

HECTOR GRAEME

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HECTOR GRAEME

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BOOK I

Hector Graeme

CHAPTER I

The dull November afternoon was fast drawing to a close. Patches of white mist lay in the hollows of the elm-dotted park; the outlines of stately tree and russet copse were rapidly merging into the surrounding grey.

Already a flicker of light was beginning to appear in the windows of Radford Hall, the home of Sir Thomas Caldwell, Baronet, a house—like its owner—solid, sturdy, and unimaginative-looking. Nearly a mile away, standing well back from a high ragged hedge of blackthorn, a line of sportsmen could be seen waiting for the last drive of the day to commence; behind each stood the waiting figure of a loader, ready with the second gun. Listless and inactive as were now these figures, they would shortly become possessed of a feverish energy; for in

the turnip-field beyond the blackthorn hedge were many partridges, and, struggle later as they might with obstinate cartridges, their movements would be far too slow for their impatient masters, who with gun discharged would view, in helpless wrath, the easiest of shots pass unscathed overhead.

At one end of the line, comfortably seated on a grouse-stick, a young man was waiting with the rest. He was a young man whose face wore a look of great conceit, this appearance being enhanced by a somewhat pronounced eccentricity of attire. There was something about this youth that struck the observer as unusual; he was in some indescribable manner different from his fellows, though to the majority of mankind it must be owned the difference was not of a pleasing kind. This gentleman was Lieutenant Hector Graeme, senior subaltern of Her Majesty's 1st Regiment of Lancers, now on foreign service in India. In accordance with his usual habit of evading his duties—or so said his enemies, among whom might be included the greater part of his brother officers—Graeme had been successful in dodging the troopship; and, having been left behind with the depot at Canterbury, was on leave from that place and staying as a guest at Radford Hall, Sir Thomas being an old friend of his father's.

Standing behind him—for the idea of yielding up his seat had somehow not occurred to him—was Lucy Caldwell, Sir Thomas' only daughter and the mistress of his household, he having been a widower for many years. In her hand she was holding Hector's second gun, her obvious intention being to act as loader to the fortunate subaltern. This, it may be remarked, was a task Lucy was thoroughly capable of performing, the young lady having been born and bred amongst sportsmen; indeed, there was little concerning beasts and birds of the field with which she was not thoroughly familiar.

At the present moment, however, there was a somewhat annoyed expression on her usually good-tempered face, and her brow was knit as she stood listening to the shrill "tirwit, tirwit," rising from the turnip-field.

"Most provoking you should have the worst place for this drive, Mr. Graeme," she said at length; "it will be the best of the day, I know, and the birds always fly over the centre and right."

"Don't you worry about that, Miss Caldwell," answered Hector; "it's the luck of the draw; and anyway the birds will come to me all right, you see if they don't."

"Indeed they will not; they'll make for that field of roots over there, they always do."

"Not this time, I think. Birds are curious things; they like coming to the best shot; and that I am, here anyway. Gad, I don't believe I could miss to-day. Confess, Miss Caldwell, you don't often see such shooting as mine, now do you?"

Lucy frowned. She had been taught to look upon bragging of any sort as

an impossible thing, and the remark jarred.

"Of course you're a good shot, Mr. Graeme," she said rather coldly; "but it's hardly necessary to proclaim the fact, is it? As for the birds coming to you, you may know better than I do. I've lived here twenty-one years, it's true, but—"

A sudden whirl of wings cut her short, and away past Graeme sped an old French partridge, which was out of sight in the dusk behind before he had time to raise his gun.

"Damn!" said Hector, "what did I tell you? Beg pardon, Miss Caldwell, but that's rather annoying, an old Frenchman too; probably played that game many times before. Clean defeat, and I don't like it. Hullo, they've started," as through a gap in the hedge before them a distant line of white flags could be seen advancing. "Now, be quiet, like a good girl, and I promise you some fancy shooting."

"Over," "over," came faintly from the advancing flags, followed some seconds later by a humming sound, rapidly growing louder, till with a roar a large covey of birds topped the blackthorn hedge, and then, seeing Graeme, broke up and scattered in all directions. A breathless moment followed, the air resounding with the crack of guns and whirring of wings, and then silence.

"How many down, Mr. Graeme?" gasped Lucy, struggling with a stuck cartridge.

"Three, for goodness' sake keep count or we shan't know where we are. Notice that last shot of mine, by the way? Sixty yards at least, and stone dead. No. Pity. Look out, there are more coming, straight to me as usual." Another right and left. "Oh, please be quicker. Damn, my guns are getting red hot. See these four coming? I'll have 'em all, hanged if I don't." Two double shots followed, and then a cry of exultation. "Done it, by the Lord! What price De Grey now? I told you I couldn't miss. Only hope the others are looking, particularly old Persian War. Wish he was next me; I'd give a fiver to wipe his eye. How many down? Thirty I make it."

"Twenty-seven, Mr. Graeme, one a runner."

"Runner, not it. I'm not dealing in runners to-day. All dead as stones. There are two more for you," as a brace came swinging over and were promptly crumpled up dead in the air. "That makes twenty-nine by your counting, thirty-two by mine. Hang! here are the beaters, and the day's over. How many down, Fox?" to a keeper who had now come up. "Thirty-two all dead."

"Gum, but that's good shooting," answered Fox, while a murmur of approbation arose from a cluster of smock-frocked beaters. "Thought I saw someone a-cutting of 'em down, sir, and I said as 'ow I thought it must be the Captain. Only 'ope the other gentlemen 'ave done as well. Hi, Rover, seek lost, good dawg, good dawg. Ah, drop it, now, would you? Oh, thankye, sir, thankye very much," and the tactful Fox's hand closed on a five-pound note, a golden sovereign

being likewise bestowed on the cluster of approving smock-frocks.

The courtiers thus rewarded, Graeme turned to Lucy. "And now we'll walk home across the park," he said; "no use waiting for the waggonette, what do you say, Miss Caldwell?"

"I don't think I will, Mr. Graeme. You go if you like. I must get back to make the tea. You know what my uncle is, if he's kept waiting."

"Do him good; he's a great deal too autocratic that old uncle of yours; thinks he's still commanding troops in Bugglaboo, or whatever his infernal Indian station was."

"Mr. Graeme!"

"Beg pardon, Miss Caldwell, but never mind him. Come along, we'll be home as soon as they are if we start now."

Lucy hesitated. She wanted to go, and for that very reason, being a woman, pretended she did not. The idea, moreover, though pleasing, was nevertheless in some unaccountable way rather alarming; for though ordinarily a walk home with one of her father's guests, however late the hour, would have caused her no qualms, with Graeme, it was different. She had known him but three weeks, and yet in that short time he had come to occupy a place in her thoughts, and, what was worse, to control her actions in a manner most disquieting to a girl as independent and freedom-loving as Lucy Caldwell. This too in spite of the fact that both her father and uncle, the General, had little liking for Mr. Graeme, and were, she knew, secretly rejoicing in the knowledge that he was leaving Radford Hall next day. Hector also was aware of this, and of the feelings of the rest of the house-party; but, having been accustomed to unpopularity since his childhood, their hostility disturbed him not at all.

"Better come, Miss Caldwell," he urged. "See, they'll be ages before they start. It's my last evening here too; I think you might."

Upon which Lucy decided that her reluctance was both prudish and absurd.

"Very well, Mr. Graeme," she answered; "just wait a minute, though, and I'll ask Mr. Robson to let my father know." This done, the two started on their walk, Lucy setting the pace, which was that of a good four miles an hour.

"Where's Lucy, Tom?" said the General, some ten minutes later, as, the bag having been inspected, the two moved off towards the waiting waggonette.

"She'll be here in a minute; she was down at the other end of the line. The last I saw of her she was helping Graeme to collect his birds. Gad, that fellow can shoot, Charles, quite like one of those fellows you read about in the *Badminton Library*."

"Yes, and we shall hear all about it to-night too—every blessed shot he made, and why he missed. Conceited, bumptious jackanapes."

"Curious thing old Jack Graeme having a son like that, one of the best, old

Jack. Must take after his mother, I suppose, she was a queer wild sort—wrong too.”

”He’s not Jack’s son at all; you know that well enough, Tom. Crawford was this fellow’s father.”

”Surely, you don’t believe that old scandal, Charles?”

”Of course I do, this fellow’s the dead spit of Crawford. The only difference between them is that he was a devilish good soldier, one of the best we had in the army. I didn’t like the fellow, but I’ll say that for him. This chap, though, is a waster, so his regiment say. They can’t stand him there, and that, as you know, Tom, is a bad sign, a damn bad sign.”

”I hope Lucy hasn’t taken a fancy to him. It’s worrying me a lot, Charles.”

”Not she, she’s far too sensible. If she did, we’d have to stop it, that’s all. I tell you, Tom, I’d sooner see the girl in a convent, or—yes, I would—dead, begad, than see her married to that fellow.”

”Oh come, Charles.”

”Yes, I would. There’s something wrong about the chap; he sets me all on edge; he— Hullo, Robson, seen my niece?”

”She’s walking home with Graeme, General, asked me to let you know. She said she’d be at the house before the waggonette.”

”Oh!” said Sir Thomas.

”Damn!” muttered the General.

* * * * *

Meantime the pair under discussion were making their way homewards across the park, Lucy rather silent, Hector discoursing on Hector and that person’s recent achievements. He was feeling particularly pleased with himself this evening, and, as a result, more than a little kindly towards his companion. At length, even the topic of self was exhausted, and a sudden rather awkward pause ensued, whereupon Lucy managed to find her voice.

”When do you expect to join your regiment in India, Mr. Graeme,” she said, ”soon, I suppose, now? How you must be looking forward to it.”

Graeme’s face clouded. ”Next September, I believe, that is, if I do go out. Don’t think I shall, though, I’ve more than half a mind to send in my papers and cut the whole show.”

”Surely not, Mr. Graeme, at your age. What on earth would you do with yourself? You couldn’t idle for the rest of your life.”

”Couldn’t I? I could idle very well, Miss Caldwell, besides, I should always find plenty to do with shooting, hunting, and golf. Those are my interests, and pretty good ones too, I think.”

"But surely a mere life of sport wouldn't content you. Don't you want to get on in your profession? Really, Mr. Graeme, I cannot understand a man holding such views."

"Perhaps not, but it's a fact all the same. I've no wish to get on, as you call it, indeed I loathe soldiering. What's the good of it after all, what can it lead to? I've no doubt if I chose I could be as good a soldier as any of them, but I don't choose. It's a life of slavery, the army, it's being at the beck and call of every silly fool who happens to have more gold lace on his hat than you have; and then the end—to become a general, a snuffy, purple-faced old ass, like——"

"Like whom, Mr. Graeme?"

"Oh, like Grampus, my present lord at Canterbury, who, when he gives a luncheon party, has the lot of us strutting past him on foot parade to show his importance and amuse his lady friends."

"But all generals are not like that, Mr. Graeme."

"All I've met. It's a natural consequence too, I suppose. When a man's young and in full possession of his faculties he's only a humble captain or major, but as he approaches imbecility he rises in rank, till in the height of senile decay he becomes a general."

"Mr. Graeme, you forget, I think, that my uncle's a——"

"He, of course, is one of the exceptions you just mentioned," said Hector with a rather nasty chuckle.

"Mr. Graeme, you're horrid; I don't wonder people dislike you."

"More do I, though perhaps if you'd been brought up as I have you'd be horrid too."

"What do you mean?"

Graeme hesitated for a moment, frowning, and then burst out, with a ring of passion in his voice:

"You've had a happy life. Miss Caldwell, parents who have been parents, I've not. My father, for some reason, would never look at me, while my mother alternately petted and neglected me. She was a queer being, my mother, mad on spiritualism and such like, and what's more used to drag me into her experiments. She said I was clairvoyant."

"Good heavens, Mr. Graeme, what an awful thing for a woman to do. I beg your pardon; I forget it's your mother I'm speaking of."

"Say what you like; I don't care. I hated her when she was alive, and do now she's dead. It's played the devil with me, Miss Caldwell. I used to lie awake at night often and shriek with terror, and I'm not much better now at times. That's the way I was brought up, nobody to care twopence about me; and gradually I got not to care too, till now I think I hate everybody just as they do me."

"Oh, surely, not everybody," began Lucy, and then stopped suddenly. At

something in her voice, Graeme turned and looked at her, a queer thrill of excitement running through him. He tried to see her face, but it was turned from him; the feeling of excitement grew, and his heart began to beat fast.

For some time he too had been conscious of a growing feeling of attraction towards this girl; more, he felt himself to be in love with her—a not unusual experience, by the way, for Hector, to whom all feminine creatures were as magnets to his iron. This feeling, however, though materially contributing to the enjoyment of the past three weeks, had hitherto not been regarded by him as serious, indeed, the idea of proposing to Lucy Caldwell had never once presented itself to him. Now the charms of such a proceeding suddenly occurred to him. The isolation, in which he had hitherto gloried, seemed no longer desirable but hateful, and with this came a sudden longing for sympathy and the love denied him in his childhood. It would be glorious, he thought, to have someone to care for him; to be interested in what he did, to have a home of his own instead of the Mess, which he hated; and straightway Hector made up his mind to do it, and, flinging prudence to the winds, spoke.

"Miss Caldwell, Lucy, is there anyone who cares?"

"I—I shouldn't think so. I—I don't know."

"Do you care?—because I do. I—I love you most—damnably."

"Most damnably?"

"Yes, and if you'll marry me—I've meant to ask you for a long time, but I've funk'd it before. I'm not much of a catch, I know. I'll try and be different. I could be, I think, if you took me in hand. For God's sake say you will, Lucy."

"But are you sure, Hector? Do you really mean it? Oh, I never said you might, and look, there's an owl flown by; he saw us, I know he did. You might have waited till he'd gone. He has gone now, Hector."

* * * * *

The four miles an hour dwindled down to a bare half. The darkness deepened, owing to which possibly they lost their way, turning east instead of west. Away from the Hall they wandered, oblivious of a purple-faced gentleman who was awaiting them there, and whose wrath was rapidly rising as he viewed the still mistressless tea-table.

CHAPTER II

The fair valley of Kashmir lay drowsing in the August sunshine—a strip of green and gold nestling amid a waste of rocky mountains. All around rose the great hills, bare and sun-scorched for the most part towards the west and south—at which point enters the main road from India—but to the east draped with heavy mantles of fir and towering pine; far away, a glittering rampart of eternal snow and ice, the great mass of the Himalayas barred the way to the north, its jagged peaks and saw-like ridges fretting the deep cloudless blue of the sky.

Over the valley itself, now a riotous waste of colour, hung a shimmering vale of heat; through the warm heavy air, drowsy with the perfume of a thousand blossoms, gaudy dragon-flies darted to and fro, or hung poised with tremulous vibration of gauzy wings; while here and there orange and purple butterflies drifted lazily from flower to flower. Tiny rivulets murmured sleepily, as they threaded their way through woods of chestnut, apple and pear, interspersed with patches of golden millet and Indian corn, the sole worldly wealth of some Kashmiri husbandman, the roof of whose hut might be seen peering through the surrounding clump of trees.

Born in the snowy mountains to the north, the river Jhelum winds its way southwards through the centre of the valley, passing through the great lake of Kashmir, a vast sheet of burnished silver, on the still surface of which lie masses of coral-pink lotus. Onward the river crawls, lapping in sleepy caress the wooden piles and temple-steps of Srinagar, the country's capital, a ramshackle cluster of wooden, chalet-like houses, built on both sides of the river. Still half-asleep, it creeps on for some hundred miles through a land golden with crops and bright with flowers and fruit, on past Baramoula, the terminus of the tonga service from Rawal Pindi, and out by a gorge in the mountains, through which lies the road to India and the south. Then it awakes, and hemmed in by jutting crag and precipice, its course vexed by boulder and quicksand, becomes henceforth a wild torrent, roaring its way onward to Mother Indus and the sea.

Following a rough track leading eastward from Baramoula, and steadily rising as he goes, the traveller passes through some fifteen miles of thinly-wooded country, broken by fields of scanty millet and maize, till at length a large wooden temple is reached, situated in a clearing at the foot of a steep fir-clad ridge. Leaving this behind, he plunges into dense forest, and after an hour's stiff climb reaches the summit, where suddenly and unexpectedly he comes upon a native bazaar of rough wooden huts overlooking an expanse of grassy plain. Roughly circular in shape, this plain is girt on all sides with a thick belt of sombre firs, beyond which again tower the mountains. All around, either just inside the girdle of trees or at its edge, are dotted small wooden houses and clusters of white tents, while in the centre of the plain rises a large and more pretentious-looking edifice, around which one August afternoon a numerous and gaily-dressed crowd was to

be seen assembled.

This is Shiraz, the hill-station of Kashmir, and here, when the valley below has become impossible owing to the heat and mosquitoes, flock the English visitors and officials of the country—both black and white. The houses and tents surrounding the plain, or Murg as it is called, are their temporary homes, while the building in the centre is the focus of Shiraz social life, serving indiscriminately as club, library, cricket or polo pavilion.

No ordinary event, however, was responsible for to-day's gathering of nobilities, no pagal gymkhana or crumpet snatch, but something much more serious, namely, the finals of the Shiraz Polo championship, and hence the brightest and best of frocks and frills were here on view, while hats and parasols were positively dazzling in their splendour.

Moreover, an additional incentive had been given to good fellowship, for was not Lady Wilford, the wife of Sir Reginald Wilford, K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E. etc, etc., and present Resident of Kashmir, At Home this August afternoon? And no experienced Anglo-Indian lady will, as is well known, forego the delights of a free tea, nor for that matter, of any entertainment, for which someone else pays. Indeed, even one modest rupee gate money has been known in that country to frighten away the fair sex altogether from race-meetings, gymkhana or polo match. To-day, however, there was no such vexatious bar to pleasure, and hence it came about that all was light-hearted enjoyment and hilarity.

Mrs. Twiddell, wife of Major Twiddell of the Supply and Transport Corps, now absent in the plains, looked radiant as she chattered away to her best friend, Mrs. Passy Snorter. True, she had a grievance, though you might not have thought it, the said grievance being the reason that necessitated the wearing of her present attire of pink, instead of one of the ravishing confections of which she had so often made mention.

"Looks charming?" she said prettily, "sweet of you to try and comfort me, dear; it's Paris I know, but such a rag now, poor old pink. So annoying of my husband not to send my boxes up in time;" and her friend, as she sympathetically agreed, wondered how dear Mrs. T. could be such a liar, for had not she—and for that matter all Shiraz—observed the lady's dhirzi[#] stitching away at the despised pink for the last three days in the Twiddell verandah? She could even have told to an anna what the said garment had cost, and the wrangle there had been over the price. She further wondered, incidentally, whether Jack Twiddell had yet paid his club bill at Riwala, for Mrs. Snorter's husband was the secretary of that institution, and told his wife many valuable secrets anent mutual friends.

[#] Native tailor.

Lieutenant Crawler of the 1st Kala Jugas was evidently in his element as, blade of grass in mouth, he discoursed on the merits of the rival teams. Crawler, it is true, bestrode a pony for the first time in his life six months ago on joining his regiment, but he had a good deal to say on the subject of horsemanship, and was expressing his doubts as to the "hands" of most of the competitors. He went on to compare polo with hunting, and indulged in personal reminiscences of the Quorn and Pytchley, of which packs he had read in the papers. Important-looking officials for the nonce laid aside cares of State, and turned condescending ear to the trivial discourse of military acquaintances, or beamed seductively on feminine admirers. The Maharajah Sahib, his retinue of sable followers grouped around him, looked calmly on the scene, now and again bending courteously to some female flatterer, the expression in his dark eyes contrasting strangely with his respectful, almost humble, salutations.

There was a stir—and sudden commotion amongst the crowd. Polo was about to begin, and away surged the chattering throng, making hurriedly for the rows of chairs lining one side of the ground.

The game to be played this afternoon promised to be an exciting one, the rival players being a scratch quartette, calling themselves the Dragon Flies, and four of the 1st Lancers who happened to be in Shiraz on leave. The Lancers were in no sense representative of their corps, one of their number only, Ferrers, the captain, being a member of the regular regimental team, but, as they were better mounted than their opponents, and having had a fair amount of practice together while in Shiraz, they were quite confident of success. The other three were Kinley, Carruthers, and Graeme. The Dragon Flies, however, were opponents not to be despised. True, their ponies were slow in comparison with those of the Lancers, but against this they were handy and well trained, and knew the game as well as their owners. The men also, though hailing from different regiments, and being at the disadvantage of not knowing each other's idiosyncrasies, were with one exception individually far better players than their adversaries, Major Rocket, the captain, being generally considered one of the best Number Twos, if not the best, in India.

The above-mentioned exception was the "One"—Lieutenant Gubbins of the 105th Native Foot, who, though extremely keen, was a far from expert performer, and had a rooted aversion to keeping in his proper place. He had promised, however, on this afternoon to amend his ways, to leave the tempting ball to Number Two, and devote his energies solely to hampering the back—and these promises Gubbins, before starting, had every intention of keeping.

Some distance away from the chattering crowd, watching the saddling of a fine grey Arab pony, stood Graeme and his wife Lucy, for despite the scoffing incredulity of those who knew, or thought they knew, Hector the proposal made

that November evening—nearly two years ago—had been duly ratified, and after an engagement of six months the two had been quietly married in Radford church.

There had been opposition, bitter opposition too. Sir Thomas, the General, indeed, the whole of Lucy's relations, having resolutely opposed the match. In vain, however, their efforts had merely succeeded in turning Hector's somewhat indefinite intentions into a fixed resolve. Even Lucy was surprised at the strength of purpose shown by her lover, and, warmly seconding him, between them they finally overcame her father's opposition, though never that of her uncle. The latter for a long time refused to meet Hector, and, but for the reluctance to cause pain to his niece, would undoubtedly have refused to appear at the wedding. So far, the general anticipation of disaster had been singularly at fault; the marriage had turned out a happy one, Hector proving himself a good and considerate husband, while, far from sliding back into former ways, he had flown to the other extreme and become a Puritan, bitterly intolerant of even the mildest lapse from conjugal duty. This, as might be imagined, had not served to increase his popularity, and it was almost universally agreed that, though objectionable enough before his marriage, since that event he had become altogether impossible, and great was the commiseration bestowed on that dear pretty little woman who had the misfortune to be tied to such an ill-conditioned prig.

"The dear pretty little woman," however, stood in no need of their sympathy, being, on the contrary, perfectly and entirely happy. She adored Hector, admired him for his principles, so different from those of other men, and, generally speaking, thought him the most wonderful person in the world. At the present moment she was listening with interest, her arm through his, as he discoursed on polo, more particularly on the part he was likely to take in the forthcoming contest.

Hector's love for this game, though of somewhat recent growth, had become the temporary master-passion of his existence, and to the acquirement of proficiency in it he had flung himself with the violence and concentration of purpose that were usual with him on taking up a new hobby. At home, it is true, he had shown no interest in the subject; it was a feeble game, he had been wont to declare, and one much too easy to play to be worth the learning. Since his arrival in India, however, he had come to regard the matter in a different light. Here everybody played polo; indeed, it was looked upon as the one serious business of life, bar love-making, and straightway it had become Hector's business too. Never would he admit that there could be anything in the way of sports or games at which he could not excel if he chose, and he set to work to provide himself with ponies, first-class tournament ponies too; he would look at nothing else. He had now six, bought at a price far beyond his means, the purchase of

which had necessitated the assistance of Ram Lai, the native banker of Riwala, and this done, and all other pursuits abandoned for the nonce, he laid himself out to learn the game.

Henceforth his conversation, his thoughts, his very dreams were of polo, while his contempt for and intolerance of those who had no liking for the pursuit were unbounded. Morning and evening he could be seen assiduously practising shots on the disused drill-ground at the back of his Riwala bungalow, while in odd moments he would employ the saises, khitmagars, and on one occasion—though Lucy had immediately intervened—the cook, in throwing him balls from every direction, while he, astride on a wooden horse, drove the said balls all over the compound. The result of all this was on the whole gratifying, the progress he made being generally conceded to be remarkable, though this verdict was usually qualified by the remark that his proficiency was mainly due to the excellence of his ponies. "Anyone could play who was so well mounted as that boulder Graeme," men were wont to observe, for in India, even more than elsewhere, possessions in excess of one's neighbours are wont to evoke caustic remarks.

Whether this were true or not, Graeme was now able to hold his own in most companies, and was anticipating a veritable triumph this afternoon, when he intended to show the spectators how polo should be played, even though by a novice. His conversation was brought to an end by the loud ringing of a bell, followed by the appearance of Ferrers, fussy and important, summoning his men to the fray. With a hasty farewell to Lucy, and final examination of his stirrup-leathers, Hector mounted the grey pony and cantered into the field, where the rival teams were drawn up in two lines facing each other.

After some delay, owing to young Gubbins' endeavours to secure a flying start, the ball was at length thrown in between the lines by the umpire, and the battle for the Cup had begun.

Straightway arose a confused *mêlée* of sticks and ponies, followed by much wild hitting, much missing, and considerable dangerous riding, Graeme being neatly bowled over by Gubbins before three minutes had elapsed. All were anxious to hit the ball, no matter where, so long as they hit it, though the general tendency indubitably lay in the direction of the gallery, where the various divinities sat enthroned, watching the doings of their own particular twin souls.

For the first two chukkers there was no score, though this, it must be owned, was chiefly due to the mistaken zeal of the Dragon Flies' Number One, who, forgetful of his good intentions, persisted in trying to hit goals of which he was incapable, instead of devoting his energies to the opposing back and leaving the job to Major Rocket. Had it not been for this, the score would by this time have been very heavy against the Lancers. In the third chukker the disaster so long impending occurred. Rocket, who in the interval had spoken very seriously

to Gubbins, at length secured the ball, and with a resounding smack lifted it well over the opposing back's head, when it rolled to within twenty-five yards of the Lancers' goal. Ferrers—the back in question—turned, and slipping the enemy's Number One, made for the ball and ... missed it, leaving Gubbins the chance of his life.

Exultantly the youth raised his stick, and was about to add one more to his already lengthy list of failures, when his arm was paralysed by a roar from behind of "Leave it, you infernal young idiot, leave it, out of the way, confound you!" Though hurt at being thus addressed, the more so as the opprobrious epithet must have reached the owner of a certain pink parasol in the gallery yonder, Gubbins this time managed to restrain his ardour, and obediently sheering off to one side was rewarded by hearing a good clean crack behind him, as the skilful Rocket sent the ball whizzing through the Lancers' goal-post. Instantly arose loud and prolonged applause from the excited gallery, and thus encouraged the Dragon Flies set to work with a will, and by the end of the chukker had scored again twice.

Three to love, two more chukkers to go, and their opponents flushed with success—truly, a bad business for the cavalry team; and faces were troubled and brows gloomy, as they rode slowly away to change their ponies. So far Hector had not distinguished himself. His early upset at the hands of Gubbins had ruffled him badly, and, this disaster having been followed by frequent defeats at the hands of the tricky Rocket, he had finally lost his temper in earnest, with consequent evil results to his play. The recent reverses, however, had affected him very differently from his companions. They were disheartened; he, on the contrary, was thirsting for revenge, and more than ever determined to win the contest, even if it meant the riding down of each individual member of the enemy in turn—indeed, his tactics in the last chukker had evoked more than one indignant cry of "Foul!"

He was now gloomily debating in his mind on whom to commence operations when he came upon the other three standing together, and at sight of the despondency on their faces wrath boiled up in Hector's breast.

"What the devil are you looking so sick for, all of you?" he said angrily. "What if they have got three goals, we can beat them all right. Damme, I'll give you this pony, if we don't!"

They stared at him, and, as they looked, something in his face caused theirs to brighten, and hope once more to dawn in their hearts. In the hour of adversity man will cling to the rottenest straw, but here was a rock, solid and unmoved by the seas in which they were drowning.

"What do you suggest then, Graeme?" said Ferrers, after a pause, oblivious of the fact that he, the hero of many contests, was now asking advice of a novice, of one, moreover, whom he had been wont to consider a fool, so true it is that

mere skill and experience must ever bow to strength of personality.

"Do?" said Graeme, seizing the reins of government thus abandoned. "Why, go for them, attack all we know, not merely try to prevent them scoring, as we've been doing up till now. Look here, Ferrers, I'll take charge: you go up 'Two,' I'll take your place at 'Three.' Now, come on, and remember what I say. Force the game for all you're worth. Knock 'em over, doesn't matter, but win we will."

Thus saying, and without a word of protest from his erstwhile captain, Hector led the way into the field, and once more the game started; but this time a very different state of affairs was manifest. The Dragon Flies, so far from attacking now, were soon solely occupied in the endeavour to save their goal from the furious and repeated attacks of the Lancers. For some time they were successful, but the latter would not be denied, and quite outclassing their opponents at length triumphed over the defence, the goal being followed by a second, scored just as the bell rang. Two goals to three, one more chukker to go, and the excitement in the gallery rising, which excitement increased to frenzy when Carruthers in the next few minutes scored one more goal for the Lancers.

Then an unlooked-for misfortune befell them, for Gubbins, by some happy accident, managed to fluke a subsidiary, and for a moment demoralisation again hovered over the cavalry team. Graeme, however, rallied his men in time, and for a while the game surged equally backwards and forwards up the ground; but a few minutes only remained, and hope was rapidly dying in the hearts of the Lancers' supporters when the last chance arrived. Graeme slipped the opposing Number Three, and securing the ball drove it clean and hard up the ground; galloping on, he followed this up by another not quite so straight, the ball rising in the air and settling within thirty yards of the Dragon Flies' goal. There it lay, a fair white sphere, right in front of Ferrers; a possible near-side shot, but most unlikely.

With passionate, strained attention Hector watched Ferrers' approach, his whole will-power concentrated on the striker, till the surrounding world, the roar of the crowd, the thud of galloping hoofs had passed from sight and hearing, and nothing remained save that flying figure before him. "You shall not miss it," he breathed, "you shall not." He saw the uplifted arm descend, he heard a great shouting, mingled with the clang of the time-bell, and then for a moment all was darkness, till, the mists slowly lifting from his brain, he found himself alone, some fifty yards away from the ground, his pony heaving and gasping beneath him. For a moment he sat, gazing vacantly around, and then, dismounting, slipped his arm through the reins, and led the sweating beast back to the waiting sais.

No one noticed his movements, every one being too excited by the recent sensational finish, and engaged in the laudation of Ferrers, who was the hero of the hour. Justly too, for such a shot at such a crisis had never before been

witnessed on the Shiraz ground. Even Crawler was mollified and expressed satisfaction with the play on the whole, though he was of opinion that the Lancers, being better mounted, ought to have won by more, and would probably have done so but for Graeme, who, he noticed, had hardly once struck the ball. He was inclined to think that Ferrers' shot was a fluke, and this remark having given rise to some difference of opinion, the hero himself was approached and asked to give an account of the circumstance. This proved somewhat vague and unsatisfactory.

"Truth is, you fellows," he said, "I really don't remember much about it. I recollect seeing the ball sittin' there, and thinking how bally awful it'd be to miss the beastly thing, and then, well, then I found I'd scored a goal. Rather extraordinary feelin' it was, couldn't do it again, I know."

"Rot, old boy," said Kinley, known in his regiment as "Porky," on account of his appearance and appetite, "of course you could do it again. Tell you what, give you a dozen tries now, and back you for a quid a time. Who'll take?"

A chorus of assent arose, for the wise always took up Porky's bets. A move was made back to the polo ground, and the ball placed in its former position, the succeeding events resulting in the speculator's return to his quarters an hour later a poorer man by twelve golden sovereigns. "Silly fool I was," he mused as he went, "but then I always am a silly fool over the bets I make."

Graeme also came in for a share of the general applause, it being agreed that he had played well; quite wonderfully for a beginner, though of course he wanted experience and knowledge of the game. Still, he had not been the weakness they expected. Ferrers went even further, declaring that Graeme had been the stay of their side, and though, when the first feelings of gratitude had worn off, he recanted somewhat, he now proclaimed the fact aloud and announced his intention of proceeding forthwith to Mrs. Graeme to inform her of his opinion. Lucy, however, was not to be found, for she had seen that to which the others were blind, and had flown forthwith across the ground to where Hector was standing slowly donning his coat and sweater.

"What is it, Hector, what's the matter?" she said, looking anxiously at the drawn haggard face and tired eyes.

"Nothing's the matter, Lucy. What should there be? I'm a bit done, that's all."

"But I saw you reel; it was just after Mr. Ferrers scored that last goal, I thought for a moment you were going to fall. Oh, this polo's too much for you, Hector."

"Fit of giddiness, that's all, I used to be subject to them, you know. I'm all right now; let's go home. What did you think of the game?"

"You played splendidly, all of you did."

"What about Ferrers' play?"

"He was wonderful, Hector, but then of course he's an old hand. When you've played as long as he has you'll be quite as good, much better, I think. But here we are at the house, I'll just ask for a brandy and soda, and then we'll go up to dress. There's a big dinner on to-night, you know. I wish there was not, I should like you to go to bed, oh, why not, Hector? I can easily arrange it with Lady Wilford."

Graeme, however, though anathematising the dinner-party, refused to retire, and an hour afterwards was seated at Sir Reginald's hospitable board, where a large and festive company was assembled, all chattering of polo and the great contest of the afternoon. Hector took little part in the conversation, but sat silent and moody, the efforts of his partner, a light-hearted grass-widow, being wholly powerless to rouse him to the smallest semblance of interest. Even Lucy, watching him in the intervals of lively play with Mr. Carruthers, at length grew indignant, as she noted his air of deep abstraction. She felt sorry for Mrs. Loveall, whose face by this time wore a look of boredom and chagrin, though it is true she would equally have hated that flirtatious lady, had Hector responded in the slightest degree to her overtures.

If he was tired, why had he not gone to bed, as she suggested? That would have been infinitely better than putting in an appearance with the sole object, it seemed, of acting as damper on the general enjoyment. The other men were no doubt tired also, but they had the manners to disguise the fact; why could not Hector be like the rest, and make an effort as they were doing? There, he was yawning; she would like to have shaken him. Graeme, however, persisted in his offence, and if he had succeeded in boring his partner, she in return had well-nigh maddened him. In fact, an almost irresistible impulse to flee was rapidly coming over him; a wild longing to escape from the lights and chattering crowd and calm his shattered nerves in the cool night air. A few minutes more, and he would have done so, but fortunately for his own and Lucy's credit the signal for release came at length; whereupon Hector sprang up, and, leaving Mrs. Loveall to find her handkerchief and other fallen trifles as best she might, made for the open window and fled out into the night, where he stood breathing deep sighs of relief. At his feet slept the now deserted Murg, glistening like some great lake in the light of the full moon. At its edge the huts and tents looked white against the background of shadowy forest and gloomy pine-clad hill, while far away a vision of unearthly beauty glittered faintly, the white splendour of the snows, a spirit city of minarets and spires in a setting of blue. Over all lay the spell of a dead world, that strange haunting influence breathed by the moon wherein two elements are commingled, seemingly apart yet inextricably interfused, the one death and the other love. For, though from a perished universe it comes, it is not gloom but passion it stirs in most human hearts, and in this alliance of Azrael

and Eros can be read the great secret of the world—that death is but the passing to another birth, and, without love, birth cannot be.

It was not of the latter that Hector was thinking now, but of that something within him, revealed that afternoon—though but in a paltry game. He knew now, ignore it though he might, that he was not quite as others were, that his was that strange gift of nature—will-power, personal magnetism, call it what you please—the possession of which marks the difference between those who lead and the herd which follows. And as he stood there, with the majesty of sleeping mountain and plumed forest around him, their greatness spoke to that something within him, reproaching it, and at its voice the curious restlessness and discontent born of the afternoon's awakening swelled to a flood of bitter self-contempt. How great was all this, and how very small he and his present aims. Vague longings came over him, a desire for the unattainable, for that it surely was. He, a married man, whose course of life was chosen—a life devoted to games and sport.

For a moment the idea of studying his profession came to him, but at the thought his mind instantly revolted. The *rôle* of smart soldier had no charms for Graeme; that he knew required a different nature from his, an unimaginative, methodical character, one content to follow the path dictated, not to proceed to the goal by short cuts, as he had done, and always would do, to the annoyance of his military superiors. No, he would leave that to such as Ferrers and Rocket, both reckoned promising candidates for advancement, the former being Adjutant of his regiment, the latter Brigade-Major to the Inspector-General of Cavalry. They were and always would be followers; as for him, he would be leader or nothing.

Well, perhaps his chance would be given him; it always was. Even now there were rumours of trouble on the frontier, and he might be sent. He would be, he would move heaven and earth, and then... "Damn, why the devil can't they leave me alone? Who is it? Oh, you. Lucy, do you want me?"

"Yes; what an unsociable person you are to rush away like this, everybody's gone home. Oh, what a lovely night; look at that moon; it reminds me of board ship. Do you remember?"

"Ship, what ship? Oh yes, of course, exactly like. The crowd too about the same in intelligence as that lot in there."

"Why do you sneer at them, Hector, what's the matter with you this evening?"

"Oh, nothing, only I'm sick to death of this chatter of polo. Hang it, to hear them talk one would think Ferrers had won the V.C. instead of scoring a miserable goal in a match."

"Surely, Hector, it's a little small to be jealous."

"I'm not jealous, Lucy, and what seems to me small is this raving about a mere game. Hang it, there are other things in life besides polo."

Lucy was silent. Accustomed as she was to her husband's frequent changes, this was a little too sudden and unaccountable. She endeavoured to fall in with his mood, however.

"Perhaps you're right, Hector, though I don't think you're quite fair. You know, I've often wished you to take a more serious view of things, your profession, for instance, but you've always snubbed me when I began."

"Bah, my profession."

"Well, why not, surely it's a good enough one for any man? And I believe, Hector, I really do, that you could be as good a soldier as any of them if you worked, perhaps even be adjutant after Mr. Ferrers, and in time command the regiment. Oh, I should love you to command the regiment."

"And after that, Lucy?"

"Oh well, that's as high as I go. I think I should then like you to retire, and perhaps go into Parliament."

"Colonel Graeme, M.P., Lord, what dizzy heights, Lucy."

"Don't sneer, Hector, I mean it, but you'll have to work. I'll take you in hand myself when we return to Riwala. Till then you may play as much as you like. And now I've got some news for you. How would you like to shoot a bear?"

"Bear, where is he?"

"About twelve miles from here, I believe. A native's just come in to tell Sir Reginald, I don't think he much believes in the story, though; he says these Kashmiris are such liars it would be only waste of time going. Still, I think we might persuade him if you'd care for it."

"Rather, of course I would," said Hector, and perchance at the sudden return to mundane interests the great mountains and forests laughed, quietly derisive, for well they knew the resistless force of which they, like him, were but the phenomena, and how—make what plans and resolutions he may—man must dance when the master-hand chooses to pull the strings and call the tune, though till then he is seemingly free to act as he pleases. And so Hector was allowed to become his own confident self once more, and, feeling rather ashamed of his recent lapse from common sense, hurried off with Lucy to the coercion of his unwilling host.

"Oh, Sir Reginald," he said, entering the drawing-room, "my wife tells me there are bears about. Why not have a go at them to-morrow?"

"I hardly think it worth while, Graeme," said the Resident, "I don't suppose there's a bear near the place."

"Surely, the fellow wouldn't dare bring you false khubber?"[#] said Hector. "Why, I'd fine his village a hundred rupees if he did, were I the Resident."

[#] Information.

"Oh, please let's go, Sir Reginald," said Lucy. "It would be a day out whether we shot anything or not. Lady Wilford will come too, and we'll have a ripping time. I should love it."

The Resident hesitated. He knew perfectly well that what Graeme had said was true, and that no Kashmiri would have dared to bring him false information, but he had secret and most important reasons for not wishing to leave his post at the time. That morning's mail had brought in news of serious trouble on the North West Frontier, hinting, moreover, at the possibility of its being necessary to recall to their regiments all officers now on leave in Shiraz. This information, being confidential, could not be given as a reason for refusing Graeme and his wife. The latter continued to press the attack.

"I have never seen a bear except in the Zoo," she pleaded, "and I promise to be very good and quiet, and not get in the way. Oh, do go."

"I have never had a chance with that new .303 of mine," said Hector, "and I badly want to give that lazy devil of a shikari of mine something to do, and see if he's the wonder he makes himself out to be, simply eating and smoking his head off in idleness, the brute."

"My dear fellow, I should like it as much as you do, but we're rather busy in the office just now, and..."

"Why not go, Reginald?" said Lady Wilford. "It would be a day out, as Mrs. Graeme says, and anything urgent could be sent after you by a peon;[#] it's only twelve miles."

[#] Native Messenger.

The Resident capitulated straightway, as was his habit with his wife. After all, she was right, he thought, and most likely no letter of importance would come. If it did, well, his secretary could give out the necessary orders to the officers. He would chance it and go.

"Very well, my dear," he said, "if you're set upon it; only don't blame me if the bears fail to appear, that's all. I'll go now, and start off the servants with the tents, etc. You'd better go to bed at once, young lady," turning to Lucy; "we'll have to leave here by five at latest, you too, Graeme, you must be tired after your exertions to-day. By the way, Latimer," to his secretary, "you might give me a few minutes in my study, there are one or two things I want to see you about," and

Sir Reginald went off to make his preparations for the morrow.

Graeme, having first inspected the aforementioned .303, proceeded to interview his shikari, to whom he imparted the unwelcome news of the forthcoming expedition. This done, he acted upon his host's advice, and, making his way to his room, was soon in bed and asleep.

CHAPTER III

Shortly after five the next morning, the party, mounted on ponies, left the lamp-lit Residency and started on their way to the village of Karin, in the vicinity of which the aforesaid bears were supposed to be awaiting them. The sun was not yet risen; the air was chill; and the sahibs sleepy and disinclined for conversation.

Close at their heels trudged the four saises, bearing their charges' blankets, while some distance in the rear stalked two dignified-looking natives, Gokal Singh, Sir Reginald's dogra orderly, and Ahmed Khan, Graeme's shikari. The latter, a man of gigantic stature and imposing appearance, was a typical specimen of the Kashmiri race.

On Graeme's arrival at Baramoula three weeks before, this worthy, recognising at a glance the green and inexperienced new-comer, had at once attached himself to Hector's retinue, and, heedless of rebuffs, had seized upon the sahib's gun-cases and started off with them in triumph to Shiraz. In vain did Graeme order him to put the guns down and be off; Ahmed Khan merely smiled and stuck sturdily to his booty.

Who did the sahib propose was to clean these weapons? he asked, marching on. Not the saises assuredly, nor the bhisti, [#] and certainly not the Presence's bearer. He appealed to the latter, who at once—satisfactory terms having been previously arranged—supported him. The Kashmiri's questions were reasonable, he declared, a shikari was a necessity to a sahib of importance; but first, why not see the man's chits, [#] for if an honest man he would doubtless have such on him, and thereupon he commanded Ahmed to produce what documents of the kind he had, and to beware of showing false ones, for, he assured his master, such things were done in Kashmir, and it behoved one to be wary.

[#] "Water-carrier.

[#] Written characters, mostly forged, from former employers.

A bundle of dirty papers was thereupon dragged to light, an examination of which proved to Hector that he had secured a treasure, for they one and all declared that, of all shikaris now in Kashmir, this one, for honesty, skill, and lion-hearted bravery, was incomparably the first. Graeme, impatient to be off, and by this time bored with the discussion, then gave in, and Ahmed secured a place, which suited him exactly. He smoked and slept all day, spent his nights in the bazaar, and left the cleaning of the guns to the sais, his sole self-imposed duty being to stand up and salute the sahib whenever he saw him, a performance which he religiously observed, and which irritated Graeme exceedingly. The present expedition, involving a departure from the daily routine, was by no means to his liking, and on receiving his orders the previous night he had at once raised objections. Right well he knew Karin, he declared, and its inhabitants, the headman especially, a liar, a very prince of liars, he was too, always deceiving sahibs by false tales of bears.

Afraid, did the Presence say, he, Ahmed Khan, afraid of a bear? How could that be, for was he not known throughout the country as a lion-hearted one, and the terror of all wild beasts? Let the Presence but deign to look at his chits once more, and forthwith his hand sought the folds of his dirty garments. The frequent production of these documents had by this time got on Graeme's nerves, and, advancing on the lion-hearted one with uplifted arm and dangerous eyes, he was about to make his meaning clearer, when Ahmed, recognising the inevitable, salaamed humbly, and with a meek "Taiyar, sahib, taiyar hojaega,"[#] proceeded, with wrath in his heart, to make preparations for the morrow. He was now morosely trudging along by the side of Gokal Singh, with whom as a Hindu dog he had nothing in common, but to whom as a soldier and man of violence he was invariably respectful.

[#] "I will be ready, sir."

For the first six or seven miles the journey lay through the dense fir and pine forest, the track winding its way along the mountain-side. Here and there the path was broken by noisy rivulets rushing down from above, nasty chasms being thus formed, bridged in the usual slack Kashmiri way by a few poles covered over with sods and brushwood. Dangerous places these for the rider, as when the brushwood rots holes are left, through which the crossing pony may chance

to drop a leg. Soon, however, these and the gloomy forest were left behind and the party emerged on to an open plateau, where the full glory of a Kashmiri morning suddenly burst upon them.

Far below lay the valley, its green and gold gleaming through a veil of silver mist, which glittered and flashed like a diamond cobweb in the rays of the morning sun. To their right stretched an endless succession of mountains, the summits rising like islands through the vapour billows which swirled around them—a restless, tossing sea, now fast breaking up and melting into floating patches of white beneath the growing splendour of the sun. Far across the valley gleamed the great snow-wall of the Himalayas, now no longer spirit-haunted and visionary, but pink-flushed and radiant with the kisses of the dawn.

At the sight Lucy gave a cry of pleasure, and, moving instinctively closer to her husband, began to point out to him the various beauties thus unfolded. He was unresponsive, for once more there had stolen over him the faint melancholy of the previous night, and with it the desire for solitude and silence. He therefore assisted her to dismount—Sir Reginald had here called a halt—and muttering an excuse went to some distance, where he stood gazing towards the north.

Lucy, much hurt at his behaviour, remained for a moment looking after him, and then, with a sigh, walked slowly away to join Sir Reginald and his wife, whom she found tucked away behind a rock, whither they had betaken themselves for shelter from the breeze that blew cold and clear from the distant snows.

The Resident had not yet regained his wonted *bonhomie*, and was full of gloomy forebodings. He ought not to have left Shiraz, he declared; something would be certain to happen in his absence, and Latimer, though a good enough fellow in his way, was not the man to cope with unforeseen emergencies. The present expedition too was more likely than not to turn out a failure; a bear-shoot so often did. Possibly they might get a shot, but he doubted it, he very much doubted it. He only hoped there would be no mistake about breakfast. Samuel—his Madrasi butler—was not given to make a hash of things, but natives were so unreliable, and to-day somehow he had a presentiment he would. But they must be getting on, not waste time on this infernal hill, where he was rapidly freezing.

"Where's Graeme? Oh, looking at the snows, is he?—very fine, very fine indeed. Where's my sais? Abdul, you rascal, leave that stinking hubble-bubble at once, and bring my pony, the lady sahib's too. Why don't you roll karo[#] and keep them warm, instead of letting them stand in the cold while you're squatting on the ground like a damned fool? They'll get a chill now and die, and you'll be in jail khana. Serve you right. Hold his head, will you, how the devil can I get up with the brute twisting about like a top? My foot, curse it, right on my foot, you clumsy lout, and now I shan't be able to shoot. Oh, come on, come on, Sarah,

you too, Mrs. Graeme, never mind about that husband of yours, he'll turn up at breakfast all right."

[#] "Walk them about."

Thus encouraged by the leader, the party, joined shortly after by Graeme, once more resumed their journey, and, the wind-swept plateau left far above and behind them, were soon winding their way through the crops and woodlands of the valley below. Gradually, as the warmth increased, Sir Reginald grew more amiable, till by the time the mud huts of Karin appeared in sight he had become his own genial self again, and was the first to point out the camp, a collection of large tents hard by the village, their white sides looking cool and inviting through the dark green of the trees.

At a respectable distance a crowd of natives were squatting, anxious for a sight of the great man and his guests. At their approach they stood up together, and a chorus arose of "Salaam, sahib, salaam," while turbaned heads bowed low in reverence. The headman came forward, and with many protestations of unworthiness proceeded to welcome the Protector of the Poor and the other Presences. Sir Reginald cut him short. Afterwards, he said, he would be pleased to see him, but not now, and thereupon he dismounted, and, followed by the others, entered the large marquee, where he stood, a smile appearing on his face as he viewed the result of Madrasi Samuel's efforts.

It was a cheering sight on which his eyes rested. On the snowy tablecloth, glittering with glass and silver and tastefully decked with flowers, stood crystal dishes piled high with peaches, nectarines, and pears, while on a trestle sideboard were displayed cold baked meats of many kinds, from the tiny but succulent quail, nestling in his bed of quivering jelly, to the lordly turkey, carefully browned and portly with chestnut stuffing. From buckets of ice, hock and soda-water bottles reared inquiring heads, while from the kitchen outside came the inspiring sizzle of bacon and chop, their fragrance mingling with that of the roasting coffee-berry.

The faces of the Resident and his wife beamed with pleasure at the sight. "Let come what might" now, the main object to them of the expedition was assured, and, no matter whether the bears were found or not, there was at any rate eating and drinking to fall back upon.

Promptly vetoing Hector's suggestion that before falling to they should make arrangements for the first drive in order to waste no time. Sir Reginald summoned the servants and the business of breakfast commenced, during which Graeme and Lucy mentally beheld the quarry, bored with waiting, stalk disgust-

edly away to their mountain fastnesses. At length the apparently interminable meal was ended, but not their trials, for Sir Reginald, drowsy with repletion, called for cheroots, and, having carefully selected a long and black weed from the box, notched the end neatly with a knife, and, lighting it, lay back in his chair and proceeded to abandon himself to dreamy reflection. This was too much for the now indignant pair, and goaded at length into action by their fidgeting Sir Reginald, with a sigh of regret, rose and accompanied them outside, where the headman and his retinue were still patiently squatting.

The story, as told by this worthy, was sufficiently thrilling. The country, it appeared, for miles round was alive with bears, black in hue, and of incredible size and ferocity, and though the number of those actually seen dwindled down to three under the close cross-questioning of the Resident, still three, one a man-slayer, was news enough to inspire any man, or woman either, and it was with a heart beating with excitement, not unmixed with fear, that Lucy accompanied her husband to the scene of the coming drama.

Hector was confident, as usual. His experience of big-game shooting was nil, but what of that? He was a crack performer with a shot-gun, and no doubt, should the occasion present itself, he would prove himself equally proficient with the rifle. His vanity also was stirred, for had not the headman besought him to deliver the village from the tyranny of these beasts, and, though he was addressing Sir Reginald at the time, his eyes had turned to him more than once; and naturally, for it was hardly likely that anyone so old and fat as the Resident could be relied on in an emergency like the present. No, it was to him they looked, and, by Jove! they should find their confidence was not misplaced. Ahmed Khan well knew how to foster these sentiments, for in them he saw lay profit to himself. Like most natives, he was an unconscious student of human nature; it is their stock-in-trade for the extracting of rupees, and, as he was aware from experience, the lordlier the sahib's frame of mind, the more noble the bakshish, as is befitting.

Edging up to his master, therefore, who on this occasion did not repulse him, he proceeded to launch forth into a panegyric of Graeme's virtues, expressing his conviction, that, of all the sahibs he had hitherto served, his sahib was incomparably the bravest and most expert with gun and rifle. And for this, he ejaculated fervently, Allah be praised, since no one less gifted could hope to emerge victorious from a contest with bears so ferocious as these undoubtedly were. Thereupon followed a stream of gruesome and imaginary anecdote illustrative of these animals' incredible daring and savagery; but, with a pleased glance at Lucy's white face, let not the memsahib be frightened, for he, Ahmed Khan, would be there to see that no harm came to her or the sahib. Only over his dead body should that happen, for he had no fear of the beasts, ferocious as they

were. Let her but look, and here again his hand sought out the bundle of papers, till, suddenly catching the sahib's eye, he changed his mind, and lifting up a fold of his dingy garments blew his nose hastily with it.

At length, after an hour's walk, the scene of action was reached, this being a deeply-wooded ravine roughly triangular in shape and about half a mile in length. Lining the base could be seen the beaters awaiting the signal to advance, the guns being placed in position near the apex, one on either side.

Perched on a tree, overhanging the edge of the ravine and halfway between the beaters and guns, sat, in dignified eminence, the patriarch of the village. His duty it was to stimulate the exertions of his friends by much laudation of their efforts, and at the same time to excite their hatred of the quarry by bitter cursing and vituperation of the same. His further mission was to act as sentinel, and to give notice of the bear's approach to his lords and patrons at the other end.

Suddenly a long loud whistle broke the silence, and at the sound pandemonium broke loose in the ravine, each villager howled his loudest, while through the din was heard the dull monotonous throbbing of a tom-tom, lustily beaten by the village priest. The line of beaters crept on, but so far there was no sign of the enemy; the uproar gradually abated, and even the tom-tom had ceased to beat, when suddenly the figure in the tree began to show signs of agitation. He craned forward, his neck was thrust out like that of a vulture, and then with a wild shriek of "Balu! balu!"[#] he commenced to wave his arms and gesticulate with a frenzied energy, which threatened every minute to precipitate him from his perch into the abyss below.

[#] "The bear! the bear!"

Instantly the clamour was renewed, the thrumming of the tom-tom rose to a roar, while, faintly heard through the din, the thin screams of the patriarch in the tree smote upon the ear. He exhorted his brothers to advance and fear not, in the same breath cursing the bear and reviling its female ancestors with an intensity and bitter hatred, which that harmless mulberry-eater would hardly seem to have merited.

At the sportsmen's end of the ravine a tense silence reigned, all eyes being fixed on the undergrowth below, whence a faint rustling and clatter of loose stones were now coming, betokening something's approach. Lucy's face whitened, and she clutched her husband by the arm. Shaking her off, he grasped his rifle tighter; but, alas! the quarry was not for him, for suddenly the "old and fat" Sir Reginald was seen to raise his weapon, a dull boom echoed through the

ravine, followed by a "Woof, woof," a commotion in the bushes, and then the silence of death. The bear was slain.

"Damn!" muttered Graeme, and was turning sharply away when a gasp from Lucy stopped him, and looking round he beheld another bear, which, having emerged unseen from below, was now hastily shuffling off. Graeme fired, but the bear paid no heed; again he fired, and still the target refused to stop, but to the accompaniment of a wail from Lucy and a curse from Ahmed Khan lumbered on to the shelter of some bushes and was lost to view.

A dreadful moment followed; not only had he, Hector Graeme, missed an easy shot in the eyes of the whole village, but, worse still, he had failed where another had succeeded, an altogether impossible situation, and one by no way improved by the well-meant, though perhaps tactless, condolences of his host, who now joined them. The thing was done, however, and the bear in safety miles away, so assuming what nonchalance he might, and avoiding the reproachful eyes of Lucy, who declined to look at Sir Reginald's bear, and the glum face of Ahmed Khan, whose hopes of bakshish had disappeared with the bear, he turned to his host, and jauntily inquired what the next move was to be. Sir Reginald without hesitation answered that that must undoubtedly be lunch, it being now past one, and the next beat more than a mile distant, whereupon, guided by a white-clad khitmagar, sent forward for the purpose by the thoughtful Samuel, the party returned to the marquee, where once more they found a repast awaiting them, more suggestive of Prince's or the Savoy than a picnic in the wilds of Kashmir.

At first Graeme's mood was not conversational, but gradually, under the influence of good cheer and much hock and soda, his mortification subsided, till at cigarette time he had recovered his wonted serenity, and even permitted himself to discuss the recent disaster.

"Curious thing," he observed, "my missing like that, wonder what happened. Don't often do it, rather good shot as a rule, ain't I, Lucy?"

"Indeed you are, Hector," answered the latter, looking indignantly at her host and refusing to respond to a wink. "My husband is considered one of the best shots in Hertfordshire, Sir Reginald, and how he came to miss the bear I can't imagine. I think there must be something wrong with that rifle, Hector, I really do."

"Wrong with the powder, I should say, Mrs. Graeme," said the Resident, in high good-humour, "wants straightening. Have to do better than that when you go to Tirah, why ... Try that Grand Marnier, Graeme, I can recommend it."

"Thanks, I will," said Graeme, filling his glass, "and about Tirah—going up, are we, when?"

"Surely, Sir Reginald, there's no chance of that?" said Lucy, with startled

eyes.

"No chance whatever, Mrs. Graeme, no chance at all, I should say; foolish of me to have mentioned it, must have been dreaming. A native regiment or two may have to go, that is, if the Afridis really mean trouble, which I doubt, but hardly British cavalry. No, no, set your mind at rest."

"Native troops again," muttered Graeme discontentedly; "it's always the same story. They have all the fun, while we fool about in cantonments. Wish to Heaven I was in a black corps."

"You'd very soon wish yourself out again, my friend," said his host. "I know I'd give something to be back in the old 12th," his thoughts reverting as he spoke to the days when he was a subaltern in a fashionable Hussar regiment. "Gad, what times we used to have, and what an infernal young fool I was to come the mucker I did. Real life that was, not this tin-pot grandeur and importance."

Lady Wilford at once intervened. To her, a former Mussoori belle and daughter of a police official in that place, Sir Reginald's London reminiscences were always distasteful. India, not England, was her native country, and she was not going to hear the former or its dignity derided, certainly not in the presence of a mere soldier officer, who, as everyone knows, is in no way the equal of an Indian civilian.

"Of course, you don't mean that, Reginald," she observed with some asperity, "and I confess I'm rather surprised that you, in your position, should have made such a remark. You'll be giving our guests an altogether wrong impression, but," turning to Hector, "you mustn't take what my husband says seriously, Captain Graeme; he often jokes in this way."

"Mayfield's your cousin, ain't he, Sir Reginald?" said Hector, unheeding. "He and Lady Edith were staying with my governor last covert shooting."

"No; she is. Rockingham was my father's brother. Good old Uncle Jack, wonder when I'll see him again. Gad, I remember...."

"Won't you tell us about the frontier, Reginald?" said Lady Wilford. "You know, Captain Graeme, my husband's one of the great authorities on the subject; indeed, his Excellency, a great friend of ours, once told me he considered him the greatest. I'm sure you would like to hear about it, both of you."

"Very much," said Hector, lying back in his chair and lighting another cigarette.

"It's hardly the subject for a picnic lunch, my dear," said the Resident, rather annoyed at being shown off in this manner, "and I'm sure it wouldn't interest our guests."

"Indeed, Sir Reginald, it would," answered Lucy, dealing a surreptitious kick at her husband's foot, at which with a low growl he opened his closing eyes.

"Some mullah fellow been stirring 'em up, hasn't he, Sir Reginald?" he ob-

served sleepily.

"The Hadda Mullah," said the Resident briefly, "trying to proclaim a religious war. Jihad, they call it. Don't think he will, all the same, for the Afridis have no religion to speak of. They'll be a hard nut to crack, if they do rise; but let's be off, it's time we were at those bears again. Wait a minute, though," he added, suddenly rising and hurrying out of the tent; "there's a man I want to see before we start. You stay here," looking hard at his wife, "amuse our guests till I return, Sarah. I won't be a minute."

"Now then, what is it?" he said sharply to a blue-clad native, with a leather belt round his waist, whose approach he had observed through the open door of the tent. "Letter for me? Hum, I was afraid of it, a wire too for Graeme sahib. Damn, but it's bad luck on her. All right, here's the sahib coming out now. You can give him the wire—not now, you fool, wait for three minutes."

"Oh, Mrs. Graeme, come over here and have a look at my bear, fine chap, isn't he? I'll have him skinned for you if you like; he'll make rather a good carriage-rug."

"It's awfully kind of you, Sir Reginald, but I couldn't think ... Why, what on earth's the matter with my husband? He seems very angry. Good—good heavens, what's that in his hand? It's, heavens, it's a telegram. Oh, Hector, what is it?"

"Only a recall, Lucy, that's all, an order to return, from that old fool Schofield. But I won't go. I'll see him damned first, by the Lord I will! I'm here on leave, and here I'll stay. You see now what comes of being in the Service, always at the beck and call of some jumpy idiot of a C.O."

"But—but why, Hector, what for?"

"I don't know; all it says is 'Return at once.' Some silly inspection, I suppose. But I ain't going. I'll wire to say 'Regret impossible.' Here, you fool with the belt, give me a form."

"I'm afraid you can't do that, Graeme," said his host gravely.

"Can't I? I'll soon show you I can. Why ... what do you mean, do you know anything of this, Sir Reginald?"

"The 1st Lancers leave Riwala for the frontier to-night. The Afridis have risen, after all, and seized the Khyber forts. I'm very sorry, Mrs. Graeme, but I was afraid of it all along. That's why I didn't want to come to-day."

Lucy said nothing.

"What's all this?" said Lady Wilford, coming up. "Oh," on hearing the news, "I *do* call that a shame, my dear, I am so sorry."

Lucy again made no answer, but, turning, left the group and walked slowly away to her tent.

"Oh, but, Reginald," continued his wife, really distressed, "surely something can be done, these two poor creatures, why not send a wire to say Cap-

tain Graeme's sick and can't move? They'd believe you, though of course they wouldn't him."

"My dear, what you suggest is impossible."

"I should just think it is," said Graeme, the anger on whose face had now turned to joy. "What! me skulk up here while my regiment's fighting on the frontier, not much. Here, I must get back to Shiraz at once. Ahmed Khan, put my things together, ek dum.[#] And you," to the peon, "order me a tonga when you get back. Gad, but this is good business, Lucy. Now where's my wife got to?"

[#] Immediately.

The Resident looked at him curiously. He didn't much like his guest at that moment.

"I think," he said rather coldly, "she has gone away to her tent. It's a bit rough on her, Graeme, you know."

"By Jove, yes, of course it is. I must go and find her at once. When do you think we can start, Sir Reginald?"

"Time enough if you leave Baramoula to-morrow. You can't do it to-night; besides, if you're thinking of your brother officers, they'll have gone by now."

