a hummocky ridge of hill and she could see the desert

spread out below them. Behind her rose the outlines of a house.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"This is my home," he answered, "between the desert and the hills."

CHAPTER VIII

THE waning moon shone with a curious metallic radiance on the copper roof of the temple of Bulana. The atmosphere was close and heavy as it can only be among the foothills. Far out on the plain a breeze was stirring, but here all was deadly still, and the faint moisture in the air which breathed from the verdant slopes served only to intensify the heat. The hum of a hundred hungry mosquitoes sounded from the shadows beneath the trees.

The temple stood at the top of the village street, which fell away steeply below it, past the tiny town which lay shrouded in darkness. Yet the streets were strangely astir, though the hour was close on midnight. Groups stood at the corner of each street talking in low tones, and there was a perpetual stream of worshippers moving towards the temple. Several times there had sounded the hoot of a motor horn, and cars had disgorged their passengers at the foot of the hill.

It was a strange scene, and one which could have been seen nowhere save in India. Men wearing clothes made in Bond Street walked side by side with devotees whose sole garment was fashioned from a yard of cotton home-spun ;

babu English mingled with the patois of the hills, and men descending from limousines were jostled by the rough crowd of peasants from the plains.

Stranger still was the fact that, though each man knew the reason for his presence in Bulana that night, not one could have told the source of the rumour which had brought him thither. It had flown from mouth to mouth in the bazaars, just the simple message, "He will be there," yet none could have said from whom it had emanated.

"It is a parrot's tale; he will not come," exclaimed a man standing in the midst of a group outside the temple walls.

"But no, it is no foolish talk," retorted another. "Did it not happen so at Jhemal?"

"Tchah," exclaimed a third, as a group of hill-men passed them, "we waste our time. It is for these 'jungli-wallahs' that he comes."

"Then why," retorted the first speaker acidly, "hast thou walked so far?"

"Nay," protested the optimist once again. "I say——"

He got no further, for at that moment a strange, unearthly cry rang out, and everywhere men paused, arrested in their stride, staring skywards. For a space none could locate the sound, then of a sudden one man pointed in the direction of the plains, and a strange sound like the sigh of an indrawn breath was audible, as the crowd all turned their eyes southward. There, clearly illumined in white fire, small and distant, wraith-like and transparent, showed the form of a flying horse!

For perhaps a full minute it was visible, then

a cloud overshadowed it, showing itself faintly luminous at first, but gradually fading to invisibility. So fleeting had been the vision that the watchers rubbed their eyes as though doubting their sight. Had they been of the West, they would most certainly have murmured the word "hallucination," but the Eastern mind is less sceptical.

For a space the streets remained crowded with men clinging together in terrified excitement, with groups all pointing and gesticulating agitatedly; then, as though with one accord, all turned and pressed forward into the temple.

The outer courts were packed to suffocation, and even the inner chambers were full to overflowing, the innermost of all alone being left empty. For perhaps an hour the multitude waited in dead silence—a silence which grew, as the minutes passed, to an all but unbearable pitch of nervous expectancy. Then, once more, that strange sigh of a myriad indrawn breaths went round the assemblage.

A light was shining in the holy of holies. It shone, in a beam, from somewhere high up in the vaulted roof, but no one could locate its source. For a space it flickered, grew brighter, dimmed again, then went out, and the ensuing darkness seemed filled with eerie presences. Nerves grew tense and rigid with expectancy; then, suddenly, across the dense silence a Voice spoke a simple greeting of peace and good-will in the patois of the hills.

Even more than the light, the Voice was impossible to locate. It had come from neither the roof nor the inner shrine, but rather had

seemed to breathe from the air. None could have told from which direction it had spoken.

For a space the silence and the darkness remained unbroken; then once more the light showed, and grew gradually brighter. For a moment a vague shape, no more than a shadow, as of some terrifying presence, seemed to move in the inner shrine, and a wave of terror passed through the crowd; but even as here and there there was an abrupt movement, the Voice spoke again, calm and distinct, but strangely distant.

It spoke of the power of love.

For perhaps five minutes the strange, unearthly tones went on, speaking in short, simple sentences that all could understand. It described the eternal conflict between love and hate.

"Always there have been these two. They are in conflict still. The powers of hate strive against me. They strive to prevent me. Yet—have no fear—I will conquer——"

The Voice wavered and grew faint on the last words as though speaking under stress. Then, faint at first but swelling in a menacing rumble, there came a sound of distant thunder. Involuntarily, men in the outer courts looked up at the skies, but they remained serene and unclouded. Still, with an indescribable horror, the eerie sound swelled and grew, as though rushing inevitably to some unknown climax of terror which none could foretell.

The darkness seemed alive with evil presences, and men sweated in fear as the ghostly, threatening thunder rolled on around them. Here and there a frightened, whimpering cry broke out.

Then, when the tension seemed all but

unbearable, the sound ceased abruptly, and in the hush that ensued the Voice spoke once more its simple message of peace and goodwill. A gasp that was almost a sob of relief resounded through the building, but the ordeal was not over yet. For a moment a vaguely beautiful white shape showed dimly in the inner shrine, but even as it grew defined enough to be visible it seemed to waver and faint once again. Then across it there passed a black shadow—no more, yet fraught with a suggestion of unimaginable evil. For a space the light and the dark seemed in conflict and the issue remained uncertain. The menacing rumble of thunder swelled again, though fainter. It seemed like the growling of some vast cosmic beast. Then, rending the air, cutting like a knife across the tight-strung nerves of the assembly, tore the sound of a terrible shriek. For one second a huge shape of horror appeared, as though in full flight, out of the inner shrine, and with yells of terror those nearest the doors flung themselves upon them, striving to get out. But the doors were bolted.

A ghastly panic seemed inevitable. There were shrieks and screams as those nearest the shrine flung themselves backward, then, trumpet-like across the din, came the sound of the Voice, clear and authoritative, bidding all be calm.

The light was shining brightly in the inner shrine, showing it completely empty. So utterly had that foul shape of evil vanished, that even that unsceptical audience wondered if their nerves had not played them false. Half-shamedly they sank down in silence, and the Voice continued speaking.

It spoke of life.

As the resonant tones rolled out across the silence of the hushed multitude, there came to each individual in that vast audience a sense of the crushing monotony, the sordid uselessness of the daily round. The Voice spoke, with infinite gentleness, of the need for patience, of the folly of precipitancy. Only in the fullness of time could all be accomplished. But that time was not far distant.

"To you," the strangely ringing tones went on, "who have waited through the ages, the hour of deliverance will come. You shall know the joys of love, of life, and of liberty. The millennium shall dawn at last upon the drear desert of your daily toil. Then you shall rest."

Of the joys of that millennium the Voice spoke in terms that all could well understand. Excitement thrilled through the audience. Not a man among them but saw a vision of Life in a new and fuller measure, looming imminently upon him. The Voice ended upon the crest of expectancy, and suddenly, in the silence which ensued, a figure came out of the inner shrine and stood in the arched doorway. He was clad in flowing garments of snowy white. His hands and feet were bare, and a white handkerchief head-dress was bound round his forehead with a linen band. A faintly transparent veil covered his face, through which two strangely magnetic eyes were dimly visible.

For a second the audience gazed, spellbound, in silence. Then, as the Teacher raised both hands in benediction, the whole multitude fell prostrate in adoration.

CHAPTER IX

HOPE leant back in her chair and watched the absorbing spectacle of the inmates of the Belvoir Hotel dining. She had been nearly a month in Paharital, and already, as an amusement, the occupation was beginning to wear a trifle thin, but she focused her mind on it deliberately, for she was anxious to avoid any form of introspection. Her tiny table was placed in an alcove and she could look on at the madding crowd, listening to its clatter and din, in something the manner, Donald Cameron had told her teasingly, of a philosopher observing the futilities of his lesser brethren.

The huge room presented a strange spectacle. At one end a Goanese band was discoursing jazz with a vigour and abandon which suggested that the latest freak of occidental civilisation was peculiarly germane to the oriental nature. Hope could hear the wheedling whines of the saxophones, but for the rest the music was drowned in the clamour of a hundred voices. It was a motley crowd in which East and West, Jew and Gentile mingled inextricably, for in Paharital there was neither creed nor caste, neither convention nor commandment. All met on the same level of, perhaps, a common humanity, but Hope wondered,

not for the first time, as she looked on, whether that did not suggest too high a standard for this modern Arcadia.

She looked rather lingeringly at the table where Donald Cameron was dining with the Frasers, having been persuaded (without much difficulty) to quit his seat at the bachelors' table. Sir James was 'up' on ten days' leave from Sukurpur. Later, when he returned to the plains, Margaret would come under her wing and sit at her table. She found herself wishing that the girl was with her at the moment. She would serve to keep her mind off other subjects; and, moreover, she had grown fond of both Margaret and Donald. There was a clean wholesomeness, a strength and an idealism about them, which appealed to her tremendously. Donald was in Paharital, not on leave as were most of the men, but on duty. The place had been made his summer headquarters, and he had an office in one of the hotel suites which stood opposite Hope's own rooms. She often paused, as she passed, to listen with amusement as he addressed his babus in language which was more facetious than official. He and Margaret were engaged, she understood, but nothing was to be made public until Lady Fraser returned to India. They would make an ideal couple.

Hope switched her mind away from the topic rather abruptly. She had no wish, at the moment, to think about marriage. Near her own table sat a trio at whom she looked with interest. Sir Tisra and Lady Kruton were old inhabitants of the Belvoir, but their companion, Preacher Stevens, had arrived only a few days before. Sir Tisra was true to type, and his personality did not

intrigue Hope greatly. A little fussy, a little self-important, with quite a kindly heart and a complete unconsciousness of any values save those quoted in £ s. d., he would make a useful friend and a good husband, but she would not have cared to cross him in a business deal. His wife was a tall, angular female, with steely blue eyes and a permanent wave which made her head look like a mahogany cauliflower. Her face wore a pinched and hungry air which was certainly not due to a meagre diet. She made Hope think of a flame whose sole weakness lay in an insufficiency of fuel, and temperamentally she classed her—though she could not have said why—with Ysobel and Mae.

The Preacher interested Hope more than either of his companions. He had been in the station only a few days, and this was the first time she had seen him at close quarters. His rather unusual title had made her think that he was probably an American, and a faint twang in his speech, which she caught now and again above the din, confirmed the impression. He was a striking-looking man, built on big lines. Tall—possibly even taller than he looked, for the unusual squareness of his shoulders must detract from his height—he carried his head thrown back at an almost aggressive angle. He had thick dark hair which grew strangely above his forehead, and very thick, level brows set above shrewd, piercing grey eyes. It was those eyes that intrigued Hope. Looking up a few minutes before, she had caught them fixed on her, and the look had disturbed her oddly, for it was not the casual glance of a stranger, but the steady gaze of one

who had penetrated past the barriers of her reserve and who stood upon the threshold of her innermost thoughts. The feeling seized upon her that while she had sat there, deliberately focusing her thoughts on the room and its motley company, this complete stranger had somehow read her intention, and, more, had divined the cause which prompted it. The thought filled her with a resentful confusion, and she felt a sudden impulse to leave her coffee undrunk and go up to her rooms, but she fought it back with her usual common-sense.

"That kind of look is probably his stock-in-trade," she told herself cynically, as she selected a cigarette from her case. "Don't behave like a school-girl."

She held her ground, remaining on at the table until the Preacher himself had left in the wake of the Krutons. He looked a majestic figure in his long black gown, cut on flowing lines, which almost swept the ground as he walked.

Hope stayed on until her cigarette was finished. The big room had emptied, and only Mae and Ysobel remained talking together at the small table which they shared. Hope was conscious that they were watching her covertly as she rose to go, but she walked quietly into the hall without seeming to be aware of their presence. Whatever her mental problems and preoccupations might be, it required more than such as Mae or Ysobel to upset her social poise.

There was dancing going on in the hall when she reached it. The band had contrived to wedge itself into a shallow alcove, and from there, with unabated vigour, it blared forth its syncopated

din. The majority of the residents were standing round the walls, and in the narrow space left along the centre a score of couples gyrated and swayed over the tiled floor. Hope paused in appreciation of the sight of Lady Kruton dancing with a short, fat little man whose head appeared to be on a level with her waist, then, watching her opportunity, she slipped through the throng and made her way up the stairs towards her suite.

There were double doors on the landing, giving on to a verandah, and on a sudden impulse she stepped out before going into her own rooms. It was a wonderful night. There was no moon, but the stars hung like crystal lamps in the sapphire dome. All around, the vast, dark shapes of the hills rose like shadowy sentinels. High on the left she could make out the pale glimmer of the snows, and, below her, the lights of Paharital encircled the black mountain like a necklace of diamonds. Only in the south-west was there a hint of trouble, for there a gigantic mass of cumulus cloud was boiling up, and as she looked she caught the shimmer of distant lightning, and heard a faint menacing rumble.

"It looks like an early monsoon," said a voice behind her.

She turned, startled, to find that the Preacher had come out on to the verandah. She felt a spasm of uneasiness, a desire to ask him how long he had been standing there watching her. For the moment she found herself wondering if he had trespassed on her thoughts again, even though her back had been turned to him. Then she brushed away the absurdity.

"It does," she agreed. "It will be a relief

when it breaks. I hate that feeling of the hush before the storm."

He nodded slowly and gravely, his eyes fixed on the distant thunder-clouds.

"Yes," he said. "It saps courage; it presses upon the nerves; trifles are exaggerated, and, worse still, we underestimate our strength. We cannot face the battle."

Hope turned away abruptly. She was a reserved woman, and her nature rose up in resentment at this intrusion on her thoughts. His words might indeed have been spoken merely by chance, but she could not feel that they had been. She felt disturbed, almost frightened, at the ease with which this stranger passed through the barriers of her defence.

"Mrs. Chesney," he said suddenly, bending towards her.

She turned again, swiftly.

"So you know my name?" she said.

He laughed.

"We know everybody's name in Paharital," he said. "Do you not know mine?"

She nodded, recognising the skilfulness of the parry.

"Yes," she said, "but——"

She did not finish her sentence, wondering if he would resent what she had been about to say.

"But——?" he prompted, as she remained silent.

She looked up at him, smiling.

"I wondered why you called yourself 'Preacher,'" she said. "It is not a usual designation. Are you an American?"

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He made a gesture, she could not say whether in assent or denial.

"I have been in America," he answered, "but—I call myself 'Preacher' because that is what I am. That, and nothing more. I am not a priest—not even a clergyman. I am a preacher; I have a message to give to the world. I am no pastor; I have no flock, but I preach. That is all."

"I see," she said slowly, though she was not quite sure that she did. She turned away once more, and looked out over towards the snows. She felt suddenly a desire to hear the remark which before she had parried.

"But—you had something to say to me?" she said over her shoulder.

He smiled.

"I wanted to apologise," he said simply. "It is an unwarrantable intrusion to—trespass on our neighbour's thoughts."

Hope did not answer. She felt the blood rise and dye her cheeks and neck, but she would not speak. By what strange power this stranger could penetrate to the threshold of her soul she did not know, but she would open no gate save in her own good time. With a sudden movement she stood up, taking her arms from the verandah rail on which she had been leaning.

"It is getting chilly," she said. "I must go in."

She passed him; then, on second thoughts, paused.

"Perhaps you were right," she added. "We should not shirk the battle. Good night."

And she went quietly into her room.

For some time she sat without moving. She did not even turn on the light. She wanted only to think. She would face out the problem that was teasing her soul once and for all. She had come upstairs with that intention half formed, and the Preacher's words had decided her.

"What was to be her attitude to Ted and Mae? That was the question which she had shirked facing. He had been up for ten days' leave, and in those days Hope's endurance had been stretched to breaking-point. Yet she had said nothing.

She was in no danger of exaggerating the affair, nor did she blame Ted unduly. She had that half-maternal knowledge and understanding of men which only an attractive woman can possess, and it made her lenient in her judgment. Her estimate of the affair remained unchanged—it was simply a sordid, vulgar flirtation which needed the moonlight to tone its garishness, and it would follow the way of such things. She was in no doubt as to that. Rather the battle was in her own soul. She knew her own proud, rather fastidious nature only too well. She knew there were limits of humiliation beyond which she could not be driven if there were to be any question of things regaining their old footing. And, when it came to being humiliated before the motley crowd at the Belvoir, and pitied by her own servants, it seemed to Hope that those limits had been reached.

Yet she had hesitated to precipitate a crisis. She knew Ted's nature as well as her own, and she knew that to broach the subject to him now would mean a split. He would never give in.

Hope's thoughts swung back to herself again.

Why did she shirk the idea of a split? Though to a certain extent a naturally religious woman, she belonged to no fixed creed—she hardly ever went to church. It was not that she held any theoretical objections to divorce that she could have defined. The matter had simply never crossed her orbit, and she was at a loss now to understand the fierce revolt of her whole being which the idea seemed to call forth. Was it, she wondered, that her old love for Ted had survived not only the deadening effect of time, but the disillusionment that those days of petty prevarication and sordid subterfuge had brought? Or was it merely that she feared the social slur? To the second question she returned an unqualified negative. The first she could not answer. Yet it seemed to her that the real cause of her revolt from the idea lay in neither of these two directions. Nor had it anything to do with the children. She had not had the time as yet to consider how it would affect them. Rather it seemed to her that the whole fabric of her life rose up in protest. Every memory of the past, every association of the present, every unconscious plan for the future caged her in. Every ideal, every instinct cried out as at a lowering of the standard; yet, for the moment, she could not see in what this lowering consisted. She groped blindly for the hidden thoughts which lurked perpetually out of sight in the secret recesses of her soul, but she groped in vain.

With a sudden exclamation she rose and switched on the light.

"Time will show," she said out loud.

She crossed over the room and took up a silver

cigarette-box. Her nerves needed steadying. She would do no more thinking that night.

Suddenly across the landing she heard a startled cry. There followed the sound of hurrying feet, then Donald Cameron's voice cried sharply:

"Stay where you are—don't come any further, Margaret."

In a few strides Hope was across the room, and had opened her door.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

The door of Donald's suite was open. She could see his figure inside, bending over something on the floor. Margaret was standing on the landing, obediently going no further.

"But why can't I come in, Don?" she exclaimed as Hope came out on to the landing. "I know something's wrong, but I'm not frightened. I'm not a baby——"

"What is it?" asked Hope again.

She crossed over to Margaret's side, and at that moment Donald came out to them.

"That you, Mrs. Chesney?" he said. "I'm glad you're here. Will you—take Margaret into your room?"

"What is the matter, Don?" she answered quietly. He was strangely white, and his voice shook a little, though he was perfectly calm.

"Something is very wrong, I'm afraid," he said in the same quiet tone she had used, but he spoke rapidly. "I must run and fetch a doctor quickly——"

With a sudden movement Hope passed him and switched on the light in his room, despite his cry of warning. Then she saw what was wrong,

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and recoiled momentarily. Margaret gave a little choking cry, but she remained quite still.

In the middle of the floor was lying the body of a man—Donald's chuprassi—and his throat had been cut from ear to ear.

"He's dead," said Donald quietly. He had passed Hope, and now he took the cloth from a table and laid it over the man. "I'll go for the doctor, but he has been dead some time."

He made as though to push them out of the room, but Hope turned of her own accord. She slipped her arm round Margaret, who was standing white and shaking, but without uttering a sound. "We'll give the alarm," Hope said. "You stay here."

It seemed an incredibly short space of time before the doctor was on the scene, but he could do nothing.

"Sir James has telephoned for the police," Hope said, as she came back on to the landing. Margaret had stayed with her father. "I didn't want to let anyone else in the hotel know, except of course the manager—but he's out. Are—are there any traces of who did it, Don?"

He shook his head. He had come out on to the landing whilst the doctor made a brief examination.

"None that I can see," he said. "I can't understand it—and there's one queer thing: nothing's been taken, so far as I can make out, except one map; and why the mischief anyone should want to steal a map that will be published in a few months' time beats me."

"What map is it?" she exclaimed.

"It's one of the sheets we were drawing—the one of the dam near Sukurpur——"

Just at that moment the door opened and the doctor, Major Rendon, came out quickly.

"There's one queer thing," he said, "that you hadn't noticed, Cameron: the man's chest was stamped with the sign of the crimson cobra!"

"What?"

Donald and Hope uttered the ejaculation simultaneously. Donald was rather white.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "The Secret Brotherhood! That was the man who brought the story of the meeting at Nana Sarai!"

CHAPTER X

HOPE walked rather listlessly along the narrow switchback of a road which bore the proud title of Mall. It was Sunday morning, and she was on her way to the Assembly Rooms, where the Preacher had announced that he would hold a service at eleven o'clock. She wondered as she walked what was the real motive which was taking her. Curiosity, probably, she told herself cynically, but she was conscious also of a desire to escape for a while into an atmosphere uncharged with complications and sinister happenings.

It was three days since the night of the murder, and as yet nothing had occurred which shed any light on the mystery, though there had been other strange happenings even that same night. The Commissioner had arrived on the scene almost immediately after the doctor's discovery of the sign of the crimson cobra, and with him had come an agitated police officer and three Indian constables. Hope had gone in search of Margaret, and the two of them had remained downstairs for the rest of the evening, but Donald had given them both full details later.

The body of the man had been removed after the police had made their examination, and the

place had been ransacked. The room was in wild disorder, but beyond the map nothing seemed to have been taken. It was while endeavouring to trace the murderer's line of escape that the second strange happening came to light.

"Whose room is that?" the police officer, a man of the name of Wallis, had asked, pointing to the apartment which adjoined Donald's bedroom. None of the party could answer the question, but the manager, who had by that time arrived on the scene, supplied the information.

"That is Preacher Stevens' room," he said.

Wallis knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Again he rapped, with the same result, but this time there seemed to come a faint sound from the room, not unlike a moan. With no further ceremony Wallis opened the door and stood amazed on the threshold.

The Preacher was bound to a chair in the middle of the room. His arms and legs had been tied with a length of coarse rope lashed round and round; his mouth was gagged, and a black cloth had been fastened over his eyes. There was a faint smell of chloroform in the room, but the Preacher, when they unbound him, was conscious, and after a short time sufficiently recovered to tell his story.

This had not amounted to much. He had returned to his room after talking to Hope on the verandah, and had been writing at his table when a slight noise had made him look up. Two men, wearing black suits, black gloves, cowls and masks, had been standing near him, though he had not heard them enter. Before he could move, one of them had thrown himself upon him and a chloroform

rag had been pressed over his mouth and nose. When he came to himself he had been as they found him and the men had gone.

Leaving the Preacher in the doctor's hands, Wallis had searched the room but had discovered nothing of interest except an empty dispatch case with a broken lock bearing again the stamp of the crimson cobra. The Preacher on being questioned said there had been nothing in the dispatch case except the MSS. of his sermons.

Hope thought it all over for perhaps the hundredth time as she walked along the Mall. What strange lunatics were they who would commit murder to obtain a map, gag and bind a man in order to steal his sermons? There was a touch of wild buffoonery about the affair which made her wonder at times if it were not some fantastic dream from which she would awaken. Perhaps Donald was right in supposing that the motive for the murder had been vengeance, but that did not explain the almost farcical incident of the Preacher and his sermons. Her mind went round and round, covering the ground she had covered a hundred times before without arriving at any feasible explanation. The affair had been hushed up in a marvellous manner, and none of the inhabitants of the Belvoir were aware that a tragedy had occurred in their midst, but she and Margaret with Donald and the Commissioner had discussed the matter amongst themselves many times. John Bolney had been wired for. Over a month ago, she understood, he had been put on special duty for investigating the matter of the Brotherhood's activities, and his whereabouts at the moment were a shade doubtful, but it was hoped

that he might arrive any day. Perhaps he would throw some light on the affair. . . .

She was glad to reach her destination and to get shelter from the sun. The expected monsoon had not yet broken, and the heat was stifling in spite of the altitude. The room was already crowded when she arrived, indeed it seemed to her, as she looked round from the seat she succeeded in obtaining in the corner, that the whole of Paharital had for once decided to attend a religious service. Sir Tisra and Heloise Kruton were seated well to the front, and she could see Ysobel some little way behind them, while Donald and Margaret were wedged like herself in a far corner. Sir James and Mae were both among the few absentees.

Very little had been done to give an ecclesiastical air to the room, save the removal of some of its more secular decorations. A lectern stood at one side of the platform at the end of the hall, and close beside it was a small table on which stood what appeared to Hope to be a loud-speaker. There was another small table standing at an angle across the other side of the platform, and on it was a small Crucifix facing down the room. This was the only religious symbol, and its presence startled Hope, not only because she had not expected it, but chiefly by reason of something strange and unfamiliar of which she was vaguely aware as she looked at the symbol. For a long time the reason of this strangeness escaped her, for a Crucifix was not an object which she contemplated frequently, yet each time her eyes returned to it the sense of something wrong, something new, came to her. At last, just as the

Preacher was mounting the steps of the platform, the explanation dawned upon her. The figure was not crucified. It was that of a man standing in front of a cross with arms outstretched, not in transfixion but in triumph. . . .

That was the strangest service Hope had ever attended, and it left her in a state of seething unrest and bewilderment. It had begun unconventionally. The Preacher, mounting the steps, had adjusted the wireless, and instantly strains of music had welled forth from the loud-speaker. Hope had sat up startled, wondering of what the lilting, haunting melodies reminded her. Then she remembered. They were like the strange song that had so disturbed her that night in the desert, though now they came through the medium of strange, wailing stringed instruments, without the sound of the human voice. Once again, as on that night, a feeling of loneliness and desolation swept over her, as the throbbing strains with their whispering underflow of passion played upon her nerves. Yet, through it all, there was, it seemed to her, another impression which she could not analyse. The rhythm of the music was alluring, yet at times it broke meaninglessly, as though its unrestrained freedom had submitted to some incomprehensible and arbitrary convention. Once too there flashed across her a fleeting but haunting sense of familiarity, but it was gone before she could grasp it. Through it all she seemed to be almost two entities, her emotions and her brain working separately, giving each their own interpretations of the melodies. She was conscious of a strange relief when the music ceased and a short silence ensued. Then the Preacher began to speak, but

only, as it were, to give out the notices ; the sermon did not come till later.

