THE WAY OF STARS

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Title: The Way of Stars
Date of first publication: 1925
Author: Elizabeth Louisa Moresby (as L. Adams Beck) (1865-1931)
Date first posted: June 15, 2021
Date last updated: June 15, 2021
Faded Page eBook #20210626

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

BY L. ADAMS BECK

The Ninth Vibration

The Key of Dreams

The Perfume of the Rainbow

The Treasure of Ho

The Way of Stars

THE WAY OF STARS

A Romance of Reincarnation

BY
L. ADAMS BECK
(E. Barrington)

NEW YORK
THE SUN DIAL PRESS

1940
THE SUN DIAL PRESS

SUN DIAL PRESS BOOKS ARE PUBLISHED
BY THE GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING CO., INC.
14 WEST 49TH STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

CL
PRINTED IN U. S. A.

“For as those stars, called the wanderers, go and return upon their orbits unseen and seen again, so it is with the lives of men.”

JADRUP GOSEIN

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PROLOGUE

In her coffin of gilded sycamore, Egypt lies, while the centuries trickle away into eternity, like sand in the crevices of her rocks. Ibis and hawk, vulture and jackal-headed gods stand rigid beside the mummy, staring down into the widely opened eyes of her face painted upon the lid. The nation that ruled the world, gave laws to faith and thought, stamped her likeness for ever on Europe and Asia, lies buried in strewn spices and aromatics, the mummy-bandages knotted about her, binding the dead arms to her sides, binding the dead face and eyes into darkness.

If the outward body of a nation dies, is it possible that its soul, that which made it a people, shall, like the soul of a man, live on, and after the judgment of the Lords of Life and Death, return in the endless round of reincarnation to live a life it never dreamed beneath its perished suns, the seed of its actions springing in a new harvest? Is it possible that the Law of Karma, of relentless cause and effect, thus rules and awakens the dead soul of a people when the Wheel has come full circle? Or is this story but a dream in the blinded head of the corpse of Egypt, lying to Eternity in her sealed mummy-chest with the jackal-headed, vulture-headed gods standing rigid beside her, staring down through the ages into the widely opened eyes on her coffin lid, painted in gold, in cinnabar and in azure?

CHAPTER I

OUTSIDE the sky rained down waves of quivering light from its metallic blue on the tawny desert. Every now and then, on a sudden puff of hot wind from nowhere, the sand danced in little whirls and dust-devils, and shimmered beneath it, and then subsided again into a goblin quiet. Some Arabs stood in a tense silence waiting, with their tools laid beside them—waiting—and for what?

The shaft, cutting the sand like a gash, shored up with beams and planks, led down to the mysteries below, and about the opening lay two painted coffin lids, with rings and pottery and many broken fragments, the relics of a dead ancientry. Men, burrowing like moles in the drift of time, had upheaved these things to the light of day and they lay there lamentably, their very use forgotten.

There were great heaps of sand and rocks where the work had gone on beneath the crags tumbled from the huge honeycombed cliffs above. It was a rubble of *débris* with neither end nor beginning, unsightly, repulsive.

In the passage at the bottom of the shaft the heat was frightful. It was as though the stored central heat of the world was escaping through it like a chimney. The silence of ages brooded there, dark, stagnant, repellent. Miles Seton wiped the sweat out of his blinded eyes with a dripping handkerchief and looked at Conway, leaning exhausted against a jut of rock before the sealed door of the unopened tomb chamber. The passage that they had already explored, with no hair-raising result, lay in two directions, empty, exploited. They had been at it for two long years. Those years, the money poured away into the sand, the hope deferred and disappointed time after time, all seemed to fall on them with a cumulative weight, and now, that they stood before the last bar to their last hope, they were too played out to be eager any more. Honestly, at that moment, they did not give a damn for anything they might find inside that door. That mood would pass, of course. Mere physical strain. The human brain in each of us is keyed up to a certain pitch and beyond that it declines to respond.

Outside, the Arabs broke out into a sudden jabbering and yelling, now the great moment had come—invocations for luck and protection from what the opened door might let loose upon them:

"We take refuge with Allah from the stoned fiend!" "In the name of Allah, and the blessings of the One be upon our lord Mohammed and his

family and his companions one and all!" "Allah makes all things easy"—and at last subsided into the silence of expectation.

Four trusty men kept them out of the shaft, doing sentry-go at the top. Masoud, the head-man, was down below with the two leaders. Not a sound in the depths.

To them, it had been the most extraordinary business from beginning to end. Never a queerer. The two men, Conway and Seton, among their war experiences had run up against a Frenchman from Egypt—a liaison officer at Poperinghe. They got friendly, for French was a strong suit of Seton's and Conway's, and the other fellows got no further than a few nouns and expletives—and the man's English was truly French. They were sorry for the poor chap, and he often spent the evening in their dugout, talking nineteen to the dozen and picking up stray crumbs of comforts, for the British Army had enough and to spare, and the less said about French comforts the better.

Looking back, they reckoned him a more unusual fellow than they had guessed at the beginning, for his neat, dark head, finished little features and trimmed up moustache had something of the *petit maître* about them—the kind of thing they used to guffaw at foolishly in the French comrade until they came to know the fire and the vim of him—and at first the two Englishmen were inclined to be a bit patronizing. That soon wore off. There was nothing of the *petit maître* about him, not a bit of it. He went a long way outside his duty one rainy night when there was a poor devil with a smashed leg groaning out in No Man's Land, for when Conway and Seton got back from outpost duty, they found it was Alphonse who had brought him in. That was by no means the only time, either. The little man was a rapier in an ornamental sheath. His name was not Alphonse, of course. He was Monsieur le Capitaine Jules Geoffrin de Neuville, and equally, of course, that was frankly impossible, so he became Alphonse in the partnership of three. He never got anything from home—not so much as a letter—might not have had a friend or relation in the world, but he paid his way for all that, for he rewarded his pals with Romance—the best gift any man can take or give, the easer of toil, the draught of nepenthe, the Light that does not fail.

Heavens, what romance! He had been everywhere, seen everything. He would sit in the light that invariably failed—a candle stuck in a bottle—with his glittering dark eyes fixed on distance and the nerves in his lean face working, and tell them of places they never heard of before. Of Cambodia and the King's dancing girls, the golden Buddha with the diamond eyes, the jade Buddha of the Lamas, set with priceless pearls. Of the vast forests

where, sealed in the knotted jungle, sleep the dead treasures of Angkor Wat, and of the splendours further in the unknown, which the dark men whisper of to each other, but never to the white stranger. That man had the gift of words, if ever man had it. One might rake in the shekels if one could set down the phrase, the incomparable manner—the pause before the dramatic moment, with the spiked forefinger to point it, the torrent that broke forth when rhetoric was needed. Seton told him once that he could have made his fortune as a professional story-teller in the Eastern bazaars, and he laughed quietly and cocked his eye at him.

"I have done it, *mon ami*! I was a hanashika in Japan for a lean year or two. But I was born there. A man must know the language, for the East takes its jokes and its love full-flavoured. And there are *nuances* also. It is a poor living, but amusing," he said, and went on to the next story.

It happened to be Egypt. He had been helping De Cartier, the great Egyptologist, on his excavations at Abu Tisht, and was present when the Osirian cave was opened up. Conway was not a person of particularly swift imagination, but Seton saw him transfixed as Alphonse gradually fired him with pictures of the close, airless passages they crept through on hands and knees, the final emergence into a shaft leading down, a velvet blackness, into the very bowels of the earth, the fall, as into a well, which nearly ended his earthly adventures, and then—then, the light, the frescoes, the stunned amazement, as the men looked round and realized the presence of an antiquity that left them dumb, before which Europe became a mushroom impertinence and themselves the barbarians of yesterday.

"For look you, my friends," said Alphonse one night, "these people were Egyptians, they had forgotten more than our wise men know. It is true they did not devote their research to steam, oil, electricity, flying and the like (a wild shriek, as a shell tore overhead, to settle, a bird of prey, one knows not where). The arrow and the sword were good enough for killing with. It was the secrets of life they wished to probe—of life that laughs at death. Therefore it was in the mind—in the soul—they made their triumphs. What we call magic, they had at their command. Marvels, miracles—and all the result of a science of which we know but the alphabet."

"A trick of their priests!" Conway said contemptuously. "Priests are the same the world over."

"Yes and no, my friend. So far as the priests made the gods responsible—a trick. But that these things were done—no trick. The mind of man. That was their kingdom. It was a secret lore, handed down, probably, from the lost Atlantis."

“The lost Atlantis? What’s that?” Seton asked. He had not the remotest notion at that time whether it was a woman, a religion, or a city. Alphonse stared at him pityingly, and there was a wild outburst of guns to punctuate his next remarks.

“Hold hard till they’re through. I want to hear!” Seton shouted.

He held hard, and hell broke loose for ten minutes. They held their heads on and wondered what the devil Fritz was at. Then it quieted off and only the usual noises supervened. Alphonse resumed, as if nothing had happened. Probably nothing had.

“In the ancient stories of all lands, my lambs, Atlantis figures as a great continent, where the people so misbehaved themselves that the angry gods considered that they needed a thorough washing within and without. They got it, and Atlantis now lies beneath the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Dreams! Rot! Nothing’s really known of it!” Conway said contemptuously. “Try another, Alphonse. Not good enough!”

Alphonse was at his suavest.

“But pardon me! There was an old gentleman long ago, who pretended to some wisdom—indeed, the world has agreed in his estimate. Have you ever heard of Plato, my son?”

Seton heaved a boot at him. This to an Oxford man! Alphonse dodged it and went on.

“This old gentleman declares that he learnt certain things from the priests of Sais, a very ancient city of the Egyptian Delta. He visited the great temple there to the Goddess Who Was and Is and Shall Be—the goddess Neith. And this is what they told him.”

He stretched out his hand for another cigarette. Conway supplied it automatically. Responsibility for Alphonse’s creature comforts had become a habit with his hosts, even if they ran short themselves.

“They told him their histories went back ten thousand years—and Plato, my friends, did not live yesterday, so you may add on two thousand eight hundred years odd to that respectable antiquity. Well, they spoke of a mighty power which in *their* antiquity was the scourge of the world, a huge island situated in the Atlantic beyond what we call the Straits of Gibraltar. It was larger, they said, than Libya and Asia Minor joined. And this strange island was the way to others, from which you might reach what they called the opposite, continent.”

“America? Rot!” they cried like one man.

"*Connu*, my friends! But listen. The priests of Sais, speaking of the Mediterranean, declared it was but a harbor with a narrow entrance, whereas the other, they said, 'is a real ocean, and the land surrounding must truly be called a continent.' What say you to this?"

They had swallowed as much from Alphonse as in a physical sense he had swallowed from them, but this was too much. He had drawn the line at fairy tales previously, and Conway picked up his three weeks' old *Times*, and Seton a grimy pack of cards, with which he played solitaire like a maiden aunt when he was bored unendurably. Alphonse repeated, undismayed, "What say you to this, when I tell you I have seen?"

"What then? You aren't nearly as effective as usual, Alphonse."

"Seen a papyrus that came from Sais and speaks of the Atlantis."

"Go along with you!"

"I have seen it in the Valley of Kafur, and very strange was the writing. My master deciphered some and would have done more but for the cholera. Cholera respects not learning. He died."

Conway put down the *Times*.

"Let's listen to him. On with the dance, Alphonse. Listen, Seton. Damn the guns! There they go again! Fritz is nervy to-night."

Another pause, while the guns did their talking. When they had fully expressed themselves, Alphonse resumed.