"I sincerely trust they have. I don't want their company, Porky in a tonga would be just about the limit, and I must go to-night. I shouldn't sleep a wink if I didn't. Oh, let's be off. You can give me a permit, I suppose, for the road?"[#]

[#] A permit from the Resident of Kashmir is required by those wishing to make the Tonga journey to the plains by night. This is on account of the dangerous nature of the road.

"Oh, as far as that goes, there'd be no difficulty, but..."

"That's settled then. I'll go and tell Lucy."

"Very well, if you insist, we'll be ready in half an hour from now. You can manage it, I suppose, Sarah?" to his wife, who was looking at Graeme with indignant eyes.

"Oh yes, but I really think..."

"So do I, but it seems our friend here has made up his mind. Rather a sad ending to our picnic, Graeme;" but the latter was already on his way to the tent, where he found Lucy lying face downwards on her bed, quietly sobbing.

At the sight, a sudden spasm of remorse seized Hector; tears were a rare

occurrence with Lucy. He knelt down beside her and tried to take her hand.

"I'm awfully sorry, dear," he began, "and I'm afraid I've been beastly selfish, but I'm afraid in the excitement I never thought of that. I can see now it's devilish hard on you, and I wish, I do indeed, I hadn't to go; but I must; you see that, don't you, dear?"

No answer but sobs.

Hector was nonplussed. He could make love as well as most men—perhaps even better—but in the capacity to feel the sorrows of others his nature was altogether lacking, and he knew no other way to dry a woman's tears save with kisses. Such grief merely bored and annoyed him, and, as he looked at the stricken figure before him, in spite of himself a faint feeling of grievance began to take possession of him.

"Come, Lucy," he said, trying to make his voice as gentle as he could. "Pull yourself together, dear; after all, you are more to blame for this than me."

"I, Hector, oh, how?"

"For not letting me cut the Service when I wanted to. You see now what has come of it."

"Oh, how I wish I had, but I only did it for your sake, Hector."

"And that being so," continued Graeme, feeling his advantage, "it's hardly logical to complain. After all, fighting is what we're for, not loafing about barracks. Why, it was only last night that you were at me to take my profession seriously, and now, when I've got a chance at last, you grumble. It isn't fair, Lucy, it isn't really; makes the going ten times worse for me."

"I—I'm not grumbling, only—crying a little. I—I shouldn't be human if I didn't. Oh, Hector, are you made of stone?"

"Of course I'm not, only I've got more self-control. I feel it every bit as much as you do; it's the same for me, you know."

"It isn't, it isn't!" sobbed Lucy. "You've got the excitement, your brother officers and—and the rest. You're not left alone with nothing to do but think, as I shall be after to-morrow, for you must go then, I suppose. Oh, dearest, couldn't you wait for just one more day, for my sake, Hector?"

"I—I'm afraid I must go to-night, Lucy," stammered Hector.

The girl sat up, her eyes rather wild.

"To-night? Oh no, no, you can't; you mustn't go to-night. I—I couldn't bear it, Hector."

"I must, dear; if I didn't, they might put me under arrest for disobedience to orders. Think what might be said too, that brute O'Hagan, for instance."

"What does it matter about him? I come first. And you can't go to-night. The road's not safe. Those awful precipices."

"There's no danger, Lucy, and, believe me, I must." Hector's jaw set and his

eyes hardened.

A long pause. Graeme looked at his watch. Quarter of an hour had already passed.

"Lucy, dear," he began again, "I don't wish to hurry you, but Sir Reginald told me to say that he would start in half an hour," and Lucy at once rose, except for her pale face and red eyes, to all appearances calm once more.

"Very well, Hector," she said in a level voice, "I will be ready. Tell Sir Reginald I won't keep him waiting. I—I should like an hour or two at Shiraz, though, if you can wait so long. I want to see about your things."

"Oh, of course, dear, and, Lucy, you know, don't you, that it's not want of feeling on my part? I hate it as much as you do, probably more, only..."

"Yes, yes, but please leave me now, Hector, or I shan't—shan't. Oh, go—go." She half pushed him out of the tent and closed the flap behind him.

* * * * *

"That fellow was right," muttered Hector, as some hours later he rode down the hill on his way to Baramoula, "who said soldiers ought not to be married. I wish to heaven I'd sent in my papers before I left England, as I wanted to; but she wouldn't have it, said she wanted me to make a name for myself, and now the time's come, it seems she doesn't want it at all. No more do I, much rather stay behind with her. God, how cursedly miserable I feel, so much for love for a woman stirring a man's ambition and making him keen to do things. It don't, it takes all the heart out of him. Hullo, there's Baramoula, now I wonder whether that fool ordered my tonga?" and shaking up his pony he rode on at a canter.

CHAPTER IV

Early morning on the Khyber Hills. Not the autumn morning known to dwellers in rural England, where eyes rest on a landscape of still loveliness, on stubble-fields of pale yellow, on copses of russet and gold, and on meadows sheeted in silver dew, but something far different from that. Here is no green of grass, no vitalising chill of morning air, but instead a dull burning heat, clothing a land of flat stony plain and glowing mountain, towering up into a sky of hard cloudless blue.

In the centre of the plain, apparently alone, a British soldier stood watching, a white-faced soldier, his khaki uniform creased and tumbled, and, though his *rôle* of sentry was no laborious one, already stained with dark patches of sweat. Around him for miles stretched the brown monotony of sun-baked stony flat, seamed here and there by ragged-edged nullahs and dry watercourses, in the sandy beds of which a few withered shrubs and tussocks of grass clung hard to a miserable existence.

Before him, some three miles away, a wall of mountains barred the view, a rampart of earth and stone glaring red in the sunlight; sheer from the plain it rose, a forbidding barrier between India and Afghanistan, a barrier too with but few gateways, one of which, however—a dark rift in the hills—lay directly in front of the soldier as he stood.

Here and there, huddled against the foot of the mountains, could be seen the mud walls and strong square towers of a Pathan village, apparently deserted save for the occasional appearance of a white-clad figure and a few herds of miserable-looking sheep and goats browsing on the hillside hard by. Far away behind him, the solid walls and ramparts of Fort Hussein rose from the plain, a former Sikh stronghold, and now the temporary abode of her Majesty's 1st Regiment of Lancers.

Screening its mass, arose a thick haze of dust and smoke, through which now and again could be seen the faint twinkle of lance-point and sword-scabbard, and, the dust at times clearing, strings of mules and horses moving to and from a pond of muddy water. Over all was a pitiless brazen sky, in which glared the yellow disc of the sun, its rays smiting down on sweating man and beast, and turning Fort Hussein into an inferno of flies, fever, and burning walls.

Sentry Bates, clutching his carbine, now well-nigh too hot to hold, viewed all these things with aching eyes, and spat on the ground and swore. "An' this is bein' on active service," he muttered, "this doin' of guards and pickets more than wot a man 'as in barriks, no fightin', no enemy, no nuthink, only patrollin,' an' stinkin' rations and 'ot beer when you git 'ome. Wot are we 'ere for, I'd like to know, wot for did they send the ridgmint up 'ere? Fed up, that's wot I am, fair fed up." He paused, took off his helmet and wiped his brow. He then replaced the headpiece, front to back, as is customary with Tommy Atkins when out of sight of authority, and, taking from his breast-pocket a packet of "Swell" cigarettes, lit one and resumed his soliloquy.

"Wonder what 'Ooky's doin' over there?" he murmured, gazing towards a hillock some two miles away to the front of him, where a small group of horses could be seen standing. "Fancy the bloke a-sendin' 'im on detached post, ruddy foolishness, I call it, not like the bloke at all. 'Ullo, they're movin', strike me, they're gone, now what the 'ell does that mean?" He remained staring vacantly.

Private Bates, though apparently solitary and unsupported, was nevertheless not so, for close at hand, hidden from view in the depths of a great nullah, a troop of the 1st Lancers were lying; to which force he was now acting as look-out man.

Here, standing in a row, their heads fastened together by the process known in the Service as "linking," were the horses, black with sweat and restlessly kicking at the buzzing flies, while their riders, except the luckless Bates and a few men told off to watch the animals, were sitting in a circle smoking and indulging in that desultory conversation to which the British soldier is addicted. Some yards away Hector Graeme was lying on his back, his head resting on his helmet and a handkerchief spread over his face. For an hour he had so lain, trying to sleep; but, the flies and heat forbidding, he had now abandoned the attempt, and was listening to the conversation of the men.

The detachment of which he was this morning in command, or rather one similar to it—for the duty devolved on each troop of the regiment in turn—was sent out daily from Fort Hussein to its present position, its mission being to watch for and report on any movement of tribesmen from the direction of the Pass. For the better fulfilment of the task allotted, and to avoid unnecessary wear and tear of horseflesh, it was customary to push forward from the troop itself a detached post of six men under a non-commissioned officer. These were stationed on a small hillock about a mile distant from the mouth of the Pass, their orders being to watch it, but on no account to enter it.

To-day the command of this post had been entrusted to a certain Sergeant Walker, familiarly known as "Hooky," for, as every soldier is aware, in the Army all Walkers are "Hookies," just as all Clarkes are "Nobbies."

It was the sudden disappearance of this party from its hillock that had so excited the interest of Private Bates, and, curiously enough, at the same time, the conversation in the nullah had also turned on the subject of this particular non-commissioned officer.

"Think 'Ooky's caught the 'Addy Mullah yet, Jim?" said a voice.

"Shouldn't wonder at all, Spider," was the answer, "got 'im tied by a neck-roppe to 'is 'orse and a-bringin' of 'im up before the orfcer. Now then, 'Addy, quick march, 'alt, saloot. Stand up straight, can't yer? and stop fiddlin' with yer 'ands. This 'ere 'Addy, sir, 'as been givin' a lot of trouble lately, creatin' of disturbances in the Khyber Parse. Most troublesome man, sir, can't do nothin' with 'im. Sivin days to barriks? Very good, sir. Right turn, dismiss. Come back, d'ye 'ear, and saloot the orfcer properly."

"'Ooky's a bloke like a lot more we 'ave in the Army," said another, Wilde by name, "always a-gettin' of a man 'set' and naggin' at 'im. 'E makes crime, does Sergeant Walker."

"That's a fact, Oscar, and 'e 'imself ain't no perticler class, neither. 'E don't know 'is 'orses and 'e don't know 'is drill, but 'e's got a kind o' soapy way with 'im wot goes down with Rawson. Don't get round 'im, though," jerking his head towards Graeme and lowering his voice to a cautious whisper.

"Oo, 'im? Why, Taylor, 'im as is waiter in the orfcer's Mess, says as 'ow the other orfcers..." The rest of the sentence was inaudible.

"Orfcers, wot do they know? Why..." Mumble, mumble, and then, in the heat of controversy, a voice raised:

"'E ain't a fool, I tell you, Ginger, the 'ole squadron knows that. Ferrers, 'oo's Ferrers? Give me 'Ector, and you can 'ave the rest, ole man and all."

"Now then, stop that language," came sharply from a recumbent figure with three gold stripes on his arm, surmounted by a crown. Sergeant-Major Stocks had suddenly become alive to the enormity of the present discussion, and hastened to intervene. At his voice a hush fell on the group till, authority once more slumbering, the conversation was resumed.

"Wot for then 'as 'e gone and put 'Ooky on detached post, that's what I want to know?" said a voice, echoing the same doubt that had arisen in Private Bates's mind.

"Better arsk 'im, cully, not me. 'E knows 'Ooky same as 'e knows every man in the squadron, and if so be as 'e's put 'Ooky to watch the Parse, 'e's got 'is reasons for it, same like 'e always 'as."

A somewhat curious smile played over Hector's face as he listened, for the speaker was right in what he said. He *did* know his men. More, he had an intimate knowledge of their natures and capabilities, such as no other officer of the regiment could have hoped to acquire even had he tried. However, the other officers had not tried, the study of character in no way being regarded as part of the training of an officer in the British Army. With Hector such knowledge was a natural gift, as well as a hobby, and possibly it was owing to this that he possessed his curious popularity and influence over the men, at which Major Rawson, his squadron leader and constant foe, had so often wondered.

And yet, knowing them as he did, he had deliberately selected a non-commissioned officer, whom he knew to be one of the most incompetent in the regiment, for the responsible position he now held. But again, as Private Thomas had observed, he had his reasons, though these would probably have much astonished that person, as well as anyone else to whom they had been divulged.

Briefly they were as follows. The present was the fourth occasion on which Graeme had been entrusted with this particular mission, and so far as had also happened to his brother officers, the proceedings had been of a singular tameness—no sign of an enemy having been seen and no shot fired. While they were content to grumble, Hector had determined to act and at all costs to have

some little fighting to his credit, even if this should involve an attack on the Pass with his one troop.

On the way out this morning, his mind occupied with the problem of how his object was to be attained, he had by chance overheard a conversation between the redoubtable Sergeant Walker and a corporal; the former, as was his wont, vaunting his bravery and informing his incredulous companion that "give me but arf a chance, and I will show them I am afraid of no Pathan blokes; up the bloody Pass I mean to go sooner or later, orders or no orders."

Graeme, at first bored, soon became attentive, and finally, to the astonishment of the troop, called the hero up, and told him he would be in command of the detached post that day. This information he supplemented with a few remarks on the necessity of daring and enterprise on the part of subordinates, concluding by a short anecdote dealing with the subject of a certain sergeant who, though acting in defiance of orders, had yet achieved great renown. Having thus fired an already sufficiently vainglorious spirit, he despatched the man on his mission, observing with secret gratification his victim surreptitiously borrow the trumpeter's revolver, and with this tucked away in his holster depart, rating his followers as he went, even more than was his wont.

Having then watched the party's arrival at their destination, Graeme, well pleased, descended into the nullah, occasionally climbing out, glasses in hand, while a frown gradually overspread his face as time went on and nothing happened. By now he had abandoned hope, and was apathetically listening to his soldiers' talk when there was a sudden general cry of "Ullo!" and removing the handkerchief from his face, he looked up to meet a pair of bulging eyes staring at him from above. It was Bates the sentry, an agitated Bates, bursting with momentous tidings.

"Beggy pardon, sir," he gasped, "'Ook ... Sergeant Walker, sir, 'as left 'is 'ill, and there's 'eavy firin' goin' on in the Parse, you can 'ear it quite plain from 'ere."

A chorus of "Gawds," a scuffle, a rush, and all were up the nullah's side and standing on the level, with eyes fixed on the dark rift in the mountain wall. Yes, there it was, the dull intermittent thudding of shots, plainly audible in the still morning air, and, as Graeme listened, a queer cold thrill ran through him—that strange sensation, half awe, half exultation, which every soldier has felt on whose ears the sound beats for the first time.

In those red mountains yonder a drama was now being enacted, a drama all the more terrible because unseen and only imagined; one in which he too must shortly play his part. He, now warm and palpitating with life, would a few minutes hence be standing in Death's presence, nay, might have passed into his keeping and become deaf and insensible as the stones on which he lay.

Fascinated, he stood gazing, and still the firing continued, but, strain his

eyes as he might, no sign of enemy could he see on those bare brown slopes; nor yet of the sergeant and his party was there a trace. They were gone, apparently swallowed up in the mountains.

At last from the mouth of the Pass a cloud of dust appeared, through which horsemen could be discerned galloping hard along the road leading to Fort Hussein.

At the sight, a buzz of conversation arose.

"Made a 'ash of it, same as I thought he would."

"Been up the Parse, cont'r'y to orders."

"An' now 'ookin out of it, double quick?"

"Ow many's been shot, I wonder?"

"Mount," from Graeme, and straightway there was a cessation of comments and a frenzied descent to the nullah and horses, each man seizing the first animal he came to, regardless of ownership. A blast of bad language rose up like smoke.

"Leave my 'orse alone, Ginger. Get on yer own ruddy 'orse."

"Which of you blokes 'as pinched my lance?"

"Take yer 'orse's foot off my carbine."

"Forward, gallop, march" from the leader, and the troop were off, making for the road along which the horsemen were advancing—Graeme with his trumpeter some thirty yards ahead. As he rode, he thought hard, speculating as to what had happened, and wondering if it meant the chance for which he had been asking, till at length the road having been reached he halted, the troop drawn up in line across the way behind him, waiting for the fugitives, now barely a quarter of a mile distant, and still galloping hard towards him. On they came, nearer and nearer still, till their faces could be seen, and at the sight a simultaneous murmur of "Gawd" broke from the staring men.

"Halt!" shouted Graeme.

The horsemen paid no heed, but still came on, a wild-eyed rabble, their horses in a lather, with necks outstretched as they thundered along the dusty road.

"Halt!" he roared once more. "Halt!" echoed the Sergeant-Major.

"Christ, they'll be into us," from the troop, whereupon an ominous murmur and shuffling arose from the ranks.

"Damn it, my lot'll be off in a moment," muttered Graeme, and then, inspiration coming to him, "Engage!" he shouted.

Immediately, at the familiar word of command, the murmuring ceased, with a clatter of bamboo and steel down came the lances, and a row of glittering points barred the road; behind them sat a line of motionless figures, soldiers firm and steady once more, their momentary wavering gone.

At the sight the fugitives stopped, and a high-pitched chattering rose upon

the air, each man telling his story, glancing the while with fearful eyes towards the mountains behind. Livid cheeks ran wet with tears, and little quavers of laughter, broken with sobs, broke from loose-lipped mouths, the loud gasping of the steaming horses drowning the pitiful outcry; but their comrades behind the lance-points answered nothing, only looked at them, their eyes cold and faces grown suddenly white and very serious.

"And these are British soldiers," muttered Graeme, a feeling of disgust coming over him; "the others would have been the same too in another minute." And then rage seized him, and riding up to Sergeant Walker, now a shivering jelly of a man, he began furiously to question him.

In vain, however; the creature was too far gone to answer, and could only babble incoherently, while he pointed with shaking finger to his horse, in whose side could be seen a small dark hole, from which at every laboured breath a thin stream of blood ran out, staining with dull crimson the white dust of the road. At length, patience deserting him, he seized the man by the collar and shook him. This method proved more effectual, and he succeeded in eliciting the fact that he had taken his party up the Pass in spite of orders, that they had been suddenly fired upon from all sides, and he couldn't clearly remember what had happened then; but they had got out all right, all of them.

"Private Mortlock missing," said the Sergeant-Major's voice from the rear, and at the words a cry of exultation almost escaped Graeme, for his calculations had proved correct, and Sergeant Walker had provided him with the chance asked for. Remembering in time, however, he checked himself, and turning his back on the troop began rapidly to consider. The risks were obvious, also the futility of the proceeding on which he had already determined, but of these he thought not at all, for with him an idea once formed became an obsession. It had to be carried out, right or wrong, possible or to all seeming the reverse, for such was his nature. The "how" might require consideration—deep consideration too, as now—but the "whether" never. His course once decided on, doubts never assailed him, and in this he had the advantage over most; for feeling no doubt, and consequently no counter-emotion rising to cloud his brain, this was at his disposal, free to work undisturbed at the problem before it. So now, with all eyes fixed upon him, he sat debating and then the plan clear before him he turned and rode slowly back to the staring troop:

"Men," he said, "I'm going back for Mortlock, I want four volunteers, who's for it?" Silence for a good ten seconds, and then out from the rear rank rode a dirty-looking soldier, one Private Williams, reputed the worse character in the troop. Forward he came, and, halting behind Graeme, sheepishly grinned at his comrades.

"I'm wiv yer, Billy, strike me," said a voice, and Private Rogers, his chum and

constant associate in evil-doing, also rode forward and ranged himself alongside.

"I'll come too, sir; it's a Christian's duty," said another quietly, and Private Green, the religious man of the troop, and an ardent temperance advocate, joined the other two.

A pause followed, Graeme's eye running down the line.

"I should like you, Haslopp," he said at last, "to make up the party," whereupon, without a word, a huge shoeing-smith, the regimental "strong man," left the ranks, and the number required was complete. "Right," said Hector, "four good men," at which unwonted eulogy Rogers and Williams winked in unison. "Now, Sergeant-Major, you'll be in charge of the troop till I return. Bring them on after me to that rise there, and open fire on the hills bordering the Pass. Don't suppose you'll see anything, or hit it if you do, but it will help to keep the enemy's fire off me. As for them," pointing to Sergeant Walker's men, now very silent and subdued, "keep 'em well in front; run a lance into any man of them who tries to bolt. That's all, I think. Now then, my heroes, forward on," and, shaking up his horse, Graeme set off, followed closely by the quartette of volunteers.

"A nice selection," he reflected as he rode, "two bad hats, one religious lunatic and a thick-headed shoeing-smith. Never mind, such as they are, they came at a word from me, and I love 'em for it. Gad, I do. Devilish quiet it all is," as mile after mile was covered, and still the silence remained unbroken; "nearly there now, must be, and not a shot so far. Wonder whether they've cleared off and it's going to be a walk-over after all. Ah, not it," suddenly ducking his head, as something sighed through the air above him, followed by a deep bang, while a wailing cry of "Allah, Allah," came faintly to his ears. "Stooks is at it too now," he continued, as the rending shriek of cordite sounded from behind, and a flight of bullets whistled overhead. "Lord, we're in for it." He bent forward in his saddle and urged his horse forward at top speed, while the air was alive with winged death and the hills ahead echoed to the loud banging of Jezail and Snider. "It's good though, all the same, worth living for;" and, a sudden feeling of exhilaration coming over him, he shouted aloud. Rogers and Williams screamed hoarsely in sympathy, till a loud thud followed by a ringing crash brought the concert to an abrupt termination. "Who is it?" shouted Graeme, pulling up and looking round.

"Rogers, sir," came faintly from a dusty heap on the road, the said heap sitting up and looking around with dazed eyes. "Not 'urt, though, sir, it's me 'orse 'e's got 'it in the 'ead. 'Ere, Billy," rising and walking unsteadily towards his chum, "gimme 'old of yer stirrup, I'll foot it alongside."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," shouted Graeme, "go back to the troop at once, and take your sword and carbine with you."

"Beggy pardon, sir, Williams and I.."

"Get back, damn you."

"Beggy..."

"Oh, go to the devil. Come on, men. Let go of that stirrup, Rogers; hit him on the head, Haslopp, if he won't," and once more the party were off, leaving Rogers looking sullenly after them. For some minutes he stood there, and then, having addressed a few pungent remarks to his dead horse, unbuckled his sword and extricated his carbine from its bucket, and, one under each arm, trudged away to a rock hard by. Here he sat down, and, having lighted a cigarette, proceeded at his leisure to take pot-shots at the hills in front of him.

Meanwhile, the party, now reduced to four, were rapidly nearing the mouth of the Pass, but so far no sign of the missing man was to be seen. Faces began to look serious, and the sense of imminent peril to strike home, but still their leader held on, though with every yard covered the situation was becoming more desperate.

Suddenly there arose a cry of "Here he is, sir," and Graeme, looking round, saw Green bending over a heap of khaki lying some distance from the road, the others with their officer having passed it by unseeing.

"Get up, Mortlock," shouted Hector, galloping towards the prone figure.

"Look sharp, man, there's no time to be lost. What's the matter, Green, not dead, is he? Oh—" stopping short and looking curiously down at what had been a human face before Pathan knives had altered it. Much interested Graeme remained staring, till roused by a warning voice.

"Look out, sir, they're comin' down from the rocks; they'll be on us in a minute. Better be off, sir; can't do nuthink for 'im now."

"Go to blazes. Haslopp, where the devil are you, Haslopp? Here, I'll hold your horse; you get down and hand him up to me, put your back into it, man. Oh, for the Lord's sake, look sharp."

"It's all right, sir, plenty of time. Christ, but ye're 'eavy, ole man. 'Ere you are, sir, got 'im? Not that way, sir. Put yer arm round 'im, let 'is 'ead rest agin yer shoulder like."

"Damn, he's slipping; he's slipped, Haslopp. Get your swords out, you two, look behind you," to Green and Williams, whose faces were now ashen.

"Orl right now, sir. Gimme my 'orse, Williams. Blast ye, don't let 'im go."

"Are you up, Haslopp? The point, Green, mind, not the cut."

"Not yet, sir, steady," to his dancing horse; "orl right now, sir."

"Come on then. Be off, you two, no good your waiting here. Gallop on and tell the troop I'm coming—you too, Haslopp."

There was no answer from the shoeing-smith; he remained where he was. Not so the other two; they were off like swallows, nor did they draw rein till a voice from the roadside made them pull up, sick with sudden terror. It was only Rogers, however, requesting the loan of a stirrup, and, much relieved, the two,

Rogers running alongside, proceeded on their way.

"Price of a pint out of this 'ere?" gasped the pedestrian.

"Thank God, on your bended knees, Rogers, for 'Is mercy to us all this day," said Green.

"So I will, matey, when I gits the pint. Think the bloke 'll stand it, Billy?"

"Ruddy oceans, cully," was the reassuring answer, "and a limon squash for the rivrend Grassey 'ere."

Meanwhile, Graeme and Haslopp were struggling painfully on. More than once the burden slipped, and but for the "strong man's" assistance would have rolled to the ground, while, to add to their difficulties, Hector's horse had been shot through the neck and was trying his best to bolt. From a canter the pace had fallen to a trot, and finally a walk, bullets and chunks of telegraph-wire shaving them at every step. Fortunately, however, the enemy, the party having once moved off, made no further attempt at pursuit. Possibly they deemed it hopeless, more probably the sight of the troop in rear deterred them; but whatever the reason, they stopped where they were, contenting themselves with shooting at the retreating horsemen from behind their rocks. Still, it was a weary journey, and Graeme's arms were numb with the strain and his brain reeling with the smell of sweat and blood, when at length the firing slackened and then, save for an occasional shot, ceased altogether. Now, but half conscious, yet clutching his burden the tighter, Graeme toiled on, till at last, mingling with the fast-increasing roar in his brain, the thud of galloping hoofs was heard approaching. Louder and louder it sounded, and then round a bend in the road ahead appeared the sturdy figure of Sergeant-Major Stocks, with the troop behind him.

Seemingly miles away, Graeme heard the shout of "'tion" followed by "Carry lance," and then the white road seemed to rear up and smite him in the face. He reeled, fell forward on his horse's neck, hung there for a moment, and then, still gripping the corpse, rolled over sideways, Haslopp supporting the double burden till help arrived, when he rode quietly back to his former place in the rear rank.

* * * * *

"Stand 'im on his 'ead, Major; always keep a bloke's 'ead wot's fainted lower than 'is 'eels."

"Take yer 'orse, Cobble, and 'urry up the ambulance. Tell 'em the orfcer's dead."

"Do nothing of the kind, Cobble. I'm all right; fetch me a water-bottle."

"Water-bottle, water-bottle," from many voices, "'oo's got a water-bottle? 'Ere y'are, sir."

"Send the men away, Sergeant-Major, what the devil are they staring at?"

"No business to be 'ere at all, sir. Be off, all of you, at once; never seen an orfcer before? Get back to yer 'orses sharp."

"Where's Mortlock?"

"Lying over there, sir, where them men are. I've sent for the ambulance; it's comin' along the road now, sir. Cut about 'orrible is Mortlock, sir, 'is brains——"

"Oh, shut up, and give me a cigarette."

"Cigarette, 'oo's got a cigarette? The orfcer wants a cigarette. 'Ere y'are, sir."

"Get the troop mounted now, and tell the trumpeter to bring my horse."

"Better ride in the ambulance, sir, ye're faint-like."

"With Mortlock? No, thank you, Sergeant-Major. I'm all right, I tell you," getting up and promptly sitting down again. "Wait a minute, now I'm ready," and shaking off the Sergeant-Major's arm he walked slowly back to the troop.

"Three cheers for the orfcer," said a voice.

"Stop that and get mounted," was the surly answer, "right about wheel, walk, march."

The troop moved off, the ambulance following close in the rear, and in an hour's time they were passing under the walls of Fort Hussein. These were lined with soldiers in every species of undress, for the messenger despatched for the ambulance had made good use of his time; and all were anxious to see the corpse, which, from Private Wainwright's account, must be well worth inspection.

"The Colonel would like to see you in his quarters at once, Graeme," said Ferrers, riding up; "the body is to be taken to the mortuary. I'll arrange about that," whereupon without further colloquy the adjutant rode away.

"Curious way to greet a fellow who's just done what I have," muttered Graeme, staring after him, "I suppose he's sick he didn't do it himself. Gad, what jealous beggars fellows are. Never mind, I've got the crow over them this time anyway," and with a pleased smile on his lips Hector dismounted, and handing over his horse to a waiting orderly made his way to the Colonel's quarters.

A cold summons to "Come in" answered his knock, and entering he found himself in the presence of two men, one his commanding officer, the other a thick-built individual, whose hair of bristling black stood up around his head like a brush, a round rosy face and staring black eyes completing the picture. This person was Colonel Quentin, generally known as Golliwog, a man who, despite his somewhat quaint appearance, was reputed to be one of the best staff officers in India. As Hector's fate would have it, he had selected this day for a few hours' inspection visit to Fort Hussein, which time he had spent on the top of the tower in company with a powerful telescope.

"You sent for me, sir?" said Graeme, addressing his Colonel and smiling as

he spoke, the smile fading, however, as he noted the expression on the latter's face, which, far from being congratulatory or even civil, was unpleasantly hostile.

"Yes, I sent for you," he answered shortly, "but first let me introduce you to Colonel Quentin. This is Captain Graeme, sir, the officer in command this morning," whereupon Golliwog rose from his chair and silently held out his hand. He then resumed his seat, his eyes fixing themselves upon Graeme in a hard, unwinking stare, maintained without intermission throughout the ensuing interview.

"It seems, Graeme," resumed Schofield, "and I regret to say it's not the first time, you've made a mess of things."

"I, sir, how?" stammered Hector, utterly taken aback.

"By disobeying orders; you know perfectly well the strict injunctions not to enter the Pass, and yet in spite of them your patrol went up this morning, with the result that you lost a man most unnecessarily. Of course, my information may be incorrect, and, if so, I should be glad to hear it."

For a moment Graeme was silent. This view of the matter was one altogether unexpected by him, and rendered his action the more impossible of explanation from the fact that it was true—though how true fortunately neither his Colonel nor anyone else knew.

"Sergeant Walker, sir, exceeded his instructions, I think, though, I'm hardly to blame for that."

"Not to blame," snapped Schofield, "who is then, I should like to know? If you'd given your instructions properly, it wouldn't have happened. An officer's not responsible for his troop, isn't he? A nice theory to hold, I must say."

"You recovered the man's body, I believe, Captain Graeme?" said Golliwog gently.

"I did," was the sullen answer.

"Was the firing heavy when you went back?"

"It was."

"Hum," and Quentin again relapsed into silence.

"It's thanks to that, Graeme, your recovery of the body, I mean," resumed Schofield in a quieter tone, "and the intercession of Colonel Quentin, who has promised to explain the affair to the General, that I do not intend to carry the matter further. I trust, however, it will be a lesson to you, and that in future you'll be good enough to obey orders exactly and implicitly. That's all, I think, unless, sir," turning to Golliwog, "you'd care to say anything."

"Of course, Graeme," answered Quentin, "I'm quite in accord with your Colonel. An officer must stand or fall by what his command does. He has the training of them, he gives the orders, and if the latter are misunderstood he gets the blame; it's really fair, for he also, and not the men, gets the credit if things go right. A very great many officers can do things themselves, Graeme, but to make

others do them for you, you being the head and they the hands, wants a leader. All the same, as regards this morning, I think, and I am sure your Colonel agrees with me, that your personal share was creditable, most creditable."

"Oh, most creditable," snarled Schofield.

"That's all I wish to say, Colonel," continued Quentin. "Good-bye, Graeme, I hope to meet you again some time," and the speaker's teeth gleamed in a sudden smile, as he shook Graeme warmly by the hand.

"That's a curious-looking officer, Schofield," he resumed, the door having closed behind Hector. "Stuff in him, I should say, must be. How does he do his work?"

"Indifferently well, to be truthful, sir."

"Hum, very likely. Three-cornered beggar I can see. Wouldn't do for an A.B.C., you think? Belman wants one, I know, for this Tirah show, and if you recommend I could easily get him the job."

"Couldn't do it, sir, really; his General would starve in a week, and I should get the blame. As you told him yourself just now, sir, a man's responsible for his subordinates."

"Hum, in that case I suppose I mustn't ask for him. Pity though, I should like to have done something for him. Good-bye, Colonel, I must get back to Saidabad. Not done much inspecting, thanks to Graeme. Good-bye."

* * * * *

Meanwhile Hector, with wrath in his heart, was striding back to his quarters, passing, as he went, the officers' Mess, a disused stable, where a crowd was assembled discussing lunch and the morning's events.

"Hullo, there goes the hero," said Kinley, seeing him pass. "Hi, Graeme, come here, tell us all about it," vainly calling. "Lord, he looks sick; wonder what the old man's been saying to him? Damned bad luck, really, to earn a V.C. and get a choking off."

"V.C. be hanged," said another, "damned disgraceful, the whole thing, I call it. Nice show up for the regiment, Golliwog looking on too."

"Shut up, O'Hagan," said Royle, one of the majors. "It was a devilish plucky thing to do, and I for one mean to tell Graeme so when I see him."

"Oh, of course, Royle, I didn't mean anything against Graeme personally. He did his best to save the situation, but, all the same, it's not a nice thing for a fellow to have his men bolt, for bolt they did; you can't get away from that. If I were he, I know I'd send in my papers and never be seen again, not a bad thing for the regiment, too, if he did. By-the-bye, I'm having a small gamble in my room to-night, hope you'll come, Royle, and you too, Carson," to another officer

who had just entered. "We'll have dinner sent over from the Mess."

"Thank you, O'Hagan, I should like to," answered Royle, but the other refused somewhat shortly.

CHAPTER V

The weeks passed, Christmas came and went, but still the monotonous peace reigning over Fort Hussein and its environs remained undisturbed. All around, sometimes even within hearing of the garrison, mountain and pass echoed to the thunder of guns and rattle of rifle-fire, but for them there was nothing; listless and inactive they remained, apparently forgotten, in the surrounding tumult. The 1st Lancers were a good regiment, not fashionable, possibly, but efficient and keen; further, they were "happy," and knew nothing of those internal dissensions which destroy the harmony of less fortunate corps. Here, however, shut up in a dreary frontier fort, with nothing to occupy or distract their minds, the tone of the regiment insensibly changed. Tempers, always uncertain in India, wore dangerously thin; quarrels blazed forth on little or no provocation; and soon cliques, constantly shifting, began to form.

On one subject, however, these various factions were in absolute agreement, that one being the cordial dislike they all felt for Captain Hector Graeme. For a time, following on his exploit in recovering Private Mortlock's body, his brother officers had been inclined to make much of him, and to show him, the juniors especially, that they considered the Colonel had been both hard and unjust; but these feelings on their part had long since died away, and their former sentiments regarding him again prevailed.

This, it must be owned, was largely due to Graeme's incapacity to respond to their well-meant overtures, but their latent aversion was fanned by the assiduous slanders of Captain O'Hagan—who had a peculiar unreasoning hatred for Hector—till now they had come to regard the Mortlock episode as one highly discreditable to all concerned in it, and of which the less said the better. The word "bolt" had been freely used by that person, and, though Royle and one or two others had at first checked him, he had persisted, even to the extent of uttering his calumnies outside the regiment, with the result that Graeme, save by the men and one other officer, found himself regarded more or less as a pariah. A recent decision of his, moreover, had given colour to O'Hagan's insinuations,

for, thanks to some unknown influence, Hector had been offered, and refused, a billet as transport officer to a column fighting in Tirah, a chance at which any other officer of the regiment would have jumped.

On receiving this application for his junior officer's services, the sole proviso being his own recommendation, Colonel Schofield had for some time hesitated. Against his own convictions—and they were strong ones—he had been impressed by what Colonel Quentin had said concerning Graeme, and, being a conscientious man and one who theoretically had no likes or dislikes among his subordinates, he had begun to ask himself whether it were not possible he had made a mistake about this junior. With this idea in his mind, he had laid himself out to find the hidden pearl in the oyster, even unbending so far as to ask Graeme to accompany him, in place of his adjutant, on one of his early morning rides, the result being that on that occasion he rode alone, Hector having unfortunately overslept himself. Stifling his annoyance, he tried again, but, though this time successful in securing his junior's company, the invitation was never renewed, Graeme's conversation, alternately silly and boastful, having tried the Colonel beyond endurance.

Major Rawson, privately spoken to on the subject, did not feel hopeful of ultimate improvement in his captain; he grew worse, he declared, instead of better, his squadron accounts were always in a muddle, while to give Graeme a duty to perform was for that duty to be scamped or, more likely, shirked altogether. True, in an emergency, such as the fire in the squadron store, he seemed to wake up—indeed, he extinguished the flames before the arrival of the engine; also the men liked him; but, for his part, he had no belief in these fly-away fellows, who only worked by fits and starts; give him the methodical straight-going officer, who was always the same and followed the rules laid down. And the Colonel, agreeing, had thereupon commenced his perusal of the morning's mail, amongst the letters being the above-mentioned application. For a day and a night Schofield wrestled with his doubts, and then, though with considerable misgiving, sent for Hector and informed him of his willingness to recommend him for the post.

"Only promise me, Graeme," he concluded, "that you really will put your back into this. Remember, it's not only yourself you have to think about, but also the credit of the regiment."

The concession—and to Colonel Schofield it was a great one—had been made in vain, for Hector then and there declined the chance offered him, giving no reason. Incredulous at first, his Chief soon lost his temper, for it was one thing, he felt, for him to hesitate to recommend a subordinate, but quite another for the latter, when so favoured, to refuse the offer. It would be far better now, he realised, for Graeme to go, even though he proved himself a failure, for, after all, he had been applied for by name, thus throwing responsibility on the

shoulders of the applier; whereas his refusal to go would assuredly give rise to caustic remarks from authority, anent lack of keenness in his command, inability to influence his officers, etc.

With these harassing thoughts in his mind, he stifled his anger and proceeded to reason with Graeme, urging upon him the greatness of the opportunity offered, and pointing out the folly of refusal. In vain; Hector remained unmoved; he had made up his mind, and with him, that done, the matter was finished. The interview also afforded him a very real gratification. Well he knew—with that uncanny intuition of his—what was passing in his Colonel's mind, and was more than ever determined to thwart him. It was his turn now; he would make the most of it, and repay his Chief for the humiliation he had heaped upon him before a stranger, in this very room, three months before. Hector never forgot an injury, or a kindness for that matter, and the remembrance of that interview had been smouldering in his heart ever since. One word of praise then, or afterwards some acknowledgment of what he had done, might have been the making of Graeme; but this was not Colonel Schofield's way. Praise from him, if earned, was to be understood, blame to be expressed, and so he had seized upon what was wrong in his subordinate's conduct, ignoring the rest.

Graeme had shown gallantry, it was true, but it was not necessary to praise him for it; the sense of having done his duty, he considered, ought always to be sufficient reward for a soldier. It was not sufficient for Hector, however, to whom applause was as essential as the modicum of opium is to the well-being of a Chinaman, and the consequence of his Colonel's refusal to gratify this craving was to fill him with a bitter sense of grievance and determination to annoy his superiors in every possible way. They wanted him now, did they? he thought. Very well, they shouldn't have him, he was not going to risk his life a second time; he had done it once, and got nothing for it save abuse, and it would be the same again, for they were all alike; he would see them damned before he went. Schofield therefore was but wasting his breath, and, realising this at last, he abandoned the effort and dismissed Graeme from his presence, concluding the interview by remarking that an officer who refused the chance of active service was, in his opinion, best out of the regiment he commanded.

"You may think what you please," muttered Hector, on his way back to his quarters, "but I'm hanged if I will resign. I meant to once we returned to Riwala, but now I won't, just because you want me to."

Thenceforth Hector went his solitary way, shunning, and shunned by, his brother officers, and doing just sufficient regimental work to enable him to avoid a second interview with his Colonel, who was now, he knew, only waiting the opportunity to fall upon him.

To most men, his would have been an impossible existence, but Graeme

had been at variance with his fellows since his childhood, and his ever-present feeling of grievance, coupled with the sense of battle against odds, served but to stimulate and harden him in his course. Indeed, had it not been for one thing, he would rather have enjoyed his present life, but that thing was a big one to him, intolerable even, namely, his total inability to cope with the slanders of Captain Robert O'Hagan, whose enmity he returned with a concentrated bitterness of hate, such as, had he been aware of it, would have possibly made that cautious person pause. Many times he had sought to bring his traducer to task, but always without success, for O'Hagan was cunning, popular too amongst his fellows, while Graeme was the reverse, and blank looks or even flat refusal was the sole response he met with in his frequent endeavours to elicit definite proof of calumny from the mouths of his brother officers.

Of wordy controversies in public—and only in the presence of others would O'Hagan condescend to address Graeme—there had been many, and violent ones, but invariably the result had been humiliating to Hector, for O'Hagan possessed the ready tongue of a cheap-jack, and easily reduced Graeme to impotent silence, the latter's feeble, though rude, rejoinders only awakening delighted titters from all present. One day, he sought out O'Hagan and threatened personal violence, to which menace his enemy, who was no hero save in public, where he was safe, replied by calling up a passing junior and requesting Hector to repeat his recent observations. This, Graeme, too angry or too careless to consider consequences, promptly did, whereupon O'Hagan at once reported him to the Colonel, producing his witness, and the Chief, glad of the chance, let himself go for a full ten minutes. Hector subsequently departed to his quarters, where he flung himself down on the bed, gritting his teeth, and tearing at the counterpane.

Thus engaged, he was suddenly brought to himself by a knock at the door, and Captain Carson, his one and only friend in the regiment, entered.

"Hullo," said the latter, looking at him, "what's the trouble? You seem put out."

"I'm busy, Peter, what do you want?" was the answer.

"Nothing much," said Carson, unruffled by his greeting. "I'll go if you want me to. Got some news for you, that's all."

"What is it?"

"Regiment's going back to Riwala, thought I'd tell you so that you could wire to your missus. She's back from Kashmir, isn't she?"

"Likely she'd stay up there in the snow, isn't it? What the devil are we moving for? I hate a move, the whole place upset and everybody fussing like blazes. Lord, how Rawson will fidget, shan't have a moment's peace now, I suppose."

"What an extraordinary fellow you are, Graeme. Don't you want to go back?"

"Of course I do, no one but a fool would wish to stay here. It's the moving I hate. Gad, but I'll be glad enough, I know, to have my own house again, and be quit of the cursed Mess and my brother officers for a while."

Carson frowned.

"Why do you always sneer at the fellows, Graeme? It's no wonder they dislike you."

"I hope they do, but I don't wish to talk about them. When are we off?"

"Three days from now, Ferrers says, just in time for the races."

Graeme's face darkened.

"Blast the races!" he said.

"In heaven's name, what for? You're hard to please this morning."

"O'Hagan's benefit, that's what Riwala racing means, Carson. O'Hagan—
—"

"Oh, shut up, you've got O'Hagan on the brain. 'Pon my soul, Graeme, I can't understand this hatred for the fellow. I don't like him much, I own, nor I believe do the others really, but I don't hate him. Why are you so infernally immoderate in everything, why not take things quietly, as I do? You'd find life much easier. After all, he's not a bad-hearted fellow."

"He's a low, cowardly blackguard, not one redeeming point about him."

"There's no fellow like that, Graeme; anyway, he's an officer of the regiment, and all our talking won't alter that fact."

"You're right, Peter, talking won't."

"Well, what else can you do? Hullo, what the—— Good Lord!" for the door had been suddenly kicked open—O'Hagan never knocked save at a senior's door—and the subject of their discussion stood on the threshold.

"You here, Carson?" he said, his eyebrows lifted in seeming surprise at the latter's being in such company. "Come and play bridge."

"Not now, thank you, O'Hagan; as you see, I'm talking to Graeme."

"That won't keep you. Graeme's in for it again, cutting stables this time. Rawson wants you, Graeme, at once, going to wheel you up before the C.O., I believe."

"All right, O'Hagan, thank you."

Hearing the gentle answer instead of the outburst he expected, Peter Carson looked up in surprise, with a curious feeling of uneasiness. Surprised also was Captain O'Hagan, but pleasantly, for at last he thought he saw his enemy cowed and conscious of the futility of further resistance. His dark eyes gleamed and a bullying note came into his husky voice.

"It's not all right, I can tell you," he said. "Rawson says, of all the slack, useless——"

"Quite so, and now—get out."

"Get out, who the devil are you talking to? Keep away, d'you hear? Carson, you're the senior officer here, you're witness—"

"Sit down, Graeme, and you, O'Hagan, be off. You've given your message, and I should say made the most of it. Clear out."

"Oh, very well, though I must say it's a nice way to treat a brother officer. The Colonel shall hear of this, I promise you, both of you."

"If you stay another minute, I'll throw you out myself, by God, I will," said Peter, the Carson temper suddenly blazing up, and rising he advanced towards the other, who, however, did not await his approach, but fled hastily.

"Riling fellow that," said Peter, resuming his seat and proceeding to relight his pipe, which had gone out. "Very near lost my temper. What the devil are you laughing at, Graeme, at me?"

"No, at him."

"Him, what for?"

"To think what a fool he is, hammering away like that."

"Hammering?"

"Yes, driving the nails in."

"Don't know what on earth you're talking about, don't suppose you do either. Well, I'm off, there's a busy time ahead for all of us," and Peter rose and went out, leaving Graeme deep in thought. For some minutes he sat there, and then walked across to the window, where he stood looking down on the squadron lines below, already permeated with the spirit of unrest, born of the news of the coming move.

Hurrying to and fro, pointing with his stick and explaining the obvious, Major Rawson could be seen, two harassed-looking subalterns and the Sergeant-Major in close attendance; while some distance away, grave-faced and dignified, Colonel Schofield was standing, issuing orders to the alert Ferrers, who was zealously taking down the same in a large note-book.

A feeling of angry contempt was aroused in Graeme as he looked. "Fussy fools," he muttered, "the whole regiment turned upside down because of a move of a few hundred miles. God! there's Rawson lifting a saddle and weighing it. Why don't he take his coat off and groom the horses and pack the kits while he's about it? And you're worse," he continued scornfully, apostrophising his unconscious C.O., "you're a damned humbug, you are; for only the other day you agreed with Quentin when he told me that to make others work and not work yourself was the thing, and now you see the exact reverse going on you stand there and say nothing. Make me sick, the whole lot of you do. Wish to God I had the running of the show; I'd soon stop all that, and at the same time get them off with no bother at all."

He turned from the window and threw himself down on the bed once more,

where he lay evolving schemes of fussless removal, and then, his interest in the subject growing, he seized pencil and paper and committed his ideas to writing. And, as it happened, the idle occupation of a few minutes was not wasted, for Major Rawson, possibly from over-anxiety, was that same evening laid low by fever, and the command of the squadron consequently devolved upon Hector, who thereupon proceeded to put his newly-hatched plans into execution. Ignoring hourly messages and instructions from the sick-bed, he the next morning summoned his non-commissioned officers to his quarters, and after an hour's conversation dismissed them, he himself departing for the day in quest of Cee Cee.[#] Nor, except for half an hour daily, did he subsequently visit the lines, though in the other squadrons all the officers were in attendance throughout the day.

[#] A kind of rock partridge.

To the disappointment of his *confrères*, no hitch occurred in B Squadron arrangements; on the contrary, while all around fuss and confusion reigned, in Hector's command there was clock-like precision, and to the minute on the day appointed for departure, their kits and tents packed away before daylight on bubbling camels, his men stood waiting beside their saddled horses, with quiet enjoyment on their faces as they viewed the agitated throng on either side. Nor did an extra-minute inspection by a cold-faced Colonel reveal the deficiencies he hoped in his heart to find, and a distinct feeling of injury was in the Chief's heart as he found himself forced to order B Squadron to move off first—A, the leaders by right, not being yet ready. At the station, however, disaster at last arose, Williams and Rogers profiting by the occasion to slip away to the bazaar, where next day they were found by the garrison police very drunk. The consequence of this mishap was severe censure for Hector, Schofield remarking that such disgraces were to be expected in a squadron left to the care of non-commissioned officers.

CHAPTER VI

A few evenings later, with the dream-like rapidity with which life's scenery is constantly shifting behind its players, Hector was once more back in his Riwala home. Gone—flitted into the past—were the bare mud walls, stinking lanterns and camp-chairs of the Fort Hussein Mess; in their place the soft comfort and luxury of a drawing-room, each detail of which had been personally superintended by Lucy herself. Here now, warm and comfortable, he reclined in a huge arm-chair, his eyes dreamily gazing into the crackling log-fire before him, and his mind in the beatific state induced by the consumption of an excellent dinner and the subsequent inhaling of a Turkish cigarette.

Beside him, busy with the knitting of a yellow silk waistcoat, sat Lucy, a dainty figure in tea-gown of lemon and white, which was quite in harmony with the soft lights and colouring of her surroundings. Like the hen-pheasant, however, in gorgeousness of plumage she was quite out-shone by her lord, whose smoking-jacket of amethyst velvet, with buttons of pink crystal, amber silk shirt, and Russia leather slippers of the same hue, formed a somewhat striking picture. On his knee reposed a somnolent white cat, a species of animal he loved, which he was caressing with much tender solicitude.

"Hector, dear," said Lucy, suddenly breaking the silence, "I've got an idea."

"Have you, Lucy? Ow!" to the cat, "you old beggar you, put your claws out at father, would you? Come and tickle this chap's tummy, Lucy, and see him kick."

"Oh, put the thing down, it worries me to see you. Really, Hector, how a sporting person like yourself can adore a cat as you do is beyond me. If it was a dog now, I could sympathise, but—a cat."

"A dog, nasty fidgeting brutes; besides, every fellow in the regiment's got one, that alone's enough. As for my being sporting, so's a cat, the finest sportsman in the world, a genuine one too, hunts for his own pleasure, not to be thought a good fellow, like most men. What about that big lizard we caught this morning, eh, old Nimrod?" again addressing the unresponsive animal.

"To me they're like spiteful women, Hector."

"Just where you're wrong, Lucy, a cat's not a bit like a woman. They're restful, which a woman's not; they're independent; know what they want and get it, while a woman not only don't know her own mind, but always does the very reverse of what she preaches."

"Really, Hector, I'm sure you can't say that of me."

"There you are, Lucy, can't discuss a thing without taking it personally. Besides, you're as bad as any of them. You're always at me to become a keen soldier, yet, when the chance of active service comes along, you——"

"Dear, that's not fair, as I've told you before. You surely wouldn't like me not to care, Hector, like some wives?"

"I don't suppose I should, but it's not that I'm talking about, it's the inconsistency. But, about cats and women a cat only takes what it wants, a woman, on the contrary—"

"Oh, bother the cats! I want to talk about something else, the Regimental Cup to-morrow."

"When I propose to be ten miles away at Rarkat Jheel, quail shooting."

"Oh, but, Hector, you can't really. The regiment's At Home, and we must put in an appearance; besides, I should like it."

"Like it, a fifth-rate race-meeting?"

"Yes, I should. I'm not a hundred, Hector, and every woman wants a little gaiety at times. Of course I love going out shooting with you and all that, but I think just occasionally we might vary the programme a little."

"Oh, of course, if you're set upon it, Lucy, that's another matter, but it's a weary business."

"Only because you make it so, and take no part in things, Hector. The Regimental Cup, for instance, every officer but you is running something, no matter whether it's got a chance or not. You only are out of it, and I hate it—it looks so odd and unsporting. I know, of course, it's not that, but the others think so."

"Let them think what they like, I don't care. I'm not competing because I can't win. I'll play second fiddle to no one, least of all to O'Hagan, and nothing I've got could beat Matador, he's a racehorse, the rest are only polo ponies."

"Hector, I do hate that Captain O'Hagan."

"Really, why? I thought he rather liked you."

"Oh, he's civil enough to me, it's because of his rudeness to you I hate him. Hector, do you know what he said the other evening at the Club?"

"That he meant having me out of the regiment? Yes, I heard of it, Lucy."

"He dared to say it, Hector. Oh, I could kill him for it," and Lucy's breast heaved and her blue eyes flashed.

Hector laughed. "Perhaps he will, Lucy; he has all the others behind him, you know."

"But you mustn't allow it, you must fight him. I'll help you all I can. The Colonel likes me, I know; let's have the old man to dinner, Hector, and do him really well. Oh, Hector, do rouse yourself, it's not like you to submit tamely."

Hector looked at her, and, as he did so, the curious glitter in his eyes vanished. Rising, he went across to his wife and kissed her.

"I believe you'd stand by me, no matter what I did, Lucy."

Some strange note in his voice startled her; she looked up. "Hector, what do you mean?" she said quickly. "Oh, Hector dearest, you won't, you don't mean to do anything mad?"

At the fear in her voice, Graeme's half-parted lips shut tight. He picked up the cat, and, returning to his chair, resumed his contemplation of the flames, his face expressionless.

"Don't be alarmed, Lucy," he said, and it seemed to her that there was a shade of contempt in his tone, "and as for O'Hagan and his paltry schemes, leave the poor fool to me. I'm only letting him play a little, and when the time comes—and it's pretty close now—it's Bob O'Hagan who'll go under, not me. But, about this idea of yours, what is it, to go to-morrow? If so, I will, as you want it."

"It's more than that, Hector, I want you to ride in the race for the Cup."

"But what on?"

"Hermes, Captain Carruther's second string. He'd give you the mount, I know, for I asked him this afternoon. He's a good pony, Hector, and jumps well, though of course he can't beat Matador."

"He'd be just about last, Lucy. I last, no thank you. Sorry, I'd like to please you, but it can't be done. I'll go to the races, as you wish it, but a ride on old Hermes is rather too humiliating a proceeding. Hullo," looking up at the clock, "past eleven, and an early parade to-morrow morning. Time for bed. Come on, Lucy. You too, Fop, old man, no tiles for Romeo to-night," Hector rose, and having lighted Lucy's candles, departed to his dressing-room, the cat hanging limply in his arms.

CHAPTER VII

"Sporting lot your fellows are, to be sure, Bob. Damme, the whole blessed regiment seems to be going for the Cup this afternoon."

The speaker, Captain Legge, a thin-faced rat of a man hailing from Bangalore, formed one of a group assembled in the ante-room of the Officers' Mess, 1st Lancers, discussing the past luncheon, coffee, cigars, and the race-card.

"Have to be, Tabby, or clear out," answered O'Hagan, glancing towards the far corner of the room, where Graeme was sitting, chuckling over the "Cat Derby," as depicted by Louis Wain. "Don't like unsporting fellows with us, don't keep 'em either. Hi! you," to a passing khitmagar[#] "liqueur brandy, jeldi, you soor,[#] d'ye hear?" his heavy eyes glaring at the man, who sullenly departed on his mission.

[#] A native waiter.

[#] "Quick, you pig."

"Grandee on the job to-day, Tabby?" asked Major Ramp, a racing gunner from Calcutta.

"Backing him myself, Barabbas, if that's any use to you," was the answer; "ought to be a pinch, now the Ferret's not goin'."

"Why didn't you buy him in the lotteries last night then, Tabby?" said another, drooping his eyelid at O'Hagan.

"I did, or rather Jackie did it for me, Cross; kept it quiet that way, and got him cheaper. That's right, ain't it, Jackie?"

"Quite," responded a squeaky voice, and Jackie, a meek-looking vet.—also hailing from Bangalore—thereupon produced a note-book from his pocket and began to turn over the pages.

"What about your own, though, Jackie," said Ramp; "he's in the same race, ain't he?"

"The old Tinker? No earthly, Ramp, been off his feed the last two days."

"Don't shout it to the Mess, hang it, man," said his patron, frowning at him.

"Sorry, Tabby, but we're all pals here, these fellows won't give it away, I know, especially if they want to back Grandee, and, if they take my tip, they will."

"Of course not," from all, and "Thank ye, Jackie. I'll bear it in mind," from Major Ramp, who, knowing the pair, made a mental note to leave that particular race alone.

"Matador's a certainty for your race, I suppose, Bob?" said Captain Brass.

"Moral, if he stands up, and he's never fallen yet. Got a pot on him, advise you fellows to do the same."

"Who's riding him, Bob?"

"Having a go myself. Must be one of the regiment, you know, which gives me rather a pull; give most of 'em seven pounds at least."

"I see old Cyclops is running, Bob; queer old devil, used to belong to us till Stainforth sold him to Carson. New game for him, racing, though, ain't it?"

O'Hagan looked round the room before answering. Strangely enough, he was frightened of Carson, though not in the least of Graeme. Seeing no sign of Peter, however, he replied boldly:

"Cyclops is not going. I stopped it. A race full of amateur jockeys is dangerous enough, without a one-eyed brute of a pony no one can hold joining in. So I just told Carson I wouldn't have it, and there was an end of it."

"Why ain't Graeme performing, Bob?" asked Brass. "He used to go like smoke at home with the Bicester."

"Captain Graeme don't ride now, except on parade, when he has to," answered O'Hagan, again glancing towards the corner and meeting Hector's eyes over the top of the paper. This was instantly raised, however, and encouraged by the surrender O'Hagan continued:

"What do you do with unsporting fellows in your regiment, Ramp?" he observed.

"Show 'em we don't want 'em," was the answer.

"But if they won't go, what then?"

"Get the Colonel to report badly on them, but surely Graeme..."

"Oh, I wasn't talking about him, of course, brother officer, you know, Ramp, and all that. Still," lowering his voice, though speaking very distinctly, "as you are aware, every regiment has its undesirables, useless fellows no one likes; one doesn't talk about it, of course, but there it is."

"He's a devilish good shot, is Graeme," said Brass, "best I ever saw, I think."

"Cavalry fellows ought to be fond of riding," squeaked Jackie, "that's their game, not shooting."

"Or go to the infantry," said O'Hagan.

"What the devil d'ye mean, O'Hagan?" said Legge, who belonged to that branch of the Service.

"I really beg your pardon, old chap. I always forget you ain't a cavalry man or a gunner"—remembering Ramp—"you're such a sporting cove. Have another brandy?"

"No, thank you, and I don't see why a fellow shouldn't care for shooting even if he is in the cavalry; it's sport just the same as racing. Besides, Graeme plays polo, don't he?"

"Oh yes, in a way. His real hobby's clothes and cats, though."

"Cats?"

"Yes, sleeps with a cat, I'm told. Jolly for his wife, eh what? Hullo," suddenly breaking off, with a look of well-feigned surprise and concern on his face, for Graeme had risen, and, apparently unconscious of his or the others' presence, was now making his way to the door, "there's the man himself," he added, Hector having disappeared, "now I have done it."

"Good Lord, O'Hagan, why the devil didn't you tell us he was there?" said Brass indignantly. "He must have heard every word."

"Well, if he did, he only knows what all of us think, and..."

"I think we ought to be making a move, O'Hagan," said Legge shortly; "it's past one now, and I'm riding in the first race. Come on, Jackie, you're always an hour decorating."

He rose, and, the others following his example, the party departed to their different quarters to dress.

Meanwhile Hector was walking rapidly away from the Mess on his way to Carson's bungalow. At the compound entrance he paused, and for a moment stood leaning against the gate, as if reflecting; then once more moved on, and, entering the house, came upon Peter engaged in the sorting of fishing-tackle.

"Hullo, Graeme," he said, "you're just the man I want. Help me to straighten this out, will you? it's kinked like blazes," whereupon, without answering, Hector sat down on the bed, and, taking up one end of the line, proceeded to disentangle it.

"Hands very shaky this morning, Graeme," said Carson. "Why the dickens don't you give up those infernal cigarettes and take to an honest pipe, like me? You look pretty seedy too; what's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, want of exercise, I suppose. Think I'll go for a ride this afternoon."

"Can't. The regiment's At Home, and we've got to be there. Pity you didn't enter one of your ponies for the Cup, as I wanted you to; you'd have had your ride then."

"I wish I had now, I'd give something for a mount. I envy you old Cyclops, even."

"Cyclops is not going."

"And why not?"

"Because I don't want to break my neck, that's why."

"Break your neck be hanged. Cyclops is a devilish good jumper."

"All right, you ride him then; you're welcome."

"Thank you, Peter, I will. I'll go now and tell the sais to have him down on the course."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I was only joking. D'you think I'm going to have your missus..."

"Where shall I find the sais?"

"I won't lend him, I tell you."

"Oh, want to back out of it, do you?"

"I never back out of anything; you know that perfectly well, Graeme."

"I used to think so."

"But..."

"Ah!"

"Oh, take the pony and be hanged to you. I don't want to lend him, I tell you that straight; but, since like a fool I offered the brute, you can have him. Break his neck if you like, your own too."

"Thank you very much, Peter, and will you or shall I have him sent down?"

"I will."

"Right, good-bye, you're coming yourself, I suppose?"

"Yes, with the ambulance for you."

"Good. I'll be off to dress," and Graeme, leaving Peter frowning at his knots, returned to his own bungalow, where he found Lucy awaiting him in the verandah.

"Where on earth have you been, Hector," she said, "and what's the matter?" staring at him.

"Nothing. I've been given a mount for the Regimental Cup, Lucy, just what you wanted, aren't you pleased?"

Lucy, however, did not look pleased. She stood, with her eyes still fixed on her husband's face.

"Why have you done this, Hector," she said after a pause, "rather a sudden idea, isn't it?"

"Oh, I know it seems changeable, Lucy, but I've been thinking about what you said last night, about its being unsporting not to ride, and so on. I'm really doing it more to please you than myself. Where are my things? I must hurry," trying to pass her as he spoke.

Lucy stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Hector," she said; "if it's only to please me you're riding, you needn't do it. I too have changed my mind; I'd rather now you didn't."

"And why not?"

"I don't think I quite know, but I don't wish you to. Let me send a note to Captain Carruthers, please, Hector, I'm sure he won't mind."

"This is absurd, Lucy; only last night you begged me to ride, and now that I've done what you ask, you——"

"I know it seems silly. Oh, Hector, I can't explain, but something tells me you ought not to. Please let me write that note."

"I certainly won't. I'm not going to be made a fool of like this," snatching at the chance of losing his temper, "and it's no good writing to Carruthers; it's Cyclops I'm riding, not Hermes."