He explained the source of the music they had heard, standing informally beside the table which held the loud-speaker and closing the instrument while he spoke. He had a full-toned, resonant voice and a wonderful power of oratory, but more than his words it was his personality which intrigued Hope. Once while he spoke his eyes met hers and she felt again that hot wave of discomfort, that sense of intrusion of which she had been conscious that night on the balcony.

" Music, my friends," he said, " is the universal language. It speaks to all races, and it speaks to all time. From the dawn of our present age until our own day, men have enshrined their thoughts in melody ; have enshrined their love, their passion, their dreams, and above all their religion, in music. And it is for this reason that in this pale dawn of the New Era an effort has been made to revivify, to relearn, to reinterpret some of the melodies of ancient days. They are, as it were, the crystallised jewels which when melted in the crucible of song give out to us the aroma of the olden faiths. And it is for this reason that those of us who have been permitted one glimpse of the Great Coming Light have wished that a cleansing shower of song should first pour over the land, quickening the soil before the Advent of the Sun. For a long time our desire seemed impossible of fulfilment, for though much was done to revive and to teach the old melodies, we were without means of giving them out save to a limited audience. But when the time is ripe for accomplishment the means will not be lacking. It was not for nothing that the

discovery of wireless had already taught us the non-existence of space, but in India, unfortunately, there were obstacles to its use. The Government, for reasons that are obvious, would not countenance a private enterprise connected with religious propaganda over which it would have no control and which could be put to political uses. But as I have said, when the time is ripe the means are always to hand. The Powers willed that one, who will go down to the posterity of the New Era as a herald of the dawn, should visit India this year. Money he had in plenty—it had been given him for the purpose—and before very long all obstacles were overcome. The Government's reasonable and necessary regulations of supervision and censorship we were more than ready to meet, broadcasting stations were set up, and you, my friends, have just been privileged to hear the first notes of that tide of song which will soon flow over this land, awaking it to the glorious promise of the spring. . . ."

Hope, craning her head forward, had no difficulty in fitting the halo to the correct head. There was a glow of self-consciousness trickling down the back of Sir Tisra's neck, and she could see Heloise preening herself like a bird in the sun.

Then followed the sermon.

Hope strove afterwards, when she was back in her own room, to sort out her impressions of what he had said, but she found herself strangely unable to do so. He had spoken of the New Age, picturing the majestic cycles of time, measured only by the wheeling of the stars in their courses; of the darkness of the present age, the travailing and groaning of nations, the widespread

expectancy and hope. He had passed, by a natural sequence of ideas, to speak of the prophecies on the stones of Nana Sarai, and then, using very simple, graphic phrases, he had spoken of the Teacher, who even now was come, describing his own privileged interview with him. Hope had listened, caught by the spell of his oratory, half convinced, certainly unrebelling, yet with one part of her, as always, looking on in criticism. It was only his final words which had filled her with a strange feeling of disquietude. He had spoken of the signs already apparent of the coming New Age, the Age of Unfettered Love.

"Even here, in Paharital, the first faint glimmer of the Light is visible. Do we not see people, men and women, finding strength to shake off the fetters which for so long have held Love in bondage? Do we not see them finding new courage to face the world with the confession of their love, knowing that it is love alone, and no words spoken by men, which forms the bond divine? Do we not also see men and women defying the chill advance of age, rising above the weakness of the flesh, prolonging the years in which, hitherto, it has been given to them to know the glory of love and life? It is the herald of the dawn, the first pale gleam of the morning star which foretells the rising of the sun. Soon we shall see him, and our life shall know the full crown of completion."

He had paused momentarily, then in tones that had changed and deepened with feeling had quoted softly :

"He has heeded the cry of the ageing,
Of the young lovers in captivity
He is aflame for the weariness of the stars. . . ."

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There had followed a hymn which Hope had not sung. She had stood up, in a state of fierce unrest and mental rebellion which held her tongue-tied. She did not know what thoughts or feelings were uppermost in her mind, but she had a sensation of having had the solid ground turn into a quagmire beneath her feet. She looked at the spurious crucifix, and once again it seemed to her that a familiar landmark had been swept away, though she could not say how or why. Looking up as the hymn drew to an end, she had found the Preacher's eyes fixed on her with just that same understanding, half-quizzical gaze which she had experienced before, and once again felt the blood rising in an angry flood to her cheeks.

Back now in her own room, she went over again the problem of Ted and Mae and of her attitude to them, which the murder and its attendant mystery had served to put out of her mind for the last few days. But the lunch-gong found her without a solution. She was grateful for an invitation to join the Frasers' table, for she felt disinclined for a solitary meal, and moreover, she had a great liking for the Commissioner, with his courteous, kindly manner, his sane outlook on the world, and his humorous speech which could at times be frank to the point of bluntness.

"You were among the heathen this morning," she said as they sat down. Donald and Margaret had already begun an animated argument, and she felt a desire to hear what Sir James' verdict of the Preacher's tenets would be.

"On the contrary," he answered, smiling faintly, "since hearing Margaret's description of

her church-going I have come to the conclusion that I was among the few Christians."

Hope laughed.

"It was very . . . modern," she said, falling back on an odd word after vainly searching for one that would fit her thoughts.

"Free love, I gather," he answered cynically. "But, my dear lady, that is not modern—it is older than barbarism. It can still be found in the jungle, but scarcely even in the Zoo."

She laughed again. As she had foreseen, his views were eminently reassuring.

"But I don't understand, Don," she heard Margaret saying, "what he meant about the music. . . ."

Donald explained.

"He said they'd dug up a whole lot of old spirituals and potted them into modern jazz. Then old Patent Medicine saw his way to make a pile, and put up the boodle. In other words, we have now a Krutonian Broadcasting Company, which among other thrilling items will give forth some vernacular music."

Hope laughed a third time. Donald's version might differ from the Preacher's slightly, but she found it vaguely comforting.

"Is it true about the Broadcasting Company?" she asked Sir James.

He nodded.

"The affair has been mooted several times," he said, "but the Government saw difficulties. Sir Tisra Kruton, however, was so ready, nay, even keen to submit to the most rigorous supervision and censorship, that their objections were overcome. In fact, so far as I can see, the K.B.C.

will be a valuable means of propaganda to them."

"What did you think of the sermon, Don?" Hope asked, turning towards the young Scot.

He made a wry face, and she could see the stern Presbyterian blood of his ancestors rising in revolt.

"Rot," he said shortly. "Or maybe I misunderstood him. Anyway, I was disappointed."

Hope left the luncheon-table with the feeling that the ground beneath her feet was solid once more. She wondered if Donald's was the general verdict and whether the influence the Preacher's words had undoubtedly had on her was due chiefly to the personal equation. The man had read her thoughts in a strange way—he had seemed to divine matters of which she had spoken to none. It was inevitable that this should influence her judgment of what he said. The answer to the question in her mind was supplied as she passed a group on the verandah and heard Heloise Kruton's voice uplifted in even more than its usual exclamatory enthusiasm.

"Yes, wasn't it *marvellous*? I must say, I *don't* set up to be religious, but to think one is doing *all that* with a little *money* . . ."

Hope lingered for a moment. She was familiar with Heloise's capital-letter style of diction, and the remarks did not impress her greatly. It seemed, on the whole, fairly obvious that Heloise should approve the Preacher's sentiments.

A man's voice took up the tale.

"Yes, by Jove, I agree. I'm not religious myself, but one can recognise genuine religion when one meets it. . . ."

"Yes"—it was a woman who spoke, "and such spirituality . . ."

"I've never before heard things put in a way I felt I could really believe. . . ."

The chorus of approbation ran on. There seemed to be no dissentient voice, and, with a rather impatient movement, Hope turned and strolled out into the garden. She had a presentiment that if she went up to her rooms she would meet the Preacher on the landing, and for the moment she felt unequal to the ordeal.

She wandered about aimlessly for a few moments, then came to rest beneath a wide-spreading deodar, where there was a seat looking on to the snows. It caused her an almost unreasonable annoyance to find that Ysobel was already installed on the seat, but she refused to turn and retrace her steps.

"Meditating?" she asked, as she sat down herself.

Ysobel turned and looked at her strangely. She seemed, Hope noticed, to be seething with inward excitement beneath her calm exterior. Several times lately something queer about her friend's manner had struck Hope, but she had been too preoccupied with her own affairs to pay much attention.

"Yes," said Ysobel at length, "meditating!"

She removed her gaze from Hope and fixed it on the snows once more. Her eyes were dream-heavy, almost trance-like and still. The other woman was aware of that seething inward excitement with which she seemed to be trembling. For a moment neither spoke. Then Ysobel looked at Hope once again.

"What did you think of him?" she asked.

By 'him' Hope assumed she was to understand the Preacher.

"I . . . I don't quite know," she answered slowly. "I haven't made up my mind yet."

"No," said Ysobel, "no—it would seem strange to you, of course. You don't know——"

"Don't know what?"

The other looked at her fixedly for a moment without speaking.

"You don't realise," she said, "that it is all true—oh, so true—all that he said——"

"What about?"

"About love—and the New Age. I *know*, but you wouldn't understand. . . ."

She looked away towards the snows again; then it seemed to the older woman that the fierce excitement under which she had been labouring got the upper hand. She turned again swiftly.

"Hope," she cried, "I'm going to tell you. . . ."

Once again, as she listened to the story of that wild, romantic night, it seemed to Hope Chesney that the solid ground quivered and crumbled beneath her feet. More than that, there came to her the curious feeling that they were being enclosed in a net of evil, that some evil presence was at work about them, enmeshing them in a web of terror. . . .

"I . . . don't understand," she stammered when the story ended at last. "Ysobel . . . you didn't . . . you don't mean . . ."

Ysobel laughed, an amused little gurgle in her throat.

"Of course, I mean—everything," she said. "I stayed there that night and came on here the

next day by the later train. I had to. . . . There are reasons why he could not keep me there—but he comes to me here. . . .”

“What?”

Hope gazed up at her in horror.

“Who is he?” she demanded peremptorily.

Ysobel laughed again.

“I don’t know his name,” she said amazingly.

“Names don’t matter between us. We are not people of this twentieth century. We are two souls, meeting once again as we have met before. . . .”

“Good heavens, Ysobel, you really believe that?”

“Of course I believe it absolutely.”

“Then you’re a ruddy little idiot,” said Hope inelegantly. She felt the need of reacting violently against the other’s romanticism. She leant forward with her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands, striving to think, but Ysobel’s voice prevented her.

“Of course, Hope, you wouldn’t understand,” she said. “People like you don’t understand real love—you only know marriage! You live in a nice conventional little world of your own, where things don’t happen. You may read of them in the papers—but they are not done by people like you—they don’t belong to the same world.”

She laughed suddenly.

“Naturally I shall understand if you don’t want to know me,” she said.

“Oh, don’t be a fool,” exclaimed Hope, almost violently. She stood up abruptly, almost as though she could not help herself. She felt the need of

action. There had been a grain of bitter truth in Ysobel's words, and she wanted to think them out, to adjust herself to them. . . .

"I daresay you're right, Ysobel," she said. "I don't understand people like you. . . . But we needn't quarrel about it."

"No," said Ysobel.

Hope moved away, and she could feel that the other's eyes were upon her for the whole length of the garden. Yet, strangely, the impression which she carried away with her was still of some mystery she had not probed. Ysobel had told her much—but she had not told her the cause of that strange, seething excitement which was shaking her.

CHAPTER XI

THE Belvoir was *en fête*. It was the night of the great carnival ball, and even the jaded visitors of Paharital, rendered *blasé* by a weekly fancy-dress dance, had gathered in their hundreds. Many had come masked, and, for the rest, originality rather than picturesqueness seemed to be the order of the day. Hope was not in fancy costume. She felt unequal to the task of thinking out anything suitable; but she had joined Margaret and Donald, and Major Rendon made the fourth of the party. Sir James had returned to Sukurpur.

Hope leant back in her chair and watched the gay scene idly, striving, as she seemed always to be striving these days, to focus her mind on exterior things. Donald was all but unrecognisable in a costume of sackcloth, with a long flowing beard of white tow. A Belvoir Beaver was the name he had given himself, and it was as good as any. Margaret made an attractive little Dutch girl, and Major Rendon was resplendent as a pirate.

"Don't mind my beard," Donald said, as, relinquishing Margaret temporarily, he took Hope into a conventional embrace. "I'll remove it if it tickles you."

"It doesn't," she answered. "What is this tune they are playing? I thought it was a fox-trot."

"Supposed to be. I believe it's called the Harried Herring—you can't expect much from it. I've spent the day composing the words of a new one-step. It's to be entitled 'Though you may be a Limpet don't think that I'm a Rock.' Do you like it?"

"How does it go on?"

"I haven't got any further," he answered. "One doesn't need to. I think it's rather good myself. There is a pleasing ambiguity introduced by the last word."

Hope laughed, wondering as she did so whether he could detect how far her thoughts were from the light and easy banter in which she strove to join. Over his shoulder she caught sight of the Preacher standing watching the whirl of dancers. For a week now she had succeeded in avoiding him, had spoken no word to him, except a conventional greeting, but as she looked up now, his gaze met and held hers, and, though she was prepared for that probing glance, she felt the blood surging to her cheeks. It was not merely the strange knowledge, the almost intrusive intimacy of his look—for that she had expected—but there had been something else in those piercing eyes, something she could not define, which set the heart knocking painfully against her ribs.

"We have lots of Secret Brothers here to-night," she said to Donald, striving to make her voice sound light and natural. In fact, the obvious possibilities of the Brotherhood's garb at a carnival dance had made it a popular form of joke. "There's one in that box up there."

Donald glanced up without much interest. The Belvoir boasted a semi-circle of boxes at a

higher level and overlooking the ballroom, in which dinner could be enjoyed *à deux*. They were mostly full.

"Yes," said Donald rather shortly. "I suppose the inmates are putting Preacher Stevens' tenets into practice."

Hope did not answer. She was not anxious to discuss the Preacher.

"Oh, look," she exclaimed suddenly. "There is Mr. Bolney."

Donald looked round in quickened interest.

"By Jove, so it is," he exclaimed. "Well, now perhaps we shall find out who killed poor old Pir Buksh."

"He is a wonderful police-officer, I believe," she said.

He nodded.

"Curious sort of chap," he said, "so secretive. I always feel he wants to vanish—to see without being seen."

"Lots of people do," said Hope, as the music trailed to an end and the usual applause preluded the first of about six encores.

Hope looked round as they slid into the dance once more. John Bolney was gone.

"He has vanished," she said.

Though she did not know it, there was one other person there that night who would have given most of what he possessed to vanish from the ballroom. Ted Chesney had not wished to come up to Paharital, or if he came he had wished to come openly. But Mae had been insistent. The affair between them was developing on conventional lines, but it had developed just a shade rapidly even for Paharital. During the last days

in Sukurpur, and the first days of Ted's leave in the hills, it had soared to the heights until it seemed to fill all the heavens. To Ted, the knowledge of the tempestuous completeness of Mae's surrender, her sheer, stark dependence on him, came as a daily revelation. Mae had no reserves. She would drag the depths of her soul to pour it out in confidence to him, and the fact that she would have done it with equal thoroughness to any five-minutes-old acquaintance had not as yet occurred to him. Moreover, the very avidity of her pleasure-loving nature gave her mirror-like qualities full play. It enabled him to see an almost god-like reflection of himself, because there was always something which she wanted passionately and which he could supply. A rickshaw ride in the moonlight ; a surreptitious visit to the pictures ; even an ice, eaten in the sultry heat of the hotel garden, were cheap and easy forms of amusement ; but her sheer abandonment to the pleasure of the moment elevated them to the dignity of episodes. To Ted, for those brief, halcyon days it seemed indeed that they were the victims of an epoch-making passion, of some great world-shaking emotion which placed them on a plane above the rank and file of their fellows. But even during the last days of his brief leave the mirror had grown a little dulled. Mae's talent for agreement amounted to a genius, but it could not quite supply all the deficiencies of her limited mind. Ted's was not a shallow nature, and there had been many times when, striving to share something of his thought with her, he had been brought up sharp against a granite wall of non-comprehension. His feelings had been

rather those of a bather who, anticipating the sensuous joy of a dive through the unfathomed depth of a shadow-cool pool, had stepped blithely into a saucer bath. Moreover, the tricks of Mae's mental equipment were not difficult to detect, and they had begun to wear a little thin. She had a talent for mimicry, and at first it had amused him to hear her repeating adverse criticisms of herself or her philosophy of life, which she had overheard, with creditable burlesque of the speaker's voice and manner. It was only later that it dawned on him that this did not, in fact, constitute an answer to the critics. But it was her jealousy of Hope which had caused the most serious rift in the lute. It was to this that he owed his presence with her now, masked and disguised, while his wife believed him to be in Sukurpur. Mae had laid this deception on him, as a test of his devotion ; he saw that now, and, faithful to the false sentiment of those glamorous days, he had come.

Hope never knew how her casual glance up at the ' Secret Brother ' in the box had made her husband turn hot and cold with horror. For a long time he sat in moody silence, not answering Mae's running commentary on the scene below. His eyes followed Hope as she danced with Donald. In her plain but perfectly-cut black frock, which showed off the whiteness of her arms and neck, with the fine slimness of her ankles and wrists, the proud poise of her head, she stood out in that motley assemblage like a thoroughbred among mongrels. Ted turned and glanced at Mae, and in that instant the looking-glass broke. She was sitting back in the box and she had lifted her mask

for a moment. In place of the pathetic sprite, the provoking nymph, the soul-mate which, in succession, she had seemed to him, he saw only an example of cheap, slightly coarsened femininity, whose counterpart could be seen by the gross in the ballroom below him. The 'realities' of which she so often boasted, of which he had almost come to believe she held a monopoly, shrunk to their true proportions, and in their place the solid groundwork of his life appeared—that groundwork which, even in his most exalted moments, he had never contemplated forfeiting. He saw himself in something the light of a man who had jeopardised his daily breakfast for the sake of eating ices for dinner. Ted was not, had never been, of the ice-cream fraternity, and in that moment he cursed himself for a fool. It was with a shock of surprise that he realised that Mae was speaking.

"You're very silent," she said.

"Am I?" he answered, at a loss for words.

"I . . . I was thinking. . . ."

"So I supposed. What about?"

There was just a slight edge in her voice that warned him to tread gently.

"I . . . I don't really know," he answered, then rashly, with a desire to escape further interrogation, "Shall we dance?"

Mae rose obediently. She had sensed that something was wrong and her instinct bade her be wary. Perhaps, after all, she had been unwise to force him to come up; he was, as she had experienced, over-scrupulous in matters of deception. The dancing gave her just the opportunity she needed to make him forget everything except

the joy of the moment, for she was a beautiful dancer.

Yet Ted was miserable as they trod the floor together. It seemed to him that Hope's eyes must inevitably pierce his disguise, that he must assuredly forget and speak just as he was passing her, and she would turn with a stare at hearing his voice. . . . He could feel Mae's slim, lithe form pressing against him, her cheek all but touching his mask, but it seemed a tawdry reward for the price he was paying.

It was as the dance drew to an end that the catastrophe occurred. There had been already three encores, and Ted, in common with many others, did not wait for a fourth. Just as they reached the doorway the music started again, and many people turned back unexpectedly to the room. The result was a jam in the arch of the door, and for a second Ted found himself beside Hope and her partner. He held his breath, fearful of moving, and in that moment he felt a hand—whose he did not know—grip his mask from behind and inexorably peel it off. With an indrawn breath of horror, Ted found himself looking into the eyes of his wife. . . .

He heard Mae gasp and felt her go rigid at his side, but Hope did not waver. Her magnificent pride came to the rescue. For just one moment her eyes held his, then she smiled, the ordinary, friendly smile of a woman passing her husband at a social gathering. Not a soul seeing it but would have supposed his presence was no surprise to her. He saw her bend forward and whisper a word to Donald, evidently some excuse, for she turned and left the ballroom, and he knew that she had

gone up to her room. For a moment he hesitated, then, with a muttered word to Mae, he followed her.

It was the least wise thing he could have done. Hope, with her pride stung beyond endurance, was in no mood for accepting excuses or explanations. The pent-up humiliations and bitterness of weeks found vent, and without lifting her voice she lashed him with her tongue, saying perhaps more than she meant, yet pointing each of her arrows with the sting of truth. Ted, with his nerves unstrung, knowing himself utterly in the wrong, fell back, man-like, on blustering, trying to make up by loudness of tone for feebleness of reason, shouting out the pitiful, threadbare arguments with which he and Mae had salved their consciences. The result was what Hope had foreseen and striven to avoid by her silence. The quarrel waxed in bitterness, and on each side things were said which, it seemed, Time only could wipe out—pride forbade them being withdrawn. In one thing only did wisdom guide Ted that night. Catching sight of the clock, he paused suddenly.

"Hope," he said, speaking in a quieter tone than he had used throughout, "if I go at once I can catch the train to-morrow morning from Ranapur and be in Sukurpur by midday. Don't let us say any more. We need time to think things over. You can have weeks to do it in. I'm going now—good night."

He waited for a moment, half expecting she would say something, but Hope remained impassive. She merely bowed her head in assent. Ted turned and left the room, wisdom still guiding his

steps, for without seeing Mae again he changed and went down the hill that night.

But Hope did not know that.

For a long time after he had left she sat without moving. It seemed to her that the very fibres of her soul were being slowly severed with a knife. This thing which she had fought for weeks had risen up and conquered her. She had been wrong—a foolish ostrich, hiding her head in the sand, pretending that her enemy was negligible, and all the time . . .

With her mind dazed and benumbed she strove gropingly to remember the things Ted had said. She had no second sight—she could not divine how he had given the lie to his own feelings, nor could she, in her present state, sort out her own thoughts. It was while she sat stricken and helpless in this strange mental pain which had overwhelmed her that she heard the sound of a door being closed on the landing. With a start she sat up and listened. That was the Preacher's door. On a sudden impulse Hope got to her feet. For a week now she had avoided this man, but now she would seek him out. For once she could not bear her burden alone. Maybe he would help her—anyway, he would listen. . . .

He seemed surprised when he opened the door, but Hope gave him no time for a question. Without ceremony she pushed past into his room, which she perceived was littered with papers and boxes. The Preacher appeared to be packing; indeed he explained, as he followed her into the room, that he was going down to the plains for a week the next day.

Hope sat down without waiting to be invited.

She felt calmer now that she had taken the plunge.

"I wanted your advice," she said; "you're surprised to see me, no doubt. . . ."

He smiled down at her.

"A little, Mrs. Chesney—but not that you should be wanting advice. Only that you should ask me."

"Why?"

He smiled again. He had come across the room and stood near her, leaning back against a table.

"Does it need explanation?" he said. "You have been avoiding me very cleverly, Mrs. Chesney."

He made the remark merely as a statement of fact. There was no rancour in his tone. Hope did not answer immediately.

"You said you were not surprised at my asking advice," she said at last. "Were you . . . in the ballroom to-night?"

She wondered whether it would be necessary to go into details, to drag up the circumstances of her humiliation. He made a slight movement, then he bent towards her.

"I was there, Mrs. Chesney," he said. "But more than that, even if I had not been, there would be no need to explain. From the first it was no secret from me—wasn't that so? You remember you said—we must not shirk the battle."

"Do you think I have been shirking?"

Hope looked up at him as she asked the question. It came, it seemed to her, very near the heart of the matter. Had she, in fact, been running away from the fight, hiding her head in the

sand when the enemy seemed too near, or had she been fighting—refusing to leave her post or surrender her colours? For herself she could not answer the question, but she knew already, it seemed to her, what his verdict would be.

He did not answer for some moments. He was looking down at her, smiling, his eyes holding hers with still that strange, knowledgeable, half-quizzical look. She found herself analysing those eyes now that she saw them at close quarters. They were a steely grey, very shrewd and piercing, and across one of them was a streak of brown.

"Shirking the battle, Mrs. Chesney," he said at last gently. "Yes, isn't it better to face the fact? You are too strong a woman to be bound by conventions. You should face the issue fearlessly. You are strong enough to do that—to be broad-minded——"

Hope interrupted him suddenly.

"Oh, don't use that word," she exclaimed. "I hate it—it has been abused out of all recognition of its meaning. Broad-minded! Look at Paharital. Would anybody in their senses call it narrow in the accepted sense of the word? Yet what is it really? Just a rut as wide as a dancing shoe. Only one form of amusement—one form of humour—one form of occupation; even only one subject for scandal! Oh, I hate it—I hate it! Is there nothing in life beside the sex question with a little jazz thrown in?"

She spoke rapidly, vehemently, with what was, for her, almost violence, and he seemed momentarily taken aback. But he shook his head at her.

"Still shirking the issue, Mrs. Chesney," he said. "Why do you cling to the conventions so?"

Why take up such a lofty attitude? Is it not because they bolster up what you *want* to do?" He moved suddenly and his voice changed. It took on almost a stern note.

"And what is it that you want to do?" he exclaimed. "To keep two lovers apart merely for the sake of your own pride; because someone has mumbled words over you, you think you have a greater right. Is that not all it is? Or is it something worse—do you want to keep them apart out of—revenge?"

He brought the last word out slowly, after a slight pause, and Hope started. Revenge? Surely that was not her motive. She thought of Mae and the simile she had used once. A rat nibbling the foundations of her home. She would as soon have thought of flogging a rat as of being revenged on Mae. Her pride rose in arms at the thought. Not for anything would she keep Ted against his will. That she, Hope Chesney, should do such a thing, should keep him unwillingly by her in order to be revenged on a poor, pitiful little thing like Mae . . .

With a sudden jerk she wrenched her mind away from the thought. She looked up at the preacher again.

"No, it's not revenge," she exclaimed. "It's just—just the whole thing—oh, I hate it—I hate it. You people make everything—beauty of every kind—just the setting for passion! Don't you see that? Is there nothing else in the world that counts, nothing higher than this thing you call love?"

"There is nothing higher than love," he answered her gravely.

"Love!" she exclaimed bitterly. "I don't think we mean the same thing!" But she could not have said at the moment what she did mean.