"De Cartier found that papyrus in a chest with feet and claws of alloyed gold, in a predynastic grave at Abydos. That is, you comprehend, before the first dynasty of kings we can trace in Egypt—how long, I cannot say. Part was history, part prophecy. It spoke of the people of Atlantis. They had learned their wisdom from the gods who walked among them. They were simple and virtuous. They grew proud and wicked—the old story, my friends. What nation has survived civilization? It kills us all sooner or later."

"But it's rather a pleasant way of snuffing out!" Seton said, remembering the nights of London with a sigh.

"Without doubt. The Atlantides thought so too. We all do. However—they were lost in the ocean, and now—Mark this, for it is extremely curious. The soul of the dead nation passed over into the North, and made the nomad tribes into a mighty nation, inheriting the wisdom of Atlantis—and its sins."

"By Jove, that's rather a quaint notion to carry on!" Seton said, kindling with interest. "Suppose we're the ancient Romans, and the French the Greeks, and so forth. I rather like that!"

"I also! It explains a good deal. But to return to this papyrus—or rather, no papyrus, but a kind of close-woven stuff, very durable, and with the figures painted on it in colours so strong that they dyed it through—it contained a prophecy which de Cartier deciphered to me, laughing at first, and grave later. It said this——"

He drew the well-thumbed notebook, which had been the text of many stories, from his pocket and read aloud.

"The Burden of Isis (she also was a great goddess of Sais). Hearken to the beautiful words of my lament. Fallen, fallen is the land of the Great Ocean. Weep for her queens, her wise men, her captains, terrible in war. Weep for her maidens, the light of all the earth. For the sea has swallowed them, the fishes swim in their palaces and for joy there is weeping. Behold, they are gone, as a dream flitting through the night. For the anger of the gods was upon them, and they were broken by their fury.

"Have mercy upon them, O Osiris! Be not angry for ever. Set the soul of them in a land they knew not. Restore their beauty and delight and let them live once more.

"And Osiris answered Isis his wife, that entreated before them:

" 'The Great White People shall put on again the garment of flesh, and their sinews shall be iron and their strength terrible. They shall dwell in the North and come out from it like locusts, and run over the earth with wings and wheels, and the nations shall abase themselves. And the sign of this shall be that Nefert, the Queen, Lady of Crowns, she whose body sits in the land of Egypt, shall return from the place of the dead. She shall glory in her beauty. She shall live and triumph.' "

He clasped the book again.

"I had a copy made of that when de Cartier died. I took it to Buisson, the greatest of our hieroglyphic readers. He read it attentively and pronounced it to be the oldest writing he had yet seen. 'As to the prophecy,' he said, 'I can say nothing. Superstition—poetry? Who knows? But the Egyptians could sensitize the human heart as we cannot, for we have bartered that domain of spiritual knowledge for commercial success, and it is difficult to run the two in harness. Still—if ever the body of this Queen Nefert is found, there may be strange happenings.' That was his verdict. But the body is not yet found."

"Then was this Nefert a queen of Atlantis?" Seton asked.

"That is not said, but one imagines it. She had an Egyptian lover, certainly. Buisson said another curious thing, which has remained in my memory. He said, 'It is a mistake to open these very ancient Egyptian tombs.

They were sealed with solemn ceremonies, and for excellent reasons. And when they are torn open, strange things find their way into the world.' "

"Diseases?" suggested Conway.

"Certainly diseases, my friend; did not Buisson die mysteriously almost directly after? The first outbreak of the plague form of influenza was coincidental with the opening of the tomb of Atet. And if, like me, you have the curiosity to trace cause and effect, you will find plague, cholera, many other little pleasantries of nature, emerging into history with the disturbance of famous tombs. But that is not all."

"What then?"

"Difficult to explain—and you might laugh if I told you. Influences—more—much more, for those who have skill to read the occult. Those places were shut and should be respected. Have you not noticed, also, that good luck never attends the riflers of tombs?"

He ran off a list of adventurers who had certainly met with inexplicable misfortunes. They listened, interested but unconvinced. He added:

"Yet this did not keep me—I who speak with you—from trying my luck. Learning the place from this document, I opened the tomb of Khar. And I had the devil's own misfortunes. Every one got the credit of my work except myself, and as I sit here now, my pay is the only thing between me and starvation, and my heart is racing me to death even if the guns spare me. All the same, I would do it again to-morrow if I could! I would go to Khar, and follow up the shaft of which I saw the traces during my own excavations. It leads, I dare swear, to a gallery in the rocks of Khar, and the finds there may astonish the world."

"I say, let's make up a party of three after this blessed business is over, and go there together," said Conway eagerly.

"Alas, I shall not be there to accompany you," sighed Alphonse, gently possessing himself of another cigarette. "In the curse sealed upon the tomb inscriptions, the robber of the Khar scarabs was promised a violent death. I robbed them. I shall take my punishment like a man. I shall not march into Berlin with you at the end of the war."

"Where then?" asked Seton, stupidly enough.

"Ah, my friend, if I could tell you that, the very guns, opening the gate to so many, would stop to hear me. Exploring the underworld, interviewing the august ghosts of the Atlantean queens (for there were none but queens among that ancient but gallant people, and the royal consort was a very small person compared with his wife), but dead in any case. Simply dead!"

He laughed as they stared at him. Not that there was anything strange in an expectation common to all out there. But there was something weird, predestined, in his way of putting it. They liked Alphonse, too. Remember that.

"But when I go, I bequeath you this notebook as the reward for many cigarettes and much *camaraderie*," he said, striking a dramatic hand upon the pocket. "It has copies of more than one document, and a later papyrus, and it will give you the clues. If you like excitement better than ease, follow them up. But yet—pause! I counsel you not to let Queen Nefert loose upon a world which has troubles enough already. She is best where she is."

After that he told them much, not to be repeated here, because it comes out in the story. They sat spellbound, staring at him while he rhapsodized and gesticulated, and the witches' cauldron outside boiled over every now and then into flames and the tumult of hell. It was much later than it should have been when they turned in.

A week after that Alphonse was killed. There were no friends to be informed, no sign of whom he had been. Many a dog might be blotted out with more compunction and observance than that very gallant and singular soldier of fortune. Conway and Seton were his only mourners, and they missed him amazingly. Of course they took the notebook. Of course they pored over it until every word was photographed on their brains, and that is why they found themselves in Egypt when the guns had spoken their last word and the statesmen's turn had come and the world had settled down to enjoy the peace (heaven save the mark!) which the soldiers had won for it.

CHAPTER II

I RESUME where the two of them, faint yet pursuing, leaned against the rock in the downward shaft of the chamber in the Khar Valley and faced the sealed door. And it was then a curious thing happened.

Masoud, their head-man, had a kind of fainting fit. Not surprising, for he was a big, bull-necked fellow, had been exerting himself to exhaustion, and the dull, stagnant heat in there nearly did for his masters as well as himself. He slid in a limp white heap to the ground, and Seton had to tilt a few drops of brandy down his throat before they could do anything with him. He began to talk, as if in sleep, the black agates of his eyes showing in a faint line under the half-shut lids. French! Seton stared at Conway and he at Seton over the man's head. Masoud did not know a word of French! Extremely rocky English—that was all his store, and little enough for his day's work. But this was French, with the true Parisian roll to it.

"The guns! the guns!" he said faintly, then was silent.

"*Mon Dieu!* That shell! It screamed like a woman! How can a man talk in such a devil's uproar?"

They were in a silence like the very heart of the tomb, the only sound the dull throbbing of the heart-beats in their ears. Seton saw Conway's eyes dilate and fix. They knew the voice, though it came weak like blown wind through leagues of distance.

"That which is sealed is sealed. So! Do not open the doors to the curse shut down with power. Let the dead bury their dead."

Another awful pause. Then, in a wild cry:

"The Horror! the Horror! Turn, turn, while there is time!"

And whatever it was went out of him with that last rending cry, and the man crumpled up altogether. They thought for a moment he was dead. Conway emptied his water-bottle over his head, and that was all he could do. After that they waited, Seton kneeling beside him, feeling it to be a discouraging prelude to the great experience. Presently, and astonishingly, Masoud sat up and looked about him, and instead of the gradual and painful recovery they expected, the next thing he did was to stagger to his legs and apologize. In fact, never was a man more apologetic—he had twisted his ankle, but it was nothing—a flea-bite. Let them now go on.

Conway, winking at Seton, addressed him in French, to the effect that the delay was nothing and they scarcely supposed he would be up to any more work that day. Masoud, still a livid yellow, evidently thought the heat had affected Conway's brain, and stared at him in amazement, leaning on the pick-ax which had done such good service. Not one word did he understand. That was plain as mud in a wine glass. A pause, and Seton motioned to him to go on, and with a great heave he let drive at the barred door, now clear of rocks and earth.

"But, I say," whispered Conway, "did you hear that, Seton? Who did you think it was? Not Masoud, I'll swear. Of course, it's all bunk, but still——"

"Of course it's bunk. What else? It sounded like Alphonse—if you mean that. But who's to say Masoud didn't serve with De Cartier and Alphonse? Who's to say he hasn't his own reasons for trying to stop us? These fellows are as deep as this shaft, and deeper. You can never catch up with the Arab brain. They think in a different cycle."

"I know. Still— Can't say I liked it. Did you?"

"Not worth thinking of twice."

"That's true." Conway was relieved. "They're one and all born tomb-robbers, and he has his little game to play. Come on. I don't give a fig for all the ghosts and devils in Egypt!"

Nor did Seton. But yet—yet— The enormous darkness, fold on fold, stirred only on the edge by the faintly flickering lanterns; the stagnant silence; the littered wall of rock; the door it had disclosed, with God knows what lurking behind it—these things caught at any braggart words and made them cheap. Sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, and nothing behind them.

Conway picked up another ax and set to beside Masoud. They were by no means scientific explorers, only impatient men, running the show on their own and eager to get through the shortest way. Their blows resounded up the shaft to the burnished sunshine where the Arabs waited and jabbered. Suddenly the door splintered and yielded, and there was an outrush of imprisoned air, exactly as when a boy bangs an inflated paper bag against a wall, but fetid, sickly. They stood back and scrambled halfway up the shaft, and sat down to await events, staring down into the dark, both of them, and each thinking his own thoughts. Seton's were a mere confusion. After all, what was the use of getting the wind up? The place might be empty, rifled already. Empty? Yet the air went up beside them like the flitting of dry wings, and the silence of expectancy below was horrid. And Masoud's strange fit! The man sat, hugging his knees, below them, staring down into the dark also, with the lantern below him flinging its light upward and

dilating his eyes and peaking his chin. It was easier to be nervy than normal as they sat there and said nothing.

They waited half an hour, then Masoud got down again and they followed. He lit a candle and fixed it on a stick, and held it at arm's length into the yawning jaws of the dark. At first it burnt a little blue and flickering, but presently a clear orange, revealing a few feet of emptiness about its small beam.

At that safety signal Conway trimmed and wiped the three lanterns and motioned to Seton to go first by right of seniority. There was a big raised ledge to the door, and he stepped over it and down, the others following.

Had they known, had they guessed what they were doing, Seton would have dropped dead there and then sooner than shoulder the responsibility. But it was as far beyond human mind to conceive as to hinder. He went on.

The lanterns were good of their kind, and they strung them out to throw the light as far as possible.

A great chamber, roughed out from a cave, with overhanging juts of rock from the roof. It was a huge oblong, unexpected recess caving in here and there, as far as the main surface went; entirely empty. There was no time then to explore the bays, as Conway called them. That must wait.