"Cyclops," echoed Lucy, who knew the animal as she knew every pony, dog or child in the regiment. "Cyclops, oh, you can't mean it, Hector?"

"I do, though. Peter offered me the mount, and I've accepted. Oh, for goodness' sake be reasonable, Lucy; it's done now. Come and dress. Where are my things?"

"And you care so little for me as to ride a one-eyed bolting brute in a steeplechase," began Lucy furiously; then suddenly her anger passed, and coming close to her husband she laid her hand on his arm. "Hector, won't you for my sake give this up? It isn't often I ask anything of you, but now I do. Oh, dearest,

please—please.”

”And have Peter and the rest think I’m afraid? No, thank you.”

”Hector, you know you don’t care what they think. It’s something to do with O’Hagan.”

”Perhaps it is, Lucy; he called me ‘unsporting’ just now, and I’m going to show him I’m not. Once more, please tell me where my things are?”

”Hector, I implore you,” began Lucy, and then, seeing his face, stopped. ”You won’t give this up then,” she said, ”whatever I say?”

”No; where are——”

”I don’t know,” she said violently, ”and I don’t care, find them yourself,” and she left him, banging the door behind her as she went off to her room.

Here for an hour she remained, dawdling over her dressing, to the just indignation of Halling, her maid, who also proposed to go racing that afternoon under the escort of the regimental sergeant-major and his wife, and who, for the first time in her experience, found her mistress both trying and inconsiderate, and also for the first time sympathised with her master, stamping up and down the verandah outside.

At length, just as Hector had made up his mind to send for a horse and ride on without her, she emerged from her seclusion, and coldly asking him if he meant to come to the races that afternoon entered the waiting buggy, seized the reins, and drove off, Hector scrambling in after her. In silence they rattled down the broad mall, Lucy looking straight ahead and declining to answer Hector when he spoke, and after some narrow escapes from collision with passing gharries—for the lady was not driving with her customary skill—arrived on the scene of action.

To those accustomed to the greensward and trees of a British racecourse, that of Riwala would have come as a rather doleful surprise. Facing a great open stretch of dusty maidan, around which ran the track, rose the grand stand, a bare-looking edifice of wood and corrugated iron, surrounded by iron railings, forming the enclosure, where the various regiments of the garrison dispensed hospitality. For some hundred yards to the right and left of the stand the course, unmarked save by rows of whitewashed stones and a few flags, was shut in by a double row of wooden railings, the stand side and enclosure being reserved for the *élite*, that opposite for the [Greek: *oi polloi*] and such natives of the lower order as cared to attend.

The second race had just finished when Lucy and her husband arrived, and a babel of voices was rising on the air, bookmakers shouting their anxiety to pay on the winner, and spectators chattering to the accompaniment of brassy and somewhat unpleasing music from the band of the Queen’s Own Purple Fusiliers.

All the notabilities of Riwala—almost, it might be said, of the Punjab—

were here assembled, mostly of military status, it is true, but nevertheless comprising a few civilians of importance, such as Mr. Timothy Qui Hye, the Commissioner, and, greater still, Sir Backshish Gussle Khana, Lieut.-Governor of the Punjaub—a very big man, and one conscious of his eminence, though, like some other great men, a little careless in his attire; his boots, of the kind known as "Jemima," and a "made-up" tie marring an otherwise irreproachable costume of decent black.

Many others were there too, though not of such eminence as his. Lady Pompom, for instance—the wife of Sir Julius Pompom, commanding the station of Dam Kot—a regal-looking lady, in a dress of imperial purple, surmounted by a white solar topee tastefully decorated with yellow flowers. A crowd of youths were about her, for Lady Pompom was fond of boys, designating them "young people of my own age." Some of these young people, it is true, looked as though they would like to be elsewhere, but no such defection was possible, as well they knew, for that would mean the official displeasure of Sir Julius, with, possibly, consequent stoppage of leave, and even—such things had been known—nasty remarks in confidential reports.

Those two ladies yonder, who were so warmly yet carefully embracing—a loving handclasp, a peck on the right place, a "How sweet you look!" and the thing was done—were Mrs. Warmon, the wife of Major Warmon of the 250th Mesaltchis, and her friend and foe, Mrs. Charpoy, better half of Colonel Charpoy, commanding the Purple Fusiliers. Rival beauties of Riwala, they hated each other right well, hence the warmth of the embrace; and both being a trifle touched up, this accounted for their care in bestowing the kiss, which operation completed they parted and spoke to each other no more that day.

Forlorn and unattended, on the steps of the grand stand, sat the two Game girls, their eyes roving in search of male recognition. This was their third year in the country, but, though hitherto unappropriated, hope was far from dead in their somewhat flat bosoms. Possibly the net may have been spread a little too openly in the sight of the bird, but, be this as it may, gamebag and creel were still empty, and the Misses Game remained, and were likely to remain, the Misses Game.

Into this throng walked Lucy, Hector following. She was all smiles, now that there were others to see—a trim, sporting-looking figure in brown, with a hat of the same colour, touched with vermilion, and smart, laced-up patent-leather boots. Not for long, however, was she suffered to remain with her husband, a cluster of young men soon surrounding her, all anxious to give her tea, show her their ponies, any pretext to draw her away for a little private conversation. For Lucy, unlike Hector, was a popular person with all, from the great Sir Backshish himself to little Tickler Macpherson, the dusky daughter—one of fourteen—

of Dugald Macpherson, Assistant Commissioner of Riwala, Highland of name though *café au lait* in hue.

Reputed inaccessible to lovmakers, too, was Mrs. Graeme, which quality, and the ready sympathy she showed with their various husband, lover, and servant troubles, endeared her to the women, in spite of her looks and clothes; while at the same time it rendered her conquest incumbent on all self-respecting shikaris of ladies.

Eventually Captain Knowles, proficient at the game of love-making, wrested the prize from the other competitors, somewhat to his own surprise, for, though for some time he had done his best, he could not pretend that that best had been crowned with any measure of success. To-day, however, there was a welcome change in the lady's manner—she no longer chilled but smiled upon his efforts, ignoring her husband, to whom the gay captain, as she knew, was anathema. To her annoyance, Hector showed none of his usual signs of restiveness at the other's presence; on the contrary, he rather abetted his endeavours to please, and, on Knowles suggesting tea, handed her over willingly, and, turning away, was soon lost to view in the crowd. For a moment Lucy stood looking blankly after him, but, speedily rallying, expressed a desire for shelter from the sun, and Knowles, instantly responding, led her away in triumph, and was shortly afterwards comfortably seated beside his booty in the darkest corner of one of the big marquees.

"Thank Heaven," muttered Hector, "I'm alone at last, now, what's to be done to pass the time? Confound this waiting, my nerves are all anyhow. Hullo, there's Cyclops, I'll go and have a look at him." He walked away to where a native was standing holding a pony, a dun-coloured beast, rusty-coated and hideous. One of his eyes was gone, the result of a blow from the fork of a revengeful sais, whose arm Cyclops had playfully chawed; the other was small, and, as usual, vindictive-looking.

Not an engaging-looking mount for a steeplechase, it must be admitted, though the look of the brute appeared at the present moment to give satisfaction to Graeme, particularly the red eyeless socket, at which he attentively gazed. Nevertheless, despite his unengaging appearance, Cyclops had his good points, being hard as nails, a perfect fencer, and possessing the pluck of the devil with the temper of a fiend.

"Khabadar,[#] sahib," said his guardian, as Hector came up. "Ai bainchute,[#] jerking at the bridle just in time to save Graeme's arm from bared yellow teeth, "Hamesha aisa hai, sahib, bôt bobbery bainchute wallah."[#]

[#] Look out.

[#] An untranslatable term of abuse reflecting on female relations.

[#] "Always like this, sir, a violent..."

"Horrid beast," muttered Graeme, looking at him. "I'll take the steam out of you, my friend; there won't be much bobbery about you when I've done." He walked away, and stood for a moment leaning over the enclosure rails. As he did so, a thunder of hoofs struck on his ears, and Tabby Legge flew past, his mount, a splendid chestnut Arab, fighting for his head as he went.

"Grandee," said Graeme, "that's the certainty, is it? Hum, and here's Tinker, Jackie up too, 'tisin't often he rides. Betty still to come—oh, here she is. Lord, what a commoner, different class altogether. I wonder what they're up to, some silly knavery, I suppose, from the way they talked in the Mess. It can't be Grandee, or they wouldn't have said so; still, that might be part of the swindle, for they know no one would believe them. All the same, I don't think it's Grandee, but Tinker, especially as Jackie's riding, they know they'd get a better price with him up. Hope to goodness they get done, though I don't see how they're going to, unless Betty wins, and she can't if the others stand up. Hullo, they're off, and one left at the post, which is it, Grandee, I suppose? No, it isn't; it's Tinker, then they do mean Grandee, after all. Funny, I could have sworn it was the other.

"Lord, it's a procession," looking through his glasses at the chestnut, who was leisurely cantering ahead of the already labouring Betty. "Well, that's over," lowering his glasses and turning away. "Why, what's up?" a sudden roar from the crowd rising on the air. "Good Lord," his eyes turned once more on the course, "Good Lord," for passing him was Betty, alone; some distance away, off the track, being Grandee, plunging and fighting with his rider. The favourite had run out. "Now, what the devil have they been up to?" muttered Hector. "Betty wasn't backed, I know. Aha, I have it, Tabby thought it was Jackie behind him, not knowing that rascal had been left, and pulled out to let him win"—which was the exact situation.

"Splendid that is, quite bucked me up; and now to dress, my race is next. I wish I didn't feel so shaky, though; my heart's going like a dynamo, and I can hardly breathe. Curious, what a nerve-ridden beggar I am, always like this beforehand, though once I'm started I don't care twopence. Anyone to look at me would say I was in a blue funk, and so I am really, or rather one part of me is; the other's right enough 'You tremble, carcass,'" he quoted half aloud, "'you'd tremble still more if you knew where I was going to take you.' Gad, you would. Ah, here's the tent. Lord, what a crowd! Most of them too, from the look of them, in a worse funk than I am. Got the colours, Abdul?" to his bearer, "All right, leave

them here. I can dress myself," and Graeme, sitting down, proceeded to array himself in Peter Carson's chocolate and blue, after which he put on his overcoat, and, having been duly weighed, set off for Cyclops' stall, where he found Lucy and Carson surveying that ill-favoured beast.

"Oh, here you are at last, Graeme," said Peter; "we've been looking for you everywhere. Thought you'd given it up and gone home. I should, if I were you, Cyclops is not quite at his best to-day."

"What's the matter with him? He looks all right, anyway he's got to go."

"Hector, I wish you'd give it up," said Lucy, laying her hand on his arm; "for my sake, please do."

"Nonsense, Lucy, it's all right. Cyclops won't fall, will he, Peter?"

"I wouldn't bet about it; he might; I wouldn't trust him."

"You see, Hector, even his owner doesn't think it safe. Besides, you're not fit to ride; you look so white and strange, doesn't he, Captain Carson?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mrs. Graeme, a bit pale perhaps, but that doesn't go for much." Then aside to Hector. "You look like a ghost, man, don't be a fool, give it up, as your wife wants you to. It's not the game to frighten her like this."

"There's the bell," answered Hector. "Give me a leg up, Peter. Hold his head, confound you," to the sais. "All right, I'm up. Chor do.[#] Steady, you brute," and Graeme rode away, Cyclops now as quiet as a lamb.

[#] Let go.

"Oh, Captain Carson, I do hate it so," said Lucy, looking after him, "I feel certain something's going to happen."

"Not it, Mrs. Graeme, see how nice and quiet the pony's going."

"But he'll bolt as soon as they start, and Hector has no experience of race-riding."

"Nor have the rest; he's as good as most of them, anyway. Don't worry, Mrs. Graeme, but come and watch the race. Where would you like to see it from, the grand stand?"

"No, I'll stay here, I think. Don't let me keep you, though, Captain Carson, I shall be all right."

"I'd rather remain with you if I may. Hullo, there's the trumpet; they're off. Here they come. Cyclops leading."

"Surely he's bolted, oh, he has—he has."

"Not he, always goes a bit free to start with: he'll soon settle down, you'll see. Ah, well over, did you see that, Mrs. Graeme, yards to spare?"

"Where's Matador?"

"Behind, Lord, what a mover he is, only cantering."

"Who's that down, surely it's my husband?"

"No, it isn't, it's Falconer on Sultan; but he's up again now and on. Look how well Cyclops is going, a good twenty lengths ahead, if only he could keep it up."

"Where's Matador now?"

"Still behind; O'Hagan will leave it too long if he don't take care. Ah, there he is coming up now, leaving the rest standing; by Jove, he and Cyclops are almost abreast, both going for the open ditch. Good—good God! ... It's all right, Mrs. Graeme, it's all right, I tell you. Your husband's up and walking about. Take my glasses and look for yourself, they're better than yours."

"But the other—the other, is he up too?"

"Can't see yet, these glasses are so infernally bad. Mrs. Graeme, do you mind if I leave you?"

"No, no, go quickly; get there first before them," pointing to a stream of people flowing across the maidan towards the open ditch. "Bring him straight back to me. I'll have the buggy waiting there by those trees. Oh, my God, what a fool I was not to have understood, you too, Captain Carson, it's as much your fault ... Why didn't you refuse?"

"Because I was a blind idiot. Hi you," advancing on a sais holding a pony hard by, "give up that ghora[#] at once."

[#] Horse.

"Smit sahib's pony," said the man, not moving.

"Don't care who's it is; let go, I say, or—" raising his stick.

He snatched the reins from the terrified native, and flinging himself into the saddle galloped away, belabouring the pony as he went. It was a race, but Carson won, and reaching his goal, a good hundred yards abreast of the leading man, sprang to the ground and ran up to where Graeme was standing, looking down on a huddled heap of white and scarlet at his feet. A few yards away lay Cyclops, his neck outstretched and one eye sightlessly staring, while away in the distance, with reins trailing and stirrups flapping, Matador could be seen, galloping gaily homeward. Seeing Peter, Hector turned and hurried to meet him.

"Can't get rid of him, can't we, Peter?" he cried. "Well, I have, I've done what you couldn't do, old man, he's gone now, right enough, he and Cyclops together, come and see."

Carson seized him by the shoulder, crushing it in his grip.

"Hold your tongue, you fool," he whispered, "look behind you; they'll be here in a minute. D'you want to hang? Oh yes, I'll come and see. God help you," and, still holding him fast, he hurried on to where O'Hagan was lying.

"O'Hagan," he called, "get up, man, get up," and then, no answer coming from the heap, he knelt down beside it, and tearing open the silken jacket felt for its heart. For a few seconds he remained kneeling, the clamour from behind growing rapidly louder, and then rose to his feet once more.

"You're right, Graeme," he said quietly; "quite right, you have done it."

"What's happened, who is it?" said a breathless voice, echoed by others. The spectators had arrived.

"O'Hagan, dead," answered Carson. "Oh, keep away, man; have you no sense of decency? Where's a doctor?"

"Who's the other? Rode right into him. Most deliberate thing I ever saw in my life. I saw it quite plainly through my glasses."

Carson spun round, facing the speaker, his eyes blazing.

"Who was it said that, who was it, I say? Don't stand skulking behind there, whoever you are, but come out and say it like a man. Some poor loser, I suppose, with five rupees on Matador, whining because he's lost. Come out, I say, if you've a spark of pluck in you," but to the invitation there was no response; the speaker declined to show himself.

"You want to know about it, do you? All right, you shall. I'll tell you as I told old Peter here. Three weeks ago in Fort Hussein I—"

"I know you did, old boy, you were quite right too; it was my fault for lending you an infernal one-eyed brute. Can't you see the man's had concussion, and don't know what he's saying?" he continued, addressing the crowd.

"One-eyed," said a voice, "that accounts for it then."

"That accounts for it, as you say. Thank God, here's a doctor at last. It's O'Hagan, Sarel."

"Bad?"

"Neck broken, I think."

"Good God! and what about Graeme there? He looks pretty queer."

"I'm not queer at all. I'm perfectly clear. I'll tell you how it happened. It's a long story, but—"

"Graeme, your wife's waiting for you. She's anxious naturally, and I promised her I'd bring you back at once, you can tell me all about it as we go, I'd like to hear. Out of the way, please," to the crowd, who obediently formed a lane, and still holding him firmly by the arm Peter hurried Graeme away to where Lucy was standing.

"Is the buggy ready, Mrs. Graeme?" he said, not looking at her. "Yes, there

it is; well, get him home as quickly as possible. Keep him with you, don't let him speak to anyone. He's a bit light-headed, you see," he explained, looking away, "don't quite know what he's saying; been talking awful rot."

For a moment Lucy looked at the speaker, but still he refused to meet her eye.

"I... understand, Captain Carson," she said at last, and then shivered slightly and turned away.

"Who's light-headed? What the devil do you mean, Peter, and where's Cyclops? Hullo, Lucy, what are you doing here?"

"You've had a fall, dear. The race is over."

"Over, where's O'Hagan?"

"And I want you to take me back. I—I'm cold," and again Lucy shivered.

"Matador, O'Hagan, what of them?"

"Never mind about that now, Hector."

"I will know, I must know, where are they?"

Lucy looked questioningly at Peter; the latter nodded in answer.

"Captain O'Hagan's hurt, Hector."

"Is he dead, is he dead?"

Again Carson nodded, but this time there was no response from Lucy; he looked quickly up, and then, moving forward, stood almost touching her.

"O'Hagan is dead, Graeme," he said; "you may as well know it now as later. Oh, for goodness' sake, get your wife into the trap and be off. Can't you see she's nearly fainting?"

"Dead," echoed Hector, a deep sigh rising from his breast; then suddenly his mouth closed firmly, and he straightened himself.

"God! what an awful thing," he said. "How did it happen?"

"Oh, never mind that now, you'll hear all about it later. Get your wife home."

"Why, what's the matter, Lucy, you look pretty bad, shaken I suppose? Come along." Putting his arm round her, he supported her towards the waiting buggy, and with Carson's help lifted her in and tucked the rugs round her.

"Good-bye, Peter," he said, taking up the whip, "and thanks for what you've done. Talked awful nonsense, I suppose, didn't I? Must have had concussion. By the way, what time will the funeral be to-morrow, early, do you think?"

Peter stared at him, but Graeme's eyes met his boldly.

"I suppose it will," he said at last. "I'll come round to-night and let you know."

"Oh, don't trouble. I shall get the orders."

"I'll be round at half-past nine. I want to know how your wife is. Good-bye, Mrs. Graeme," and Peter raised his hat and walked quickly away.

* * * * *

Nine o'clock had struck. Once more Hector and Lucy sat together in the softly lighted drawing-room, the former a trifle pale, but otherwise in no way changed from the man of twenty-four hours before, the latter haggard-faced, with dark lines under the eyes that stared into the flames.

Now and again she would glance up furtively at her husband, her eyes curiously wondering as they took in the sheen of silk and velvet, the cat slumbering on his knee, and the air of placid content pervading his whole being; then, with a shiver, she would turn away and resume her contemplation of the fire. For, like Peter, Lucy failed to understand. Suddenly her lips began to tremble and her eyes to fill with tears; for a moment she remained fighting against it, and then, abandoning the effort, flung herself on her knees beside Hector, sobbing wildly:

"Oh, Hector, speak, say something; it's awful to see you, I can't bear it, I can't, I can't."

Graeme stroked her hair, and, bending down, kissed her.

"Hush, dear," he said gently, "you'll only make yourself ill, and after all, Lucy, it wasn't you who did it; it was I. Take it as I do. I don't..."

"It's that which is killing me, Hector, your not caring. Oh dear, can't you realise the—the—horror of it all?"

Hector frowned.

"I'm not a hypocrite, Lucy," he said slowly, "why should I pretend to care when I don't? I hated the fellow, so did you. Why this fuss then now?"

"Fuss, oh, my God, Hector, are you human, that you can talk of it like that?"

"I honestly don't understand you, Lucy, are you going to say now you wish the man back?"

"I'd give all I've got, Hector, for him to be alive again. I'd give even my sight, and there's nothing worse than blindness. Hate him, of course I hated him. I hate him now more than ever, because this afternoon was his fault. Oh, can't you understand it's not of him I'm thinking, but of you, Hector, you?"

"You think they—there'll be unpleasantness over this, Lucy? Well, if there is, I'm ready for it. They can't call you as a witness, though, that's one thing. A wife, you know—"

"I would insist on being called. I would force my way in."

Hector stared.

"You—you mean you'd give me away, Lucy? Jeanie Dean's conscience, eh?"

"And I'd lie and lie and lie! I'd go through hell for you, Hector, you can trust me, dear, not to fail you."

Again Hector stared.

"You beat me, Lucy," he said, "you go for me for doing it, and then want to

perjure yourself to pull me through. But, look here, indiscriminate lying won't help us, we must have the story pat, and stick to it like bird-lime. Hullo, someone outside, come for me already, have they?"

"It's only Captain Carson, Hector; he said he'd be here, you know, at the half-hour."

"Did he? I forgot. Think he knows, Lucy? I can't remember what I said. I was off my head at the time."

"He knows everything, but he won't speak; you can trust him. Here he is."

"Leave us, Lucy; we must have this out together."

"But you won't lose your temper, Hector, you won't abuse him?"

"Not I, I'm like an angel to-night. Go, Lucy, please," and Lucy went, Peter entering by the other door as the curtain dropped behind her.

"Glad to see you, Peter. Have a drink?"

"No, thank you, Graeme."

"Cigarette, then? No, I know you won't. Fill that old pipe of yours and sit down. Match? Here you are."

A pause.

"Well, Peter?"

"How's Mrs. Graeme?"

"All right, thank you; you've not asked after my health, though."

Another pause.

"So that's what you wanted Cyclops for, Graeme?"

"I'll give you the pick of my stable, if that's what you're after, Peter."

"Was it a sudden idea?"

"No, that afternoon at Fort Hussein. I saw it was the only way, since then I've been waiting. If I'd failed this time I'd have done it later. I knew, though, I shouldn't fail, I meant it, you see."

"Good God!"

"Why do you say that?" burst out the other with sudden passion. "I only did what you and half the others wanted in your hearts. Oh, I'll be candid with you; you know most of it, anyway, and you played the game this afternoon. That fellow was a plague spot, Peter; he was ruining the regiment, though for that I don't care two pins; it was when he put himself up against me that I took a hand. And he did attack me, you know that, Peter, insulted me, blackguarded me behind my back, said I was a coward, and vowed he'd have me out of the regiment."

He paused. Peter said nothing, only watched the other's face, for this was a changed Graeme to him, and, as he looked, he began to understand a thing he had never quite been able to before: how Private Mortlock's body had been recovered that August morning, six months before.

Graeme resumed, in the same tone of concentrated purpose. "Well, Peter;

when anyone goes for me, I hit back, not as most do, blow for blow, wasting their strength, but with one blow only, and I take care that one has not to be repeated, Peter, it settles the matter for good and all. That's what I've done with O'Hagan, and that I'll do with anyone or anything which comes up against me. It was him or me; can't you understand? There was no room for us both, I had to kill him, myself, or both. And now you know, what do you propose to do—give me away?

"And Hector Graeme walked between
With gyves upon his wrist."

Is that it? Do, if you like and can."

"For God's sake, no levity, man."

"That's another thing. You, and my wife too, seem to expect me to show penitence, to cry over what I've done. Why? I'm glad, not sorry; why should I then pretend a sorrow, like the Walrus with the oysters?"

Peter stared at him, with bewilderment in his eyes, as there had been a few minutes before in Lucy's.

"Because," he said slowly, "because you're a human being, Graeme."

"Well, I don't feel it, not in the slightest degree, and I'm not going to sham."

Carson rose, and for a moment stood looking down at him.

"Graeme," he said, "you and I have been friends since you joined ten years ago, and, well, I stand by my friends, and do not give them away, whatever they do; their actions are matters for their own consciences, not mine. Of this afternoon I'll never speak again; it's a thing, I confess, beyond my understanding; let it remain at that and be buried. Only you—you must see it can never be quite the same between us again; you do see that, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"I can't help that; it is so, for me, at all events. But one thing I promise you: no one outside shall see it; they must not. We *must* be careful, for ... your wife's sake. Good-night, Graeme."

"Good-night, Peter."

CHAPTER VIII

The hill station of Chillata lay seething in the summer rains. This queer, ram-

bling place, the hot-weather capital of India, is a collection of houses strewn seemingly haphazard along the crest and slopes of a fir-clad ridge, or rather chain of hills, some three miles in length and many thousand feet above the level of the plains. On all sides of the ridge the ground falls steeply away; on the south towards the plains, a haze-veiled vista of brown flat, stretching unbroken to the horizon; on the north, east and west to a succession of forest-clad hills and valleys, beyond which rises a chain of snow-capped mountains. Running along the crest of the ridge lies the one metalled road, the main artery of the place, bordering which stand the various European dwellings. These are few and far apart towards the western extremity, but increase in number as the road runs on eastward, till finally they merge into the town itself, a heterogeneous mass of shops, Government buildings, and native bazaar.

Such in brief was, and is, Chillata, the summer residence of British official might and majesty in India, and consequently, during that season, the resort of all that is most select and fashionable in the country. In the hot weather of the year 1900, however, thoughts other than those of social pursuits and sport were occupying the minds of most men. The British Empire was at war in distant South Africa, and so far, though close on a year had elapsed since its beginning, no sign of the end was at hand, and the fate of England still rocked in the balance.

Still, even this fact, patent though it was to all, failed to interfere appreciably with Chillata enjoyments, for to human nature it is not public but individual interests that matter; and even a toothache is of far greater moment to him who feels it than the fate of a hundred empires. Thus it came about that, so far from proving a damper, the war acted as a stimulant to the enjoyment of Chillata youth; the ever-present possibility of harrowing partings added zest to love-making between the sexes; waltz tunes gained in enchantment; and hearts thrilled in response to stirring martial ballad.

In high official quarters a somewhat different view prevailed, for here were men with a stake in the country, oldish men to whom waltz tune and martial ballad failed to appeal—their time for that was past. Unlike the others, they, being more largely interested, were able to take a larger view, and thus realised that England's downfall would certainly involve that of India, and consequently their own, a very serious matter indeed. Here faces were grave—the higher the official, the graver the face—as, deaf to the gay glamour rising from the Mall outside, they sat in dingy offices anxiously deliberating or wrestling with increasing correspondence.

In one of these offices, a bare and cheerless apartment, situated in the huge brick edifice forming the Military Offices of Chillata, a man sat busily writing one September morning—a thick-set man, with bristling black hair and round, staring eyes, last seen one August morning in Fort Hussein, now a brigadier in

rank and Adjutant-General to the Indian forces. On the table before him lay a pile of letters, fat-looking documents in long official envelopes, both white and blue, most of them marked "Urgent," "Very Urgent," or "Confidential." These he was opening in turn, rapidly reading, and answering on slips of yellow paper, which he carefully pinned to the various documents, and threw into tin trays placed on the floor beside him for removal and subsequent engrossment by his clerks.

A knock at the door was heard. "Come in, come in," he muttered, and Captain de Boudoir, Star Comedian of the Chillata A.D.C., appeared. To prevent the departure of this officer for the plains, and consequent disappointment to the public, he had been retained as staff officer, despite protest, to the Adjutant-General to the Forces, the Intelligence Department—the natural refuge of such as he—being unfortunately full up at the time.

"In an hour, De Boudoir," said Quentin, "I'm not ready for you yet. No, it's no good asking for a morning off; I won't give it you for fifty rehearsals."

"But, sir, this evening, sir, his Excellency's coming. Hoped you would too, sir."

"Bah! You can't go, I tell you. What's that, a card? I won't see him, whoever he is."

"He won't go, sir; it's Captain Pushful; he's here every day."

"What does he want?"

"Usual thing, sir—South Africa."

"Tell him to go to blazes. I have work enough, as it is, without being worried by every fool who wants to go battle-fighting. Confound it, De Boudoir, what the devil's the good of you if you can't—. Hullo! what the—who the dickens is this?" for the door had gently opened, and a head appeared, its eyes beaming upon him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said an insinuating voice, and thereupon a body followed the head, "but could you spare me a minute? I won't keep you long sir."

"Who the devil are you?"

"My name is Pushful, sir. I think, sir, I'm a connection of yours by marriage. My sister—"

"Turn him out, De Boudoir. Oh, damn it all, this is—"

"My sister Mary, sir, married your second cousin William. 'Boodles' we used to call him, because—"

"Really, sir, I fail to see—"

"And Boodles told me to be sure and look you up."

"Tell me what you want, sir, and go."

"I thought, sir, perhaps you would see your way to get me out to South Africa, and—"

"Send in an application then. Good-day."

"I have, sir, six already."

"Send another then, and I'll consider it."

"Thank you, sir, and you will—"

"Oh yes, yes. Good-day, and De Boudoir," as the door closed behind the visitor, "when that application comes, put it where the others go, in the basket; d'ye understand?"

"Very good, sir, anything more?"

"No. Yes, there is. Do you know a Captain Graeme, 1st Lancers? I thought I saw him the other day."

"Yes, sir; he's here on two months' leave. She's been in Chillata since April, living at Dilkhusha, the house the Pennants had last year."

"If you see him to-day, will you tell him I want him? If you don't, send a note."

"Very well, sir. I'll get my pony, and go there now."

"No, you won't; you'll stay where I can get at you, in your office. Go this afternoon if you like, till then work. That will do, thank you," upon which De Boudoir sorrowfully withdrew, cursing the fate that had placed him here, instead of with his friends in the Intelligence Department.

"I'd like to give the fellow a chance," muttered Quentin; "he was badly treated over that last affair. Colonel would not even recommend him for a transport billet"—for in this way had Schofield saved his face on Hector's refusal—"and he was wrong, I'm sure of it; the fellow's got stuff in him, if it can be got out, that I'll swear, though I only saw him for a few minutes. Well, I'll give it to him, and damn the recommendation." He sat thinking for a moment, then plunged once more into his correspondence.

* * * * *

Three miles away, the subject of these reflections was idly lounging in the breakfast-room of Dilkhusha, a fair-sized two-storied building lying among the fir-woods at the extreme western end of the Chillata range. Nearly three years had elapsed since a certain fateful Riwala race-meeting, three uneventful years, spent in the manner usual to Anglo-Indians in India. Two more Regimental Cup races had been won and lost, but on neither occasion had Hector competed, nor even been present as a spectator. With Lucy's full concurrence, nay, urging, he had shut up their bungalow and departed with her on shooting trips to the hills. During these three years Lucy's health had gradually declined, till she was now but a wreck of her former self; that she had been too long in India was the opinion of most, while the doctors declared that it was a nervous breakdown, started probably by the shock of the Cup incident, and in this perhaps they were right,

for illness and Lucy had had little acquaintance before that event.

It is true there had been no trouble over the matter, or suggestion of foul riding on Hector's part; on the contrary, much sympathy had been expressed with them both for the pain and grief they must be foiling. A letter had also been received from O'Hagan's mother, a sad letter, for it appeared that, whatever his other feelings, the dead man had been a good and devoted son, but she in no way blamed Hector for his share in her son's death. It was even worse for him than for her, she wrote, and from where he was now, Robert, she knew, forgave him as fully as she herself did.

Hector, having read the above, when handed to him by his wife, had absently rolled it into a spill, and was proceeding to light a cigarette with it, when Lucy had snatched it from him and hurried away to her room, where she had sobbed on her bed for hours. One consolation was hers, and that was the obvious avoidance of her by Peter Carson. When they met, as was sometimes unavoidable, he was always friendly, more so even than before, but he took care not to meet her eye; and he did not come to the house at odd times, as was his wont. Finally, he had left Riwala for a year's shooting expedition to Eastern Africa, and, though the twelve months was nearly up, she would not see him again—not for a long time, at any rate—for shortly she too would be gone, leaving the hateful country, she hoped, for good. She and her husband, a few months hence, would be at home, a course urged upon Hector by the doctors for over a year, but which Lucy had refused to follow till he could accompany her. At last, after many refusals, Colonel Schofield had agreed to Captain Graeme's going in October, three months ahead, not a day before.

A change now was more than ever imperative for Lucy, on whom, in addition to her other troubles, a further burden had been laid—one for which she had always longed, but which in her present feeble condition threatened to overwhelm her. To all the doctors' entreaties, to go home in the spring and let Hector follow her six months later, she refused to listen, her only concession being to spend the hot weather in Chillata, instead of remaining in Riwala with her husband as she originally intended.

Here he would be able to run up for the very few days' leave he could hope to obtain. They would be in the same country, at any rate, and if he were ill she would know at once, and have a home ready for him to come to; whereas, by the other plan, thousands of miles of sea would be between them, and anything might happen to him even without her knowing—things in India occurred with such appalling suddenness.

Hector, on his part, had done his best. He had rented one of the best, though unfashionably situated, houses in Chillata, and personally superintended every detail for her comfort. He even accompanied her on the long, tedious fifty-mile

carriage drive up the hill, a special comfortable landau having been chartered by him for the journey, instead of the ordinary two-wheeled tonga usually employed by travellers to that place. This was a most unwonted attention on Hector's part, who had hitherto held himself aloof from all such matters, leaving them to be dealt with by Lucy, even to such details as the packing of his personal belongings and arrangements for the transport of ponies, etc.

Like Lucy, he too had changed much of late, and now showed a consideration and affection of which even she would never have believed him capable. Of what had brought this about she was ignorant, nor did Hector himself know exactly. Remorse for O'Hagan's death was certainly not the cause, or even regret for the pain caused to his wife; nevertheless he too had been shaken, not by the act itself—the memory of which troubled him not at all—but by the revelation within him of some tremendous capacity for evil, rendering him a thing apart from his fellows. The knowledge of this for a time had shaken even his callous soul, and given birth to a feverish desire to be as others are, to feel as they felt, to live as they lived.

With this feeling within him, he laid himself out to please Lucy, anticipating her every want and devoting himself to her to an extent that caused Graeme's uxoriousness, as it was called, to become a byword, especially in Chillata, where connubial devotion was a somewhat unusual thing. Hector was far too desperately in earnest to care for the world's sneers; they didn't know what his object was, how should they? He redoubled his efforts, and now that a child was to be born to them strove with all his might to interest himself in the baby's coming—little liking as he had for children—for in the cultivation of such purely natural feelings as affection for wife and child, he realised dimly, could he hope to stifle the monster of whose existence he alone was aware.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, for her, Lucy knew nothing of all this. She was too sane and healthy-minded to be able to comprehend such a nature as her husband's, and with the curious fatality that had always marked her dealings with him, she now, instead of aiding, rather frustrated his efforts, and always, sadly enough, to her own undoing. It was not want of tact on her part, for of that quality Lucy had more than most, but simply that, being so normal herself, the comprehension of the abnormal was beyond her understanding; and, though touched and pleased with her husband's constant wish to be always with her, she yet fought against it, believing that he stayed solely to please her. With this idea in her mind, she was constantly urging him to leave her, and mix more with his kind; it was unnatural, she declared, for a man to wish to remain in the house all day with, at most, an hour's walk as his sole exercise. Of course, it was sweet of him to wish to be with her, and she appreciated the thought, but she would much rather he didn't; she could get on very well by herself, and he would always be

home before dark.

Hector, driven in upon himself, would go off on long solitary rides—the worst thing for him—leaving Lucy happy in the consciousness of an unselfish action. How well she understood him, she thought, and what a dear he was. True, there was that one episode of the race-meeting—to which she owed the present state of her nerves—but even for that she had by now come to account. It had been an accident after all, she was certain, and Hector, to gratify his vanity, had made out it was intentional, and was hence naturally unable to feel the remorse, which she and Peter Carson, in their ignorance, had expected of him. Callous? Not he, why, every action of his since then had shown him to be the very reverse.

Gradually, braced by the clear Chillata air, and the prospect of a speedy return home, Lucy, though still feeble, had somewhat recovered, and with the arrival of her husband, on a quite unexpected two months' leave, was now almost happy. For the first two weeks after his coming she had been somewhat anxious, for talk in Chillata was almost exclusively of war, and the place thronged with applicants to be sent out to South Africa. Only too well did she realise Hector's vanity, and feared that he also, solely from a morbid disinclination to be left in the background, might in his turn apply; and she knew he would certainly succeed, as he always did, when those dreadful sudden fits of determination came upon him. It was therefore with a feeling of heartfelt relief that she saw him, apparently, in no way interested in the matter, though, had she known his mind, it is possible she would not have been so lighthearted on the subject, and would have been more than ever touched by a further proof of his devotion. For exactly what she had feared was in her husband's mind, and for that reason Hector avoided Chillata assemblies like the plague, refused to attend the theatre, despite Lucy's urgings, and, when obliged to pass that way, hurried by the Military Offices without a glance.

He was now, on this September morning, brooding over the subject, a crumpled copy of the *Pioneer* in his hand, detailing some fresh disaster, which he felt bitterly, had he been in command, would have been no defeat, but a brilliant success. For a week without intermission it had rained steadily, rendering even the short morning and evening walks impossible; and day after day, night after night, the rain had poured drearily down, rattling on the corrugated iron of the roof, turning Lucy's small garden into a quagmire, and shrouding the surrounding hills and valleys with a pall of white vapour. Small streams had become torrents; hill paths running rivulets; while from weeping fir-tree and chestnut sounded the continuous drip of water on dank fern and rotting vegetation. As Hector looked and heard, a feeling of depression came over him, and with it that other self began to make itself heard. The longing came over him to be off at once to the Military Offices, send in his application, and go, for despite the constant

refusal to others, he had no doubt of success, were he to apply.

"Three weeks more of this," he reflected, "then two months' idling in the plains, and after that home, a year's loafing again, while others are making names and passing me. It's that which galls me, being out of it, I who could leave them all if I chose. Oh, curse my folly of five years ago, impulsive fool that I was; I could have got out of it easily too, if only they hadn't opposed me. If they'd made it easy, I don't think somehow I'd have persisted. Oh, damnation take it, here am I, with the best wife in the world, regretting. Apply? Not I. Oh, thank God, here she is. Lucy dear," throwing down the paper, and hurrying forward to meet the pale ghost who now entered, "it's good to see you down so early. Here's your chair, I've got the cushions and everything ready for you. There," settling her comfortably and tucking the shawl round her feet, "now tell me how you feel, better?"

"Much better, Hector dear, thanks to you and the way you cheer me up. I'm afraid I'm rather a burden to you now, and so very plain and unattractive. You can't call me pretty, as you used to."

"Nonsense, Lucy, you're prettier than ever, and far more attractive to me now, naturally."

"Oh no, I'm not, Hector. You only say that because, because ... you're the best husband in the world, so different from most men to their wives. But isn't that the *Pioneer*, any news of the war?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Lucy; the war, as you know, doesn't interest me."

"But surely it ought to, besides, there are so many we know fighting out there. Oh, Hector, how thankful I am you're not one of those who volunteered. It would have broken my heart had you done so."

Hector turned sharply away, and walking to the window remained for a moment staring out into the mist.

"Lucy," he said suddenly, "why did you always oppose my retiring? I could have done so before the war started, now I can't."

"Because I didn't want to spoil your life, Hector. I want you to command your regiment, not settle down yet; you're too young. It was for your sake I refused. I should have loved it myself."

"And at the same time you don't want me to see active service," said Hector, with a somewhat justifiable show of irritation. "Can't you see, Lucy, that not being in this war will certainly prove a bar to my own or anybody else's chance of future command?"

"But you *have* seen active service, Hector. Surely once is enough for any man, besides, you did so well then, everyone knows you ought to have got the V.C. Oh, by the way, I have meant to ask you for some time, do you know a— Oh, bother, there's a caller, don't go. Hector, it's only Mrs. Swaine. How do you

do, Mrs. Swaine?" to the lady who was ushered in by the bearer.

"So glad to find you in, Mrs. Graeme," said the new-comer. "I came round to ask whether you and your husband would care to come round to lunch to-day. Rather short notice, I'm afraid, but my nephew has just received orders for South Africa; he goes to-night, and I'm inviting a few friends to give him a send-off."

"Your nephew? oh, how dreadful for you, Mrs. Swaine, I'm so sorry."

"Oh, I don't know, after all, it's what soldiers are for, and Tom's really very fortunate to be selected. Everyone's applying nowadays, you know, and nearly all are refused. They only take the best men, and Tom, though he is my nephew, is very highly thought of at Headquarters."

"They'd like my husband to go, I know," said Lucy, up in arms at once, "he only has to apply."

"Oh, really? I didn't know they'd take married men. Sir Henry told me the other day they wouldn't. Anyway, I'm sure Captain Graeme wouldn't think of leaving you ... now," with an arch smile at the frowning Hector, "the thing's quite unthinkable. But about lunch, will you come?"

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Swaine, I should like to, but I'm afraid my husband—"

"Oh, I'll come," said Hector.

"Capital," said the lady. "Well, I must be off, I've got all sorts of things to see about. Good-bye, you two, so glad," and away trotted Mrs. Swaine, leaving silence behind her.

"Hector dear," said Lucy, after a pause, "you didn't mind what that woman said? She's a good soul really, only tactless."

"Not I," said Hector, "but you were saying something when she came in. You asked me if I knew—"

"Oh yes, General Quentin, such a curious person, Hector. They call him Golliwog here, and I should say he has about as much intelligence. Really, I don't think I ever met such a dull person in my life before."

"He's one of the few men I know, Lucy, whose opinion I respect. Also, he's the only fellow in the army from whom I ever learnt anything."

"Good gracious, Hector," said Lucy, surprised, for such commendation of a military superior was something very novel. "I didn't know you'd ever seen the man. Tell me about it."

"Oh, it was after that Mortlock affair, he spoke to me then, snubbed Schofield too—did it jolly well."

"That was nice of him, Hector, and of course I only saw him for a few minutes; he didn't even know my name. I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll invite him to dinner."

"Certainly not, Lucy," was the unexpected answer, "why, he's Adjutant-

General.”

”What does that matter? He’ll come, and you must have somebody to talk to besides me, we’ll ask him for to-morrow night; it’s your birthday, you know, though I suppose you’ve forgotten that. Had you, Hector?”

”I had. I’m a fool about dates, as you know; but, Lucy, please don’t ask Quentin.”

”No, I won’t please, I’m going to; you like him, and that’s enough. Oh, look, Hector, the sun, a break in the rains at last. Now I’ll write the note, and you shall take it; the ride will do you good, and you can meet me at the Swaines.”

”Lucy, I’d much sooner stay here with you.”

”No, I’ve got things to do, I must get on with my sewing, and I can’t do that while you’re here.”

”Why not? I’m interested in that sewing. Oh, I do wish, Lucy, you’d let me know a little more about—about the infant. I really want to, and you never will talk about it.”

”Of course not, such things are not for a man to know about. I intend to keep everything of that sort from you, dear. When he or she comes it will be different, but till then you mustn’t ask questions.”

”But, Lucy, can’t you understand——?” began Hector.

”Perfectly, and it’s sweet of you to be interested, or rather appear to be, for of course you’re not really; no man could be in such details, and a woman would be a fool to expect it. Now go, like a good boy, and order the pony while I write the note.”

She turned away and sat down at her writing-desk, leaving Hector standing looking at her, with a baffled expression on his face. For a moment he remained irresolute, then walked slowly away to order the pony, and presently returned to Lucy.

”Here’s the letter, Hector,” handing it to him. ”You’d better go to the Military Offices, you’ll find him there now; and I wonder, would you mind getting me some ribbons at Lace’s when you pass?”

”Yes, I’ll do that for you gladly, Lucy, but not the other.”

Lucy looked at him, and then suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

”Very well, Hector. It’s only a little thing I ask of you, but of course if you won’t; and I understand, you—you’d rather your friend didn’t see me like this. I—I know I’m dull and plain, but—but——”

”Give me the note, Lucy,” said Hector quietly. ”I’ll take it, and enter the Military Offices for the first time since I’ve been here.” He went out, and, mounting the pony, departed on his mission.

As Lucy had said, there was a break in the rains, and for a while the dense canopy of cloud burst asunder, and lay in sullen banked-up masses girdling the horizon. A blue sky glared overhead, from which shone a bright sun, its rays burning down on dripping tree and sodden ground, forcing from the latter a thick steam, odorous of damp earth, reeking fern, and rotting leaves.

The sound of running water filled the air, from the faint murmur of tiny rills, threading their way through emerald moss and tangled undergrowth, to the roar of swollen torrents thundering down the hillside on their way to parent streams below, faint gleams of silver appearing at intervals through the luxuriant vegetation clothing the valley depths. Beyond gleamed the mountains, no longer parched and bare as three weeks before, but clad in velvet green, veined with silver threads glittering in the sunlight, as they too danced on their way to the river below.

Graeme noticed none of these things, for the depression of the morning had now deepened to heavy gloom, and with it had come a sense of foreboding, the feeling of being driven on by destiny, which, struggle as he might, he was powerless to resist.

Two or three times, in obedience to a faint far-off and in some way strangely reproachful voice, he reined in his pony and paused, the inclination to return strong upon him, but then, cursing himself for an irresolute fool, he rode on. As he passed through the Mall, crowded with folk, who, like butterflies, had emerged from seclusion to desport themselves in the welcome sunshine, the feeling of foreboding grew, till, on reaching the Military Offices, so loud had the voice become that he then and there determined to obey it and return. Arriving at this decision, he experienced a sense of great relief; the cloud of gloom lifted from his mind, and, feeling strangely light-hearted, he was turning his horse about, when the animal suddenly stumbled, recovered himself, and then went on; but he was dead lame. "Picked up a stone," muttered his rider, and, dismounting, was proceeding to extract a sharp, three-cornered flint wedged between the frog and shoe, when a voice hailed him.

"Good morning, Graeme, what are you doing here?"

"Nothing," answered Hector, "a ride, that's all. Just going back. Curse this stone."

Captain Pushful, for that person it was, winked solemnly.

"Nothing," he said, "'only a ride,' just so, that's what I'm here for, that's what we all come to the Offices for; it's no use, though, Golliwog won't see you, none of 'em will. I ought to know, for I've tried most of 'em. Going to have a go at his Excellency, though, this afternoon; we'll see what that will do. Another choking off, I suppose, but no matter."

"What on earth for?"

"Same old thing, to get out to South Africa. I'll do it yet, though, in spite of 'em all."—It may here be remarked that Captain Pushful was eventually sent out; De Boudoir, indeed, offered to pay his passage to get rid of him—"But surely you're not having a shot? It's no earthly use for you, believe me, you're married. He won't see you, I tell you," as, the stone extracted, Hector moved away.

"He certainly would, if I wanted him to," said Graeme, stopping; "but, as it happens, I don't."

"I'll bet you he doesn't."

"Oh, all right then, we'll see," and Hector, tying up his pony to the rails, mounted the steps leading to the Offices.

"Which way?" he asked; "d'you know?"

"Do I know," answered Pushful, with some scorn, "couldn't I draw a plan of the whole rotten place by now? You come with me; I'll have another try too. I'll ask him if he's got my application."

"Hang it, we can't both go."

"Oh yes, we can," and, regardless of Graeme's protests, Pushful led the way to the door of De Boudoir's room, and, without knocking, entered.

"Can I see—" began both simultaneously.

"No, you can't. Oh Lord, it's you again," said De Boudoir wrathfully, seeing Pushful, who had thrust himself ahead of Graeme. "By the Poker, but I'll have you out of this double quick," and, springing up, he seized Pushful, who was stealing past to the Adjutant-General's door, by the collar, and after a short but sharp struggle succeeded in putting him outside.

"And now for you," he began, turning to the other visitant. "It's no use, I tell you beforehand; the Chief won't see anyone. Oh, it's you, Graeme; I beg your pardon. I was just writing a note to you, asking you to come round. The General wants to see you. That door; go in quietly; he's a bit upset this morning."

Upon which Graeme knocked, and a testy "Come in" answering him, entered.

CHAPTER IX

"Well, what is it now," said Quentin, not looking up from his papers as Graeme entered, "and what the devil's all that row about? Damn it, De Boudoir, if you want to play 'Box and Cox,' you must find another.... Oh, good morning, Graeme;

I didn't see it was you. Glad to meet you again. How are you?"

"All right, thank you, sir. I'm sorry to disturb you; I only came to——"

"Yes, yes, I know; I sent for you. Wait a minute, will you, till I've finished this letter, I've something to say to you. Sit down; smoke if you like; there are cigarettes."

Graeme took one from the box pushed towards him, and lighting it sat back in his chair and waited till the other had finished. What on earth, he wondered, could the Adjutant-General have to say to him? Surely it didn't mean that Colonel Schofield had already submitted his application for leave home, and it had arrived at Headquarters, only to be refused? Yes, that must be it, and Quentin had now sent for him to inform him of the fact. At the thought, Graeme was seized with anger, and he braced himself for fight. He wouldn't stand it, not he; he would speak his mind, and tell this Jack-in-office, Adjutant-General though he was, that he had made up his mind ...

Suddenly he became aware that the scratching of the pen had ceased, and that Quentin was regarding him with the same unwinking stare with which he had favoured him three years before at Fort Hussein.

"Have you ever met a Colonel Bradford, Graeme," he asked abruptly, "now commanding at Gurrumbad?"

"I think I have, sir; he dined with the regiment last manoeuvres," answered Graeme, his anger giving way to surprise at the unexpectedness of the question. What was the man driving at, he wondered.

"Does he know you?" was the next and equally abrupt query.

"I don't think so, sir, by sight possibly, but that's all."

"Hum ... pity."

A pause, then Quentin went on.

"He's one of the rising men, Graeme, one of the cleverest they ever had at the Staff College, they tell me; did well, too at last cold weather manoeuvres."

"Indeed, sir," muttered Graeme, his perplexity increasing.

"They've just given him the command of a brigade in South Africa, and he has written to me asking if I know of a"—a pause—"a suitable A.D.C."

Enlightenment at last, and with it the blood rushed to Hector's face. His forehead grew wet, and the room reeled before him. Far off he heard Quentin's voice continuing:

"It's a great chance, Graeme, for any soldier, and after consideration I've determined to offer the post to you."

"But, but ... sir, I'd give my soul to go, but——"

"You're thinking about the recommendation, I suppose, from your Colonel. He won't give it; is that what you mean?"

"No, he would not, sir," said Graeme, snatching at a straw.

"Hum, that's a pity, a very great pity. A Colonel's word, you know, Graeme, goes for a lot in these matters. Still, this is a purely personal appointment, and if I choose to take the risk of recommending you in spite of unfavourable reports, well, that's my lookout. And I'm prepared to take it, Graeme."

Silence.

"I'm prepared to take it, Captain Graeme," repeated Quentin, his eyes now like lamps. "What's the matter, aren't you well?"

"Yes, sir, only—only rather taken by surprise, sir."

"I hope you'll do me credit, Graeme."

"I—I'll try, sir. Thank you."

"I'm sure you will, and now I must ask you to leave me, I've got a good three hours' work here," laying his hand on the papers before him. "I'll wire to Bradford at once, and let you know his answer this afternoon; but I think I can tell you beforehand it will be all right. You'd better go home now and pack. Good-day."

"Good-day, sir," and Graeme stumbled out of the office and along the stone-flagged passage leading from it, till he found himself once more at the steps, on the top of which was seated Pushful, pensively smoking a pipe.

On seeing Hector he sprang up, with inquiry in his eye, but the other passed by unheeding. Declining an offer of his company in a manner that even Pushful recognised as final, he unhitched his pony from the rails, and rode off—Lucy, ribbons, and the Swaines' luncheon party completely forgotten. Arrived at home, he entered the house, and deaf to the bearer's offers of lunch went off to his room, where, locking the door, he flung himself down on the bed and tried to grasp the reality of what had happened. "I am going out to South Africa; to-morrow at this time I shall be gone," he repeated to himself for the hundredth time. But in vain—the words conveyed no meaning, and his thoughts wandered off into a confused labyrinth of trivial matters.

Finally, in desperation, he sprang up and hurried out to the garden, where for a time he walked up and down the sodden paths, and then gradually realisation came, and with it an intense feeling of remorse and unavailing regret. Oh, cursed unstable fool that he'd been, thus to allow himself to be driven into the very thing he had vowed to avoid. Where was his boasted strength, where the resolutions of the last three years? Gone, all gone. At a word from a stranger, he had betrayed the only being who loved him. From a weak-minded inability to refuse, he had accepted a thing for which he had not only no wish, but actual loathing, and brought misery on one whose only thought and wish were for his happiness. To leave her now, alone here amongst strangers, to get home as best she might, oh God! And, thoughts crowding thick upon Hector, he clenched his hands and cursed.

Then suddenly through the darkness shone a gleam, one of those that always come when the hour is blackest: the hope of the coup that haunts the ruined gambler; the dream of reprieve to the criminal on his way to the scaffold—false, always false, mere Will-o'-the-wisps, but clung to and believed in always. Perhaps he might not be sent after all, Quentin must have seen his disinclination, he had thought his manner cold when he said good-bye. No, he would choose someone else, someone who wanted to go, like that fool who was sitting on the Office steps—not him. Why, two hours had already elapsed since he left; if a wire had been coming it would have been here by this time, and Lucy ought to be back by now from the Swaines—good heavens, he had forgotten all about the luncheon party. Never mind, he would make it up to her, he would show her a devotion that would surprise even her, would make her so happy, and this time there should be no mistake. He had had his last lesson, and, once home, in would go his papers and ...

"Chitthi sahib, Faujdari dufta say aya,"[#] said a voice at his elbow, and looking round he saw his bearer holding out a salver on which lay a letter.

[#] "Letter from the Military Offices, sir."

"Jao,[#]" said Graeme, and snatching up the document strode away with it, the man looking curiously after him.

[#] Go.

At the far end of the garden he stopped and looked at the envelope, with dread in his heart; then, suddenly clenching his teeth, tore it open, and seizing the paper within, read at a glance:

"DEAR GRAEME,

"It's all right. Colonel Bradford agrees. Report yourself to him at Gurnimbad to-morrow night. You needn't wait for official orders. Good luck.

"Yours, "C. QUENTIN."

As he stood staring at the words, the sound of rickshaw wheels was heard coming along the road towards the house. It was Lucy returning from the Swaines'. For a moment he remained listening. Then, crushing the letter into his pocket, he ran towards the house, gaining its sanctuary just as the rickshaw men trotted briskly up the drive.

"Where is the sahib," he heard from where he stood hovering within, "and what has he had for lunch?" much outspoken indignation greeting the bearer's answer that the master had not deigned to eat the meal provided.

"Of course he'd eat, it's your fault and the cook's if he didn't. Hector, where are you? Oh, there you are, why didn't you come out to meet me as you always do? Oh, Hector, I'm so sorry about your lunch, those stupid servants; and there was a guinea-fowl and the ham and—"

"It—it wasn't their fault, Lucy. They had the—the things ready, but I refused; I didn't feel like eating."

"Hector, you're ill; your voice is different somehow; come into the light, dear, and let me see," but Hector hung back.

"I'm all right, Lucy," he said hurriedly. "I've got rather a fit of the blues, that's all."

"And no wonder, being without food all this time. We'll have tea at once. Abdul, bring tea and two eggs for the sahib. And now sit down, and I'll tell you about the Swaines. Oh, Hector, why didn't you come? I was so disappointed."

"I—I was rather late getting back, Lucy. I—I—who was there?"

"Lots of people, and we'd such fun, not a bit like a farewell party. Captain Dance was there, you know, the man who does the comic parts at the theatre. And he was really most amusing, quite cheered me up, and—and oh, Hector, dear, he's given us a box for the theatre to-morrow night; you will come just for once, won't you? He's got a new song about Kruger, and I believe it's too funny. Oh, heavens, though, I forgot, General Quentin, don't say he's coming, please, Hector."

"He's—he's not, Lucy; he's rather busy just now, and—"

"Thank goodness, I should have been so disappointed, and we'll have a nice little dinner here together, just you and I, and go on to the play afterwards. Oh dear, I feel quite excited about it, I hope you do too, Hector."

"Lucy, my dearest."

"And Omar shall have a blue ribbon. Oh bother—"

"Omar?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to tell you, dear, not till to-morrow; but I've got a cat for you, my birthday present, Hector. He's a Persian, that's why I call him Omar, not very brilliant I fear, but I'm not clever, as you know only too well."

"Clever, you're the dearest—"

"But not clever, Hector, don't say so, because I know. Oh, I'd love to be clever like you."

"Me? Good heavens!"

"Yes, but about Omar. I know how you missed poor Fop, and I've meant to get you another in his place for a long time, but couldn't find one good enough. He's white, Hector, and rather nice, come along now and inspect him."

"Lucy, wait. I—I've something to tell you, something terrible, dear, has happened, and—and—oh, my God, how can I say it?"

"Hector, what do you mean?" the smile dying away.

"I ... they ... I'm ordered to South Africa, Lucy."

For a moment she stood staring at him, with no comprehension in her eyes.

"South Africa," she repeated; "you—are going to—South Africa," and then suddenly she rushed forward and flung herself on her knees before him. "Hector, Hector," she said wildly, "it's not true, tell me it isn't. You can't leave me, you can't, do you hear?" She tried to drag his hands from his face, but in vain. Then her mood changed, and she rose and stood before him, her eyes blazing in her white face.

"So—so you've volunteered like the rest, you whom I called only this morning 'the best husband in the world.' You'll go off and leave me as I am, helpless and alone, oh, what are men made of to do these things?"

"Lucy, I did not volunteer. I was weak, criminally weak, if you like, but that I did not do; the thing was forced upon me. Will you listen?"

"Go on."

Hector told her, and, as is usual with such recitals, suppressed the evidences of his own weakness, insisting on the fact that, as Quentin had put the matter, he had no choice but to accept, that it had been less an offer than an order. He didn't want to go, he repeated again and again, he never had had any wish to go, and let Lucy but say the word, he would wire to Bradford this minute to refuse. He would say he was ill, he would be ill, there was stuff in his medicine-chest upstairs. And then he stopped bewildered, for Lucy was smiling at him, a smile oddly in contrast with her white face and despairing eyes.

"No, Hector," she said, "you mustn't do that; you must go, dear."

"I won't, Lucy, what do I care for what they say?"

"But I do, dear; and—and, Hector, I was wrong in what I said just now, but I thought it was your own doing, and that you had volunteered. It was that which hurt me, dear, and made me say what I did; and—and I know you despise Mrs. Swaine and those other people, but they taught me a lesson this afternoon. She felt her nephew's going—I know that, because I found her crying afterwards in her room—but she never showed it to him. She was all smiles before him and the others, as I shall be when—when the time comes, Hector. When is it, dear?"

"To-morrow morning, but—"

"To-morrow? Then—then we've very little time; I must go and see to your things; and we'll keep your birthday to-night, dear, instead of ... and Omar shall have his blue ribbon."

"Lucy, for God's sake listen to me before we decide. I have a feeling about this. I know somehow I ought not to go, that if I do, it will be an irrevocable step. Oh, I can't explain, but—but I feel that—that this is my last chance. Something is dragging me, Lucy, I am being driven, God knows where! I have felt it before, I felt it only this morning on my way to those cursed Offices, and I know too that you and the baby alone can save me. Oh, Lucy, if you love me, tell me to stay."

"It's because I love you, Hector, that I now ask you to go. It's everything to me your wanting to remain; but, dearest, I cannot let you—I should be wickedly selfish if I did; and what you say about that feeling is wrong too, dear; it is morbid and unhealthy. Fight it down, Hector; it is nothing, and—and soon you will come back to me, and there will be the baby, and we—we shall be so happy, and we couldn't be if we were to shirk our duty when it's come. But I must leave you now, no, you stay here, dear; you—you would only hinder me," and she went.

* * * * *

Next morning, with the rain pouring down upon him, Hector rode away, and, as he reached the gate opening on to the main road, he stopped and looked back at the still figure watching him from the dripping verandah. For a moment he stood fighting the strange, wild impulse to return, and then, mastering it once and for ever, galloped away through the downpour.

BOOK II

CHAPTER X

Many thousands of miles away from high-perched fir-clad Chillata—now no longer rain-drenched and sad, but a white fairy-land of glistening ice and snow—

a large column of mounted men was slowly toiling its way through a waste of rocky mountains. A weary-looking column it was, the men silent and sullen-faced; the animals dull-eyed, with their ribs showing through tightly-stretched coats. On they crawled, mile after mile, now breasting the side of some stony mountain, now sinking into the airless depths of gloomy gorge or desolate valley. Lower and lower dropped the sun, and then, with one last blinding flash of light, was gone, leaving the western sky aflame with specks of burning cloud.

Rapidly the light began to fade, a veil of hazy blue blurred the mountains, a few stars twinkled feebly overhead; and then at last came the welcome order to halt. The men clambered wearily down, and led the horses away to where a staff officer was standing, looking dubiously down at a few pools of muddy water, the remains of a sometime rushing torrent. Directing and objurgating the sullen men, he remained till the last beast had drunk and gone; and then he too turned away in search of such cheer as he might hope to find in the Headquarter Mess.

For weeks past the present day's work had been but a repetition of its predecessor: the rise before the dawn; the eventless trek through veldt and mountain; the bivouac in some hot valley, where alone water could be hoped for; the dreamless sleep, hard upon the unappetising meal; and then once more the awakening and profitless resumption of the march. For profitless it seemed, this pursuit of the elusive Dutchman, Van der Tann, rebel and murderer, whose capture many had attempted, but all, so far, failed to achieve.

Six weeks before, full of hope and confidence in their leader, despite the gloomy prophecies of those who had attempted the task before, this column had started on its quest, and so far not one man of the hostile commando had they seen; apparently at its ease, it kept just one march ahead, which distance, strive as he might, Colonel Bradford found himself powerless to lessen.

Gradually, in the column, hope had died out, and with its death came the longing for the comforts of civilisation: hot baths, whiskey and cigarettes for the officers, beer and tobacco for the men—luxuries that for the past three weeks they had been without. The former grew slack and dispirited; the latter sullen, in the last few days, indeed, almost openly mutinous, a state of things of which their leader was only too well aware, and which in his heart, secretly as hopeless as theirs, he knew himself powerless to combat. He was thinking of these things, and even meditating the abandonment of his quest, as he sat on the hillside overlooking the bivouac, and gloomily noted the air of unwillingness pervading the men below.