"No, maybe we don't—you have never known it," he said in unconscious echo of Ysobel. "You have never known it—yet. Mrs. Chesney, don't you see what I am trying to show you? You are too big, mentally and morally, to be held by a mere convention, to put the social bond higher than the bond of love. Are you the type of woman to keep a man unwillingly? Surely not! I want you to be strong, to be free—free for the power of love which will come to you—which will find you when you have acted strongly, finely!"

"Oh . . ." Hope put out her hand suddenly. She felt at the end of her tether. "I hate it, I hate it," she repeated vehemently. "It's wrong somewhere, but I can't see where . . . now . . ."

Her voice broke suddenly on the last word, and his manner changed.

"Mrs. Chesney," he exclaimed, "you are overwrought to-night. It is no use thinking of things any longer. Wait. . . ."

He got up swiftly and crossed the room. Hope watched him listlessly. She felt too spent to care what he said or did.

He came back to her presently, and she saw he held a glass of water in his hand.

"Take these," he said quietly, holding two white tablets out to her. "They will make you sleep. Later you can think out your problems, but not to-night."

Hope took the tablets and swallowed them obediently with the water he held out to her.

"Thank you," she said, as she rose to go.

He walked with her across to her door and held out his hand.

"I am going away for a short time to-morrow, Mrs. Chesney," he said, "but . . . I shall be thinking of you. When I come back we can talk again."

His hand held hers in a strangely strong, crushing grip. She was aware of his eyes gazing into hers with still that look which never failed to disturb her, but already the drug he had given her was beginning to act. She felt drowsy, and glad to bid him a hasty good-bye and get into her own room. Once in bed, the drowsiness showed signs of passing off, but she gripped herself together by sheer will-power, refusing to think, until gradually sleep stole over her and she drifted away from the burning memory of her problems.

CHAPTER XII

YSOBEL faced her lover furiously across the strip of moonlit garden which separated them. It was three in the morning, and she had waited at this *rendezvous* since one o'clock. For a time she had thought that some accident must have delayed him, but he had come in the end, wholly unperturbed, with no excuse for his lateness. Worse still, he had remained strangely unmoved by her reproaches. For once there had been no impassioned love-making, no delirious moments of romance. He seemed distrait and preoccupied, and, as her anger mounted, he turned to go. It was only a cry from her that had arrested him. She looked at him as he stood in the wan, eerie light of the waning moon. A tall, lithe, buoyant figure, strangely slim in his close-fitting black clothes. . He wore no turban this time, but a black cap covered his head. He had been at the ball then, masked, but he had removed the mask before coming to her. She could see the warm olive of his skin even in the dim light, could see a pulse beating in his throat. He was looking at her in the familiar way between half-closed, lash-curtained eyes, waiting, unruffled, for her to speak. A sudden fury, a veritable tempest of passion, took possession of her. Her heart beat chokingly,

and for a moment she felt almost faint with the violence of her emotions. Then, with a swift movement, she crossed the space between them, and stood in front of him, cutting off his retreat.

"You—you dare!" she panted. "You dare to flout me like this. To leave me here waiting—and then——"

Words failed her. She felt impotent before his complete indifference. He threw back his head and laughed.

"But you are adorable, Dilkhusa," he exclaimed. "I love to see you angry."

'Dilkhusa' had been his name for her. He had told her that it meant 'heart's delight,' and at the moment it seemed to increase her fury to hear him use it thus lightly.

"You dare!" she exclaimed again, helplessly—no other words would come.

"I—I hate you," she panted, and again he laughed.

He moved up to her suddenly and put his hand beneath her chin, tilting her face to the moonlight.

"Beloved," he said lightly, "you are beautiful, very beautiful. But there are other things in life. What would you? I cannot sit for ever at your feet and be fed with sugar-plums. There is work to do. It is for you to wait until it is done."

He leant forward and brushed her lips with his own.

"Au revoir," he said.

But Ysobel flung out her arms, blocking his path.

"No, wait," she cried imperiously. She had

become suddenly calm, and involuntarily he paused, arrested by her tone. She moved away from him and stood looking up into his eyes, her hands held rigid at her sides.

"You treat me as a toy," she said, speaking slowly and quite quietly. "I suppose, to you, all women are that. But you can know this—I may be only a chattel to beguile your leisure moments, but—*I know who you are*. If I choose, all the hotel, all Paharital may know it. Do you understand?"

For a moment he had recoiled, and as she finished speaking he bent and looked at her closely. Then he smiled.

"And why not, if you wish it, sweet?" he exclaimed lightly. "Is the secret of my identity anything so wonderful?"

She continued to stare at him fixedly. She was not to be put off by his manner.

"Why," she said quietly, "did you pull off his mask to-night?"

He started as though he had been stung. Until that moment he had believed her to be bluffing him. For a few minutes he did not speak; then, as though making up his mind, he turned towards her, and encircled her waist with his arm.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "but you are cruel, Dilkhusha! But half an hour could I steal from work—work, beloved, that must be done—and I come to you for love—for consolation. What do you give me? Reproaches and then—threats?"

He was drawing her closer and closer. For a minute she resisted, her pride up in arms; then the spell of his nearness descended upon her, and suddenly her strength left her. He felt her sway

against him, limp in surrender. Still he whispered on, tenderly, passionately. . . .

When she left him the old glamour held her in its net. Not only that night but the whole of the next day passed for her in a trance of waiting. A little after midnight she lay down on her bed. Her window had been set wide as he had commanded. A light shone full upon her. In her sea-green nightgown, with her golden hair flowing over the pillow, she looked like some wistful Undine.

So, through the silent minutes, she waited. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

It was late when Hope awoke the morning after the carnival ball. Her head was splitting and her eyes felt burning and heavy. The drug which the Preacher had given her must, she realised, have been a potent one, but she was grateful for the hours of oblivion which it had brought her, for in spite of her headache she felt better able to face life and cope with its problems than she had done the night before. She had breakfast brought to her room, and afterwards set out for a solitary walk. The Preacher was, she understood, holding a service before he went down to the plains, but not for anything in the wide world would she have attended it.

The air was cool and fresh, for there had been a storm in the night and the thundery oppression of the monsoon's advent was relieved. Hope panted as she climbed the steep hill path which led upwards from the hotel, but she did not slacken her pace. Indeed she half welcomed the physical exertion and discomfort it entailed, for it seemed to clear her mental vision. In the bright, sane light of the morning the incident of the night before had shrunk a little. In fact, she was not sure that it was not in the nature of a storm in a

tea-cup, yet beneath the surface of this common-sense attitude she was aware of a menacing rumble, and in her heart of hearts she knew that the battle must be faced. She must fight this thing out with herself and decide what action she was to take.

But, though she walked for an hour, she found herself no nearer the solution of the problem. All she had gained, it seemed to her, was a return of the burning pain, the futile anger and rebellion, the intolerable sense of impotence which had assailed her the night before. She felt like one adrift without a compass by which to steer. All the old familiar landmarks had been swept away as though by an avalanche, and it did not bring her any consolation to reflect that the upheaval had only been a small one—it had at least been big enough to deprive her of her means of steering.

The sound of booted feet trudging sturdily along the winding path made her look up surprisedly, breaking off her meditations. She had been resting against a rock, and so far none but Indians had passed her, for she followed unusual byways, caring little where she went so long as she encountered no one from the Belvoir. The sight of the short, stocky figure in a flowing brown habit and battered topi which came into sight round a bend increased her surprise, and she gave vent to an exclamation.

“Why . . . Father Xavier! . . .”

He came to a halt beside her.

“Ah, Mrs. Shesney, so you too honour Paharital.”

He smiled as he shook the hand she held out

to him. He looked commonplace and common-sensical with his straggly grey beard and cheap glasses, and there was, anyway, reflected Hope, no fear of his reading her thoughts or offering unsought advice.

"I thought you were in Sukurpur," she said.

"I am on holiday," he answered. "I have had fever—no? They send me to wassis recuperate."

Hope got to her feet and grasped her walking-stick.

"If you're going in this direction I'll walk with you," she said. She felt very glad of his company. Her desire for solitude had been mainly inspired by a disinclination to meet any of the crowd from the Belvoir, or in fact any resident of Paharital, for Indian society, more especially in the hills, is a colony of glass-houses; but here, anyway, was a companion as far outside her world as a being from another planet. She felt even more grateful as they walked along together that she had chosen to accompany him, for his strident tones, the quaintness of his accent and diction, the drollery of his humour, seemed somehow to take her out of the narrow rut in which she had been suffocating. The conversation turned mainly on Indian customs, of which he had an intimate knowledge, and on incidents in the life of the people which he had encountered during his career; but to Hope, surfeited with discussions of the latest jazz tunes, the latest dance-steps, the latest 'show' and the latest scandals, it came like a breath of fresh air in a stifling room. It opened up horizons which she had momentarily forgotten, and ones which, moreover, were

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safe. There was no fear of any avenue of talk leading her back to her problems.

"Have you crossed the trail of the Secret Brotherhood at all?" she asked in a pause of the talk. It struck her that one so intimate with the lives of the people might well stand a chance of doing so.

He shook his head, and a slight frown appeared on his face.

"Ah, the Brotherhood—no," he answered. "They leave Sukurpur alone a little while. But you have them here, I think?"

She nodded and gave him a description of the tragedy at the Belvoir, to which he listened with extraordinary interest.

"And this Preacher Stevens—he is who?" he asked, when she paused.

Hope hesitated. She had brought the question on herself, yet it was one she had been anxious to avoid. Almost instinctively she shrank from all thought of the Preacher and of the strange influence he exercised over her.

"I—don't know who he is," she said at last. "I don't know quite what he is . . . I don't understand——"

Again she hesitated; then, unconsciously almost, as though speaking to herself, she began to describe the man, or rather, her own confused and varying estimates of him. Starting with jerky, disjointed sentences, she became more fluent as she went on, until unconsciously she said more, revealed more than she intended.

"Oh, I don't understand," she reiterated, winding up a description of the Preacher's service on the previous Sunday; "there was nothing

definite—nothing I could lay hold of to object to—but I don't understand, Father Xavier. . . .” On a sudden impulse she leaped the very barriers of which a few moments ago she had been so thankful. “This place muddles me. I feel as though all the old landmarks were going. Someone said to me the other day that I lived in a comfortable, conventional world of my own—that I thought of things as happening to people in newspapers but never to me. . . . Perhaps they were right.”

“What things?” he asked laconically. “Murder—*hein*?”

Again she hesitated, then once more the words came with a rush, though ordinarily she was the least impulsive of women.

It was purely from the abstract point of view that she put the problem in front of him, but she gave it in detail and allowed him to draw what inference he pleased. At the close of the recital a sudden recollection of his calling dawned on her, and she stammered an apology.

“Of course, I forgot . . . divorce . . . for your Church——”

“For us it is settled—yes,” he answered. “We have our Creed—it is definite; but now I speak for you—no?”

He looked away from her over the vista of rolling hills. Unconsciously they had come to a halt while they spoke, and at this point, over a tangle of wild white roses, a vast valley opened at their feet, fading into the dim blue distance. Far, far below a thin thread of silver marked the course of the river, and above them showed the faint glimmer of a snow-peak. Hope felt her

heart beating in a sudden dread and excitement, but his first words seemed curiously off the mark.

"In 1914 I was at home—in Belgium," he said. "My home was not far from the German frontier. It was August. All day we had heard the guns booming. But it was at night—late—that we were told to go—quick. The Boches were coming. We get together our things. My mother was old—she had been in bed sick with rheumatism. My sister was with us—her husband, he was with the army already. She had a little boy, three years old—another baby would be born in two months. My father's car had been given to the Government. We must do the best we can. We go—quick, quick, to the station—the trains are being run to Ostend. As we go a shell falls—the first to hit the town. We do not understand at first. We hear shrieks. The streets, they are full of people. I hear a cry from my sister. She is holding her child. It is dead. In that street there are terrible things—I do not describe them—no. We go still quick, quick. Another shell fall before we reach the station. There are worse things. My mother—she live till we reach England. I do not speak of these things—I say only this—we fight because it is our bond. A man say to me in the train, 'The English will come—it is their bond.' The English come. They do not lose their homes but they give their sons to be killed, to be maimed, to be blinded, made mad. Why? It is their bond. A scrap of paper—*hein*?"

He paused suddenly, then turning he pointed down the valley.

"Down there," he said, "and there"—he

swept his hand southward towards the invisible plains—"there are men—natives—who will tell you 'A sahib's word, it is enough. He will not deceive.' Their own kind will lie, trick, cheat them, but from a sahib they will get justice. And it is true *at present—hein?* Honour, truth, loyalty, they are the English virtues—no? To be born north of the Channel, it is enough—you have them. An Englishman's word is his bond—yes—but his bond it is no longer his word if he give it to a woman at the altar! No. He swear 'till death,' but if in a few years he meet someone else—oh, it is not right that he should be held by that old vow—he did not understand when he made it—he was too young, maybe. And for his wife—she will have money—he owe her that, but nothing else. It is only in his work that he owe honour, truth, loyalty. His work and his country. His wife and his children—he owe them money—nothing more—no?"

He stopped speaking abruptly, still looking not at her but over the sunlit valley, while Hope strove to sort out her thoughts. She could not have said whether the long speech with its odd English and strange welter of tenses had left her more confused or enlightened, but it had at least put things from a new standpoint.

"I think I understand," she said, "but——"

He threw out his hand in a sudden gesture.

"A sahib's word," he said, "it is good at present—but for how long will it remain so? Can you bring your son up to believe that a bond does not count in his own life, but in his work he must endure, he must suffer everything for honour? No, it is not logical. You can do one thing—you

can make marriage only a temporary thing, and then you do what? You put the clock back—centuries! You say that two things count—passion and money. But it is the races lowest in civilisation who say that. No, you cannot do that, so you wassis compromise. You do not look at these things. You take a hard case here, a difficulty there. You talk big—pouf!—a man has a ‘right’ to happiness—all men make mistakes, it is not ‘right’ that they should suffer for a vow made in inexperience. Mrs. Shesney—you bring up your sons to believe that—you make them soldiers—*hein*? They will not be shot in the trenches—only at dawn!”

Again he stopped speaking, abruptly, while still Hope strove to arrange her thoughts in order. She felt sanity and solidity returning to her, but phrases of Ysobel’s, of the Preacher’s, of Ted’s floated through her mind: ‘You have never known love—only marriage.’ ‘It is love and love only that makes the bond in the sight of God.’ ‘Incompatibility of temperament, affinities, these things can’t be helped. There’s no blame attached to them—they’ve got to be faced.’

With a sudden helpless gesture she turned towards the priest.

“But there are such things as affinities and antipathies,” she said. “One experiences them with people one meets. Some people one knows one will not get on with——”

“But certainly,” he agreed. “There are many such. But, even if I were not a priest, I would not choose one of those to marry—no.”

For a moment she did not see the application

of his word, then as it dawned on her she felt a sudden wild desire to laugh. Sanity came back with a sweep. How many of the 'incompatible' couples she had met had actually married for anything but love? She recalled Ted's own ardent wooing, and as she contrasted it with his passing infatuation for Mae she felt the ground grow solid beneath her. They had been married ten years and, though his affection for her might or might not be dead, it was certain that his feeling for Mae would hardly survive as many weeks of humdrum married life. And, knowing this, should she smash up their home, jeopardise their sons' future all for the sake of a few theories held by strangers?

Father Xavier's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"We have our Creed. For us it is settled on higher grounds—no? I speak for you."

She turned to him impulsively.

"You've made me feel sane again," she exclaimed. "Father, do you know, this place frightens me? I've felt lately as though the ground, everything, the whole framework of life was crumbling about me."

He looked at her sharply.

"Everything?" he queried. "No, not yet. There is cancer, but not corruption."

He saw her look of non-comprehension and laughed.

"You have a cell in a body," he explained.

"It lives for itself—not for the 'one' life of the whole body. That is cancer. But when all cells live only for themselves, then there is no 'one' life—that is corruption, death. You get that in society to-day. So many cells that live for

themselves—that start a life of their own; but corruption will come only when the soul is dead. That is not yet. We have still the Secret Brotherhood.”

Hope stared at him in bewilderment.

“The——?” she began helplessly.

“I do not speak of the Burra Bhai,” he assured her, laughing, but he did not explain his meaning, and her bewilderment increased. There had flashed across her mind a picture as it were of the two forces which at the moment were arrayed against each other in India—the dark Brotherhood of the Burra Bhai and the growing fraternity of the white Teacher. The force of Hate and of Love. On which side did she stand? She could not answer the question, but it brought in its train another memory—that of the Preacher and his strange compelling personality. She thought of the way in which he had read her thoughts—had seemed to penetrate to the very threshold of her soul; of the power of his oratory and the ease with which he had made even the most worldly and sceptical hail him as a prophet, and once more she felt her soul sway back on to the old torturing see-saw of doubts and darkness.

Then with an effort she thrust it back, gripping hold of the old clear-cut, soldierly creed in which she had been reared. Having set one’s hand to the plough one did not look back. A pledged word was sacred. It might be a narrow creed, but at least it was concrete.

“Oh, I believe I hate that Preacher,” she exclaimed, speaking her thoughts out loud. “He has an odd power, but I think it’s the brown spot in one of his eyes.” As usual in perplexity she

fell back on the lighter vein, taking refuge in a vague cynicism. "Or else it's his voice and his long black gown. Are you staying long in Paharital, Father?"

They had unconsciously resumed their walk while she had been meditating, and she saw the path which led back to the Belvoir was in sight. He did not answer immediately.

"I stay a wassis month," he said at last, as they reached the spot where the paths divided and came to a halt.

"Then perhaps you will come and see me?" she said as she held out her hand.

He shook it cordially.

"I shall be delighted," he said. "You are at the wassis Belvoir—no?"

The double wassis lingered in Hope's mind as she hurried down the steep path to the hotel. It had been almost entirely absent from his conversation while they talked, and she recalled her notion that it only slipped in to hide abstraction or embarrassment. But what could have caused either at that moment? She did not give the matter much thought, nor did she look back, but had she done so she might have been surprised. Father Xavier remained standing motionless on the spot where they had parted for perhaps three whole minutes after she had disappeared. On his face was a look of puzzled wonderment, and once he spoke out loud, seemingly addressing a passing crow.

"But it is not possible," he murmured, "no, it is not possible. . . ."

In his eyes there was a strange look, almost of fear. For the space of another minute he lingered,

then with a sudden air of resolution he too set out along the path to the Belvoir.

But this Hope did not know. She hurried down the steep, winding way, feeling happier than she had done for days. She was a strange woman in many ways. Though not over-orderly with her papers and effects, she had a peculiar horror of an untidy mind. Always from childhood she had abhorred the thought of what she termed 'lumber rooms' of jumbled thoughts and fears on which she had, so to speak, slammed the door, not daring to sort them or to know of what they were composed. Once she had set them in order she felt better able to face whatever action might be called for. At the moment, though she had not yet decided on her course of action, she felt that, for the first time, she had sorted the litter which had worried her for weeks.

She knew where she stood in regard to Ted. They were held together, not, as the Preacher said, by words mumbled over them, but by their own pledged words given freely and with full realisation of what they portended. To go back on that pledge because the road had become uphill and wearisome was, to one of Hope's mentality, an unthinkable lowering of the standard. As well might a soldier hand in his papers on the eve of a battle. Moreover they were committed to a definite work which entailed the handing on of the torch, not of life only, but of ideals. To Hope it meant little to have brought men into the world unless she could make them fine men, and that, it seemed to her, she and Ted could only do by sticking to their contract. Her thoughts went

back to that evening in the desert and her meditations on the ancient Aryan race. She and Ted, too, were people of a 'civilisation' which had been built up through the centuries on a definite ideal of marriage. The whole framework of society rested on it, and for an exemplar of the modern ideas they must put the clock back two thousand years. A recollection of Sir James' pithy comment came into her mind, and it was with a smile on her face that she entered the Belvoir and encountered Mae on her way upstairs.

For a moment neither spoke ; then, as the sight of the younger woman's white worried face, of the question which so obviously hovered on her lips told their own story, Hope smiled suddenly.

" Has the luncheon gong sounded ? " she asked evenly, her voice coming with perfect naturalness. " If so I shall be late, because I've just ripped a ladder in my last pair of real silk stockings and simply must change them. Also I've lost my best loved beaver puff, and my nose feels like a beacon. That sort of thing always happens on a Sunday, doesn't it ? "

She saw the look of bewilderment and incredulity dawn on the other's face, and almost laughed out loud as she brushed past her and went on to her room. A knowledge of the *lingua franca* could be very useful at times.

There was a wire lying on the table in her sitting-room. It was from Ted, sent off from Sukurpur, and it did but confirm what Mae's white worried face had already told her—that he had gone straight back to the plains, without hesitations and without explanations, the night before. Hope laughed softly to herself as she stepped

through into the glazed-in verandah which formed an offshoot to her sitting-room. Then she stopped, arrested, for Preacher Stevens rose from a chair as she entered.

"You!" exclaimed Hope, and she was conscious that her voice sounded startled to the point of rudeness. "I—I thought you had gone down the hill," she stammered in explanation.

He held out his hand as he smiled down at her. Mechanically she put hers into it, and felt it gripped in a firm, strong grasp.

"I shall be hard put to it to catch my train at Ranapur," he said, "but I could not go before I had seen you, Mrs. Chesney. I hoped that you might be at the service, and when I did not see you there I came on here. I had to see you before I went."

He still held her hand, and without seeming pointed she could not withdraw it.

"Why?" she asked lightly. "Were you afraid you had given me an overdose?"

He shook his head, then, releasing her hand, walked over to the window.

"No," he said, "I knew that was all right—but I was afraid——"

He turned back on her suddenly.

"Mrs. Chesney," he said, "I was afraid I must have seemed unsympathetic last night, but, believe me, it was not so! I—I could not sleep for thinking of you and your worries. Oh, I had to tell you to be strong—not to shirk the battle; but don't think that I didn't understand what you were feeling. To break up the past—to realise that it has been an illusion—above all, to feel one's love scorned and oneself flouted, oneself thrust

aside for an inferior . . . oh, don't think that my blood doesn't boil at the thought of these things! But—I had to tell you to be strong.”

She looked up at him for a moment without speaking.

“Strong?” she repeated slowly. “I wonder what ‘strong’ is exactly? Just now I met Father Xavier——”

He started slightly but did not speak for a moment.

“Father Xavier?” he said at last. “I know him. There is, of course, no need to ask what he said, but does it matter very much? A funny old man like that is hardly likely to influence you. Personally I always refuse to believe that he is anything worse than that—a funny old man—though, of course . . .” he paused a moment as though unwilling to speak his thoughts. “Mrs. Chesney,” he exclaimed, seemingly making up his mind, “you will think me uncharitable in saying this—believe me, I hate doing it—but there are odd stories in the bazaars about Father Xavier. For myself I have never believed them. I have only one thing against him—he is an enemy of the natives. He aims to keep them in their bondage, though maybe he does not realise what he is doing. I always like to think that he does not. But he is a reactionary—he will defend caste—any abomination that is of the settled order of things. I would not say this if I were not so concerned for you. I know you will not repeat it.”

Hope did not speak—she could not at the moment think of any words; and suddenly, with a whimsical smile, he glanced at his watch.

"I've simply got to go," he exclaimed, and before she knew what he was doing he took both her hands in his. "I can't miss my train, but I must say this first—it is what I stayed here to say: there is a fate in most things—above all, in our names. It was not for nothing that you were called—Hope. For you there will always be that; don't be afraid, however dark the skies may look. I know—I can see the light ahead for you!"

He was gone before she realised it, and for a long time she sat still with her head in her hands, while all the torturing doubts came back to her soul. One thing he had made her realise—the gap in her reasoning of that morning. While she groped after the general principles involved she had forgotten the personal side of it all; but now her hurt pride, her scorned affection, the shattered fragments of all the unconscious dreams which had made her home, seemed to press upon her in an intolerable weight. Above all, she felt afraid—afraid of the lonely road ahead devoid of love and intimate companionship. Her sons were at school, and when they grew up they would leave her—she had no one to claim for her own. Always she had maintained that it was an anomaly that these days of emancipation for women should be the very days in which they seemed most afraid of facing life devoid of love and marriage—most determined that they had a 'right' to happiness and that there was no other road to it than a 'compatible' marriage. But for the moment she herself felt afraid. . . .

It was only her pride that made her pull herself together and go down to the luncheon-room. Later, when she had returned to her own suite,

she looked out of the window and saw, faint and distant, a tiny black speck moving down the winding road to the plains, and she knew it was the Preacher's rickshaw. A sudden feeling of desolation assailed her, and she felt the tears rising in her eyes; but she choked them back, sitting down at her writing-table with an air of determination.

"The game is more than the player of the game," she quoted, as she set herself to a survey of school bills. Kipling seemed a natural person to quote at such a moment; Thomas Hardy perhaps less so, yet it was some lines of his which she found herself repeating a few minutes later.

"In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just."

For some seconds the words repeated themselves meaninglessly, then, with a jolt, realisation came. That was it—the soldier's creed—ingrained surely in the very fibres of her being—though unrecognised till this moment. Without it life were an unendurable ordeal, a hideous, cynical, farce, but with that ingrained, implicit, unrecognised faith there would at least always be, as the Preacher had said—hope. It mattered little whether the crowning came in this life or another, the faith must be there to make the road endurable.

For the rest of that day she wrestled determinedly with accounts, and at night slept almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, worn out with the ceaseless activity of her mind.

It was a hammering at her door that awakened her, and for a moment she strove fruitlessly to

adjust her mind to the realities and shed the dreams from which she had been roused. Then, before she could reach it, the door was thrown open and Mae tumbled in, white, shaking, all but incoherent.

Ysobel had been found dead in her bed, shot through the heart, her golden hair spread out over the pillow, and on her breast the sign of the crimson cobra.

CHAPTER XIV

It was a steamy day at the end of August. Once again Sir James Fraser, Chesney and Bolney sat in conclave in the Commissioner's bungalow. Over a month had passed since Ysobel had been found murdered, and Bolney, who had been absent from Sukurpur the whole of that time striving to trace the perpetrator of the crime, looked both discouraged and disgruntled.

"There's not a clue anywhere that doesn't lead to a dead end," he exclaimed. "I've never been up against a worse case. I felt certain when we heard of her—her lover from Mrs. Chesney and Mrs. Madderson that we were on the track, but it has led to nothing."