As they stood, his lantern caught up a dim glimmer of gold at the further end, and they all set off at full speed along the dry sand of the floor to see what they could make out. It almost seemed as though the sand had been strewn and left there by the people who had sealed the door, for surely it never could have penetrated the sealing and the rocks and the weight of the earth above it. It was a thin covering of sand, as though laid to deaden footfalls. And presently Seton stopped short and flashed his lantern downward. He saw the tracks of feet going back to the door from the extreme end where darkness reigned supreme. Feet with a thong between the great toe and the next—sandalled, therefore.

He touched Conway and pointed silently, and Conway stared, his eyes rounding in astonishment.

"Tomb-robbers!" he shaped with his lips, and raced on.

Suddenly he halted and flashed his light upward as gold and colours swam into sight. A fresco. The wall of rock was smoothed with the utmost care into a broad band, possibly four feet high and twelve in length, and thus prepared for the artist with a surface smooth as marble and then apparently gilded. In this the figures were deeply incised and filled with either coloured stones or pastes as hard as stone, level with the gilded surface and polished

off like enamel—the colours fair and fresh as when they left the hands of the craftsmen ages ago. They were as hard as adamant, whatever the substance, and turned the edge of Conway's knife.

There is a passage in the Bible which describes exactly what met their astonished eyes:

"There portrayed upon the wall the images of the Chaldeans, portrayed with vermilion, gilded with girdles upon their loins, exceeding, in dyed attire upon their heads, all of them princes to look to."

Solemn lines of nobles, not a woman among them, converging to a throne supported on lions' legs and claws of gold and raised upon a high dais, so that the occupant towered above the heads of the hushed audience as an idol to be worshipped. Wide rays of gold broke from the crown and conveyed an impression of divinity, and lo—this divine ruler was a queen.

It is difficult to convey the majesty of the seated figure. A solemn black river of hair descended on either side of her face, which was painted an ivory white, in contrast with the dark features of the surrounding Egyptians and Nubians. The eyes were closed, the full lips were dark vermilion. The head, supported by the high inlaid background of the throne, was crowned with a diadem so singular that they had never seen the like—golden snakes interwound, their three venomous heads darting outward above the brows.

Rows and rows of jewels encircled the throat, and fell in a flood of splendour to the knees, meeting a jewelled girdle above the loins, in plaques of jewels set in gold. The bare feet rested upon a couchant sphinx, dreaming its secrecies also, it seemed, for the eyes were closed. Mystery of mysteries!

They stood before this great fresco, for great it must be called, from the sense it gave of an awe-stricken crowd, of waiting suspense, majesty.

The colouring also—the sharp, clear notes of scarlet, blue, emerald, orange, all thrown upon the background of dull gold—shone like an enlarged and glorious missal, illuminated with figures of—no, not saints—anything but that! These figures were archaic, terrible, possessed by instincts and obsessions the explorers could never know, or, knowing, could never comprehend—beautiful, dangerous, and more especially terrible in the white calm of the central figure.

The men of to-day were intruders. They had no business here. They interrupted some solemn ceremonial that had taken ages to perform and was not yet ended.

"That lady—she *mafish*—she dead," said Masoud in a guttural whisper in Seton's ear.

“Nonsense! Who ever saw a dead queen holding a court?” Seton whispered in spite of himself.

“All the same, I think he’s right,” Conway joined in. “I think the face is whitened to suggest death. What else could it be?”

There was no answer ready. Probably he was right, but dead or no, the thing fascinated Seton, drew him to it in silent thought. Standing stock still, he mastered the details slowly and did not notice that the other two had moved on.

What was that she held so stiffly in one hand? A long-stemmed lotus, and from the other depended the looped cross of life, so familiar in Egyptian sculptures and paintings. Was she beautiful? The artist had aimed at beauty, had struggled to express it, but the unnatural size and lengthening of the eyes had a strange unreality, so that the image appeared to be rather the symbol of a woman than the woman herself.

Suddenly he started. A shout from Conway, more like a cry:

“Seton, come here. Quick!”

He could not see them. They had stepped into a bay, but the dream shattered and was gone, and he sprang to join them.

Heavens! The bay was the low entrance to an inner chamber, and the others had gone on and in. He must stoop almost to the level of his knees to follow, and struck his head smartly in doing it, and all but fell into the lower level of the floor beneath. Then, recovering, he hurried on to join the other two, who stood like statues, flinging their lights far and upward.

What—what was it that dawned spectral through the gloom? They were not alone. A Fourth was added to their party. But a silent, a terrible one.

On a dais of black granite from Syene, polished like a mirror, an astonishing magnificence for such antiquity, was raised a throne: a throne with a curved seat and stately back of ivory, poised on lions’ legs and claws of gold. A figure sat upon it, the bare feet resting on a sphinx of black granite dead white, reflected in the black water-like surface of the stone. The head was crowned. The hair——

They stared, dumb. The woman of the fresco, living but sleeping.

That was the first impression. Then—no, not living, not sleeping. No breath heaved the fair bosom, stirred the locked lips. There was no trembling in the stiff hand that had grasped the golden lotus for ages; the cross of life never wavered in the other. Dead. Death is always terrible. Ten thousand fold more in this petrified loveliness. In the picture outside she held her court amid hundreds of eyes that sought her as a divinity. Here, alone, and

the more majestic, she sat with closed eyes, surveying some inward secret, unspeakable and dreadful.

The first impression passed. Conway, the earliest to recover, set his lantern on the ground, snatched out his pocket sketch-book, and began to draw feverishly.

"They won't believe it. They can't, unless we have a record. I don't believe we can photograph even with a flashlight—but get the camera down. Why, I'm not certain I'm not dreaming it myself! For God's sake, look at the jewels!"

But Seton stood lost—utterly abstracted. All the imagination Conway lacked was his in double portion, and, heaven knows, if there were ever anything to strike a man's imagination dumb, it was here.

He called to mind reading, long ago, the true story of a tomb opened in Rome—a most ancient tomb—and within it they found the body of a maiden of the great Julian family, immaculately fair and exquisite as when she lay down to take her eternal rest—a lily of death, beautiful as the Roman Proserpina, crowned with calm leaves of sleep. For one breathless instant the Romans beheld such beauty as the outworn world offers no longer, and then, even as the blinding Italian sunshine stole over her, the whole dissolved swiftly into a little heap of grey ash, and only the incredible memory was left. Would that be the fate of the throned loveliness before him? There was no questioning her beauty now. The outlines of the marble-white face were clear and nobly cut, the lips curved like the bow of the moon-goddess, the black waves of hair flowing to her knees. Yet, even these, and the soft gloom of silken lashes, were not the chief delight. It was the deep repose of the face, the faint, faint smile which touched the mouth. She looked a bride, sleeping in the arms of Death, the Lover.

"My aunt! What a find!" cried Conway, working rapidly. "Why, it'll mean staggering the world, old thing! An Egyptian queen of a date before the first Dynasty, throne, lotus and all complete—a beauty like this, too! Her jewels! Why, we're made men! I wonder how on earth they preserved her. My heartiest thanks and blessings to poor old Alphonse. Why—what in the world!— Are you asleep, man?"

For still Seton stood, dreaming, beyond the reach of the other's voice, fixed, rapt on the white face above them. Conway threw aside his pencil and shook him by the arm.

"I say, don't let's have any more of these stunts! Masoud was enough. Wake up, man! You're as white as the woman."

Seton passed his hand stupidly over his eyes. Where had he been? What had he remembered? For the nerve touched was memory:

> "I have been there before,
> But how, I cannot tell."

His mind, not only his sight, had journeyed back, back into some long-dead Egyptian court, where a great queen ruled less by her royalty than her mysterious beauty. Slowly—slowly—he reached the surface of consciousness once more. He faced Conway, trying to laugh—a little awkwardly. The spell was broken.

"It's deuced hot in here, and the whole thing's so astonishing that it curled me up for a minute. Go on with the sketch while I note the details. We must lose nothing."

He got out his own notebook and began systematically cataloguing.

"Necklace: flat emeralds set in square plaques of gold, with golden lions and vultures interposed. Diadem: three twisted snakes, heads projecting above forehead. Girdle of gold fringes and jewels, so long as to be a garment to the knees. Armlets and anklets of gold, crystal and emeralds. Feet supported on granite sphinx. Golden lotus in right hand. In left——"

He stopped suddenly, seeing a small object beside the throne—a ring of dull beaten gold with a large carbuncle cut deeply with figures. It lay upon the sand as if it had fallen from the lovely hand that held the lotus. Then it had been hers! In life she had worn it. Now it had passed to him.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Conway was hard at work on his sketch; Masoud had turned to the entrance. Seton stooped quickly, and retrieving the ring, slipped it on the third finger of his left hand. A pledge—a token? What? It had evidently been a thumb-ring, for it fitted him well. He went on with his list, reading aloud for Conway's benefit, but with his heart throbbing like a girl's.

"In the left, ivory *ankh*, or Cross of Life. On steps of throne at each side ivory and crystal vases. Hieroglyphics on back of throne and on each step."

He stopped. Again the weird sense of memory captured him. What was the use of making lists when Beauty, incarnate Beauty, sat before him and called on some sealed chamber of his brain until it echoed responsive? Could he catalogue her charm—that faint, maddening smile that set her apart, though with his hand he could have touched the white foot that rested on the sphinx? He dared not touch it. An insane longing to drive his companions out of the cave, to end the profanation that disturbed her dream, to sit down there alone and worship—these were the thoughts which

narcotized his reason. Was it the hot, close air, or some miasma imprisoned for ages in the heart of the tomb-cave, or was it her ring that clasped his finger?

"I'd give something to know how they preserved her in this life-like way," said Conway from behind. "She might be asleep. Nothing of the mummy about that! But the chemists will get at the secret. She must have been a handsome woman."

Unbearable! Hateful! He felt he could stand it no longer. Must she be lifted from her throne and set down in some museum for cold and curious eyes to stare at? Was he to see rough hands profaning her lovely limbs—and he himself the cause of what he felt would torture her?

Better shovel the sand over the whole thing and blot out all memory of it to the Day of Judgment. But no, it was too late already! Masoud had carried the news to the men above and they were shouting themselves hoarse with delight and excitement. For good or evil, the thing was done.

He came to his senses. Conway had finished, Masoud was bringing down the camera. They took several flashlight photographs, hoping for the best. They took rubbings of the hieroglyphics. They closed and barred the door and set a guard, and, climbing up the shaft, dispatched the great news by camel to the Egyptian authorities, and then dined, too excited almost to eat, and lay down, exhausted, to sleep in their huts. And the ancient night, crest-jewelled with the moon of Hat-hor and the stars of Isis, brooded over the outrage to the majesty of forgotten kings, the gash and wound in the smooth golden sands of the desert.

Conway slept soundly that night, Seton not at all. The darkness was full of voices that answered no questions, but mourned and mourned. Who was she? Could she be the lost Nefert of Alphonse's story? Why had the manner of her burial differed from that of every other royalty known in the long history of tomb-exploration? Why had she died so young? True——

> "Queens have died young and fair,
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye."

Surely there must be some wild and terrible romance behind it all. How could he breathe in peace until the hieroglyphics were deciphered and the truth known? He pressed the ring to his lips and felt the sharp-cut inscription against them. It was sickening to feel it a mystery.

All night he lay and stared out at the dim glimmer of light in the opening of the tent.

CHAPTER III

THE next day brought with it Walworth, a skilled hieroglyphist, who happened to be working up at the neck of the valley, fourteen miles away, on a little problem of his own. They had sent him word the afternoon before, and he came, eager as a boy, though a man of sixty, a picturesque figure, with his long white beard, perched on the swiftly moving camel, and attended by his faithful retainer, Ali Agha, known also to all Egyptologists, and himself nearly as learned in antiquities as his master.