Surely it was justifiable to give up now, he thought; he had done all that a man could, but the task set was beyond him or anyone else; better to accept the inevitable and go back. He was but wearing out men and horses in a vain quest, and to force the march on was to risk the catastrophe of mutiny and consequent

ruin of his career. His authority, he knew well, only hung by a hair, and the mere writing out of orders for the next day had become a torment, so fearful was he of a flat refusal to obey; only, last night their issue had been received with "booing"—a sound that had filled him with nervous dread. Despite his present despondency, Colonel Bradford's reputation was that of a good and able commander; and since landing in the country five months before his career had been one of unbroken success. Cool in action, ready of resource, and deeply read in military lore, he had, as a brigade commander in the main body, won high opinions from superiors and subordinates alike, and it had been in the full hope of a successful issue that to him had been entrusted the capture of the notorious and hitherto undefeated Van der Tann.

Unsuspected by all, however, in Bradford's character there was a weak spot, which events so far had failed to discover, and that was the inability to hold on his way, unmoved by the opinions of those around him. Give him a willing army to lead and all was well, but, let the men become discouraged and show hostility to authority, he also, only too soon, came to share the one feeling and fear the other. The double task of overcoming them as well as the enemy was beyond him—as it is to all save the Marlboroughs and Wellingtons of history—and in the present crisis, instead of rooting up the sprouting weeds of insubordination, his sole desire, and that the most fatal of all, was to conciliate the malcontents, with the inevitable result that the murmuring grew daily louder.

There was one, and, probably the only one in the column, who was not only unaffected by the general depression, but rather stimulated by it, and that was Captain Hector Graeme. So far, in his novel rôle of A.D.C., he had failed to justify his selection for the post by General Quentin; indeed, Bradford had many times thought hard things of the Adjutant-General to the Indian Forces, for providing him with a staff officer so negligent and ignorant of his work.

On more than one occasion he had had just reason for complaint, Hector's arrangements as to messing and the transport of his chief's baggage having only too often proved defective, while his cavalier treatment of senior officers had brought more than one rebuke on his careless head. His sartorial eccentricities, too, were a source of constant irritation to Colonel Bradford, for now that he was no longer a regimental officer he had given free rein to his taste for original garments; and, bizarre as were many of the uniforms worn at that time in South Africa, Hector, in unconventionality and strangeness of attire, eclipsed them all.

Several times Bradford, stung by the remarks of distinguished visitors to his Mess, had debated the advisability of sending Graeme about his business, or at any rate palming him off on some unwary new-comer, but somehow he had never done so; and in the last fortnight had come to be glad of his forbearance. For during that time a surprising change had come over his A.D.C. In proportion

as the spirits of the rest went down, his went up, and no matter how long or profitless the day Hector never seemed tired or depressed, but, on the contrary, cheerful and full of fight. And gradually Bradford, harassed by doubts and the unresponsiveness of his followers, began to turn to his erstwhile obnoxious A.D.C., whose confidence in ultimate success seemed to increase daily, and who alone amongst his fellows appeared to be thoroughly enjoying the present expedition.

He looked at him now as he lay on his back close by, calm and content, the end of a "Pinhead" cigarette—given him at the rate of one daily by his servant from the latter's scanty store—between his teeth, and, as he looked, he sighed. He wished that he too could feel like that. Hector heard the sigh, and, instantly opening his eyes, sat up and gazed meditatively at the mob of men and horses below.

"Hard as nails, those horses," he observed cheerfully, "do their thirty miles a day easy now; never so fit in their lives before."

"I don't know what you call fit, Graeme," was the moody answer, "they're all skin and bone. Worn out, that's what they are; look at the way they're standing."

"Only healthily tired, they'll be bucking after a night's rest. The men seem a bit sullen though, the brutes. What the dickens do they want, I wonder? Fine weather, grand country, and quite enough to eat. Damn it, they've not fed those mules yet. I'll soon see about that," rising as he spoke.

"Better leave the men alone, Graeme; poor devils, they're tired too. For heaven's sake don't hustle them, they'll only lose their temper and answer back."

"Lose their temper, will they? So will I, then, and I'll warrant mine's worse than theirs."

"There's a time, Graeme, you know, when it's better to shut one's eyes—the velvet glove, you know;" but Hector had gone, and was now making his way to where a group of men were sitting in a circle, at some distance from the famished mules.

"Velvet glove be hanged," he muttered as he went; "that's all right when the steel hand's inside, not the flabby digits your gloves contain. Damn, you may be a devilish fine tactician or strategist, but you don't understand men. I do, and always have," and he strode on, the light of battle in his eyes.

Sick with nervous apprehension, Bradford watched him approach the group, and, as he reached it, say something to one of its members. The man, turning his head, looked up without rising, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, was resuming his conversation when Hector rushed at him, seized him by the collar, and dragged him to his feet. The others jumped up and gazed in astonishment at the intruder; a murmur of anger arose, but was almost instantaneously silenced, quelled by a fury such as staggered their dull souls. For a few minutes the winged words flew, and then Bradford saw Hector wheel round on

the first man and point to the mules. Slowly the fellow was slouching off, when for the second time Graeme was on him, and, whirling him round, again spoke, when the man's hand went to his cap in a salute, and he stood stiffly at attention. Another order was given, on which the rest ranged themselves into line, were numbered off by fours—the proving being repeated three times before the requisite smartness was attained—and the men were marched briskly away to the waiting mules, which they proceeded to feed, Hector supervising. This operation completed, he rejoined his chief.

"Bit and spur, not sugar, for a tired horse," he observed, resuming his seat on the ground. "It's not the men's fault, though; they'd be all right if properly managed."

"What did you say to them, Graeme? It seems to have been pretty effective, whatever it was."

"Cursed them well, sir, called them every name I could lay my tongue to. That big fellow I promised to shoot if he spoke again. I'd have done it too, devilish near thing as it was."

"What?"

"Certainly I would, it was him or me. Obedience I meant having, and if he wasn't going to give it, he'd have got hurt, that's all."

"This is not the German Army, Graeme."

"No, if it were we shouldn't keep the useless devils we do in command. Old Carthew, for instance; I wish you'd let me have a go at him, sir."

"Kindly remember, Graeme, you're speaking of a senior officer."

"Well, if I am, sir, I'm only saying what every one in the column knows. Why, last night at dinner, before his officers, he said that our present expedition was hopeless, and that he had reason to believe you thought so too."

Bradford was silent.

"Of course, he ought not to have said that, Graeme," he answered after a pause, "but I'm afraid he's only expressing the general feeling."

"What does that matter, sir, if it's not yours?"

"But ... perhaps it is mine, Graeme; it's certainly that of my staff officer, Major Godwin."

"Godwin? An old woman."

"Graeme!"

"So he is, if he advises giving up; and it's all very well for him, he won't get the blame—you will. He'll probably say afterwards too, he was all for going on, but you wouldn't."

Again Bradford was silent. From what he knew of staff officers, he thought that this was more than likely to be true, and the idea was unpleasant. And then a fatal and ever-to-be-regretted moment of weakness came over him, and he turned

to Graeme.

"What would you advise, then?" he said. "I don't mind owning I'm done."

"Try for a bit longer, anyway," was the instant response. "Look here, Colonel, I, as you know, am not much of a tactician, but this is not a question of tactics; it's a question of our will against Van der Tann's and my—ours is stronger than his; I know it."

"I don't follow you, Graeme," said Bradford, looking puzzled, for to him psychology was an unknown region.

"Simply this, we've been after this fellow now for six weeks and one of us must give, and that soon. The strain is too great to last. Our lot may be bad, but think what his must be, with us always hanging on to his heels, and never knowing when we're going to pounce on them. I know he goes as fast as we do, faster perhaps, but so does the rabbit than the stoat, yet the stoat gets him in the end, because the rabbit's nerve goes and he chucks it."

"Yes, but the rabbit can't turn round and fight the stoat. Van der Tann can; a nice plight we should be in if he were to attack us to-night. Regular *cul-de-sac* this place we're in."

"Not much attack left in men who've been pursued for six weeks; besides, they're probably thinking the same about us."

"Hum, can't say I think much of your argument, Graeme. Let's go and have tea. I suppose we've not run out of that, have we? Coming? No? Well, don't go beyond the sentry line, these Dutchmen are always prowling about;" and Bradford rose and walked slowly away, leaving Hector seated on the ground.

For a few minutes he remained there, and then, his Chief out of sight, sprang up, and, evading the none too alert sentries, made his way across country till he struck a rough sheep-track leading into the heart of the mountains. "I'll think this out," he muttered. "I'll get him on somehow, the faint-hearted fool, only another day or two, and we'll have this fellow Van der Tann. He's close by somewhere. I don't know why I think so, but I'm sure of it. I wish to heaven I was in charge; give me a day only, and you wouldn't know that column. I'd..." And here his thoughts wandered off, as Hector's were wont to do, into a picture of personal achievements.

He had just worked out the capture of the Dutchman, having seen every detail of the march and subsequent fight vividly before him, and was proceeding to give orders for the disposal of the prisoners, speaking—a habit to which he had of late become prone—half-aloud as he did so, when, striking his foot violently against a stone, the pain brought him straightway back to earth. With a sudden shock, he became aware of the darkness and deep silence around him, and hurriedly striking a match looked at his watch, which by good luck he had not forgotten to wind the previous night. It was close on eight, and at six he had

started, which meant that he was now, at the pace he had come, well-nigh seven miles from the bivouac.

By this time dinner would be over, and a search-party probably out after him; he must get back at once, that is, if he could find his way, which he rather doubted, for he had been too deeply engrossed with mental visions to take much note of the road he had come by. He looked behind him, in the hope of seeing the bivouac lights, but in vain—a wall of mountains lay between. He turned off the track, and clambered up on to a peak of rock, thinking he could possibly see better from it.

For a few minutes he stood there, straining his eyes into the darkness, but no fires were visible, only the shadowy shapes of mountains on three sides, and on the fourth a black abyss, falling sheer from his feet. Suddenly he started, a thrill of excitement running through him, for far down below him a faint spark of light was visible; it flickered, disappeared, and then shone out once more.

In a flash, Hector's imagination had rent the veil of darkness. The light stood revealed as a camp-fire, its disappearance caused by the figures of passing Dutchmen, and a faint far-away sound from the depths the neighing of a horse. It—it was—it could only be—Van der Tann's bivouac. Quivering, he stood staring down, but all was black once more; the glimmer had gone, and the sound, whatever it was, had ceased.

Visionary as the glimpse of the light had been, it was enough for Hector. He had asked for a lever to move Bradford, and here was the handle thrust out for him to seize. He then and there determined to work it. After all, he was the sole witness, and what he said no one could dispute. It would force his Chief on, that was all that mattered; and if, afterwards, he should be proved wrong, and no commando was to be found, well, what of it? Bradford would possibly say hard things, might even dismiss him from his staff in disgrace, but that could not hurt him much.

He was obscure enough now, and were his Chief allowed to carry out his present intention of returning, a failure self-confessed, the cloud that, in the future, would assuredly overhang Bradford's name, would also serve to blot out altogether that of the failure's personal staff officer. No, this was his chance, the last he would have, and take it he would. His eyes shone, his jaw set, and, clambering down from the rock, he regained the sheep-track, and set off at a run for the bivouac.

* * * * *

"Where the dickens has the fellow got to, d'you think, Godwin?" said Bradford, laying down the battered-looking novel he was reading by the light of a camp-

lantern.

Dinner was long since over in the Headquarter Mess, and the two were sitting there alone, the rest of the party having retired to bed.

"Goodness knows, sir," answered the other, a long-nosed individual with a high forehead, who was generally supposed to be the ugliest man in South Africa: "he's nowhere in camp, for I've sent all round to see. Must have got through the sentries and been captured, or shot, or something. That jacket of his would be rather a prize for a Dutch lady, make her a nice combing-jacket."

"I particularly ordered him to keep within the boundaries," said Bradford irritably. "Damn the fellow, he's been more trouble to me than the whole of the rest of the column. But never mind about him now; about those orders, you understand, that we remain here to-morrow to rest, and the next day start back?"

"You think it's no further use, sir?"

"None, I— Hullo, who's this? Why it's—where the dickens have you been, Graeme? We've been hunting all over the bivouac for you, disobeying my orders again, I suppose, and—"

"I've found Van der Tann, Colonel," panted Graeme.

"What!"

"He's in a valley about seven miles away; his whole commando's there, I saw it."

"North, south, east, or west?" asked Godwin, his green eyes fixed on Hector's face.

"Oh, over there," pointing into the darkness.

"That's west," said the Chief of the Staff, "in which case we passed within a few miles of him to-day. Sure you saw him, Graeme?"

"Positive. I was quite close, crept down the mountain-side—almost a precipice it was, too—and got within a hundred yards of them; there were about five hundred, I should say."

"That coat of yours make you invisible, Graeme?" resumed Godwin, glancing at Bradford. "You must have gone through their sentries as you did ours. Van der Tann's commando, sir," to Bradford, "is, as you know, a thousand strong, at least."

"Major Godwin, do you mean that I'm a liar?"

"Oh, be quiet, Graeme," said Bradford wearily. "remember to whom you're talking. Do you mean seriously to tell me you have seen Van der Tann's commando?"

"I do."

"You're quite sure you weren't deceived by the darkness, didn't mistake cattle for horses, for instance? It's a thing anybody might do, you know."

"I'm quite sure, sir."

Bradford stared hard at him for a moment, and then looked towards his Chief of the Staff.

"What do you make of it, Godwin?" he said.

For a few seconds the long-nosed man made no answer; his green eyes were fixed upon Hector.

"I think, sir," he said after a pause, and a rather curious quaver was in his voice, "I think it might be worth trying."

Another pause followed, and Bradford rose, and taking a map from his haversack spread it on the table.

"Now, Graeme," he said, "show us as nearly as you can where this fellow lies."

"There," said Graeme, putting his finger on the map.

"Could you guide a column to the place, do you think?"

"Yes, blindfold."

Another pause, then Bradford spoke, with restored confidence in his voice—here was something tangible to fight, not an atmosphere—"Send to commanding officers at once, please, Major Godwin," he said, "and tell them to come here."

Godwin left, returning a few minutes afterwards.

"We shall want three columns," continued Bradford, "one here, one there, and another where Graeme was standing. You'll take one, Godwin, I another, and—and Carthew, I suppose, the third."

"For heaven's sake not him, sir," put in Graeme quickly.

"Kindly hold your tongue, sir, and don't interfere," answered Bradford, his assurance growing.

"But he won't get there, sir; it's a beast of a road, and he'll turn back for certain. It's courting failure to send him. Let me have the third column, sir, I found the man."

"You, a Captain, utterly impossible," Bradford was beginning, when Hector received quite unlooked-for support.

"With all respect, sir," said Godwin, "I think, if it could be managed, Graeme's wish should be indulged. As he says, sir, he found the man, and—" but here once more the odd quaver sounded in the speaker's voice; he paused, and then continued, "Apart from everything else, he alone knows the track."

"But how the dickens can I? He'd be junior to the leader."

"I think I could arrange that, sir. Keep Colonel Carthew with you, and give Graeme the Colonial troops. There are less than a hundred of them, quite enough for the third column, if what he says is right about the ground. He said, didn't you, Graeme?" turning to the latter, "that you were standing on the edge of a precipice, so they're hardly likely to break that way. Let him have Rufford's lot,

sir; he's only a Captain too, and won't mind, I know."

"He's a Major by now, though his name is not in the 'Gazette' yet; besides, even as a Captain, he's senior to Graeme."

Godwin, however, stuck to his point.

"Send him a note, sir, telling him to act under *Major* Graeme's orders to-night. You can rectify the mistake to-morrow."

"Oh, damn it, Godwin, what for?"

"Because," burst in Hector, "Major Godwin knows that I can carry this thing through. I'll have my lot in position, sir, at any hour you like, if I have to carry them there. I don't think you know me, sir," he added quietly, and Godwin, watching his face, suddenly realised that this statement was possibly correct.

Between the two, Colonel Bradford gave way.

"Very well," he said slowly, "I'll write the order, though I don't like doing it. You give it, Godwin, or, better still, as he might ask questions, you take it yourself, Graeme, to Rufford. If you like to lie about it you can, I won't, nor shall my staff officer."

"Here's the order," writing it out as he spoke and handing it to Hector. "Now be off and make your arrangements. You must be in position overlooking that valley before dawn. Understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," answered Graeme, and hurried away through the darkness to where the Colonial troops were lying. Here he found Rufford, and to him handed the order.

"What's the game now?" said the latter, opening the envelope and reading its contents. "Oh, command my beggars, is it? All right, you're welcome to, if you can, though it's pretty hard cases you'll find 'em. Sit down, and tell us about it. Have a fill," handing him his pouch; "got no whiskey to offer you, only baccy, and that mostly dust."

"Call up your officers at once, please, Captain Rufford, and rout out the men."

"Oho! coming the old soldier, are you? Can't be done, old chap; you'll hear something if you try it. They're all dossed down and asleep by now."

"Rout 'em out, I say. Oh, damn it, man, don't sit gaping there, here, give me that lantern, now, where are they? The officers first, please," and, followed by the grinning Rufford, Hector hurried away to where a row of blanket-covered figures were lying close by, and thereupon proceeded to rouse the slumberers, with an energy and flow of words, which speedily changed their feelings of wrath at the awakening into respect and desire to be up and doing. This achieved, he flew down the men's line, cursing, exhorting, joking as he went, till all were astir and busy with bridle and saddle. Then, leaving them to their work, he hurried away to Headquarters, where his own horse was now waiting. This he mounted,

galloped back, and, quickly marshalling his small force, was away, at their head, on his mission, a good half-hour before the other two columns had begun to turn out.

Through the black night he drove them on; now dismounting to lead up some steep boulder-strewn hillock, now plunging down into the depths at a pace which made even the careless Colonials hold their breath.

"The devil's in the fellow," muttered Rufford, from his post in rear, whither he had been despatched to whip up stragglers. "Slack, casual beggar I always thought him, and here he is hustling my crowd along as I'd never dare, well as I know 'em. Damme. They seem to like it too, rum thing. Wonder what he's after? Choked me off to rights when I asked him, thought for a moment he meant braining me with that old knobkerrie of his. Well, I don't care, let him run his own show; he seem to know all about it. Now then, close up, will you, what the hell are you hanging back for? Oh, 'halt,' is it? What's that? Pass it on, confound you—oh, 'officers.'" And thereupon Rufford hurried up to the front, where he found Graeme surrounded by the rest of the officers.

"Keep back from me, will you," he was saying, "now then, listen," whereupon, in quick sharp sentences, clear as daylight, though couched in somewhat unmilitary phraseology, Hector proceeded to give out his orders. "Now, be off," he concluded, and the group broke up and hurried away.

The tramp of feet followed soon after, and then, in single file, up came the men, rifle at the trail; two columns of them, one on each side of the track. Arrived at where Hector was standing, the leading files of each column wheeled off to the right and left respectively, followed by those in rear, till all were gone, swallowed up in the darkness. Now and again the clatter of loose stones was heard, a stifled oath in answer, and then these sounds, too, ceased, and all was still and silent as before.

For a few minutes Hector stood, his heart swelling with exultation at the good work accomplished. In less than two hours he had brought his force eight miles through the heart of the mountains—and this on a pitch-dark night—exactly to the spot desired.

They were not men of his own regiment either, but Colonials, who were notoriously independent and difficult to manage, and yet without the slightest difficulty he had managed them. From the time when, in face of their own commander's warnings, he had roused them from their beds, there had not only been no murmuring, but, on the contrary, a willing obedience and confidence in his leadership. And to-morrow, or rather to-day, when the fighting began...

Suddenly realisation came to Hector, and from the heights he fell headlong to the depths, the certainty of disappointment upon him. Fool that he was to have forgotten; fighting, there would be no fighting; there was, there could be, no one

in that valley below. No, the darkness would lift, the emptiness be revealed, and all his labour would be gone or nothing—worse still, unrecognised.

Hector did not fear the consequences to himself once the fraud was discovered, for that was the gamble, and if he lost, he was prepared to pay, but to know himself a leader of men, and for that knowledge to go unshared by all save him, that to Graeme was bitterer than death. A dreary laugh broke from his lips as the realisation of the giant hoax he had played upon all, himself included, came home to him. He pictured Bradford and the long-nosed Godwin struggling over the mountains; their cautious injunctions for silence in the ranks, the eager anticipation of the officers as they posted their men, and impressed upon them the necessity of straight-shooting. God! how absurd it all was, how damnably absurd.

Then, as hope never dies in human hearts, a thrill of excitement ran through him, as he became aware that the solid blackness was loosening and the hour of revelation close at hand. With heart wildly beating, he watched the shapeless masses around him take form and become the tops of mountains, blurred at first, and then sharply defined against a sky fading from violet to green. And suddenly it was light, and a still grey world stood revealed.

Straining his eyes downwards, he lay till the last patch of shadow clothing the valley below had melted away, when, with a sudden cry of exultation, Graeme flung his helmet into the air, and rolled over and over on the grass, laughing hysterically at what he had seen. In the centre of the valley, or, rather, horseshoe-shaped indentation in the mountains, stood a rough farmhouse, with a cluster of large cattle kraals close by, and around the house and filling the kraals were dark masses of horses. It was Van der Tann's commando beyond a doubt.

No sooner had one hope been realised, and anxiety relieved, than another equally insistent took its place—the fear of the escape of the quarry lying so unsuspectingly below. True, the main entrance, that on the side farthest away from him, and leading into the open veldt beyond, would be certainly held and barred by now; nor was flight possible up the mountains on either side, for these rose sheer from the valley's level. No, it was not there that the danger lay, but at his end; for Graeme had made a mistake, and a bad one, the previous night. He was not standing at the edge of a precipice, as he had imagined, but on a neck or depression between two hilltops, whence the ground sloped gently to the farmhouse, forming a natural causeway at least two hundred yards across, and easily accessible to Boer ponies and horsemen, who, finding other exit barred, would assuredly turn about and make straight for where he stood. And to stop them, to block that two hundred yards, he had but seventy-five men all told—a weak obstacle, truly, to the rush of desperate fugitives.

Thinking hard, he lay there, but no solution of the problem came, and then

through the still morning air a shot rang out from the far end of the valley, and at the sound the dark figures below awoke to instant life. From the ground they sprang up, out of farmhouse and kraal they poured, swarming in and among the crowd of horses some few fevered minutes, and then, mounting, streamed off at a gallop, heading for the entrance to the open veldt.

Immediately the roar of musketry arose in greeting, and from the rocks on either side a sleet of lead beat in their faces, but for a moment they held on, till, recognising the impossible, they rushed headlong back the way they had come, straight to where Graeme, with his seventy-five men, was lying.

"Bang!" went a rifle close beside him, and at the sound seventy-four others also began to speak, disjointedly; and then were suddenly silent, for their leader was up and running down the line, shouting for the fire to cease and the men to rise and fix bayonets.

"The fellow's mad," muttered Rufford, "never mind, I'll follow you, old chap, and, God! see, the men, after him like hounds," and Rufford sprang up and ran, wildly shouting, after Hector, who was bounding over the stones, swinging his knobkerrie as he went.

Onward rushed the opposing forces, the one a galloping mass of horsemen a thousand strong, the other a weak ragged line of khaki and steel. And well ahead of the advancing commando a man on a white horse led the way, a big, bearded man, white-faced and shifty-eyed; and on those shifty eyes Hector's own were fixed unwaveringly, his pace increasing as the distance between them lessened. Either he or the Dutchman must give in a moment, he knew, and the giving of the one meant the giving of his followers. They were nothing: it was between the leaders the issue lay.

Not twenty-five yards divided them, and still the big man came thundering on, his followers and Hector's checking themselves involuntarily to watch—and then suddenly the end came. The white horse, obeying his rider's mind, and not the merciless lash, swerved, reared and then began to rein back. Up went the big man's hands, "I surrender," he said, his shifty eyes roving from side to side. "I surr—" And then with a choked scream he fell forward, his face a red, featureless mask from the smash of the knobkerrie; a second time the club rose and fell, a dull crushing sound was heard, and Cornelius Van der Tann rolled sideways from his horse and fell on the ground dead.

"On, men, on," shouted Hector, "now's the time to drive it home," and he rushed on, waving the bloody knobkerrie as he went, "Ah!" and a shout of exultation burst from his lips, for again the horsemen had turned, and were galloping back to the farmhouse and kraals, where they lay for a while undisturbed.

Only for a time, for, on the mountain overlooking them, figures soon began to appear, cautiously picking their way among the rocks. A burst of firing

from the buildings below greeted them, whereupon, crouching low, they came forward at a run, dodging from stone to stone, and then suddenly sank to earth and were gone. A moment's pause followed, and then came the sharp sound of shots directed straight down into the crowded kraals. It swelled to a roar, was answered by a burst of screams, and then up went the white flag. Bugles rang the "Cease fire," and silence once more.

From the far end of the valley a knot of horsemen came galloping, a red triangular flag waving in their midst. At the sight the mountain slopes around awoke to life, and brown figures started up from the ground, their white faces glaring in the morning sunlight. A ripple of movement went through their ranks, helmets flew off, and were raised aloft on rifle-barrels; a murmur arose, which swelled and grew until it merged into a roar of triumphant cheering.

* * * * *

"I have sent for you, gentlemen," said Colonel Bradford, addressing the assembled officers some two hours later, "to thank you all for the loyal support and assistance you have given me this morning. There is one thing, however, I should like to say, there is one great lesson I hope all of you have learnt in the campaign, which has just been so successfully brought to a conclusion, and that, gentlemen, is the necessity of never yielding to despondency. I am aware—I must say it, though I regret to—that amongst both officers and men there has been of late a certain tone of discouragement. That, gentlemen, was wrong and unsoldierlike, where, I ask you, should we be now had I too showed those feelings? Back home, gentlemen, back home, in disgraceful retreat.

"No, gentlemen, a soldier's motto must always be *Nil desperandum*, for, as you know, 'the blackest hour is always that preceding the dawn.'" He paused, puffing out his chest. "That is all, I think," he added, "except to ask you to convey my thanks to your respective commands, though, of course, I shall publish an order on the subject. And now, Godwin," turning to that officer, "for breakfast. Graeme, where the deuce has that fellow got to? What, breakfast not here? Oh, damn it, man. Ah, I forgot though, you were guiding Rufford's column, and devilish well you did it too. By the way, that was a nasty rush you stopped, killed Van der Tann too, I hear, how did you do it? I couldn't see clearly from where I was."

"Went for them with the bayonet, sir; didn't wait for them to come to us, but attacked. They couldn't stick it, and went."

Bradford whistled, his face grown suddenly disapproving.

"Gad, but that was a risky thing to do, Graeme, why, you had but a hundred men."

"Seventy-five, sir, to be exact."

"And you charged them with that. You're a very lucky officer, Graeme, that's all I can say. Still, it turned out all right, though I'm hanged if I can understand how. And now for breakfast, we'll draw the Rutlands, I think, Godwin," and Bradford, humming a tune, walked gaily away.

"And that's just one of those things you never will understand," muttered Hector, looking after him. "They don't teach that at the Staff College. Oh, Godwin, I didn't see you. Do you want me?"

"I do, rather," answered the long-nosed man, and then was silent, staring at Hector until he grew restive.

"What is it?" he asked sullenly.

"I should like to say, Graeme," replied Godwin, still staring, "that I consider you one of the pluckiest officers I've ever met."

"You—you mean that charge, sir?" said Hector, his face lighting up.

"I don't mean anything of the kind," was the unexpected answer. "I am alluding to the information you brought in last night, and on which we—providentially acted."

"I don't understand you, sir."

"Oh yes, you do, and so did I all the time, and that's what I mean when I say you're the pluckiest man I've ever met. And on that pluck I congratulate you, Graeme, only, if I were you, I shouldn't try it again, it mightn't come off a second time, you see. About that charge of yours, though, that's a different matter, and, speaking unofficially, of course, I say do *that* again; by *that* I mean attack whenever and wherever you can." He stopped, looked at Graeme, and burst out laughing. Then suddenly holding out his hand, wrung Hector's in its clammy grasp, and hurried away, leaving the other staring after him.

CHAPTER XI

Laden with trophies, bright-faced and triumphant, the column started on its way back to civilisation, and in ten days' time, to the strains of the local band, sent forward to meet it, was marching proudly through the poplar-lined street of Gethsemane. This town is inhabited mostly by Colonial Dutch, whose loyalty or the reverse rose or fell according as the fortunes of war inclined to one or the other contending party.

The death of Van der Tann and capture of his commando having brought about a fall in Dutch stock, they were now loyal British subjects, and consequently from every hotel, private dwelling-place, and shop the gay bunting streamed. Functionaries, in civic robes, came forward to greet their preservers with hands outstretched in welcome, as they bade them enter and feast themselves on the good things made ready in their honour.

Nor were the prisoners forgotten, a forbidding wire-enclosed zeriba having been prepared in their honour, and here, the whole town turning out to watch the operation, they were speedily deposited, and left till such time as the authorities saw fit to arrange for their removal to Cape Town.

A time of relaxation ensued, the officers revelling in late hours, clean shirts, and the social delights of tennis, croquet party, and dance; the men in unlimited beer, tobacco, and well-nigh nightly "sing-songs."

Colonel Bradford made speeches, roared lion-like at social entertainments, and spoke of the British flag, and the well-known loyalty of Gethsemane inhabitants, sentiments greeted with loud and unanimous applause by his hearers.

On all faces were smiles, in all hearts joy, save in the case of Hector Graeme, who was, as usual, in antagonism with his fellows. "Confound it, man," said Bradford to him one morning, Hector having been more than usually unresponsive to his Chief's good-humour, "what an ungracious fellow you are, one would think, by Gad, you were sorry instead of glad at our recent success, why, last night at dinner you were infernally rude to the Mayor. I tell you I don't like it, Graeme, and, what's more, I won't have it," and Bradford stalked away in dudgeon, another black mark registered in his mind against his unsatisfactory A.D.C.

Had it not been for Major Godwin, events would long before this have come to a head between the two, for, since the capture of the commando, Hector had once more relapsed into his former irritating ways of slackness and inattention; and had, moreover, recently added another fault to the list, that of almost continual absence, passing his days, to the neglect of his Chief, in long solitary rides about the surrounding country.

This in itself was not distasteful to the Colonel, rather was it a relief, for his former feelings of annoyance at Hector's ignorance and casualness had of late become replaced by another—that of dislike, even hatred, for his subordinate. He felt that peculiarly bitter hatred we feel for those to whom, in a moment of expansion, we have revealed some jealously-hidden weakness, and who have responded to the revelation by a counter-display of strength, comforting possibly at the time, but becoming an intolerable and rankling memory once that hour is passed and security attained. To all save Hector—and perhaps one other—Bradford was a hero, one who had accomplished the hitherto impossible, and daily the longing grew, not so much to get rid of this one witness of his hour of

humiliation—for that, for reasons of his own, he shrank from doing—as to crush him, stamp on him, and load him with obloquy. This he did to the full extent of his power, depriving Graeme of the smallest show of independence, ruthlessly snubbing him, and countermanding even such orders as in his position he was entitled to give, fearful lest they should be construed by those outside into his management by a subordinate, and that this suspicion would finally culminate in the belief that it was not he, but Hector, who had in reality brought about the recent capture.

If Bradford, on his part, cherished these feelings towards his aide, Hector was even more bitter against his Chief, the main reason for this being the Colonel's refusal to acknowledge or even allude to the services rendered to him by Hector on that momentous occasion. "Damn it," he muttered, watching the hero's gracious acceptance of congratulations on one occasion, "it was I, not you, who caught the beggar; but for me, you would have slunk back with your tail between your legs, and instead of addresses and flags, it's hooting would have met you from this same loyal town of Gethsemane. Lord," yawning and turning away, "how infernal slow that honours' list is in appearing, six weeks, at least, since the names went in. I wonder what they'll do for me? Brevet, I suppose, and probably a D.S.O. as well; can't very well do less, they might give me a column too, and then, Bradford, you ass, you can run your own show, and we'll see what sort of success you'll have. Gad, what a show-up it will be for the impostor, doing all right when I'm there, but coming to grief once I'm gone," and Hector, comforted at the thought, called for his horse and rode away into the mountains.

At last the long looked-for honours' list arrived, in which Bradford's name appeared as a Major-General and C.B., and Godwin's as Lieut.-Colonel and C.M.G. Many others were rewarded with Brevets and D.S.O.'s—amongst the latter being Rufford, of the Veldt Rifles. Of Hector Graeme, however, there was no mention, peruse and reperuse the list as he might; and, incredulity at last giving way to certainty, his face grew suddenly livid, and a look came into his eyes, which caused Godwin, who, with Bradford, was in the room, to spring up, and, seizing Hector by the arm, lead him outside, before the words trembling on his lips were uttered. "I know, I know," he said hastily, "but don't be a fool, Graeme; there's time enough yet. Go for a ride; curse the veldt if you like, but not the..." Hector, obeying him, went, and riding fiercely away into the mountain flung himself down on the ground, where he lay, a prey to one of those secret wild fits of passion, the first he had given way to for four years—in his room at Fort Hussein.

Limp and white-faced, he returned to his quarters, to find Godwin awaiting him; and a long conversation followed, the first of many, for the long-nosed man had taken a liking to Graeme, one of those occasionally awakened—which are

almost invariably strong and lasting—by the universally unpopular. This liking, however, was in no way returned by its object, who considered the other a bore, the more so as he was continually harping upon one subject, that of the necessity of military reading to a soldier, a pursuit for which Hector had no liking, especially for the class of literature recommended by Godwin.

"Two things are necessary to make a leader," his self-appointed counsellor would urge, his pale-green eyes lighting up with enthusiasm as he spoke, "one the natural qualities of character, which cannot be acquired; the other, knowledge of one's profession, which can, by books. The qualities—I may be wrong, of course—I think you have; you're certainly aggressive, the great thing; but the knowledge you have not; indeed, you're one of the most ignorant officers it has ever been my fortune to meet. And you may be the strongest man in the world, Graeme," he concluded, "but, if you can't box, the fellow, with half your strength, who can will knock you out in the first round."

"Not necessarily," was the answer, "the cleverest professors with the gloves are often useless in the ring. Their hearts are wrong, they don't mean smashing their men, and never lead, only wait to be knocked out. And it's just the same, I imagine, in war. Take this last show, for instance; you know as well as I do, Godwin, that—"

"That but for the—information you brought in that night," interrupted the latter hastily, "Van der Tann would probably still be at large. That, of course, is a matter, Graeme, I must decline to discuss, and if you take my earnest advice you'll forget the episode as quickly as you can. Believe me, you'll ruin your career if you don't. But what you say, about the finest boxer being useless in the ring, proves nothing beyond the fact that character is the most essential of the two things I spoke of. Make the two boxers equal, or, as that's impossible, make them nearly equal in that respect, and the victory goes to the one with most science. Take Blücher, for instance, as strong a character as there has ever been, but, because he was ignorant, he lost army after army till Gneisenau took him in hand, and, acting as his brain, told him what to do. He, a general, Graeme, had to rely on another man's knowledge; he admitted it himself when he said, 'Ah, Gneisenau, what a general I should have been had I only read!'"

"I'd read fast enough, Godwin," said Graeme, "if I'd got any incentive to do so. It's recognition I want; give me a start, I'll do the rest."

"Bah!" replied the other, "some men go without recognition all their lives, and still struggle on. And it may come yet, who knows? Be prepared for it when it does, that's my point; don't handicap yourself with ignorance. Now, I've got nothing to do for an hour, and if you like I'll—"

"Oh, thank you very much, Godwin; it's awfully good of you, but I'm afraid I can't stay now. There's my pony waiting outside, another time I shall be de-

lighted," and here the conversation, as such conversations invariably did, ended in nothing.

Then a fresh disaster befell Hector, his one friend being called home to take up an appointment at the War Office, and with his departure the rapid decline of Graeme's fortunes began. With no mediator to intervene between them, Bradford's treatment of his A.D.C. became daily harsher, till at length his animosity began to be remarked on, and to give rise to the very comment he was so morbidly anxious to avoid; the juniors wondered how Hector could put up with his Chief's bullying; the seniors, why the General persisted in retaining on his staff an officer who, by his own showing, was so altogether incompetent and objectionable.

Bradford, accordingly, found himself in a quandary, for were he to dismiss Hector now, he might find his way to the staff of some other column leader, who—jealous as were most at that time of their kind—would be only too ready to listen to a tale belittling Bradford's recent achievements; while, on the other hand, did he keep Hector where he was, the suspicion would certainly arise that he had his reasons for doing so, those reasons being that his A.D.C. knew too much to be allowed to leave.

His whole frame of mind was an instance of the curious childishness that saps the intelligence of men, often deemed the strongest, who, while listening to the admiration expressed by the public for some edifice constructed by their hands, are all the time conscious of a flaw in its foundations, which at any minute may cause the building, and with it its architect's reputation, to crumble before their eyes. None of the spectators know of the flaw—probably never will know—but the architect does, and the alarming, though quite natural, cracking of the new edifice is to his mind the voice of the flaw, shouting its existence to all present. He hears it, they must too; and the slightest word—a careless suggestion uttered without reason or meaning—tells him that all is discovered, and he will be proclaimed an impostor.

Thus it was with Bradford. The most casual observation anent Hector and his doings on the fateful night would throw him into a fever of anxiety, the culminating point being reached on the occasion of a visit from the Commander-in-Chief to Gethsemane, when, in the course of conversation, he remarked that his host's A.D.C. certainly cultivated a somewhat remarkable style of dress, but to which, from what he had heard, other staff officers, notably Gneisenau, were similarly addicted. It was an unfortunate remark, and on hearing it Bradford grew hot with agitation. Gneisenau? He, then, was Blücher, and the Commander-in-Chief knew everything. Someone must have talked; someone in the column—probably Graeme himself. At the last thought a fury of hatred seized him, and, his distinguished guest having departed, he summoned Hector to his room, where

he accused him point-blank of gossiping about him, his Chief. Graeme denied it. Bradford called him a liar, upon which Hector's pent-up rage broke loose, and he told Bradford what he thought of him.

With horrid accuracy he dissected his General's mind before his eyes, holding up the pieces for him to see, and concluded with a direct accusation of jealousy of one to whom alone he owed his recent honours and reputation.

"Yes," he said finally, "I lied that night, I own it, I did it to save you, and it did. It was the only way to get you on; you were all for going back, but I made up my mind you should not. Now you have it." He stopped, panting.

"Your ... quarters ... sir ... consider yourself..."

"Only too glad, and I'll tell the court-martial the whole story," answered Hector, going.

"Come back."

"Ah!"

"I said, 'consider yourself dismissed.' Don't come near me again, d'ye hear?"

"Where am I to go?"

"I'll arrange that, go." Hector went, leaving Bradford white and shaken, as he saw in his mind's eye his late A.D.C. hurrying from Mess to Mess, and stripping, as he went, all his new-born reputation from him. Like most mental visions, it was altogether baseless, for, whatever other faults Hector possessed, pettiness was not among the number, and despite his threat to reveal all at the court-martial, he would, nevertheless, had such taken place, kept scornfully silent on the subject.

Bradford, however, had little or no understanding of human nature or character, and consequently sat where he was for hours, fearing to go out lest he should read in men's faces the knowledge of his own undoing. At last, wearily rising, he moved across to the writing-table, and, sitting down, proceeded to indite a letter to Headquarters, in which he stated that, for purely personal reasons, he was desirous of changing his A.D.C., and asked that his present one might be transferred to a post elsewhere.

He suggested the Transport, an unpleasant smile on his face as he wrote, and having finished the letter sealed it, and summoned the orderly, whose face he watched narrowly as he handed him the document. With sinking heart, he noted a cloud on the man's face, the consequence, it may be observed, of a misunderstanding with Martha, the Mayor's parlour-maid.

The result of the letter was Hector's appointment as transport officer to a small column working in the Transvaal, and to that place he departed, after a short leave-taking with his late Chief, who wished him good luck in his new venture, and regretted that the arrival of a nephew from England necessitated

Hector's removal. He also regretted any differences they might have had, and—and he hoped that—that ...

"I am not a gossip," answered Graeme coldly, "though you were good enough to accuse me of it once, nor am I small," and, ignoring the outstretched hand, he turned his back on his well-wisher.

Mounting the Cape cart, he drove off, and a few hours afterwards was in the train jolting on his way north. In the novel *rôle* of transport officer, however, he proved himself even more unsatisfactory than in that of A.D.C.; indeed, thanks to him, the column he served well-nigh starved, and this fact, in the form of a peculiarly damaging report from its leader, having been brought to the notice of the authorities, Hector was relieved of his duties, and relegated to a stool in a commissariat office.

With the decline of his fortunes, his ineptitude seemed to increase. A further and even more damaging report having been received, Hector again started on his travels, and this time for the last and lowest stage of all—a blockhouse on the lines of communication. The months passed, the War slowly dragged to its close, but no further notice from authority did Graeme receive; and with the flitting of the days his sense of grievance and injustice increased, till his whole mind was consumed with bitterness and hatred of his kind.

At times he even meditated, should the chance occur, the throwing in of his lot with the enemy, and taking what revenge he could on his persecutors; but, fortunately for him, the chance did not occur—no enemy showing themselves within a hundred miles of his dreary abode. Day after day he sat staring moodily out on the bare brown hills and monotonous stretch of scrub-clad veldt, praying for the enemy to appear; but in vain, and at last this hope died. Another scheme took its place in his mind, that of leaving the army, once the War was over, and joining that of some other nation, his eventual aim being the leading of that army against his own country-men.

It would be a delight, indeed, he thought, to show to those who now ignored him what manner of man it was they had dared so to treat. How he would crush them, gloat over them, remind them of the despised transport officer and commissariat clerk; and perhaps, if fortune were kind, Bradford might be in command against him, Bradford brought in a prisoner before him. He wouldn't hurt the creature, oh no, he would be rather nice to him, and let him go, asking as a favour that he should continue to lead the opposing forces, so as to make his task the easier.

How mad they would all be, traitor they would call him, and so he would be, and glory in it and their hatred. Even Lucy would turn from him; no, she wouldn't, though. Lucy would be heartbroken, but never turn; and after all she would have had her wish, for she wanted him to retire. She was as bitter as he

about the injustice he had received. He took from his pocket her last letter, and read it again, and as he did so his face assumed the puzzled expression it always wore on the perusal of her letters. "Again no mention of the child," he muttered; "nothing but the postscript, 'Ruby, poor mite, is well enough.' Well, it's mail-day to-day, perhaps she will say more. There is the mail too," watching a small cloud of dust rapidly approaching along the sandy track. "Here, you," to the orderly, who had now reached the blockhouse, and was handing a bundle of papers and letters to the Sergeant, "bring mine out here. Hum! three; one I don't know, one from Lucy, and a London paper, addressed to me in her handwriting. I wonder what for, home news does not interest me at all."

Faintly curious, he stripped off the wrapper, and, unfolding the newspaper, ran his eye over the pages, till at length he found the marked paragraph he expected. For a moment he stood staring; then his face grew suddenly scarlet, and a shout of jubilation burst forth from his lips. Sergeant Newcome and the men, running out to ascertain the cause, beheld their erstwhile apathetic officer throw his helmet into the air, rush at it as it reached the ground, and dance upon the headpiece till it lay a mangled mass of khaki and cardboard. "Orderly," he shouted to the retreating figure of the postman, "come here, take this fiver, and order up beer from the commissariat, gallons of it; we'll make a night of it, Newcome, my friend, or rather you and the men shall, while I do sentry go."

"Sir?" said the astonished Sergeant, while the men stared vacantly at the transformed figure before them.

"Read that," shouted Hector, handing him the paper; "not there, you fool, oh, give it to me then, and listen." He read:

"To be Brevet Lieut. Colonel.

"Hector Archibald Graeme, Major"—Hector's majority was but two months old—"1st Lancers."

"A bloody Colonel, d'ye hear that, Newcome? Now go. I'm off to that kopje, and if you come near me I'll brain you!"

Hector, the paper in his hand, hurried away, and, reaching the kopje, flung himself down, his heart singing and pulses leaping with exultation. Gone, dispelled in one brief moment were the rancour and bitterness of the last twelve months; and in their place, though but ephemeral, was a feeling of kindness towards those very military authorities, schemes for whose downfall had so recently been occupying his mind. They had made amends, tardy, it was true, but nevertheless they had made them; they had recognised his merit at last, and that in no unsubstantial way.

Colonel Graeme—he a Colonel, snap his fingers now he could and would at all, Peter Carson amongst the number, Peter, who had always been so damned superior over his seniority to him, and yes, by the Lord, he would be senior to

Royle, now a fortnight old Colonel. No, he wouldn't though; Royle's promotion had been antedated, which brought him on top by a few months. "Swindle, that antedating is," he muttered, a cloud coming over the shining sky of his happiness; "takes half the pleasure away. They might have given me a D.S.O. too while they were about it; three ribbons is a beggarly show for a Colonel, must have five or six at least. I ought to have five too, if I'd had my rights: the V.C. for that Mortlock business; the Jubilee, which would have gone with it; the frontier and the two they are certain to give over this. Never mind, I'll soon add to my three. I'll volunteer for every blessed show; they won't refuse me; they daren't now I'm known.

"Lucy ought to be pleased too; it's a lift for her as well, and, oho, won't her old uncle, the General, be furious? Thought me a waster, did he? Well, it will show her that what I always said, and she refused to believe, was right, that he's a prejudiced old fool. Hang it, I think I'm more pleased at scoring off him than anything else. By the way, my other letters, I'd forgotten them, let's see what Lucy says first.

"Hum, hum, 'So glad, so very pleased. I always knew it would come in time, and how much nicer to retire as a Colonel.' What, *I* retire, and settle down like a cabbage in a field, now that I've just begun? No, Lucy, not for the wide world; that idea is dead; you had your chance, and wouldn't take it. Funny to think how I might have missed it though; one word from her that night at Chillata, or even the next morning, and I'd have stayed, I wanted to, too, I wished to sink myself in husband and father, though I'm hanged if I can understand it now. Ah, Lucy, there are bigger things in store for me, now. A Colonel, what's a Colonel, after all? But, to go on ...

"The very loveliest place in Norfolk, an old hall, just what you've always wanted—'yes, but not now, Lucy—'2,000 acres rough shooting, partridges, ducks, and a golf-links close by. Oh, do please make haste to retire and come home.'—Partridges ... ducks ... a golf-links ... Bah!—'Ruby, poor mite, is anxious for your coming..."

Again the puzzled look came into his eyes. "Why always 'poor'?" he muttered, "it irritates me rather; I've no doubt she's the same as other children, fat and bouncing. 'Daddy' I suppose she'll call me, want me to play bears, tree at Christmas, and all the rest of it. Doesn't appeal to me at all, I'm afraid, though, in my folly, I thought it would at one time. Now for the other letter, hullo," turning it over, and looking at the signature, "it's from Godwin, what on earth can he have to write to me about?" He began to read:

"MY DEAR GRAEME.

"It's come at last you see—congratulations. I, regret to have heard of your recent successive misfortunes, but, as they are entirely your own fault, I confess to feeling no pity for you. If a man not only refuses to learn the rudiments of his profession, but, in addition, takes a curious pleasure in putting up his superiors' backs, he must expect to go to the wall. I hope, however, that eight months in a blockhouse may have been beneficial, and now that you have been so unexpectedly fortunate you will change your ways, and also read. 'If I had only read, Gneisenau, what a general I should have been!' Write these words out and, stick them up on your looking-glass, where, I should say, they run the best chance of being seen.

"Yours, EDWIN GOODWIN.

"On reflection it may occur to you that the tardiness of recognition in your case may not be without its advantages."

Hector sat staring at the postscript and then suddenly a light broke in upon him. "Kept it back, I see," he muttered, "till I was a Major, thus giving me double promotion. Lord, but they must think something of me to do that, I wonder who it was? Godwin, I suppose. He wasn't quite such a fool as the rest; he could see what they couldn't. How the old fellow, though, hammers on about reading. I've done pretty well without it, so far, and yet I don't know—he might be right. Hang it, I've a good mind to give the thing a trial; there's nothing else to do here, and the War may go on for months. I'll send for some books to Cape Town. I'll do it now, by Jove!" And, one of those sudden imperative desires coming over him, he left the kopje, and, hurrying back to the blockhouse, wrote out an order for all the military books he could think of, sending it off by mounted orderly the same afternoon, special messengers being daily despatched to the post-office till the literature ordered arrived.

From that time the transformation of Hector's blockhouse apartment into a library, and himself into a book-worm, proceeded apace; weekly consignments of military works thenceforth arrived, and, the heart having been torn out of them, were thrown aside and looked at no more.

In his youth Graeme had been sickly, and on that account had not been sent to a public, or even a private, school, his mental training having been entrusted to governesses and tutors, whose instructions were on no account to force the lad's inclinations, with the result that he grew up practically uneducated. He had managed to scrape through the necessary army examinations, but this was due rather to a certain "crammer's" uncanny knowledge of his art than to any proficiency on the part of the pupil, and a few months after the undergoing of

his ordeal Hector's mind had once more relapsed into its former happy state of ignorance, in which condition it had remained till the present time.

Fortunately for him, the mental ground thus left fallow had never been weakened by the rank growth springing from the assiduous reading of novels, and the soil was ready and hungry for such seeds as he might choose to sow. In a very few months—though yawning at times over their dulness—he had easily mastered the contents of the dry and unimaginative text-books. This done and duty satisfied, he thereupon indulged to the full his own peculiar bent for character study, as exemplified in the biographies of the world's great commanders.

These he read from cover to cover, no longer yawning, but eagerly taking in the smallest details; indeed, it was chiefly on the trivial incidents of childish life—revealing, nevertheless, the true unalterable character of the subject—that Hector would dwell, marking as he went the paragraphs in which these particulars were described.

Now, to read with the object of acquiring information is one thing; but to read in order to discover a resemblance between yourself and the subject of a biography is quite another, and a most dangerous one, especially for those to whose nature the abnormal appeals, the inevitable result being an unconscious desire to make the resemblance complete, even to the smallest and most objectionable details.

This is what Graeme now began to do. Since he had received recognition, and with it the birth of ambition, he had become firmly convinced that he was destined to join the ranks of the great, and the more he read about them the surer and more exultant he grew, for in the story of their lives he recognised a hundred traits of character similar to his own, particularly in their oddities and eccentricities, on which his mind eagerly seized.

There were some among them, it is true, in whom no sign of himself was to be met with, these the eminently sane and methodical characters; but such he passed over as lacking in the true fire of genius, and their biographies, once scanned, were thrown aside and looked at no more. Of the others, however, there was one in whose character he especially delighted, that one being Prince Suvarov, the great Russian.

His power over his soldiers, eccentricity of attire, recklessness of consequences, and, above all, the ingrained determination to attack and never wait on the defensive, all these characteristics he felt himself to possess; and inasmuch as Suvarov not only scorned to conceal, but gloried in, the revelation of mental peculiarity, so now did Hector do the same, giving full rein to that passion for difference from his fellows which hitherto, chiefly from the wish to please Lucy—to whom such was anathema—he had to a certain extent concealed.

The immediate result of this was, as usual, in the army, the bestowal of

a nickname, Graeme soon becoming known as "Mad Jack," a designation which stuck to him till the day of his death. This, far from annoying its recipient, delighted him, and fired by the sensation he was causing he went further. One of his habits, that of riding down the line of blockhouses in a state of nature save for a towel, having come to the ears of the General commanding the district, the result was a sharp reproof and request that Colonel Graeme would in future comport himself as an officer and a gentleman.

To this Hector replied in rhyme, which so infuriated its recipient that he reported the matter to Headquarters, and for a time Graeme's career was in serious jeopardy. Providentially, at this crisis the enemy at last thought fit to put in an appearance, their assembly at a farmhouse three miles distant, with the avowed object of capturing Hector, who as a colonel was worth something, being reported to the latter by an English farmer living in the district.

Thereupon, without waiting for the expected onslaught, and in defiance of standing orders, Graeme called up the garrison of every blockhouse under his command. Leaving these empty save of scarecrow dummies, he sallied forth the same night, and surprised and captured the sleeping commando at dawn.

The following day happening to be Palm Sunday, he despatched his prisoners to District Headquarters under an escort decorated with long grass and reeds, his despatch, giving an account of the affair, being couched in the form of a hymn. This the escort were forced to practise for an hour before starting on their mission, their Chief conducting their efforts with his knobkerrie, with which he threatened instant death to any man who sang out of tune or laughed. His labours were in vain, however, for, despite the most stringent orders and threats of dire punishment did they disobey his orders, the escort's courage failed them at the eleventh hour, and the prisoners were handed over in silence by a crimson-faced, grass-decorated subaltern.

For this exploit Hector received nothing except a reproof for impertinent levity, and, the War shortly after coming to an end, he was despatched to Blauboschfontein, to await the arrival of his regiment. This took place some few weeks later. Royle was in command, and over him Graeme soon established a complete ascendancy. Carson, the one man who might have proved an obstacle in his path, having retired shortly before, disgusted at the regiment's non-participation in the War. Hector thus succeeded to the position of second-in-command—that is, nominally, for to all intents and purposes he reigned supreme.

He conducted the training of the troops; introduced startling innovations; and, in short, did what he liked, his confidence in himself and contempt for superiors growing daily. A constant and, to his fellows, unaccountable sequence of successes in field-days and manoeuvres followed, Hector's methods when confronted by an adversary being so unusual as to render useless the ordinary stereo-

typed means of defence, and though generals and other superior persons shook their heads and talked of wild schemes, still these plans somehow always came off, despite their gloomy prophecies.

Graeme's schemes were not quite the wild ones they were supposed to be, but, on the contrary, were formed on a perfectly sound basis, namely, on his knowledge of his opponent's peculiar character, and thus proved the safest. Well he knew the process of the ordinary military mind and its adherence to text-book principles. These and the answering moves they understood, and were consequently never confronted with them, being paralysed at the outset by a cut to which no text-book gave the correct parry.

Give him the wild, hairbrained adversary, however—and on one occasion such a foe was put up against him with a view to his discomfiture, by General Banks, officer commanding the district, and his bitter enemy—and straightway Hector's tactics became of the most ordinary and stereotyped description, the result on the occasion in question being the rout of the harebrained one without his opponent having moved from his original position.

Graeme moreover, by now, knew his text-books as well as and probably better than, his most learned adversaries, and was consequently well aware of the risks he ran, and from which quarter danger was likely to come; and, this being so, half the peril he incurred was gone.

Altogether Graeme prospered, and was happier in Blauboschfontein than he had ever been before; and with happiness came physical well-being and health, things that had been practically unknown to him till now.

He loved the country too, spending hours roaming about the veldt till nightfall, when, with cheeks aglow and eyes alert he would return to his quarters and bury himself in his reading till dinner. A most respectable meal consumed—for him—he would seek his room once more, read again for an hour, and then tumble into bed and sleep dreamlessly till dawn. With reveille he was up, and away to the riding maneges to take his place amongst the young horsemen, a situation for which, to speak truth, Graeme was not qualified, being as a rider deficient in both "hands" and patience.

All this time Lucy's letters were weekly growing more insistent for his return. Did he not want to see her again, she wrote? The house too, Cuddingfold Hall, she had taken, relying on his coming, though only for a year, in case he should not like it. She had, however, the option of a long lease, though goodness knew when another prospective tenant might appear. If he did not, after all, now wish to retire, and from his last letters it seemed he did not, at least he could come home on leave; they would not refuse him that after three years' absence.

Lucy's appeals remained disregarded, and probably would have remained so but for another event that took place about this time, namely, the sudden death

of his father. Hector thus becoming owner of a small property in Scotland.

The announcement of the death was accompanied by a letter from his lawyers, requesting his immediate presence at home; and though this also was for a time ignored, Messrs. Quill & Screw became so urgent in their demands—hinting at serious pecuniary loss did he fail to return at once—that Graeme was at length forced to comply, and submitted an application for six months' leave of absence.

This was gladly forwarded by Colonel Royle, who had secret hankerings after the control of his own regiment, and equally gladly approved by General Banks, who jumped at the chance of getting rid of Hector, if only for a time; and a week later, his passage secured, Graeme was comfortably seated in a first-class compartment of the famous *train de luxe*, on his way to Capetown, where the mail steamer, *Dunrobin Castle*, 12,000 tons, was already waiting alongside the quay.

CHAPTER XII

Through the shining tropic sea sped the *Dunrobin Castle*, homeward bound, a speck of scarlet and grey in a waste of still, oily blue. Canvas awnings glared white in the morning sunlight; pitch bubbled in the seams of the holystoned decks; from metal-work and fitting, flashes of light smote blindingly on the eye. Over the towering oval-shaped funnels a faint shimmer hovered; from clanging engine-room rose the reek of oil and steam mingling with the hot air above; wire stays quivered dizzily to the dull throbbing of the screw.

On one side of the ship, where a faint breeze blew, a row of chairs stretched along the deck, their occupants reading, chatting, or lazily looking on at games of deck billiards, quoits, or bull, played by the more energetic of the passengers; on the other, now invaded halfway across by the glare of the slanting sunlight, there were only two figures, the one that of Hector Graeme, the other—the length of the deck away—of a girl, Stara Selbourne.

Both were apparently reading, but neither had turned a page for an hour, their thoughts being of one another. Stara wondered why, since this man was so obviously interested in her, he declined to avail himself of board-ship licence and speak instead of staring. Hector revolved in his mind for the hundredth time suitable words with which to begin, and cursed the curious awkwardness

that inevitably assailed him when in her vicinity, impelling him to pass her by without a word when he had approached her with the object of commencing the attack.

This stupidity on his part, moreover, apart from its novelty, was the more galling, as for the first time in ten years he found himself desirous of talking to a woman other than his wife; in fact, even in the short space of two days this desire had begun to take possession of him to the exclusion of all else, even to that of the perusal of a parcel of new books with which he had intended to occupy his whole time when on board.

It is perhaps unnecessary to mention, Hector's attention having been thus aroused, that Stara Selbourne was possessed of personal attractions, these being of that soft, essentially feminine kind before which the strength of men evaporates.

Looking at her now as she lay, lazily disposed among a heap of pink-and-white cushions, the short-lipped, sensuous mouth half open, and soft, dimpled cheek resting on a tiny white hand; noting, moreover, the fineness of cambric blouse and skirt, the sheen of tightly-stretched silken stocking, and the amber combs in the elaborately curled hair, one knew instinctively that this daintiness was not mere outward show, but part of her nature, and that, strip off the outward husk, no incongruities would stand revealed, no monstrosities of wool and flannel, the unseen would be a wonder of snowy and beribboned delicacy. In hunting parlance indeed, Stara, even where no such catastrophe was to be apprehended, was, and always would be, dressed "for a fall."

Nevertheless, despite this general appearance of femininity, signs were to be observed of other characteristics, signs of a somewhat startlingly contradictory nature. The chin, for instance, though soft and white, was most unfemininely firm, almost hard; while the eyes, long in shape and black-lashed though they were, were not of blue, as to be in keeping they ought to have been, but of light grey, clear, steady and rather cold—in no way languishing.

These eyes she now kept fixed on her book, firmly determined to run no risk of meeting even one of the frequent glances directed at her from the other end of the deck; of which glances, as also of Hector's mental restlessness, she was at the same time perfectly aware.

"Let him come and talk if he wants to," she thought impatiently; "ogling is a practice I abominate; it's a servant-maid's trick." And Stara at last turned another page, forcing her attention once more back to the relation of the adventures of one Mademoiselle de Maupin, Hector at the same time returning to the theory of heredity as expounded by Arthur Schopenhauer of pessimistic notoriety.

"Physical qualities from the father's, mental from the mother's side," he reflected, laying the book down again. "Well, that seems true, my mother was

clever enough, though a bit cranky. He's a bit out, though, about the other, poor old governor was rather an ugly chap."

He yawned, stretched himself, and once more his eyes wandered to the far end of the deck. "Still there," he murmured. "Wherever I am, there she is too; must do it on purpose; wants me to talk to her, I suppose; doesn't know I'm married; if she did, her interest would very soon die. Bah! what humbug it is, that a man should be debarred from amusement because of a mere conventional tie. No wonder those other fellows, Nelson, Suvarov, and the rest, revolted; they couldn't stand restraint any more than I can.

"Mustn't, you're married, family man and so forth, it's just that makes one want to do things. Damn it, for years I've never looked at a woman except Lucy, and see the result, I've become a fossil; don't even know how to begin. I've been only half alive all this time, and I want to live, and I think somehow that girl would help me. She looks as if she'd love well. I've a good mind to try it, just for the voyage. I'm strong enough, thank God, to pull up when I want to. Hanged if I don't let myself go all I know; no, I'm bothered if I do; she'd only laugh at me if she knew and that I could not stand."

Again he took up his book and began to turn over the pages. "'Ethics.' Don't know what they are, and don't want to either. 'Man's need for metaphysics.' Have none myself. Ah! 'On Woman;' that sounds better. Oho!" reading; "this is capital.

"Injustice is the fundamental failing of the female character. This arises from the want of reason and reflection, and is assisted by the fact that they, as the weaker sex, are driven by nature to have recourse not to force but to cunning, hence their instinctive treachery and irremediable tendency to lying. For as nature has armed the lion with claws, the bull with horns, and the sepia with ink which blackens water, so has nature armed woman with powers of deception for her protection."

"I'd like to read that aloud to you," muttered Hector, again glancing up; "shake your conceit a bit, I should say, or ought to."

He went on reading:

"Only the male intellect befogged through the sexual impulse could call that undersized, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped and short-legged sex fair, for in the sexual impulse resides its whole beauty."

"Beastly way of putting it," murmured Hector, who possessed the ultra refinement that is usually a characteristic of those in whom the moral sense is deficient, "and it's not true either—she's neither undersized nor short-legged. I'll take a walk past her now and look, to make sure, rather interesting this."

He rose, and moved slowly up the deck towards the reclining figure, who, at his approach, turned another page.

"I really believe he's going to at last," she thought, with a faint feeling of excitement. "No, he's not, he's shied again," as Hector went by looking straight before him. "Oh, this is too absurd, I must help him, I suppose." Whereupon away fluttered Stara's bookmarker, across the deck, a low exclamation of annoyance escaping her as she watched it nearing the ship's side.