"Surely you must have some clue to the man's identity," exclaimed Ted.

Bolney shook his head.

"None beyond the fact that he is an Indian and lives somewhere within, say, fifty miles of Sukurpur. There are about twenty zemindars that it might apply to; most of them have several sons, to say nothing of brothers, nephews and cousins to the *n*th degree living on their estate. How are we to trace one among all those? We have no real description from anything that Miss Stoneham seems to have said—nothing but a lot of

romantic rubbish that might apply equally to half a dozen different people."

"But might not someone have seen them together?"

It was the Commissioner who put the question. Bolney made a sudden gesture of despair. "Seen them?" he exclaimed. "Of course they have! I could produce half a hundred witnesses all prepared to swear that they had seen her with each of the several relations of the twenty odd zemindars—and they'd all have watertight alibis, even if I could get a slight bias against, say, half a dozen of them. But I can't do even that—the odds are extraordinarily even. Oh, we're not suffering from any lack of witnesses—they're a glut in the market at the moment!"

The other two nodded without speaking. They knew India too well not to realise the force of his remarks. In a land where 'there ain't no ten commandments' and lies can be made a marketable commodity, the difficulties of tracing anyone by means of witnesses are obvious. Moreover, false trails can be laid with fiendish skill.

"And even," remarked Ted after a brief silence, "if you could trace her lover, it doesn't say that he had a hand in it, or how she incurred the wrath of the Brotherhood."

"It does not," agreed Bolney gloomily, and again there was silence. Then Sir James sat forward with an air of resolution. His face was very grave.

"Things are serious," he said, "very serious. There is no use in concealing the fact. The Brotherhood movement has spread with extraordinary rapidity—there seems to be no part of

India unaffected by it. Moreover, it is obviously not only highly organised but controlled from one centre. It seems almost incredible that we should so far have failed, not only to identify the leader of such a vast concern, but have missed the means they employ for their communications. Yet such is the case, and please believe I do not say this in censure. I know perfectly well that every possible means have been taken—that no stone has been left unturned. It is hardly surprising that the Brotherhood is growing bolder and bolder, and—this is the thing which alarms me most—it bids fair to accomplish what so far no one has done, that is, to unite all castes and creeds into one whole.”

Sir James paused momentarily and took a sip at his peg.

“And the royal visit takes place in two months,” he added significantly. “Something has got to be done.”

For a moment there was silence again. Ted took out a cigarette and lit it with an air of irritation. He was feeling seedy and disgruntled.

“So far as my own district is concerned,” he said, “I can vouch for it that the peasantry are not affected. They seem singularly quiet and contented. The movement is confined to the slightly more educated classes.”

The Commissioner nodded.

“That is true,” he agreed, “but it is cold comfort to say that things might after all be worse. The point is that they are bad enough. The Brotherhood, whatever class it is confined to, is rather more than we seem to be able to manage at the moment. And you’ve got to remember, too,

that nothing succeeds like success. The peasantry would doubtless throw in their lot with the Brotherhood if it brought off a coup. The only wonder is that they have not done so so far."

"How about the Holy One?" asked Bolney suddenly.

Both the Commissioner and Chesney nodded simultaneously.

"That's the lad," said Ted. "But for him I believe we'd have had the peasantry in it by now."

Sir James agreed.

"Yes," he said, "I believe you're right. Really, his appearance on the scene is little short of providential. When one thinks of it all one begins to wonder. . . ."

"Has that movement spread too?" asked Bolney.

The commissioner nodded.

"Yes," he said, "in a quite extraordinary way. It, too, is all over India. It is quite unpolitical, being confined to mysterious appearances of the Teacher in various mosques and temples, and to messages, circulated no one knows how, purporting to come from him. Beyond this it is manifested chiefly in a growing belief in, and expectation of, a new avatar. The Government fosters the movement unobtrusively to the extent of being particularly prompt and obliging in giving protection to the worshippers against the Brotherhood whenever trouble is threatened."

"Has there been much?"

"No—but that no doubt is due to the protection we have given. The Brotherhood has threatened ugly things against the Teacher and his followers, but they have not resorted to force

yet. They prefer to strike by stealth, and in the dark. So far we have been too much for them, and of course one must remember that the Holy One's genuine mysteriousness is his chief protection. No one has been able to locate him yet or to predict where his next appearance will be. One other way we have been able to help things along is by allowing the K.B.C. to broadcast the ancient hymns which are such a feature of the movement. They are becoming more and more popular."

There was silence for a minute or two. Bolney sat staring frowningly in front of him. He did not appear to derive much comfort from the Teacher's activities. Sir James got up from his chair and went over to his writing-table, coming back with a map in his hand.

"As I said," he began, "something has got to be done, and I am going to suggest a fresh start from a new angle. Hitherto we—or rather you, Bolney—have taken up the trail of the Brotherhood from the spot where they have been in evidence. That, on the face of it, is the only possible way, and a way too for which you, with your intimate knowledge of the country, are peculiarly fitted; but we have got to admit that in this matter we are baffled at every turn by a man whose knowledge of India and the Indians is all but uncanny. He foresees every turn of the game, and covers his trail with a skill that is almost superhuman. During the last months, whilst I have been down here, I amused myself with this map on which, purely for the sake of curiosity, I marked with a black dot every scene of a known Brotherhood meeting or activity. And, as you

will see by looking at the result, one rather odd fact emerges, and that is that our own unimportant little cantonment stands at the very centre of the darkest part—the part where the dots are thickest. Sukurpur, that is to say, appears to be the storm-centre.”

He had spread the map out on a table, and all three men bent over it in quickened interest. The truth of his remarks was obvious.

“By Jove, sir, that’s an idea,” exclaimed Ted.

“I’ve noted the fact for some time, of course,” continued the Commissioner, “but just to-day chance has thrown in my way what may prove to be a valuable clue; on the other hand, it may be only moonshine. We cannot afford to neglect it, however.”

He paused, and from his pocket-book extracted a slip of paper, while the eyes of his two companions followed his movements with absorbed interest. Sir James held the paper out to Bolney.

“What do you make of it?” he asked. “Have you seen anything of the kind before?”

The Policeman gave vent to an exclamation of excitement as he bent over the crumpled morsel, though it looked ordinary enough—simply a tiny piece of common paper obviously torn from a scribbling book. There were some hieroglyphics scrawled on it and, in one corner—it was this which had riveted Bolney’s attention—was a rough drawing of the well-known sign of the crimson cobra.

“Yes, sir, I’ve found bits like this before,” he exclaimed. “I’m sure that this is one of the messages of the Burra Bhai making arrangements

for a meeting—if only we could decipher it. Where did you find it, and how ? ”

“The where is interesting, but the how was by pure chance,” replied Sir James. “As you know, I am going up to the hills to-night to fetch Margaret, and old man Madderson was supposed to be coming with me. All arrangements had been made, but this morning he came into my office to say that he had news from somewhere in the desert that one of his prospecting parties had dug up something or other and he simply must go out to them. Heaven send,” he added in parenthesis, “that he doesn’t make any new epoch-making discovery ! If he does I’ll resign. We’ve all we can do, and more, to protect the royal potentate at the dam and at Nana Sarai ; if we have a new spot to defend, the only extra precaution I can think of is to order coffins. However—to get on with what I was saying. Just as he was about to leave, Madderson, who had been, for him, comparatively lucid, pulled out a paper and pencil to make a note of something or other. He blinked at the paper for a moment, then handed it to me with an apology, saying that he thought it must be mine and hoped that it was nothing important. (Don’t know whether he suspects me of being Burra Bhai !) The paper was this piece, as you no doubt have surmised. I asked him where he had found it and why he thought it was mine, and he said he was quite sure he had picked it up in—here is the interesting point—my office ! It had been while he was waiting to see me—he had thought of a note he wanted to make and had picked the paper off the floor. Just at that moment I had come out and he had put it in his

pocket without thinking. Well—so much for the history of the paper. The point is—can we decipher it ? ”

All three men bent over the tiny fragment. It had little on it besides the sign of the cobra. Only a number—29—and in the centre of the piece three crosses. That is to say, there was a plus sign set in the top angle of a large X and, in the opposite angle, rather farther from the centre, another smaller plus sign. That was all.

“ H’m—not over-lucid, is it ? ” remarked Ted.

“ They never are,” said Bolney. “ I’ve had them before and . . . why ”—he paused for a moment and an excited light came into his eyes—“ I believe I’ve got it ! ” he exclaimed. “ Have you a large scale map of the cantonment, sir ? ”

The Commissioner nodded and led them into an adjoining room, where a large map adorned the wall.

For a moment Bolney, who seemed consumed with inward excitement, examined it in silence, then with a sudden whoop of joy his finger pounced on a particular spot.

“ That’s it, sir,” he exclaimed. “ Look——”

At the spot where his finger rested were the letters R.C. followed by a cross not unlike the plus sign on the paper.

“ That’s the R.C. church, of course,” said Bolney. “ That’s the recognised symbol for a church ; but look at the cross-road below it——”

Both men looked, then gave vent to exclamations of delight. The roads crossed just south of the church at exactly the same angle that the X lay below the plus sign on the paper.

Bolney’s finger ran down further southwards.

"The other cross would be about here," he said. "I presume that it marks the spot where the meeting is to take place. And, by Jove," he exclaimed, his voice rising in his excitement, "that brings us to Venkata's shop—a man we've had our eye on for some time as suspect!"

With a sudden gesture, Sir James crossed over to the door, which stood ajar. He peered out, but there was no one there. He closed the door carefully, and crossing the room again shut the one on the farther side which gave on to the compound.

"To-day is the twenty-ninth," he said, coming back to them, "and I believe we have, as Bolney says, got it. The meeting is to take place to-night at Venkata's shop. We've got to discuss our plan of campaign."

Behind fast shut doors in lowered voices they talked for the best part of an hour, and at the close of that time they had drawn up a plan which boded ill for the Burra Bhai should he walk into the trap.

"And that's that," said Bolney decisively. "It's a pity we can't bring up some reserves, but, as you say, it would raise the alarm. And I suppose, sir, that you won't alter your plan of going away to-night, for the same reason?"

"Certainly I shall not alter anything," agreed Sir James. "To do so would be fatal. I shall go away, a trifle ostentatiously, at the appointed time. As you know, my daughter is not in Paharital now, but at Perushad, and I am meeting her at the foot of the hill, so we shall be back here to-morrow morning. By then, I hope, Bolney, you will have the Burra Bhai under lock and key."

Ted walked home feeling tired and disgruntled. He had had malaria badly during the past month and felt seedy and overworked. Yet he dared not take leave. He still heard from Mae regularly and felt bound to write to her—to keep up the fiction, though each letter became increasingly difficult to compose. Hope had left Paharital with Margaret after the murder of Ysobel, and had been at Perushad ever since. In the ordinary course of events she would have been returning to-morrow with the younger girl, but she had given no notice of any such intention. Her letters were brief programmes of events, and she refused utterly to discuss their relationship. Ted did not dare to take leave to Perushad, yet he felt overwrought and unfit for work.

As he neared his own bungalow a recollection of the vague suspicion which had occurred to him on that former occasion came into his mind, and once more he stood stock still for a moment or two considering it. When he walked on again his plan was made. If to-night's effort failed, he would apply for leave, and spend it ostensibly shooting, but in reality following out his suspicion.

CHAPTER XV

THE moonlight creeping between the pillars of the wide verandah shone eerily into the large room, illuminating a strange scene. On every available seat, on the floor, and standing round the walls, were black-cowled figures whose sombre garb merged with the shadows, so that it was only by the white glimmer of their eyes, and now and again the flash of a smile, that they could be detected. It was as though a company of lost souls had come back to earth to plot mischief.

The meeting was already approaching its close. For obvious reasons there were no lights, but for the rest the Brothers sat or stood at their ease, talking in their natural tones, quite indifferent to the chances of capture. The Burra Bhai wound up what had been a long speech.

"That is settled then," he said. "Let us once more summarise. This is the end of August. In two months, nay, rather sooner, the royal visitor will arrive. By that time our organisation must be complete. In each district the mine of revolution must be well and truly laid, so that at a given signal it can be fired. But understand that the factor of time is of capital importance. How often before have promising plans been

ruined by a too hasty or too dilatory action! The mines must be fired at the given signal and not a moment sooner or later. That signal will be the destruction of the royal visitor, the Viceroy, the Governor, and the whole of their staffs. How that is to be accomplished I will reveal to you at a later date. For the moment it is enough for you to know that you are to await the signal which will be conveyed to you in the usual way. That is all, and already the dawn approaches; we had best go our ways. I have only one piece of advice to offer: do not go near Venkata's shop!"

"One moment!" It was a strident voice that spoke, easily recognisable as that of Brother H., though it came from an inscrutable black mask.

"Let us hear something of this (un)Holy One," he exclaimed. "In every district he holds his meetings and we do nothing! But for him we would have by now an army of peasants. What do we do with him?"

The Burra Bhai flicked his fingers contemptuously, though murmurs of approbation had arisen all round the room.

"We leave him—for the present," he said. "A dreamer of dreams! How can he hurt us? We do not need the peasants—as yet! Later we will find for this Teacher a post—in one of our schools, maybe!"

He laughed, not over-pleasantly, and though there were murmurs of discontent no one spoke out. The man's personality held them, and the sight of the greyness of dawn which was already dimming the moonlight counselled a speedy departure.

Down in the bazaar round Venkata's shop, out

on the Maidan, near the Franciscan College and the church, in every probable and improbable spot, disguised and sleepy police constables waited in vain for the Brothers, and at eight o'clock a dishevelled Bolney met the Commissioner and his daughter on their arrival.

One sight of the policeman's face was sufficient to tell the story of defeat, but Sir James had it confirmed in the car on the way to the bungalow.

"Not a sniff of them anywhere," reiterated Bolney; "and how the news of our precautions leaked out beats me!"

Sir James sighed. He had hoped much from the trap set with such care and caution and, as he thought of the weeks of anxiety ahead, the burden grew very heavy. There were few things in life which he would not have exchanged at that moment for the news that the Burra Bhai was safely under lock and key.

"Ah, well," he said, "we can but go on trying and hoping. Perhaps there will be a trace of them somewhere about. After all, they had, I am sure, arranged to meet in Sukurpur last night—they must leave a footprint somewhere."

"It's nice to be home," Margaret said as she entered the drawing-room and moved over to her bureau, in one corner of which, she knew, any letters would have been placed. "Perushad is a nice spot, but I'm glad to be back in dear old Sukurpur. Why—what's this?"

Her voice rang out startled, and in two strides Bolney was across the room at her side. Then he too gave vent to an exclamation.

On the bureau was lying a single slip of paper with a sentence scrawled on it:

Thanks to the Commissioner-Sahib for the loan of his bungalow.

That was all, except for the, by this time, sickeningly familiar signature of the crimson cobra.

CHAPTER XVI

FATHER XAVIER hummed to himself not untunefully as he surveyed the drop from the window to the ground. He was standing in the glazed-in verandah which till the day before had been Donald Cameron's office, Donald having departed to the plains rather early, leaving the rooms vacant. The Belvoir had seemed to hold a strange fascination for Father Xavier of late—this was his third visit in a week, though it was the first time that he had penetrated into Donald's rooms.

"It was a wassis difficult thing to do," he murmured to himself as he turned back towards the landing.

At the head of the stairs he encountered Sir Tisra Kruton, who was just returning from his daily round of money-making. The priest greeted him cheerily.

"You are Sir Tisra Kruton—no? I come to see you. I have here a subscription list for my wassis orphans——"

The millionaire regarded the figure in the shabby brown habit a trifle dubiously. It was not the form of visitor that Heloise would welcome, but, since it blocked the way at the moment to his own suite, and since, moreover, Paharital had

been a dull place since the time of the murder, he made up his mind quickly.

"Come and have some tea," he invited.

They found Heloise reclining on the oriental divan which had been purchased at the expenditure of a good deal of persuasion as well as of cash from a local rajah. The suite was a handsome one with huge rooms, and the Krutons had spared nothing in the way of lavishness in its adornment. Father Xavier regarded it all benignly, and if he had the impression of finding himself in a rajah's harem, nothing of the kind appeared in his manner.

"I am a beggar," he said cheerfully by way of greeting to Heloise, who had unwound her great length slowly and somewhat reluctantly from the divan. "I appeal for my orphans—no?"

His eyes wandered past her and encountered the loud-speaker.

"Ah, the music from the air—*hein?*" he exclaimed. "I have heard of it."

It was a fortunate opening. Heloise belonged to that class of person capable of seeing and thinking about only one thing at a time. In England, after a brief time during which the whole riddle of the universe had appeared to be solved by vegetarianism, she had plunged head foremost into an orgy of antique buying, and it was only her voyage to the East which had caused her to return to the more superficial affairs of ordinary existence. Since her arrival in Paharital, Preacher Stevens, his philosophy and personality, his work and the part played in it by the K.B.C. had completely ousted both the antiques and the vegetables, and she lived in an atmosphere of modernised oriental occultism.

"Oh, *do* sit down," she said, suddenly gracious.

Father Xavier complied, and for the space of perhaps another quarter of an hour he heard details of the apostolate of the K.B.C.

"But it is very good," he exclaimed in a brief interval. "And this Teacher, this Holy One—he is who?"

Heloise looked at him speculatively. Until that moment she had regarded him solely as an eccentric old man in a shabby brown dressing-gown, but now she began to see in him the glorious possibility of a proselyte.

"You *don't* know?" she exclaimed incredulously, and set about rectifying the deficiency. Certainly, if at the end of ten minutes he did not know who the Teacher was, and had been in successive incarnations, it was no fault of Heloise. He seemed a trifle dazed by the amount of information he had been made to imbibe.

"It is a wassis philosophy," he murmured tactfully; "and these hymns—they are procured how?"

Sir Tisra took up the tale. He felt that so far justice had not been done to the K.B.C.

"The hymns are, of course, only a small part of the affair," he explained. "Just a side-line—their importance has been a trifle over-emphasised. The K.B.C. is a perfectly ordinary and rational business concern for all that its *raison d'être* is religious. We have a growing number of private subscribers, and in addition there are receiving sets in practically every cinema—particularly the Indian ones; and a tremendous number of villages have adopted the idea of a set being installed in or near the temple or mosque. Of

course the Government censorship is very stringent, but we are able to give good and varied programmes."

"That is good," said Father Xavier; "and you have many broadcasting stations?"

'For one who had described wireless as 'music from the air,' the priest appeared to be an apt pupil.

"Relaying stations only," explained Sir Tisra. "There is only one programme broadcast from Paharital and relayed from the other stations. That is in order to comply with the Government censorship."

"So—it is interesting, and lucrative, no doubt. This Preacher Stevens—he is a shareholder?"

"Oh no." It was Heloise who now took up the tale, and for the space of a quarter of an hour Father Xavier heard details of the source of the hymns which, apparently, constituted the Preacher's only interest in the K.B.C.

"They are only sung or played by really *holy* men," she ended; "the Preacher thinks that more important than *anything*. It would be *terrible* if they were performed by men with jazz souls—it could not *fail* to affect the vibrations and militate against their work. But wait!"

She got up and crossed the room towards the loud-speaker.

"You shall judge them for *yourself*," she exclaimed; "it is time now——"

For a moment there was silence, then there stole upon the air the melodies to which Hope had listened weeks before at the Preacher's service.

Heloise watched the priest covertly as the music throbbed and swelled around them. His

face wore a queer but wholly inscrutable expression, and there was no doubting his rapt attention. He seemed to follow every note.

"You are interested?" she breathed when the last hymn had sunk to silence.

His answer was a peculiar one and made her wonder whether he were insane or merely intoxicated. It came in the quaint, clipped accent of the native born.

"Oah, noh! I am boyscout."

On his way homewards later he still seemed tunefully inclined, for he hummed several of the hymns with perfect accuracy of pitch, but with an effect somewhat spoiled by the fact that he used nothing but the syllable 'pom' for their interpretation.

"Pompom, p—o—m, pompompom," he chanted, bidding defiance to the breathlessness engendered by the steepness of the climb, and, arrived at his destination (one of the hill colleges for boys founded by his Order), he continued to stand in the middle of the room appointed for his use, still giving forth poms with an air of absorbed interest. He desisted presently and, making his way to the boy's common room, rummaged for some time in the dusty bookshelves, returning to his own quarters with a thumb-marked edition of the Boy Scout's Manual and a look of triumph. There, seated at his table, he proceeded to cover several sheets of paper with hieroglyphics, pomming vigorously at intervals, and at other times sitting silent with a brow furrowed in thought. One passage seemed to elude his memory and, after several futile efforts to render it correctly, he arose and made his way to a room in which

there stood a decrepit harmonium. For the space of perhaps twenty minutes, working hands, feet and voice vigorously, he created a din which drew a group of boys in alarm round the window, but at the close of that time, the correct rendering of the passage having apparently come to him, he rose, and with complete indifference to the interested audience outside, marched back to his own room.

As he entered by the door a dark figure slipped hurriedly out through the window, and with incredible swiftness Father Xavier was across the room and peering out. For a space he could make out nothing, then, in a faint glimmer of light from a window near by, he caught a momentary glimpse of the features of John Bolney.

With a muttered exclamation he turned back into the room. The ink-bottle was upset and the papers on which he had written were missing.

“Damn!” swore Father Xavier.

CHAPTER XVII

"AND the new edition of the map is really nearly ready?" said Margaret.

Donald nodded.

"Smart work, rather," he said modestly. "We made it up largely from the colour trace—you don't know what that is, but it doesn't matter—then sent four men down here to check it on the ground. Like to see it?"

Margaret nodded, and they bent their steps in the direction of Donald's office. He had been down for two days only in Sukurpur, but his office had preceded him.

"Are you having it specially guarded?" she asked him as they entered the steamy, hot building.

"Yes—to a certain extent, but after all they're hardly likely to want another one."

"Then you think it was because they wanted the map—whoever they are really—themselves, and not to prevent you having it?"

"Oh yes, I think so," he replied. "I haven't thought about it from that point of view much, because the stealing of the map seemed so absurd that I always thought it was either a mistake or a blind."

"But a blind for what?" she asked. She had seated herself on one of the tables and was

swinging her legs meditatively while she pondered the problem.

"Lord knows—I don't," he ejaculated. "The whole thing's a puzzle. Why did they steal old Stevens' sermons?"

"That was because they were about the Teacher, I suppose," she said. "I only wonder they didn't kill him."

"You bloodthirsty little thing!"

She laughed, but her face remained grave.

"Well, they didn't stop at much—there was Ysobel," she said.

"There was," he agreed shortly. He had been brought into closer contact than he wished with the tragedy of his step-aunt while winding up her affairs, and had no desire to discuss the subject.

"Well, here's the old map, anyway," he exclaimed, changing the topic.

Margaret jumped off the table and together they bent over the large, finely-drawn sheet spread out on the table that he had indicated.

"But I thought you said it was of Sukurpur and the dam," said Margaret after a brief examination.

"So it is—at least, I mean they come on to it, but only here at the extreme south-west corner."

"They look very small."

"Well, naturally—you've got to remember that this map is on the half-inch scale. This sheet represents a tidy bit of country——"

He launched into technicalities which ordinarily would have interested the girl, but her attention wandered.

"Don, I don't understand. Listen!" she interrupted suddenly. With a swing she perched

herself on the table once more and sat looking up at him, ticking the points off on her fingers.

"Daddy's worried—desperately, really," she said, "about this business. He thinks, and so does Mr. Bolney, so does everybody, that the Brotherhood wanted to get hold of the plan of the dam—that they're plotting some special mischief there when the royal visit comes off. But the thing's absurd. There are loads and loads of plans of the dam and of Sukurpur, huge things—oh, ever so big——"

"Four inch," he murmured. "Yes, I know there are—and they can easily be procured; it was perfectly senseless to go and steal my map for that!"

"Then why did they do it?"

"Lord knows," he repeated; "it must have been a mistake or a blind, as I said."

"Has this part been mapped before?"

"Yes—once, years and years ago on the one-inch scale. They're not over-accurate at the present day because these rivers change their course quite a good bit. Sometimes you'll find villages marked on one bank which are now several miles away on the other bank. Sometimes they've disappeared altogether—gone into the river! It's odd, because, of course, substantially the course remains the same—as witness the bridge and the proposed dam."

"Then it almost looks," said Margaret, still working out her own thought, "as if it was the country above the dam—the rest of the sheet—that was important to the Brotherhood."

"It does," he agreed. "By Jove, infant, you know you ought to write detective yarns."

'The Blood on the Bath Bun' by Margaret—Cameron. We'll live on the proceeds, then I can retire and collect caterpillars."

There was, at this point, a brief interlude which had nothing to do with either maps or detectives, and it was some moments before Margaret returned to the subject.

"Do you remember that night you told me about the Teacher, Don?" she asked.

"I do," he assured her.

The incident in question had been one which they had often discussed, for they had agreed that it was on that very night that their peculiar predestination for each other had become patent to their minds. At the moment, though, Margaret was not to be re-enticed into sentimental byways.

"I never thought then," she said, "what a strange business it was going to be, but I remember feeling horribly creepy. The only part that I couldn't understand, and can't still, was that part about the flying horse. It sounds like a fairy story."

"It does," he agreed, "but it's a well-authenticated bit, all the same."

He recounted the facts which he had told to her father previously and she listened wide-eyed.

"Where are the places? Let's find them," she said, getting up and going over to the large map of India which hung on the wall opposite.

"Rameswaram"—Donald gave her a pencil and she underlined each town as she found it. "Dehra Dun," she finished. "Why—do look—that's odd, isn't it?"

He glanced at the map and her pencillings,

then as the same thought came to him as to her an excited light came into his eyes.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed.

They broke out into animated discussion, but though they ranged through many theories, possible and impossible, no satisfactory solution occurred to them.

The next evening Margaret had an engagement and Donald wandered rather disconsolately down to the Maidan, where the Survey 'plane had been housed. There was to be a further experiment made that season in survey by aerial photography and, though Donald's rôle in the 'plane which had been attached to his party was designed to be that of photographer-passenger, he intended taking the machine up on a short flight of reconnaissance that evening. Flying had been a passion with him ever since boyhood (it had been only due to an anxious parent that the letters R.E. and not R.A.F. followed his name) and, his pilot being at the moment laid up with a bout of autumn malaria, Donald saw his chance of spending a congenial evening.