Seton and Conway almost dragged Walworth off his beast in the excitement of seeing knowledge at hand. They fed him, they put the sketches of the fresco and their notes before him (by agreement holding the secret of the dead queen as yet); they tried to wile or drag opinions from him which he was too wary to give until he could see for himself; and finally the three descended to the shaft with Masoud and Ali Agha in attendance.

No need to recapitulate his astonishment at the inlaid fresco. It very much surpassed their own, for he had knowledge to back his, and when he assured them that the earliest known example hitherto discovered was at least eight centuries later, his expression of awe and wonder quieted all Conway's jubilations.

"It will revolutionize our knowledge of Egyptian history and set back Egyptian art to eight thousand years B. C.—if not earlier."

He stood before it like a worshipper at the shrine of his devotion, and they could hardly persuade him to leave it for the inner chamber.

"There can be nothing more amazing than this," he repeated again and again, "for there are many points of interest which you fellows are too young in Egyptology to appreciate. The dress, the ornaments, the features, all point to a most astonishing antiquity. And the woman hasn't the appearance of an Egyptian. I take her to be a goddess, not a queen. It is evidently an act of worship."

He turned to Ali Agha, who broke into rapid Arabic, pointing, waving, almost dancing in excitement.

"Queer! He persists that it's a woman, a stranger queen. Well, we shall know presently. I have my papers here. No, boys, don't show me anything else! I must digest this marvel first. Strange it should have come to you two with so little time and experience, whereas I've been at it all my life and seen nothing like it! Well, luck's luck!"

Seton was waiting silently. The dominant thought in his heart was that he would see her again. It was like a man standing at the door of a royal audience chamber.

But Conway could endure the waiting no longer. He almost dragged Walworth into the inner chamber. He must see the marvel of marvels, and without preparation. She should break upon him, a light sundering in darkness—he too must worship at the altar of the loveliness of the Eternal Sleep.

A trembling took Seton as he followed mechanically. Was it some strange quality in the air, some miasma which affected him only? He could hear their cheerful voices hollow from within, then a kind of cry, and dead silence. He leaped after them, wild with anxiety.

The lanterns flashed on emptiness. She was gone! The throne still stood there, the sphinx, the vases, all, all, but the one jewel, the central splendour. The gracious figure was gone. Who had stolen her? Or had she stepped through the guarded door? Only one thing was certain. The world would never now look upon that fair face shining like a star in the darkness of the tomb. She had escaped them. He sprang up the steps of the dais, unheeding Walworth's cry of warning. A heap of dust lay before the throne—the necklace, the girdle, half buried in dust, lay there, the anklets and armlets had fallen on the steps as if they had slipped softly from smooth limbs overpowered with their gorgeous weight. He heard Conway gasping, almost sobbing, with the cruel disappointment. He heard Walworth's calm, incurious voice.

"Sure you saw it? Sure it wasn't another fresco, or a reflex image of the one outside thrown on the dark? Oh—ah! all three of you saw it? Curious. Sketch—photographs? I hope they'll come out. She's crumbled into dust. It has happened with the bodies of ibises and some of the sacred cats at Bubastis. Sad pity! Yes, indeed! What a loss to the world. Lucky the jewelry survives."

Thus they meandered on, while Seton stood dead silent, raging inwardly.

So she was snatched from him. How had he been presumptuous enough to think a queen of Egypt would stay for his poor worship? No—she had fled to her royal kindred in their strange secret paradise. The barbarians had broken into her solitude, they had sought to commercialize her beauty and majesty. She refused the outrage.

It almost terrified him that she had been so real a presence to him—a dead woman, long dead—what bond could there be between them? But it had left his heart empty. How should he face it? That was the problem. If he

had been alone—but no!—how could he even think with Walworth rambling on.

"It was the outer air. No, my boy, you couldn't have averted it. Opening to the outer air was fatal. You never could have moved her. Never mind. You have the sketch, and the photos may be better than you think. That's always something. Now let me sit down to the hieroglyphics."

That roused Seton at last. He came heavily down the granite steps and stood behind Walworth, while Ali Agha set his camp stool, and got his papers, and brought two fresh lanterns and set them to best advantage.

Conway, in a bitter bad temper, occupied himself in photographing the fresco as best he could in the cave outside.

"There's an inscription on each step in characters I never saw before," was the great man's final verdict. "Ali Agha says the same, and he has seen everything there is to see. It rather suggests the cuneiform character, but is not that. The hieroglyphics that run underneath, I believe to be a translation. If so, we're in luck."

After four hours of steady work, they all returned to the light of day for food and rest, and, that over, Walworth gave them his results so far.

"The Queen of the Great Land. The Queen Nefert, beloved of Hat-hor. Companion of Isis. Lady of Jewels. She who treads on the necks of her foes. Before whom the Kings are abased."

"She was evidently a stranger queen, and this was before the unification of Egypt," Walworth interrupted himself to say. "I haven't unravelled 'The Great Land' yet."

But Conway and Seton were staring at one another in a wild surmise. Alphonse! The priests of Sais. Queen Nefert. They did not speak, nor need to. Each read the other's face unerringly. Walworth continued in his monotonous sing-song, maddeningly missing a word and going back every now and then.

"The great king, King Zezar, made this tomb for her. Her praise reached heaven. The heart of the king died with her."

That was all. The rest depended on the inscriptions below the fresco (afterwards found to be the same), or any chance find of contemporary or later inscriptions. Walworth wanted to discuss the chances interminably, but the two men could wait no longer. Seton, with Conway prompting, told him the story of Alphonse. He was interested, and it turned out that he had met him with Buisson; did not think very highly of his Egyptian knowledge; "a brilliant but superficial person." Still, he admitted his value as an explorer.

Past that point he listened with acute attention. Of course, as a scholar, he knew the Platonic story well, and, like the rest, had speculated on its fascinating possibilities. But this—could it be a ray thrown on an antiquity so immense that all trace of it had been lost until now? Impossible! Yet what else—? He stared at them, troubled, perplexed.

"It can't be. But where's the document that he spoke of? De Cartier is dead. So is Buisson; but if Buisson had seen such a thing, the news of it should have reached every Egyptologist within a week. How do you account for that silence?"

"Alphonse accounted for it by saying that he and Buisson agreed to wait until he could return to Egypt and finish his research. He left the document with Buisson, and Buisson died almost immediately after of some mysterious disease the doctor couldn't clear up. Alphonse applied for the document again and again, but it could never be found, so he was assured by Buisson's secretary. But a thing of that value, who can tell?"

"Damned bad luck!" said Walworth morosely. "As like as not they burnt it for an old rag. The secretary probably was a conceited, ignorant young ass. Why, the stuff it was painted on alone might have taught us a world about the ancient manufactures of Egypt!"

Seton interposed, trembling with eagerness. There was no doubt the whole business had got badly on his nerves.

"But we've the copy, sir—Alphonse's copy. It's not worth a rap to the scientists, for of course they'll say he forged it, but to us and to you——"

"Yesterday I should have said without hesitation that he had forged it. To-day—I don't know. Fetch it out and let us have a look. The internal evidence may damn it in the first few characters."

Seton went to the little clamped box which held their treasures, and carefully drew out a flat packet where, secured between two thin boards and wrapped in damp-proof paper and silk, lay Alphonse's most precious legacy. He disengaged it with careful fingers and laid it on the table before Walworth.

Alphonse had spared no expense. It was all copied on parchment, the characters beautifully clear and finely executed—the work of an expert. Seton looked hungrily at Walworth, envying the knowledge which could cut its way through such a labyrinth to the secret—birds, dog- and bird-headed divinities, signs like axes, snakes—and through this jumble a man must wade to find out what concerned him more than any earthly thing! Walworth perched his spectacles serenely astride his nose.

"You'd better leave me to it," he said. "And I warn you, I can't promise much until I get back to my base—in other words, my books and papers. Now, you two boys clear out and leave me quiet with Ali Agha."

He would say no more. They wandered about the caves more or less all day. The jewels were gathered up, the throne prepared for packing, and desolation reigned where the pale Moon of Beauty had shone in the inner darkness. They developed their photographs, which were not so bad as they had feared. One, indeed, gave a striking enough picture of the dead woman sitting in her solitary majesty. At that, Seton would scarcely look. His heart remembered every gleam of grace that no picture could ever reproduce, and he was silent before Conway's triumph. He went to the inner chamber alone and sat there for an hour, dreaming, his mind the strangest confusion of thought and memory, struggling like a drowning man in deepest seas. Memory—it flashed on him in cruel glimpses, to disappear the moment he tried to focus it. The billows of time swept over it, drowned it. All he could be certain of was that it had been there. Turn his gaze from it, and it floated to the surface; look steadily, and it sank at once and was gone. The torment affected his body also, for a strange sickly weakness seemed to be invading him and his heart was beating all over his body, as it seemed. He fell heavily asleep during that hour and dreamed the fresco and many other incidents of yesterday. At the last, the silent Queen—but in the dream she opened her eyes, wells of unutterable darkness, and looked steadfastly, not at him, but at the ring on his finger, and so closed them again and sank back into her sleep. That ring was his one consolation. She had left it to him when she fled from them.

In the late afternoon Walworth laid before them what he had achieved. Better give it as he completed it later.

It repeated Alphonse's prophecy of the reincarnation of the lost people, and proceeded:

"The burden of Nefert, the Queen. She went down to the grave with scorn and loathing. With scorn and loathing shall she arise. Break not the door. Cast not down the stone, lest she arise and come very terrible. In the same form shall she come, and her sign is war and blood."

There was more, but it read like a kind of wailing repetition of the above, with invocations to strange gods and secret ceremonies to propitiate them. It ended with a cry:

"The curse of a rent heart and a desolate home be on him who breaks the seal I, Zezar, have set upon the door."

Walworth laid down the parchment and blinked serenely on them through moony spectacles.

"If this is authentic—mind you, *if*, for it is a most singular document—there was evidently some grievance against the lady, and they sealed her down for keeps. She may have been one of the firebrands of antiquity, a sort of nearly antediluvian Cleopatra. Why I think the document *may* be authentic is that there are so few ideographs. You don't understand? Well, a hieroglyph is a picture more or less of an actual object seen. An ideograph is an attempt at rendering an idea, such as love, hope, etc. Naturally these came much later. Now this document is nearly all hieroglyph. I don't suppose that would have occurred to a forger."

They listened with breathless interest. Conway's cigarette had dropped from his fingers as he leaned forward.

"Ali Agha tells me—what I knew before—that there's a superstition here that when the door is opened for them, these buried royalties—and indeed the lesser fry also—reincarnate and give trouble. They will have it, the Kaiser was born just after the tomb of Rameses the Twelfth was opened. He brought ruin on his own dynasty and on Egypt, and for a time she was enslaved. The characters of the two men being alike, probably worked up the story, but the people believe these things, and they infect others. Look at a sensible man like Buisson, for instance. Who could suppose——"

But Conway interposed.

"For God's sake, sir, tell Ali Agha to hold his tongue. If he infects our men, we may have big trouble. As it was, Masoud threw rather a remarkable fit before we got in at all, and you bet they've made the most of that."

"What was it?" Walworth pricked up his ears. Conway told him.

"Doesn't look well," was his conclusion. "The man had some private end in view and wanted to frighten you. Well, I must be trotting. Good moon to-night. I should reach my diggings about nine. I wish you a continuance of your good luck and a happy issue out of your afflictions with the Egyptian Government. So long! You should take a dose of quinine, Seton. You look seedy."

He gave them the necessary instructions as to whom they should inform and how best to approach the Cairene authorities, and they overwhelmed him with thanks and stood hurling last questions at him until the camel moved off.