Hector, turning at the sound and noting its cause, picked up the errant bookmarker and brought it back, indulging himself, as he did so, with a straight, steady stare into her eyes, and, meeting them, one of the odd fits of giddiness, which of late had been increasing in frequency, came over him; the sweat stood out on his forehead and the girl's figure was hidden for a moment in mist. He reeled, catching at the back of her chair for support; then fingers of steel gripped his arm and he found himself in Stara's chair, she standing looking down upon him, her eyes alert and interested.

"Damn!" said Graeme, when the mists had gone and he realised the situation.

"Certainly 'damn' if you like," was the answer in clear tones, "but don't move, stay where you are; d'you hear me?"

"I certainly won't, why should I?"

"Because I tell you to. I'm a nurse, and know what I'm about."

"You ... a nurse?"

"Yes, but never mind about that. Why do you sit in the sun, if it affects you like this?"

"Because I like it, but I'm hanged if I'll sit here while you're standing. I'll fetch my chair and bring it over."

"No, I'll go," and Stara walked leisurely away, and returned dragging the chair, in which she proceeded to settle herself.

"What a beast of a chair," she said, wriggling; "not nearly so comfy as mine. Oh, there's a book here, what is it? Ah, Schopenhauer," picking it up and opening it, the pages falling apart where Graeme had last been reading, 'On Woman.' "Oh!"

"Don't read the stuff, please, Miss Selbourne; it's rubbish from beginning to end, that chapter."

"Don't be alarmed, Colonel Graeme; I've read all his works, and about this essay, personally I think it very true, though perhaps a little violent. I wonder, though, whether he made it up with her afterwards."

"Her, who?"

"The woman that essay was written at. Pique and disappointment show in every line. He was certainly in love when he wrote it."

"Surely a man like Schopenhauer would be above such weakness."

"Above humanity? I think not, Colonel Graeme."

"You think, then, that every man must—must—"

"I don't think at all about it, I'm sure. That's what he exists for, and woman too, though she pretends not to. I should say I know my Schopenhauer better than you do, Colonel Graeme."

"In that case, if we exist solely as prospective fathers and mothers, and the attraction between the sexes is merely the cry of the unborn child, the stronger the attraction the finer the child. Any two people who feel that attraction should—should—" He stopped, confused, for the light grey eyes were on him, and the look in them brought him to a standstill.

"If we were beasts of the field, no doubt we should be as they are. Rating ourselves, however—perhaps wrongly—as higher, we recognise the necessity of social laws. But tell me, or don't if you like, what was the matter with you just now. I'm professionally interested."

"I don't know, it's a thing that has been growing on me lately; whenever I'm excited it comes on as it did then. It's a nuisance when I don't want it, though useful enough when I do. I can't control it, though, that's the mischief, but I'm boring you."

"No, you're not, go on, tell me what you mean by not controlling it."

"Why, this. Whenever I'm in a difficulty, and don't know what to do—have to fight a battle, for instance, and can't think of a plan—I just shut my eyes and let myself go. For the moment I seem to lose consciousness of my present self and become another, and that other always knows and tells me what to do. Then I sort of wake and do it. D'you think I'm mad, Miss Selbourne?"

"I think," said Stara slowly, looking at him, "you're going the right way to make yourself so. That other self you talk about is—call it the subconscious, if you like; and let that—and you're encouraging it to do so—gain the upper hand over the conscious, and madness results. I should stop it at once, Colonel Graeme; it's deadly dangerous."

"May I ask how you know all this?"

"As I told you, I'm a nurse, or rather going to be one. Oh, don't look so astonished and stare at my clothes. I'm very frivolous and expensive-looking, I know; but once I get to work, away goes all this into portmanteaux, and, with it, the world, the flesh, and the devil."

"I don't think he'll remain long in the portmanteau," said Graeme, looking at her mouth and dancing eyes.

"I don't mean him to; he goes with me when I have my day out, or whatever nurses have. Then I shall become frilly and pretty again, and make a night of it, see all the wickedness I can. That's my idea of life, Colonel Graeme, austerity or debauch. I love the veldt, I can saddle my own pony, shoot buck and koran, and cook as well as most chefs, but I must have a break-out sometimes; not a

lady-like break-out—tea, dancing and flirtation—but the real thing.”

Hector frowned. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said shortly.

“I do, perfectly. I said *see* the wickedness, Colonel Graeme, not take part in it. I’m not a man.”

“You certainly could not go out by yourself; it wouldn’t be—safe or—right,” answered Hector, the value of social conventions dawning upon him for the first time.

“Nor proper, I suppose. Thank you for telling me, but, as it happens, I can take excellent care of myself, and if you’ve got a pair of foils on board I think it possible I might surprise you, though you are a soldier. Oh, listen, that’s the ‘Matschish,’ which always thrills me, makes me feel I should like to have a lover. Oh, please, don’t be obvious, I should hate it really, I only like to think about it, like Madeleine de Maupin, though that’s not quite a parallel case either,” she added, reflecting.

“Who was Madeleine de Maupin?”

“Oh, you’ve not read the book, that’s all right then. I can talk about her. I’m afraid Madeleine was not a very correct person, like me. She too wanted to see life, and, if she could, find a perfect lover—not one who pretended to be, like most men, and talk afterwards when they’re drunk, but someone she could trust when away from her. So she put on men’s clothes, which I should hate, though in my fencing kit, white satin ... but perhaps you’ll see me in that if you’re nice and don’t make love except when I want you to. That time is not now, Colonel Graeme,” another look from the grey eyes arresting the movement of his hand towards hers.

“I wasn’t going to,” he muttered sulkily. “I don’t want to touch your hand, why should I?”

“I can’t imagine. But about Madeleine, she had all sorts of adventures on her travels; women made love to her, she fought duels and won them too, and then at last she found him.”

“And got married, I suppose? Same old ending, why can’t they think of something different, I wonder?”

“Madeleine did; there was nothing banal or ordinary about her. She waited some time after she found him, trying him, and then when she was satisfied he was what she wanted, she put off her man’s things and sent for him.”

“Without her things. I agree with you, Miss Selbourne; Madeleine was far from correct.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course she had a dress on, a woman’s dress; that’s why she sent for him, to show herself in it, to prove to him she was a woman after all.”

“And what happened then?”

"Oh, nothing much; there the story ends. She admitted she loved him and next ... after that, left him."

"That was a poor sort of thing to do, why did she do it?"

"She didn't want to spoil it, I suppose. I think she was right too. They parted, loving one another, anyway."

"I don't think much of the man for allowing it. I would not have—"

Stara looked at him meditatively.

"No," she said at last; "you, I should say, would have followed it up till she'd really begun to care, not the mere passion that she felt to start with, but the steady love that comes with time, and only a woman, I believe, can feel. Then you'd have got bored and left her."

"That's cheap cynicism, Miss Selbourne; there are happy marriages."

"No doubt. I was talking of what you'd do. Very rude of me, but you introduced the subject."

Graeme felt very angry indeed. Analysis of character, he considered, to be his own particular privilege, and to have it applied to himself, especially when, as in this case, the reading was so obviously false, was most irritating. His whole life gave the lie to her words, he thought, and a sudden feeling of loyalty to and affection for Lucy sprang up, momentarily obliterating Stara's attractions from his mind.

"As it happens, Miss Selbourne," he said stiffly, "you're rather out in your prophecies. I've been married for the last ten years, and believe that, so far, I have shown none of the symptoms you mention."

"I apologise, Colonel Graeme. I didn't know, of course, and you don't look married."

The frown vanished from Hector's face, for her words were pleasing—no man likes to look married.

"I suppose," he said, "it's because I've been such a lot away. It's three years since I was last home."

"I wonder whether you ever met my brother, Richard Selbourne, he was out with the Yeomanry during the war, and settled down afterwards on a farm in the O.R.C. I've been staying with him and my sister-in-law."

"Place called Duikerpoort?"

"Yes."

"I have, then; my regiment camped on his ground last manoeuvres, and your brother dined with us, I remember. Where were you?"

"At home, with Polly, my sister-in-law. We watched you ride away. Oh, look!" with sudden delight in her eyes as they fell on a small fat child slowly toddling about the deck some distance away, "quick, fetch her and bring her here; she'll be gone if you don't hurry."

Graeme reluctantly rose and walked over to where the child was playing. Unceremoniously picking her up, he returned to Stara, the little girl faintly whimpering in his arms.

"The idea of holding a child like that," said Stara indignantly, snatching his burden from him; "no wonder the poor mite was beginning to cry. Oh, you darling," bending rapturously over the baby, who was now smiling up at her, her hands playing with Stara's coral chain, "how perfectly sweet you are, and how I wish you were mine. Look at her little feet and legs, Colonel Graeme; oh, you're not interested a bit."

"I confess I'm not; babies have no attraction for me."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Every man ought to love children. Haven't you any of your own?"

"No," snapped Graeme, and walked sulkily away down the deck, stopping at the far end to look back. Stara was still holding the child in her arms and talking baby talk to it, obviously oblivious of his existence.

"Schopenhauer's right," he muttered; "they're hypocrites, every one of them. Night of it, Madeleine de Maupin, and now baby talk—don't go together the two. I've done with it, I know the sort: pose as fast and bite you if you say anything. I'll get some books and go on the upper deck. I shan't see her there."

He descended to his cabin, picked up a couple of books at random, and went above, where he sat down amongst the boats, and, ignoring the luncheon bugle, tried to concentrate his attention on Lombroso. "It's too hot for this stuff," he muttered, after reading the same paragraph half a dozen times without taking in a word. "I'll try the other, Shelley; I don't know why I bought the thing except for the short biography at the beginning." He read this through and lay back reflecting. "Woman, always woman in these fellows' lives," he murmured; "domestic unhappiness seems inseparable from genius." He began to turn over the pages. "*Epipsychidion*—now what does that mean I wonder?" He began to read, and, bored at first, soon became absorbed, the flaming passion in the lines stirring something within him that had been hitherto unawakened.

"We shall become the same, we shall be one
 Spirit within two frames. Oh! wherefore two?
 One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,
 Till, like two meteors of expanding flame,
 Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
 Touch, mingle, are transfigured: ever still
 Burning, yet ever inconsumable."

Graeme laid down the volume. His eyes were shining, and his face had become

very pale.

"Nothing banal about that," he murmured; "no married sameness, no dreary domesticity. It's all free and lawless, as it ought to be. God, the thing's maddened me; I can't keep still!" He sprang up, hesitated for a moment, and then hurrying below looked furtively up and down the decks. He searched the saloon, the music-room, the library, but all to no purpose; that which he sought was not there. Gradually he was seized with anger, then anxiety, and finally a sick longing. Restlessly he wandered about the ship, now trying to read, now pacing the decks, till at length the dinner-bugle sounded and he went below to dress.

"She shan't escape me afterwards," he thought, watching her across the crowded saloon; "we'll sit together away from the world, and the romance of our lives shall begin." Stara, nevertheless, did escape him, despite his vigilance, and, wait though he did till after the decks were in darkness, she appeared no more.

Sick with disappointment and a bitter sense of humiliation, he at length went down to his cabin, and, flinging himself on the bed, tried hard to sleep. But the bells clanged the hours away and sleep refused to come, till at last he rose from the tumbled bed and sat up, irresolution in his eyes.

"Sanders told me not to," he muttered; "he said for me it was fatal, but what am I to do? I shall go mad if I don't sleep. I don't care—I will," and Hector switched on the light, dragged out a dressing-case and took out a small phial containing tablets.

"Thank heaven," he murmured drowsily, half an hour later; "better than all the natural sleep in the world. Stara..." His eyes closed, and he fell asleep at last.

CHAPTER XIII

The old proverb, "One man may better steal a horse, than another look over the hedge," like most sayings of its kind, possesses a very deep meaning, particularly when applied to the passions and emotions by which human nature is swayed.

There are beings, for instance, to whom a little flirtation is a pastime, enjoyable maybe, but never to be allowed to interfere with the serious business of their lives; it is taken up or dropped whenever it pleases them, for their natures allow them so to do. On the other hand, there are others to whom a love affair, once entered upon, means a temporary enthrallment of body and soul; and to this class belonged Hector Graeme. Though but ten days had elapsed since the

episode of the bookmarker, he had managed, even in that short space, to forget both love of wife and his ambition, the one destroyed for ever, the other for the time superseded by a mad unreasoning desire of possession the more imperative because of the seeming impossibility of fulfilment.

The small phial, hidden away in his dressing-case, was by now almost empty. Its contents had been drawn on at the rate of three or four tabloids a night, and yet sleep, save intermittently, failed him; nor could he eat, racked as he was by the triple pangs of unsatisfied desire, impatience of the wasted present, and jealousy of the future, with its certain rivals.

Such love as this the brutal and plain-spoken call "lust," the more refined "earthly passion." Scornfully they contrast it with the sentiments they feel for their own beloved, ignoring the fact that love between man and woman, disguise it as you will, is that and that only—the sexless guardians of the harem proving this in their insensibility to the emotion—though it varies according to the nature of him or her who feels it.

Thus the dull, material being is as dull and brutish in his loves as he is in all else; the rare, steadfast nature, knowing no satiety, loves on till death; the ardent and imaginative invests his mistress with a halo of romantic fancies. And so, Hector loved Stara, with an exalted, passionate adoration, rendering him, for the time, ready and longing for any manifestation of self-sacrifice, and, as he truly believed, incapable of the very wrong to the accomplishment of which his whole present energies were nevertheless directed.

It is men like Graeme who are the only really dangerous lovmakers to pure-minded women, for apparently grossness has no part in their minds, they place their divinities on a pedestal and worship at it: not for worlds, they declare and believe, would they sully her white purity with suggestions of earthly passion. Then the time comes, and they ... do, and that far more effectually and thoroughly than doer, the ordinary commonplace lover, whose feeling, though obviously of the earth, is nevertheless healthy, and not rendered unnatural and fantastic by a fevered imagination. And so Hector vowed that Stara was, and would be always, sacred to him: he only wanted her love, that was all, and to gain this he now concentrated all the force of which his nature was capable. But the days were slipping by, the end of the journey was already in sight, and still so far, apparently, his efforts were all in vain; for, from the first, Stara had made it plain that she would have none of his lovemaking. Good friend he might be to any extent, but nothing more; and to this resolution she adhered, despite all his attempts at trespass on ground forbidden, and thereby rendered imperatively desirable.

The whole day long she would sit with him, and often till late at night, when the decks were dark, and, save for them, deserted; also she would dance with him,

fence with him, and on one occasion had even matched herself to drink against him. This last, however, like their fencing bouts, had resulted in humiliation to Hector, who, with the deck heaving beneath his feet and the stars dancing giddily above him, had staggered away below, his steps being guided by the soft, white, yet steel strong arm of his late antagonist. Further, she would discuss love in all its aspects, but at any attempt on his part to take advantage of her candour, and turn the conversation to a personal issue, Stara would round on him, lashing him with her tongue in a manner that left Hector sullen and discomfited for hours afterwards.

Indeed, so far, with the woman lay victory, even in those very intellectual attainments on which he had now come to set such store; for his reading, compared with hers, was as the veriest smattering, while in knowledge of subjects called deep, and ability to discuss them, Stara was on another plane.

Nevertheless, though hitherto baffled, Graeme's purpose remained unchanged, rather it increased in intensity with the passing of the days. Nor did his confidence in ultimate success lessen, for that Stara loved him he felt intuitively certain, though at the same time he realised that she was determined not to acknowledge that love, possibly from pride, more likely because she did not believe in his, thinking it to be but a passing infatuation and not the life's passion it really was to him.

He must make her believe—that was all; not by words, for they, he realised, would never convince her, but by action, and that soon, for his own endurance, he knew, was now well-nigh at an end. The only question was, what was that action to be? Something big it must be; nothing small would do. Well, the bigger the better; he wouldn't shrink whatever it was, even to the burning of the ship, if necessary, and subsequent rescue of Stara from the flames. He didn't care—the end was before him, and everything must give way to the attainment of that end.

He was debating these things in his mind one afternoon, as he lay in his deck-chair with eyes closed and brain feverishly working. From the other side of the ship, where sports were now in progress, bursts of delighted screams and clapping of hands came at intervals.

Close beside him sat Stara, reading; a somewhat pale-faced Stara of late, with blue shadows beneath the long, grey eyes.

Suddenly she smiled over her book, and, looking up at her companion, spoke. "Here's something for you, Colonel Graeme," she said. "Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't see you were asleep."

"Asleep, how the devil could anyone sleep with that row going on? Oh, confound it all!" angrily, as another loud outburst of hilarity came from the other side.

"You're very captious this afternoon, why grudge those people their amuse-

ment?"

"Amusement! Dropping potatoes into a bucket or chalking a pig's eye on the deck? The swine's an unclean animal to most of them too, I should say. Amusement—God!"

"Far better for you, Colonel Graeme, if you were to do the same, instead of sitting all day reading unhealthy books. I should like to talk to you seriously about those books; I've been wanting to for some time. Will you listen?"

"All right, if you'll listen too when I talk seriously, as I shall ... soon."

"What do you want to say, nothing silly, I hope; because, if so ... what is it?"

"Never mind now; go on."

"Well, then—oh, bother you, Colonel Graeme—! I wish you wouldn't interrupt; I've forgotten what I was going to say."

"My books," watching her.

"Oh yes, don't stare, please. Well, an unhealthier selection than you have here on board I've never seen. There's Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, imagination gone mad. Schopenhauer, a philosophy to justify wrong-doing, hence its popularity; it's full of flaws too."

"How?"

"Here's one, at any rate: in his main argument for pessimism, he says desire for anything means unhappiness."

"He's quite right."

"And because we're always wishing for something, we must necessarily be unhappy. He's quite wrong; it's that which alone gives happiness and keeps us alive; for, take away hope—the same thing, for what we desire we hope to get—and suicide would inevitably follow. Everyone, even the most wretched hopes, don't you?"

"Yes, but don't rest content with hoping."

"Well, there's one flaw in your Schopenhauer, there are many others too, but never mind. Now for Lombroso, your other favourite. I see you have 'The Man of Genius' there. Throw it overboard, if you're wise."

"What's the matter with it? It's science."

"Perfectly true, but you're neither a scientist nor a doctor. That book is as bad for you as the advertisement of a quack medicine is for some weak-minded people. You find all your own symptoms, and, like them, are glad when you do. Drop such reading, Colonel Graeme; take up something healthy."

"Like that thing you've got there, I suppose, 'The Cow in the Morning,' isn't it? It sounds as if it might have been written by one of Lombroso's friends."

"Don't be cheap, please. It's 'The Heifer of the Dawn,' and, well, you may think it silly, but I don't. Listen to this, and judge for yourself, though in the

interests of women I consider this particular paragraph ought to be suppressed." She took up the book and began to read.

"She that is to retain her lover's love for ever must possess, first, a body without a flaw, or his senses will stray from her to other bodies, for it is their nature to seek their proper object; secondly, intelligence, or his esteem will depart elsewhere; and thirdly, goodness, or his soul will abandon her in search of that without which it cannot do, and without which the other two component parts are worthless except for a time. And as it is for the woman so it is for the man, with this difference, that their bodies and their intelligence and their souls are totally unlike."

"And, if she has all that, he's bound to be faithful, I suppose?"

"In theory yes, but I'm afraid not practically. You see, the speaker, being a woman, looks at it from a woman's point of view, which is not that of a man, their intelligence being, as she says, totally unlike. She thinks that, if she is perfectly beautiful, her husband's thoughts will never stray to one less so. But that can't be right, for in many cases men have left beautiful wives for ugly mistresses. A woman can't or won't see that—that—how shall I put it nicely?"

"That in the sexual instinct lies her whole attraction. Pah!"

"Thank you, though that's not nicely put.... And once that dies, her beauty ceases to exist for him. She might be a picture on the wall as far as he's concerned: the beauty is still there, and others see it, but the owner has seen it too often and got tired."

"And the intellect part?"

"No good at all to keep him. A man may like talking to a so-called clever woman—which, by the way, only means one quick to utilise men's brains, for no woman can originate, only receive—but that doesn't prevent him from kissing a pretty fool five minutes afterwards."

"According to you, then, fidelity is impossible to a man."

"Certainly not; however, it's not love that keeps him faithful, but other things, a sense of honour, pride in his family, and possibly a feeling of compassion."

"What damned nonsense!"

"Colonel Graeme?"

"So it is. You sit there, knowing nothing at all about it, and reel off yards of cheap clap-trap cynicism picked up from rotten, morbid books. Lord, talk of my reading doing me harm!"

"My views are not gathered from books, but observation. I know what I say is true."

"And may I ask how, if you do, you can contemplate the idea of marrying one of us brutes, as you told me the other day you did eventually?"

"Because I'm human, like everyone else, and when the time comes, as it unfortunately must, I suppose, I shall be like any other woman, or like—like you. I shall recant all I've said, and believe in undying love and the rest of it. I can see now; then I shan't be able."

"Sure you can see now?"

"Quite sure, Colonel Graeme, absolutely, perfectly sure," she added, somewhat unnecessarily meeting his eyes.

"Absolutely—perfectly', why such emphasis, Stara?"

"Please don't call me 'Stara'; it annoys me."

"I shall call you 'Stara' from now."

"You will not. Why—why should you?"

"Because—"

"Be quiet, here's someone coming. Oh, it's that poor creature Hayward, why doesn't someone look after him? It's sad to see him."

"Drunken brute! I'll bash him if he comes here. I wish he would, and insult you, I believe I'd kill him if he did."

"You'd do a very cowardly thing, then, which would disgust me more than I can say. It's not the destruction, but the saving of life that appeals to me, Colonel Graeme."

The man, a harmless creature enough save for his one failing, at this moment shambled by, smiled vacantly at the two as he passed, and then, moving behind the wind screen some distance away, perched himself on the rail, where he sat rocking, his figure just visible from where they sat.

"I've pity for that man, and pity only," continued Stara. "Why, where are you going, Colonel Graeme, to see the sports? All right, I'll come too."

"No, stay where you are," answered Hector rather indistinctly, his face averted from her; "I'll be back in a minute, I'm only going down to my cabin to fetch..." The rest of the sentence was lost, the speaker having disappeared through the main companion.

Once more Stara returned to her book, and then a minute later flung it down and jumped up, her face blanched and every nerve quivering; for high and shrill in her ears a scream of mortal terror was ringing and then was suddenly hushed.

"Man overboard! starboard side!" wailed a voice from the forecastle head. The beating of the screw ceased, and the ship quivered to the short, sharp bursts of the siren.

A tumult of voices arose; the clatter of hurrying feet. "Where is he, who is it, Stara?" and Graeme, coat and shoes discarded, stood beside her.

"It's Hayward, he's no longer there, what are you going to do, Colonel Graeme? Hector, you shall not."

"Oh yes, I shall—but before I go—Stara, say it."

"Say what?"

"You love me, Stara—quick!"

"Oh, I do—I do, Hector—you—you shall not. Oh, Hector, there are sharks hereabouts."

"No shark can hurt me now, Stara, love; good-bye." and springing on to the rail he stood for a second steadying himself, looked back once and was gone. With a crash he struck the water, the blue surface seeming to rush up to meet him as he fell, and then, like an arrow, flew down, apparently for miles, down through a strange jade-coloured world into the very heart of the sea. Surely he must strike the bottom soon, he must have journeyed for hours already, yet still he was rushing on. What would it be like, he wondered vaguely, that unknown ocean floor—rock, sand or oozy mud?

Ah, he was stopping at last, and yes, slowly, very slowly rising. The return to daylight had begun, but—what a journey lay before him: those endless miles of water, thousands of millions of tons of liquid crystal between him and air. Could he hold out, would his breath last? No, not unless he hurried, and a sudden desperate feeling of anxiety seizing him, he began to fight, his hands tearing at the dense green wall above him. Frenzied, he fought, heart and lungs well-nigh bursting, and in his head the loud, wild clanging of bells; then, suddenly, the desire to struggle ceased, and in its place he felt a sense of rest and dreamy content. In his head, now strangely clear and light, a voice began to sing—only one verse, that of a music-hall ditty, last heard at a soldiers' "sing-song" in Dutch Gethsemane. "I would I were a kipper in the foam," it repeated for the hundredth time. Well, that's what he was—in the foam, at any rate; but a kipper—a kipper... "I would I were a kipper in the foam."

He must think this out; it was clear as daylight really—daylight—light—light; and then with a sudden stunning roar the mists of death were torn asunder and the veil of water gone.

Slowly back from death's gates he came, his dazzled eyes blinking at the fathomless blue above, and labouring lungs gulping down the salt evening breeze. It seemed hours that he lay there, though but a minute in all had passed since his leaving the ship's side, hours of perfect peace and rest; and then suddenly strength came rushing back, and with it consciousness of his own being. A faint wonder at first, a chaos of mingled remembrances, and then sequence of ideas and full realisation of his surroundings. With a thrust of his foot he raised his head and shoulders above the water and looked about him; there, a mile or so away, floated the great grey shape of the *Dunrobin Castle*, a faint haze of smoke showing above the scarlet funnels, her decks black with figures, all faces turned to where he lay. And yes, that was a boat being lowered down her side, and

thereupon the last cloud of mist lifted from his brain and he remembered what he had set himself to do.

Again he looked around, and saw some distance away a white object, with pole attached, looming gigantic against the sky, as it rose and fell to the lift of the waves. Striking out, he swam towards it, and, seizing the cork circle, held on, his eyes searching the water about him, and then, with an exclamation, let go and struck out to where a black object had appeared for a moment above the surface and disappeared. Reaching the spot, he waited, peering down, until it again slowly rose, and a steel claw shot up from the depths, gripped his foot, and under went Hector in the hold of a drowning man. Then up once more, the two interlocked, till wrenching his arm free, Graeme beat on the other's head, and the frenzied struggling ceased. Then throwing himself on his back, and clutching the man's coat-collar, he slowly towed his prize back, and, reaching the buoy just as his strength was failing, held on gasping, the other's head falling forward into the water, where it lay.

For a minute Graeme remained contemplating him, and then hauling him up beside him, looked closely into his face.

"Dead, I think," he muttered, "and God knows I hope so. Anyway, I've saved what's left of you. I'm a hero now, thanks to you, you drunken sweep," and despite circumstances hardly calculated for mirth, something seemed to tickle Graeme, for he suddenly burst out laughing.

Suddenly he stopped, with a startled look in his eyes. "Now what was that?" he murmured. "I could have sworn something touched my foot." He looked down, and below him saw hanging a dark shadow: a dull eye was fixed upon his, and then the shadow was gone, hung poised for a moment, and whirling round, came back. A monstrous shape gleamed white through the green beneath him—a savage tug, and the burden he was holding was nearly torn from his grasp, and then became strangely light, trailed loose in the water, now no longer clear.

For a second, Graeme was seized with wild terror, a loud shuddering shriek burst from his lips and went echoing across the sea; a hoarse shout of encouragement, the rattle and bang of feet upon boards, coming in instant response from the boat rushing onwards. Well its crew knew the meaning of that cry, knew also that their efforts might be all in vain, and where rescuer and rescued now floated nothing might be found save a few torn rags and a swirl of bloody water.

With this vision before their eyes, they bent themselves to their work; rough hands closed on the great oars, and corded muscles stood out on fore-arms, till the heavy boat rushed through the water and foam flew up from her bows. But the shriek was not repeated, for already rage had conquered fear in Hector's heart, and with rage came not only the fierce determination to hold on to that which he had won, but to grapple with and destroy this new enemy who

had dared to attack him.

Feverishly he sought for a weapon, and in his pocket found a small knife. With eyes as wicked as those beneath him he peered down, his arm drawn back to strike. On came the shape once more, down went Hector's hand, a curse escaping him as the enemy turned and fled. "Damn you!" he shouted to his burden, "but for you I'd go after him, I can't leave you, though; I've sworn to get you back and I will. Come on, come on!" he shrieked.

"It's all right, sir; you're safe now," sounded from close behind, and Graeme and his prize were seized, hauled up and placed gently in the boat, a horrified "Gawd!" rising from the crew as they saw what Hector was holding in his arms. For, as he himself had said, it was only what was left of Hayward that had been saved from the seas.

"Let me go, blast you, let me go!" screamed Graeme, struggling with a burly sailor. "I've not begun on that shark yet, let me go!"

"Strike me, but you're a masterpiece!" muttered a voice. "It's no use, though, sir; the bastard's gone. Look," and a hand pointed to a black triangle, swiftly moving through the water a hundred yards away.

"Ark, sir, to that," cried another; "they've seed you, sir, from the ship," and for a moment the creaking of the oars ceased, all listening to a dull roar rolling across the water from the motionless *Dunrobin Castle*. "They're cheering you, sir; blow me if we don't cheer too," and seven lusty voices set up an answering shout, Graeme the while sitting frowning at the still open knife in his hand.

"Spoilt it all," he muttered, "that devil getting off."

Back across the sea the boat went springing, and, as she neared the grey side, from the whole ship's company—crew, passengers, stewards, even the white-aproned and behatted cooks waving ladles and frying-pans—renewed cheering arose, and then suddenly was hushed, for the boat was now under their eyes and they saw the grim heap in its stern.

Up the lowered ladder went Graeme, the Captain himself standing at the gangway to meet him.

"You're a brave man, sir," he said; "it's not your fault it's been so ... little use."

Graeme said nothing, for again the ill-timed merriment was seething within him, and only with the greatest difficulty was held in check.

He hurried on, and then stopped, for Stara was before him, a new Stara to him, the grey eyes misty with tears and face white and quivering.

"I've brought him back, Stara, what's left of him, a shark tried to get the rest, but I fought him and won."

"God bless you, Hector. I—I—" and Stara burst out crying, whereupon the cheering was renewed, and Graeme, with exultation in his heart, went below.

* * * * *

"Can't—can't you forget it, Hector, it was wrung from me, is it fair to take advantage of a moment of weakness?"

Stara's form drooped before him, her whole attitude spoke defeat. Alone on the darkened decks the two were standing; eight bells had just clanged through the stillness.

Hector looked at her, his eyes glowing into hers, drew nearer and then suddenly bent and kissed her. Maddened at the touch of those soft lips, he caught her to him and repeated the offence a dozen times, Stara resting passive in his arms.

"Darling, why struggle any longer?" he whispered. "We love each other; it's no use fighting, Stara. Oh, my love my love;" and then stopped confounded, for the girl had done the best thing she could, and was sobbing violently on his shoulder.

At the sight, that which men call the better mood came upon Hector, passion yielding for the moment to tenderness, its child.

He laid his hand on the bowed head and stroked her hair.

"Stara, dearest, listen. It's true I love you, and you—it's no use denying it now—love me; but there's no harm in that. I won't hurt you, dear. You're safe with me. We don't injure that which we love, Stara."

Stara looked up at him, the grey eyes tear-dimmed and hair tumbled.

"It—it's not possible, Hector; I couldn't trust you or—or ... myself."

"I'm strong enough for both, Stara."

Stara stared into his eyes, searching for that she wished to find, and wishing, as always, found.

"I want to trust you, Hector."

"You can. You're sacred to me."

"If I do, will you promise to—to be as you were, before ... you ... knew, you won't make love to me, you—you'll never try to kiss me again, you'll be content with my friendship?"

"More than content, Stara."

"If—if you really mean that, dear, if you won't take advantage of what I've said, I—I ... will trust you, and ... for the last time I will say it again, I love you, Hector. Good-night, dear."

"Good-night, Stara." He turned away, his eyes looking out seawards. A touch on his shoulder roused him, and looking round, he saw Stara once more before him, her face scarlet and eyes shy.

"Hector."

"My dearest."

"I—I've come back to say ... good-night, dear; and ... as it's for the last time, and from now we're only ... friends, you may ... just for this once..."

For a moment she clung to him, returning kiss for kiss, and then, breaking free, hurried away, leaving Hector on fire behind her.

CHAPTER XIV

"What you venture to propose to me now, Colonel Graeme, is, in plain English, a double establishment, over one of which I am to have the honour of presiding, and this, I suppose," tapping a slip of paper in her hand, "is my first quarter's housekeeping allowance?"

Stara's voice was like the dropping of ice-cold water and her eyes steely as she stood up, straight and slim, every faculty alert and concentrated on the crushing of her opponent, who was carelessly lounging against the ship's rail, his half-closed eyes fixed on hers.

"The exact opposite, as of course you know; but 'even as the sepia darkens the water with ink, so does woman."

The thin ice of Stara's composure flew into a thousand sparkling fragments, the grey eyes darkened as she moved towards him, her small hands clenched.

"You, you stand there and jibe at me! You insult a girl you professed to—to care for, and then laugh at her. You ... devil!"

"I told you I loved you, if that's what you mean by professing. I say so now, and give you the greatest proof I can."

"How? By proposing to degrade me, me who you said was sacred to you, by a low intrigue? Your wife one day, I suppose, and me the next. I'm to be your toy, an amusement when you tire of her or want distraction from your soldiering. A proof of love, faugh! This cheque's another proof, I suppose you think."

"Hadn't you better be quiet and listen?"

The thicker ice of Graeme's self-control was now beginning to crack ominously.

"I won't. I hate you. You took advantage of a moment of weakness any other man would have respected, to—to make me say things. You swore I could trust you, and I, like a fool, believed it, and against my own judgment let things be as before. I've sat with you, tried to amuse you, dressed for you even, why, it was for you I put on this dress to-night, because you said you liked it and this

was our last night together. And all the time you were thinking, planning ... this."

She stopped suddenly, for Graeme, all pretence of composure abandoned, had seized her by the shoulders and was shaking her. For a moment she faced him bravely, and then before his anger hers died. She began to tremble, and then broke down and sobbed.

"Now, will you listen to me? If I have to keep you here all night to do it, I'll make you in the end. You're wrong, altogether wrong."

"I won't. I don't want to hear; and how—how can I be wrong? You said you wanted me to belong to you, and how can I, except in—in the way I said? You're married, and—and ... you gave me money; it's the money which kills me!" And passion reawakening, she flung the cheque from her over the rail. For a moment it fluttered in the breeze, and then was blown back again to their feet. Hector picked it up, smoothed it out, and, after looking at it for a moment, put it in his pocket.

"Perhaps it's as well you did not present this, Stara," he said; "I forgot to date it, as I usually do. Now, if you're ready and won't interrupt, I'll explain."

"You can't. Don't try to. I shan't believe you whatever you say. Oh, go on then."

"I'll take the money first; that's a trifle, the other's not. You remember some time ago, when I told you I was always hard up, you offered me your quarter's allowance. Fifty pounds it was—all you had."

"That was different."

"And you said that surely one friend could do a little thing like that for another. Did I fly out at you then?"

"But you didn't take it."

"Because I didn't want the money. You do. There are those bills you told me about."

"I would never have told you, had I thought you'd take advantage like this. That's not what I did it for."

"I know that as well as you do, but all the same you did tell me, and you said that, when you reached London, they'd probably serve a writ on you. Now, I'm not going to have you bothered by beastly tradespeople, and so I did the little thing you said one friend might do for another—I wrote you a cheque."

"Hector, will you swear that was all you meant?"

"Certainly I will."

"Oh ... We'll let that pass, then, though I don't say I believe it, mind. And now for the other, rather more difficult of explanation, I imagine."

"I'm coming to that presently. First, you must take this money."

"I will not, the idea."

"I'll give you another cheque to-morrow morning. That's settled. Now..."

"Oh, please, please don't ask me. Well, if—if I do, I won't spend the money."

"Please yourself about that; and now for the other." He paused, and then again seizing her by the shoulders while the glow in his eyes became a leaping flame, went on: "We love each other, Stara, and love such as ours must be satisfied. What do conventions matter to you and me; leave them to the weak fools whose lives they trammel. Belong to me you shall, not, as you think, by paltry deceit, but openly, for the whole world to see. It's marriage I offer you, not dishonour."

Stara looked up at him bewildered.

"Are you mad, Hector, your wife?"

"What is she to me—what is anything to me? Stara, in the whole world I can see but one thing now, you, and you I swear to have."

"I don't understand. You're married; nothing can alter that. Oh, why talk about impossibilities?"

"There's nothing impossible to me. There never was from the time you told me you loved me. Listen and I'll tell you what I mean to do. To-morrow I shall see her—I will call her 'my wife' no longer, Stara—and I'll tell her it's you I love and not her. I'll say, too, I've come to break with her, that the past is finished and a new life begun. Oh, I've thought it all out; the thing's as good as done now."

"I won't be party to such a hateful bargain. Besides, what if—if she won't?"

"She will, she's a sensible woman; she will understand and set me free, and then, then, Stara, I shall claim you."

"You shall not, I won't be a party to this, I say. Oh Hector, dear, this is madness. Think what you're saying, think what it means, to abandon a wife of ten years for a woman you met but three weeks ago, the dragging of your name through the mud of the Divorce Court. Never, Hector, never!"

"Such things are nothing to me, but you do what you like, consent or not as you like. I shall do it all the same. Can't you see it's my love for you that has made it impossible for me to go back to her?"

"But, Hector, we—you would forget in time; you will come together again and—and be glad."

"Like they do in moral story books, I suppose, and why should we? We've got a chance of heaven now; we don't get many. D'you think I'm going to give up that for mere paltry scruples? Bah! you're but a weakling after all."

"I'm not, only I happen to have some sense of honour and the ordinary feelings of humanity. Oh, please, please, listen to me."

"Spare yourself the trouble; my mind's made up. It's but a small thing lies between us and happiness, and now you shrink from it, though you're not asked to do anything but look on."

"A small thing, great heavens, you call this a small thing!"

"Anything's small that stands between you and me."

Stara was silent, feeling the futility of further opposition.

"What—what is it you want me to do, then?" she said slowly.

"Marry me when I'm free."

"And if she refuses?"

"She will not, I tell you; but if she does, we'll have to content ourselves with platonics, I suppose. In any case I break with her."

"You'd be satisfied with—platonics?"

"No, I should not, but I won't ask more of you. I promise you that, and I keep my word, Stara."

Again the girl was silent.

"You really mean to do this thing, Hector—nothing I can say will stop you?"

"Oh, why go over old ground, Stara? Now, about you, will you wait in London till I return?"

"No; I will go back to South Africa by the next boat. My brother will think me mad, but he'll be glad all the same. He always hated my nursing schemes. And there's something I want to say now, Hector, before I leave you." She paused and then went on hurriedly: "When—when it's over, definitely broken off, I mean—and, oh, for my sake, dear, try to get her to divorce you—you may come out to me then."

"Why do you say for your sake, Stara, isn't it for both our sakes?"

"Because—because—oh, I won't tell you now, but perhaps you'll find that I'm not quite the weak creature you think, and if you make this sacrifice for me I too may ... make a return. And, Hector, one thing more. Till then I don't want to see you again, to me it would seem like—like an intrigue. When you come you must be free. And so, when we land to-morrow, don't look for me, you won't find me if you do."

"How am I to give you that cheque, then?"

"Send it by a steward, if you must; and when it's all over, wire to me the one word "Coming." I shall understand and be waiting. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XV

The north wind blew keen and lusty over the Norfolk marshland, bending the lush grass and sedge and ruffling the surface of dyke and pool. Overhead there

was a sky of pale blue dappled with white and grey, from which shone forth the yellow ball of a December sun.

Tossed in the wind, flocks of screaming plover and white kittiwake flew aimlessly over the green flat; the plaintive cry of a lonely curlew rang eerily as he scudded swiftly along the foreshore. Now and again a sturdy mallard could be seen stoutly battling his way against the wind towards some rush-covered sanctuary, quacking triumphantly as he hung for a moment over it, and then, dropping, was lost to view. Away to the east a low, ragged line of sandhills broke the green monotony, beyond which lay a foam-flecked jade-coloured sea, streaked and mottled with ever-shifting shadows of purple and ultramarine.

Some two miles inland the square, white shape of a house could be seen nestling in a clump of trees, an unpretentious-looking place, despite its appellation of Hall—Cuddingfold Hall, to give it its full title—but solidly built and comfortable, nevertheless. This was the home of which Lucy had written to her husband, and here for the last four months she had been installed, living now in one room, now in another, for painters, paperers and their kind had been plying their respective trades, and life had been full of discomforts.

Their work had been at last completed, and even to Lucy's exacting mind Cuddingfold Hall had been transformed from a ramshackle human warren into an almost perfect dwelling-place. In spite of the somewhat extensive improvements carried out, it was only for twelve months she had rented the Hall, but she had the option of taking it on at the end of that time for seven, twenty-one, or ninety-nine years, if she wished.

That, however, was for her husband to decide—the husband who was arriving that evening after more than three years' absence. Of his decision she had no doubt whatever, but Lucy, in her own way, was wise, and refrained from signing any lease; she knew that to do so without his consent would be more than likely to inspire him with an instant distaste for the place—partridges and ducks notwithstanding. To bind Hector, meant for him to chafe against his bonds and the certain rupture of them.

She would leave him to do it, and, if she knew him aright, that very night would see a letter, nay, a telegram, despatched to the land agent, to the effect that Colonel Graeme would take Cuddingfold Hall for a term of ninety-nine years. Take it? No, he would certainly insist on buying it, and rush up next morning to his bankers, for the purpose of raising the necessary sum. She could hear him say, "What's the good of paying rent, Lucy? Much better buy; it's always cheaper in the end."

Well, if he wanted to, why not? He must certainly not be allowed to raise the money, for that would not be cheaper in the end. It would only result in a financial crisis, as had happened once before, and an ignominious abandon-

ment of their new home before the year was out; and here, at the thought of her husband's business capacity, an irrepressible smile stole over Lucy's face.

No, she had her plan, that being to buy the place herself and give it to him as a present. She had a little money of her own, which had come to her from her mother, and already Lucy had approached the trustees on the subject of reinvestment. They had demurred, it is true, her uncle, the General, being strongly averse to any scheme giving Hector control over his wife's property; but Lucy, as once before, had conquered, and eventually he, with his co-trustee, had agreed. After all, they decided, it was house property, this proposed new investment, and as such allowable under the trust; and, at any rate, the General would take good care that the place was settled upon his niece and that that fellow, as he always designated Hector, should have no chance of laying his hands on it. And so the matter had been left till Graeme's arrival.

On the afternoon of that event, Lucy was sitting on a rush-covered bank, happily dreaming of the time when this estate of marsh and sandhill would be their own. Here, she thought complacently, watching the wheeling birds, they would settle down for life, and partings and war scares would be nightmares of the past. She would have her rose garden, Hector his shooting, and later, she hoped, a seat in the House, and perhaps in time they might—oh Heaven, how she prayed for it—be given a son. Here Lucy's smile died and the blue eyes clouded. A son, a strong, straight-limbed boy, not like Ruby; and at the thought of her, their only child, a sudden passionate feeling of revolt came over Lucy and her eyes filled with angry tears.

"Why," she thought bitterly, "should such a thing have happened to me? I was so looking forward to her coming too, and was so very very careful. It was not my fault, or that of my ancestry; we have always been strong and healthy. Oh, my God, how am I to tell him? I was mad to keep it from him, but it looked so awful in a letter. What will he say when he sees her—he so intolerant of weakness and disliking children at any time? And all these years I expect he's been wondering what she's like, picturing her as a round, rosy child, who'll want to romp with him and pull his hair. Ruby, romping! Oh," a sudden revulsion of feeling coming over her, "what a brute I am, wicked and unnatural. It's not her fault, poor mite; and if I, her mother, run her down, who's to take her part? And perhaps Hector won't take it so hardly; he'll be kind to her, even if he can't love her—Hector could never be anything else. And he won't see much of her; she'll be in her nursery all day; this cold would kill her at once, poor child."

With a sigh, she rose from the bank and made her way back to the house, when for the hundredth time that day she ran through the preparations for her husband's coming, and then, after a short visit to the nursery, went to her room to dress. The sudden chiming of the clock startled her, and hurrying over the

last stages of her toilet she flew downstairs, impatiently calling for the pony-cart, though it was not due for a quarter of an hour. Rapidly her anxiety was becoming a fever from waiting when at length the trap appeared. Hastily mounting, she took the reins, and, whipping up the white pony, sent him along at his best pace to the station.

Here, as she might have known, had excitement not rendered reflection impossible, she arrived a good half-hour too soon, a time of waiting that would certainly be prolonged to at least one hour—the trains on that line being remarkable for a monotonous unpunctuality. However, with the aid of a little conversation with the station-master, a thorough perusal of the texts decorating the one dingy waiting-room, and some twenty minutes of sentry-go up and down the platform, the time was at length got through.

The sharp tinkling of a bell broke the silence, the sound of wire rustling at her feet was followed by the clack of a falling signal, and then a faint humming growing gradually louder. Far down the line a yellow point could be seen, another shot out beside it, the humming swelled to a roar, and with the rush of a whirlwind the train dashed past Lucy, a flare of yellow lights flying giddily by.

"Heavens, it's going on!" she gasped, dismayed; "they've forgotten to stop it. No, it isn't, though," as the rattle died down and the mass of wood and iron came to a rest at last. "There he is," and Lucy, dignity forgotten in joy, ran up the platform to where a man was standing gazing vacantly about him.

"Hector, darling, oh, Hector, at last, after all these years!" she began, and then stopped suddenly, an icy finger seeming to touch her heart, for this man who stood before her, though bearing her husband's features, was surely a stranger; yet, no, he was speaking to her, addressing her by name, though the voice too was unfamiliar.

"Oh, Lucy," he said, "is that you, how are you?"

"Hector ... what on earth's the matter, aren't you glad to see me? Oh, darling, you're ill; you look half dead," and conviction gaining upon her as she looked, the sudden terror of the unknown died in Lucy's heart and was replaced by a rush of protecting tenderness. She took his arm, her face looking up into his, a world of loving anxiety in her eyes.

"It's nothing, Lucy. I'm only tired; I've been up since dawn."

"Of course you have, dear, I forgot; and I know I was the same, Hector—so excited. I thought the daylight would never come. And then the day, how it's dragged; but it's all over at last, and your..." Again a sudden stop, again the icy finger at her heart, for her husband had turned sharply away, and a ghastly silence followed.

"Porter—where's the porter?" muttered Hector. "Oh, there you are, get my things out, will you? Not that one, you fool, where to? God knows—I don't,

when's the next train back to town?"

"Ain't no more to-night, sir, Colonel, that is, beg pardon, sir," said the man, staring at him and then questioningly at Lucy, whom he knew and liked well, as did already all the natives of Cuddingfold village.

"Take them to the luggage cart, Sims," said Lucy, her voice become suddenly level; "the Colonel's tired with his long journey; and you," smiling at Hector, "come with me. That's our trap standing over there with the white pony. Get in; I'll drive you; he knows my hand, and he's always a little playful at starting. Good-night, Sims; tell your wife I'll be round to see the new baby soon. Steady boy," to the dancing pony; "that's right," and the two drove away. For the first mile there was silence, and then, like a pistol-shot, words burst from Hector's lips.

"What's his name, Lucy?" he asked, the triviality of the question being in odd contrast to the voice that asked it. But triviality was now what Hector was fighting for with all his power, conversation on purely ordinary matters; for in that way only, he knew, could he keep off the numbing sense of unreality that was creeping over him—a nightmare feeling rapidly sapping the strength of purpose that till then had burnt so strong and steadily.

"I have come to do this thing, and I will; I'll be firm, firm, firm," he repeated to himself, and the word mingled with the rattle of the flying wheels and were flung back at him in meaningless echo. Apparently miles away, he heard Lucy's voice answering some question he had put, and which now he could not for his life remember.

"His name, dear?" she said cheerfully. "I call him Whiting, because he's white; and when he's fresh his head and his tail come together. Not very clever, I fear; but then I'm not clever, as I told you once..." She broke off, a sudden stab at her heart. When had she said this very same thing before? Ah, she remembered, at Chillata, that last night; what thousands of years ago it seemed now. "It made Tom laugh," she added hurriedly.

"Tom?"

"He's the groom, and the gardener and hoot-boy and the keeper and all sorts of other things. He's rather a treasure, really, though not much to look at. He's so looking forward to your coming; we—we all are, Hector."

"How—how is—?" God, he'd forgotten his own child's name!

"Ruby?"—a pause. "Oh, you'll see her presently, and I—I hope you won't be disappointed, Hector. A baby, you know, very often at first is—is not ... But I want to tell you about the shooting. It's what you've always wanted: miles of marsh, and such a lot of ducks, you can hear them quacking every night; and to-day a flock of widgeon passed over the house, within shot too. And there are partridges and pheasants, though not many; and the house—oh, Hector, you'll

like the house," and here Lucy launched out into a description of her property, though truth to tell, she had very little idea of what she was saying.

Only on two points was she clear: one, that at all hazards silence must not again be allowed to fall; the other, that she must hold back for the present from any questioning of her husband as to what had brought about this change in him. God knew what the thing was that had come between them, but, whatever it was, she would hear in time, that was certain; for, thank heaven, whatever her husband's other failings might be, that of deceit was not among them. Till then she must wait as best she could, and, when it came, face and fight it with all the strength in her power. A great crisis was at hand, she knew instinctively, one involving her whole life's happiness; and Lucy was not going to give that up without a struggle.

She might not be clever—she knew she was not—but she was the possessor of a fund of sound common sense and the pluck and staying power of a hundred. And so, as if unaware that there was anything amiss, she chatted on cheerfully, the light trap flying through the country lanes, till at length a pair of white wooden gates were reached. Passing through these, they rattled along a short carriage drive, finally pulling up in front of the house, through the open doors of which a stream of light shone out into the darkness.

At the sound of the wheels a rosy-cheeked maid came bustling out, all smiles and anxiety to help; while from the stables close by a queer-looking creature hastened, wiping his mouth with his sleeve—he had been disturbed in the middle of his tea—and, having touched his cap and grinned sheepishly at Graeme, seized the pony by the bridle and led him away to stable and oats. This person was Tom, of whom Lucy had spoken, a Norfolk man born and bred, and a stranger to towns and their ways. Not a gentleman's servant in appearance possibly—his multitudinous duties forbade that—but an honest and devoted creature nevertheless, and one who had already identified himself with Cuddingfold Hall and its interests.

The arrival of his new master was an event in Tom's life, one he had looked forward to for many weeks; for though contented enough—as were all Lucy's servants—in his present post, he had felt that a man was wanted about the place, one who would be up and after those feathered denizens of marsh and pool, the thought of whose undisturbed serenity had of late begun to get on Tom's nerves. But now that the master had arrived, the master of whose prowess with the gun he had heard so much and often, he felt, strangely enough, a bitter sense of disappointment. This was not the hero he had expected, this white-faced haggard man, who had not so much as looked at him or noted his greeting, but without a word had descended from the cart and walked stiffly into the house.

Something was also wrong with the mistress; the brightness had gone from

her face, and she had also omitted her usual "good-night." Tom was not given to fancies, but, like most of those whose natural instinct has not been stifled by a smattering of education, he, in common with the beasts and birds he loved, knew things intuitively, and that intuition made him aware of a strong feeling of repulsion towards his new master. In vain did he fight against it—it remained; and Tom's ruddy face was strangely overcast as he unharnessed the white pony and shook out his evening feed of oats; nor was his whistle quite so shrill and cheerful as it generally was when performing that operation.

Hector, meanwhile, was left standing alone in the black-and-white tiled hall, for Lucy, on their entrance, had disappeared and the maid was already busy on her knees upstairs with the unpacking of portmanteaux. But now that he was alone and had time to marshal his thoughts, for which he had been praying all through that nightmare drive, the same deadening sense of unreality descended on his mind like a pall, and he stood there, his brain a whirling chaos. Only a few hours before he had felt himself to be of steel, inflexible of will and insensible to all human emotions save that of love; he had even gloried in what he meant to do, as marking him out as a man above his fellows, in that for him conventional scruples had no meaning, and bonds deemed unbreakable he could tear asunder without a pang.

He had told Stara—and had believed what he said—that this was nothing to him. But in the exaltation of that moment he had overlooked two things: the one, the power of old associations over the human mind; the other—the curse of natures such as his—nerves, a legacy bequeathed to him, amongst other things, by his mother, and the revolt of which means paralysis to the strongest will. In vain did Hector call upon that will, it would not answer; in vain did he repeat that this was nothing; old associations told him he lied, and bade him look around and see what this thing was he was about to do.

They pointed to the thousand and one evidences of womanly love and forethought: the spotless cleanliness and comfort of the old firelit hall, the gleam of brass and pewter ornaments, the polish on oak and mahogany. The scales fell from Hector's eyes, and he knew that this same nothing was in reality a horror, growing in intensity with the passing of the minutes, and at the thought of which his coward nerves now quivered and shrank.

Only too well did he realise, standing here, what his homecoming meant to Lucy; the care she had lavished on this place to make it a home, such as he would like; the pride with which she had looked forward to welcoming him to it. All this was his; he was the master here whom all were anxious to serve; no longer was he a mere irresponsible officer of cavalry, but the head of a household—a man to be looked up to and respected. Respected? He? Why, the very servants who now waited so smilingly upon him would turn from him with loathing did

they know his purpose; and soon they must know it, and to-morrow all would be changed.

At the thought, a sudden wave of hatred of himself came over him, and with it a sense of moral uncleanness and unfitness to be in this innocent, harmless household. He bowed his head and shuddered where he stood. Nevertheless, despite his present tortures, he knew that do this thing he would; for his will was but paralysed for the moment by shattered nerves, and it remained the while unchanged; only it was harder, infinitely, immeasurably harder than he had thought. Then he heard the sound of Lucy's voice from above, and, looking up, he saw her from the gallery overhead smiling down upon him, and there was something in her smile that made Hector wince.

"Come up here, will you, Hector?" she said, and the cheerfulness in her voice rang false; "I have something to show you." Without a word, Hector mounted the stairs and joined her.

"What is it, Lucy?" he said dully.

"It—it's Ruby; I want you to see her now, at last; and—and, Hector, you will try not to be disappointed, won't you? She—she's not a very strong child, and there's something ... wrong."

"Wrong, what do you mean?"

"Oh, I know I ought to have told you, and I tried to many times, but ... couldn't. Go in now and see for yourself, and please try and not show you ... you notice, Hector."

"Where is she?"

"That door there. No, no, I won't come in with you; don't ask me, Hector, for I can't," and Lucy hurried away, leaving Hector standing before a red baize-covered door. Faintly curious, he knocked, and a voice said, "Come in." He entered, and then stood staring. In a high chair, drawn up close to the fire, a small pale-faced child was sitting, holding in her arms a yellow plush monkey, to which she was softly singing. As Hector entered, she turned quickly, and at the sight of her eyes the new-comer muttered "Good God!" and clutched at a chair.

"Yes, sir," said the nurse, watching him, "she can't see you; she was born like that. It's your father, Miss Ruby, come to see you and say good-night to you. I think, sir," turning again to Hector, who was still standing motionless, "perhaps you had better go now; she's not very strong, sir, and if distressed..." But the nurse stopped, astonished; for Hector, unheeding, had suddenly stumbled forward, and, picking up the little child, whose thin arms closed round his neck, was crying over her like a woman.

Hastily the nurse rose up, thimbles, needles, and work falling unheeded on the floor, and rushed headlong from the room and downstairs to the kitchen, where she was soon sobbing loudly in the cook's arms.

"I'll never forget it, Martha, not if I live to be a hundred. Him disappointed, him not love the child! Why, from the moment he set eyes on her, he just made one rush and—and ... Oh, he's a good sort is that man, Martha, a right down good fellow," and again she sobbed aloud, the cook also weeping in sympathy. Nor, may it be here remarked, did the nurse ever subsequently change her opinion, but, deaf to all argument and blind to proof, maintained always that the master was a good master, let them say what they liked, and, if some folk weren't rightly able to understand him, that was their fault, not his.

Above, in the firelit nursery, father and daughter made friends; for the incredible had happened, and Hector had taken to this poor weakling as he would never have done to the sturdy, healthy romp prayed for by Lucy. Perhaps in little blind Ruby he recognised the physical incarnation of his own twisted soul, perhaps in some dim way he knew that to him and him only her infirmities were owing, but, be this as it may, his heart went out to her and hers to him.

Here, where he had least expected one, he had found a friend, and forthwith his tortured nerves were calmed and his working brain at rest; and he opened out his mind to this baby as to one his equal in years and knowledge. And the blind eyes were kept fixed on his own, and the thin hands stroked his face, as she murmured words of sympathy, possibly wondering what all this might mean and possibly comprehending, for God and his angels alone know what little children do understand.

An hour passed and still the two sat there, though in silence now, for the sightless eyes were closed and Ruby was happily dreaming; then the door opening noiselessly, the snuffling nurse stood on the threshold, and behind her Lucy, her eyes wide with wonderment and a certain awe at the marvel Heaven had brought to pass. In silence she followed Hector from the room, and when the door had closed behind them, and they stood in the passage outside, she turned and laid her hands on his breast.

"Hector," she said very low, "you have taught me a lesson. I have been so wicked about her, dearest, so unnatural; but from to-night I—I will make amends." She leaned towards him, but Hector started back, his eyes wild. For a moment he stood staring at her, and then sharply turning left her, and a minute afterwards was lying face downwards on the bed in his dressing-room, his hands gripping the iron frame-work and his face rigid with pain.

Here Lucy, entering half an hour later, all pale blue and white lace, found him, but paid no heed, only rallied him gently for being late the first night of his return, and said, "Do you like my present? Oh, never mind; to-morrow will do, it isn't much really, only, oh, Hector, do please look at them," and Lucy flew to a large brown paper parcel lying ignored on the floor, and on which was inscribed in large letters: "To HECTOR, WITH LUCY'S LOVE." "They're something you've

always wanted," she ran on, her slender fingers busy with knots as she spoke, "and I've always wished to give you, but never been able to till now. There—" as the last wrapping of paper was torn off and the lid of a brown leather case revealed and lifted—"don't—don't you like them?" looking rather anxiously at Hector, who was staring silently down at a pair of shining Purdy guns, delights which in the past he had often longed for but had never been able to afford. At least three years of close saving on Lucy's part did this gift represent, for well he knew that not one penny of the price had been taken from his own money; out of her own small income alone had these toys been bought.

"They're all right, Hector, aren't they? They're ejectors, you see," fingering the barrels of one as she spoke; "and there are plenty of cartridges downstairs—Kynochs brass. No. 6, the ones you always used to use. And to-morrow we'll try them, won't we? Oh, I'm so looking forward to to-morrow, I do hope it will be fine, and then you and I and Tom..." She stopped suddenly, for Hector had again turned away from her and was leaning against the mantelpiece, staring into the fire.

"Hector," touching his shoulder, "won't you, can't you tell me now, dear?"

"No—no, not now—later. Leave me, Lucy; I'll join you in a minute." And Lucy without a word left him.

* * * * *

Dinner was over, and wrath reigned in Martha's ample bosom, for the skill and knowledge of a life-time had gone to the preparing of this night's repast, and bitterly she felt that all her talent had been wasted. "Mark my words, Eliza," she said to the kitchen maid, "there's something wrong with a man as don't relish a beautiful dinner like this. There's that vol-o-vong, the souffly too, came down untasted. It ain't in nature, Eliza—it ain't; and 'im too just back from furrin parts. Oh, I've not patience with him, nor yet with the Missus either," and she shut the oven door with a bang.

Upstairs, in the softly-lighted drawing-room, Lucy and her husband were sitting looking into the fire. Silence had fallen, for the woman's chatter, sustained uninterruptedly during the meal, had ceased at last, and the time had come for the one to hear and the other to tell. Now she sat waiting, with nerves braced and every faculty alert and ready for battle.

The minutes ticked away, but still the silence remained unbroken, for by now all coherence of thought had left Hector, and, strive as he would, no sequence of thought would come. In vain did he try to call up Stara's face to strengthen him; in vain did he repeat that this was mere weakness, and that carry this thing through he must; he could say the words as much and as often as he liked, but

no resolution lay behind them—they were but as ghosts.

The exaltation of the night before; the long train journey; the meeting with Lucy; and then the final blow dealt by a pair of thin baby hands—all had told; and now, when he had most need of them, strength of purpose and clearness of thought were gone.

Suddenly Lucy rose, and, moving swiftly across to him, knelt on the hearth at his feet, her bright eyes fixed on his.

"Dear, tell me," she whispered, "as you promised; I am your wife, remember, and have the right to know. I don't mind what it is, Hector, so that you tell me."

"Lucy, I can't, I meant to, God knows; but now the time's come, I can't think—my head's whirling. Give me till to-morrow, Lucy, I will tell you then, I swear."

"And you think, Hector, I could wait till to-morrow," said Lucy passionately, "oh, how can you be so inhuman? Surely, surely, it can't be so hard a thing as this, that you can't tell me, your wife of ten years. Oh, my dearest," and Lucy put her arms round his neck, "we have never had secrets from each other, like most husbands and wives."

"This is different, Lucy."

"Is it money ... gambling? If so, I can help you. I have——"

"It's not money, Lucy."

"Something you've done in the regiment, then, have—have they cashiered you, Hector? If that's it, I don't mind a bit. I always hated the regiment; it was never a good enough one for you."

"It's nothing of that sort, Lucy."

Lucy stared at him, her brow knit in thought; then suddenly her arms fell from his neck and she sank, a huddled heap, on the hearth-rug.

"It's ... another ... woman, Hector?"

"Yes."

Silence, and then the bowed figure straightened itself, and the light of battle once more came into her eyes. She would fight this out to the end.

"Tell me about it, Hector," she said steadily, "everything, please. I want the whole story, nothing kept back whatever."

Hector began, a recital very different from that arranged in his mind only a few hours before. "Lucy, when I left South Africa, three weeks ago, I could say, what very few husbands can to their wives, that I had never been unfaithful to you."

"You needn't tell me that; I know it. Go on."

"But on the ship—the—the—I can't think of the name—I met her ... and——"

"Her, who?"

"Never mind that, Lucy; it would do no good telling it ... and we—she and

I got to care for each other, and—and—that's all, Lucy. Oh, for God's sake, don't let's go on now."

"Is that all, Hector? Was she—this woman—good? There was no—no wickedness, you understand me, Hector, don't you?"

"There was none."

"Thank God!" she breathed, and then a pause followed.

"Where is she now, dear?"