The visibility had been bad all day owing to a dust-storm, but it was clear enough now to justify his ascent, though, he realised when he had mounted above Sukurpur and taken a preliminary circle, not very clear over the desert. He had intended flying in the Nana Sarai direction, but a glance at the dust-haze lying thick on the surface made him realise the futility of his intention, and, turning, he pointed the 'plane's head northwards.

It was appreciably cooler at the altitude to which he had attained, and the air was free from dust. The hills showed ahead, no longer faint

and nebulous, but clear-cut and close, touched already with the colourful light of evening. Donald settled down to the enjoyment of the moment. He handled the fine little machine with that skill and knowledge that is born only of love. An iron nerve, a love of adventure, a knowledge of mechanics, will make a man a good flyer, but Donald had just that gift, that added 'something' which makes the difference between talent and genius. The streak of poetic imagination which ran so oddly through his hard-headed Scotch temperament awoke and sang for joy as he realised that he was adrift from earth, held to her now only by that same strange force and attraction which controls equally the fluttering fall of a feather and the flight of the stars in their courses. The thrill of speed held him, though he was unconscious of the pace at which he travelled. He could see Paharital to his right, hanging on the dark mountain's side like a pendant of pearls on the breast of a dusky goddess, and, as he thought of the long wearisome hours of jolting train journey which separated it from Sukurpur, he felt that he had all but annihilated space.

The foothills rose about him presently and the atmosphere grew bumpy and treacherous, but Donald seemed to have almost a sixth sense in matters of aerial navigation. He could see Perushad, the tiny hill station where Margaret had stayed and where Hope Chesney still remained, close above him, and away on his left, out on the plain, lay the huge dam at Bulana. He could see the network of canals and tributaries which it fed gleaming like silver threads in the evening light, but the lengthening shadows warned him

that he must not linger, and he brought the plane round in a great circle, soaring above the first ridges of the hills, and headed her homeward.

It was at that moment that something—some slight movement that he could not have defined—made him turn his head to the left, and for a moment he stared wide-eyed, careless of where he flew. He blinked his eyes, even shutting them for a moment, for it seemed to him that he must be suffering from an hallucination. But, when he opened them again, the strange sight was still there. Pale and ghostly against the darker grey of the hillside, there showed the form of a huge flying horse.

For an instant Donald hesitated, then, reckless of the lengthening shadows, he brought the 'plane round and gave chase.

He had the advantage of speed. So much was obvious in the first few minutes, for he gained rapidly, but his quarry was none too conspicuous in the failing light, and Donald had the impression that it flew silently, while the roar of his own engine must herald his approach from miles away.

It was already dusk among the hills—he could see lights beginning to show like bright jewels in Perushad. About him was a chequered grey twilight none too safe for flying, but Donald held on. Not for the whole world would he have abandoned the chase now, for by the behaviour of the quarry he realised what before he had already suspected—it was trying to elude him.

It was flying eastward, and as it surmounted the crest of a ridge Donald roared triumphantly only a hundred yards in the rear. For a moment only he lost sight of it, necessarily, as the ridge

intervened, then as he too crossed the spur of the hill he stared round incredulously. The horse was not visible.

The thing seemed impossible, but it was dusk in the valley which lay between two high out-running spurs of hill, and it was chiefly by movement that he could detect his quarry. Perhaps, he reflected, it could hover motionless and so escape observation.

He cruised round, cautiously, not daring to go too near the hill in the failing light, but he saw nothing until he swung round towards home once more. Then he drew in his breath sharply. The 'phantom' was between him and the plains, and the steadiness with which it came towards him told its own story. Until that moment, despite his sturdy scepticism, there had been a faint doubt in Donald's mind as to whether the strange apparition might not be something supernatural, but he knew now beyond question that, whatever the agency behind it, it was human. Moreover, he was no longer the pursuer, but the pursued.

It was some queer instinct which told him this last fact, but he acted on it instantly. His retreat towards the plains was cut off and he dared not turn towards the hills. There was only one thing to do—he must get above his pursuer and try to break away towards home over his head. He banked steeply, but it did not take him many minutes to find out that, though he might have the advantage in speed, the strange thing which was hunting him could outmatch him in almost everything else. It rose effortlessly and vertically, outsoaring him with ease, and Donald, seeing the

hopelessness of his idea, swung his machine's head westward. He must trust to his superior speed alone and run the risks from the out-jutting spurs of the hills. But he was too late—his enemy had approached too near. Even as he turned it pressed in perilously close, and he had a momentary glimpse of a face (which even in that instant of stress, and despite the failing light, he recognised) peering up at him from a basket hung between the horse's front 'legs,' then a blinding pain shot up his arm and his hand fell from the lever. He felt the machine surge onwards out of control, and had a vision of the hillside rushing to meet him. Then, with a violent effort of will, he pulled the levers again, driving the 'plane upwards with all his might. He cleared the spur by a hair's-breadth, and, still helped by that odd sixth sense which seemed to be his in matters of flying, he steadied the machine into a smooth downward gliding spiral. He had a dim recollection of fields of cultivation that he had seen below him. He might be mistaken, but there was a chance.

He was aware of a jar and rebound, followed by the bumpiness of a rough but successful landing, and his hands, still controlled by instinct, mechanically performed their tasks. Then, as he felt the 'plane draw joltingly to a standstill, he slumped forward in his seat unconscious.

CHAPTER XVIII

"ONLY two more weeks," remarked General Kimball with an air of patient martyrdom. "Really life is a trifle hectic."

The Commissioner nodded gloomily. He was in serious, though semi-official, conference with the G.O.C., his Brigade-Major and the Station Staff Officer.

"It is," he agreed. "Without any desire to be unkind, one cannot help hoping that His Serene Highness may contract some devastating illness at Aden which will necessitate an immediate return to European climes."

"For my part," said Major Sanders, "I can't help thinking we are exaggerating the danger. After all, what evidence have we that this Brotherhood is really the lurid thing we believe it to be? There are always murders in this happy country, and it's my humble opinion that, since this Brotherhood stunt started, every man-jack who dislikes his neighbour sticks a knife into him and then jams on the old red snake to make it look spectacular."

"And anyway," chimed in the S.S.O. hopefully, "they've been remarkably quiet just lately."

"That," said the G.O.C., like a fractious child refusing to be comforted, "is what worries me."

Sir James concurred.

"It does me, too," he said. "Loud demonstrations, blowing of trumpets and beating of war drums, threats and *hurtals*—all those I can understand and they don't alarm me much. But I don't like this eerie silence. It looks to me as though the Brotherhood was anxious not to discourage the royal visit to the dam."

No one spoke for a moment, and the silence was punctuated only by the hissing of a syphon.

"How about that fellow—what's-his-name—Bolney?" asked the General suddenly. "He doesn't seem to have accomplished much."

"He hasn't run the Burra Bhai to earth, which is the particular job he was given," said the Commissioner, "but he's come near it, and he and the police in general have gone through the bazaars with a fine comb. I don't think there are many suspects on whom they couldn't lay their hands. Bolney is away at the moment, still on the hunt, but I shall be glad to have him back here for the ceremony at the dam. He is a remarkably efficient officer, and his knowledge of the Indian is extraordinary."

"Anyway, if things go wrong it will be mainly a police funeral," said the S.S.O., voicing the sentiment with which all save the luckless police-wallahs themselves are wont to soothe their frayed nerves at times of royal visitations.

"That won't save a European war," remarked the General gloomily.

Sir James sighed.

"We can but hope for the best," he said. "After all, the Burra Bhai is not superhuman and there are some comforting factors in the case."

One is, as I said, that the royal train need not go into Sukurpur, the danger spot. The passengers can be disembarked at the station by the dam. We shall have, as you know, enough troops concentrated here for a Frontier war, and the reserves—all, that is to say, for whom there is not actual cubic space left at the dam—will be encamped on the low ground between Sukurpur and the bridge. For the rest—any feature of interest that H.S.H. succeeds in catching a glimpse of will be through a haze of police constables. I don't see what more we can do."

"Short of shooting every babu at sight—nothing," agreed the General. He regarded the yellow fluid in his glass lovingly.

"Well, well, from all red snakes and Royal Bugs—Good Lord deliver us. Here's best——"

Margaret meantime had been pacing the verandah in an agony of anxiety. For three days Donald had disappeared. She had had no single word from him, and, though outwardly calm, she felt half crazy with fear and suspense. The sight of the dâk wallah's figure coming up the drive only made her face look a trifle more white and pinched. So many times in those three horrible days she had rushed out to meet him hopefully, only to receive a bitter disappointment. She did not dare to move one step towards him now.

Yet, at the sight of the writing on the letter which he held out to her, the blood came flooding joyfully to her face. Five minutes later she met her father, as he came out from the conference, in a state of incoherent excitement. Donald was safe, but wounded. They must go to him at once. He was in a native hut at Sala. They must

go to him at once. He had something frightfully important to tell them. They must go to him at once. AT ONCE. . . .

Sir James succeeded in calming her sufficiently to be allowed a glimpse of the letter. Its contents made his brow furrow in thought. It was obvious that Donald had something of importance to communicate, and the Commissioner had a great respect for his future son-in-law's intelligence. The lad would not urge them to go on a wild-goose chase. Moreover, the spot from which the letter had been written struck him as significant, for that very morning he had had a letter from Ted Chesney, away ostensibly shooting, but, as Sir James knew, following up a vague suspicion of his own. Ted, too, had written that he had something important to communicate and was returning to Sukurpur to do so. The point which struck Sir James was that the spot from which Ted had written was close to Sala, from where Donald's note had come. The fact seemed significant, and it would be easy, he reflected, to send Chesney a wire telling him to meet them at Sala.

After a minute's cogitation he turned to Margaret.

"All right, lassie," he said. "We'll go by to-night's train."

CHAPTER XIX

DONALD CAMERON turned on his side and gazed out of the unglazed aperture which did duty for a window. From where he lay he could see his 'plane out upon the stretch of more or less level cultivation, and the mystery of his immunity from further attack was explained. He had landed by great good fortune on level ground in a strange little furrow on the western side of the spur. From where it lay the machine would be invisible except from directly overhead or, maybe, from the west, and there a ridge of hill forbade access to aircraft of any kind. When the attack had been made on him the 'horse' had been flying eastwards, and doubtless his enemy, believing him to have crashed on the further side of the spur which he had crested with such difficulty, had deemed discretion the better part of valour and continued his easterly flight.

Donald remembered nothing from the moment that he had lost consciousness until he awoke to find himself in his present quarters. His host was a forest guard, an Indian of respectable standing, sterling character and hospitable intent. He, with a number of other villagers, had lifted Donald from the 'plane and brought him to this house. The local sub-assistant surgeon attached

to the dispensary had attended to his hurts, which were, all things considered, of an unexpectedly light variety, and at the moment Donald's only worry was a doubt as to whether his letter had reached Margaret in safety.

He had just finished breakfasting off bananas and milk, while, to beguile his repast, his host's small daughter, seated cross-legged on the floor, sang in a thin, high treble voice to a stringed instrument, from which her nimble fingers drew strange sounds. Donald smiled at her cheerily. She was a pretty little thing, of, he judged, about ten years of age, but conversation was limited, as she could speak only the patois of the hills, of which he was ignorant. She had a few words of Hindustani, but not sufficient to carry a discussion to any length.

"That's a pretty song—what do you call it?" he asked as the quaint melody wavered to an end.

She smiled at him shyly, evidently understanding the drift of the question, but uncertain how to reply, and at that moment there occurred an interruption. Voices were heard outside, at the sound of which Donald half started up in bed, forgetful of his hurts, and the next instant Margaret had entered the room and scandalised the singer by shamelessly embracing the invalid. Sir James followed at a discreet interval, and after him came their host, bearing morah stools and a chair of the same make for Margaret. He and his daughter withdrew, and after a short interval, during which Margaret's questions tumbled over each other, giving no time for answers, her father managed to slip in a word.

"Suppose we let Don tell us in his own way just what happened?" he suggested.

Margaret subsided obediently on to the chair which she had pulled to the head of the charpoy, or bazaar bed, on which the invalid lay, and sat holding his hand as he spoke.

Donald told his story briefly but clearly, beginning with his first glimpse of the 'horse' and ending with his lucky descent on to the field of Sala.

"The 'plane's damaged, of course," he ended, "but, though I haven't seen it, I gather not badly. If I could have my mechanic sent out from Sukurpur he could be getting it put to rights. I ought to be on my feet quite soon, though there is one spot in my leg that may be a bit lengthy. But—this is what I really wanted to say to you sir: I believe I know who the Holy One is—I recognised the Johnny who fired at me. It was Latif Khan!"

"Who?" The exclamation came simultaneously from both Margaret and her father, and they stared incredulously. They knew Latif Khan as an Anglicised Indian zemindar, educated in England, a keen sportsman and polo player. To connect him with the Holy One seemed nothing short of ludicrous.

"You must be mistaken, Don," said Margaret. He shook his head.

"No, it was Latif Khan all right, I am certain," he said. "Of course I may be mistaken in supposing he is the Teacher. But he was in the 'horse,' anyway, wasn't he?"

The girl puckered her brow in perplexity.

"I never did like that horse," she exclaimed. "It didn't seem to fit in, somehow. And, Don, surely the Teacher wouldn't have fired at you?"

It sounds more like one of the Brotherhood. And then, Latif Khan is just an ordinary Moham-medan—somehow one thinks of the Teacher as being a Hindu. Oh, I don't know—it's all a muddle."

"It's certainly an odd problem," said Sir James, who had sat silent since hearing the story. "Of course one has to remember that Easterns look at things in a different light to what we do. The Teacher might not stop short of firing at someone whom he thought a spy. Or again it might not have been he, but a fanatical follower; but somehow I cannot help seeing the hand of the Brotherhood in the affair. Can it be a further effort to discredit the Holy One, do you think? One thing seems to be established—that is, that the horse has nothing supernatural about it."

"Margaret and I had already suspected that, sir," said Don. "We underlined the places where it had been seen last autumn and they make a perfectly straight line through India. We thought——"

He was interrupted by the sound of booted feet outside, followed by a sharp rap, and the crazy door opened to admit Bolney.

"Great Scott!" Sir James greeted the new arrival in surprise. "What brings you to this unlikely spot?"

The Policeman panted slightly as he answered, as though he had been hurrying. He seemed in a state of strange excitement.

"I heard you were here as I arrived, sir," he said, "and came up to report. I am following my man—I have discovered the Burra Bhai!"

"What? Who?"

The exclamation came from three pairs of lips simultaneously.

"It is Father Xavier," said Bolney.

There was an instant's complete silence, whilst once more the hearers stared at each other incredulously. If there was one thing more unlikely than that Latif Khan should be the Teacher it was that Father Xavier should be the Burra Bhai.

"What makes you think that?" asked Sir James, whilst Donald gave vent to an indignant exclamation.

"Old Wassis? Rot!"

"Let's hear the facts, Bolney," said the Commissioner.

The Policeman sat down on the end of the bed.

"I've suspected him for some time," he began, "though I couldn't say what started me doing so. He has an extraordinary knowledge of the country and the natives, you know. Then—one never quite understands these R.C.s. He was up in Paharital at the time of both murders, I discovered, and of course, as you know, sir, he was one of the people through whom the news of the royal visit could have leaked out. Also he was in the vicinity of Nana Sarai the night of the meeting you told us about. Lately his conduct has been odd, to say the least of it. He has positively haunted the Belvoir, and seemed extraordinarily interested in Captain Cameron's room and also in the one Miss Stoneham had occupied. Then, just three nights ago, I heard him going home singing in the strangest fashion; what he was doing I don't know, but I followed him. Even after he got into the college I could hear him still

singing and behaving peculiarly in his room. I listened under the window. Presently he went out—I slipped into the room and took up some of the papers he had been writing. They were covered with strange sentences—and they were in Russian. Father Xavier came back just as I was examining them, and I slipped out of the window. He saw me, I think, but I crept back and listened to hear what he did when he discovered that the papers were gone. He said ‘Damn!’ I waited around, wondering what he would do, and I was not surprised when I found he intended a bolt. That very night he slipped away from Paharital and came down by a most unusual way through the hills. I followed him—lost him once or twice, but caught up with him here. He is at Sala at the moment, but will not stay when he hears you are here. I came up to report, but I must go, sir——”

Once again the speaker was interrupted by the sound of voices without, and their host ushered in Ted Chesney in response to the Commissioner’s permission to enter.

“I got your wire and came as quickly as I could, sir,” he said, as he greeted Margaret and glanced in surprise at Donald. “There seems to be quite a party here; perhaps I had better wait to make my report——”

“Great Scott! don’t tell us you have discovered the Burra Bhai too!” exclaimed Donald.

Ted looked at him again in surprise.

“I—I have my suspicions as to his identity,” he said.

“Then for the Lord’s sake let’s hear them,” exclaimed Sir James.

"Latif Khan," said Ted tersely.

Again there was silence for a minute, then the Commissioner's brow cleared.

"Come, that is anyway less unlikely than what we've heard so far," he said. "Let's have your reasons, Chesney."

Ted gave them briefly.

"It was just a vague resemblance," he said, describing the man he had seen, without giving details of the occasion. "But I thought I would follow it up. I've been shooting near Latif Khan's place, and I've discovered that, not only was he absent from home on all the occasions that the Burra Bhai was known to be active elsewhere, but that there is a good deal that is mysterious about him. For one thing, he has changed his habits oddly of late—never plays polo or does any of the things he used to do. Also"—Ted glanced momentarily at Margaret as though in doubt, then continued briefly—"also his servant recognised a photo of Miss Stoneham—though that may not mean much, of course."

"It probably means nothing," exclaimed Bolney. "I don't want to throw cold water on your idea, but I am sure you are on the wrong tack. Latif Khan may turn out to have something to do with it, but he is not the Burra Bhai. The man I am after——"

For the fourth time that morning a visitor knocked on the door of that tiny room, and the occupants looked up in almost superstitious awe.

"Come in," cried Sir James.

Father Xavier stood on the threshold.

"Ah, you have a wassis party," he exclaimed cheerily. "I hear by accident of your presence,

Sir James, and I come to speak to you. I am here on parochial duty—no? I have something of importance to tell you——”

His eye lighted on the policeman.

“Ah, Mistair Bolney—we have met lately—no?”

For a moment there was a strained silence. Then Sir James made a slight gesture.

“Are you going to tell us you have discovered the Holy One?” he asked.

Father Xavier shook his head.

“But no, I have discover the Burra Bhai!”

“Who?”

The question was like a pistol-shot.

“It is Preacher Stevens,” said Father Xavier. With a helpless gesture Sir James sat down.

CHAPTER XX

MARGARET was the first to recover.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "Father Xavier will tell us his story?"

"But certainly," agreed the priest genially. He sat down on the decrepit chair which their host had just thrust through the door.

"I begin at the beginning—no?" he said. "Twenty-five years ago I come to India. I go to the college at Sukurpur. I am home-sick—pouf! But that does not matter. There is there a boy—we call him Ivan. His mother, she had been a Russian. His father we do not know, but it is probable that he was of this country. Later the boy go to Europe to be educated. He run away from school and I hear he has gone, perhaps to Russia. But of that I do not know. I hear nothing of him all these years, but always I remember—three things. First, his song. He have a strange gift of music. Always he can make melodies, rhythms from everything. One night he sing to me, he say that he tell me his secret. I think that that secret sound evil. 'Art thou a devil then?' I ask. He answer, 'Oah noh! I

am boy-scout.' I think he make a mock of me because I train the boy-scouts—no? I teach them the morse with the flags. And the second thing I remember is his disguise. Always he will be someone else, and by one so small mark only may he be known. That is the third thing I remember—that so small mark.

"Well—I hear nothing for many years, but always, I think, I look for him. He will come to India one day—that I know. But I do not see him. Then one night I dine in the desert with Mr. and Mrs. Chesney. You remember, *hein*? All that evening, I think, I do not know why, of Ivan. His face it come up before me, his voice now and again, but I do not know why. Later I sleep in the waiting-room at the station and I dream of him—so vividly. I wake and I hear his song—out there in the desert. I think, 'It is a dream still,' but then I remember—Ivan was a boy—the voice that sing out there in the desert it is a man's voice. I get up and I go to the door, but I see nothing. Later I hear there has been a meeting of the Brotherhood that night at Nana Sarai. I am interested. After that I think always: 'Ivan—the Burra Bhai. The Burra Bhai—Ivan. Are they not perhaps the same?' Always I look for that one so small mark, but I do not find it. One day in Paharital I meet Mrs. Chesney. She talk to me of this Preacher Stevens. She say, 'Oh, I hate that Preacher—he has a brown spot in one eye.' That is it—the one so small mark that Ivan cannot change! I wonder. I know they have had the Brotherhood in the hotel—a murder—no? I follow Mrs. Chesney to the Belvoir, but I am too late. The Preacher he has

gone down the hill. Next night they have another murder. I wonder much, and always I watch at the Belvoir. One day I meet Sir Tisra Kruton. He start the K.B.C.—no? It broadcast the hymns which I think are very like Ivan's song. I go and talk to them. Lady Kruton she try to convert me. Sir Tisra he tell me how to rule India—on a cash basis. But they are kind people and I listen. I hear the hymns—they are like Ivan's song. I hear too that it is Preacher Stevens who procure the hymns—from a temple, no? It is he who choose the singers because they must be holy men. Always, and this is strange, while I listen I think of my boy-scouts. Going home I reason so—' Preacher Stevens he is Ivan—he has the mark. Then it is Ivan who make those hymns to be broadcast. For why?' And always I think of my boy-scouts. I sing the hymns as I walk. You know them—no?"

Suddenly and lustily, with a complete absence of self-consciousness, Father Xavier broke into song.

"Pompom p-o-m, p-o-m, p-o-m, p-o-m," he chanted at the full pitch of his lungs, giving forth the strange wavering melodies with absolute accuracy of pitch. "You have it—no? Neither had I, but at one part the path is steep—pouf—I cannot sing, but I hum the rhythm on one note and think the tune—so——"

Once more he gave forth a punctuated rush of 'poms' in monotone, till Margaret felt her sense of humour overcoming her. But Donald broke out excitedly.

"Great Scott! Morse code, and we never spotted it!"

There was a startled exclamation all round the room. Father Xavier beamed round on them.

"Ah, you have it—the morse code, hidden in the music, and you do not spot it, as you say, because you think of the melody—the pitch—no? And the words. But you have someone who listen only to the rhythm—the beats—and he hear the message. You have too the tom-tom accompaniment. That give the punctuation—it divide the letters and the words. Sometimes you have it reversed. Then the voice it give a long sustain note and the tom-toms they give the morse. But not often, I think, because that is dangerous. Well—I go home. I get my book of boy-scouts—no? I make out the messages—but they are in Russian. I cannot understand them. One passage escape me—I cannot recall the notes. I go to a harmonium to assist myself. When I come back I find Mr. Bolney has taken my notes."

"You seemed very annoyed," exclaimed Bolney, who had been listening rather sullenly to the recital. "I heard you say—'Damn!'"

"But certainly—you upset the inkpot. I mop it up. I intend going to find Mr. Bolney, but just at that very minute I get a telephone message. One of my parishioners is dying. He live in a place not very far from here. I go to him at once. I stay with him a little. He die. I come on here to take the train at the bottom of the hill because I return now to Sukurpur. I intend going to tell Sir James when I reach there, but most fortunately I find him here."

There was dead silence for several moments as the priest finished speaking. They had heard

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so many different stories and theories in a short space of time that the combined effect was a feeling of helpless confusion. Bolney was the first to break out.

"Oh, Lord, it's hopeless," he exclaimed violently. "The same old story that I have been up against all the time—no lack of witnesses or solutions, but too many. Each of us stumbles on a different one, and which of us is right? None, probably. I believe this Preacher Stevens red-herring is a further effort on the part of the Brotherhood to bring discredit on the Holy One. Open warfare has failed, so they resort to these methods. And anyway we haven't answered any of the questions.—How did the news of the royal visit leak out? Why did they steal the map? Why was Miss Stoneham murdered? Where does Latif Khan come into it?"

"Why not arrest him?" said Ted.

"Where is he?" retorted Bolney.

"Why not arrest Preacher Stevens?" suggested Margaret.

"He is where?" demanded Father Xavier.

"Where is the Holy One?" asked Sir James.

"Where is the Burra Bhai?" countered Bolney.

Once again there was silence, while each one stared at his companion almost suspiciously. Then Bolney made a hopeless gesture.

"I can't arrest shadows," he exclaimed truculently.

Father Xavier rose from the decrepit chair and faced him.

"But I am not a shadow," he said. "You arrest me—no?"

For a moment there was another tense silence, and it almost seemed that the policeman would act on the suggestion. Then Sir James intervened.

"We can't arrest you for saying damn, Father," he said, "and that is all we have against you. Besides—we can always lay our hand on you."

The words relieved the tension, and the Padre took his leave with undiminished geniality. Bolney left in his wake with a precipitancy which suggested that his suspicions were not allayed, and Ted and Donald were left alone with the Commissioner and his daughter.

"Well, anyway," remarked Margaret, "even if we can't locate the Burra Bhai, we've got a whole heap of new people to suspect."

"Or shoot at sight," suggested her father. He turned to Ted.

"Is Mrs. Chesney up at Perushad still?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the other. "Would you like her to come down here and stay with Margaret until Cameron is on his legs again? I'm sure she'd be delighted."

"I should be very grateful," said the Commissioner. "We can have tents and servants sent up for them and they will be quite comfortable. As for yourself, Chesney, as you seem to have established relations with Latif Khan's ménage, I think you'd better extend your leave and stay around."

"With pleasure, sir," said Ted. He was by no means anxious to return to civilisation at the moment.

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“Then that’s that,” said Sir James. “Come, we’ll see if there is any liquid refreshment to be had—I’ve brought up a temporary camp.”

They went out, leaving Donald and Margaret together.