It left a lonely feeling in the air when he was gone. It seemed somehow that they had bitten off more than they could chew. The business was one

which needed more knowledge, more experience, than they could bring to bear on it. They stood in the flooding moonlight almost in silence—the men, lying and sitting, grouped about the rocks before turning in.

A woman came slowly along the sand under the silvery splendour which gave it the appearance of hoar frost. It muffled every sound of feet clad only in *papooshes*, and she came on without a sound, a drapery flung over her head and muffling her body, held so close that nothing but her eyes could be seen. She stopped, looked at the group of men, and beckoned with authority to Masoud. A most singular circumstance, remembering the attitude of the Egyptian or Arab woman, where the choice seems only to lie between a slave and a scold. She pointed to the shaft, black in the moonlit surface of the sand.

"Curse thy father, Oh brother of an evil sister, what hadst thou to do with that? May thy portion be in the hell of the infidel for ever and ever, that wouldst let loose the ruin of the pit upon the faithful Moslems."

Masoud, evidently startled, was propitiatory. He employed the politest modes of address.

"Oh lady, Oh female pilgrim, what cause for fear? The dead are dead and the Recording Angel hath written their doom and the book is closed. Pass on in the peace and security of Allah!"

The men were all listening intently. She laughed aloud.

"Thou hast let loose a worse than the simoom, and thinkest to escape! May Allah make cold thy countenance and thy masters'. This man is doomed, and this, and this!" She flung out her fingers, pointing at Seton, at Conway, at several of the men, staring at her with blanched faces and mute terror.

"Oh bride, Oh daughter, speak good words! What talk is this for a modest woman?" stammered Masoud. He was evidently terrified and at his wit's end. She turned, and flashed a last retort over her shoulder—an unanswerable one.

"The disease of the grave, the leprosy of the tomb, be upon you all, for at your hands the very earth herself has shaken the accursed woman from her bosom. *Aywa. Aywa. Aywa.* Even so. Even so. Even so."

She turned and glided away over the sand and disappeared into the shadows of the rocks. Conway called for a translation, which Masoud gave trembling.

"An evil woman, a daughter of Shaitan, a companion of devils," he said. "What talk was this for the men to hear! And that though I spoke her fair—

for she was an old woman, and ugly as Jehannum. I take refuge with Allah from the stoned fiend. Go in, Effendi. The night dews are poison. Go in."

Conway, seething with fury at the probable effect of this incident upon the men, turned to Seton for sympathy, and halted.

"You do look a bit white about the gills, old man. D'you feel queer?"

"A little," Seton admitted. "A bit giddy. Swimming kind of feeling in the eyes. As if I'd had a debauch on shocking bad whisky."

Quinine was clearly indicated, Conway said. He would have a dose himself and dish it out all round. In his own mind he decided that Seton was badly peeved at the disappearance of the lady. He himself regretted her, but not like that. It was the priceless boom, the unrivalled advertisement he mourned. The scholarly interest was beyond him, and he supposed Seton had more of that than he had himself, for he had seemed to take it to heart in a surprising way. After all, they had the fresco, the throne, the jewels, and so forth. It might have been very much worse.

They went to their hut, and night brooded with starry eyes over the desert.

Next morning eight Arabs were down, and Seton unable to lift his head from the pillow, a very sick man indeed. It was a stunning and most unexpected knockout, and the whole weight of it fell on Conway. The men who were still on their legs loafed about with dark, sullen faces. Two had disappeared altogether. Masoud survived, and Conway tried to sound him. Had he ever seen this kind of thing before?

Certainly he had, and by the favour of Allah had escaped by prayers and prostrations and the use of an amulet——

But Conway's scant patience broke down at the amulet. He told Masoud flatly that he was not out for tales of the Jinnee. He wanted to know what was wrong with the men. Anything in the food?

"*Ya Allah!* May the twelve Imaums protect us! The food? No. It is the tomb sickness. Send for the French doctor to the camp at Zisht—but what can he do? In these tombs are hidden like bats diseases that men know not. And worse. And worse!"

The man was almost incoherent with fright. Conway dared not send him for the doctor lest he should desert altogether, and his experience was necessary. He chose two others and dispatched them with a chit, and then turned into the hut to have another look at Seton.

He was lying in a heavy stupor, his eyes open but glazed and fixed, his breathing quick and weak like a pneumonia patient's. But the singular thing

was the colour of his skin. He was a fair man, of the strong, grey-eyed type, a fine specimen of Anglo-Saxon, clean-run and muscular. And he lay before Conway, mouth and eyes sunk and an extraordinary bronzed look upon him —almost as deep a pigmentation as the Arabs outside. It so changed the character of the face, made such an amazing contrast with the light hair, that for a moment it struck a panic into Conway almost as bad as Masoud's. He stood, ransacking his scanty medical knowledge, but could recall no memory of disease which changed a man so horribly as this. Meeting Seton, he would never have known him.

He touched the pulse with ignorant fingers. No need for knowledge there to cry danger. It was racing madly, with now and then a break—a stop, as when a charging horse cranes at a fence.

"I wish to God the doctor would come. I can't stand much more of this!" said Conway.

There was no comfort outside. The men were lying under the canvas shade rigged up for them, in agonized, contorted postures, and one was groaning horribly. And when the doctor came four hours later, things were not much better, except for the shifting of responsibility. He was a badly puzzled man. He sprinkled about as many learned terms as he could remember, told Conway the quinine could do no harm, mixed what looked a totally inadequate fizzing draught for each of the patients from his medicine case, and went off in the afternoon, leaving Conway with a sick camp and the apparent certainty that Seton was done for, his only consolation being that the doctor knew nothing about it either, and so could have done little good by staying.

That night two of the Arabs died. The next day two more. Seton still clung feebly to life, his grip loosening hourly. Had Conway been an imaginative man, he would have shuddered in looking at the mouth of the shaft that gashed the sand like a wound.

"The sickness devil—he come up there!" Masoud said, pointing tragically. But Conway only laughed bitterly.

The time he could spare from Seton was devoted to an enraging correspondence with the authorities at Cairo. His temper, never of the best, was fretted to tatters daily and hourly, and there were times when he bitterly regretted they had ever heard of Alphonse, ever embarked on the business at all. There was certainly no time for sentiment, even if he were inclined that way.

He turned sullenly to work, and Seton moaned and muttered from the hut.

The shaft lay open and empty. Its work was done.

CHAPTER IV

SIX weeks later Miles Seton, white and drained of strength and almost of memory, was convalescing at Abuksa, and Conway was in Cairo up to his eyes in business, doing two men's work, and tasting all the pleasures and displeasures of being a celebrity in a small way. The strange story of their find had stirred Europe and Asia with a thrill of supernatural romance, and, had it not been for the ticklish condition of the snarling little Balkan States, nothing else would have been talked of for at least a week. That was the credit side of the account. On the debit, the authorities were driving him into daily furies with their claims and prohibitions. And there was no Seton to calm him with the assurance that it would all be the same a hundred years hence, and to shed the oil of a perfect serenity on the billows of impatience. Perhaps that would have maddened him the more—Conway was an impatient man—and he made the most of all his grievances, including the fact that Seton had crocked up and left him to face the music alone.

He had been in Cairo a fortnight, and more, and Seton, at Abuksa, was beginning to get about a little and to feel a spark of awakening interest in success, in the things that seemed to matter once, ages ago, in another life, as it seemed. There were curious changes, however. He had gone through experiences in that illness which no mortal man but himself would ever know. How her face had haunted him, the closed eyes that must dream so sweetly under the black lashes lying like midnight upon the pale cheek, the divine tranquillity, moon-like in the gloom. She possessed him. Sometimes, a living woman, she looked at him with eyes so lovely that all the beauty of life and death commingled in them to drive him wild with longing. He pursued her down avenues of hopeless quest, where she dipped and vanished like a star below the sea-rim whenever he seemed nearest to achievement. She was enchantment, fugitive and torturing, and fled before him with a backward look that forbade pursuit—and ensured it. Madness, indeed, to die for a beauty entombed for ages, but then, what magic had preserved it to madden unborn ages? Surely Death himself must have been her lover, to use her so tenderly that decay's effacing finger had never brushed the marvel in his sheltering arms.

But always the dreams ended in horror. Within his very arms she would crumble, a torrid wind sweeping away a handful of grey ash, or, worse still, she would shrink cowering from him, the dreadful eyes staring at him from a

death's head of bleached bone. And then he awoke, shuddering from head to foot, the clammy sweat standing on his forehead, exhausted, done for.

So it went on through weeks of misery, and at last he drifted back to life, cured, as he hoped, with the deep of the mysterious disease washed out of him finally. She could never be a matter of mere antiquarian interest as she was to Conway, but he believed that his heart had returned from its strange quest and would be at peace. An episode, but to be hidden from all the world. That was how he considered it now, with a conjecture that the oncoming of illness had laid him open to such a madness. The ring only was left. Conway's eye had fallen upon it and he had said, "I never saw that before. Where did you pick it up?"

"Ask me another," he answered with an attempted laugh. That was his secret, and he did not propose to share it. That, and a memory.

The dying out of this preoccupation left him free to observe the other guests at the little hotel with a languid curiosity. It was filling up for October, though the rooms were still empty enough. Two women caught his wandering eyes first and intrigued him by a doubt about their relationship. They could scarcely be mother and daughter, and, if not, were difficult to place, one was so much the elder.

He heard the younger calling one day outside his window:

"Sara, Sara, do hurry up. Have you gone to sleep again?" and liked the voice, gay and sweet, with a kind of suppressed laughter. The answer came from the window above:

"Don't wait, Venetia—do you hear? Go on with the Greys. I can't come yet."

Cousins probably then. He was too weak to trouble about them at the time, but later had the curiosity to go to the office and ask, for he saw them oftener now, coming and going, and once or twice he fancied the elder looked at him pityingly after Conway had gone off and left him alone. He could see words waiting on her lips if he made the slightest sign of encouragement. "The Misses Grant, London. I think two sisters," the clerk explained. "Very nice lady. I think, rich."

With that information Seton went back to his long chair in the cool colonnade and dismissed them from his mind. But they returned. There was so little else to look at, for one thing. Sometimes he heard them talking to each other in a language entirely unknown to him; more than once he heard the same voice reading aloud behind the pillar that hid them. He listened. It was a romance of India, and she read it with a sense of beauty and the value

of words which gave it the charm of a soft, grave music. His thought was, "I could listen to that for ever. It rests me."

He heard quite plainly when no one else happened to be talking or passing. This story was not modern, not the facile amours of the hills and the racket of life in garrisons, but an old story, of veiled women, of conquerors sweeping down the Afghan passes, of empire, of wild and stirring romance, with the exquisiteness of beautiful words, the perfect phrase, the perfume of the hidden spiritual mysteries underlying the golden and coloured veil of visible life in India. There must be something more than common in the woman who cared to read that book and linger over it.

"That does me good," he thought. "It makes life worth while. A man wants to mount and ride when he hears that kind of thing."

This went on for two or three days more, and now he began to wish he had the courage to speak to the elder one. She looked about forty-six—a clear, open face, with brown eyes set widely apart, a healthy colour in the cheeks, and dark hair touched with grey. The younger he had scarcely visualized as yet under the brim of her sun hat—he thought of her as a delicious voice, no more.

Next day he was walking up and down the colonnaded veranda, when the elder came in with a book in her hand. Suddenly she stopped beside him, her colour rising like a girl's.

"We've just finished this book, and I wondered whether it would amuse you. We have been so sorry for you—all alone. And evidently not strong. Do forgive me if I intrude. I have been rather ashamed of saying and doing nothing for so long."