"I don't know—in London somewhere, I believe; she returns to Africa in a few days."

"And you, Hector, what do you mean to do, to go back with her? If so, tell me now, and—and..." Lucy paused, and then went on, "if that's what you really want, Hector, if it—it's not only a passing infatuation, and you feel you cannot live without this woman, I—I will help you, dear."

"What do you mean?"

"This, that I am too proud, Hector, to keep you tied to me against your will. I—I don't look upon marriage as some do, as a chain which nothing can break. Love's the only chain I recognise, and if that is broken between us I will set you free, Hector."

"You want to get rid of me, is that it, Lucy?"

"Oh, my God, Hector, if there is but a chance, the merest atom of hope, I would cling to it, but I—I don't think there is, somehow. Hector, is there?"

Here was the way made easy, here were the obstacles lying down of their own free will to let him pass, and yet, strangely enough, it was this very ease that conquered Hector now and dealt the final blow to resolution.

Had Lucy opposed him, had she but hinted that the bond between them was indissoluble, Hector's soul would have risen in instant rebellion, and with rebellion would have come strength to act. But Lucy's love for once had made her subtle, and so, there being no opposition and nothing to fight, the sword remained useless in the scabbard.

"Hector," she went on, and her lips were now set in a firm straight line, "tell me, are you going back with this woman to South Africa or not?"

Hector's groping hands snatched at the dangling rope and held on. "She is going back alone," he muttered; "there was never any thought of our returning together."

For a full minute Lucy knelt looking at him, her blue eyes searching his soul; then again her arms went around his neck, and she broke into a passion of weeping.

"Thank God, oh, thank God!" she murmured; "you're my Hector still; forgive me, dearest, for having doubted you. I ought to have known that you, of all men, would never be guilty of dishonour or treachery to me. Oh, it was hateful

of me, hateful.”

”Lucy, wait. I—I—”

”No, you’ve been brave and true, Hector; you’ve fought temptation and conquered it, and I honour you for it and love you a thousand times more than before. And—and she, oh, don’t turn away; I wouldn’t speak ill of her for the world. I will pray for her, and ask God to comfort her, for she—she must be a good woman, Hector, far—far better than I am. I would never have given you up had I been her.”

”For God’s sake stop, Lucy; you—you’re wrong.”

”No, Hector, I won’t; my heart’s too full of gratitude to God and her, and—and, dear—”

”Well?”

”I should like some time, if you’ll let me, to write to her and send her some little thing from me and Ruby to show her I know and sympathise; for we, Ruby and I, owe her so much—so much. And you, you poor boy, I’ll help you through. I will be patient and tactful, dear, and won’t expect things ... yet. But it will all come back again, won’t it—your love, I mean—and I haven’t taken it so badly, have I? Oh, for God’s sake, dearest, don’t you break down,” for Hector’s head had fallen forward on his hands and his whole body was quivering. ”Come upstairs now and sleep. To-morrow the sun will be shining and we’ll start afresh, Hector, you and I and ... Ruby.”

CHAPTER XVI

The morning came, the white-rimmed marshland glittered in the morning sun, kittiwake and plover renewed their battle with the wind. The daylight faded and was gone, a glow of pink and yellow appeared in the west, green of sky deepened to blue, the sound of unseen wings clove the violet dusk overhead, and dim shapes stole phantom-like across the moon. The first day of the new life was past, and the gloom was not lightened but had become deeper, ever deeper, with the flitting of the hours.

With Hector’s coming, the peace and happiness reigning over that Norfolk home had spread their wings and fled. There was something wrong, and everyone knew it, despite Lucy’s strivings after concealment; but the instinct of the servant class is a hard thing to baffle, and, ignore it as she might, only too well

did the mistress know that there was not one member of the household but was fully aware that between her and the master all was not harmony.

Further, she knew—and to Lucy's proud soul this was perhaps the hardest of all to bear—that, with one exception, they were with her and against Hector. The exception, of course, was the nurse, who maintained stoutly that they were all a pack of fools, and if misunderstanding there were, though for her part she could not see it, it was the fault of the mistress, to whom in consequence her manner became somewhat cold and distant. And for this Lucy loved her, and hated her self-constituted allies, snubbing their advances on all occasions and showering unnecessary favours on the haughty nurse. In vain, however, for in both directions did she fail: her allies continued to smile and sympathise; the enemy declined to be mollified.

Day by day the clouds thickened, and she realised that that which she had thought but a rift between her and Hector—an ugly rent maybe and one that, though healed, must ever leave a scar behind—was in reality a chasm, the depths of which she was unable to fathom. Hard though she fought to bridge it and cross over to where he was standing, it was all in vain; for the planks she stretched out fell uselessly from the farther edge, receding as they touched it, and the figure on the other side grew daily smaller and more indistinct. And Lucy might hope to cross that yawning chasm in vain, for that which lurked within it, pushing its sides asunder, was a lie unconfessed. If Hector would only confess and pluck the lie from the depths, no longer would the gulf widen, but remain fixed for her to bridge, could she but find the plank. If it were left, however, like an iron wedge it would sink lower, ripping and rending as it sank.

Of such a confession from Hector there was little hope now: the lie was almost out of sight already, and he wished it so buried. His brain reeled at the thought of further explanations, every jangling nerve clamoured for peace—peace; for that odd paralysis, which had seized upon his will the first night, had not lifted, as he had hoped, in the morning, rather had it tightened its hold, till now all power of resistance had left him and he had fallen to drifting without mast or oars on a grey, horizonless sea. Something would happen; it was for that he lived now; not for ever could he wander on like this; land must be viewed at last; and at the thought a ray of hope would glimmer above the grey monotony, and its beam for an instant strike warm on his heart.

Yes, sooner or later the end would come; Lucy would see and insist on his going, and not only offer to let him go, as she had done before. He forgot, in his own blindness, that Lucy too could not see, for he himself had taken away her sight. The days dragged on, grey and purposeless, and at last Lucy also began to despair. Do what she would, it was all useless. Unhappiness, unkindness even, she had been prepared for and would have known how to meet, but this dull

apathy, this total lack of interest in life, it was that which crushed her.

He was so changed, too, from the husband of former years; his whole nature and tastes seemed to have undergone some strange transformation. All his assertiveness and intolerance had left him: she might advance what views she liked now—and often she did in the vain hope of awakening the old Hector—it was all to no purpose; he never contradicted or opposed. Even the laudation of newspapers, from which only had Lucy learnt of a certain event on board the *Dunrobin Castle*, was ignored by its object, and it was she, not Hector, as it would have been in former years, who sent for every paper dealing with the subject, and having read their contents to the assembled household, cut out the paragraphs, and, tying them up with stout ribbon, put them carefully away with a certain honours' list and other treasures.

The shooting also, from which she had anticipated such joy, failed to arouse any enthusiasm, and the peace of marsh and pool remained almost undisturbed by the bang of the Purdys. True, on one or two occasions he had gone out in answer to her frequent urgings, but he was all the time obviously thinking of other things, and screeching snipe and quacking mallard flew away only too often unscathed, even unseen, by the erstwhile vigilant eyes. Then, while the sun was yet high in the heaven, he would suggest a return home, and, once there, would shut himself up in his room, and read uninterruptedly till dinner, and after that silent meal till well into the night.

This, perhaps, was the most disquieting change of all, the transformation of the former restless, energetic Hector into a bookworm. Such books too: no less than three works on the doings of an uninteresting and seemingly insane person called Suvarov; a collection of medical works, or such they appeared to Lucy; and another, one she had found on his dressing-table one morning, a thin daintily-bound volume called "The Heifer of the Dawn." What a strange name, she thought and, taking it up, opened it, and then stood rigid, with her eyes fixed on the title-page. For a moment she remained looking, then with sudden passion tore the book across, and, thrusting the halves into the fire, stamped them into the burning coals with her foot.

"Oh, it's no use—no use at all," she thought drearily, and from that day abandoned the struggle and left it to be fought out by Ruby. And in no better hands could she have entrusted it, for indifferent to all else as Hector had become there was yet one who, whatever his mood, was always sure of a glad welcome, that one being his small daughter.

"Miss Ruby, sir," the nurse would say, breaking in upon him without ceremony, "and she's much better to-day, sir. I declare she's getting quite strong now her father's come home," and down would go Schopenhauer or Lombroso, and Hector, springing up, would rush at the little figure groping its way towards

him, and, placing her on his knee, invent lame and improbable fairy stories, or carry her off to the stables for inspection—if such it could be called when one could not see—of the white pony and a certain grey rabbit, bought for her by him in the village.

At other times, when the black mood was on him, she would lie quite still in his arms, her hand now and again stroking his face, while she murmured words of sympathy and encouragement. For Ruby always knew and understood, and in those baby fingers lay a strength and power, which were rapidly growing, till in time they might have torn away Stara's grip on his heart, had the battle been left to her and Fate not interfered. As it was, she made a good fight for it, and very nearly won; for Hector, even thus early, had begun to ask himself the question, "Ruby or Stara?" And though the balance was still down on the one side, yet daily the other was drawing up.

At last, one bitter January morning, as the two sat in his room by the fire, she on his knee, the knowledge awoke within him, that, quivering, the scales hung level, and, knowing, for a moment he pondered, and then spoke.

"Ruby," he said. At his voice the child looked up quickly, for there was something tremendous coming, and she knew it at once.

"Oo's frightened, daddy, 'oo's frightened at something. Tell Ruby." Her hands groped their way to his face and rested there. The balance went clashing down.

"Would you like me to stay with you always, Ruby, just you and I, and mother, and Peter?" Peter was the rabbit.

"James"—the yellow plush monkey—"too, daddy, and 'Iteing."

"James too, of course, and Whiting. Would you like it, Ruby, or ... shall I go away?"

"You're my daddy; I'se not let you go. Oh, daddy, daddy," and the thin arms were wound tightly round his neck, and the sightless eyes filled with tears, "you can't go, you shan't go. It's my burfday soon, and you promised to have tea wiv me, you and muvver."

"But, Ruby, dear."

"Oh, daddy, oh, daddy, 'oo promised."

Graeme rose and put her gently down. His face had grown ashen, but in his eyes shone a light such as none, not even Stara, had seen there before, a light that none ever saw again.

"I'll keep my promise, Ruby," he said, an odd ring in his voice. "I'll go now and tell mother. You wait here, dear, and take care of James till I come back," and Hector left her, and went on his way to tell "mother."

She was not in the house, the maid said; she thought she was in the garden. The girl looked rather hostile as she told him, more so than usual, he thought;

but he paid no heed, for all that was to be at an end now, and passed out into the frozen garden, at the far end of which a figure could be seen pacing slowly up and down the gravel path. A bitter east wind was blowing, but neither hat nor wrap had Lucy, and, for the first time since his home-coming, Hector noted such things; a pang of self-reproach struck him, and he hurried on.

"Lucy dear," he said, drawing near, "you're mad to be out in the cold like this; come into the house and sit with me over the fire. I've got something to tell you, something I hope you'll be glad to hear. I've been blind, Lucy, but—"

"So have I been blind," and at the words Hector stopped, staring, for surely this was not the gentle Lucy, this white-faced woman, whose blue eyes glared at him?

"You liar! ... You unutterable liar!..." she went on in low, trembling tones. "Oh, don't speak, but look at that," thrusting out a slip of paper towards him. It was a cheque for £150, undated, and made out to the name of Miss Selbourne.

"Where did you find this?"

"In the pocket of one of your coats, the one you were wearing yesterday. Like a fool, I was looking over your things as ... as I used to do. That fell out."

"Lucy, this ... this is nothing."

"Nothing? You send this creature money, or were going to send it, it's the same thing, from here, your wife's house. You—you cad, Hector!"

A flame of anger appeared for a second in the man's eyes, his face grew white, but he mastered himself, and answered quietly enough:

"I was not going to send it, Lucy; that cheque was written six weeks ago. I forgot to date it, as I usually do my letters or cheques. The money was refused."

"Forgot? Refused? That sort of woman refuse money? You expect me to believe a wild, improbable tale like that. Oh, but I understand, though you think any lie is good enough for a poor trusting fool of a wife to believe. And it was, Hector, but—but not now."

"Wait, I've not finished. It's true that cheque was refused, but I insisted, and wrote another the same night, did not forget the date, and this time it ... was accepted."

"And you tell this to me, you stand there and own your vileness?"

"Yes, for I wish to tell you the truth, Lucy."

"Spare yourself the trouble. I don't believe you."

"As you please then, I don't care. Five minutes ago I did, but now—" He stopped suddenly and, turning away, stood with his back towards her, and then, the devil fought under, tried once more: "Lucy, won't you hear me, if not for my sake, then for ... Ruby's? I did lie to you that first night, or rather I let you believe what was not true, but my nerves were all to pieces, and I couldn't think or speak. I'll tell you the whole story now. It was for that I came out here."

"Yes, now that you're found out and caught."

The devil conquered. "Found out," before the fury in his voice Lucy's died, and fear sprang to life, "what do I care what you find out? I do love this woman. I thought just now I did not, but I was a fool, I do. I love her as I've never loved you, and—and I'm going back to her now."

"Hector, you're mad. You can't, you shall not—Hector?"

"You're too late, I came out with the full intention of telling you all, and, cur that I was ... giving her up. Oh, it was not for your sake, don't think it; it was for..." A spasm contorted his face for a moment, but in an instant passed, and he went on:

"Yes, for the first time in my life I was weak, but of that weakness you've cured me, and given me back my strength, and for that, my wife, I thank you. No more puling sentiment now for me; no more 'mummy and daddy'—hell's curse on you all!—but love ... life..."

"A life of sin, Hector, for, as God hears me, I'll never set you free now. Had you been honest with me from the first, as I implored you to be, I would have done it, but now—no!"

"Lucy, take care."

"Take care, why should I take care? What have I to care for now? Kill me if you like, Hector, it's the only way. I swear it. What stops you, my husband? You did it once before, and..."

"Twice."

"I dare say fifty times, and for far less reason. Kill me, I ask you, I'm not afraid to die. You won't? Then ... go." And Hector went.

At the hall door an uncouth figure was standing, awaiting him; it was Tom, bearing news of widgeon in the marshes and woodcock in the spinny, blown in by the gale last night, but the story was cut short. "Bring the cart round at once. Damn the widgeon!" answered his master, and hurried within. There was barely time to catch the train, but the devil was aiding him now, and ten minutes later dressing-case and portmanteau had been carried below and thrown into the waiting cart; and he was left standing in the room he was leaving behind for ever.

Dully his eyes rested upon the new guns reposing in their leather case, the wild grasses on the mantelpiece, and on his bed the yellow plush figure of James. For a moment he stood staring at the monkey, and then, snatching it up, thrust it away out of sight in his pocket, and hurried from the room. Down the stairs he went, through the black-and-white tiled hall, creeping like a thief past a certain closed door, and then into the cart and away at a gallop.

Rocking and swaying, they flew through the narrow lanes, rounding corners on one wheel, and shaving heavily-laden country carts. On through the village, scattering children and flocks of frightened geese, till at last the station

was reached. Only just in time too, for the train was already on the move, but one push from the gleeful devil and Hector was across the platform and into the train; and three minutes later was lying a huddled heap in the corner, the flat green landscape around him sliding away into the past.

Tom sat gazing after him, with a look on his face that few had ever seen there before. He climbed slowly down, and, taking out a blanket, spread it carefully over the white pony's quarters, streaked with rivulets of sweat. For a moment he stood contemplating his quivering charge, and then his eyes fell on the golden sovereign lying in his hand.

"Curse your dirty money!" he said violently, and flung it far over an adjacent hedge into the field beyond.

* * * * *

Lucy remained, where they had parted, in the frost-blighted garden, her heart as numb and cold as the ground on which she stood. With stony eyes she gazed out over the marshland, shining in the winter sunlight; she saw the foam-flecked, cloud-shadowed sea, and heard the scream of gull and quavering cry of speeding curlew, and knew that as she loved it all once so she hated it now. For here, where she had looked forward to perfect happiness and union with one beloved, she had found nothing but a broken heart and faith shattered beyond recall.

As she stood there, a little figure came stumbling towards her, its face blue with the east wind and a wild terror in the sightless eyes.

"Daddy, daddy," she wailed, "'oo's gone, and 'oo's promised to stay wiv me," and, still calling and running blindly on, she struck an iron hoop guarding the border and fell headlong, her cries dying to a feeble moaning.

Passionate indignation against Hector shook Lucy at the sight, and, running forward, she lifted the child and held her close against her heart.

"Daddy's left us, Ruby," she said, "but you have me, your mother, still. Oh, darling, why did you come out here in the bitter cold? It was very wrong of you, Ruby," and Lucy hurried away, her burden clutched tightly in her arms.

"I want daddy! I want daddy!" And strive as she might, no effort of Lucy's could still those cries, which later became feebler, running off into snatches of song and prayers to God.

"Send for her father, ma'am," implored the nurse, her ruddy face white with anxiety. "You ought to, ma'am; it's criminal not to, and I say it, though I am only a servant."

Lucy bade her hold her tongue and not interfere, opposing the same sullen obstinacy to the doctor when he came.

"You're taking a very great responsibility on yourself then, madam," he

said, being an outspoken man, though fond of little children, and, seating himself beside the cot, he fixed his keen eyes on the baby's face.

Then, at last, terror conquering pride, Lucy wrote out a telegram and sent it off, only to receive it back an hour later—it was too late, and the office closed.

A message, nevertheless, was next morning delivered to where Hector was sitting in his dingy hotel bedroom, a yellow plush monkey in his arms, and the devil vanquished at last. The message ran:

"Ruby died last night.—LUCY."

Hector stood looking at it, and then suddenly laughed, high-pitched laughter, long and loud, till with a crack it ended, and he fell forward on to the floor, where he lay motionless. And the devil beside him once more raised his head, came nearer, bent down, and began to whisper fast and low in his ear.

CHAPTER XVII

Richard Selbourne stood in front of his South African home, blankly surveying the cloudless heaven.

Over the white farm-buildings and tin-roofed kaffir huts a slumbrous peace was reigning, for it was the hour of noonday rest, and men and beasts alike lay placidly sleeping.

Clothing the shores of the great dam hard by—now shrunk to half its usual proportions—the feathery willows drooped motionless, as though in silent lamentation of its fallen estate; even the restless windmill had ceased from toiling, and save for an occasional dismal clonk, uttered seemingly in its dreams, slumbered with the rest.

Stretching away on all sides from the small oasis of trees, lucerne patches, and dam, forming Rosebank Farm, rolled a sea of yellow grass, from which stuck up, like islands, saw-like ridge and conical kopje, and beyond them could be seen a giant ring of brown, paper-like hills, their outline sharp-cut and rigid against a sky of hard vivid blue.

As he looked at the scene, a frown gathered on Richard's handsome face, and in impotent anger he shook his fist at the blandly-smiling heavens.

"Confound you!" he muttered, "why can't you hide your face and rain for once in a while? My lucerne's withering, the dam will give out in a fortnight, the beasts are dying in the fields. Gad, I came out here to get away from English mists

and fogs, but I'd give something now to feel one of those same old yellow fogs in my throat again. England, London, shops, Club, Savoy—oh damn! I'll go in and sleep." Richard shook his smart person—for clad though he was in weatherbeaten garments, patched and stained, Selbourne possessed that indefinable air of "class," which ancient clothes but serve to emphasise—and walked slowly back to the house.

On the stoep the figure of a girl was standing, clad in a black-and-white homespun riding-skirt, a white drill jacket, and a large grey Terai hat. "Hullo, Stara," said Richard, seeing her; "now, what the blazes are you up to, not going out riding in this heat, surely? You'll get sunstroke to a moral, if you do. Hullo!" suddenly aware of something unusual in her appearance, "what have you done to yourself? Lord, you've got on a habit, what's up? Oh!" and Richard's mouth expanded into a grin; and he winked at his sister, whose face straightway became bright red.

"And why shouldn't I put on a skirt?" she answered with dignity. "I know I usually do not, but—"

"But now he's coming you do."

"Nothing of the sort, I put it on because it's cooler. Don't keep me, please. I'm going to meet the Cape cart, as you're too lazy. Where's Polly?"

"In bed and asleep, but I shouldn't worry if I were you. The boy ought to know his way by now. I'm afraid though, old girl, this pal of yours will have rather a dull time, nothing on earth to do but look at the sunset, and you, I suppose. What's the game, Stara, are you going to make a job of it at last? Tell your brother, my child."

Again the vivid blush, but with it now a sharp stab of pain. Make a job of it, yes. Tell her brother, not for a thousand worlds, though ten times a thousand would Stara have given to be able to say, "I'm going to marry him," instead of telling a lie—the first of many.

"There's nothing to tell you, Dick," she answered, looking away; "he's a friend, that's all. You know I have men friends without any thought of other things."

"I'm aware you have, though the poor devils themselves think differently, I should say. Never mind, old lady, you carry on and do what you like; it's no business of mine; and it's dull enough for you here, God knows, with only Polly and me."

"It is not, Dick, it is not, you must never think that, I love being here, and I—I hope you will like Colonel Graeme, though I'm afraid somehow he's not quite the sort of man you would."

"Oh, I'll like him all right, Stara, don't you bother. I do most fellows, unless they're wrong 'uns, and I know you wouldn't fancy one of that sort. Funny I

never saw the chap when the '1st' came through here last year. I dined with them, you know, and can remember most. There was a fellow called Porky, who never stopped talking till he got blind, and Graves, and Carson—good fellow, Carson—and old Royle, and yes, there was another chap none of them seemed to fancy. I didn't cotton to him myself, either, though I don't know why. He set my teeth on edge, for some reason."

"What was he like, Dick?"

"Rum-looking fellow, long nose, pale face, black eyes, not a bit like a soldier. Wore a purple silk cap at dinner, I remember, with gold bugs on it. Never saw such a thing in my life."

"Dick, it's he; but his eyes are not black, they're blue."

"Lord, you don't mean it, Stara? Damn, but I'm sorry, somehow. I wish it had been Carson—never mind, though. I dare say I was wrong, I usually am, and, anyway, your bringing him here is good enough for me. I'm going in to sleep now. Bye-bye, old girl; don't overtire yourself; you look a bit white. Polly and I will be looking out for you when you get back."

"Dick, if—you'd rather not have him here, I'll arrange it. I'll tell him you've sickness in the house, and that he must put up at the hotel. I could ride with him every day just the same."

"Hotel be blowed, Stara, what, a guest of mine put up at that Duikerpoort drinking shanty. Thank'ye no, I don't do that sort of thing. Now be off. Here's your pony, and tell Graeme from me he's very welcome; don't forget," and Richard rather huffily pushed aside the cane blinds and disappeared into the house.

Stara mounted and rode slowly away, the old antagonists watching each other once more across the battlefield of her mind—loyalty and straight-dealing on the one side, and love on the other. Of struggle between them, however, there was now none, for the question had been fought out three weeks before, on that day when the single word "Coming" had been flashed to her across six thousand miles of sea. Then indeed the battle had been fierce but final, for Stara, unlike most women, did not, her antagonist once down, lift him up again for the pleasure of renewing the combat with the consequent certainty of ultimate defeat.

Slower than Hector in decision, for to her the throwing overboard of honour and loyalty was a heart-wrenching pang, she nevertheless, in this instance, showed herself stronger than he, and the giving up of all once determined on, the sacrifice would be made freely and unreservedly. And so honour and loyalty were crushed down, and love remained alone on the field. Her mouth hardened, she thrust aside the thought of what lay behind, and, striking her pony with her spurred heel, hurried on to the destiny rushing to meet her.

For miles she rode without drawing rein, her mount lolling easily on, as if impervious to heat or fatigue, till at length, some eight miles having been

covered, she pulled up, and, dismounting, loosened the girths and led the pony away from the track to a small rise a few hundred yards away. Here she left him, the reins trailing loosely on the ground—Basuto-bred, he would stay there, she knew, for hours—and, throwing herself down on the grass, lay there, with her eyes fixed on the road ahead, a white thread seaming the yellow plain, till, topping a distant rise, it became lost to view.

Far below her, stretching across the track, a great herd of blesbok were moving restlessly, their forms looking vague and unreal through the gauzy veil of heat. Save for them and a wide-winged lammergeier hanging motionless in the blue vault above, sign of life there was none—veldt, kopje, and mountain slumbered undisturbed.

Suddenly Stara's body stiffened, her half-closed eyes opened wide, and a look almost of terror came into them, for the peace was broken at last, and the blesbok below, like her, were startled. Their aimless wanderings ceased, the outlying groups drew in, till the herd became one solid mass, and their heads were turned away from her towards the rise, beyond which the road dipped and was lost to sight.

Something had frightened them, but what? Then Stara's eyes grew wild as she, too, saw what that something was—a small cloud of dust topping the hill, and then rapidly descending into the plain below her. For a while the herd stood staring, and then began to move away, at a walk first, then at a trot, and finally in a headlong gallop, bounding over the grass for some miles, when they stopped, wheeled sharply about and again stood staring.

The cloud of dust drew nearer, taking shape as it came, till a Cape cart drawn by mules could be plainly seen. In the cart there were two figures—one in black, with a conical hat, sitting bolt upright and brandishing a whip; the other seemed strangely misty and indistinct to Stara.

She rose, turned her eyes towards the browsing pony, and moved away; then stopped, with her mouth firm-set, and sat down once more.

"What a woman I am, after all," she muttered, "flight, hide for him to pursue and find; we're all the same, pretend as we like. Heavens, how fast that cart's coming, what does Jacob mean by driving the mules like that? Ah! they've seen me; there's the boy pointing with his whip, they're stopping, and it's come at last. Oh, I daren't look at him, I know he'll show elation, and I shall hate him."

"How do you do, Colonel Graeme?"

"Quite well, thank you, Miss Selbourne; that's the right answer, isn't it? Damned fit I am, look at me and see."

Startled, Stara looked up, and fear vanished in amazement, for here was no triumphant conqueror, but a stricken, haggard-eyed man. "He has done it and regrets," she thought, and instantly was in revolt.

"It's so very good of you to come, Colonel Graeme, such a long journey in the heat. Did you have a good passage? My brother is so looking forward to seeing you, shall we get on? My pony's here, and—"

"Don't be a fool, I've not come eight thousand miles to see your brother, sit down."

"I think perhaps, as it's getting late—"

"Do you want to hear, or don't you? If not, I go back now."

"That—that depends. If ... you regret ... I don't."

"Bah!"

"Tell me."

"Kiss me first, not like that—properly." He caught Stara to him, and kissed her in a way that made her cheeks flame. She shrank back frightened and ashamed.

"Does that look as though I regretted? Listen. I've broken with her, as I said I would. Please God, I'll never see her again, blast her!"

"Oh, Hector, hush! Why?"

"Because she failed to ... No, that's not the reason, because she won't divorce me. That settles us, you see, no marriage for you and me."

"I never expected it, Hector. I was ready for it. But ... there's something more. What is it?"

"More, what more do you want, isn't that enough?"

"Hector, there is; there's something which has ... hurt you. It's not the parting from her. I can see that. Dearest, I must—I will know."

"There's nothing, I tell you, me hurt, by the death of a blind brat? Oh, God, curse me for a babbling fool!"

"Good—good God!"

Hector turned savagely on her. "Why do you say that? What right have you to assume ... Take your arms away from me. Oh, you must hear, must you, satisfy your damned curiosity, I suppose? All right, you shall. I told you on the ship I had no children. I lied; there was one, I'd never seen her when I spoke. She was blind and sickly, but—God knows why—she ... liked me, used to crawl over me, and call me 'daddy,' me, Stara, 'daddy.' Laugh, curse you, laugh, you won't? Look here, then," he dragged from his pocket the battered figure of James, and held it from him, wildly laughing, "here's what I play with at nights alone, croon and chuckle over it like the madman I am. Damn you, give it back—give it back, I say," for Stara had snatched James from his hand and was holding him against her breast, her tears raining on the plush. Hector's hand fell to his side and he turned sharply away, then once more went on:

"And when I left—I did suddenly, one morning—she came out to find me in the garden. There was an east wind blowing, and she ... caught cold, I suppose,

and she,” the expression of his voice made Stara shrink back—“the nurse wrote to me, let her die without me; she asked for me, but she wouldn’t send till it was too late. Oh, don’t be a fool and snivel like that, who cares? I don’t. She wouldn’t have lived, in any case. Oh, it didn’t take much to kill my child, Stara, she paid in her body for the rottenness of her father’s soul. For I am rotten—rotten to the core.”

”You’re not, you’re not, no man can be who can love a child like that. Dearest, I won’t have you say it, for you’re mine, Hector, mine. My love is all yours now, and so am—I.”

”Yes, with reservations. Oh, I know the sort of love—pure, no vile, earthly thoughts—thus far and no farther.”

”No. I am not like that. I make no reservations. I give you all.”

Hector stared, and, passion once more reawakening, he caught her by the shoulders; but Stara held him off, her grey eyes looking up into his.

”Wait, there is something you must promise me first. It—it may be, Hector, that in time there might come—another—oh, don’t shrink away from me, it hurts so much—and you’d love my—our child, wouldn’t you, Hector? But if ... that should happen, you must take me away ... leave the army, forsake ambition for—for love. Could you do that? Think well before you answer, for it’s a big thing, Hector.”

Hector, however, was now in passion’s grip, and reflection had become impossible. Had Stara at that moment asked for the Southern Cross to wear in her hair, he would have promised her that, or anything else; and without a second’s hesitation, he swore, if called upon, to do her bidding.

CHAPTER XVIII

Thus Hector followed in the footsteps of those with whom he claimed kinship, and, like them, left the broad track of conventional duty to turn aside into the by-paths of illicit love. True, behind him, trampled in the dust of the highway, broken vows and the fragments of a woman’s happiness were lying, and, ever vivid and distinct, a tiny grave. But what of that, since he had carried through his purpose, and proved himself above the human weaknesses by which other men’s lives are cramped and fettered? Feverishly he drank of the cup held out to him by Stara, and, his thirst quenched but too soon, revived the dead craving

with the salt of imagination, and demanded more, ever more.

A month passed, and he was no longer a stranger, but one of the household; the hand of fellowship was held out to him by all, and by no one more eagerly than his host, whose cordiality was adopted the better to hide the curious instinctive aversion of twelve months before, which had but increased with fuller acquaintance with his guest. In vain did Richard assure himself that the feeling was one of prejudice only; it grew in strength daily, till at last, at Graeme's approach, Dick would make off, feigning work on the farm, or any excuse to avoid being alone with a man in whose presence he became so unaccountably silent and embarrassed.

His wife, however, had from the first taken to the stranger, though her only reason for such liking was, it must be owned, the essentially feminine one of sympathy for a lover, for that Hector was Stara's she had realised from the first, though why undeclared was beyond her comprehension.

It must be her sister-in-law's fault, she had come to believe, and was in consequence somewhat annoyed with Stara, frequently pressing her for explanations. If she cared for Colonel Graeme, why did she not admit it? It was not fair to play fast and loose with a man's devotion. Upon which her sister-in-law would smile, and assure her she was altogether wrong and didn't understand; she and Hector were friends, nothing more. Friends! as if she, Mary, was blind or a fool. And with much indignation the hostess would return to her housework, leaving the pair as usual to their own devices. They must settle the matter their own way, she decided, and, if Graeme was but half the man she took him to be, he would sooner or later bring Stara to book, for of the latter's feelings, too, Mary had no doubt, though Stara was far more successful in concealing them than Hector. Still, there was no mistaking the improvement in her sister-in-law's looks, or the meaning of the shedding of her former assumption of mannishness, which, with the bifurcated riding garments, had gone apparently for good, a modest riding-skirt replacing the one and a soft womanliness and radiant happiness the other.

Stara was happy, despite the lie she was living, for this had now become a habit, and troubled her not at all. And being happy, and loving, a change came over her: the veneer of hardness and independence disappeared, and with it, unfortunately, much of her former wit and brilliance. She was all woman now, fussing over Hector, ministering to his comforts, and exercising those small tyrannies dear to most lovers' hearts.

The inordinate consumption of cigarettes she put down firmly, retaining the supply in her own room, and doling them out at the rate of five a day—no more, save as a special indulgence. Schopenhauer and Lombroso also went, while the small phials were taken out on to the veldt the day after his arrival,

and carefully buried in the home of an ant-bear, a solemn promise being exacted from Hector never to touch such things again. For Stara, wiser than Lucy, had from the first seen in which direction Graeme's peril lay, but while formerly she had regarded his morbidity merely as an interesting study, now the suppression of all encouragement of, and incentive to it, had become to her a matter of vital necessity.

For a time she was successful, Hector apparently being well content to idle the days away, roaming through the hot grass veldt, lying down on it for hours, or lounging with her in desultory inspection of farm-buildings, dam, and lucerne-fields. But, unknown to her, the poison was already working, and Graeme, when he seemed to be asleep on the grass beside her, was debating problems in his mind; for Stara, though she never knew it, had been stabbed to the heart by the unconscious hand of a blind child, who was now lying in sleep eternal to the lullaby of wind and waves.

Hector loved her, it is true, but it was not the love it had been, for, since the hour of darkness passed with the devil in the dreary hotel bedroom, there had come a difference. The ideality and the golden halo with which he had clothed his mistress were gone, and with them the longing to serve. Now he only saw her beauty, and in the possession of that beauty he strove to find oblivion from an undying memory; but in vain, for in the one pure emotion Hector had known, or could ever know, his eyes had been opened, and the real gold of the one showed the other to be but counterfeit metal and base. Thus Ruby was avenged, and, as usual, not on the most guilty fell the vengeance.

Hector began to ask himself questions, and critically to analyse the love he felt—love to which analysis means death. Why was it, he pondered, that passion so great as his did not act as a spur, but rather as a bridle? Surely Nelson was wrong when he said that "if the world held more Emmas, there would be more Nelsons"? For his own love for Stara was equally great, and yet indulgence in that love, so far from proving the incentive he had hoped, was fast suffocating ambition and rendering him a mere lotus-eater, content to idle away the hours on a God-forsaken African farm.

Gradually, fight against it, blind himself as he might, the bitter truth became known to Hector, that whereas passion denied, even vexed or hindered, is the greatest incentive to ambition man's nature can know, passion indulged without let or hindrance becomes inevitably its murderer. And with this truth, unacknowledged though it was, awakened in his mind, Hector became restless and rebellious, the sense of revolt growing as he realised that no sympathy was to be hoped for from Stara, but rather active opposition.

She now always became silent when he spoke of future greatness, or turned the subject to another future of which ambition was not the aim, but those very

domestic joys which before she had been wont to deride. Only the other day she had put forward the same absurdity advanced by Lucy years before, namely, the hope of military renown without the disadvantages of his having to seek it on the battlefield. Nor was it only in her views that Stara had changed, for gone too were her brilliancy, her cynicism, the unlikeness to other women that had so fascinated him on board the *Dunrobin Castle*. He was now the cynic; she the believer, bitterly resentful of sneers at domesticity and marital fidelity.

As the days wore on, the monotony began to pall, the long rides to lose their charm, for, lover of the veldt though Hector was, solitude was also essential to his enjoyment of it. Silence and freedom to think undisturbed were what he craved, not talk of trifles, which only passion's glamour could render interesting. But Stara saw nothing of this, for she was blind, as she had said she would be blind, and when he was lying dreaming of future greatness she would irritate him with gentle caresses, asking him if he was thinking of her; and, starting, he would answer "Yes," and fall to silence once more.

The varnish, too, of normality, so laboriously laid on him by Stara, began to wear off; sleeplessness returned, and his real nature reasserted itself. Through the long night hours he would lie thinking, strange, monstrous thoughts, gradually weaving themselves into a fabric upon which he saw himself depicted as great as those others were great, and, like them, solitary in their greatness, for she whom he loved was dead. Stara had left him, and yet in some dim way stood near, a radiant vision, beloved as never on earth, guiding him on his lonely way. In a rapture of adoration he would be there talking to her, telling her of his undying love, till, torn with remorse for his cruelty and neglect to her when living, his eyes would fill and ecstatic grief wring his heart. And when the day came, Stara would greet him, her eyes dark with a love to which his own felt no response.

Nevertheless, strangely enough, in his dreams there was never a sign of Ruby, for she lay buried in his heart; the other only lived as a fantasy of fevered imagination. At last the day came when he knew he must return to a man's life once more, leaving her, the living and neglected, to dream of her dead and beloved, and of this necessity he told her one morning as they lay in the shadow of a lonely kopje.

"Stara, I must go," he said suddenly, "your brother's sick of me, and my regiment wants me back."

The girl looked up with startled eyes, her face grew suddenly pale and scared.

"Hector, you can't—not—not yet. Send them a wire."

"What's the use? I must go some time."

"Why?"

"Why? ... Because it's my life, Stara. I can't remain on leave, idling here

for ever. Remember, I've got a name to make, and as yet I've not begun."

"You're a Colonel, isn't that enough, why do you want to make a name for yourself, Hector, aren't you happy here?"

"Of course I am, but—"

"Hector dear, I've been thinking a lot lately, thinking that perhaps the ambition we used to talk such a lot of is nothing, after all. I am sure now there is only one thing in the world that matters—love; that's real, the other's only a dream."

"What do you mean, Stara? This is against everything you used to say. Talk of inconsistency!"

"I know, but you mustn't expect a woman to be consistent. Besides, I wasn't in love then, but now I am, and can see things clearer. Oh, I am ashamed when I think of the nonsense I used to talk. Dear, I don't ask it, but couldn't you, wouldn't you like to give it up and be with me always?"

"Stara ... you don't mean? You ... can't. Oh, God, there seems to be a curse on me," and Hector flung himself face downwards on the grass.

A look of desperate pain came over Stara's face, as she answered hurriedly:

"No, no, you need not fear. I was only thinking, you being so happy here with me, that perhaps you had for gotten your ambitions."

"I? Never, they're part of me. Oh, thank God, but you know, Stara, I'd have done it, don't you? I'll keep faith with you."

For a fraction of a second Stara hesitated, but, before she could speak, Hector went on, and the chance was gone:

"You see, Stara, I must go back; they'll be finding out things if I don't—fellows are so infernally inquisitive—and then your brother might come to hear. By the way, he's no idea, I suppose?"

"None whatever. I told him what you said, about being here on leave when you're supposed to be in England, and that if they knew there'd be trouble. Dick won't say a word."

"And Polly?"

"She knows, of course, that we love each other, Hector, any woman could see that. She's never told Dick though. I asked her not to, but, Hector, she's always asking me things, why we ... don't..."

"What did you tell her?"

"Oh, some lie, but she didn't believe it. Hector, do you know, I think if she knew the truth, and we were to go away together, she'd stand by us two."

"Why are you always harping on this, Stara? I've told you the thing's practically impossible, though of course I'd do it, if anything happened. Why, do you know what I have to live on now that I've given up my income to her? Fool that I was! Two hundred a year besides my pay, and the last would stop once I leave,

bar £120 a year.”

”I don’t think I should mind, Hector. I’m a good housekeeper, and we should have each other, which is everything, and perhaps in time your wife might relent, and we could marry.”

”Damn her relenting, Stara; don’t dream of it. I wouldn’t do it for your sake, as much as mine. Oh, why can’t you be satisfied, we are everything to each other now, and—and it’s possible that if we were tied like that, you—I shouldn’t—might tire, it’s the freedom, don’t you think, that makes love lasting?”

”No, I don’t, I hate those ideas. They’re wicked and unnatural. It’s the advocates of immorality who start such theories.”

”I’m not so sure, but about going, I should like to leave to-morrow, if it could be managed. I can easily get leave later, you know, and come back again.”

”When?”

”Oh, in two or three months. I’ll come when I can, you know that.”

”Very well, Hector, if you think you ought to. Oh, it’s hateful, this parting.”

”It’s only for a time, Stara, and, as I’m going, I think we ought to return home now. I’ve my packing to do, and the train leaves early to-morrow morning.”

”I’ll do your packing; I should love to. My brother shan’t see, and Polly won’t mind, I know. Come, as we must,” and together they rode home, Graeme for once talkative, but Stara silent.

* * * * *

Next morning, before the sun had risen, the woman’s dream had come to an end, and Hector was on his way back to a man’s life once more. Within a mile of the station, at the top of the rise, where Stara had first seen his coming, the boy pulled up his mules, and pointed backward with his whip at a speck on the road behind them, rapidly growing larger.

”Missy Star,” he said.

”We’ll lose the train,” muttered Hector, but the boy, ignoring the hint, refused to move till the flying figure had caught them up.

”Hector, I want you.” Stara’s voice was desperate, and her eyes wild.

Graeme, with one glance at the station ahead, climbed down and went over to where she was waiting, the pony’s flanks heaving with distress.

”What is it, Stara? Quick! it’s sweet of you to come after me, but the ... train.”

Stara was silent, struggling with difficult words.

”Stara, you must hurry. Lord! but there’s the train in sight.”

”Hector, I—I, oh, I can’t, I can’t. I’ll write. Good-bye, my own dearest,” and Stara, wheeling sharply about, galloped away whence she came.

Hector stood staring after her, with a vague feeling of uneasiness in his heart.

CHAPTER XIX

"Number One and All's Well."

The cry of the night sentry wailed through the silent barracks, which no longer looked bare and unlovely as when seen in the glaring African sun, but had been transformed by the moonlight into a city of silver walls and roofs of lotus pink.

"Number Two and All's Well," came in instant response, and then there was a pause.

"Number Two and All's Well," rang out once more, this time with the full power of lusty lungs, in the generous hope of arousing Number Three, happily dreaming in his nest of hay. In vain, however, though Four and Five, alive to the emergency, took up the call right quickly Number Three did not answer, and the omission was at once noticed by experienced ears.

The guard-room door opened hurriedly, and an irate corporal, bearing a lantern, emerged, followed by two men. The recumbent form of Number Three was found, and, after being rudely awakened, was borne straightway to durance vile, there to finish his slumbers. A door banged, a key grated in the lock, and then there was silence once more. This was broken now and again by a sudden savage squeal from the stables, the sharp thudding of hoofs against wood and iron, and the angry growl of a sentry.

In Number One block, Officers' Quarters, a light was seen to flicker, disappear, and then shine steadily; a door opened, and a figure, gorgeous in dressing-gown of yellow silk and fur, came out on to the verandah, and, leaning his arms on the rail, stood looking out over the sleeping barracks.

"Lucky devil, Number Three, whoever you are," he muttered; "it's cells for you to-morrow, right enough, but you're a lucky devil, all the same. You can sleep, you're not racked and harried like me. You thank God for your brainlessness, my friend; if I'd been born like that, I too should now be able to sleep. Yet you have your troubles too, I suppose, as great to you as mine are to me—one hundred and sixty-eight hours' absence from the canteen, that will be one of them. Oh, but I'd do your one hundred and sixty-eight cheerfully, stone-breaking, shot-

lifting, or whatever amusement the prison warder provides, to have your peace of mind.

"Half-past three," as a sharp ting came from the room behind him; "four hours before Murphy comes to call me, four hours of thinking, trying to find some hole in the net I have thrown over myself, a hole which doesn't exist. I could tear it, and break through it that way, but that I will not do; I gave her my word, love-struck fool that I was, and there's enough on my soul now without adding perjury to the rest. And yet to do it is ... hell! I'd sooner shoot myself, infinitely rather, for that would only destroy the carcass, the other means soul damnation. And coming, as it does, now, now that war is almost certain, and my chance staring at me at last, oh, it's too wicked, too cruel."

He clenched his hands and paced restlessly up and down the wooden verandah. "My own fault too, all my own fault. I clamoured for freedom, and I got it, only to bind himself hard and fast again. I was better off with Lucy, for she expected little, but Stara wants everything, my whole life. And she'll have it too, there's no escape, and by to-morrow night the wire will have gone, and my career be finished. The regiment will go to war, and I shall not be with them. I shall be a retired officer, living on my pension in some damned French watering-place. I shall read of the war, of Porky getting a D.S.O., Royle a C.B. Oh, God! God! surely there must be some way out, if I could but find it. I'll get that letter again and read."

He turned and walked slowly back to his room, which was now in darkness, for the candle had burnt down and gone out. The open doorway gaped a black hole before him; he hesitated, in sudden terror of the dark. Then, feeling in the pocket of his dressing-gown, he produced some matches, and, striking one, hurried into the room, where he snatched up a letter lying beside the bed, and rushed out again, glancing fearfully over his shoulder.

"There are ghosts in there," he muttered. "I've felt them about me before, but never like to-night; not for a thousand pounds would I go back again. Here I stay till dawn."

He opened the crumpled letter, and, laying it on the rail, read it by the light of the moon, or rather imagined he was reading it, for he knew every word of the letter he now repeated by heart.

"My brother has found out at last, someone at home ... last mail. He is furious, Hector, I have never seen him like it before, and he says I must either swear never to see you again—as if I should!—or leave here at once for ever. That I don't mind; not for fifty thousand brothers would I give you up, and would go away and earn my living somehow, but, Hector, I can't, not now, for *it* has happened. I meant to tell you that last morning three weeks ago, that's what I rode after you for, but something in your face stopped me; it was so hard and

unsympathetic, not like my Hector at all. Darling, please don't say you're sorry. I'm not, not a bit, I shall love it, for it is yours, but I must, dearest, I have no choice, I must ask you to keep your promise and take me away. Is it such a sacrifice, Hector? God knows I hate asking it of you, but perhaps it is for the best after all, our life in the future will not be the lie it is now. And I will make you happy. I will try to prevent your regretting. Oh, think of it, darling, always together, you and I and ... her, for that I know you would like best. Don't worry about me, I know you will, but you needn't, only send me a wire in answer to this, just the one word "Yes," and let me have it by Thursday evening."

"And to-day is Thursday," he muttered. Then followed a carefully-erased sentence, which, nevertheless, had been made out by Hector, as such sentences, no matter at what toil, always are made out: "If not by then I shall know, and settle things in my own way."

Hector flung the letter down on the boards beside him, and crushed it under his foot.

"Is it a sacrifice?" he jeered. "Oh no, no sacrifice at all; and you pretend to understand me, and think I'm a man to be satisfied with the life you propose. No; if I do it—and do it I must, I suppose—it will be hell for both of us. I'll probably kill you in the end, and myself too. That will be the finish of our heaven, Stara, a heaven green with absinth, most likely, that's the French remedy, I believe, for despair."

Once more he took up the letter, and studied the sentence erased. "'If not by then I shall know, and settle things in my own way,'" he repeated, and then his eyes darkened with anger. "A threat," he muttered, "to show me up, I suppose, write to the Colonel, like forsaken sweethearts do about their soldier-lovers. Do it then, by all means. God! but you make me laugh, Stara," and he laughed harshly at the thought.

"No, I'm wrong, though," he went on after a pause; "you don't mean that, I know, but what in the devil's name, then, *do* you mean? Nothing, I suppose, put it in to add emphasis, and scratched it out on reflection. Four o'clock, another half-hour of Thursday gone, and still no nearer solution. Well, I may as well get it over, as it's got to be, and, by heaven, yes, there's just one chance—they may not accept my papers now war's only a question of days. It's a toss-up, let Fate decide; if I'm to be great, nothing can stop me; if a derelict, then that I shall be whatever I do. I'll write that wire out now, and give it to Murphy to take when he calls me; it's light now, and the ghosts are gone."

He entered the room, grey and unreal-looking in the approaching dawn, and taking up a telegraph-form from the writing-table sat down and wrote: "Yes—Hector."

For a moment he sat staring at the words, with a peculiar smile on his face.

"Good-bye, Hector Graeme, conqueror of worlds," he murmured. "Westminster Abbey is not for you, my friend; it's in Boulogne Cemetery your bones will rot, an example of what woman's love can do for a man."

Then a fit of despair came over him. He rose, and hurrying from the room, stood once more on the verandah, with his eyes fixed on the dark blur of mountains appearing dimly through the grey. "Come down, come down, you black devils yonder," he prayed; "begin your throat-cutting to-day, and I'll bless you for it. It's only a few hours I've got—for the love of God, come down!"

For a while he remained watching. Then suddenly a great drowsiness came over him: he swayed drunkenly, and, staggering back to his room, fell heavily on the bed and slept.

* * * * *

"Beggy pardin, sir, your tea, sir, you're for the field, sir. What time would you like the 'orse?"

"And why the devil shouldn't I drink the stuff if I want to? It's all I've got ... eh ... er? Oh, Murphy, thank God!"

"What time would you like the 'orse, sir? Field day at nine, sir. Rondyvoo, Grobler's Farm, two miles from 'ere, sir."

Graeme sat up and drank the tea at a gulp.

"Horse at half-past eight, and ... take that telegram there to the post-office. You can ride the second charger; and don't gallop him along the road as you always do, you'll have him down if you do. Bath ready? Right—get out," and Hector dragged himself wearily out of bed, and proceeded to dress for the coming field day. "My last show this," he muttered, buckling on his belt, "and I'll make the most of it. I'll astonish them all to-day, make Bumps open his eyes, the insolent, ignorant fool. Murphy taken that wire? Yes, it's gone; no hope now. Only hope he won't show it about, though it wouldn't matter much if he did, their thick heads wouldn't make anything out of it. Murphy's no Sherlock Holmes, thank heaven; he's an unobservant beggar too, don't suppose he's a thought in his head besides his dinner and beer. Hallo, half-past eight, I must get on." He went out, mounted his waiting charger, and followed by his orderly and trumpeter, set off at a canter for Grobler's Farm.

Murphy, from the verandah of the servants' quarters, watched him go, and then returned to his perusal of the telegram, a rather worried look on his unmeaning countenance.

"Can't make nothing of it," he muttered. "'Yes,' he says, but 'Yes,' what? Now, wot's 'Ector up to, I wonder? I don't like it—I don't, Pen, straight," to Penrose, Ferrers' servant, who was polishing a sword scabbard close by.

"What's up, Mickey?" said the latter; "bloke turned nasty about yer bill or wot? You take my tip and tell him, as 'e don't seem to 'ave no confidence in you, you prefer to return to yer dooty at once. It's what I does with Ferrers when 'e gits uppish, and I never 'as no further trouble. "Course I trusts you, Penrose,' 'e says. 'I was a bit 'asty, perhaps; we'll say no more abaat it.' And 'Very good, sir,' I says, 'uffy like, and goes off to the Orfcers' Mess for a drink, which I puts down to 'im."

"'Ector never says nothing about 'is bills," answered Murphy, still worried; "'e ain't got no cause. This ere's a tallygram to 'is girl Stara, and I can't make it out, that's all. You see, Pen, when a bloke's dotty about a girl, there's no saying wot kind of foolishness 'e'll be up to. She's a good-looking girl, I'll say that for her," continued the unobservant one, thoughtfully. "'Ere's 'er photograph," taking a card from his breast pocket and handing it to Penrose, who, regarding it, said "Yum." "But good-looking or not, she ain't going to put the bloke wrong, and that's all abaat it."

"But wot the 'ell can she do, Mickey?"

"I don't know, Pen, and it's that wot's worrying me. There's 'er last letter I ain't been able to git 'old of, and there's something in that letter wot's troubling 'Ector. You see, I knows 'im, and I'll eat my 'orse if so be 'Ector ain't going to do something wot 'e ought not. It's all in this tallygram 'ere, I knows, if I could only get at it."

"Ain't your bloke married, Mickey?" said another servant, for a moment stopping hissing at a boot and holding it up for contemplation, his hand acting as boot tree, "Wot's 'e done with 'is own lawful box of bricks?"

"I dunno, Simmy, and that's a fact," answered Murphy; "'e ain't 'ad no letter from Lucy since 'e come back. It's my belief she's needled and given 'im the bag—she would do straight if she saw them letters of Stara's. 'Strewth, them letters!" he added reflectively.

"What's in the letters, Mickey?"

"Never you mind, Simmy; that ain't no business of yours. A bloke's letters is 'is own, 'is servant's different, of course."

"'E's a rum 'un, is 'Ector," said Penrose. "Did you blokes 'ear of the turn up between 'im and Tim Molloy yesterday? Tim was up before him for using disrespectful langwidge to the room corporal, and 'Ector was a dressing of 'im down—'e can throw it abaat too can 'Ector—when Tim loses 'is 'air, and ups and tells 'im 'e wouldn't talk to 'im like that if so be 'e weren't an orfcer and 'im a private. And 'Ector 'e larfs and stops the Sergeant-Major wot was calling for a file to take Tim to the guard-room. 'Ho, wouldn't I?' 'e says, like that, and 'im and Tim goes orf together to the sick lines, when 'e orfs with 'is coat and the two of 'em go at it, the Sergeant-Major keeping the time; and 'Ector 'as Tim outed

in the second round! Larf fit to bust theirselves did the squadron win they sees Molloy's eye and Hector's ear."

"Didn't 'e wear mourning whin 'is cat died, Mickey?"

"Wot abaat 'is looting of the commissariat godown whin the dinners was stinking?"

"An' the lifting of them cabbages off Botha's farm to teach the men scoutin'? 'See without being seen,' 'e says, as 'e pulls 'em up. Ho! ho!"

"Botha was a Dutchman, an' 'ostile to the English," answered Murphy, "and as such 'is cabbages was liable to be pinched. But I ain't goin' to stop 'ere jawing no longer. 'Send this tallygram at once,' the bloke says, 'if not sooner,' 'e says. 'Ere Tomkins," to Graeme's second servant, who was sitting on a iron bed-cot nursing a cat, "nip up to the stable and fetch the chestnut 'orse, while I change my costoom," and thereupon Murphy retired to his room, where he proceeded to transform himself into as near a representation of his master as the state of his wardrobe allowed.

Having oiled his hair and fastened his collar with an imitation gold safety-pin, he mounted the horse and rode away on his mission. He proceeded at a walking pace till he was well clear of the barracks, but on reaching the hard high road he shook the old horse up, and at a good sharp gallop made his way to the telegraph office.

Hector, meanwhile, was rapidly nearing the place of rendezvous. On the way he overtook Graves—now Adjutant of the 1st Lancers—also bound for Grobler's Farm.

"Morning, Colonel," he said, touching his helmet. "Heard the news? It's all up with the war, Mahongas have caved in. Rotten, ain't it?" A curse was the only answer, and Graeme rode on, disregarding his brother officer's "Hold hard, I'm coming too; there's plenty of time. Surly beggar you are," continued Graves, looking after him, "but you're up against it this time all right. I'd have warned you too, if you'd been civil, for I've a pretty good notion what to-day's 'scheme' is, after what Johnson let out last night. Deuced unfair one it is too, got up by Bumps solely to floor Graeme; Johnson owned as much. Well, if he is floored, so much, the better; take him down a peg," and, somewhat consoled, Graves cantered on. Turning off the path, he made his way across the veldt to where a dark mass of men and horses could be seen, assembled for what General Rivers was pleased

to call "Instructive Field Operations."

CHAPTER XX

Major-General Rivers, C.B.—better known as Bumps, from his seat on a horse—was fond of describing himself as "a soldier of the old school"

"I'm a practical man, sir," he was wont to declare, "hard knocks and plenty of 'em for me; that's the way we won our battles in the past—and we'll do again in the future, mark my words—not by poring over books and mugging away at map reading."

This prophecy of the gallant General may or may not have been correct; his liking for hard knocks also was doubtless genuine, though unfortunately it had never been put to the test, actual fighting not having come Bumps's way, but the theory is certainly a convenient one for those who possess neither the ability nor inclination for study. He relied on himself solely; his views on warfare were his own and borrowed from no man, and though at times they were somewhat at variance with those of accepted authorities on the Art of War, who shall say that Bumps was not right when he declared that the opinions of Napoleon, Wellington, and others were as obsolete as the uniforms they wore?

One thing was very certain, however, and that was that Rivers would tolerate no opposition, nor allow his infallibility to be questioned. Some generals there were, he knew, who prefaced their remarks by "My opinion is." Not so Bumps; he despised such a concession as weakness; his criticisms on military operations were no expressions of opinion, but statements of facts, and, with this conviction in his mind, no one was so scathing in condemnation of, or sarcastic in comments on, what he believed to be mistakes in strategy or tactics as Bumps. Indeed, he was an excellent instance of the truth of the saying that, whereas few men think, all will have opinions.

Further, like most general officers whose service has been passed almost exclusively with infantry, he held especially strong views on the subject of cavalry. Engineers and artillery he left alone, they could floor him with abstruse details concerning cubic contents and breech-blocks, but with the mounted arm there were no such annoying technicalities. He knew all about them, he considered, and indeed it was a cherished article of faith with him that, had not Fate ordained his march through life to be in large square-toed boots instead of a seat

in a saddle, his career would have been that of a Seidlitz or Murat—that is to say, if he had ever heard of these warriors, which unfortunately he had not.

For Hector Graeme, as has before been mentioned, General Rivers had a particular aversion, not that he admitted this, for hatred means equality, and never would he have allowed the existence of such between himself and a junior. Nevertheless, hate him he did, with that virulent form of hatred a man bestows on one to whom, though superior in rank, he is inferior in the very qualifications of which that rank is the sign manual.

Graeme was his subordinate, and, as such, theoretically bound to accept his dictum and teaching on matters military, while practically, as he well knew, Graeme did nothing of the kind, but on the contrary treated his lessons with an almost open contempt, never missing an opportunity of showing up his instructor and exposing his absurdities to all present; indeed, an argument between the two was productive of much innocent enjoyment to seniors and juniors, with the one exception of Graeme's colonel, Royle, to whom such moments were full of heart-felt anguish.

To-day, however, a supreme effort had been made by Bumps to crush once and for always this insolent questioner of his infallibility, and it was with a glow of anticipatory triumph in his heart, revealed by the twinkle in his small grey eyes, that he now beheld Hector's arrival on the scene.

He returned his salute graciously, and said "Morning, Graeme," a civility awakening instant suspicion in Hector's mind and a muttered "What's Napoleon up to now, I wonder, and what the deuce is the matter with Royle? He looks half dead with funk."

"A little late," continued the General; "almost time to start. All your force is waiting for you to lead them to—victory."

"All, sir?" answered Graeme, looking round. "I don't see the infantry. There are the guns, a section (two) of them, and the cavalry, three squadrons. Those waggons, too, are meant to represent a convoy, I suppose, but no sign of the 'feet.' Am I to take on eight hundred infantry"—there was only that number, as Graeme was naturally aware, in the station—"with three squadrons, two hundred and eighty men in all?" and Hector laughed, a suspicion of the plot dawning upon him. He was to be given an impossible task, was he? Right, then; so much the greater score when he won, as he certainly would.

"You'll know all about it in good time, I've no doubt, Colonel Graeme," answered the other; "but you ought not to think of odds, you know. Dear me, a cavalry officer frightened of infantry—this is something new."

"Not at all, sir. I only wanted to know what was against me. A somewhat usual knowledge, I believe, for a commander to possess."

"The General has just told you, Graeme," put in Royle hastily, "that you'll

know all about it in good time. Why can't you wait till them?"

Royle was not quite at his best this morning. Always frightened of a General, he was especially terrified of Bumps; and though ordinarily he had confidence enough in Hector—indeed, he sought his advice on all regimental questions—since seeing the scheme[#] his nerve had left him. Graeme would certainly be defeated, he felt, and on him would fall the blame; for, as he was responsible for the training of his officers, their downfall meant his own.

[#] A printed paper, given to each opposing leader, though naturally differing in each case. On these papers is described an imaginary military situation, followed by the task to be carried out, the actual execution of this being, of course, left to the respective commanders.

Official censure was the one thing most dreaded by Royle, and, though he had escaped it so far, the catastrophe was in sight at last. The sword hung but by a hair, that hair being Graeme's ability to placate; and now, in sheer sport, it seemed that person was making the blade to dance over his head, till the hair must undoubtedly snap in a moment.

He looked imploringly at Graeme as he spoke, and was conscious of a faint sensation of relief, for his subordinate's face was confident as ever. Why could he not feel the same?

"I beg your pardon, sir," answered Hector; "I have no wish to be unduly curious. One thing, however, I should like to ask, if I may, who's commanding the opposite side?"

"Certainly you may know that, Graeme," said Bumps, watching him; "it's Colonel Wicklow." And once more Hector laughed, for his opponent was a Staff College graduate, and reputed one of the smartest officers at that time in South Africa.

"Thank you, sir," he replied; "I'm much obliged to you for giving me a chance of defeating such a distinguished officer."

"I hope you may," snapped the General; "but it's time you saw the scheme; here it is," drawing a long blue envelope from his pocket and handing it to Graeme, at the same time again closely watching him, the twinkle deepening in his eyes.

Hector, however, did not open it there, but walked some hundred yards away, where he seated himself behind a large boulder. He then took out his case, lighted a cigarette, and, having removed his helmet so that the sun beat full on his face, leisurely proceeded to open the envelope.

"As I thought," he muttered; "the plot at last revealed; he's got it up for me

this time and no mistake. But no matter; there must be some way out, and I'll find it."

He stretched himself flat on the ground, the cigarette between his teeth, and, closing his eyes, passed into semi-unconsciousness. A voice began to whisper in his ear.

The following was the scheme. Hector's force, composed of the 1st Lancers and two guns, was directed to escort a convoy of waggons to Tafelberg Farm, a distance of about six miles. Between him and his destination lay a high rugged ridge, the only openings in which were two narrow passes two miles apart, and by now assuredly guarded by Colonel Wicklow with his eight hundred infantrymen. Other way round there was none, save by a detour of some fifteen miles, and, even if the distance had not made such a turning movement prohibitive, the country on that side had been carefully marked "out of bounds."

The ridge itself Hector knew well, knew also that, save by the two passes, neither waggons nor even horses could hope to cross throughout its length; for many times on his solitary rides he had made the attempt on his Basuto pony, but had always been forced to desist. Only on hands and knees could a man scale those rocky sides, and even then the task was difficult, more particularly about midway between the two passes, where the ridge reached its highest point and was well-nigh precipitous.

This, then, was his task: the crossing of a mountain barrier, impassable for waggons and mounted troops—of which his force was composed—the two gates being guarded and held by infantry. Truly, General Rivers had been successful in his object.

Suddenly Hector stirred, sat up, and gazed for a moment vacantly around him; then, springing to his feet, stood rocking dizzily. Slowly the mists cleared from before his eyes, and they lit up; a flame of red appeared in his cheeks: his knees ceased from trembling, and he was awake—with the solution of the problem clear before him.