CHAPTER XXI

THE twenty-six 'letters' of the Brotherhood—the framework of that confraternity—were met in solemn conclave at Nana Sarai. It was a vital meeting and all felt the seriousness of the occasion. They would not meet again until after the *grand coup*, and to-night they were to receive their final instructions.

The Burra Bhai stood in their midst addressing them. He had received from every man a report of the work in each particular district. Now he gave the final instructions.

"So—that is satisfactory," he exclaimed. "There is not one adverse report. In each district the mine of revolution is well and truly laid. It needs but the match. That match must be applied at the given signal *and not one moment sooner or later*. It is impossible to stress that point too much. The time factor is all important. The signal will be given immediately after the destruction of the royal visitor, the Viceroy, the Governor and their respective staffs. It will be given——"

There was a sudden interruption in a well-known voice.

"Bah, the signal, it will be given doubtless—but the killing—how does that take place? Does

our Burra Bhai know, for instance, the extent of the precautions to be taken ? ”

The Burra Bhai gestured lightly, and replied with a pithy summary of the exact strength of the said precautions which surprised his audience, but would still more have surprised the G.O.C. could he have heard it. The Burra Bhai himself seemed singularly unperturbed by the strength of the forces arrayed against him.

“ Of that I talk presently,” he said with a delicate wave of his hand. “ I speak first of the signal. It wants now but three days to the ceremony at the dam. Sufficient time for each man to reach his district and await the moment. The signal will be given by wireless. Though our erstwhile channel of communication, which has served us so well, is now no longer trustworthy or available, we have our own installation which will be safe enough for a short period. I come now to the more detailed matters. Brother N. and Brother X., stand forward.”

Two dark figures detached themselves from the shadows and stood out into the middle of the floor. It was noticeable that though both were masked the Burra Bhai had looked at each in turn as he called their names. He spoke now to the one on his right.

“ You, Brother X., will go to Bulana. It lies, as the crow flies, perhaps fifty miles north of Sukurpur. By river, or by the only roads available, the distance is greater, about ninety miles. It is a small place, important only by reason of the dam which feeds a large irrigation system. There is a small colony of engineers living there, and a larger population of Indians on the further bank

of the river, but that is all. There is a chain ferry across the stream and a single line of railway running from the canal colony in a south-westerly direction which joins the main line some twenty miles away. Along the railway are telegraph and telephone wires, and there is also one telephone wire leading up to Perushad in the hills and connected up through that place with Paharital and other stations. All of those wires must be cut and the place thus completely isolated at the time written on this slip of paper. The chain-ferry must also be put out of action. You note what I say. At the time written, and neither before nor after. Before might lead to premature discovery, and after—might be too late. It must be done at the time stated. There is not likely to be either trolley or engine at the station, but to be quite sure the line must be wrecked for, say, a distance of twenty yards in two or three places. This is important, but not as important as the cutting of the wires. The object is to isolate Bulana from communication—other than by bullock-cart!—with the outside world. On the paper you will find a detailed plan, drawn to scale, of the vital points in your work. You may have difficulty, but the place is too far from Sukurpur for any particular precautions to be taken."

He handed the paper to Brother X. and turned in the same dry, unemotional manner to Brother N.

"You, Brother, have already been at Bulana for some time. The unusually large consignment of dynamite given to your charge is already, I understand, laid beneath the dam?"

The Brother bowed his head.

"It is laid," he said. "We have had to tunnel from a long way out in the desert to escape detection, but it has been accomplished."

"That is good. There are then few instructions to give you. The mine is to be fired at the time written on this slip of paper. You note what I say. *At the time written* and neither before nor after."

He turned to the assembled company in general once more.

"The main features of the scheme will now be apparent to you, my Brothers. It has been mathematically calculated with the utmost nicety—hence the importance of the time factor. The country between Bulana and Sukurpur is desert—there is therefore no fear of the alarm being given from anywhere in that area. The flood—a gigantic one, for the dam is a huge affair—will sweep down upon the new dam unheralded, and, owing to a configuration of the land, it will not be perceived until it is almost upon the works and the distinguished visitors gathered there. Moreover, the ground on the north bank, between Sukurpur town and the bridge, is below river level. A channel further upstream gives access to this low-lying expanse, on which, incidentally, the whole of the artillery detachment will be encamped. The guns, therefore, will not come into action at the dam, because the flood will reach them, also unheralded, a little while before it reaches the dam itself. The works of the dam, being on the south bank (on which there is higher ground), will be completely cut off from Sukurpur both by the flooded low ground and owing to the fact that the bridge itself will

inevitably collapse in a very short space of time. The whole main current of the river—the greatest force of the water, that is to say—will be going through only two spans, and they cannot possibly withstand the strain. At the works themselves there will inevitably be confusion. I, the Burra Bhai, shall be there—one knowledgeable man, one watchful man amidst a host thrown into confusion. With my own hands shall I slay the royal visitor, the Viceroy, all necessary people, and then escape—my way is planned—and give the signal. For the rest”—he spread out his hands—“the rest lies with you, my Brothers!”

There was a pregnant silence as he ceased speaking, while the gigantic ingenuity of the plan sank into their minds. They seemed awed by its fiendish completeness. Then Brother H. broke out in a sudden challenge.

“You will be there,” he exclaimed, “as *whom*?”

The Burra Bhai laughed lightly.

“But certainly I shall be there,” he exclaimed, tapping the pocket of his coat. “Have I not here the official intimation that my presence will be required?”

And in the silence which followed, two mocking eyes gleamed bafflingly through the slits in the mask.

CHAPTER XXII

HOPE came out of the tent pitched on the hillside in which she and Margaret had been staying. The girl had left for Sukurpur the day before in order to be there in readiness for the ceremony at the dam, but Hope had remained on—she had no wish to return to Sukurpur yet awhile. She looked at her watch by the pallid light of the waning moon and saw that the hands pointed to three o'clock. She had not slept all night, and as she held her hand to her aching head she knew that it was unlikely that she would do so. It was suffocatingly hot. Up on the hills behind her a thunderstorm rumbled and growled, and she could see the blinding white flashes of lightning splitting the heavy mass of cloud, but about her no breath of air stirred. Far down below on the plain she could make out a tiny white speck in the moonlight which she knew was Ted's tent. He was still in the neighbourhood, ostensibly shooting, but in reality watching for Latif Khan. Donald was with him to-night, for he had been sufficiently recovered to accompany Margaret to the railhead, and he had gone on to Ted for the night. The 'plane was still in the hands of the mechanic, but Donald had hopes of it being ready on the morrow, or possibly the next day.

Hope pulled a deck-chair out into the open, away from the tent, and sat down to think. Sleep was out of the question just so long as the thundery oppression hung about, and there were thoughts which must be faced. She could not stay on in the hills indefinitely, letting matters slide. She wondered rather bitterly, as her eyes rested on that faint, far dot of white, whether Ted was chafing to be at the dam and to see Mae once more. The estrangement between them still continued. Though he had come up to Sala once or twice during Margaret's stay there, and though outwardly things were normal, Hope knew that there was a solid wall between them. She saw no reason why it should ever be broken down—hardly knew, in fact, whether she desired it to be broken. On matters of general principle her mind was clear now. She had no sort of doubt but that it was her duty to hold together the home at all costs. Only so could she fulfil the task to which she and Ted had set their hands together. But it was with her own pride that the battle now lay. Moments of stress and upheaval are apt to be revealing, and the insight she had obtained into Mae's mentality during the hideous time which had followed Ysobel's murder had revolted Hope's fastidiousness. That she, Hope Chesney, should enter into competition with a girl of Mae's calibre, should vie with her, strive to outdo her, seemed impossible. One did not, could not enter the lists with any save an equal. . . .

So matters had remained. It seemed to Hope looking back on her stay in Perushad and at Sala, that she had lived in a state of mental inertia.

From the Preacher she had heard more than once—strange letters which had never failed to affect her with a faint echo of the influence his compelling personality had exercised upon her, but her will fought against them. Her mind was made up on the general principles involved. The battle now lay only with herself, with her hurt pride and aching loneliness. She had not answered the letters, not only because she did not choose to do so, but because there had been no address on any of them.

Hope looked at her watch once more. The hands marked a quarter to four. In a little over four hours now the ceremony at the dam would take place, for it was timed to begin at eight a.m., that being the latest hour at which the temperature would be tolerable to a visitor from Europe. She got up presently and moved restlessly into the tent. It was no use thinking—she could arrive at no satisfactory solution, and she was possessed by a strange inward conviction (she could not have said whether it were faith or fatalism) that the issue of these matters did not lie in her own puny hands. Somehow her problems would be solved. . . .

With sudden energy, prompted by a desire for mental occupation, she pulled a box out from a pile that lay stacked at the back of the tent. She had left Sukurpur too obsessed by her worries to pack with intelligence, and she distinctly remembered bundling things into this case with no thought of their usefulness. Doubtless it would repay a sorting—there would be a lot of rubbish she could get rid of. . . .

It was a strange occupation for four o'clock

in the morning, carried out by the light of a waning moon, but Hope worked with a will, sorting things into heaps, pondering each object which she extracted. A piece of paper wedged into the interstices of the lunch-basket claimed her attention and she stared at it with furrowed brow.

It contained two or three lines of typewritten figures in groups, but she could make neither head nor tail of them. Did they belong to Ted? she wondered, but never before had she seen anything of the kind. There were other signs interspersed with the figures—signs on the same shift-key, she noticed, thinking how careless must have been the typist. Unless . . . a sudden thought struck her and she went into the tent once more, returning, after some rummaging, with an old typewriter of Ted's. She sat down on the deck-chair, balancing the machine on her knee, and slipped in the piece of paper, winding it through until the lines of figures appeared above the ribbon.

" $-\frac{1}{2}92\ 70\ \%@; @5\ -7\frac{1}{2}@-@$ " she read, and underneath, " $17346.\ 58;3K.$ "

With her eyes fixed on the strange groups she started to type, copying them, but without depressing the number shift-key. She had no thought in her mind save of some vulgar intrigue between Ted and Mae, and she stared at the letters which she had typed uncomprehendingly for some minutes. Then, as the realisation of their meaning dawned on her, she leaped to her feet in horror, sending the typewriter crashing to the ground.

"Good God!" she exclaimed.

For a moment still she stood indeterminate, half paralysed with the stupendous possibilities of what she had read, then turning, she ran into the tent and began scrambling into her clothes.

In an incredibly short space of time she was ready. She did not wait to rouse a servant, though she remembered to put her electric torch in her pocket and to pull the piece of paper out of the typewriter. Her one devouring thought was to reach Ted and Donald in their tent, and without stopping to reflect on the difficulties in her way she set off down the hill.

Later, looking back on it, it was always a source of wonder to Hope how she survived that night. Though the tent had looked near from the hillside it lay three miles away along steep and tricky paths, through treacherous jungles and over rough ground. Though the moon still shone pallidly, the storm had drawn nearer.

She could hear the thunder rolling and rumbling, growling and grumbling on the hills around her like a great beast hunting for its prey. A few drops of heavy rain fell, but luckily the sky ahead of her remained unobscured, for the clouds clung to the hillside.

Hope half scrambled, half fell down the steep path, her breath coming in gasps, but, hard as the going was, it was better than when she had entered the patch of jungle on the more level ground. Here it was pitch dark, and despite her torch she was in terror of missing her way. A veritable fever possessed her to reach the men in their camp, but thoughts and fears clamoured in her brain. She had been a fool to come by herself, so impulsively. She would never win

through. She should have waited long enough to rouse a servant to come with her, or, better still, have roused the villagers. They might have provided a horse, or anyway a guide. . . .

Still she struggled on. It was useless going back now. The overhanging branches whipped her face, and several times she nearly fell as her foot caught in a treacherous root. Her torch was useless save to illumine a very small patch, and she could not see whether she had missed the path or not ; but luckily she knew enough to take her direction from the stars, which were still faintly visible. In the east there was a pale fan of light which told of the coming dawn. . . .

At last she was through the jungle and out on the plains, but here the going was inconceivably rough, and more than once she all but despaired of reaching the tent. She could not see it any longer, now that she was on more level ground, and to make matters worse the rain came down suddenly in one of those deluges which only a monsoon can accomplish. Hope was drenched to the skin and blinded by the force of the water. Still she struggled on. The stars were no longer visible, but there was that faint fan of light to give her direction. . . .

In the end the tent came upon her while she still believed herself far away. She discovered it by falling heavily over one of the ropes, and lay for a few seconds winded and exhausted on the ground. Then, realising where she was, she scrambled to her feet and hurried round to the entrance.

It took some minutes to rouse Ted from his slumbers, and when she had done so he stared at

her uncomprehendingly for a while, then, realising that something was badly amiss, got hurriedly out of bed and pulled a chair out for her.

"Sit down, old girl; what's up?" he exclaimed all in one breath. "Hi, wait a minute—I'll rouse the servants and get you some tea."

Hope swayed on her feet and he caught her, lowering her into the chair.

"Ted, Ted," she cried, "they are going to blow up the dam at Bulana—we've got to stop them. . . ."

After that she never quite knew what happened. All was confusion while she tried to explain what she had discovered to Ted and to Donald, who had appeared on the scene, and the servants whom Ted had roused ran here and there, lighting fires and waking the camp with the thoroughness and efficiency of native servants in a crisis. They had no idea what the dramatic arrival of the mem-sahib might portend, but they understood that some action was required of them and, no orders having been given, set about preparing a meal as the most likely thing to be needed.

"But—but I don't understand, Hope," exclaimed Ted as she strove to explain. "How did you find this out?"

She gave him a brief account of the paper and held it out for his inspection. He read the strange incomprehensible rows of figures, then, underneath, the sentences which Hope had typed.

"Blow up dam at Bulana. Query time?"

Ted gave vent to a low whistle.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated, and stood for a moment in thought.

"The telegraph office," said Donald, and

almost simultaneously both men turned and hurried into the tent.

"What's the time?" called Ted, as they huddled on their clothes.

Hope peered at her watch in the half-light of the dawn.

"It's just after five," she answered.

Ted and Donald came out of the tent together almost before she had finished speaking.

"You stay here," the former said, throwing a rug over her knees.

It was chilly in the dawn after the rain, which had stopped as soon as it had begun, and Hope was glad of the warmth in her wet clothes.

"We'll go down to the telegraph office and rouse someone, or break in and operate ourselves," her husband called back as they hurried away down the slope to the tiny village which lay half a mile away.

Eternity seemed to begin for Hope as they vanished. She wished with all her might that she had accompanied them, but she was exhausted with her long and desperate scramble to the camp, and her limbs felt incapable of supporting her. Those last two ominous words of the message which she had deciphered ran through her mind. Query time? When would the catastrophe take place? Would they be in time? She simply did not dare to contemplate the possibility of failure, but set herself instead to visualising the lie of the land and the chances for and against them. The plain on which Ted had pitched his tent was in reality a tiny tableland, and the hills came down closely on the western side of it. She could see the river below her now, very faint in the dawning

light, winding like a silver thread away to the desert. Though the village of Bulana lay only half a mile away, the dam itself was some three miles upstream, and it was inaccessible from this bank, for the hills came down precipitously to the river's edge. The small canal colony in which lived the engineers and other officials whose work lay round the dam was four miles away from the dam on the further bank of the river. The only means of access to it was by the chain ferry at Bulana village. Fortunately the village not only boasted a telegraph office but was connected both with the dam and with Perushad, up the hill, by a telephone wire. Hope sighed with thankfulness as her mind dwelt on this comforting fact. If only Sala village had been similarly equipped, what valuable time would have been saved! But Ted and Donald would get through. They must. . . .

A servant brought her tea, bread and butter, and boiled eggs, and she ate and drank gratefully, thankful not only for the food but for the distraction which it afforded. The dawn had waxed now and she glanced once more at her watch. A quarter to six. They must be through by now. Or perhaps one of them would go on to the ferry and cross to give the alarm. But that would take a long time. . . .

The sound of booted feet made her look up, and she saw her husband coming towards her. He was alone, and one glance at his face told her that things had gone badly.

"Cameron's gone back to Sala," he greeted her without preamble. "He thinks that by harrying the mechanic the 'plane can be made possible for

flight in a few hours' time. We could not get through. The wires are cut."

"What?"

"Cut," he repeated. "Also the ferry chains have been done in and the boats put out of action. We're completely isolated. Can't get in touch with the folk at the canal colony. . . ."

"Couldn't someone swim across?"

"No, the current's like a mill-race here—simply unswimmable. Nothing but a chain ferry can get across. Lord! why was I such a fool as to camp on this side of the river? Latif Khan's got a hydroglissar up at his place that I'd have got hold of somehow—but it's above the dam and on the opposite side. I thought it looked less suspicious for me to camp here——"

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Only one thing—and it's a forlorn hope. I'm going to try and make my way up through the jungles on this side. I may be able to reach the dam and get across it in time. . . . I came back for some men and an axe. We'll need one to cut our way. . . ."

Hope was on her feet in an instant.

"We'll need lanterns too," she said. "It will be dark for some time yet in the jungle."

"We?" he exclaimed. "Hope, you're not——"

"I'm coming, Ted," she said quietly. "Don't be afraid—I shan't be a drag. If I can't keep up with you I shall follow at my own pace. But I'm coming. After all, I may be of some use. . . ."

Mechanically, with a woman's instinct on such occasions, she had poured out a cup of tea, which she held out to him.

"Drink this, Ted, and there's an egg. You've

got to eat it—I'll give the orders to the servants; and don't forget your topi——"

Even in the midst of his perturbation a sudden smile twisted Ted's mouth rather wryly. Though they had not been up against such gigantic issues, he and Hope had faced many minor crises, and he seemed to have a vision of her always pressing food on him and reminding him about his topi, as steady and calm as himself. The vision brought with it a recollection of the estrangement of the last few months, which seemed like an ugly dream. On a sudden impulse he spoke, and his voice was hoarse.

"Hope—thank God!—thank God that it is you who are with me!"

It was a strange, even a blatant tribute, but for Hope it wiped out the bitterness of the last months. There was a new smile on her face as she looked at her watch once more.

"Five minutes to six," she murmured. "I wonder how long——"

The question was answered for her. Even as she turned to give the orders to the servants there came a flare of light in the western sky. It was followed by a thunderous roar of sound which seemed to shake the world about their ears.

The dam had been blown up.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR a second or so they stood paralysed, then with a dart Ted caught Hope by the arm.

"The water," he cried. "It's coming—we've got to run for it."

Even as he spoke she heard the roar of its approach, and turning raced with him for the higher ground. The servants had heard it too, and from every point of the camp there were figures flying in the direction of the hill. They were none too soon. Even as they climbed the first steep slope the 'head' of the flood thundered past in the river channel—a raging, foaming giant piled many times higher than the banks and sustained only by its pace. Behind it came the less spectacular but no less inexorable fan of rising water, spreading over the level ground with a gurgling, stealthy swiftness. Hope was up to her waist in water, and her feet were slipping under her, when Ted caught the overhanging branch of a tree, and, pulling himself up, dragged her after him. Wazir Ali, their old Mahommedan bearer, had made for the same point of vantage and scrambled up the trunk like a monkey behind her, pushing and prodding her unceremoniously to safety. They clung pantingly for a while on the lower branches, but it soon became apparent that

the tree would be only a temporary refuge. Standing as it did at the edge of the slope, the water was eating away the soil from its roots. It must inevitably collapse before long, and already they could feel a suspicious tremor in the slim trunk.

"Hell!" swore Ted briefly. "What do we do now?"

The question was answered for him. Three of the camp servants, with superior fleetness of foot, had reached a tree on a higher level, and from there the plight of the sahib and memsahib was apparent to them. Even as Ted spoke a shout hailed him, and a 'rope' formed of the knotted and plaited pugaris of the three men circled through the air, a stick tied to its end giving it weight. Wazir Ali was the most alert, and he caught the stick dexterously as it passed.

"*Jeldi, Memsahib, jeldi,*" he exclaimed as he made it fast to the tree.

"What does he want me to do?" cried Hope.

"You must swing yourself across," said Ted. "It doesn't look very pleasant, I own, but it's the only chance. We'll all three be in the water in another minute—the tree will go—and from the look of it we shouldn't have much hope in that torrent. Quick, dear——"

For one second Hope shut her eyes, then she set her teeth. The gap between the two trees was not an enormous one, but it seemed a gigantic leap to make with that foaming fury of water beneath her and only the frail rope of stuff to cling to. Yet it had to be done. . . .

With an effort she rose to a crouching position on the quivering branch, drew in her breath, then,

reaching far out along the rope, swung herself into space. A shout went up from the other tree.

"*Shabash, Memsahib, shabash. Jeldi bhai, jeldi. . .*"

It seemed an eternity to Hope that she hung there, and the pain in her arms was blinding, then a hand seized her firmly and she was pulled breathless and dishevelled into the larger tree. Ted and Wazir Ali followed, and it was always a mystery to Hope how the frail rope stood the strain. The tree they had reached was a giant silver oak and it accommodated its six strange inhabitants quite comfortably.

"Ho, brothers, we are rajahs!" exclaimed Lal Singh, a cheery hill-lad of some eighteen years who had been attached to Ted as a sort of extra shikhari. "Behold—the camp is struck—our work is done for us, we have but to sit still."

Hope smiled at the boy in quick appreciation. She had been in trying situations before, and she had never known either the humour or the goodwill of her servants to fail. But as she looked at the sea of brown water which a few moments before had been the camp, her spirits sank.

"And the Burra Lad Sahibs," queried Wazir Ali anxiously, "who are at the *bund*? What will be done?"

Hope shuddered. In the excitement of their own peril her mind had momentarily lost sight of the bigger issues at stake.

"Ted," she questioned fearfully, and she looked at the raging brown torrent below them, "how long will it take, do you think, to reach the dam?"

His answer was interrupted by a shout from

the men, for at that moment the tree from which they had been rescued swayed suddenly and fell out across the stream. For a moment it seemed that it would be carried away, but a boulder or some obstruction under the water caught it and it lay like a miniature pier thrust out into the flood.

"Can't say," said Ted, recurring to Hope's question as the excitement died down. "One can only make the roughest of guesses. Cameron was talking about it before he left. Of course, now we know why the Brotherhood wanted that map. It had the levels on it—the only one that had. Cameron said he thought the flood would keep its 'head' for a long time, and it will travel very fast at first. The banks are high here and the channel cut very deep. Also the gradient is stiff. It will lose pace some miles further on—lose its 'head' too, maybe, though one can't tell—but it will get back a lot of its pace at the steep, narrow gorge leading out on to the plains proper. After that it will lose pace steadily and spread out over the level lands. The ceremony starts at eight and he blew it up roughly at six, so that means he thinks it will take at least two hours. But of course he must have allowed for it taking much more, really. His calculations could only be rough when all is said and done. He'd allow the biggest margin for error in either direction that he could, and that means that he would calculate it all on a basis of the water getting to the dam somewhere about nine o'clock, because the function won't be over until ten."

"But, Ted, how—who——" she began helplessly. The thing was still a maze to her, though she had grasped one soul-staggering fact.

He interrupted her as a new thought struck him.

"One thing may upset his apple-cart a bit. The river's in spate as well, or I'm a Dutchman. That storm last night was a fairly useful one, and it's bound to have brought the water down a bit. But, it won't make enough difference to be any good, I'm afraid. After all, it would only mean that the flood would travel faster, but not fast enough to reach the dam before the visitors, I fear."

"Besides, he's probably allowed for such a contingency as the storm," said Hope bitterly. Their impotence seemed unbearable.

Ted shook his head.

"He may not have thought of it," he said. "It's extraordinarily late in the year for a storm like that."

"But won't they see the water coming at the dam? After all, the country is level."

He shook his head.

"That's just the damnable part of it. You remember those hummocky ridges of sandhills just east of the works? They'll hide it till it's too late—or anyway until it is very late. Hullo, what's the excitement?"

The men had broken out into interested commentary on something they had perceived apparently floating down the stream. For a second Ted looked without much attention in the direction that they pointed, then he gave vent to an ejaculation.

"Great Scott! it's a boat—no, more than that, it's the hydroglissar, as I'm alive! I told you the river was in spate—it must have broken

loose from its moorings. It was that hydroglissar that first made me feel sure I was right in suspecting him. He keeps it always filled with petrol, and I couldn't see why, unless he wanted it for a 'get-away' in an emergency. By Jove!—if we could get it—it will do sixty miles an hour at a pinch."

"What is a hydroglissar, Ted?" asked Hope. It was something new to her.

"A kind of glorified punt with an aeroplane propeller attached. It only draws about an inch of water. Oh Lord! fancy having to sit here and see it go past——"

"Can't we do anything?" •

"What?" groaned Ted impotently, as he looked at the roaring torrent around them and the wide expanse of water on which that tiny dot came dancing towards them.

It seemed inhuman, unbearable, that they should have to cling there helplessly and watch it pass, yet what could they do? Suddenly Ted looked round in surprise. There was a stir among the men and he saw Lal Singh stripped to the waist preparing to descend the tree.

"What are you doing?" he asked quickly, and then the idea in the men's mind dawned on him. They were going to struggle to make their way out to the end of that 'pier' which the fallen tree had made. Whether they could accomplish anything when they had arrived there remained to be seen. But it was better than inaction.

"*Shabash*," he exclaimed. "By Jove—I believe we may do something yet."

The trunk of the tree in which they were

enthroned was covered with tough-fibred creeper at which already Lal Singh was hacking with the knife he invariably carried slung to his belt. Chunga, another hill-lad, had also stripped for action, and he had taken possession of Wazir Ali's pugari and had rapidly knotted it on to the others which had done such good service.

"Good egg!" said Ted. "What a providential brain-wave it was that made natives carry seven yards of tough cotton on their heads. Now for it, lads."

He held out his hand to steady them as they slithered down the trunk and, entering the water, struck upstream. The oak-tree was above its fallen friend, but he perceived that the men intended swimming up as much as they were able to do against the current and then allowing themselves to be carried down by the force of the water on to the pier. There was no time to lose, for already the black dot was drawing close, and it was a quicker method than clambering out along the slippery, half-submerged tree-trunk would have been. The first fierce rush of the water was over now, and Ted had seen as the men left them that at the base of their oak tree it was no more than waist-high.