Seton knew in an instant how he had needed the sympathy of a woman's voice. It soothed him inexpressibly, seconded by the kind, uplifted eyes.

"If you knew how I wanted you to speak to me I shouldn't have to tell you how grateful I am," he said eagerly. "I've been ill, and it's been a long pull up."

"Yes—and without your wife!" she said kindly. "They told me at the office she was to join you later."

"My wife? I don't possess such a blessing! Why this wild romance?" Seton said laughing, and the circumstantial tale, patched together from heaven knows what misunderstandings, made them friends at once.

"Perhaps I deserved this show-up for having had the curiosity to go and ask who you were," she confessed. "A pretty cool proceeding, wasn't it? And when they told me you were the celebrated finder of the dead queen—"

He winced a little at that, and deflected the talk.

"Well, as I went myself to ask about you— And did that villain set me as much adrift as he did you? He said you were two ladies from London, sisters, and that your name was Grant."

"No, that's quite right, except that we're half sisters. My sister is young enough to be my daughter. I know we're a perplexing pair."

She sat down in a wicker chair beside him and took out her knitting. The soft evening breeze blew gently down the colonnade and the divine boat of Ra, the Sun, was nearing its western haven. The shadows in the sands were of a floating ocean blue, like deep water, and against the sky a line of palms stood out scribbled in black on gold. He felt better than he had felt yet, and the prospect of a talk was delightful.

"Surely, it was a great pity your friend had to leave you alone. His name is Conway, isn't it? We have talked of your wonderful finds almost night and day for the last month."

She was so eager, so keenly desirous to hear, that Seton launched out a bit, his own interest lighting up as he saw hers. After a while she laid down the knitting, her hands clasped on her knee as she listened entranced.

"Then it was all true? You really did find the queen like that? Wonderful! If only my sister were here! I shouldn't have this treat all to myself. May I call her. Oh, here she comes!"

Light feet were running up the steps and a light figure stood against the sky for a minute. A waking moon showing like a young goddess floating in rosy clouds above the fringe of palms, made the coming night lovely, and the silence of the desert drowned all in tranquillity. So he saw her for the first time.

She came up to him with the same well-bred frankness as the other. An introduction was scarcely needed. She sat down at once and slid into the talk.

There are some people, Seton reflected, in whose presence everything pleasant and easy seems to flower. They say exactly the right thing to prompt you. You talk better with them than with anyone else, in the happy certainty that they can understand and sympathize. It never struck him that a girl of two- or three-and-twenty might prefer a lighter subject for talk than Egyptian antiquities. Her eyes were so sparkling as he described the great fresco that he never doubted she was as keen as he was himself. No attention could be more flattering. It led him to the entrance to the inner chamber, and there for a minute he paused. Could he speak openly of that strange

experience? Was it possible? Her eyes encouraged him. He went on. It grew easier when he was once launched.

"One pities her like a living human being," cried Sara Grant. "There's something terrible to me in thinking of a young girl sitting there in the dead dark all those ages. I can't help feeling she must have known it and been thankful when you let the light in at last."

"But it ended her," Seton said with darkling eyes. "She might have been there, eternally beautiful, but for that. I felt next day as if we had killed her."

"I think of her as a prisoner chained to her dead body. You set her free," Venetia Grant said in the low voice that redeemed her every word from commonplace. But Seton started. It recalled other words to his mind. Buisson's, quoted by Alphonse:

"I counsel you not to let Queen Nefert loose upon a world which has troubles enough already."

That also was freedom, and the first harvest from the furrow of the open grave had not been joy. Eight Arabs dead, and he himself escaped by such a miracle of constitution that the doctors told him he bid fair for a hundred years unless he came across another Egyptian tomb. His face was troubled and she read it swiftly.

"Have you any superstition about opening these tombs, Mr. Seton? I read a book of Buisson's after we came here, where he hints of something of the sort. Only a hint."

"Not the least," he assured her. Could it be called a superstition when all one's reason denied it—when it was only a dark, shapeless cloud hovering in the back of one's being—a relic, no doubt, of primitive savage beliefs long relegated to the scrap heap? "There have been one or two coincidences," he added, "and of course they're remembered and the rest forgotten, and so the story grows. But we've talked of nothing but my adventures! Mayn't I know a little about you and where you're going?"

They were here to see a little of Egypt on their way to India. They liked travelling, were keenly interested in Oriental life, had been in China, Burma, Java—everywhere.

"India, we know best of all, and love it best," Sara Grant concluded. Venetia took up the tale.

"We're going to pay a most interesting visit there. We are going to the native state of Mianpur to visit the old Begam—the queen. We have known her all my life and a great deal of my sister's, for our uncle, Lord Cheriton, was English Commissioner there, and my sister kept house for him. The

Begam is the mother of Mahmud Mirza, the Amir of Mianpur, and we used to be with her constantly. The most wonderful old woman. You can imagine how interesting it was to have the run of the zenana in that way. We know the younger Begam, his wife, very well indeed too. The loveliest girl—like a princess in the 'Arabian Nights'."

"Now, that's fascinating," said Seton. "You should write a book about it. Is he one of the powerful princes? Surely the title Amir is very unusual in India?"

"Yes, and it has a history. His ancestor came down over the passes with the first Mogul emperor of India and he was granted the State of Mianpur and the title of Amir. He was descended from one of their uncles and had the rank of Mirza, which, after the name, always means royal blood. They have married Mogul and Persian princesses from time to time."

"Of course, I have heard of them. Then he is really a very big man among the princes?"

"About the grandest in India, and utterly loyal to the British Raj. His grandfather did splendid service in the Mutiny in sheltering English women and children, and since then—and before—Mianpur has been the right hand of the Government in India. They are the kindest people, and really fond of my sister and me. Mahmud Mirza thought great things of my uncle."

"Do you stay in the palace?"

"Oh no. The differences of custom would make that rather a *gêne* for us all. There is the most delightful royal guest house overlooking the lake. They turn that over to us. You should just see the beauty of the place! We never are so happy as there."

"Any one who could adequately describe the Begam in a book should make his fortune," Sara put in. "A perfect old character, and yet a great lady in her way—a very great lady. Mianpur is a most beautiful city and quite a bit of ancient India. Hardly any tourists get in and Mahmud Mirza doesn't welcome them. We have been three times there since my uncle died."

"I envy you!" said Seton emphatically. "If only I could see India from the inside like that, I'd go to-morrow."

When they parted later, they were strangers no longer. They knew some of the same people in Sussex, they had done the same things, shared the same tradition, and a great content filled his mind as he looked out over the mysterious sands, quiet as a sea beneath the moon. The ease and friendliness of that intercourse—how he liked it! Women so well-bred that they were certain of themselves and of the deference of every man they spoke to.

And now he began to remember and consider Venetia's face. Her personality had been too engrossing for him to study it in her presence.

Her figure—that was charming, light as a flower swaying in the wind, or the delicate sweeping of grass when a light-foot breeze runs over it. Her eyes—yes, they were dark blue, hyacinth blue, with a haze of gold-touched lashes about them matching her darkly auburn hair, pressed close to the head in waved abundance, beautiful hair, and growing beautifully, springing in strong curves from the low brow and temples, massive as the bronze ivy-leaves of a Greek nymph. Was she a beautiful woman, he asked himself—one that all male hearts must sway to from their orbits? Not a bit of it! Until she smiled—and then—no, not beautiful, but lovable, infinitely kind, gracious, sweet.

"And that suits me a thousand times better," he thought, and pulled up short. "Me?" What had he to do with her? Ridiculous.

All the same, he watched her from his little lonely table at dinner. They were talking what he was now sure must be Hindustani, and there seemed to be a perfect companionship between them, in spite of the difference in age. They talked and laughed in a never-ceasing ripple of interchange, and he felt like a man standing outside a firelit window that is none of his—lonely and envious. He was the only one left of his family, had never known that kind, familiar intercourse.

So it went on for some days. They never passed him by now, and the acquaintance grew steadily. Sara Grant talked to him often when Venetia was away with the Greys, sketching and what not. He learnt what he could about her. Her mother had been a beautiful Highland girl from Lewis, little older than Sara, a McLeod of Skaebost, brilliant, frail, gifted with the second sight, a mystic, a poet.

"She knew she would die at my sister's birth. She told me so and it killed my father. You would understand that if you had known her," Sara said gravely. "That is why my sister is so different from me. I could think sometimes that it's her mother sitting and looking at me."

Yes, they were different indeed. But he liked them both, each in her different way. He counted on their sympathy. He began to be sure they liked him, for, though it had begun with pity, it was pity no longer: it was the happy dawn of friendship. There were days when he looked no longer at his ring, and cared nothing for the unread mystery of the inscription.

One night he stood in the colonnade, looking up to the stars that hung so low and golden over the ancient land. He was waiting. Of course he would not intrude on their kindness, but whenever a step came along, his eye shot

sidelong, hoping it was one or the other, but most of all Venetia. At last! It was Sara Grant. They sat in the mingled starlight and electric light under a palm which made a nook of its own, and talked of India.

"My sister is so excited about getting back that she can scarcely wait. You can't think what an interesting place it is. Mahmud Mirza is a great collector of old Indian art, and not only of that, but of Persian and Egyptian as well. He has really a fine museum in the palace. If any of your discoveries were ever to be sold, he would surely be a buyer. He's enormously rich."

"I'll remember that when the English and Egyptian Governments have done fighting over them," he said, laughing. "But do you think that would be any sort of introduction if I asked leave to go to Mianpur later on? Should I have a chance of getting in and seeing anything? I hate the ordinary tourist's line."

"Certainly, he will have heard of you. Say who you are when you want to get in."

"I wish I were going now. I want to get out of Egypt. I want to smell the sea," he said wistfully. Then suddenly, in response to those kind eyes, "Why shouldn't I do it? Would it bore you if I went in the same boat? Be frank. But honestly, I don't think you could be anything else if you tried."

She laughed.

"I shan't try, and I have nothing to hide. We should be as pleased as possible if you were on board the *Akbar*. And there's another inducement for you. That wonderful Mr. Revel is going too."

"Never heard of him. Do tell me."

"Why, he's that mysterious, fascinating European personality behind so many things. Hand in glove with various governments, rich as rich, and nobody really knows who he is. Young, handsome, knows everything—one of those wonderful quick minds, bright as an electric flash, talks well—altogether a most unusual person. We met him in Cairo and he was very nice to us. He's going out on a visit to Mahmud Mirza. That came out when we spoke of the Begam."

"But where does he come from?" asked the cautious Englishman.

"I don't know. A sort of international figure. His name may mean nothing. He simply said that, except for an English education, his life had been spent more or less in the eastern Mediterranean countries. He had been in India before and had an Indian servant who seemed devoted to him. I think he knew Mr. Conway, for he spoke of asking him some questions."

"Probably a Levantine. Don't like 'em!"

She laughed again.

"Let me reassure you. Very rich. That's a good letter of introduction."

"Yes—if other things fit in. Not, if not. So many of these Levantines are most dangerous bounders. Why is he going to Mianpur?"

"Because he is a friend of Mahmud Mirza's. I believe they knew each other first as collectors of Egyptian antiquities. He has stayed at the palace more than once."

Venetia coming up, slipped into the talk without a break. She welcomed the suggestion of his seeing India. Of course he should! It delighted Seton to look at her, the frank eyes, the humorous smile that hovered about her mouth when she was pleased or amused, but, more than all, the sunshiny air that came and went with her.

"Now you're talking of Mr. Revel. The most interesting person I ever met."

"Revel—that might be English," Seton said reflectively.