Taking out his glasses, he carefully scrutinised the distant ridge, each stone of which could be seen through the powerful Zeiss. He noted the figures of men lining the rocks at the sides of the passes, and then lowering the glasses, remained motionless, thinking rapidly.

"Kinley," he called, "Major Kinley."

"That's the first thing," he muttered, "remove him from command of the cavalry"—this position, being next senior to himself, Porky was now occupying, Royle being detailed as umpire, and he in command of the side—"He'll sell me to a certainty if I don't."

"Kinley," he called again, no answer to his first summons being forthcoming, and at length after some minutes' waiting, Kinley having had to be aroused

from his slumbers, that person appeared, rubbing his eyes.

"Well, old chap," he said yawning, "bit of a teaser this, eh? Johnson's just told me about it, but never mind, I've got an idea; tell you what it is if you like."

"Thank you, Porky, I should; can't make head or tail of it myself. You ride with me and we'll talk it over together."

"Right-o—glad to escape the dust. But what about the bloomin' regiment? I'm in command, you know."

"Hand it over to Graves, we'll send him on ahead while you and I sit with the guns and watch. Ask him to come here, will you—the rest as well."

Porky departed, returning some few minutes later followed by the other officers of Graeme's army. These proceeded to range themselves in a half circle before their leader, their faces showing varying degrees of interest; for, though to the majority field days had long since lost their charm, there was always a chance of something sensational happening when under their present commander, not to mention the practical certainty of a row between him and Bumps.

Nor were their expectations disappointed to-day, for of the many mad schemes in which, under his leadership, they had previously participated, the one now propounded surpassed them all in sheer lunacy, and their faces grew bright with interest as they listened to the plan laid before them.

"Here's the game, gentlemen," he began, "we've got to get that lot of carts to Tafelberg Farm. Between us and it lies an impassable ridge, only two openings, both held, as you'll see if you look, by infantry and guns. No way through—or so thinks Bumps." Here Graeme paused to allow the impossibility of the task to sink into his hearers' minds; for this was his way, to make out that a thing was impossible and then to show his audience how easy it really was for him. It was a touch of theatrical display in which he, like some other and more distinguished commanders, delighted.

"He's out as usual, though, is Bumps," he continued; "for the convoys are going through all right and will be at the farm in three hours from now. Against me is that most distinguished officer Colonel Wicklow, who, as you know, is a Staff College graduate. Now, at that abode of learning they read books, and those books teach them that the way to defend a ridge is not to spread troops all along it, but to hold the passes strongly, and keep one or two reserves somewhere in rear, ready to come up to the threatened point. That, gentlemen, is what my opponent is now doing, and on his so doing I make my plan.

"Here it is. The cavalry under you, Graves—Porky remains to advise me—will start off and head straight for the western opening. Then, when they begin to shoot, and Wicklow's reserves have started to reinforce that point, as they will, thinking we're going to rush the pass, you'll turn half right and go, hard as God will let you, for the centre of the ridge, that peak there. At its foot you'll

dismount, swarm up it, there'll be nothing but a picket on top—the reserve by that time will be a mile away—and having settled them, work along the ridge to the left, and come down on the western opening from above, and knock that lot out too. Then Jehu,” pointing to the transport officer, ”and I will bring on the carts and run them through and away to Tafelberg Farm. The guns will bang away as soon as the cavalry starts from here, their target the western opening. That’s to keep up the delusion of attacking them. Now, you’ve got it. Get away and be off.”

All but Porky saluted and hurried away. ”Stand to your horses!” was shouted, and, at the sound, sleeping figures rose up from the ground and busied themselves with bridle and loosened girth. ”Mount!” was called once more, followed by ”Walk march!” and then suddenly ”Halt!” from many voices, and the clattering mass came to a standstill.

”What the devil are they halting for?” said Graeme. ”Go and see, Porky, tell them to shove on. Oh Lord, if it ain’t that old idiot who’s stopped them! Here’s Johnson coming too,” as Bumps’s A.D.C. came hurrying up. ”What is it, Johnson?”

”The General’s compliments, sir, and Major Kinley’s to command the cavalry,” was the answer.

Graeme uttered an oath, and consternation was displayed on Porky’s face, for here was a bombshell indeed. The latter, as usual, was the first to speak.

”Look here, old chap, I’m not for this at all. Taking on mountains with cavalry! Ain’t goats, you know.”

”What the hell do you mean, you fool? You never said a word just now when you heard the scheme.”

”I know I didn’t; but then, you see, I wasn’t responsible—but Graves. It’s another pair of shoes now. If it comes off, all very well; but if it don’t, it’s me who gets damned, not him. You know what Bumps is about cavalry.”

”Oh, go to blazes! I don’t act to Bumps nor anyone else. Get away to your squadron, and don’t talk.”

”For heaven’s sake come with us, then. You see, Graeme, if you’re there, you get the damning, as is only right. It’s your scheme.”

”Of course I’m coming. D’you think I’d let a turnip-headed ... Oh, come on. Trumpeter, my horse,” and Graeme mounted and was hurrying away, when again Johnson was seen approaching.

”The General’s compliments, sir,” he said, ”and he wishes you to stay with him. The cavalry under Major Kinley is to go on at once and...” And then the A.D.C. stopped astonished, his ears listening to a flow of language such as struck his simple soul with genuine admiration.

”You can tell your something something General,” he concluded, ”to draw

his something something face on a something something blackboard and take a something something sponge and spit on it and—”

”Will you obey orders, sir,” interrupted a quavering voice, and Royle rode up beside him. ”For God’s sake,” reverting to pleading, as he caught Graeme’s eye, ”for all our sakes, don’t put the General’s back up.”

Hector glared at him for a moment; his mouth opened and then shut with a snap.

”Very well,” he said, ”I’ll come. Only don’t blame me for what’s going to happen; or rather do, if you like, I don’t care,” and thereupon he dismounted, and, handing his horse over to the trumpeter, walked away to where Bumps was sitting.

”Now, Colonel Graeme,” said the latter affably, ”we want to hear your plans; but first, I must tell you, you were wrong in proposing to lead the cavalry. As commander of a mixed force, your place is with the guns. You’ve told Major Kinley, I presume, what you meant to do?”

”I’ve tried to.”

”Tried to, what do you mean? Either you have or have not, which is it?”

”I repeat, I’ve tried to; but my plan requires me in person to lead.”

”By that you mean, I suppose, a field officer in your regiment is incapable? What do you say to that, Colonel Royle?”

”I don’t know what Graeme means, sir, I’m sure, Major Kinley’s a most excellent officer,” answered Royle, who but yesterday had lamented Porky’s total want of intelligence to Hector himself.

”I confess that is also my opinion,” said Bumps, ”he’s an officer, with ideas, too, is Kinley, and what’s more is both modest and unassuming. Always ready to learn, doesn’t think he knows better than his superiors. But about your plans, what are they, Graeme?”

”To attack that ridge where it’s highest,” answered Hector.

”Really, and how, may I ask, charge it with cavalry?”

”That’s my idea.”

”Graeme, you don’t, you can’t mean that,” from Royle. ”Sir,” turning to the smiling Bumps, ”I can assure you this is directly contrary to my teaching.”

”And mine too, Colonel.”

”I meant yours, sir. Why, it was only the other day, after your last lecture on cavalry, that I had all my officers up, and impressed upon them how right you were when you said—said—” Here Royle was brought to a standstill, memory failing him.

”Say no more, Colonel, I believe you; but there are some people too clever to learn. Ah, they’re off! Sit down here, Graeme, and watch. I think, possibly, in the next few minutes you may learn something, or the experience of forty-five

years goes for nothing.”

“A mule that had been through all the wars of Frederick still remained a mule,” muttered Graeme, and, sitting down, lighted a cigarette and closed his eyes.

That disaster was imminent he knew well, but now cared nothing. Let Bumps have his silly triumph if he liked. His own plan had been right, of that he was intuitively certain, and that was all that mattered to him; it would fail, of course, as it was, but that was to be expected, Porky being in charge.

Sitting there, he could foretell, knowing that officer, what was in his mind as he rode along, almost to the words he was now uttering to Graves galloping beside him.

“Hanged if I get a telling off,” he was saying, “for Graeme or anyone else; my plan’s much sounder, and will pull him through, and then he’ll be glad he didn’t run his own rotten scheme. Look ye, Graves, we’ll make for the centre of the ridge now, straight away, that’ll entice those blokes away from the pass, and then we’ll turn and be through it like winking. It’s the same as his plan, only the other way round.”

In vain did Graves, who possessed intelligence, protest. Porky was firm, and carried out his scheme, or rather the first part of it, for in the last he was not so successful.

On they headed for the ridge, Wicklow watching them through his glasses as they came, and for a moment doubt arose in his mind, soon quelled, however, for his Staff College teaching told him that cavalry do not attempt the crossing of precipitous mountains. “It’s a transparent ruse,” he reflected, “to draw me away from the passes, their only hope,” and he called up his reserves till each entrance was guarded by close on four hundred men.

A cry arose of “Here they are!” Cartridges rattled in breech-blocks, and Wicklow’s heart was joyful within him, when, a cloud of dust preceding them, a straggling mass of horsemen burst upon them. The storm broke, but on they came, for Porky was valiant and by now reckless, till at last, with guns thudding in their faces and withering fire from Maxim and rifle pouring in upon them, even he became convinced of the futility of further advance, and halted his cursing, sulky-faced regiment in the centre of the pass. A loud shout of laughter greeted them from the infantrymen looking down from the rocks on either side.

“We’re in for it, Graves,” he calmly observed, “but a damning is no new thing to me.” Then Porky proceeded to light his pipe, and, seating himself on a stone beside the path, waited for the wrath to come.

“A pretty piece of business,” said the General, as he lumbered across the veldt towards the scene of disaster, “very pretty indeed! Oh for heaven’s sake keep up beside me, Colonel Royle, and stop talking to Graeme, you can do that

afterwards.”

”Yes, sir; very sorry, sir,” gasped Royle, rushing his horse up and cannoning into the General in his haste. ”oh, I beg ten thousand pardons, sir, and you were saying—”

”How the devil can I say anything when you damn near knock me over? Hold up, confound you!” pulling at his horse’s mouth, as the animal skipped cleverly over the hole of an ant-bear. ”Nasty clumsy brute to give a general officer. Who chose him—you?”[#]

[#] It is usual for the general and his staff, when not bringing their own horses with them, to be mounted by the cavalry regiment in the station they are visiting. Amiability is a *sine qua non* in the quadrupeds selected for this honour.

”No, sir, Colonel Graeme, sir—”

”Damme,” roared the General, ”it’s always Colonel Graeme, pray, does he command the 1st Lancers or do you?”

”I do, of course, sir; but Graeme, being the second in command, I usually leave such matters to him. I thought he was to be relied on, sir; but after to-day I see—”

”I hope you do, a nice show up for your regiment, to-day’s performance. Now, perhaps, you’ll believe what I’ve always said about this officer.”

”Indeed I do, sir, and if you like, sir, there are the Confidential Reports to go in soon, sir, and—”

”Do your own dirty work, Colonel,” snapped the General, who found this servility even more exasperating than Graeme’s insolence. ”I should advise you to remember, however, that you’ve always cracked the fellow up till now; made him out a sort of Julius Cæsar.”

”But, sir, that was before I knew, sir. Now, sir, that my eyes are opened, thanks to you, I see my mistake, and—”

”Oh, do you? Well, here we are. Sound the officers’ call, Trumpeter.”

”Gad, but your trumpeters want practice,” he snarled, as the man, infected by the general demoralisation, blew a cracky, discordant blast, ”and look there, see the way your officers are lounging up, like a lot of ducks shuffling along. For the Lord’s sake, go and march ’em here yourself properly. All present? Hum, yours too, Wicklow? Sit down there, please, closer, damn it! I don’t want to shout.”

”Now, gentlemen—when you’ve finished arguing with Captain Graves, Major Kinley, thank you—I think we’ve had a most instructive morning, we’ve

learnt, or I trust most of you have, how cavalry should ... not be handled. The scheme, I allow, was perhaps a little too difficult for the 'Blue' [#] commander; but even so, that's no excuse for the insane performance it has just been our privilege to witness. No attempt at scouting, no reports sent in, merely a blind, headlong rush to destruction. May I ask, Colonel Graeme, on what information you acted? As far as I know, you had not the slightest idea of what was in front of you."

[#] On field days one side is usually designated the "Blue," the other the "Red."

"There were two companies of infantry, with two guns, holding either pass. In rear, four companies in reserve," was the careless answer.

There was a murmur from the officers of Wicklow's force—the diagnosis was correct.

"Really?" said Bumps. "Stop whispering there, will you! What do you say to that, Colonel Wicklow?"

"It's correct, sir," he answered, "except that my reserves came up as soon as the attack developed; they were there in time to repel the cavalry charge."

"There you are, Graeme; four more companies than you thought. However, you've paid the penalty of disregarding my own and your Colonel's teaching, and there's no more to be said. I hope it will be a lesson to you in the future to be a little less cocksure. It's a fault which has brought many a better soldier than you to grief. And now I'll tell you what you ought to have done. First, you should have sent out patrols and scouted."

"To find out what I already knew, sir?"

"Kindly refrain from interrupting; besides, you did not know; it has just been proved. And then, having ascertained the enemy's dispositions, reported to me that the task was beyond you."

"I understood, sir, we were supposed to be on active service conditions?" said Graeme.

"So you were, sir, what of it?"

"As far as I know, sir, there are no umpires on active service." At this remark a stir of anticipation ran through the audience, despite disaster, Graeme was again not going to fail them.

"Umpires, sir, what do you mean, sir? I'm speaking of the officer who would be your senior, and to whom, consequently, it would be your duty to report."

"In which case, being my senior and on the spot, wouldn't he have made the plan and given the orders?" The stir thereupon developed into ill-concealed mirth, at sight of which Bumps's foot went down.

"I'm not here to answer foolish questions, Graeme, nor yet to argue; kindly bear that in mind. I've told you what you ought to have done, and there's an end of it. One thing more, however, I should like to say, and that is, I in no way

blame Major Kinley, though it's true his action resulted in disaster. He was given an impossible task, and very rightly declined to run his head against a mountain ridge, and instead did the best he could under the circumstances. He showed initiative, at any rate—the great quality in a cavalry officer—and dash, though, perhaps, a slight want of judgment. That is all, gentlemen, good-day. You ride home with me, Colonel Royle; I wish to speak to you." The General rose, and, mounting his horse, was soon lurching away over the veldt lunchwards.

Graeme rode back alone, no one showing any inclination to accompany him. He was down now, and the strong man or animal down is a being whom all smaller creatures shun; for such is the penalty those who claim pre-eminence over their fellows have to pay if but for a moment they fail to support their claim. For though to all living creatures a lord is essential, nevertheless they hate that lord and the dominion he imposes, and, once fallen, are on him like wolves on a disabled leader. Only in the case of hereditary kingship is it different—then it is the place and not the individual to which they bow.

This came home to Graeme as he rode homewards. Yesterday—this morning even—his brother officers, though disliking and perhaps fearing him, would nevertheless have followed his lead and accepted without question his dictum on military matters; but now, thanks to a mere field day disaster, or, rather, to the utterance of a Bumps, all this had changed, and his former unbroken sequence of successes had been obliterated from their minds.

While he was thus reflecting, the clatter of hoofs sounded on the track behind him, and Wicklow rode up, stopping for a moment as he passed.

"Hullo, Graeme," he said; "rotten job they gave you this morning, no man living could have done it. Funny, though, at one time I thought you were going to pull it off, but I think my reserves might have got there in time. They hadn't started for the passes when you headed for my centre. There was only a picket of six men on top, but of course I knew you wouldn't do an unsound thing like that; besides your horses couldn't have got over."

"Supposing I'd dismounted and swarmed up, then moved along the ridge and come down on you from above?"

"Glad you didn't, it's I who'd have had the damning then—not you. Bye-bye, I'm off to lunch," and Wicklow rode on, leaving Graeme the bitterer at the knowledge of what ought to have been and had not.

A feeling of despondency came over him, a sense of futility, one of those black moods to which the self-reliant, and consequently solitary, are at times prone. What was the good of it all, he asked himself, this laborious building up of a name, which the slightest mistake of a subordinate or momentary ill-luck could destroy in a moment. Even worse, perhaps, was the crass stupidity of those by whom he was surrounded; their total inability to see matters that to his eyes

were as clear as daylight. He knew there was not one of those officers present at to-day's operations who had an inkling of the motives that had prompted him to act as he had done. To them his plan had been a wild gamble, which with luck might come off, but only with luck; whilst he had known—even without the confirmation of Wicklow's words—the success of that plan had been certain, based as it was on his knowledge of human nature, which never changes and never can change.

Oh, to get away from it all, abandon this thankless profession, and leave the army to the ruin it courted by the retention in high places of such as Bumps! Then there suddenly flashed upon him the remembrance of the telegram that had been despatched in the morning, and till now forgotten; for in the concentration of purpose usual with him there was only room for one thought in his mind at a time.

A sigh of relief burst from his lips.

"Thank heaven," he muttered, "I did it; fool that I was to wait so long." And thereupon, suddenly exhilarated at the thought of speedy release, he struck spurs to his horse and rode on, until he reached his quarters, before which a soldier in uniform was standing, awaiting him.

"Hullo, Lobb," said Hector, surprised at the apparition, the man being a trooper from his own late squadron, "what are you doing here, where's Murphy?"

"Beggy pardin, sir, Murphy's 'ad a haccident; 'orse come down with 'im this morning and broke 'is arm, and the Sergeant-Major sent me to do first servant to you in 'is absence."

"Where is he?" shouted Hector.

"Oo, Murphy, sir? In 'orspital, sir; they took 'im there strite, compound fracture, I've 'eard, sir, the bone—" But Hector was already galloping away to the hospital, with a sudden desperate anxiety in his mind.

"Murphy, did you send that telegram?" he burst out, rushing up to the bed upon which the sufferer was lying.

"Beggy pardin, sir, I—"

"Did you send it?"

"No, sir; 'ere it is," and Murphy drew a crumpled sheet of paper from under the pillow. "Very sorry, sir." But once more Hector was gone, and five minutes later had reached the telegraph office, where, pushing aside other applicants for attention, he thrust the paper beneath the grating.

"When will this reach Duikerpoort?" he demanded.

"Couldn't say," answered the clerk, with the nonchalance that a manly Colonial independence seems to demand; "perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow morning."

"It must get there to-night, d'you hear?"

"Oh, must it? You're in a hurry, you are! Oh, beg pardon, sir," as Graeme suddenly appeared behind him, having burst open the door marked "Private" and entered. "I'll send it off at once; it will be all right, I think, if the line's not blocked. Good-day, sir."

Hector rode slowly back to barracks, where till nightfall he wandered about aimlessly, his mind racked with this strange newborn anxiety and the impotent desire to act.

"Dinner—not going to dinner," he replied to Lobbs's reminder that the dress trumpet had sounded and the hour of eight was close at hand. "Bring me a bottle of champagne here; that's all I want. Another damnable night," he muttered, the meal of liquor consumed, "only nine now, twelve hours at least before I can get an answer. I think I'll send for my pony and spend the night on the veldt." He walked to the door, and as he did so, nine o'clock struck. Then a strange thing happened, for with the ceasing of the strokes the fever of restlessness suddenly left him, and in its place he felt perfect peace and calm. For half an hour longer he remained contentedly resting in his chair, his eyelids gradually growing heavier, and then sleepily undressing he lay down on the bed and was almost instantly asleep. Nor through the night hours did he move, but slept dreamlessly on, till a hot deluge in his face awoke him to the fact that early morning tea had arrived, and also that it was Private Lobb, and not the experienced Murphy, who had brought him that tea.

"Beggy pardin, sir," said the perspiring soldier, rushing for a towel and proceeding to mop the soaking bedclothes and incidentally Hector's face, "very sorry, sir; caught my foot; can't think 'ow it happened; 'ere's a tallygram for you, sir," and Lobb fled hastily from the room. A faint rustle of paper was heard from within and then all was silent save for the ticking of the clock.

"Lobb."

"Sir?" and in rushed the soldier. Once more he unfortunately "caught his foot," this time against the water-jug, which breaking at the impact let out a flood of water over the wooden floor.

"Beggy pardin, sir, I'm sure," began Lobb, in an agony, and then stopped, for his master was speaking to him, and at the sound of the voice and look in the eyes of the speaker the disaster was forthwith forgotten.

"Never mind that now, Lobb, but go at once and tell the Adjutant to come here, and then fetch a Cape cart. Ten minutes I give you; don't be longer," and Hector rose from his bed and sat smiling at Lobb, a smile that sent the latter flying from the room, leaving Hector alone.

Still smiling, he unfolded the paper in his hand and remained curiously

regarding the charcoal-written words: "Stara dead."

CHAPTER XXI

The train rocked wearily onward through the fast-gathering darkness. The purple moorland and rocky gorges of the Great Karoo were gone, and in their place there were great rolling plains of yellow grass, swelling hill and misty blue mountain. Onward it crawled, through lines of ruined blockhouses and crumbling earthworks, relics of bygone strife, now increasing its pace, till the groan and rattle of cars swelled to a roar, now slowing down to a crawl as it clanked cautiously over a girder-bridge spanned river, or pulled up with a jerk at some lonely veldt siding.

It was a very caterpillar of a train, express though it claimed to be, and crowded with humanity, black and white, bound for garish, golden Johannesburg. Nevertheless, packed as were its other dusty compartments, there was one in which a man sat solitary, his peace undisturbed by friendly chat and the rustle of turning pages. True, more than once passengers had entered it, sat there for a while—some even venturing on conversation with its inmate—but all, after a time had left, preferring heat and lack of elbow-room elsewhere to space and the company of one not only unsociable but "strange, most strange."

For many hours now Hector Graeme had been left alone, if alone he were; for if that were so why did he talk, not as one who speaks to himself, but to someone with him, someone whose voice he could hear, though all other ears were deaf to it? And this indeed was the case, for a strange thing had come to pass, and that other voice, heard for so many years, yet hitherto impersonal, had since the morning undergone a startling change, and was now become that of Stara, lying dead some thirty miles away.

Quite suddenly, too, recognition had come to him, almost simultaneously with the receipt of the wire telling him of her death. Since then they had spoken together without ceasing, and, tedious though the long journey might be to others, to him there had been no tedium, but a wild, mad happiness and gratitude.

Dead; yes, she was dead, but only her body; for her spirit lived on, and from now would be with him always, watching over him, guiding him on his path, as in the dreams he had dreamed. Never would he be in doubt again, never at a loss as he had been sometimes before; for death had rent the obstructing veil of flesh,

and the soul at last was free to come to him where and whensoever he should call.

How simple henceforth it would all be. He had only to ask and be told, for he had already proved that, by much questioning on points to which he knew the answer, and could have shouted with delight at the accuracy with which those questions were solved. Only on one point was she dumb, of her death she refused to speak, and, press as he might, no voice came back in reply.

Still, he would soon know, very soon now, and together they would stand looking down on the husk her spirit had left, and he would tell her; for she would understand, as living she never would have understood, how he had wearied of that husk and longed for the flesh-obscured soul.

He stretched his cramped limbs, and, rising, went over to the window and looked out. The train was slackening speed.

"Are we here, Stara?" he asked, and back flashed the answer, "Yes."

"Duikerpoort! Duikerpoort!" a voice was heard calling in the darkness, and obeying the summons the train stopped for a moment, and then, creaking and groaning, moved slowly forward once more.

The lighted cars glided by till all had passed; red and green tail-lights grew smaller and then vanished; the roar died to a murmur and was stilled. A drowsy porter passed, his lantern swinging as he went, and then he too was gone, and Hector Graeme stood alone, with the wide-eyed planets above him and the silent immensity of the African veldt around.

No one to meet him, thank God; he would have his walk alone. Ten mile trudge though it was, it did not matter; he was fresh and strong as never before, and Stara was there to keep him company.

"Come, Stara," he called, and at her response he started on his way, swiftly striding along the track, deep in sand though it was.

Mile after mile he covered, insensible to fatigue or hunger, though he had fasted since the night before; for he, like dead Stara, was nearly all spirit now, and for a time unconscious of fleshly claims. At last, far away, a speck of light shone through the black, and the man laughed happily, his outstretched hand guiding his silent companion's gaze to it.

"Home, Stara, at last," he cried, "the home where your body is lying. Tell me where, in what room?" She answered: "My old room, dear; you know it; hasten." Together they ran on, and did not stop till they stood before a farm-house, now as still and silent as one of its inmates.

"Stara, keep with me; follow me close," and Hector's fist crashed against the door, a muttered exclamation from within coming in answer. A flicker of light appeared, the sound of footsteps was heard, and then the door opened. Richard Selbourne stood before them, his eyes searching the darkness without.

"Who are you," he said, "and what do you want at this hour? This is no time—"

"It's we, Dick, Stara and I."

Richard fell back, with terror at his heart; then came recognition, and with it a hatred that banished fear.

"You," he said, "you?"

"We, Dick, Stara and I. We've run all the way here. Oh, don't stand staring there, but let us in," and Hector pressed forward.

"Damn you! Never!" began Richard, but Hector was past, easily thrusting the other, a man with twice his strength, aside, and was standing in the hall, his hand on the staircase rails.

"Take me to her," he said, "or I'll go alone."

Richard stared at him for a moment, measuring Hector's strength with his. "A weak creature," he thought; "he took me unawares just now; that was all. I could kill him easily enough, and, God knows, I've prayed for the chance; but yet, now that it's come, I can't—not with her lying dead above.

"Follow me," he said, and led the way to a small room, called by courtesy a study, but used by its master indiscriminately for the keeping of guns, fishing-tackle, and seeds.

"Untidy as ever, Dick, I see. Look, Stara, the same old mess."

Selbourne wheeled round, his grey eyes searching the other's face.

"Do you wish me to believe you mad," he said curtly, "is that your coward's refuge?"

Hector stared vacantly. "Mad, mad!" he repeated, "you may be, I'm not. Mad, what do you mean?" a look of anger appearing in his eyes.

"You must be to come here, I should think. Why have you done it?"

"You always were a dense fool, Dick. What do you think I've come for? To see the body, of course."

"To see the woman you murdered, you mean."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't? Then I'll tell you. My sister died last night by her own hand, why, you know, I only guess; but this I do know, that her death lies at your door. Of your villainy in making love to her when you had a wife at home I won't speak. She knew it, it seems, and I'm not going to blame the dead. But of the other, of the cowardly abandonment to her fate of a woman you professed to love, of that I will, Colonel Graeme."

"Say what you like, if it pleases you, Dick. I shan't defend myself."

"I intend to. It seems—I got that much out of my wife—Stara wrote you a letter five days ago, and that letter asked for a wire in answer. Even the most callous, I should have thought, would have sent something, but you did not. With

that letter in your pocket, probably unread, you spent those five days loafing about barracks, too damned lazy even to walk to the telegraph-office and send the answer which would have saved a life.”

”Right as usual, Dick; go on.”

”For three days I had boys waiting at the Duikerpoort office, and last night she went there herself, and stayed till the place was shut. Then she came back and an hour afterwards was found on the veldt—dead.”

”That was fine of you, Stara.” The words were only breathed, but Richard heard them, heard too the unmistakable ring of gladness in Hector’s voice. At the sound, decency and respect for the dead above him vanished, and in their place the primitive overmastering desire to kill prevailed. He stretched out his hand to a drawer, clutched something, and in one more second Graeme would have been lying dead, his spirit free to wander by Stara’s side, but in that second a woman stood between them, and her eyes, dulled with tears, were lifted reproachfully to her husband’s face.

”Dick,” she said, ”is this a time for quarrelling? Think, Dick.”

”Let me go, Mary, such as he are better dead. My God! if you’d only heard.”

”I did ... and ... he isn’t worth it, Dick.” She turned and faced Graeme, who was standing with a rapt look on his face, apparently unconscious of their presence.

”What do you want?” she said with level voice and eyes hard as flint.

Hector’s wandering wits came back; for a moment he stood regarding her, and then, recognition dawning, held out his hand. Mary drew back, sweeping her skirts behind her.

Hector laughed, faintly amused. ”So you’re against me too, are you? You’re as dense as Dick. Well, well, the battle’s begun already, you and I, Stara, against the world.”

”I repeat, what do you want?”

”To see her.”

”He shall not, I say. Mary, if you’ve any respect for Stara’s memory, you’ll not sanction this outrage. Think what this man’s done, think what Stara used to be and is now.”

”Hush, Dick.” Mary’s eyes were fixed on Graeme’s face and, more observant than her husband, she saw something there that made her hesitate; for the moment the hatred in her heart was lessened.

”If ... if I let you see her.”

”Alone?”

”Mary!”

”Dick, I beg of you dear, to leave this to me. Alone, if you wish it, Colonel Graeme, for five minutes only.”

"Half an hour."

There was a pause, while Mary's eyes rested unwaveringly on Graeme's face.

"Very well, half an hour. Will you promise me to go then?"

"Yes."

"Come then," and Mary passed out, leading the way upstairs to a closed door, where she stopped. "In there," she said. "I trust you," and left him.

* * * * *

"Stara! we're here, your spirit and I come to say good-bye to the body they're burying to-morrow. It's only for a few minutes; I mustn't stay. They won't let me, Stara, for they say I killed you. But I know better than that, for your spirit has told me the truth, and I honour you for it and adore you, Stara. Wiser than all, you knew that love for a body must die, but love for the spirit lives for ever. I wanted your soul, and you, knowing it, have given."

He paused, crept closer, and stood looking down.

"You beautiful thing," he whispered, "yet, beautiful as you are, I shall be glad when you're hidden away out of sight in the ground for then I shall see the soul whose voice only I now can hear. When will that be, my Star, when will that soul be revealed? To-morrow, yes, to-morrow it shall be, over your grave, when the sun is dead too, and all are gone. Promise me it now, dear, let those dead lips speak for the last time."

"Speak!" He stood towering above her, command in the eyes fixed on the rigid mouth. A gust of wind blew, the lamp flickered, and over the still face a shadow hovered and was gone.

Then through the silent house a mad cry went ringing; the two waiting below started apart, with terror in their eyes; and above a man was on his knees beside the bed, with a dead woman held to his heart, and the scent of crushed lilies rising to his brain.

The minutes passed, and still he knelt there, holding her, and then, slowly raising his head, gazed into the stiffly-smiling face.

"Good-bye, body beloved," he said. "Good-bye, earthly love, and welcome now the spiritual." He rose from his knees, and stood erect, one hand laid on the cold breast, the other raised aloft to heaven.

"Unseen soul of Stara," he breathed, "hear me now. May God's curse strike me, may my limbs rot and wither on my body, may the devil burn and tear me in the Hereafter, if but for a moment my love shall stray from you!"

He stopped, his eyes alight with ecstasy, then, bending down, kissed the

dead lips once, and went swiftly out into the star-gemmed night.

CHAPTER XXII

The red glow of a dying sun framed in masses of angry storm-cloud; a group of dark-clad figures standing in a roughly-walled enclosure, in their midst a white-clothed priest. Around, the sunlit veldt and mountain mocking the shortness of human life, their own tenure, though but a span, an immortality compared with that of mankind.

"I am the resurrection and the life." The high-pitched voice rose on the evening air, chanting words that had been millions of times repeated, yet always sounding new, for of death they form the song, and neither Azrael nor Eros can ever weary humanity. Apart from the throng, close to the grave's brink, a man was standing. Dully the words beat on his brain, but conveyed no meaning, for physical endurance had reached its limit, and understanding for the time was dead.

Vaguely he listened, wondering what it all might mean, now and again raising his eyes to the chasm's far side, where stood the chanting priest, and beyond him the group of black-clothed figures. What was he doing here, what were these people doing here, and this dark hole at his feet, what was its meaning? Vacantly he looked around, seeking for something to lay hold of, some landmark to link the present with the past, but in vain, all were but as symbols on an ever-flying wheel, seen for a second, gone, seen again and lost once more.

Then for a space the whirling circle stopped, and the figures came to a rest and stood steady before his eyes. Ah, there were two he recognised, a man and a woman, the former rigid-faced and stern, the latter weeping. Yes, he knew them; they were Richard Selbourne and Mary, but why was she crying? There was no reason for it that he could see. He looked hard at them, trying to attract their notice, but in vain, almost it seemed as though they would not see. Ah last Richard looked up, met his eyes full, and without recognition lowered his own again. "Cut me, intentionally too, what, in God's name for, what have I done? Confound that other fellow too, with them, staring like that; what the devil does he find in me, a stranger, to interest him? Never takes his eyes off me, damn him! Looks like a doctor, well, if you are, go back to your pills, you fool, and leave me alone. I want none of your drugs."

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Ah, he recognised that. They were burying someone then, and this hole at his feet was a grave. But whose, and what, had it to do with him? Faintly curious, he moved forward and peered down. Yes, there was a coffin, a name on it too, if he could but read:

STARA.

Then back rushed remembrance; he knew, and laughed aloud. Everybody looked up; the man with the deep-set eyes made a half step forward; Mary clutched her husband's arm; and the priest, scandalised, stopped, and then went hurriedly on: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes dust to dust."

Graeme's head nodded slowly in approval, for here were words of sense at last, little as the mumbling fool that uttered them knew it. To him they were but a formula, the fine words spoken by the hero of some stage drama, the finale bringing down the curtain to a burst of hysterical applause. He alone knew how true they were, and that in death lay no sting and in the grave no victory, but defeat, and in an hour from now the proof of that truth would be given him.

The throng melted away, and moved slowly homeward across the veldt. Two men approached, spade in hand, glanced at Graeme, and then set swiftly to work. The dull thud of earth on wood sounded from below, then earth on other earth, till the yawning chasm had gone and only a brown scar remained.

One final stamp on the loosened soil, and they too, shouldering their tools, went homeward, and Graeme was alone in the fast-falling night. The sun had long since died—to be born again in another world—and over his fiery western grave a pall of blue storm-cloud hung, rapidly rising and spreading over the heavens. The wind moaned fretfully, and the low mutter of thunder came from the distant mountains.

The hour was at hand, its herald the tempest, the birth-pangs of earth in travail of a soul.

A sudden fearful excitement shook Graeme. His knees knocked together, he rocked and swayed, and then the mood passed, and, steady once more, he strode forward till he stood over the lifeless body below, his livid face raised to the darkened sky.

"Stara!" he called, but only the thunder of an outraged God responded. "Stara! Stara!" he shouted again, and then stopped, for the answer had come.

A flash of blue light, a rending crash overhead, and, to the swell of harp and organ, the heavens yawned slowly asunder, and the dead woman, white fire rolling around her, stood looking down upon him. For a moment he remained,

with face lit up and hands outstretched towards her, and then, with one loud triumphant cry of "Stara!" fell forward on his face, quivered for a moment, and was still.

Almost as quick as the lightning-flash, from behind the wall at the far side of the cemetery a man came running up, followed slowly and seemingly unwillingly by another.

"Quick, Selbourne," said the first, "fetch a Cape cart; look sharp, man, the storm will be on us in a minute. God! did you ever see anything like that last flash?"

Richard came slowly up to where the speaker was kneeling, with Graeme's head against his shoulder, while he was forcing the neck of a small phial between the clenched teeth.

"What's the matter," he said coolly, "lightning struck him? If so, he ought to be dead. Is he?"

"Nothing of the kind; he's as alive as you or I."

"What's wrong, then?"

"I don't quite know—fit of some sort, I should say."

"Leave him to get over it then. Rain will bring him to. I'm going, I was a fool to stay, don't know why I did, except that you made such a point of it."

The other looked up, frowning. "Look here, Selbourne, what your quarrel is with this fellow I don't know, and don't want to; but I'm a doctor, and if he's the biggest blackguard under the sun, he's my patient now, and I don't leave him. You go if you like, but in common humanity order the Cape cart."

"I'll ... see ... him ... rotting first."

"See here, Richard Selbourne, I'm a good friend of yours, and I think I've shown it, haven't I? I wasn't in time, I know, for ... but that was not my fault, I came as quick as I could, and there was nothing to be done, but you know what I risked over signing the certificate as I did."

"I do, and you've Mary's and my eternal gratitude, Lees ... but—"

"Show it now, then, by fetching that cart."

"If you knew what I do, Lees, you'd leave him here to die."

The other laughed. "Don't be a fool, Selbourne," he said.

"Where do you propose to take him? If it's my house you're thinking of, you can save yourself the trouble of a journey, I warn you."

"I'm not, I'll take him to the hotel, and get him away to-morrow or the day after. You shan't see him again, I give you my word."

Richard rose from the wall on which he was sitting.

"On that understanding then," he said, "I'll send a cart, but don't ask me to touch the fellow, because I won't. You and the boy can lift him, I suppose, or shall I send a man?"

"The boy and I can manage all right; he's light enough, poor devil. Please be quick, Selbourne."

The latter walked slowly away, leaving Dr. Lees looking down on the still unconscious figure in his arms.

"Good thing I was watching you, my friend," he muttered. "I knew when I saw you at the funeral you couldn't last much longer. I wonder what it all means, and what you saw just now? for you did see something, I know that, and probably will to the end of your days. You'll be an interesting study in the future, Colonel Graeme, or I'm much mistaken. 'Stara,' you called, and that was her name, poor girl; she poisons herself, and my friend Dick, the most amiable fellow I know, hates you, hates you so much that he'd leave you here to die. For you would die of exposure if I left you now; as it is, you'll be pretty bad for a day or two. Still, I think I've got the story all right; it's an old enough one, God knows. Oh yes, you're a bad lot, Colonel, right enough, but it's possible you're not quite so much to blame as they think. I doubt if you're quite ... responsible; not mad—I'm sure of that—but not quite responsible. Ah, the cart at last! Hi, you, this way; fasten the mules to the wall here, then come and help lift the Baas. Easy, that's right now." Together they lifted the light figure into the Cape cart, and, Lees still holding it in his arms, drove away to the Spring Bok Hotel, Duikerport, the mules shying and plunging at the lightning playing on the rocks around.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Oh, do hurry up, for heaven's sake, Graves; it's past three, and we're playing in the second chukker."

"Don't fidget me, but come in and sit down. Throw that dog out of the chair;" whereupon Captain Annesley, white-breeched and brown-booted, entered his friend's room, and having lifted the sleeping dachshund, and placed him carefully on his knee, sat down, his eyes resting morosely on the scantily-clad figure before him.

"We'll be late," he observed.

"You've said that before. I'm shoving on all I know. There's a drill-book on the table there; take it and read it for once. It will do you good."

Annesley declined the monstrous proposition.

"Drill-books," he remarked, "are for those with no ideas of their own."

"That's why I suggest your reading it, Worm, but that ain't yours, that's Graeme's. I recognise the brand; there's enough about, too, goodness knows, of the same sort."

"Madder every day," continued Annesley. "He pow-wowed the squadron this morning in a white top-hat. A—white—top-hat! I'm not lying, Graves."

"I saw him, it's sickening. Lord! what a second in command, or rather C.O., for Royle's only a dummy. I thought too, after that last show-up before Bumps, he meant putting his foot down. Talked enough about it, but he ain't done it. Graeme wins another silly battle or two, and it's worse than ever. He daren't say "Damn it" to him now. Cavalry officer in a white top-hat, God!"

"Funny thing, the men never laughed. They did when they saw him first, but once he began to talk they shut up, and sat listening with their mouths open; so did Fanshawe and I, made us think, Graves, no end, felt I'd like to be—Napoleon."

"You—Napoleon?"

"Well, why not? Every soldier, you know, carries a field-marshal's what-you-may-call-it in his ruddy—"

"Shut up, for God's sake, you make me ill, Worm."

"Think he's really mad, Graves? Pa says he is."

"Pa?"

"Pa says—his room's next to Graeme's, you know—that he hears him talking to himself at night. Damn sick about it Pa is, says it stops him sleeping. It's ever since he came back three weeks ago. Where did he go, d'you know?"

"You can see it in the leave-book, if you're interested, I'm not."

"Graves, I believe it's a girl's put Graeme wrong."

"You've not the slightest reason for thinking such a thing, Worm, Graeme never speaks to a woman."

"I know, but, all the same, I'm sure of it. What did he go on leave for then, why does any fellow go on leave in this cursed country, except he's after a girl, or looking for one? If that's so, and he's taken the knock, I'm sorry for him; must be damnable to be chucked by a girl. Gad, if Fanny were to play it low down on me, I'd ... I don't know what I would do, Graves. You've heard me speak of Fanny, haven't you?"

"I have, many times. Are you coming to polo?"

"Yes, wait a minute though; there's something else I wanted to tell you, only it went out of my head, talking of Graeme. I had a letter from Johnson, at Cape Town, this morning, and he says the Mahonga show is all on again, and we shall be for it."

"Johnson's a fool, always spreading some shave. Come on, if you *are* coming, that is." The pair went out, and mounting their waiting ponies rode off to the

polo ground.

Johnson, however, though a fool, as Graves justly observed, proved himself on this occasion a true prophet, for next day into the ante-room—at the time crowded with officers drinking afternoon tea—burst Porky, pregnant with great news. For a moment he stood surveying them, his face bright with anticipation of the unwonted delights of an attentive audience, and then, as they, as usual, paid no heed to his presence, he let loose the torrent fighting for escape within him.

"I've news," he said, in a would-be indifferent manner, but again no one heeded.

"I've news," he roared, "listen, damn you!"

"Don't shout, Porky," said a voice, "what's the matter?"

"Matter, why war's the matter," and at the word "war" a hush fell, and everybody looked up. "Bloody war!" he continued, having an audience at last, "and this gallant corps is for it, whether or no. The Mahongas have risen, and are playing hell all round, so sharpen your swords and spears, my sons, and make your last will and testament."

"It's a lie," said Graves crossly, from his corner.

"It's no lie, it's all right, I tell you; no damned shaves or leg-pulls this time. I had it straight from Cape Town ten minutes ago."

"It's begun, thank God," muttered a voice, and Graeme rose and made his way out, his departure being unnoticed in the general uproar.

"And I thank God too," said young Fanshawe, overhearing the latter part of the sentence, "that it's you, and neither Porky nor Royle who will run the show in this same bloody war."

BOOK III

CHAPTER XXIV

A wild December morning was breaking over the great British camp. Masses of storm-cloud swept overhead, the wind howled, and gusts of rain and sleet beat

against the black streaming tents. In the broad lanes and square parade grounds, deep in mud and patched with rapidly-widening pools, arms and accoutrements could be seen lying, thrown down by their owners, and left to rot and rust at will.

Some distance away from the camp rose a cluster of huge marquees, their flags of white marked with the red cross of Geneva proclaiming them to be the field hospital, and towards them, phantom-like in the drear half-dark of morning, an apparently never-ending procession was moving. Swaying ambulance waggons and creaking litters—their canvas bottoms red-stained and dripping—toiled through the slush of the road, their path impeded by a throng of limping, maimed, and cursing pedestrians.

The heart of Surgeon-General Macpherson, standing at the main entrance of the hospital, grew heavy as he watched, and his face dark with shame and grief, for never before in a life of more than sixty years had he seen a sight like this.

"Poor old England," he muttered, "you're done at last," and then suddenly his spare form stiffened, and his lips twisted into a smile, for a young officer was approaching; and to Macpherson, and such as he, the maintaining of a stiff upper lip before juniors is a rule of life never to be forgotten, no matter how imminent and certain disaster.

"Hullo, Newton," he said, "what's the matter with you now? Can't have the A.D.C.'s going sick, you know, or who's to run the army?"

"I'm all right, sir," answered the new-comer, touching his cap; "it's not about myself I've come to see you, but Lord Harford, Sir Archibald wants to know how he is."

Macpherson looked away, for despite his efforts the mask for a second had slipped, though this was the question he had known was coming, and one which would have to be answered, not once, but many times that day. At that moment he would have given the half of his small worldly possessions to be no longer Surgeon-General Macpherson, Principal Medical Officer to the British Forces, but instead a junior officer—nay, even a private soldier—in one of his beloved Highland regiments. Still, there was no use burking it, and he answered:

"Lord Harford died two hours ago, Newton; he was shot through the lungs; there was no chance of saving him from the first."

The boy's face fell, and an expression of dismay, almost of terror, was displayed on it.

"Dead," he repeated, "the Commander-in-Chief dead? Good God, sir, what an utter damnable mess we're in!"

Macpherson made no answer, for of a truth there was none to be made. They were in a mess, such a one as probably no British army had been in before, save perhaps in the earlier days of the Peninsular War. Then, however, a great

leader was there to guide them, one in whom all trusted, but now it seemed that there was no one, for he in whose hands their destiny had lain was dead. For the great war that had been prophesied for years past by countless Cassandras had come upon England at last, and as always, prophecies as to its course and method had been totally false. A guarding fleet, the Balaams had declared, lured away, then the horrors of invasion, the enemy successful at first, but in the end gloriously repulsed, the British lion having awakened from his slumbers. But here there had been no invasion—at least, not on the enemy's part—nor any thought of such yet, though a hundred thousand citizens, with guns and uniform, designated the Hearts of Oak—once known as the Territorials, before then as the Volunteers—were waiting on the coasts to receive them, patriotic rage inflaming their breasts. No, the fleet had not been decoyed away, or destroyed; on the contrary, it had done its work right well, and what remained of the enemy's fleet was now safely shut up in blockaded ports.

Then a strange thing happened, and yet perhaps not strange, but as certain to take place as the sun to shine in the heavens—England herself determined to invade.

What does our Army exist for? This is the question invariably propounded to a listening House by the merchant, lawyer, or doctor on appointment to the charge of Army fortunes, and equally invariably answered in accordance with party dictates, which demand at all costs retention in Office. Not for aggression, most emphatically not, he shouts, but for defence, and this being so, large numbers are but a useless expense and conscription an unnecessary hardship. Never can there be any question of England's invading a Continental or other power, he goes on to declare, and party dogs and Little Englanders bow-wow applause, and a slothful country smiles well pleased.

In this, as in many other political matters, he lies, for an army exists to fight whenever and wherever it is called upon so to do, and the military history of our own and other island nations is a story of successful invasion—from Crecy to South Africa it is one and the same story. For history, as the record of human nature, can never lie, and must always repeat itself, and a nation, unless degenerate, demands the striking of blows, not the mere waiting to receive them. And so England, flushed with success, began to seethe and clamour for more; but alas, of the Army there was only a handful, and the Hearts of Oak, by special decree, existed merely for defence against invasion.

A deadlock ensued, and Europe began to laugh. Under the sting of its laughter fury arose, and with it clamorous demands for an expedition, the greater now, because the balance was beginning to fall against England. The enemy had annexed countries she was bound by treaty to defend, and with a lengthy coastline thus secured, was hard at it building warships and repairing those disabled.

It was but a question of months now, and England's fleet would be overwhelmed by numbers.

The fury increased, mass meetings were held, and the Government rocked where it sat. Expedition or resignation was demanded. Naturally the former won, and a special decree was passed by which the Hearts of Oak became liable for Service abroad. In vain they protested, deserted even; it was all no good, for public sympathy was against them, and in a few weeks a heterogeneous force of soldiers, sailors, and Hearts of Oak was packed on transports and sailed away to war.

In chief command was Lord Harford, a man of remarkable ability as an organiser, though notoriously deficient as a leader in the field, and assisting him as Chief of the Staff was Sir Thomas Moleyns, also a man of ability. His talents, however, were not those of a soldier, but rather of a political intriguer, his present eminence being mainly owing to the assistance given by him to the War Minister in a recent difficulty connected with the public discovery of a shortage of Government stores.

He was a strong, pushing person, however, and fully meant having the control of the present expedition, an aim which the age and infirmities of the Commander-in-Chief rendered comparatively easy of attainment. Contrary to expectation, the landing of the army was unopposed, and, that having been carried through without a hitch, the force marched on unmolested for three days, the few hostile cavalry scouts met with invariably retiring before its advance.

Almost it seemed as though the enemy invited invasion, which indeed was the case, it having exceeded their most sanguine expectations, and consequently the strictest orders had been issued to allow the British to come on unopposed till well out of reach of their ships.

At home, however, this was not realised, and the news of the successful debarkation aroused much enthusiasm. An unopposed occupation of the capital was now confidently predicted, and preparations were already in progress, and festivities organised to celebrate the event.

Their joy was but short-lived, the next news to hand being that of a crushing disaster.

On the morning of the fourth day, the march was suddenly brought to a halt by the tidings of a large force in position on a wooded ridge ahead, completely barring the road by which they were moving to the north. To the same message was added another to the effect that General Sir Hector Graeme, commanding the cavalry division, had taken over charge of the advanced guard, and was now preparing to attack. This having been telephoned on to Moleyns, he at once directed General Graeme to desist from his preparations, and, further, to recall all his advanced scouts and patrols. His ostensible object in so doing was to

lull the enemy into security; his real one being the determination to thwart a man for whom he had a whole-hearted dislike, and also, should things go wrong, the securing of a scapegoat on whom he could lay the blame.[#] Moleyns was a far-seeing man, and he knew, moreover, that Graeme's downfall would be most gratifying in high places, particularly to his friend and patron, Mr. Quibble, a Manchester solicitor, at that time Secretary of State for War.

[#] This, it may be remarked, was a scheme played with success on many occasions by generals during the time of the South African War.

This message sent, Moleyns issued orders for the advanced guard to fall back on the main body, the whole army being further directed to camp one mile north of the village of Rass. This done, and plans drawn up and despatched to the various divisions, he sought out Lord Harford, whom he found seated in a motor car some miles in rear, and propounded a scheme for attack to be carried out that night; and, as usual, he gained his point.

Night came; the attack was made by a third of the whole force, the result being a crushing defeat.

Ignorant of the country, whole divisions went astray, and wandered aimlessly about in the dark, and when eventually the bulk of the force reached the place appointed, the night was suddenly illumined by the glare of searchlights and star shells, and a tempest of lead and iron burst upon the huddled mass. In vain did the foremost ranks turn to fly, the pressure from behind was too great, and though at last they did manage to get away and stream back into camp in the small hours of the morning, it was as a rabble they reached it—a rabble, moreover, shorn of at least half its numbers, the Commander-in-Chief himself being mortally wounded by a chance bullet.

This reverse by itself was bad enough, but worse still was the news sent in by the Cavalry leader—who, despite orders, had not withdrawn his patrols, but instead sent out more and farther ahead—to the effect that a huge body of hostile troops was coming up from the north, while from the east another large column was rapidly advancing.

Lieutenant Newton, therefore, A.D.C. to Sir Archibald Townsend, was but stating a fact in describing the situation as a "mess"; indeed, it was considerable odds on the capture or annihilation of the British army within the next forty-eight hours.

Meanwhile two other officers had joined the pair, bent on the same errand as the first. "Poor old Harford!" said one on hearing the news, "this is what comes

of having an Office man as Chief of the Staff. I suppose he'll run the show now. Lord help us! Who's the nominal head, though, it's your fellow, ain't it, Newton?"

"No, it isn't, worse luck; it's Lieut.-General Sir Hector Graeme, better known as Mad Jack. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it, friend Caldwell."

"Thank ye, Newton. I've no wish to be sick."

"That's no way to speak of a general officer, Caldwell, let alone the Commander-in-Chief," said Macpherson, his rugged face red with anger. "Man, but I've a devilish good mind to clap ye under arrest, Sir Archibald's A.D.C. though ye be."

"I beg your pardon, sir," answered Caldwell sullenly. "I shouldn't have said that, but my family and I have special reasons for hating this General Graeme."

They were all silent; the new Commander-in-Chief's matrimonial differences were well known.

"That may be, Caldwell," said Macpherson at last, "but those are private matters, and best kept to yourself. Before me, at all events, ye'll kindly remember Sir Hector Graeme is your superior officer, and as such to be spoken of with respect."

"It's salvation this, a godsend, no less," said the third officer, who hitherto had taken no part in the conversation; "we'll be in the capital in a week now." Everyone turned to stare at the speaker, a somewhat quaint-looking youth, with long hair and a uniform deviating from the regulation pattern.

"And who may you be, young sir?" said Macpherson. "I thought I knew most of the A.D.C.'s, but yours is a new face to me."

"My name's Glover, sir; I'm Sir Hector's A.D.C. Hulbert went sick three days ago, and I got his place."

"Might have known it from his clothes and hair," muttered Caldwell. "They all get like that; Hulbert was just the same. Pick it up from him, I suppose; even his orderlies look like Merry Andrews. Gad, if I were Commander-in-Chief, I'd soon—"

"I beg yer pardon, Mr. Caldwell."

"Nothing, sir. I should like to know, though, what Glover means by salvation."

"The man's quite right to stand up for his General, Caldwell."

"It's not only because I'm that, sir," answered Glover, with sudden animation, "it's because I, and all who have been under him, know what he can do. Oh, I know it's said he's only fought against savages hitherto, but, all the same, savages though they were, the Mahongas were giving us a pretty bad time till the Coney's Drift affair. Precious little thanks he got for it too, only abuse from the Radicals, and the name of Butcher Graeme. It was a bloody business, I own,

but that's his way, and in my opinion the right way too. Anyhow, it finished the war; the Mahongas hadn't a kick left in them after that. There was his work in Georgistan, too—"

"Tell us about the ghost, Glover," interrupted Newton, yawning.

"Ghost, what do you mean, Newton?" asked Macpherson.

"Surely you've heard the yarn, sir? General Graeme's supposed to keep a tame spook, which he consults before fighting a battle. It's common talk, sir; I thought everyone knew."

Macpherson looked at Glover, despite himself, a Highlander's interest in the subject gleaming in his eyes.

"A lie, I suppose, like most of the gossip about him," he said. "Eh, Glover?" But the boy hesitated, at a loss what to say.

"There's no ghost, sir," he said at length, "at least, neither I nor any one else I know has seen it."

"I should think not," broke in Caldwell, temper and prudence going together. "The story's on a par with the rest of the humbug he and his gang love to surround themselves with. Thank the Lord, I say, I'm only a straightforward soldier's A.D.C., not a ruddy Jack o' the Green. Why... What the devil's up, Newton, seen the gho—?" He finished the rest of the sentence inside his helmet, which an unseen hand had suddenly banged down over his eyes—Caldwell had become what is vulgarly known as "bonneted."

"Jack o' the Green," he heard a harsh voice say. "Who calls the bloody Commander-in-Chief a Jack o' the Green? Mutiny, mutiny! String him up, old Clan na Gael! Scots wha hae! Where's a rope?"

With a wrench, Caldwell tore off the muffling headpiece, and stood staring, for before him, with his wild eyes gleaming through a shock of grey hair, stood the man of whom they had been speaking. On his head was his usual white top-hat, a covering which no orders could induce him to discard, and bound around it a green scarf. A sheepskin coat, dyed red, hung on his wasted body, a common worsted muffler of orange and green was wound round his scraggy neck, the costume being completed by breeches of yellow leather and long india-rubber boots. Sign of orthodox uniform there was none; indeed, had Sir Hector Graeme fallen into the enemy's hands in his present attire, his instant execution as a civilian in arms would have been amply justified by the rules governing modern warfare.

His had been a somewhat chequered career during the last fifteen years, short-lived bursts of fame alternating with lengthy periods of obscurity. First brought into notice by the affair, already alluded to, at Coney's Drift, where, taking advantage of his senior's absence for the day, he had collected such force as he could lay hands on, and with them fallen on and practically annihilated the

Mahongas' main army, he had signalled his victory by such subsequent outspoken criticism of his superiors as had ensured his speedy supersession from further command.

True, before this had happened, his promotion to the rank of Major-General had been wired out from home, but he was given plainly to understand that no further advancement would be his; and thenceforth, by most, his military career was regarded as finished. So undoubtedly it would have been, had not hostilities broken out five years later in Georgistan, and, after a succession of reverses, the papers began to clamour for the despatch to the scene of General Graeme. For some time the demand was ignored, but, the reverses continuing, he was eventually sent out, and entrusted with the command of the Lines of Communication, in which capacity it was thought he would have no chance of making himself conspicuous. Fortune, however, favoured Hector, in the shape of a fierce attack on a post in which he happened to be resting for the night, and not only did he repel that assault, but, following up the retiring enemy, completely routed them, although they were double his strength in numbers. Probably owing to the fact that this was the first British success since the war's commencement, Hector's name, as a saviour, was blazoned forth on the placards of every evening paper, and so great became the clamour for his advancement that reluctantly the authorities placed him in command of the cavalry division. This division—a failure hitherto—straightway began to harry and destroy, their movements being conducted with such energy and ferocity that in a short time the mere sight of a horseman would send the Georgistan warriors scuttling hurriedly away to their hills.

For these services he was made Knight Commander of the Bath, and, on the termination of the war, was given the command of one of the great Indian Presidencies. Here, however, disaster overtook him; for shortly after his appointment a certain member of the British Parliament made his appearance, and proceeded to preach sedition to the natives living in Hector's district. Graeme had been given the strictest orders to refrain from interfering with this person, and for some weeks he ignored his presence, though the effect of Mr. Belch's words on the ill-balanced native mind was daily becoming more apparent.

Unfortunately for both, however, Hector one day happened to be walking through the bazaar, accompanied by his A.D.C. and orderly, and, coming upon the orator haranguing the mob, stopped to listen. For some time he stood there, till at length the man perceived him, and, goaded to fury at the sight of his country's uniform, commenced a tirade not only against the army but against His Majesty the King. Now, devoid of most human feelings as Hector was, being filled with an unreasoning hatred and contempt for his fellows, there was yet one contradictory trait in his character, and that was a great veneration for his Sovereign. Hearing

the King's name bawled forth in a native bazaar, he was seized with sudden rage, and moved forward. Calling on his A.D.C. and orderly to follow him, he charged through the mob, and seizing the now terrified Belch, bore him to a shop hard by, where, with the aid of the other two, he proceeded to tar and feather him. Not till the work was thoroughly completed did he release the fellow, after which, thanks to a liberal use of their fists, the three made their way through the crowd, and though somewhat battered, reached home in safety.

Thereupon ensued a lively time at Headquarters. Cable upon cable poured in, some from individuals unknown to Hector, of a congratulatory nature, others from high quarters, demanding instant explanations. The former he tore up contemptuously—he had no wish for the approval of his fellow-men—the latter he answered in a letter couched in official terms, to the effect that, thanks to him, Mr. Belch being now quite black, was more wholly one with his friends; and as regarded the feathering, that, he considered, improved the man's personal appearance. He concluded by announcing his intention of burning the native city, now in an uproar.

Further cables followed in quick succession, suspending, threatening, and finally entreating, but to no purpose. Hector continued his preparations for destruction.

At the eleventh hour His Majesty himself intervened. A telegram was received making known his pleasure to Hector, whereupon he at once ordered the troops, already in position round the city, back to barracks, and he himself started for England. Here he entered Parliament, where he soon became a very terror to the War Minister, a member of his own—nominal—party, exposing many things, and piercing through all shufflings and evasions. But his animosity was mainly directed against the Territorial scheme—as it was then known—his crowning indiscretion being an address, delivered to a regiment of these warriors drawn up for inspection before the Mansion House.

"My dear fellow," the War Minister had said to him some minutes previously, "for goodness' sake give these chaps a pat on the back. I know you don't think much of them—nor, between ourselves, do I—but the country won't stand conscription, though we all know it's the only thing. For the Lord's sake remember your party—we're a bit dicky as it is—and say something civil."

Whereupon Graeme spoke, his words being audible not only to those he was addressing, but also to the assembled crowd.

"I've been asked to speak to you," he said, "and damme, I will. Listen, then. Soldiers I know, sailors I know, but you, you're neither flesh, fowl, nor good red herring. I give you my word one regiment of regulars would play the bloody bear with an Army Corps of such a scratch mob as you. My friend Jampots here"—this in graceful allusion to the firm of which the present War Minister was a

member—"says he don't think much of you, nor, begad, do I."

This peroration completed, Graeme rode off, well pleased with himself, and his speech having been reported in every paper, the result was a vote of censure on Jampots, a division in the House, and the subsequent defeat of the Government.

For Hector, for some strange reason—the stranger considering the contempt he had for them—was beloved by the British public. The very Socialistic spirit of the age, which he abhorred, being almost reactionary in his own views, worked in his favour; for Hector was always at war with authority, and the hearts of the mob warmed to him as they viewed his fierce battling with overwhelming odds. He made them laugh too—a certain passport to their favour—and yet with this laughter was mingled no contempt, his reckless bravery and constant brilliant success forbade that. Added to which, there was much sympathy felt towards him on account of his well-known marital differences, for that Hector was responsible for them no one save the Caldwells and their relations believed. For the man, though notorious throughout the Service for an outrageously blasphemous tongue, was yet renowned for his austere morality, whereas Lady Graeme was now one at whom a good many looked askance. For in that way had Lucy taken her trouble, and few would have recognised in the full-busted, dyed-haired, and loud-voiced Lady Graeme the modest country-loving Lucy of former days. Of her husband she would talk openly, and as openly ridicule. "Mad Jack again!" she would exclaim, to the crowd of boys always in attendance. "Gracious, what a nuisance the man's getting! Give me a cigarette, like a dear, and talk of something else. You forget I lived with the treasure for ten years, and, heavens, how bored I was!" And so, as usual, the least guilty received the blame, and Lucy, in men's eyes, was the sinner, and Hector the injured—liked the better for his injuries.

Further—and probably this was the chief factor in their regard—there was about Graeme an undefined element of mystery; the strange story of the ghost, derided by some but believed in by many, invested with a weird charm his successes, which, brilliant as they were, they would have lacked without.

All these things, together with his utter disregard of consequences to himself, his obvious disinterestedness, and his contempt of party shufflings, impressed the variable mob; and such an expression of opinion as that uttered before the Mansion House completely damned the Territorial scheme, and destroyed all public faith in the party then in power. Graeme, however, did not seek re-election—he was already sick of the dirty political game—but proceeded on a tour round the world, from which he had returned but a few weeks before the declaration of war. Again the same attempt was made to ignore him—and this time it was stronger than ever, for both parties were now against him—but

the public would have none of it, and though the authorities refused the demand for his appointment to the chief command, they so far yielded to pressure as to give him the leadership of the two cavalry divisions, from the camp of which he had just arrived, unfortunately in time to hear Caldwell's last remark.