"Heaven send they're strong swimmers," exclaimed Hope. "What if they overshoot the mark and get carried past the end of the tree?"

"They're not going to," said Ted as he watched them, though he spoke with more conviction than he felt. What he feared most was that the men's weight when they reached the improvised pier would be sufficient to loosen it from its accidental moorings and send it and them together careering

down the river into the full force of the main current.

"Good, they're there!" he exclaimed, as he saw Lal Singh catch hold of an outlying branch of the fallen tree and gingerly pull himself on to it. Another moment and Chunga had followed him, straddling the slippery trunk as though it were a horse.

"And now what?" murmured Ted. Having got there it did not seem very obvious how they were to intercept the hydroglissar, for they were still very far indeed from the main stream of the river down which presumably it would pass. But as he looked Ted perceived what the men must have realised before they started—namely, that at a spot a little below the end of the fallen tree there was an eddy into which sundry objects of flotsam had been swept. If the boat only tarried there a little they might conceivably get hold of it, for it was not very far from their vantage point.

"It's coming," murmured Hope, who had also perceived the idea which was in the men's minds, "but will it be too heavy to get caught? It may be swept straight on. It may—oh no—look——"

The craft was in the eddy now. For one moment it had seemed that its weight would bear it onward, but it had hesitated in the curious, inconsequent seeming way of floating objects, obeying a law which is not apparent to watchers from the land. Even as it paused, Lal Singh was in the water with a rush, the current and his own strong strokes sweeping him down on his prey. In the short interval that they had waited on the tree the two men had knotted the tough-fibred

creeper on to the cloth-rope, thus lengthening it and giving it a certain stiffness. Chunga held one end and the other was tied round Lal Singh's waist.

"He's got it," cried Ted, and a shout of acclamation went up from the two remaining men in the tree, as they saw the swimmer's hands seize the side of the boat. "Now—can he pull it?"

It was a tough job, and Hope as she watched marvelled at the strength of the men. Ted had pulled off his coat and was half-way down the oak to go to their assistance when another shout told him that they had succeeded. Lal Singh had tied the rope to a ring in the prow and with his own strength and Chunga's combined had pulled the lumbering, but on the whole light, flat-bottomed craft to the head of the submerged tree. It remained now for the party to reach them.

"How many of us will it hold?" asked Hope as she prepared to descend the tree.

"Only four," said Ted. "We'll leave Wazir Ali and this other bird here—the water will be abating shortly now and they can salvage anything that remains from the camp. They can climb the hill and make their way up to Sala for food, so they'll be all right. Come on, dear."

Wazir Ali and his companion concurred readily in the plan and offered their assistance as Hope slithered down the tree. Ted caught her as she reached the bottom—the water was no more than waist-high and the swirling force of its first onrush was abated.

"Steady now!" Ted admonished, and cautiously they moved forward, testing every foothold carefully. The tree when they reached it proved the most difficult part of the journey, for it was

slippery and the water below it strangely deep. It lay, Ted realised, with its top branches caught in the branches of a smaller submerged tree, and formed in reality a kind of bridge.

"Lord! that was a bit of luck," he exclaimed. "Fancy the difference it may mean. . . . Steady, now——"

Carefully, helped by the two swimmers, they climbed out along the tree and eventually half scrambled, half fell into the boat. Lal Singh gave a push with his foot against the providential pier and they were out on the water, heading for the main current.

"Now—to see if she's in working trim," muttered Ted. Then abruptly, "What's the time?"

The question startled Hope. Time and a wristwatch seemed a curiously banal idea in the midst of such adventures.

"It's—good Heavens, Ted, it's half-past seven!"

She stared at him in consternation. So rapid and stirring had been the events since that dread moment when they had heard the explosion that time had seemed to stand still. She could not believe that actually an hour and a half had passed. Half-past seven—and by nine o'clock at the latest—certainly at the very latest with the river in spate—the catastrophe would occur.

Could they do it? Beat the flood that had an hour and a half's start of them?

"Ted," she gasped, "can we?"

He did not answer immediately. He was busy with the controls. Then, as the hum of the engine responded, he spoke.

“ Sixty miles an hour—and ninety miles to go. An hour and a half—doesn’t leave much margin ! Particularly as we can’t average that in the twisty part. But the current will add to our speed a bit and on the level we’ll be able to take almost a bee-line with the floods out. Cut off maybe ten miles like that. We’ll do it—we’ve got to——”

The hum swelled suddenly to a roar, and the craft leaped like a live quivering thing through the water. Hope gripped the sides, holding herself steady, while her eyes never left the rushing brown expanse of the river with its unknown dangers. In her mind was only one thought.

They would do it—they were meant to do it. They would win in the end. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

SIR JAMES mopped his brow with a gesture of relief. The hands of his watch pointed to three minutes to nine and he was beginning to breathe more freely. Never in his life again, he hoped would he be called upon to undergo such a strain as had been his that morning and, indeed, for the whole previous week. The intercepted messages, from the translation of which they had hoped much in the way of clues to the identity of the Burra Bhai, had in fact yielded nothing, for they turned out to be in a code which so far had baffled the ingenuity of all the experts. The broadcasting of the hymns had, of course, been stopped, but it was unlikely that that would prove an insuperable difficulty to an organisation of such resource as the Brotherhood had proved itself to be. Up to the last moment the desperate efforts had been continued, but to no avail. They were still completely in the dark as to the quarter from which a blow might be expected, and it only remained to trust to their elaborate precautions.

As the royal train had slid smoothly into the tiny desert station prepared for its reception, Sir James had felt nearer to sheer terror than he cared to remember, but now as the minutes passed he experienced a rising of the spirits. He looked

round and noted that Bolney too, who stood some distance away, his dark brow furrowed in thought, showed signs of returning animation. Near him, talking volubly, was Father Xavier, an incongruous figure in that assemblage, but the only one who appeared completely unperturbed. Sir James breathed yet another sigh of relief and turned his attention to his immediate surroundings.

The distinguished group was a small one, consisting of the visiting Royalty, the Viceroy, the Governor, General Kimball, himself, Manton the engineer, who was their official guide, and Madderson, to whom the exalted visitor was at the moment talking. The personal staffs stood grouped together not far away and he could see Sanders endeavouring to explain something in execrable French to a politely bewildered officer in resplendent uniform. Sir James glanced surreptitiously at his watch again and almost smiled a natural smile for the first time that morning. Nine o'clock—no—one minute past nine. Things were going splendidly, and in fifty-nine minutes the train would leave the station once again. . . .

They had all but completed the tour of the works, and were standing now close to the water's edge at the point where that laboriously built spit of land jutted out into the stream. It had grown considerably in the past months, all but spanning the river, and leaving only a narrow channel in the middle. For the moment the Serene Highness appeared to have lost interest in the dam and was rapt in attention of Madderson.

"Zat is inter-resting, Mistair Madderson," Sir James heard him say, "but I haf not clearly understand. You say——"

It was at that moment that the Commissioner caught sight out of the corner of his eye of two khaki-clad figures running across the sand on the higher ground behind them. With a start he turned and stared in their direction. He had excellent eyesight and he was in no doubt as to their identity. The Chesneys! But why in creation . . .

Sir James felt a sudden presage of disaster as he looked at them, though he could not have told why. It required all his self-control to make no movement that would betray his perturbation. With a slight jerk of the head, having caught Major Sanders' eye, he indicated the arrivals, signalling that action was to be taken; then with an effort he returned his attention to his distinguished companions.

"It is my opinion," he heard Madderson saying with his clear, precise enunciation, "that there are further cities all along the banks of this river. Though the course may have changed in the centuries, it is, after all, the best guide we have as to the sites most likely to have been selected by that ancient but ingenious race who——"

He paused momentarily and glanced downwards at his foot as though in mild surprise. The water was trickling over his boot.

"The ingenious race who——" he continued, his voice just a note higher as though in protest at the interruption. General Kimball too stepped back suddenly and looked at his feet. They were wet, and the water seemed to be flowing faster, frilling up against the frail spit of sand built out into its midst.

"I say," he began in a rapid undertone, and

at that moment the Commissioner realised that John Bolney was standing close behind the Royalty, his attitude tense and rigid. Behind, but only a few paces, was Father Xavier, brazenly ignoring all rules of etiquette, and Ted Chesney stood on the outskirts of the group, panting from his run. With a quick backward jerk of his head Sir James made out the flying figure of the S.S.O. in the direction of the giant tents which had been pitched on the higher ground, and he was aware that the groups of the personal staffs were broken up as though for action, but he could not take in the details.

"What does the S.S.O. want?—the telephone!" flashed through his mind in a lightning illumination, but he had no time to think.

"As I was saying," he heard Madderson's voice continuing imperturbably, and in the same instant the General's agitated whisper:

"The water's rising. . . ."

The Viceroy turned quickly. He too had heard the whisper and he looked down at his feet.

"We had better——" he began, but at that moment John Bolney pounced. He took one step forward, his hands shot out, and his voice rang clear and authoritative, despite the ceremony of the occasion.

"Oswald Madderson, I arrest you——"

There was a shout, a scuffle, a shot rang out, and the swish and rush of the swiftly rising river seemed to sound a menacing and drowning accompaniment. The whole party pressed backward unconsciously, and at the end of a moment's confusion the Professor was revealed, still struggling in Bolney's grip, his spectacles gone, and in

some subtle way his face altered. The scuffle had wiped away some of the ingenious make-up. From Father Xavier there came a sudden shout.

"Ivan—yes—it is Ivan. Oh, the big fool I am not know it!"

There was no time for more, for at that moment the Royalty himself interrupted unceremoniously.

"Zee water—it come!" he cried, and catching the Viceroy and Governor by the arm, in something the fashion of a friendly schoolboy, he set off in a run. "We race—no?" he cried.

Of the scene which followed, Hope, who, standing far off on a vantage point of sandhill near the tents, had watched the arrest with her heart in her mouth, could remember only a blurred impression with one incident standing out with cameo-like distinctness. The water was rising with the swift, inexorable advance of a tide, and on all sides the rush had begun. Coolies (retained at the works for the purpose of exhibiting their labours) from further down stream were racing for the higher ground side by side with exalted officials, and the distinguished visitors themselves were heading the cavalcade. From the tents where the ladies had been left, to avoid the heat, an exodus began as the sound of the disturbance reached their ears, and for a time all seemed an inextricable confusion.

It was as she herself turned in the direction of the tents that the incident occurred which remained graven on her mind for ever afterwards. John Bolney and his prisoner, accompanied by several constables, caught up with her, for Bolney had struck to the left to avoid the crowd and was

conducting the captive by a more circuitous route. Madderson was completely calm and self-possessed, all trace of the impotent fury which had assailed him at the moment of arrest having gone.

"Ah, Mrs. Chesney," he exclaimed as he caught sight of her, "so it is you who are the cause of my defeat? Well, well—at least you are a foeman worthy of my steel. But may I ask how? Ah, of course, the hydroglissar. Then the river is in spate as well? I had half guessed as much, for the water was a trifle ahead of my calculations. Dear, dear!—and I did not think to order, in case of such a contingency, that the boat should be hauled to safety, or at least left empty of petrol. It was an unpardonable oversight. But I am still in the dark as to how you discovered my plan."

For the life of her Hope could not have stopped herself answering, and even Bolney made no attempt to end the conversation. Madderson still ruled by his personality, even though he walked bound by the policeman's belt in lieu of handcuffs. They were all walking together towards the higher ground.

"It was that scrap of paper," said Hope. "I couldn't think at first how it came into my luncheon basket, but afterwards I remembered. You were typing by the river that day when the dust-devil rose, and I saw you chasing papers when it had passed. This one must have lodged in our car and got pushed into the basket when the servants were packing up."

"Ah, the dust-devil," he acquiesced. "I remember—that missing paper caused me much perturbation until I became convinced that it

must have blown into the river and been washed away. Well, well—by such frail freaks of chance are the works of genius frustrated.”

He smiled at her as Bolney, apparently suddenly becoming alive to the unconventionality of the proceedings, hurried him along, the native constables following in the rear, and, as his eyes met hers, Hope felt her senses reeling. It was not possible—she must be mad. The enigma grew beyond her comprehension. . . .

In the tents all was confusion, and the situation certainly presented features which, in spite of the arrest of the main conspirator, were enough to whiten the hair of harassed officials. The water was still rising, though less rapidly now. It had all but swamped the works and was lapping against the tiny ridge of sand-dunes which lay between it and the wide plain behind, a curious feature of the rivers in that part of the world being that, owing to the continuous deposit of silt which they bring down, they appear to run along the higher ground. A vast brown sea stretched now from the dunes on which the multitude was huddled in confusion to the smaller ridge on the north bank of the river, behind which lay ground several feet below river level. In the centre the current still raced with terrific force, and Hope, as she glanced at it, remembered with a shudder Manton's explanations on the day when he had shown them over the works. How long would the bridge stand? And the question brought another to her mind. What of that low-lying ground? If the water topped the tiny ridge on the further bank would they be cut off from Sukurpur?

The question, though she did not know it, was

being answered that very moment in the group where an agitated G.O.C., a perspiring Brigade Major, and a panting S.S.O. were in poignant conference.

"We're cut off, sir," exclaimed the S.S.O. "I've just been at the 'phone. They've been trying to get us. The water got on to the low ground where the guns are before it got here. They're getting them away as best they can, but it's a bad business. We're bound to lose some, if not most. They're coming in this direction——"

"What, the guns? Damn the guns," exclaimed the G.O.C., little thinking how soon he was to eat his words; "what we want is submarines."

"They're coming, sir," exclaimed Sanders, "I can hear them," but he referred only to the despised guns.

As he spoke the rumble of the approaching wheels was plainly audible along the distant road, which, like most roads in that part, was built up like a miniature causeway above the plain, and so far remained above the flood, though they could see the water lapping up to it—almost level with it. The tower of the bridge stood up like a lighthouse in the midst of a brown sea.

"Better hurry if they want to get across before the bridge goes," muttered the General. "Hullo, Colonel—what is it?"

The new arrival engaged him in earnest confab, and several more agitated officers joined the meeting, while Sanders gazed through his field-glasses at the approaching guns.

"Only three of them," he muttered, "and, as the G.O.C. said, I don't know what good they'll be to us here. Well—oh, I beg your pardon——"

The ejaculation was provoked by his sudden discovery that the Serene Highness was standing at his elbow. He had been tactfully shepherded into the bigger of the tents, but had apparently contrived to evade notice and escape in the general hubbub.

"You prepare for war, eh?" he asked. "But it is wonderful organisation. And you provide the excitements in this country—no?"

Sanders had not the least desire to contradict him even if politeness had permitted, but he was saved the trouble of an answer, for even as he stammered in the effort to speak, he saw the Royal hand go up in a gesture of horror, and a low rumbling sound came to his ears.

"The bridge!" he yelled, and turning saw it crumbling and crashing into the flood before his eyes. . . .

The guns had not got across. They were halted, only just in time, on the further side, marooned on an island amidst the raging brown sea, for the water had risen above the roadway now.

"Hell!" said the G.O.C. inadequately.

There was a curious silence over all the motley assemblage. Sir James, coming agitatedly from the tent where he had been adjusting organisation to meet the emergency, in search of the distinguished guest (whom he had left in Margaret's charge) arrived just in time to see the catastrophe, and stood rooted to the spot. On every side there was a sense of consternation, a realisation of disaster which the advent of the flood had failed to bring. With the fall of the bridge a feeling of finality, of an accomplished evil, settled on the crowd, seeming momentarily to paralyse them.

Outside the tents white-faced women stood huddled together, shaking and frightened, but for the most part silent. Only here and there was there a whimper. Mae was looking dazed and miserable. Mrs. Kimball, the General's wife, had been assigned the unpleasant task of breaking the news of her husband's arrest, but it had left the girl strangely unmoved ; it hardly seemed to have penetrated to her consciousness, for, in fact, her whole mind was concentrated on one point. Why was Ted there—with Hope ? Why had he not sought her out on his arrival ? To her shallow egoism nothing mattered in comparison with that.

It was the figure of an Indian orderly, running swiftly, which broke up the paralysis that seemed to have fallen on everyone.

"*Sahib—Sahib—dekko!*" he cried, and as both the Commissioner and the General looked in obedience to his injunction they became galvanised into life.

The whole of the plain behind them was, it seemed, alive with a rough rabble of peasantry advancing menacingly. A rough rabble—yes—but armed with modern rifles and, in the background, something that looked suspiciously like machine-guns.

It was then that General Kimball proved the stuff of which he was made. The situation was a desperate one, yet what could be done was done with a celerity which seemed almost like magic. The giant marquees were hauled down ; men were digging a trench in the soft sand with desperate speed ; the tiny contingent of cavalry was charging the enemy ; the still smaller handful of infantry had been rushed into place, the gaps in its line

supplemented by the armed police, all before the more dilatory had found time to think. But, through it all, everyone, even the most dense and ignorant, could see the hopelessness of the case. Wedged in from behind by the still rising water, hopelessly outnumbered, all chance of retreat or of help from outside seemingly cut off, facing an enemy which, though rough, undisciplined and unused to the weapons employed, had nevertheless the strength of fanaticism—what possible chance could there be?

The sudden boom of a gun followed by the crash of a bursting shell brought a faint ray of light through the darkness. The marooned guns were in action. Another and another shell followed, and it was clear that the nerves of the enemy were shaken a trifle, despite their fanatical disregard for death.

General Kimball cast a glance up towards the bridge.

"That's the stuff, lads," he said, "but how long can you keep it up? Not long, I fear," he added, turning to Sanders; "what little ammunition they have is probably half wet, and there's no chance of any more yet awhile. How soon can the aeroplanes get here after receiving our 'phone message?"

Sanders shook his head gloomily.

"We can't expect them for at least two hours," he said, "and look——"

The situation was certainly not a pleasant one to contemplate, and the General cursed volubly as he looked in compliance with Sanders' suggestion. The infantry had withdrawn once again, and they were now only a few hundred yards from the

pitifully shallow trench in which the women were crouching. Moreover, it was clear from the long intervals between the shells from the bridge that a strict economy of ammunition was deemed essential. Already the enemy were surging on again, completely recovered from their temporary lapse.

"Hell!" swore the General. "We're done—unless a miracle happens. Where's His Nibs and the other tin hats?"

"In the trench, I suppose. I must say he's a sport."

"That won't stop a European war," said the G.O.C. pessimistically. "Where's that hell-fiend Madderson?"

"In the trench too, with Bolney sitting on his head. Why?"

"Could he do anything with that rabble out there?"

"Probably could—but would is a different tale. He didn't organise this little picnic for the sake of our health."

"Hell again—what's that?"

The General became suddenly taut and rigid in listening. For a second neither spoke, then, as above the din of the fight there floated the sound of a steady rhythmic hum, Sanders leaped to his feet and gazed skywards. For a moment he said nothing, then of a sudden gave vent to a wild whoop.

"Saved—Lord, look at them! Everywhere—they've let the whole blooming aviary loose. Look, sir, there and there——"

The General was already looking with all his eyes and on all sides heads turned skywards in sudden renewed hope.

"Great lads," cried General Kimball, "but how the mischief have they done it in the time?"

"It's Cameron's work, sir," exclaimed Ted Chesney, who had come up. "Good boy—I thought he'd do it somehow."

"And now what?" asked Sir James. "What is the next step?"

"You wait and see," rejoined Sanders, and in truth they had not long to wait.

Hope always remembered the next two hours or so of that dreadful day as a rending nightmare of noise and horror. She, with Margaret, Mrs. Kimball and one or two others, was attending to the wounded at one end of the trench. The casualties were not many, and mostly in the ranks, but Ted was amongst them later in the afternoon, having contrived to intercept a fragment of shell. It was only a slight wound in the arm; but out on the plain, when at last the terrible racket of the battle died away, there were no wounds that were slight, few casualties that were light. . . .

"I'm sorry, sir," said the first pilot to descend and alight from his machine, making a gesture of apology towards the desert, "it's a pity—but we couldn't help it. They seemed determined to die."

The General shrugged his shoulders.

"Poor devils," he said. "They were fanatics. I wonder why they faced such wholesale slaughter?"

He was standing at one end of the trench, and a voice answered him unexpectedly.

"They believed that all who fell in this battle would be immediately reborn in the millennium. I was most careful to instil that belief. Nothing less would have made them fight."

For perhaps two full minutes the General glared down at the man who had been the cause of all this carnage and could speak of it in so calm and detached a manner. Then he spoke in a curiously suppressed voice.

"Officer, remove this—prisoner"—the word was peculiarly unexpected—"and confine him in that small tent there until we can have him conveyed to more suitable surroundings. Have him adequately guarded and allow no one to speak to him or go near him. I'm not a religious man, Madderson," he added, "but for all that I wouldn't stand in your shoes at the moment for anything Creation has to offer. That"—he swept his hand out towards the plain with its dead and dying—"will have to be paid for if there is a God in Heaven, and I wouldn't care to foot the bill."

It was not till the first shadows of evening were lengthening that the Royal visitor stepped into the 'plane which was to bear him to civilisation and safety.

"But it is magnificent," he exclaimed, cordially shaking hands with the General and the Commissioner. "Such organisation! You have zee battle—zen pouf!—zee aeroplanes zey arrive on zee pick of time. It is marvellous."

No one told him that the organisation accountable for the timely arrival he so much admired was that of an energetic young Survey Officer, a perspiring engineer, and the smith of Sala village, who, roused from his slumber before the dawn, had sat by an improvised forge on the hillside, blowing the bellows with his toe and, wholly unperturbed by the nervous excitement of his two confrères, had patiently tempered steel, moulded

and welded metal in such fashion as to enable the young officer to take flight while the sun was still low among the hills. By such frail instruments are the mightiest schemes foiled. The hero of the adventure, having flown from Lahore to the dam in lieu of another pilot sick with malaria, was at the moment recounting his story to a girl with a white face but starry eyes and creditably steady nerves.

"It's wonderful, Don," she exclaimed. "You saved us—but more than that you've saved—oh, just think of it. Everything—a war, perhaps——"

He shook his head in depression.

"I haven't saved that," he said, nodding towards the plain, "nor the bridge, nor all the misery and heartburning there will be all over India. Think of one man causing all that. . . ."

Night fell. Most of the guests had been got away, and those who could not go in time were accommodated with food and shelter for the night in the great tents, which had been re-pitched. Some nurses had been flown from Sukurpur to look after the wounded, and Hope was released from her duties. Mae had departed in one of the earlier planes, Margaret was asleep, and Ted peacefully resting, but Hope herself felt strangely wakeful as she sat trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle which still baffled her. From the tiny tent where Madderson was detained there came the persistent clack of a typewriter, for the prisoner had declared his intention of making a statement. Later in the night as she still lay wakeful she heard, as on that other night which seemed so long ago, the sound of a song. Wild, wailful, alluring, it throbbed across the dark, and

she felt her very heart-strings grow tight with horror at the strange evil and beauty of it. It was as though a fallen angel sang. . . .

Slowly it died to silence. The guard remained on unmoved outside the tent. No shadow passed them, yet, when the next day they opened the flaps to enter, they saw the dead body of Ivan staring at them with ghastly glassy eyes. By his side was coiled not the sign but the reality of the crimson cobra. . . .

On the table lay two envelopes. One was addressed to Sir James, the other to Hope. They brought it to her while she waited for breakfast and, sitting in the warmth of the early morning sun, she read the strange solution of the plot which had wound its tendrils round her life for so many months.

CHAPTER XXV

THE narrative began abruptly :

“ This is not the story of my life ; for that many volumes would be needed. It is simply the tale of the greatest plot ever conceived. Let me begin at the beginning.

“ All my life I have dreamed—dreams of power and splendour ; of pleasure and of riches. Dreams wherein no less than the destiny for which I was fated was fulfilled, for always I have known that I was not of common clay. No mere ready-made groove of departmental drudgery could hold me—one does not cage a lion in a cardboard box.

“ But I must get on to the main point, for time presses.

“ It was on a hot October evening that the first germ of the great scheme was born in my mind. I had played truant all afternoon from the dull college routine, and, concealed in the rags of an old beggar woman, watched the search for me being conducted. Watched too, as I loved to do, the pageant of the bazaar street. None understood it as I did. None could pass through it unchallenged, in a hundred different disguises, as I could. And it was as I sat there that the idea came. I had been learning morse code with the Boy Scouts, and as I memorised it, unconsciously,

as it were, I set it into song—for I made music of everything. Then I saw the vision of myself as a spider in the centre of a vast web sending forth a message in song which would be repeated and sung by a myriad voices from Kandahar to Cormorin, unconsciously spreading my message, carrying my orders. A foolish, boyish dream—but nevertheless the germ from which the finished scheme was evolved.

“ Later I was sent to Belgium, though by whom I do not know, and many volumes could be filled with my adventures, but, since time presses, I cannot even speak in detail of how I fell in with some from my mother’s country, nor of how I joined their band. Suffice it to say that twenty-four years after my departure from it, I stood on Indian soil again as the accredited, but secret and unknown, head of a Bolshevik propaganda organisation. Here was the framework for the accomplishment of my boyish dream, of myself as supreme ruler, absolute monarch of all India. Men, money, means of smuggling in arms were at my disposal—but how to make them serve my ends while duping the men that I worked with them for a common end? For this it seemed to me, after much cogitation, that I must have a second, secret army, unknown to my fellow-workers, and looking round I found the material ready to my hand. The placid peasantry who could be stirred but never wholly roused by any political seditionist, who could be exploited but never excited—surely they were the very tool for my purpose! But how to rouse them? Again my intimate knowledge of the country stood me in good stead. Religion was the only way, and,

since there were vague and ill-defined notions of an avatar floating around, why should I not qualify?

"It was during this visit to India that I made the acquaintance of Latif Khan. He was my half-brother, for I have Indian blood in my veins, though by a freak of nature my colouring is abnormally fair. He and I were not unlike save for this vital matter of colouring, having the same build and gait, similar features and height, and even then the idea of impersonating him took shape in my mind. From him I gained much valuable information concerning the Mahommedan ways and mentality which stood me in good stead later, as did Latif Khan's prestige among his co-religionists, which I assumed together with his personality. It was during this period too that I acquired Nag, the crimson cobra, who, though so far only his portrait has appeared, is destined to fulfil a not unimportant part in my drama. He is some strange freak of nature—maybe, even as I am unique in the world of men, so is he in the world of snakes. He came to me from the jungle one night, lured by my singing, and since then we have been close companions, save for the brief time I spent in England.