"Well, his Christian name is Theon. No mistaking that. He said his mother was Greek. I think if you do come in the *Akbar* you'll like him. I never heard anyone make antiquities live as he does. He told us the story—indeed, he was in Rome at the time—of the discovery of a very ancient tomb—have you heard of it?—when they found a beautiful girl's body that fell into dust almost as soon as they looked at it. He saw it."

"It's extraordinary we should know two people who have seen that amazing sight. It never crossed my mind before," said Sara. "It almost frightens me to think of seeing a woman who lived when the world was young. I should like to hear you both discussing and comparing."

"Yes—those long, lovely nights on the Indian Ocean, with a great moon and dipping stars—it will be delightful to sit and listen to you two learned people. Not that Mr. Revel looks learned. He looks like—" She hesitated.

"Like what?"

"I won't say like a Greek god, for that's the most-worked-to-death, disgusting old chestnut that ever! What is it, Sara? You describe him."

"I tried before you came, and failed. Well, he's straight, dark, and tall, but lots of men are that. He has a quiet, passive sort of manner, sometimes as if he were half asleep, and yet a kind of radiance behind it. You feel as if there were something bright and wonderful that might break out and startle you. Some kind of hidden power."

Seton laughed.

“I know. An engine working at half pressure, and then you turn a steam cock and, gee whiz! the revolutions fairly dazzle you.”

“That’s my theory, on a lower plane,” Sara Grant said, laughing too. “Now, Venetia, come along. It’s getting late, and there are heaps of things to be done.”

But Venetia lingered a little.

“I know what he’s like,” she said. “That bronze Death in the Uffizi. A dark, mysterious face, shut into itself, secret. He doesn’t want one to think that. He laughs and talks—but—one gets no nearer.”

“I know what you mean—but there’s something which concerns me much more. Will you mind my coming to India in the *Akbar*?”

“Mind?” she said cordially. “Why, no. I’m glad you’re coming.”

CHAPTER V

AN unexpected thing happened four days later. They were all dining together in the long, cool coffee room, the jalousies open to the evening air, when a man came lightly in and looked about him, the waiters hurrying to find a table. Glancing easily round, his eye fell on the Grants dining with Seton, and instantly he crossed the room.

"Miss Grant? What a pleasure! I little thought I should find you here at this sort of between-season time. Miss Venetia! How are you both? May I sit here?"

A chair was brought, and they introduced him to Seton. "Mr. Revel."

It was all as cordial as possible. While the others were knitting up the broken threads, Seton had time to look at the stranger and draw his own conclusions.

Handsome? yes. Haughty? yes. His bow had been distant, though of a type Seton could approve; his speech was faultlessly refined, though with a distinct and not unpleasant foreign accent which Seton could not place. He might be twenty-eight, the hard, unsympathetic brilliance of youth softening a little with knowledge and experience. His clothes hinted at a skilled London tailor; he wore only one ring, a carbuncle set in gold. Sara Grant was right. The man was unusual, something to be deciphered—a personality, intricate and baffling. You must look again, must listen. You caught yourself wondering what he would say, how he would look next. A kind of suspense came with him, not unpleasant, stimulating. He knew more, could be more, than he seemed. That was the feeling. And with it the wish to follow him up, as it were, and await developments. Presently he turned to Seton.

"It's strange you should be the first person I'm introduced to, for I came up to see you before sailing for India. I met Mr. Conway in Cairo the other day, and, though he could scarcely stop for a minute, in fact snubbed me mercilessly, what he said decided me to try and catch you before you moved on. The fact is, I have been tremendously interested in your work, and I have some information which may or may not be useful."

"Really?"

Seton's eyes leaped to life at once. This promised better than the bombardment of ignorant curiosity which drove Conway half mad in Cairo. Revel looked like a man who might know things worth knowing. As Sara Grant rose, they joined up and followed the women to the veranda.

"Yes. May we smoke, Miss Grant?"

Revel offered a cigarette case contrived out of a very ancient flat box of greenish gold. The design was intricate. It had a beautiful scarab of lapis-lazuli set in the side. Seton, trained by three years in Egypt, thought and said that the scarab looked very rare. Revel courteously held the case out for examination, and as he did so, Seton's eye fell again upon the engraved carbuncle on the slender olive hand. It had a familiar air that startled him. Certainly not shaped like his own—and yet——

With his eyes on the ring he asked as easily as he could, "Can you make out the inscription?"

" 'Thou endest the night.' It is part of a most ancient charm, quoted in the Book of the Dead. That scarab was given to a Greek ancestor of mine who visited Egypt with Herodotus. A family tradition."

"How long ago?" Venetia asked, touching the ring with curiosity.

"Perhaps you would scarcely believe me if I told you. The jewel in my ring, which is older still, was found later, and I had it set in the ring for a reason."

"May we know?" she asked with interest.

They settled down under the pot palms which shaded the veranda and the sisters faced them. Venetia was gazing at Revel with an eagerness which seemed to breathe her lips apart and hold back a heart-beat that she might hear—the most unconscious flattery in the world, entirely self-forgetting. Her eyes were soft as the midnight sky, darkly azure in their long lashes.

But Revel politely ignored her question. He lit his cigarette, and his head, with its fine-cut dark features lay back against his chair, his thoughts on something which certainly was not Venetia, and his answer was not to her but to Seton.

"My reason turns partly on the information which I think may interest you. Will you hear it now?"

"I'm greatly indebted to you. The sooner the better."

The moon was showering pale glory over the sand, now the colour of old ivory in her mysterious light. The silhouette of black palms was thrown up against her and she peered between them with cold curiosity, a goddess not wholly detached from the world she illumined, she appeared to lurk and listen. There was a great silence.

Revel reflected a moment, and began.

“Some years ago I was travelling in Egypt on my way to Khartoum, with a man named Ibn ul Farid, a Persian, descended from one of the famous Magians who have given their name to ‘magic’—a man of the strangest occult powers. I won’t lay myself open to ridicule by saying I believe in the word ‘magic’ as it is commonly used, but I have certainly seen Ibn ul Farid do things which must be grouped under that name for want of a better. We were passing through the Valley of Khar, then undisturbed by human hands, and had camped there on just such a night as this—a moon nearly full, not friendly, not a moon of lovers, but cold, dangerous, sinister, as we see her now.”

Seton looked up at the moon. She seemed to stare at them with a pinched and pallid inquiry through the palms. Venetia shuddered imperceptibly. Sara knitted on unperturbed.

“We had eaten our evening meal,” Revel went on, “and sat at the tent door talking, as it might be now. I remember he was repeating some verses to me from the Secret Rose Garden (I know some Persian), and suddenly he stopped in the middle of a sentence. We two might have been alone in the desert valley.

“He caught my hand and held it firmly, and instantly I saw, dimly at first, as one sees the negative of a photograph held against the light, and steadily clearing up with definite form and outlines. A man and woman were standing under the crag which rises beside the shaft you opened. But not people of to-day—no, no. The man was in the tightly swathed garment we know in old Egyptian figures, the woman in a robe which clung to her like flowing water. He wore a mitre-shaped headdress with a gold snake about it darting an angry head forward. She had a diadem of three gold snakes intertwined, the three heads striking as if at prey. By no means an Egyptian crown.”

Seton started slightly, but said nothing. Revel’s quick eyes caught the motion.

“Am I too diffuse?”

“Pray go on.”

The women were breathless. Sara Grant’s eternal knitting had dropped to the ground.

“They stood, as it seemed, in silence, but with clasped hands; then, loosening hers, he drew from his breast a roll which looked like papyrus and offered it. Covering her face with one hand as if in grief, she took it, and even as she did so, a dagger flashed out in his right hand and he drove it into

her heart. One instant she wavered, and then fell at his feet, the dry sand scattering as she fell. I started forward to help, to defend, and so wrenched myself from Ibn ul Farid. All was gone. There was nothing. The sickly moonlight fell on an empty world—sand and rocks which looked deserted since the beginning of time."

"You saw that?" Seton's tone was coolly critical and incredulous.

"And more," Revel answered. "For the Persian caught me back savagely —'There is danger—danger!' he cried. 'Around these things the air is charged with deadly vibrations. Keep back! Watch what happens!' I yielded, for his grip was like iron, and once more I saw. No longer the crags. A chamber so great that the end vanished in darkness. Nubians, black as ebony, holding torches as if at a great solemnity. Behind them in the flickering light men like princes, each with a band of gold about his head, and on a throne a dead woman holding her silent court. You have seen that sight, Mr. Seton. I need not describe it—but mark what follows."

His own face looked ashen-pale in the strange moonlight. His voice sank to something like a whisper.

"I saw the man take from his breast a roll of papyrus. I saw the chief priest ascend the steps of the throne and open what I must call a panel in the ivory and gold of the back, beneath a great carved sun disk. In this he deposited the roll, and, even as he did it, all the Nubians flung down their torches and darkness rushed upon them like a sea, and I heard a great voice that wailed and thundered in the echoes of the chamber:

" 'Nefert the Queen shall bear her doom and carry her secret until times and a time.'

"And Ibn ul Farid flung my hand from him, and I saw only the moonlight and the sand and crags. And again there was a great silence."

There was one also in the veranda. Seton stared at the ground, conscious of distaste and unbelief, yet impressed in spite of himself by the solemnity of the man's tone, though he condemned it inwardly as theatrical. The others waited for him to speak. After a minute Revel reached out for another cigarette, lighted it, and smoked composedly. That relaxed the tension, though the women looked anxiously at Seton. He lifted his head.

"You're certain you saw this? And what was the Persian's explanation?"

"Before I give you that, I must tell you that at dawn I went over and over the place where I had seen the two standing. You will remember this was more than two years before you made your shaft and that nothing was even guessed of the treasures beneath. Lying in the sand I found this scarab now

set in my case. On the lower side is incised a name—the name of Zezar, but not the Zezar of any Dynasty we know—a king of some utterly unknown time, of whom all we can say is that he was a king in Egypt. You will see that on the upper side is cut an emblem no one has yet deciphered—it looks like a fish and a boat!"

Seton now examined the box with the closest attention, then looked up sharply.

"And you carry a treasure like that about with you, loose—a thing you might forget or drop! Surely that's a little—well, rash, isn't it?"

"I have a reason for keeping it upon me and in company with the jewel in my ring. But if we speak of treasures, may I look at your ring? Indeed, that's a very fine one, if I am a judge at all."

He leaned over eagerly, and Seton, feeling the blood rise in his face, "fool-fashion," as he said to himself, had no choice but to stretch out his hand to the stranger. He would not take the ring off. He drew the line there. Revel seized his hand and examined the ring closely, comparing it with his own.

"That's an extraordinary thing!" he said. "Look! Do you see it's the same stone, the same inscription as mine? 'Thou endest the night.' Well, that is truly amazing. But yours is a carbuncle, too, and far older than mine. The Egyptians did not reverence the scarab in pre-historic time. The scarab god, Khepera, came much later. Haven't you deciphered the inscription? But hold hard—this inscription underneath: '*Sutem Hemt Urt*.' It means, 'Royal Wife, Great Lady.' I haven't got that on mine."

He stopped, looking keenly at Seton.

"Where did you get it? Mine has been in my family for more years than I dare say."

"I got it some time ago." That was all the answer he vouchsafed.

"Do pardon me—but can't you throw any light? Imagine the interest to me!"

Imagine the interest to Seton! But nothing would wring an admission from him.

"It was found amongst a raffle of Egyptian odds and ends. I never knew its history."

Revel saw he could go no further. He drew back politely.