"A hanging job this, Cockaleekie," he went on, looking around him; "where's a rope? Aha!" Then running to the marquee he drew a knife from his pocket, and cutting through one of the tent cords, returned with it in his hand to the now silent quartette.

"Round his neck, so!"—fitting the noose over Caldwell's head as he spoke, and then tossing the other end over the bracket of an adjacent lamp-post—"Ready now? Sound the dead march then, whack your tummy for the drum, old Mac; what the devil are you laughing at?" seeing abroad smile on the surgeon's and Newton's faces. There was no smile on the faces of Caldwell and Glover, however, but an expression of scorn on the one and terror on the other, for well Glover knew Hector Graeme, and also Hector Graeme's idea of a joke.

"Think I don't mean it?" he cackled. "Gad, I'll show you, then." He drew the rope tighter, but the boy never flinched, and his eyes now expressed hatred as well as scorn.

"Sir," said Macpherson, his smile suddenly fading, "Caldwell was only joking, very wrong, I own, but he's young, sir."

The cord dropped from Graeme's hands.

"What did you say his bloody name was?"

"Caldwell, sir, General Belfield's A.D.C."

A slash of the knife, and the rope lay in pieces on the ground.

"Be off," he said, "cackle as much as you like, I won't touch you. It's the way you and the rest of the brood have been brought up. Go and chatter about your Commander-in-Chief, if you will; I've stood it for years, and despise it. Clear!"

Silently Caldwell saluted and went, and for a minute an awkward pause followed. Graeme stood looking after the retreating figure, and, then suddenly throwing himself forward on to his hands, he turned a couple of cartwheels and once more came back to the group.

"What's the night's bag," he said, "a good un, ain't it, and mixed?"

"I don't know yet for certain, sir," answered Macpherson. "There are four generals killed, and close on seven thousand officers and men either dead or wounded. The missing, of course, I don't count."

"Hurrah! That'll make 'em sing *Rule Britannia* at home; a jolly good lesson to 'em, though they'll forget it in a year. Think we're going to win, Mac?"

"Yes, sir."

"You don't, that drawn mug of yours gives you away, we shall, though. The old green-backs, yonder," waving his hand to the north, "are in for a hell of

a hiding. Like my hat?" suddenly addressing the open-mouthed Newton.

"N-no, sir."

"Boil my lights," suddenly becoming furious, "d'ye hear that, MacSporran? He don't like my hat. Well, well, nor does Moleyns; and that reminds me I'm due at the talking shop at nine. Holy trousers!" pulling out a frying pan of a watch, "half-past by my old chest protector. Tra la! tra la!" and gathering up his skirts the Commander-in-Chief skipped nimbly over the rails guarding the hospital entrance, and jumping on his horse galloped away to Headquarters, flakes of mud and sprays of dirty water flying around him.

From the marquee behind a man emerged, his white apron and sleeves splashed with blood, and joined Macpherson, who was now alone, Glover and Newton having ridden away together.

"Morning, Sir George," said the P.M.O., turning to the new-comer; "pretty busy in there, aren't you? Gad, but the country ought to be grateful to you."

"Bah!" said the latter, a famous London surgeon, now on self-imposed duty with the British expeditionary force, while a thousand patients were left lamenting in town behind him.

"Isn't that Sir Hector Graeme riding away?"

"Yes."

"Commander-in-Chief, now, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I'm one of his admirers, General."

"So am I, Sir George."

The other smiled—for an admirer, the speaker's voice was singularly unenthusiastic.

"I believe in the ghost too," Romford continued.

The P.M.O. frowned, hesitated for a moment, and then spoke out. "Look here, Sir George, you're one of us, so there's no harm in you and me discussing the question. Tell me what do you make of this ghost business—epilepsy?"

"Decidedly not—Graeme's no epileptic; nor were Joan of Arc, St. Paul, and other visionaries, as used to be supposed. That idea's exploded. An epileptic never remembers what he's seen in his seizures—they did."

"What is it, then—mania?"

"Nor that either. All that eccentricity, in my opinion, is only a pose, probably to attract attention. Diseased vanity's at the bottom of that, I should say; it's quite separate from the vision part—that's a form of hysteria."

"Purely physical, you think?"

"Partly and partly metaphysical. I'll tell you my theory, if you like; it's my own, and probably worthless, but such as it is you can have it. It's this. In every human being there exists something—call it soul, call it subconscious self if you

like—and that something, which I hold to be immortal, passes at death to another body. But in the majority, though it controls, it works underground, and is silent; in others, however—the abnormal—it makes itself heard, and at certain moments takes charge and speaks; then we have what are called flashes of genius. A genius does not reason or think a matter out as we do. His ideas come, and are followed. And to my thinking they come not from the man himself, but from his soul, endowed with the knowledge and experience of thousands of years. That's what makes the characters and masterpieces of poets and painters that were drawn ages ago true to present-day life. It is universal, not individual, human nature they describe."

"But the visions—how do you account for them, a man can't see his own soul?"

"Something or someone seen when the mind, from certain causes, is extraordinarily excited, and so it becomes indelibly photographed on the mental vision; thenceforth, by a very natural sequence, the voice of subconscious self becomes that of the vision."

"But I've always understood that these visions are only seen occasionally."

"Exactly, when the mind is in the same state as it was when the apparition first appeared, that can and usually is as the mental picture fades with physical powers, for delusion dies with or just before the body, brought about by drugs or some other excitant to the nerves."

"What for?"

"Because he must have the vision to tell him what to do. It gives him the inspiration, without which he's firmly convinced he cannot act—and he couldn't."

"But Graeme's not a drug-taker; he won't touch even a sleeping-draught, though ordered by a doctor; he smokes but little too, five cigarettes a day, never more."

"What does he drink?"

"He's a teetotaler, save for an occasional bottle of champagne. Hullo, Glover, what do you want?"

"Sir Hector, sir, I forgot to give him his flask; here it is."

In an instant Sir George had stretched out his hand, and coolly taking the flask unscrewed the top, and put it to his nostrils. He then handed it to Macpherson, who did the same.

"Hurry, Glover," said the P.M.O., "you'll catch him if you're quick," and the boy galloped away, leaving the two looking at each other.

"Good-day, General," said Romford at last; "I must get back to my work."

CHAPTER XXV

"Any sign yet of Sir Hector? It's past the half-hour, and our time's short enough, goodness knows. You might look out, one of you, and see, will you?"

The speaker, Sir Thomas Moleyns, glanced up from the desk at which he sat, with a typewritten document before him. He alone of the assembled crowd was seated, the remainder, all generals, were standing together in a group some distance away.

Moleyns, however, had already assumed the mantle of Lord Harford, just deceased. With this garment upon his back, he had now discarded his former transparent cloak of subserviency, and was issuing orders boldly in his own name, one of the said orders being the summons to attend the present conference at Headquarters.

All had obeyed save one. That one was his nominal chief, for nominal Moleyns intended him to be; if not, well, he had cards up his sleeve higher than any the other was likely to possess. If necessary, he would produce these, but such necessity, he felt confident, was hardly likely to arise, for Graeme would certainly knuckle under, as Lord Harford and all others with whom he had hitherto come in contact had done.

At his request, brigadiers, major-generals even, anxious to placate the all-powerful, hastened to the door. Then they suddenly stopped, and looked back over Moleyn's head, to where the upper half of a top-hatted figure was to be seen busily engaged in cutting an entrance through the side of the tent.

The Chief of the Staff was once more bending over his papers, and did not note the rapidly-growing astonishment on the faces of his audience.

"Can't you see him?" he said, after a pause. "Really, this is—"

"It is. Good-morning, your Highness," and with an agile spring Graeme leapt in front of the desk, and, doffing his hat, bowed low. "And what may be your Nib's royal commands?" he continued. "Oh, pray be seated," as Moleyns rose, and with narrowing eyes stood regarding the quaint figure before him.

"As Chief of the General Staff, sir," he said, with an almost open sneer in his voice, "and the matter being urgent, I took the liberty of summoning these gentlemen to a conference."

"A liberty, Thomas? Oh, don't say that."

Moleyns coloured. "In the absence of the Commander-in-Chief, sir, I submit, with all respect, it's the duty of the Headquarter Staff to act on their own responsibility. Lord Harford took that view, sir."

"Lord Harford's offered it, Thomas, flown away aloft, and now it's bloody Hector Graeme who runs the show. 'Mad Jack' they call him. And Mad Jack now says to Thomas, 'Shut up, you had your fun last night, and you ain't going to have no more.'"

"Sir?"

"Stuff it! Jack commands his own bloody army his own bloody way, and that way ain't Thomas's. Stop your cackling now; I jaw here. Off your perch quick, and join the other blokes. Now, all of you get into line, and let's have a look at your dials; there's a lot I don't know." Mechanically the crowd shuffled into line and stood silently, while Graeme passed along them, staring hard at each in turn. Opposite one he stopped, and then suddenly held out his hand.

"Long Nose," he said, "I'd know that bill in a thousand. What are you doing here?"

"I'm commanding the tenth division, sir," answered Godwin, for he it was, a flush rising to his face at the instant recognition.

"Nose seems longer—regular curlew's beak," said Graeme, and passed with a muttered "One good un, anyway." The inspection ended, he returned to the desk, and, perching himself on it, sat there for a moment regarding them.

"Blokes," he said at last, "I don't want ye here, nasty wet day to be out, but you can thank Thomas for that, not me. Still, now that you've come, I'm going to ask you all a conundrum. You know the hat we're in. Uriel's lot of thirty thousand, full of buck after last night's pantomime, in our front fifteen miles away; behind them one hundred thousand under Gabriel—a scorcher, Gabriel, I tell you—and from the west, coming up fast, another eighty thousand under Michael, almost as hot as Gabriel. By to-morrow night we'll have at least two hundred thousand of the best against our scratch lot of a hundred and fifty thousand, that is, if they don't off it before then, which, from what I saw as I came along, seems more than likely. There you have it in the neck, and I hope you like it. Now each of you in turn answer this question—what are we to do? I'll begin with old Archibald there."

"Retreat, sir, to the coast, as quick as we can," was the ready answer.

"Get back to the ships."

"Retire."

"Retire."

"Slip away to-night."

"Have another go at 'em, sir. I can beat last night's lot off my own bat. My

men ain't Hearts of Oak, sir."

"Oho! and who are you, my fighting ram?"

"Fellowes, sir, Guards division," answered the speaker, a huge red-haired man with choleric, blue eyes.

"Hum ... and you?" passing on.

"Retire, sir, nothing else for it."

"Retire."

"Stay where we are, sir, and fight them as they come. We'll be wiped out, but that don't matter much; it's better than slinking home, anyway."

This from a skeleton of a man, with haggard face, large dark eyes, and hair patched with grey.

"Who are you, Drink or Colney Hatch?"

"Roy, sir, Lancashire division."

"Roy," repeated Graeme, passing on, "Roy. And you, Boko?"

"Retire, sir, but fight them all the way," said Godwin. "Retreat to Corunna, sir."

"And now we'll hear Thomas."

"Certainly retire, sir, it's the only possible course. The plans are already drawn up, and here ready for your approval."

"Let's see them."

Moleyns' confidence returning at the request, he handed a document to Graeme, who thereupon rolled it up into a ball and threw it at the other's head. The Chief of the Staff, however, ducking in time, the missile flew over his head, hitting Sir Archibald Townsend in the stomach.

"Missed him!" cried Hector, annoyed, and then once more turned to his audience.

"Clear, all of you," he said, "back to your commands, and shove some heart into 'em, if you can; for, begad, they need it—so do you. Return here at two o'clock. I'll have something to tell you then."

All save one saluted and withdrew in silence. Moleyns stood before Graeme, with a mixture of defiance and uneasiness on his face.

"After what has occurred, sir," he said, with surface boldness, "there is only one course, I think, for me to adopt, and with your permission, sir, I now tender my resignation as Chief of the Staff."

"You can go to the devil for all I care," was the answer, "get out!" and Sir Thomas also withdrew, leaving Graeme alone.

"He's off to cable to Quibble," he muttered, looking after him. "All right, let him; he won't get an answer, if I know anything about it. Hades, but I'm up against the politicians as usual, same as every English general's been, Marlborough, Wellington, and now poor old Hector. Cowardly brutes, sitting at home

in the talking shop while we're fighting their battles. The enemy's not enough, they think; must fight them as well. Never mind, I'm equal to them; the more against me the better I like it. Now what am I to do? Not an idea so far, except that attack I must. It will come all right; I've only to ask. First thing is to appoint a new Chief of the Staff, don't suppose though one of those fellows would come, too frightened of Moleyns. Not much catch if they did; of the lot only two were for fighting, the curs. Still it has to be one of them, but which? Fellowes, no; thick-headed fighting man and that only. Roy, too pessimistic. Ah, what about Godwin? He might do, and his old fancy for me still lasts; I could see it when I spoke to him."

"Orderly," he called, "here, run after General Godwin—he's a bloke with a beak—and tell him I want him. Don't come back without him, d'ye hear?"

The man vanished, and a quarter of an hour afterwards the sound of galloping hoofs was heard, followed by advancing footsteps. Then the curtain was pushed aside, the long-nosed one entered, and stood at attention.

"I want you, Old Un," began Graeme, without preliminary, "as Chief of the Staff. Moleyns has given me notice. What d'ye say?"

Godwin hesitated.

"I suppose you think," continued Hector, eyeing him, "that if I go under over this, Moleyns being Quibble's boy, it's a poor look out for you. I ain't going under, though; you mark that, old bird."

"I wasn't thinking that at all, sir," was the answer, "my career's finished, in any case, by age."

"Do what I ask, and you shall be Commander-in-Chief when you get back."

"What about you then, sir?"

"Me? I've done with it after this. I'll pull them through now, and then home I go and speak out—tell the nation what sort of troops Quibble and his like send out to face the best soldiers in the world. I'll do what Roberts ought to have done when he had the chance in 1900, but wasn't man enough to take it. He told them afterwards when he was outed and had no further advancement to hope for; but no one would listen then, and rightly—he hadn't the weight of office behind him. 'Why didn't you speak then?' was a question he couldn't answer; 'we'd have believed you if you had; now you're one of us, and we won't. You're a nobody now.' But I'm rambling, what's your objection?"

"That Chief of the Staff, sir, is an appointment made by the Army Council. What if they cancel mine by wire?"

"Leave that to me, will you or not?"

"Very well, sir, if you wish it; and I'm proud of the honour, sir."

"Here's what you're to do, then. Go back to your division and hand over to your next senior. Then deliver these orders," writing as he spoke, "to Sir

Archibald Townsend and these five others. Out they go, that's the first thing."

"Sir," stammered Godwin, aghast at this high-handedness—"six generals relieved of their command. What reason, sir? They're bound to ask."

"Tell them I don't like their faces—nor I do. Now, see here, Cockalorum. Once upon a time at a field day, fifteen years ago, I was sold by a junior, and a lesson once given I never forget. I didn't blaspheme, Godwin, I didn't whine, for no one cares why a fellow loses, or believes his reasons. No, I took the blame, but I swore that never should such a thing happen to me again. To keep those six generals means six useless divisions, and every one of those divisions I shall want. So ... out they go. Now, when you've done that, ride through the following camps," giving him another paper, "don't ask questions, but keep your eyes open, and let me know what you see. Be back here at half-past one; that will give us half an hour before the generals arrive. One thing more—tell the guard outside to post sentries round this tent, and on no account to let anyone pass till you come yourself."

"Very good, sir. Is that all?"

"Replace the present telegraph staff with men you personally know and can trust. Give them orders that all messages, no matter to whom addressed, are to be given into your hands or mine. That's all."

"Very good, sir," and Godwin went out leaving Graeme once more alone.

"Now for the plan," he muttered, and rising, he closed every door of the marquee in turn till the tent was plunged in gloom. Then, returning to his seat, he dived into one of his voluminous pockets, from which he produced the flask handed to him an hour before by Glover, and, unscrewing the top, drained its contents.

This done, from a leather case he took two of the five thin black cigarettes it contained, and proceeded to smoke them slowly through, one after the other, with his head thrown back and eyes closed. Gradually the drug and the cigarettes took effect, and Graeme stirred restlessly in his chair, till at last, springing up, he commenced pacing rapidly up and down the tent.

"Two short hours," he muttered, "only two. Stara, why don't you come? I'm waiting."

Rapidly his excitement grew; the sweat poured down his grey, working face, and he staggered as he walked.

"Stara, speak!" he shouted, and then stopped dead, with eyes glaring into the gloom.

"Yes, yes," he whispered, "you're coming. I can hear those harps again, they're sounding louder. Ah!" with a scream, "the light—the light, Stara, beloved," and Hector threw out his arms, swayed for a moment, and then, falling forward on to the ground, lay motionless.

A quarter of an hour passed, and then a faint tremor shook the still figure. He moved restlessly, tossing out his arms, then painfully raised himself on his elbow, and looked vacantly around.

Slowly the light of understanding returned to his eyes. He struggled to his feet, and groping his way to a chair lay back in it for some minutes, panting; then from his pocket he produced another flask—a tiny gold one—and putting it to his lips gulped down the contents.

Rapidly the liquid fire ran through his numbed body, and a faint colour returned to his cheeks. He sat up, his eyes bright with exultation. "Königgratz, she said," he murmured, "only the one word, but enough," and then, with full strength restored, he hurried over to the desk, and seizing pencil and paper began feverishly to write.

For over an hour he sat, covering sheet after sheet with his round sprawling caligraphy, and flinging each sheet on the ground when finished, till a heap of paper rose by his side. His task completed, he gathered up the documents, pinned them together, and read them rapidly through. This done, he flung the bundle on the desk, and striding across to a large blackboard standing at one end of the tent chalked on it a picture—if it could be so designated when the drawing would have disgraced a child of ten.

Barely was the work completed and the artist's signature subscribed, when footsteps were heard approaching. Hastily covering the board with a cloth, Hector returned to his desk, which he reached as Godwin entered, with gloom written on his face.

"Raven!" roared Hector at the sight, and then ran to the tent-pole and began to shin rapidly up it, where he chanted, from the top:

"... grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird of yore—
* * * * *

Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"

He then slithered down again, and stood once more on the floor.

"I'm sorry, sir, if I look a bit down," answered Godwin, forcing a smile, "but I've just been round those divisions, and it's been rather a depressing experience. Honestly, sir, I believe that once the retreat begins half of them will be off, and if the enemy have good cavalry they'll cut them down like sheep."

"So much the better, teach them not to run in the future; there's nothing like practical experience. But see here, take this and read," throwing over his recent work as he spoke, "look sharp, those fellows will be here in a minute."

Godwin took the papers, and read as directed. Half-way through the first page he stopped, and glanced up at the other, with a startled look.

"It's not to be retreat, then?"

"It is not, Old Un; attack I will and must, till the sawdust's out of me. But look here, those Napoleons are beginning to arrive. This will explain quicker." He walked over to the blackboard, uncovered it, and stood watching Godwin's face as he looked. "Got it, Old Un, I see," he said, after a pause.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, take those papers with you and read them later; you will find it all fully laid down there, numbers and everything. Your job will be to get the main army in position by three a.m. to-morrow morning. There are only three roads, so, to avoid jostling, some of the divisions will have to move across country. You had better have compass-bearings taken at once."

"And about Roy and Fellowes, sir?"

"I'll see them myself, and tell them what to do. Did you give those orders to Archibald and the others?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing to me, sir, but I believe they're all in Moleyns' tent now. I found out too that he has sent two cables this morning. I tried to see their contents, but the clerk refused to give them."

"Send for that clerk here, and put the poker in the fire."

"No one knows where he is, sir; the man's disappeared."

"Oh, well, never mind; we'll have the answer, which is all that matters. One thing more, what do you know of Roy?"

"First-rate man, sir, but ... reckless."

"Why?"

"Some trouble at home, sir, I believe," answered Godwin, colouring and looking away.

"He'll do for the west road job, you think?"

"I believe he'd thank you for it, sir."

"Right; call those fellows in now; I can hear them shuffling about outside."

In trooped the generals once more, with an even deeper cloud than before on their faces, for Moleyns had many adherents, and the news of his resignation, coupled with that of the suspension of six of their number, had aroused ill-concealed resentment and alarm. They stood regarding Graeme with a certain curiosity, but without any semblance of confidence—nor were his opening words calculated to alter their opinions.

"Rot me!" he said, staring at them, "a sadder-looking lot of blokes blowed if I ever saw together in a lump. Glorious war don't seem to agree with most

of you, and that's a fact. Strike me stinking! how the devil do you expect your men to chirp when you, their leaders, slope along as happy-looking as a batch of oysters in the sun? Retreat, cut away, back to your turkey and plum-pudding. That's all you're thinking about, eh, Old Guts?" turning to a portly officer, whose face wore a particularly grave expression.

A stir of anger ran through his audience. The stout General's face crimsoned, and then grew white.

"You're pleased to insult me, Sir Hector," he said, with cold dignity. "My opinion, asked for by you, was, it is true, for retreat. I believed, and still believe, it's the only thing to be done. I was not thinking of myself, but of the army. Now, however," he paused, biting his lips, and then his voice rang out, "I say go on and fight. Lose the army if you will, I don't care. After what you've said, I for one will not return home. I will resign my command. I will scrape together such men of my division as will follow me, and—"

"And how many will that be, do you think?" jeered Graeme.

"And attack Uriel's position to-night, while *you* are off home. You may call George Stanhope 'Old Guts,' if it pleases you, Sir Hector, but coward you shall not, nor shall any other man."

A murmur of sympathy ran through the assembly—the speaker was known as one of the bravest men in the army.

"Roused you, have I?" roared Graeme; "want to fight now, do you? Very well then, you shall, George, my boy; we all will. And now stop muttering, all of you, and ... listen." Hector rose from the chair in which he had been lounging and stood erect, facing them; and, at something, something indefinable in the tone of the last word, a sudden silence fell. All eyes were fixed on the speaker, and as they looked amazement grew, for over the shabby, grotesque figure before them a startling change had come. In some strange way he seemed to have grown bigger, and to fill the tent to the exclusion of all else; even the gigantic Fellowes appeared to have become a pigmy like the others. Gone too was the demeanour of the buffoon, and in its place there was visible a dignity—almost a majesty—of bearing, unimpaired by the clown's trappings of top-hat and sheepskin coat.

In that instant, at the one simple word, all had changed, and in a flash the truth of the stories that they had heard was revealed—stories of the strange power emanating from this man, of the ascendancy of his mind over those of his followers, stories at which they had so often scoffed, but at which, having felt his power themselves, they scoffed no longer.

Nor did their mood change even when he ran to the black-board, and uncovering the picture, proceeded to explain it in the jargon of the streets. The palpitating vibrating speech held them silent and thrilled, despite the words in which that speech was uttered.

"Yes, fight it is," he continued, "and, this time, win. I needn't tell you that, you know it as well as I do now. Want to know how, do you? See there then," and with outstretched hand he pointed to the board, on which the following was depicted:

In the foreground lay a prostrate figure, looked down upon by another, huge of stature and with bearskin on head. Over the pair were scrawled the words: "Uriel, deceased, 6 a.m., December 25th." Beyond him a third figure was to be seen sinking to the ground, under the blows of a man in a top-hat. The falling figure was labelled "Gabriel," and the man in the hat "Mad Jack." To the left was a tall thin man, with a long pole in his hand, with which weapon he was pushing away another man twice his size; the big man was labelled "Michael." Under the whole was written,

"One down, t'other come on. "H. G., R.A."

"That's how," continued the artist, "there's the whole blasted scheme in a square yard, better than fifty pages of Staff College clap-trap. Ha! there's one who don't seem to tumble," looking at Lord Fellowes, whose face wore a look of deep perplexity, "never mind, Flamingo Head, your thinking-box may be thick, but your heart's right enough, and that's all I want from you, for it's you, my lord, that's going to lead the bloody cotillion. Hullo! there's another woolly brain. I'll have to hammer it in, I see. Listen then.

"That fellow in the front is Uriel, as you see, old Uriel, sitting on his hill yonder, rubbing his hands over what he gave us last night, and praying for Michael and Gabriel to hurry up and catch us before we're off to the briny sea. But tonight, when he and his men are dreaming of medals and golden crosses—perhaps drawing lots for my Piccadilly tile—old red-head there will be close by, waiting for the morning, and when the light breaks he creeps up, nearer, nearer; the bayonets flash, and then ... God help you, Uriel, and a merry Christmas to ye."

"Good," said Fellowes, a smile breaking over his face.

"And then up comes Mad Jack with the rest—Hearts of Oak, sailors, soldiers, the whole bloody rag, tag and bobtail—and hurrying on to that ridge beyond will wait there for Gabriel, poor old Gabriel, who's been wearing his men out in his hurry to catch us before we're gone. Down he goes too, with his hundred thousand with him. And away to the west, Michael will hear Gabriel's death-yowl, but won't be able to chip in, for there's a man there I know," and here Graeme looked directly at Roy, who nodded slightly in answer, "a cove with a long pole, who says to him 'Keep off, Michael, old bird, leave Jack and Gabriel to fight it out; it's their bloody scrap, not yours.'"

He stopped abruptly, and then went on:

"I beat them in detail, you see, blokes, what the Austrians should have done before Königgratz, and would have, had Hector G. been driving the coach and not Benedek. Now, go back to your divisions and pull them and their arms out of the mud they're in. Your orders will be sent you later, go. Fellowes and Roy stay behind; I want you both. You first, Fellowes; Roy, wait outside." All except Fellowes saluted, and went silently out.

"You said, Fellowes, you wanted another go at them. You shall have it; you'll attack at dawn to-morrow with three divisions, your own guards, the Highlanders, and Irish. Move off to-night and be at this point," indicating a spot on the map, "at 3 a.m. to-morrow morning. You'll give the orders to your command yourself. Off you go, Roy."

"Sir?"

"You'd like the pole job?"

"Yes."

"The other fellow's much bigger than you. He'll break your pole and kill you for certain, Roy."

"It's the luck of the game, sir."

"There'll be no luck for you—and no retreat either, mind that. Roy, it's a fight to a finish, and the finish will be only one way."

"What can you give me, sir?"

"Two divisions only. Your own, and any other you like, bar Fellowes' lot."

Roy thought for a moment.

"I'd like the Yorkshire men, sir, they're friends of my men."

"You shall have them. You'll start from here at eight to-night, moving by the west road. Shove on as hard as you can till you meet Michael. Then take up a position and fight him till you've not a man left. Under no circumstances is he to be allowed to interfere with me. Send back word now and again to let me know how it goes."

"That all, sir?"

"That's all, except to say good-bye. Perhaps meet you later in the brimstone duck-pond." Roy went out with a light in his dark eyes, leaving Hector considering.

"Thank God for a lunatic," he muttered, "stroke of luck for me striking him. Now, what will I do to pass the time? Ah, I know. Godwin."

"You called, sir?" answered the long-nosed one, appearing.

"Which is the worst division, the absolute bloodiest bloody?"

"The 15th, sir."

"I'm going round to call on them. You carry on; you know what you have to do."

"I—I—if I might suggest, sir, I shouldn't. They're almost in open mutiny."

"That's how I like them." He picked up his gloves and hat, and walked to the door, where he paused for a second. "Look out for cheering from the 15th division, Old Un," he said, and went out.

"Trumpeter, come with me; not you, orderly—only Sykes there. On for a lark, William?"

"Yes, sir," from the trumpeter, a friend of many campaigns.

"Come on, then," and mounting his horse he rode away through the driving rain, the trumpeter following at some distance. At length they reached an open space, deep in slush, in which could be seen lying rusty rifles and accoutrements. These had been thrown down by their owners, who were now in the surrounding tents, where they lay sleeping or cursing their officers.

In the centre of the square Graeme stopped.

"Fifteenth division this, ain't it, Sykes?" he asked the trumpeter.

"That's her, sir," answered the man. "Gawd! look at them guns."

"Tu-whoo, tu-whoo then, bust yourself."

"What's it to be, sir?"

"We'll start with reveille."

Without a word, Sykes raised his trumpet and blew, the first notes evoking a faint "booming" from the closed tents. This ceased, however, as the call continued, and it dawned upon the hearers that it was the reveille sounding at three o'clock in the afternoon. Soon a few heads were thrust out to ascertain what the unusual departure portended.

"Again, William," and a second time the notes rang out. More heads appeared, followed by bodies, and then there was a general exodus from the tents. All faces were turned toward the quaint figure in the middle of the parade ground, and faint sounds of mirth arose.

"Laughing, that's something, anyway," muttered Graeme; "now the 'Assembly' quick, Bill."

The man obeyed. The figures hesitated for a moment, a buzz of conversation arose, and then a few came lounging forward. The remainder, a lead having once been given, followed, till a sea of sullen upturned faces surrounded the pair.

"Men of the 15th division," said Graeme, regarding them. "I'm the Commander-in-chief. 'Mad Jack' they call me. Allow me to introduce myself." He took off his hat and bowed all round.

There was a puzzled silence, broken by a voice:

"Go to 'ell! We don't want no bloody Commander-in-Chiefs 'ere."

Graeme turned, and for a second sat looking at the speaker, a pale-faced Cockney; then, pulling out his revolver, he forced his way to where the man was standing, and shot him through the head. After this, wheeling his horse about,

he faced each section of the crowd in turn, with the smoking weapon brandished in his hand. Back surged the mob, growling and calling on their leaders, but one was now gone and the others failed to appear.

"Dogs!" shouted Graeme, "hounds! Oh, snarl away if you like; it's all you can do, and I'm not afraid of you, though I'm only one against your thousands. Small wonder you got beat last night; they're soldiers yonder, but you, you're only jackals, noisy enough when there's no fighting, but slinking to your holes once a gun's fired. Hullo, you want to speak, do you?" pressing forward again; "out with it then."

"Nuthin', sir, I ain't got no call to say nothink."

"Forgotten it, eh? Funny how one does sometimes. Anyone else got a call to say anything, what, no one? Then I have," and thereupon Hector proceeded to let loose on the now silent crowd a torrent of blasphemous abuse, before which their own limited vocabularies sank ashamed. For full five minutes the flow poured on unchecked, nor was a single epithet repeated, and gradually at such proficiency a faint feeling of admiration dawned in his hearers' hearts, and replaced their former resentment. In this, at all events, he was their master, and, their minds admitting it, they listened in silence, with growing interest on their faces.

Graeme, noting the change, thereupon abandoned the mere bludgeon work of vituperation—for of sarcasm, knowing soldiers, not one word had he uttered—and then, discussing the matter in the light of cold common sense, he asked them if they wished for death, death at the lance-point and sabre, for such would assuredly be theirs in their present helpless state. On a memory that never failed he drew now, giving them many instances of what flight with cavalry in pursuit meant, painting its horrors in terms that caused a general feeling of uneasiness.

While he spoke, Graeme was closely watching them—waiting for the change of mood when he could make the final effort. Till then he knew he must refrain from an appeal to the emotions, which proves irresistible when the ground is ready, but when made too soon only excites ridicule.

At last it came. A voice from the crowd said: "We aren't afraid of no green-coats, we're Englishmen," a speech that was followed by a murmur of applause. At the sound Graeme stopped, the thrill running through him that every orator knows when he feels that his audience is his.

For a moment his throat seemed to close, and his heart to swell in his breast; then off went his hat, and he stood bareheaded before them, holding up his hand in an appeal for silence. Shouts of "Order" arose, and then there was a hush. For a few seconds Hector sat motionless, gazing over their heads with eyes blurred with tears, and then, as if fire were running through his veins, he threw back his head and spoke. With a face pale with exaltation, with eyes alight and grey hair streaming in the wind, he addressed them—his voice now sinking to a whisper,

now rising to a shout.

"Men, soldiers of England," he concluded, "the eyes of those who love you are on you now. They are misty with tears for your wounds, men; they run over with water for the dead. But torn with grief though they are, that grief is tempered with pride, for those they mourn have given their lives for the Flag. Will you change that pride into shame, men? Will you bring disgrace on your homes?"

Fustian, emotional fustian, of the lowest, but now was the time and here the audience for fustian.

"No. No."

"We ain't no cowards."

"Take us there; we're ready for 'em, sir."

"I will. That's what I've come here to tell you, for fight you shall, and this time, men, it's not defeat, but ... victory. I promise it you.... I—"

He got no further, for at the word a roar burst from the men, whose faces were white with emotion, and caps were thrown in the air. Then again there was silence, for Hector's hand a second time was raised. "Now, go back to your lines, pick up those arms lying there in the mud"—a rush for the discarded weapons—"you'll want them soon enough. See, the rain has stopped and the sun is shining. Go and get ready."

The crowd melted away, leaving Graeme and the trumpeter alone, save for a rigid figure lying huddled in the mud, with a blue mark on its forehead. With tired eyes Hector looked around him, for he was worn out and shaken with the strain of his emotions.

"Sykes, I'm done, tired out."

"Why not 'ave a sleep, sir?"

"Why not? You're right, I will. We must get rid of that, though, first," glancing down; "it's as poisonous dead as alive. Here you," he called to a passing sergeant, who instantly came running up at the summons, and, smartly saluting, stood at attention before him, "take that away, and bury it. Dig a hole anywhere and shove it in."

The man touched the corpse with his foot contemptuously. "Very good, sir," he answered, "I'll have him put in the refuse pit—best place for 'im. Glad he's dead, sir; he was the cause of 'arf the trouble."

Graeme made no answer, but rode away, with a cynical look on his face, for he had seen the speaker amongst his late audience, as sullen-looking and mutinous as any; but there was no purpose to be gained by alluding to that now. He passed on, through the lines of tents—alive with men, polishing, cleaning, now and again bursting into snatches of song—and made his way back to his tent, where he found Glover awaiting him, with a face of contrition.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I didn't know you were going out, or I'd have been ready. I tried to find you, but no one knew where you had gone."

"I didn't want you, Bobby," answered Graeme. "I shan't till ten to-night. Be here then with the horses and one orderly. I don't wish a crowd."

"Your dinner, sir?"

"Bring a bottle when you come. I shan't want anything till then. I'm going to sleep." He turned into the tent, closed the flap, and lying down on the bed, covered himself with rugs and blankets. "Stara," he murmured, "I want sleep; give it to me." He sighed, smiled happily, and then almost instantly fell asleep.

* * * * *

Darkness fell, and confused sounds began to arise from the camp. They soon swelled to a clamour: words of command were heard; the clang of rifle-butts; then the steady tramp of marching feet and the rumble of passing wheels. The army was starting on its way. The hours flew by, the beat of feet and rattle of wheels died to a dull murmur, and ceased.

The heap of rugs stirred and were cast aside. Graeme got up, unfastened the tent-flaps, and looked out.

The muffling canopy of storm-clouds was gone from overhead, leaving the black vault a-glitter with a myriad points of flame. It was Christmas Eve and freezing hard.

Through the darkness a figure loomed dimly, its footsteps crushing the rapidly hardening ground.

"That you, Glover?"

"No, sir, it's I—Godwin, may I come in? It's urgent." He lowered his voice as he spoke.

"Men refused to turn out?"

"No, sir, no trouble at all. It seems what you said to the 15th division has gone all over the camp, and—"

"Bah! What is it then?"

"Two cables, sir, one for you and one for Sir Thomas. You told me to bring any that came. You have the cipher, sir."

"Yes, hand them over and wait outside." He tore open the envelopes, and with the aid of the cipher read the contents in turn, that addressed to Moleyns first. It bore no signature.

"Acted on your suggestion," it ran; "wire again if necessary."

"Oh, have you?" muttered Graeme, "and now for the suggestion." He opened the second. It came from Whitehall, and was signed "Gribble."

"Commence retreat to coast at once; on no account assume offensive."

Graeme stared at the paper for a moment, and then laughed.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "there are some who might obey that. I ... won't."

He tore the cables into small pieces, and striking a match carefully burnt the fragments.

"Godwin," he called, "old Gneisenau, come in."

"What is it, sir? Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Serious be hanged, nothing is serious in this life, haven't you found that out in your sixty years? It's all a big joke, Old Un, with someone overhead splitting his sides over it. We don't laugh sometimes, because we're fools; but we should, if we were wise. Ah, there's Bobby outside with the bottle. Come in, Bobby, and fill the glasses. It may be the last we'll have together, and this time-to-morrow we'll be laughing at the moon as we pass. We'll have wings up there, Long Nose, bloody wings, and a harp apiece. God! I'll be a trial to the bandmaster, I'll never get the damned thing in tune, give me a month of Sundays to do it. Pop! there she goes; fill up and drink. Here's the bloody toast:

"Damnation to our green friends yonder, and a rope to their best friend, Lawyer Quibble, Secretary of State for War. He'll have it too, when I get back, I promise him.

"But that's treason, Bobby, or near it, anyway, so I'll change it to one we can all drink.

"Here's to the one gentleman in the whole scurvy crowd—the King." He paused. Then with a loud cry of "The King! The King!" he drained his glass, dashed it to the ground, and rushing out of the tent, he mounted his waiting horse, and galloped away into the night.

CHAPTER XXVI

The shadow of death hovered over the sleeping armies. But a few miles apart they lay, thousand upon thousand, covering the frozen earth like a pall—the one exultant with victory gained, and eager for the morning to reap their harvest, the other equally eager and equally confident. But Death, looking down, laughed, well pleased. What mattered to him the paltry triumph of green or red. His feast he knew was assured.

The hours passed, the darkness deepened, and then rapidly began to fade,

the splendour of the stars dulled. A figure—one of three British soldiers lying apart from the rest—stirred in his sleep, and suddenly awoke. He sat up, with a loud clanging in his ears, for the telephone-bell at his feet had spoken sharply, and now it was ringing again, a continuous vibrating sound.

The signal for the curtain's rising had come.

"That you, Sir Hector?" breathed a voice along the wires, that of Lord Fellowes, five miles ahead. "I'm going on, sir."

A quarter of an hour, half an hour, three-quarters of an hour passed, but still the silence remained unbroken, though the black was all grey now. Then suddenly Graeme sprang up, his body quivering and his eyes staring ahead.

"Surely that was a shot? And, yes, another; heavy firing now and—and it is—it is cheering. They've done it," and Hector pounced on the sleeping Godwin and shook him awake.

"Bloody victory!" he shouted. "D'ye hear, Old Slugabed? Get up, blast you, and rouse the army. Bring 'em on at a double after me, Hearts of Oak leading, don't forget that. Sound the 'rouse,' Trumpeter; Bobby, come on with me," and away flew Graeme to his horse, the high notes of the bugles now ringing through the dawn—their sound soon to be drowned in the swelling roar of the waking army.

"Forward, forward," he shouted, and was gone, swallowed up in the icy morning mist. His horse's hoofs rang on the iron-bound road, as he thundered on to the ridge ahead, whence a confused shouting was heard, punctuated with the dull thudding of shots and the scream of dying horses. On he rushed, the ridge rising darkly before him, and then he was at its foot, and up and through the trees that clothed it, his horse shying at prone green figures and grim silent shapes of guns.

At length he reached the top and drew rein, looking down into a huge cauldron of mist beyond, where a mighty conflict was now raging—a strange phantasmagoria of overturned tents, riderless horses, and fleeing phantom shapes of men.

Truly, a merry Christmas for Uriel, lying still and silent, with a broken bayonet in his breast, and his erstwhile jubilant army a shrieking mob of fugitives.

In his dreams death had found him, for the pickets, believing only too readily his and their officers' words concerning British demoralisation, had abandoned the irksome duty of watching, and, soundly sleeping, had, like him, died where they lay. And over their dead bodies the Guards had rushed, pouring into the sleeping camps, stabbing the half-naked wretches as they sat up blinking at the bayonets, and, loudly laughing, chased such as fled, pouncing on them when they tripped and fell over the tent-ropes.

Lead by Mike Curran in person, a band of Irishmen had headed straight for

the Headquarter marquee, and in a second the ropes were cut and the mass of canvas billowing on the ground. Into this men were now thrusting bayonets and officers emptying revolvers, till through the white canvas red patches began to show, which rapidly spread till they merged into one great crimson pool, and the writhings and groanings ceased.

Through the artillery and cavalry lines the skirted Highlanders were running, some busy hamstringing the fast-tethered horses, whose screams rang high and shrill above the uproar, others killing the hapless owners, as they ran confusedly to and fro searching for sword, lance, or carbine with which to defend themselves.

Beyond, barring escape to the north, east, and west, the cavalry divisions were leisurely sweeping across the plain, picking up, as they rode, such as sought refuge by flight from the death behind.

As Graeme looked, a loud shout of joy burst from his lips. "Coney's Drift again," he roared, "oh, where, where are my Hearts of Oak? Turn them loose in this; give them a taste of blood, and they're made. They'll think it's all like this. Ah! here they are," as, panting and breathless, a brigade of pale-faced volunteers came running up, gasping with haste and astonishment at what they saw. "Leu in! Leu in!" he cried; "have at 'em, boys, worry, worry!" and thereupon, with loud cries of delight, off rushed the Hearts of Oak, tugging at their bayonets as they ran. Graeme sat down and rocked with laughter.

"God, but it will be the death of me, this," he gasped. "Hullo, Long Nose, you're here, are you? Good, I wouldn't have you miss this for the world. Oh, look, man, look! See that tall chap there? He's prodded his man three times, and ain't settled him yet.

"Holy God, what's *he* up to, I wonder, he is—blow me tight—he *is* going through his man's pockets. That ain't cricket quite, my friend; but never mind, it will make his pals all the keener when they see that watch.

"Ha! here are the regulars coming up; they'll be on to it too in a minute. Damn, but the whole army will be all over the place if we don't watch it. Hi, you blokes there," turning to a group of staff officers who were now standing behind him, "three of you hurry off to Fellowes. Tell him when he's finished to get his men together—not before he's finished though, mind. Two more of you round up the Hearts of Oak; take care they don't shoot you though; they're after loot, and fierce. The rest of you cut away to the other divisions and tell them to halt as they come up. Godwin."

"Yes, sir."

"That's our position over there," pointing to a long line of wooded hills two miles ahead. "As soon as Fellowes has drawn off, bring the whole lot on there and post them as I told you. Three divisions and six batteries to line its length,

the reserve in the centre behind that conical hill there. Tell the three divisions to dig themselves in at once; they'll have a thin time if they don't.

"Move as quick as you can; it's close on eight, and Gabriel will be thereabouts by one. There's Fellowes' lot getting together now. I'm going on with the cavalry; join me when you've finished by that tree there. Come, Bobby," and Graeme galloped off, threading his way through the muddle of fallen tents and corpses, the Guards roaring a welcome as he passed. When clear of the ruined camp he joined Maitland, the cavalry commander.

"What sport, Maitland?"

"A few, sir; nothing much."

"No prisoners, I hope."

"None, sir."

"Come on then," and the two rode off together, the cavalry following in line of brigade mass, the ground being open and going good.

The plain crossed, the force halted and dismounted, Graeme, Maitland, and the two A.D.C.'s ascending the ridge, from the top of which the country could be seen for miles ahead and around.

The line of hills—on the highest point of which they now stood—was about five miles in length, rocky in parts, and sparsely covered with trees. Through the centre, close beside them, lay the road to the north, along which, fifteen miles distant, Gabriel was known to be advancing; while far away to the left could be seen a double line of trees, marking the course of the Western Road. In front of them spread a wide open plain, similar to that they had just traversed, but crossed, parallel to their front and some two thousand yards away, by a brook, or small river, with steep, overhanging banks. Towards this the ground fell gently, subsequently rising till it reached another ridge, four miles away, which was also crossed about its centre by the Northern Road. The passage over the brook was by a small wooden bridge.

To the right and left the country was open for miles; the left, however, being scantily covered with trees, which became thicker until they formed a dense woodland, and somewhere in this Roy was now lying, waiting for Michael.

Graeme surveyed the scene through his glasses, and regarded for some minutes the ridge ahead, where a faint twinkle could now and again be seen.

"Enemy there," he muttered, "cavalry, a good many of them too. Have to turn them out of that, Maitland. Too close—see everything."

"I'll go now, sir," said Maitland, turning.

"And look here, when you've outed them, hold on to that ridge for a bit. No heavy losses, mind; your time for that's later. Just tickle up Gabriel, matador him, make him mad to come on. Then join the reserve."

Maitland went, and soon from below the sound of movement arose from

the waiting cavalry. A word of command rang out, taken up by other voices; then followed a loud clatter and jingle as over the hill, close beside Graeme and Glover, passed a cavalry division, which, on reaching the level beneath, trotted briskly forward.

"Thud, thud, thud" came in instant greeting from the enemy's horse artillery on the ridge ahead, followed later by the stuttering of a maxim and then by a crackle of musketry.

The leading squadrons opened out fanwise, their front being now well-nigh a mile in breadth; from a trot they broke into a canter, then into a gallop, as they resolutely pressed on, despite the storm beating in their faces. Small dark heaps began to strew the ground; tiny figures could be seen running and clutching at the trailing reins of the now numerous loose horses, or holding sturdily on to the stirrup-leathers of more fortunate comrades.

The rattle swelled to a roar, for magazine fire, the last hope, had opened; the clamour of the guns rose to one continuous rapid thudding, and then suddenly ceased. The thin, clear notes of bugles sounding the charge were borne back on the breeze, followed by a faint echo of cheering, and over the distant ridge surged the black tide of horsemen, their swords flashing and lance-points glittering as they rose and fell.

Graeme chuckled as he looked. "Ha, ha, Old Un," he said, turning to Godwin, who had ridden up some minutes before, "that's one up, ain't it, for the military expert? The term 'sabres' has lost its meaning, has it, cavalry in the future must rely on rifles? [#] Poor old weak-kneed Army Council! Thank the Lord, I never would have it, though they threatened to break me if I didn't. What have you got to say, eh? You were one of the Whitehall lights at the time, you know."

[#] Referring to a work by one Colonel Caldwell, at the time of its writing a garrison artillery man. This masterpiece, probably in deference to the British civilian public, who at that time developed views on military matters, was for a while adopted as the text-book for officers' promotion examinations in India till saner councils prevailed, when it, and not the sword and lance, were relegated to obscurity. During the short period of its existence, however, it was successful in doing an infinity of harm. This and a somewhat similar effort by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle exemplify the folly of writing on current events till sufficient time has elapsed to allow of the mind being cleansed of purely personal impressions.

"It was a fine performance, sir, though a bit risky, don't you think?"

"That's what cavalry are for, my friend. Stop their taking risks and they're useless. Army up yet?" he asked abruptly.

"They're nearly all here, sir. The three divisions and the batteries are now digging themselves in. There are some of them, sir," pointing to a group of khaki-clad figures close by busy with picks and shovels.

"All we want now, then, is old Gabriel. Hope he will come on, and not wait for Michael. That would dish us rather."

"I don't think you need fear that, sir; the two, I happen to know, have little love for each other. It's jealousy, sir; they've been rivals for years. Gabriel would sacrifice Michael, or Michael Gabriel, without the smallest hesitation."

"Good heavens, man," said Graeme, turning furiously on him, "here's information I'd have given a thousand pounds for, and you casually mention it as if it were of no consequence whatever. How do you know it, though?"

"I've relations in the country, sir, and they know both men. I'd have told you if I'd thought it of consequence, sir."

"Of consequence? It's the whole blessed thing. It makes it a certainty, can't you see? Why, but for knowing it I might have shoved on to meet Gabriel—a risky job with my lot. Now I sit here and smoke my cigarette in peace. Hullo, hear that?" suddenly gripping Godwin by the arm, and staring westward, whence a faint dull boom had sounded.

"It must be Roy, sir."

"Of course it's Roy, don't be an obvious fool. There it is again," as a second dull boom was heard, followed by another, and then more, merging into a low, intermittent muttering.

"It's begun now, Old Un—seconds out of the ring, first round, time. See there," pointing ahead, "Maitland's helio going; what does he say, you?" to the officer in charge of the Headquarter signalling station close by, whose own helio was now clicking violently in answer. The man spelt out the message, rapidly jotting it down as it came, and then brought it over to Graeme.

"To C.-in-C. (it ran) from O. C. Cavalry:

"Patrols report large column advancing North Road, about eight miles distant. Artillery fire heard towards west."

"Eight miles only. Gad, but Gabriel's shoving on. Here, Bobby, give me a cigarette, and don't talk to me, either of you, till I've finished. You'll upset me for the day if you do." He lay back and luxuriously proceeded to fill his lungs with smoke, his eyes closing in great content.

"Message for you, sir, just come in," and a staff officer stood before him holding out a missive.

"Eh, what?" answered Hector dreamily, and then burst out in sudden fury: "Go to hell, sir, take your damned letter away and yourself too. I'm having my first cigarette, blast you!"

Nonplussed, the officer stood staring, then, catching Godwin's warning

eye, handed him the letter and turned on his heel, with a sneer on his face.

"Good sort of Commander-in-Chief, that," he muttered, "can't read an important despatch because he's smoking a cigarette. Thank God for old Godwin and Fellowes, that's all I can say. Beakey must be a blooming wonder; no one thought it of him before this, either," and thus reflecting he joined a group of his *confrères*, who were fidgeting about in rear, anxious to do something, and to whom he proceeded to retail his reception by the Commander-in-Chief.

"Read it out, Old Un, I've finished," said Hector, regretfully discarding the last atom of the cigarette.

"It's from General Roy, sir, headed from Blay. He says, 'Taken up a position here. Enemy three miles distant and coming on.'"

"Blay," repeated Graeme, "that's about twelve miles from here. They've been at it now for close on an hour, and it's getting pretty hot, judging from that," looking as he spoke towards the west, where the intermittent cannonading had now become a steady, continuous rolling. "Hullo, there's Maitland begun," as the sudden sharp rapping of a maxim came from the ridge ahead, mingled with a few scattered shots, and then heavy firing. "Noisy lot of devils they all are—on Christmas Day too! Peace on earth and goodwill towards men. Lord, what a row. Ha! there's his helio; look sharp with it. Well?"

"From O. C. Cavalry, to C.-in-C.:

"Enemy's advanced guard attacking me. Cavalry, infantry, and guns. Shall hold on for a bit, and then fall back."

"That firing to the west's getting louder, seems coming this way. God! it will be a near thing. Ah! there's Maitland coming back, about time too, I should say. Lord, what a stampede; and, by Jove, there are the enemy at last, up on the hill he's left, shooting after them. Shoot away and be hanged to you. Ha, ha, like that, do you?" as the six batteries in position on the ridge on which he was standing suddenly roared out together, and the crest ahead grew blurred with a mist of white smoke starred with tiny sparkles of flame.

"Keep it up, keep it up," he shouted, "long as you can; it's the last chance you'll have, for outed you'll be soon enough once Gabriel gets on to you. That's part of the game, though; if I made you too strong you might check Gabriel, and I don't want old Gabriel checked. I want him here."

"They've cleared, sir," said Godwin, suddenly pointing to the hill ahead, whence the figures had now disappeared. "No, there they are again—guns, sir, the whole crest's bristling with them."

"Time for umbrellas then, Old Un," answered Graeme, rising and sauntering away to a rock hard by; "it's going to rain pretty hard, and that rain will hurt if it hits. Come along, Bobby, what'll I do for cigarettes if you get outed?" and reaching the rock he flung himself down behind it, the other two crouching beside

him.

Then with a sudden earthquake roar the storm burst, and the ridge seemed to tremble and rock. Over the sun a curtain seemed to fall; the green landscape vanished from before their eyes, hidden by a thick pall of sulphurous smoke, torn with crimson flame and alive with flying fragments of iron.

Crashing and shrieking, the huge shells thundered down on the quaking ground, throwing up great fountains of earth and splintered stone, splitting the trees, and seaming the green hill with ragged brown wounds.

Faintly to be heard through the tumult, the sharp thudding of the defenders' guns sounded in defiant answer, rapid and well-sustained at first, then intermittent, and at last sinking into silence. But still the tempest roared on, increasing in fury till blackness shrouded the vision and the brain was numb from the continuous crash and hammer of iron on stone.

A cloud of black stinking smoke eddied round the rock, under the lee of which the three were crouching, with handkerchiefs bound round their mouths and eyes streaming with grimy tears.

Glover's face was white and scared; on Godwin's there was a look of studied calm; Graeme was staring out, his eyes vainly trying to pierce the murk before him. A touch on his foot from behind made him start and look round to where a staff officer, who had just crawled up, was holding out a paper.

"Message from General Roy," he shouted.

"What? Speak louder, can't you? Oh, from Roy; give it here," and taking the missive he tore it open and read:

"Heavily engaged. Forced to fall back to avoid being surrounded. At least six divisions against me. Enemy's losses very heavy."

"Don't mention yours, I notice. God damn it, if only this infernal smoke would clear away and I could see what Gabriel's up to. Row seems to be slackening a bit; must be his infantry coming on. Ah, at last, a breeze," as a sudden puff of wind moaned through the shattered trees, and then, growing stronger, tore away the muffling veil, and he could see.

A cry of delight broke from his lips at what he saw, for the plain in front was no longer empty, but covered with line upon line of green-clad infantry, rapidly advancing. The leading ranks—being more or less opened out—were already almost up to the brook, but behind them came dense masses of men, and beyond these, descending the hill, three huge columns, the whole surging forward like some rolling dark-green sea.

"Means to rush us, Godwin," said Hector, "walk right over us. You're a trump, Gabriel, old man."

"That firing to the west is coming nearer, sir."

"I know it is, so does Gabriel; that's what's bringing him on so fast, the jealous old dog."

Hector was right, for the sound of the hourly swelling roar of the western battle was rapidly goading Gabriel to frenzy. This victory was his—his, not Michael's. It was all but won now, for no longer did the British guns answer his, and though their infantry might make some show of resistance, still that could be but short-lived, for half of them were volunteers, demoralised, moreover, as his information had told him, and not for a moment capable of withstanding such troops as his.

True, they had managed to destroy Uriel, but this, though possibly unfortunate for Uriel, might nevertheless be viewed in the light of a blessing, for by his death the British had been encouraged to stand, and had thus given themselves into his hands; also, Uriel was one of the Michael faction, and worthless, as were all that gang.

If only Michael too could be beaten—he was having a hard time out there to the west, he knew—well, perhaps if fortune were kind, he would be, and the Emperor no longer be blinded to his own superior merits. But then a message had been received from that same Michael, telling not of defeat, but success, and his hopes of being in time to aid Gabriel in his battle; at this, Gabriel had thrown all remnants of prudence to the winds. Scorning reserves, he launched his whole force to the attack, shouting to his generals to rush their men on, and not to mind the losses, assuring them that before them lay a beaten army, to crush which they had only to press on.

Gabriel having, despite the one fatal flaw in his nature, the soul of a great leader, the spirit that possessed him was felt in the hearts of his followers, and forward they rushed, ignoring distance and interval, for these meant delay, and delay was not now to be thought of. Into the brook's swollen waters plunged the leading lines, their weapons held aloft as they struggled through the torrent, and then, shaking themselves like dogs, they hurried on to the smoking ridge ahead.

Fifteen hundred, one thousand yards only lay between, and with the lessening of the distance the thunder from behind slackened, and then, but for the tramp of feet, all was silent.

Then suddenly from among the trees a whistle blew, its shrill piping echoed by others, and at the sound that battered shot-torn hill awoke to life.

From crumbling trench and lead-splashed stones a line of thin brown tubes rose up, wavered for a moment distractedly, and then together came down, and row upon row of tiny, steel-ringed eyes peered inquiringly on the green waves

rolling towards them.

A second time the whistle was blown, which was again taken up to right and left; and then the heavy silence was broken by the scream of cordite and the stammering voice of maxims.

The leading ranks of the enemy went down, some falling forward on their faces with a groan—this was death—others reeling sideways to the ground, where they lay writhing and shrieking in the torture of splintered bone or bullet-ripped vitals.

Those checked in rear flung themselves down, their hands tugging at buckled cartridge-belts, but in a second their officers were on them, kicking them up and driving them on with shouts and curses, and once more the lines surged slowly forward, men dropping in hundreds as they came.

"Two messages from General Roy, sir," shouted a voice in Hector's ear; "they came within a few minutes of each other, sir." The speaker's voice was strained and his face white.

Graeme opened them in turn. The first ran:

"Lost half my force and all guns. Enemy's losses enormous; shall hold on here till all is over. Done my best.—Roy."

Hector's face was unmoved as he read. He opened the second:

"General Roy dead. All lost.—Maddox, Captain."

"Just where you're out, my friend," muttered Hector; "it's all won now."

"What does he say, sir?" asked Godwin.

"Nothing much. He's done what I wanted. Michael's had his bellyful."

"Wh—what are those, sir?" came suddenly from Glover, staring towards the west. "They're wearing our uniform, but ... God!"

Together Graeme and Godwin looked towards the spot at which the boy was pointing, and saw far away to the left a scattered band emerging from the trees. A band of fugitives they were, seemingly, some thousand in all, without order or semblance of order. Over their heads shells were bursting, and clouds of dust were flying up around their feet; but, unheeding, they slowly toiled on, till at last they were hidden from view behind the left of the ridge upon which the three stood watching.

"It—it's Roy's force," stammered Godwin, "all that's left of twenty thousand men."

"Well, what of it?" snapped Graeme. "We knew that would happen, didn't we? You old corncrake you, what's the good of crying over it? Can't you see he's won the battle for us. Look there, look at Michael's force after him; see what a mob they are, bad as the lot they're pursuing. Thank ye, Roy, the goose is cooked and now we'll eat it—for I'm hungry." His teeth bared in a grin. "Come on, and God help Gabriel now."

* * * * *

The leading ranks of the enemy were now but a few hundred yards distant—ragged lines of weary, smoke-blackened men dragging painfully onward. Behind them thick, green-clad masses, all pressing forward to assured triumph, on towards those grimy figures, now opening on them with magazine.

On they came, cheering lustily, their ranks glittering with bayonet and waving sword, but even as victory's laurel seemed within their grip the god of battles averted his head, and Death sat grinning in their faces.

For the ridge in front was now echoing to the blast of bugles and the shrill tone of pipes, and at the summons the crouching khaki-clad figures rose up together and stood looking calmly down upon them. And as the green men halted, wondering what this might mean, with a shattering roar the hidden batteries of the reserve, silent so long, flamed into life, cleaving wide lanes in the crowd below, till their cheering ceased and died.

"Charge!" clanged the bugles again, and obeying, carrying the lines forward with them, the mass of the reserve came pouring over the hill, fresh and thirsty for battle—a solid phalanx bristling with sharp, gleaming bayonets.

For one moment, and for one only, the green men stood, wildly firing in the face of the approaching host, who paid no heed, but with one loud pealing shout of triumph rushed on, a living wave of steel, and rolled like a sea over the now terror-stricken masses. Away to the left, Michael and his men, toiling on in pursuit, heard the uproar, and as they took in its meaning stopped and hesitated.

"March to the guns" is the soldiers' motto all the world over, and here were guns thundering in their ears, comrades too in dire need of assistance. But ... yet ... bad as was the case, their own was nearly as desperate, for Roy and his men had done their work right well, and of Michael's eighty thousand barely ten thousand had been scraped together for pursuit.

While they stood debating, the cry of "Back!" arose from the rear: "Back! back! see the cavalry waiting for us," and straightway the groups, glad at heart, turned, and that same night were tramping hurriedly away whence they came....

Gabriel was abandoned to his fate. And the hand of that fate was heavy on Gabriel this Christmas evening, as he stood looking down with desperate eyes on what, only one short hour before, had been a jubilant army, but was now a shrieking, terrified herd of humanity.

Almost superhuman efforts had he and his staff made to turn the tide, to show a front, even to form a rear-guard, but in vain. With his own self-control had also gone his and his officers' hold over the army; by his own orders had the reins of discipline been abandoned, and, strive as he and they might now, they had passed from his hands never to be recovered. Plainly he could see now, so very plainly, the simple trap into which he had fallen; like some maddened bull in the arena he had rushed at the red flag held out, and fallen on the sword behind, and as he stood staring down on the welter below, a horror of despair came upon Gabriel and the will to live died. He raised his hand, fired, and fell.

Far away, on the ridge opposite, his figure sharp-cut against the pale green of the sky, the British leader stood watching, with madness in his eyes also—but the madness of a great triumph, and not of despair. For here was glory at last—glory such as crowns the very few. But a few short hours, and English steeples would be rocking with the clash of joy-bells, and the voice of an empire would be shouting his name to the skies. The adoration of a multitude, the approval of a King—all, all was his. Ah! to die now, now when glory's gold was untarnished, and the green of laurel fresh. "God kill me now, now," he breathed, and with the prayer came the answer. A blinding flash overhead, the snap of a breaking harpstring, and Hector was down on the frozen ground, life's bright crimson bubbling from his breast.

In a second an arm was thrust beneath him where he lay, with his head fallen back on a khaki-clad shoulder. Green eyes, horrified and appalled, looked down into the dimming violet of a dying man's.

"Old Un," he gasped, "that—that you? What's h—happened, Old Un?"

"Shrapnel, sir, burst right over you. I—I am afraid you're hurt, sir. Oh, fetch that doctor, damn you, damn you."

"Old Un, you're crying, blast you. There are tears running down that long nose of yours. You look damned absurd. What's the harm in dying?"

"No, no. Oh, will you hurry?"

"Shut up. I'll be gone before he comes. Put your bill closer, I—I want to say something; a bloody swan sings when he's dying, Old Un, and I—I can't shout. Where the devil are ye? I can't see you."

"Here, sir, close beside you," sobbed the other.

"The devil's got his own at last, Godwin. D'ye hear him chuckling, the old Satan? Ha! ha! Chuckle away, my friend; I'm not afraid; I'll twist your tail yet, blast ye. Old Un."

"Yes, yes."

"I'll tell you something, Old Un, it's about the ghost. It was all delusion, I know it now, death's laid the bloody phantom at last. But come closer—closer. There was one thing real—no delusion, old boy, I loved something once—a child—my own, sh—she was blind. Will that count, d'ye think, where I'm going?"

"Of course it will, sir. God—"

"Damn your preaching, I want her—not G—God. A—ah!" His voice suddenly rose to a scream, and he sat up, stretching out his arms. "She's there—and—and look, Old Un, she sees, she sees. Ruby! Ruby!" and Hector Graeme fell back dead.

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