"Gradually my scheme crystallised, and, when the main details were clear, I returned to Europe to begin them aright. It was then that 'Oswald Madderson' first appeared on the scene, but perhaps it will clarify things if here I say a few words on the subject of disguise. In no single one of my characters have I been wholly myself—there has been in each at least a slight alteration of my appearance. I am extremely fair, as I have

already mentioned, and, except for my eyes, there is about me no striking feature which is undisguisable. My height is just under six feet—the best, I maintain, for purposes of disguise, for it is not too tall. It is a mistake to believe that slimness exaggerates height—with those who are excessively tall it may do so, but medium height it tends rather to diminish than to accentuate.

“As Latif Khan I was myself in height, figure, gait and features, but I had an olive skin (there are wonderful pigments to be had in the bazaars), dark moustache, eyebrows, *eyelashes*, and Indian dress. The eyelashes were the only tedious part of the make-up, but they were a work of supreme genius. My own eyelashes being meagre, it was necessary to wear false ones—mere colouring would not have done. As Madderson, on the other hand, I was myself in colour and features, even to the scrubby beard, which was genuine whenever I had time to grow it—at other times it had to be supplemented by a forgery. But in this disguise I wore glasses, walked with a stoop, a shuffling, pottering gait, and doctored my skin to make it look old and faintly wrinkled. As Preacher Stevens I was myself in nothing. My height was exaggerated by the straight, flowing lines of the gown I wore, which had been padded to produce an appearance of breadth and further add to the illusion of size. I wore dark hair, a faint bronze tinge over my fair complexion, an ingenious bridge to my nose, and bushy eyebrows. Only in one thing was I exposed to recognition, and that was my eyes. As the Burra Bhai and the Teacher, since I was masked or veiled, I had no need to think of an elaborate disguise. . . .

“Well, having returned to Russia and arranged for the execution of the ‘remains’ which were subsequently to be unearthed (their manufacture was a marvellous feat upon which I have unfortunately no time to dwell), I made my way to England (it was better, I had decided, to break upon the world of Indian society with English credentials rather than foreign ones), and it was there that I met Mae. She was living with her mother (a fat woman with a bovine soul, who made me think of a cow in a feather bed) and earning her living as a singularly indifferent typist. It was not long before I had decided to marry her. I had already conceived that a wife would be a good asset to ‘Oswald Madderson,’ for it would give him an air of middle-class respectability; but my taste, unfortunately, revolted from the idea of the only type a character such as I aimed at portraying would be likely to acquire. Then, on meeting Mae, I perceived other possibilities. She was sufficiently unintelligent to give me no qualms on the subject of her penetrating my disguise, and she was, on the other hand, passably attractive—enough to be endurable, yet not sufficiently distinctive to make her seem a conspicuous misfit as my wife. Only let the fact that she had been my secretary get about, and people would see me as an absent-minded, guileless old fool led unsuspectingly to the altar by a young woman desirous of acquiring a home and comfortable income with no exacting duties attached. Nothing could have suited my book better, for that was exactly the impression I wished to produce, and moreover it occurred to me that Mae might be useful on occasions for keeping tiresome officials otherwise

engaged when their presence might have been annoying to me. Of her own feelings in the matter I never had any fears. A little baiting of the hook with money and comfort ; a little judicious talk of India (which she already knew) and of the pleasures to be had out there ; a tactful insinuation that, in the event of her meeting someone more to her liking, I should not prove unreasonable, and the matter was done. On the whole I was quite satisfied. She filled exactly the part I had assigned to her, and she had a soothingly clever way of agreeing with me in everything which was restful, until it proved irritating.

"We returned to India almost immediately, and, leaving Mae in Lahore on the pretext of starting my prospecting, I returned to Colombo, where already certain other preparations had been made. It was there that I found the airship, which I had ordered to be made in the likeness of a flying-horse, awaiting me, and together with its trusty designer I flew in a bee-line through India, eventually landing at Bulana—Latif Khan's home. My half-brother was abroad, as I knew (he has a passionate desire for travel, and is at the moment, I believe, in America), and I found very little difficulty in passing myself off as him. True, there was a risk that his servants might have had news of him, but, knowing his habits, I did not think it likely. I took the first opportunity that offered, on a trumped-up excuse, of sacking his staff and substituting men of my own, and, writing to him, told him that I had taken up a temporary residence in his house and would see to his affairs. The answer was long in coming, but when it came it was as I had foreseen, quite

satisfactory. He had no objection to offering me hospitality.

"Needless to say, it was only at intervals that I used his house. At other times I was passing as Madderson. The scheme was working admirably. My progress on the flying horse had had the exact effect which I desired; a judicious use of wireless and some clever film effects, at my 'appearances' as the Teacher, were no less successful; and when, a few months later, Madderson made his 'discoveries,' the ground was already prepared. Indeed, the only uneasiness I experienced was due to the unforeseen amount of interest aroused in European circles. I had not expected anything like as much excitement in that quarter, and feared experts might arrive to detect the fraud.

"The details of the scheme came to me only one by one. It was at a dance in Sukurpur that I met (in the character of Latif Khan) Sir Tisra Kruton, and the idea of getting him to finance the K.B.C. occurred to me as a wonderful possibility which would solve our problems of communications. It was while talking to Lady Kruton that the best character in which to approach them (that, of course, of Preacher Stevens) took shape in my mind. It was that very night, too, that I inaugurated the Brotherhood. . . .

"My second inspiration occurred at a dinner in the desert when I heard of the advent of His Serene Highness from Mr. Chesney. But that night I made two tiny slips. I had arranged a meeting of the Brotherhood to take place at Nana Sarai, and shortly after dinner I retired to get ready to attend it. Leaving a light burning in

my room and a servant to click the typewriter, I donned the garb of a camelman (taking my Brotherhood dress with me in a bundle) and sauntered out through the compound. There I witnessed an incident between Chesney and my wife, and momentarily, in my interest, remained standing where they could see me. It was a bad slip, and one which may, for all I know, have had serious consequences. My interest, in point of fact, had been roused, not so much by Mae's conduct—that was to be expected—but by the fact that I had perceived Mrs. Chesney also watching the pair.

“Hope Chesney had intrigued me—perhaps chiefly because I had not located that usually blatant thing, the chink in her armour. Many times during the intermittent periods which I spent with them in camp I regretted that I could not probe her mentality under some more temperamental disguise than that of an absent-minded professor. That night I watched her more than I watched the other two, but I could see little of her face in the moonlight and, as I said, in my interest I lingered too long and Chesney saw me. That was my first slip, and on the way home from the meeting at Nana Sarai I made my second. Thinking out the details of the plan which had already begun to form in my mind, I started to sing in my exaltation, forgetting that Father Xavier, whose presence at dinner had caused me considerable uneasiness, was still in the neighbourhood. Whether he heard me or not I cannot say, but it was a foolish slip, for no other can sing as I can, and he alone could recognise my song.

“For the rest, things were going splendidly.

My character of Oswald Madderson was admirably conceived, and the pose of despising the prophetic nature of the discoveries I consider to have been the crowning touch of genius. That evening, too, the meeting with Bolney had been an immense stroke of luck. That man was the chief enemy we had to fear, and already he had been a source of annoyance to us. His knowledge of the country was second only to my own, and in the very first moment of its existence he had contrived to stumble across the trail of the Brotherhood. At Jellundur (where he went 'unofficially') he very nearly caught us, and I had once or twice seriously considered the necessity of killing him. But that night I had seen the chink in his armour. He was overwhelmingly ambitious—proud of his knowledge of the Indian and jealous of it. He wanted to make good—to capture the Burra Bhai and wind up the Brotherhood—but he also wanted to do it by himself, to get ahead of all others in the field. It was easy to play on this, to flatter his vanity, to supply at times vague (and spurious) clues, to fan his jealousy of others, and, later, in the character of Preacher Stevens, to play on his superstitions, which are never quite dead in such men. He really half believed in the Holy One's pretensions, of which he had heard only through the medium of the Preacher. In this way, though he was always a danger and a difficulty to the Brotherhood, to me he was an asset, as his very concentration on the Burra Bhai served to distract attention and suspicion from the Holy One. I think, though, that in the past few days vague suspicions of Madderson and his discoveries must have formed in his mind, otherwise he could not

have been so prompt in his arrest, on the evidence the Chesneys gave him. But I am running on too fast.

“It was the next day at the dam that the details of the plan finally came to me. Till then I had only conceived of the royal visit as a climax, an obviously good date for firing my mine, a signal, as it were, but the actual ‘how’ had not occurred to me. It was, strangely enough, a remark of Bolney’s, followed by Manton’s explanations *re* floods and the dam at Bulana, which supplied me with the idea ready-made almost. More than that, the fact of the dam being at Bulana, just below Latif’s house, seemed almost impossible good fortune. The whole scheme sprang full grown from my brain and, for fear of forgetting any necessary details, I seized the first opportunity of getting them on to paper. I frequently adopted a transparent device for keeping notes—that of typing them with the number shift-key depressed—which would seem to have been dangerous, but it was convenient, and no one was likely to pry among the notes of Oswald Madderson, most of which were dummy ones and of a harmless nature. It is a strange reflection that at the moment of its very inception my scheme had been doomed to failure. The dust-devil and the consequent loss of the paper caused me anxiety for a little time, but I became speedily convinced that it had been blown into the river and swept away.

“It was on this day that I made another—not slip, exactly—but let us call it a fall from grace. That is to say, I allowed my attention to be distracted from concentration upon the main issue into a side-path of dalliance. I have had many

adventures, sentimental and otherwise, in my time, but I have always cherished a vague desire to experience the kind of unreal and quite impossible romance which figures in certain tales of the East and in the imaginations of neurotic females. I had never given it much thought, for it was so obviously a matter of fiction, but on meeting Ysobel Stoneham that day the idea occurred to me that such a romance might perhaps be contrived with a suitably prepared stage. She had the requisite beauty (and lack of humour) to make it possible. It was a mistake on my part, for one should never allow one's mind to stray to flippant matters until one's task is accomplished. So far as the experiment itself went it was successful, but it cloyed sooner even than I had expected, and later it became a nuisance.

"After Mae and the rest of Sukurpur had got safely away to Paharital, I set about preparing my début as Preacher Stevens—my public début, that is to say, for I had, of course, already approached the Krutons in that guise with complete success. I was rather pleased with my impersonation of the Preacher—he was an original conception and I had no very definite model to copy, but it seemed to me that to give people the 'religion that they want' could not be very difficult, it being so obvious what people do want! It was with this in mind that I had the 'crucifix' which I displayed made to my design. Christianity holds the field—that is to say, it has all the power of association and sentiment at its back, but Christianity is a religion of suffering, and what people want is to escape suffering. There is no way of doing this save the one which I had marked out

for myself—that of throwing all suffering on to others; and even this needs a genius to carry it through. Also there are certain contingencies (as the one I am coping with at the moment), which cannot be avoided, and for these there is, again, only one way—the one I intend using. But this is a digression. I produced, with a success which staggered even myself, a religion which, while it appeared outwardly to bear a resemblance (not too marked save to those determined to find it) to Christianity, in reality obviated all the tenets of that creed. One might, after all, as soon expect music without vibrations, bread without flour, as Christianity without suffering, but people do not think lucidly. Also, they are easily deceived by the mere sound of language. Dress a thing up in pretty words and they will be sure to find it uplifting. As I said, my success staggered even myself. It did not really form part of my scheme, for I was not greatly concerned with what the British element thought or believed. My work was among the Indians, who were my tools, and not merely my victims, as the British were designed to be. My chief reason for being in Paharital was, of course, to inaugurate the K.B.C. on lines suitable to my scheme, and my over-tenderness for Governmental restrictions and fears was a good idea, for it naturally allayed suspicion.

“Yet again it was while in Paharital that I allowed my concentration to waver momentarily, and I was led aside by the curiosity with which Hope Chesney had inspired me. Knowing, as I did, the secret cause of her care and preoccupation, I had, it seemed, a unique chance of probing the

depths of her mind, and I must say that I was not only surprised, but piqued, by her resistance. It led me to dally longer than I should have done—to expend more thought than was advisable on a side issue.

“ But first let me speak of the theft of the map—which also had, of course, been one of my reasons for visiting Paharital. It was necessary for my scheme that I should have the levels of the country to be traversed by the flood, and this, I found, I could only obtain from Captain Cameron. I intended merely ‘ borrowing ’ the map for that evening, making a rapid copy of what I needed and returning it the next day, and I had chosen the time when I knew the chuprassi was likely to be absent for a short while. Unfortunately I delayed, talking to Hope Chesney, and the man returned before I had finished my task. It was necessary to kill him, and, since propaganda of ‘ frightfulness ’ is a good thing, I stamped the sign of the crimson cobra upon him. That done, I returned to my room, hid the map under the carpet, and, to obviate any chance of suspicion, tied myself to the chair and splashed some chloroform about, having first stamped the cobra on an empty case. The fact that this was said to have contained sermons dealing with the Teacher added to the idea which I had been so careful to foster, of enmity between the two factions.

“ The murder of Ysobel was a tiresome necessity. I had made yet another of my small but annoying slips in not allowing for the acuteness of a woman in love. I had thought that my eyes had not been sufficiently conspicuous as Latif Khan for her to have noted them—I only saw her

at night in that guise. But she had seen them and realised my identity as the Preacher. More than that, she had divined something of my interest in Hope, and a jealous woman is obviously too dangerous a thing to leave about. She had seen me that very evening pull the mask from Ted Chesney's face (an action done on the impulse of the moment, merely with a desire to see in what way Hope would react to the crisis), and interpreted it as a wish to show up Ted in order to further my own suit. It was necessary to kill her, but I did not do it until, as Preacher Stevens, I had been seen conspicuously leaving Paharital.

"I must put on record here the one grave fall into weakness of which I hold myself to have been guilty. I have always realised that any form of love, of tenderness, or of pity, must necessarily lead to suffering, and was therefore to be eliminated from my scheme of things, but on that night, when Hope Chesney came to me, I pitied her. She had fought me well, not lowering her standard one jot to my arguments, and the experience of having a foeman too intelligent to go down before the puerile sophistries which in the world to-day will pass for wisdom, exhilarated me. When at last she broke, though still with her flag unlowered, I pitied her—at least, I conclude that that is the right name for the emotion which assailed me. Possibly I was nearer at that moment to the dangerous and insidious form of weakness men deify under the name of love than I have ever been in my life. Be that as it may, I turned aside from my purpose and let her go. Had I continued the battle then I might have conquered, but by the next day she had rallied her forces once again.

And in the end it is she who has been instrumental in defeating me! Well, well, at least sooner she than another!

“There remains little more to be said, for the main features of my scheme will be matters of history. With the peasantry I was supremely successful. It was easy to work them up to a definite date and, the Government being friendly, the smuggling of arms presented few difficulties.

“That, I think, covers all the ground in the matter of explanations. I have preferred to record myself the few slips on my part, by which it may, to a certain extent, have been foiled, but the real reason lies not in any human agency, for there is none capable of foiling me. I have been frustrated and defeated by such seemingly casual occurrences as a dust-devil, a storm on the hills when such things should have been over, a wakeful woman, and the fact that in the twilight I could not see the aeroplane, in which I thought I had killed young Cameron, land at Sala village. By such effortless means does the Power which made us take delight in frustrating our efforts and mocking our genius. Yet men will say there is no God! I, at least, have never been capable of so shallow an intelligence. I have no doubt as to Who it is I shall meet when Nag has opened the gates of the audience chamber for me. I have no doubt that I shall live for all eternity—for nothing less could I have been created, and through all eternity will I cry my hatred and defiance against the Author of my being. For all eternity will I . . .”

Hope let the manuscript fall from her hands,

and covered her face, shuddering. She could not read that last paragraph of blasphemy, though a glance had shown her that in expression it soared to the stark heights of poetry. She felt sick to her very soul. Somehow the flat, colourless fashion in which the story had been told had made it seem to her more awful than any swaggering or defiance could have done. Such things might have counted for an effort to excuse, or at least explain, but instead there had been a bald, clear, almost pedantic record of facts, given with a half-apology for any half-ray of light which might serve to soften it. Then at the end this sudden lyrical outburst of blasphemy, which yet bore the hallmark of a passionate sincerity. He was not posing; for the first time this man spoke with his own voice, and expressed the depths of his own soul. He would defy, and glory in defying, for all eternity, as the last passage proclaimed, "a Foeman worthy of my steel."

With a sudden gesture she caught up the manuscript again and tore it across and across, flinging the fragments from her. A puff of wind took them, scattering them with a contemptuous flourish, and for a moment Hope almost fancied that she heard the echo of a mocking laugh. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

THEY had breakfast, Hope and Margaret, Father Xavier, Bolney, Donald and Ted, spread out on the sand at a spot away from the turmoil of tent-striking and general exodus which was in progress. Sir James had departed by aeroplane that morning, and a boat was coming to fetch them later. All the other guests had by now departed, and theirs was the last remaining party. Hope had been relieved by one thing that Sir James had said in answer to her question concerning Mae.

“ Oh, she'll be all right. She's not implicated in any way, and she ought to be quite well off. It seems certain that he must have had quite a lot of money (though probably one would be wise not to enquire how he made it), and he won't have left a will, so she will be all right. Moreover, I don't imagine she will grieve unduly ! ”

It was the point about the money which had reassured Hope. Till then she had had some uncomfortable qualms, though so far as Ted was concerned she had no fears—the affair was finished. The whole solid groundwork of their common life had been uncovered, disclosed, it seemed, in some curious fashion by the events of the past twenty-four hours, and by contrast Mae appeared no more important than a bubble which

has encountered a hard and concrete substance. But she knew that Mae herself stood in a different case. Ted was an attractive man, of that there was no doubt, and Hope had divined long ago that what had begun in nothing deeper than vanity and passion on Mae's part had grown to unexpected proportions. Just so long as she strove to cling to him, Ted would inevitably feel bound like Lancelot of old, but with money at her disposal one could feel assured that no grief would last very long nor cut very cruelly ; and Hope went to her breakfast with a good appetite.

It was pleasantly warm in the sun, which had not yet risen high, and there was a faint breeze stirring across the desert. The water had subsided. On the higher ground of the south bank already the wreckage of what had once been the works was beginning to show through the flood, but on the further side there was still a turbid brown sea up to the very outskirts of Sukurpur itself. They would go home the whole way by boat.

The party was unexpectedly cheerful, even Ted, despite his slight wound, seeming to have quite recovered from the strain. Only Father Xavier remained quiet and preoccupied. His eyes had been fixed on that tiny tent which had held the prisoner overnight, but which now held only a grim, still object as its sole occupant, and in a pause of the conversation he spoke suddenly.

" Ah, the pity of it ! And it was I maybe who paved the way for him."

Hope looked at him, startled.

" You ? " she exclaimed.

He nodded, still with that look of preoccupation.

"It was I, or rather it was my people, at my suggestion, who paid for his education in Europe," he said, and relapsed momentarily into silence. Then with a sudden gesture, almost of apology, he began speaking.

"What would you, my friends? I was young, I was homesick—oh, one does not know what that means till one has experienced it! I see this country, so different from all I have known, from all I have loved, through which all the good I know has come to me, and it seems to me evil, this India, not because I see as yet the evil itself, but because it is different, ragged, disorderly, tattered and tawdry. That is a thing we know but do not realise—*hein*?—where convention and commandment differ. I think, 'That boy, he will lose his soul here—in such an environment. He must be sent to Europe, where everything is so circumspect and right.' But no, now I would not do such a thing. Now I do not think India evil—not as I thought her that night. Nor, certainly, do I think her a prophet of good as some think. She is——"

On a sudden impulse, as though unable to remain seated, he rose to his feet and stood looking out over the waste of waters.

"She is," he said slowly, "like a child—or no, a woman, maybe. Her soul is asleep—she is content to lie in the sun; and sometimes she is cruel, violent, yet her heart, it is like the heart of a child. Yes, that is it—she has a child's heart and a drugged soul. Drugged by the sun—*hein*? But where will you find more loyalty, more devotion, more courage—yes, courage—than in India? They have all the natural virtues, these people, but they

are ignorant like children without a parent, helpless like soldiers without a leader. They are at the mercy of every man who will spin them fairy-tales—will promise them the moon. That is what he did—no? Yes, again I say it—India, she is not evil, she is not good. She is a woman, tawdry, frivolous, ignorant, pitiful, with the heart, through it all, of a child. . . . And, my friends, you see India like that? Then you see, a little, the world as God sees it!”

He stopped speaking, and again his eyes wandered to the tiny tent.

“Ah, the pity of it,” he sighed again. “So attractive—so clever. He might have been a great statesman; he might have been a poet; he most certainly could have been a great musician. He had every good gift—and he prostituted them all!”

Hope thought of his words later that morning, as the boat bore them homewards over deep waters lying where yesterday had been the teeming works of the great dam, designed shortly to bring fertility to a myriad homesteads. The words recalled strangely her own vision of India as a veiled and weary woman, lying asleep, and now, as she thought of it again, she saw limbs bound by inexorable bonds of caste, of creed, and of custom. What could ever break them? And might there not be danger in breaking them before her sun-drugged soul was awakened from its dreams?

As she meditated, other words which Father Xavier had used on a different occasion came into her mind, and pondering the events of the past months she came at last to understand them.

This man, Ivan, who, as she had read his strange document that morning, had seemed to her egoism incarnate, had in fact played, though all unconsciously, a symbolic part—symbolic of a force at work in every sphere of the world to-day. Looking at each separate rôle that he had played in the lives of every one of them, she saw how to each he had come as an evil genius, promising the moon at a trifling cost, and leaving behind him a trail of destruction and of death. A Bolshie among the babus, he had preached to the petty, pitiful mentality of the semi-educated, drunk with their own little greatness, a gospel of universal liberty, welding them for his own ends into a fictitious Brotherhood by a device which broke down no barrier, but gave full play to their cowardice, prejudice and dishonesty. And, in the result, the prisons would be glutted with babus for many weary months. To Mae, shallow, frivolous, avid for pleasure, he had offered an escape from drudgery and work, a comfortable income, and a broad-mindedness in the matter of lovers, at the negligible cost of the sacrifice of such poor little ideals of romance as she may have cherished. If the price Mae paid now was comparatively light it was due to no forethought of his, but to Mae's own meagre capacity for suffering. To Ysobel he had come as passion in the guise of an impossible romance; and Ysobel lay dead. To the dissipated folk of Paharital he had preached that true strength lay in yielding to their passions; and who could say how many complications, how much misery and heartburning had not followed on his advice? Hope thought of all he might have accomplished in her own life, and shivered

a little in spite of the heat. With her he had appealed—she saw it clearly now—to her pride, that pride which had been intolerably stung by Ted's treatment of her, and she shivered again as she thought how nearly he had succeeded in swaying her to his will. To a peasantry contented in the main with the simple ways of their lot, he had come with the rousing cry of a millennium when no man need work, when no one would suffer, when all would be rich and happy—and the peasantry lay dead at his bidding on the plain. That surely was the blackest of his dastardly crimes. Everywhere he had passed in the guise of liberator, teacher and prophet, while to the world at large he had seemed the kindly, absent-minded, philanthropic scientist, wholly detached from human aims and ambitions. Everywhere the ignorance, the sloth, the greed, the lust and the weakness of humanity had been his fruitful seeding-ground. And everywhere he had but used the common clap-trap of the modern world, which, as he himself had contemptuously said, passed for wisdom. It was in pondering this last strange fact that Hope came to an understanding of the words which had puzzled her when first Father Xavier had used them.

"There is cancer, but not corruption," he had said; "the soul is not yet dead. We still have our Secret Brotherhood."

At the time the words had seemed to her meaningless, but now, looking round at the party in the boat, she seemed suddenly to see in them, too, a symbol. The quaint figure of the priest, seated in the stern reading his prayers; Bolney, with his dark, inscrutable face, gazing ahead over the waste

of waters ; Ted drowsing beside her ; Donald and Margaret intent on each other ; herself with her strange groping thoughts and fancies—surely a motley handful of people to have saved India ! Yet the startling fact remained that each one of them, groping blindly towards the truth, steering each by his own lights, had indeed been instrumental in averting the final tragedy, even though much of it they had been too late to prevent. To Hope the thing seemed suddenly a parable, and they themselves the type and symbol of that Secret Brotherhood of which the priest had spoken. The men who stood for religion, for order and government ; the soldier standing for duty and discipline ; the girl and the woman who could still take love as an uplifting adventure, and marriage as an ideal beckoning to sacrifice—could they in their wider, more motley Secret Brotherhood, save, not India, but Civilisation, when the force of Egoism brought down the floods of destruction to sweep away the landmarks of ages ?

Despite the scene around her, Hope felt strangely optimistic. The havoc was real and terrible, but it was small, pitifully small, compared to all which they had contrived to avert. In a few weeks the waters would abate, and then once again the slow, patient, persistent toil would begin. The men would dig and shovel ; the asses would file in plodding strings ; the women would sit weaving their mattresses of reeds, and gradually, with infinite slowness, the work would take shape and grow, until eventually the mighty dam stood up triumphantly to accomplish its great work : to bring fertility to a myriad homesteads. She thought

of Mae, of Ysobel, of Heloise Kruton, all with their ceaseless, restless activity, their perpetual striving to find an Everest in every ant-heap. Did the sum total of their life's work amount to as much as that of one woman who sat patiently weaving a mattress of reed? And how much at the end had Ivan's genius accomplished? She thought of the simile he had used, "One does not cage a lion in a cardboard-box." So much was undoubtedly true. In the absence of steel bars one looked for a gun. Yet it was nevertheless a patent fact that oaks were enclosed within acorns.

Hope moved suddenly, squaring her shoulders unconsciously as though to face life anew.

"Oh, it's a good world!" she exclaimed out loud, stretching out her arms, not troubling whether anyone would agree with her.

Ted stirred, disturbed from his slumbers, and looked up at her sleepily.

"Hope," he said, and smiled into her eyes.

THE END