"Well, if you ever are interested, I'll tell you the history of mine. It's a most interesting thing, and most singular that part of the inscription should

be the same as mine. I've never seen it anywhere else, and I had inquiries made, I can assure you. But to return to the Persian. I demanded an explanation next day, for that night he would say nothing. He told me that he was 'sensitive' to the influences of the past, and that just as a water-diviner feels the neighbourhood of water, so he felt instinctively when what he called the dead vibrations are set trembling. 'Do you mean you feel and see the spirits of the dead?' I asked. He answered, 'The Egyptians believe that the Ka, or double, inhabited the tomb. That is what I see, and what you saw when I grasped your hand. Below those crags there are certainly the bodies of the dead and what we have seen are their doubles, the Dwellers in the Tomb.' I asked, 'Did you know we should see this?' He answered, 'How should I—I, a Persian from Azerbajan? All I now say is: We have seen. Let us leave the place swiftly.' I made a small sketch map of the crags and fixed the position and we moved on with the utmost haste. Our dragoman (who had seen nothing, remember!) said, 'This place not good—men sick if staying. We go on.' And we did."

Venetia leaned forward, pale also in the weird moonlight.

"Do you believe that anything really was hidden in the throne?"

"Certainly. But whether it is there now is another story. I don't know what precautions Mr. Seton has taken. It's worth trying. That is why I give him the information. Ladies, it grows very late, and I make an early start to-morrow. Will you permit me to say good night?"

They all rose and he kissed the sisters' hands, foreign fashion, then bowed to Seton. It seemed as though there were an unaccountable coolness between them—on Seton's side at least. He hated that ring business! He pulled himself together hurriedly, catching Venetia's astonished eyes.

"Thank you very much for a most interesting talk. I shall be meeting my colleague in Cairo and we'll examine the throne together. It is in the Vaults of the Osirian Museum now. From one or two things you've let drop, I see you have knowledge of these matters, and I shall very much hope for more talk with you."

"A great pleasure! But I sail for India in the *Akbar*, so my time is short."

"Oh, but Mr. Seton talks of coming too," cried Sara Grant. "And in that case there are endless opportunities. He even talks of Kashmir—our own goal. It's not settled yet, though."

Suddenly Seton knew he was going. There was no more hesitation. The reason was not yet clear to him.

"Yes, I'm going by the *Akbar*," he repeated. "I shan't be wanted in Cairo for some months and my friends will see to our job meanwhile. Must have a change."

The usual pleasant, courteous things were said, and presently he was alone. He lit a cigar and sat down to think.

Was it all tomfoolery? Was it a lie, a trick? What motive could the man have? What lay behind the inscrutable courtesy of the smile? Or was it possibly true that strange and sinister influences haunt these sealed repositories of the dead and that some minds, more sensitive than others, are taken by storm, flung open to their assaults? But if so . . . He shuddered a little, and the night grew colder. The wearied moon was sinking now behind the western palms with a decaying light, a dull phosphorescence. The air seemed brooding, unwholesome.

And the ring, what of that? He stared heavily at it. He savagely resented the notion that any man but himself should own one even remotely like it. 'Thou endest the night.' Strange! He had ended her night, the almost eternal darkness. How it fitted in! What a marvellous coincidence that he should have found that, dropped as it were from her hand, spoken as it were by her dead mouth. His fancy played about this for a while, half fearfully, with a groping dread.

He sat late and long, then rose and went slowly in.

CHAPTER VI

BEFORE he came down next morning there was a rap at his door and when he opened it a slim, dark-eyed young man in a white turban and coat stood there, holding out a large envelope.

"From my Sahib to the Sahib," he said in very halting English, and bowing, disappeared. Something about the man struck Seton. He stood looking after him a minute and then tore the letter open.

A drawing, hastily but clearly done, of the throne, the lions' heads, the sun disk on the back of which he remembered so well. A line from the margin indicated the disk and beneath this was scribbled the word *cache*. With this was a note:

> DEAR MR. SETON:
>
> I felt it might simplify matters if I sent you a sketch. I hope it may prove useful. I shall look forward to meeting you on board. Faithfully yours,
>
> T. REVEL.

He held the paper in his hand, bewildered. The throne was a secret to the public for the present. Yet here—could he be sure no one had got through the fence? Impossible to say, especially with a rich man and in a country like Egypt.

His thoughts flew back to the story of last night. He dressed hurriedly, eager to catch Revel before he started, to ask a hundred questions he had not thought of until now. When he got downstairs he went straight to the office. Too late. Mr. Revel had gone a quarter of an hour before. He was riding. His servant had taken the light baggage. They did not know where.

Seton thought a while and called Masoud.

"What was Mr. Revel's servant? An Indian? Find out for me."

In a few minutes Masoud returned.

"Indian, they believe, but cannot know for certain, *Effendi*. They think they heard the name of Ibn ul Farid, but this also is not known."

That evening was the last but one before the Grants' return to Cairo and he was afraid they might have no time to spare after dinner, though he had not seen them all day. But Venetia was pacing slowly up and down the empty veranda, and alone, the other guests playing bridge or talking in the

lounge inside. Her eyes were an invitation and he joined her at once and fell into step.

"My sister may be down later. I've finished my own work," she said. "There are things no one can ever pack for one, and I fled from her struggles."

The sense of soothing and rest that came with her presence filled the air about him. It was always the same. Whether she spoke or was silent, a mute harmony moved her feet. It was delicious to be with her, to watch the soft uplift of her long lashes when she looked at him with the candour that showed the untroubled soul behind. Where the modern girl is dry, sharp, over-eager, Venetia was dewy, lingering, infinitely gentle. She dwelt in a citadel of calm. Oh, that she could open its doors to him! His strange sickness had left him nerve-wearied, on edge, and sorely needing rest, and he dared to picture her touch on his hot temples, like cool water gliding into the hollows and closing his eyelids in a sleep of peace. Was it the thought of her which had made the voyage to India inevitable? A faint perfume from the beautiful hair that crowned her like a goddess was breathed against his nostrils as she walked beside him—he could not take his eyes from the deep bronzed waves that sprang so strongly from her white forehead and were rolled and tamed to bind her head. What it would be to see it flowing about her, released from constraint—to bury one's hands in the warm silken masses, to see her eyes like hidden pools of light in the meshes, to. . . . He scarcely heard what she was saying; what she was, at the moment eclipsed even her words. Now he awoke with a start, because she spoke of Revel.

"Don't you think Mr. Revel has something very unusual about him? I often try to define it, but I never can. It's a beautiful face—but it isn't only that. What is it?"

His dream fled. He was broad awake now.

She looked up at him expectantly.

"He's a very good-looking fellow, certainly," he agreed, a little drily. "He reminds me of something or some one I've seen, but I can't place him."

"I can. He's exactly like that wonderful bust of the young Antinoüs in Paris. You must know the one I mean. Those very long agate eyes, the sensitive nostrils, the beautifully cut lips—a little full——"

"You seem to have studied him," Seton interrupted, and was instantly ashamed of himself before that clear look. He went on in a different tone. "Yes, you're right. It is the Antinoüs. The same firm marble chin with a cleft in it, and the heavy, carved eyelids and full throat. They say Antinoüs was a

Syrian. Something dangerous about him. I felt as if those eyelids might suddenly flash open and reveal—what?"

"You felt that?" she said, interested. "So did I. The languid beauty of that bust is just a mask. Do you feel that about Mr. Revel?"

Seton considered a moment.

"If you mean that he's inscrutable—yes. Dangerous. . . . I don't know yet. I can tell you more when we touch Bombay. It may only be the different race that shuts one off. Very difficult to get over that. One must always allow for it. It's more than the Greek mother, I think."

He was determined to be generous, just because he was certainly piqued by the interest she showed so plainly. She went on, as if thinking aloud.

"He dulls the people about him, if you know what I mean. Makes them less alive. His own vitality is so vivid that other people seem torpid. His mind goes in a kind of grasshopper leap, and he's there before you know he has started. But it's more than that—I feel as if he were—how shall I say it?—how one struggles with words!—a part of nature, beautiful, unscrupulous, radiant; as if what lay behind it all might be something dreadful, if one could only know. Did you feel anything of that?"

"Nothing—but then you know him—I don't. I am not sure I believe his story, and don't see his reason for telling it. It *may* be antiquarian interest, but it didn't convince me, somehow."

She went on as if she had not heard.

"That is how I could picture a faun. Seeing nothing as we see it. A heart as cold as marble, only full of wants to be satisfied at any cost. A beautiful animal with the brain of a man. Nero must have been like that."

"You certainly are not flattering to Revel!" Seton laughed, but was secretly pleased.

"Oh, it may be utter nonsense. Sara likes him immensely. But I feel—as if he belonged to some different race altogether and could never understand or let us understand him."

"No doubt he does. He probably represents a perfect pool of races. They're often very good to look at, these mongrels, but you can never trust them."

He knew he was unjust to the man just because he was afraid his unusual good looks might catch her eye. One might not like Revel, but it was possible to imagine a woman liking him so warmly that anything else in heaven or earth might matter nothing. Even her shrinking from him might be

the beginning of an interest which would go far. She had clearly studied him, thought of him. She coloured a little now, as if rebuked, and said carelessly, "What did you think of his information about the throne?"

"Not much. But it never does to neglect any clue. A bit of thread may pull on a rope that opens a dam. I shall see to it in Cairo."

They walked slowly up and down in a measured rhythm, each thinking his own thoughts. His were confused, restless; hers calm as the night.

After a long while——

"What are you thinking?" he asked suddenly.

She answered frankly, "Thinking how glad I shall be to be in India again. I found my peace there. In Europe there is such a war of creeds and thoughts, passion, anger, groping. In India, the peace of the old, old teaching of the wise men. My uncle was a believer in it. Sara never cared for it, but he taught me— The greatest gift of all my life."

"What is it? I know nothing. Tell me."

"How can I? But it transfigured all life into harmony for me. Where others see injustice, I see justice, in everything the working out of Law. Beautiful, wonderful!"

"This world beautiful?" he said with astonishment. "No, no! I think of the war, of Russia, of all the horrors about us and yet to come. You can't call that beautiful. You live in a heaven of your own thoughts and forget the rest. Well, I don't blame you. It's the only way. It's well we none of us know the future. How should we have courage to face it?"

"Because we make our own future by our own character. Character is destiny, and we are what we choose to be. I'm certainly not afraid of the working out of what I have done in past lives and in this, because even if it hurts, it will be to strengthen—growing pains, you know, and——"

"Do you mean to tell me you believe in reincarnation?" he interrupted in astonishment. "A heathen belief like that—where a man may be a dog or an ape in the next life—a series of transformations which seem like the mad dreams of an opium-eater? Surely your uncle—I've heard what a brilliant man he was—never could have taken up with such an extraordinary creed?"

"I think it was because he *was* a brilliant man," she said, laughing. "And as to what you say about reincarnation, that's the western way of putting it, not ours. I wish you could have known my uncle's friend, Jadrup Gosein. I never saw—I suppose I never shall see—a human being so full of joy, shining, like an ocean calm lying still beneath the sunshine. If I had known

nothing, heard nothing more, I should have wanted to be what that man was."

"And what was he? A Buddhist?"

"He was what Buddhism sprang from—a teacher of the ancient Vedic books, and he thought the Buddha a mighty teacher. So you see, I have drunk at the fountains of wisdom."

She stopped suddenly, as if words faltered under the weight of bliss, and looked up at him. Happiness had flowed in and filled her, it rippled sparkling in her eyes.

"But this is most extraordinary!" he said, perplexed. "You are a mere girl—I suppose you may be twenty-two—how can you know things like this and care about them? This is for scholars, not for you."

"Oh, I'm much older than I look. I was twenty-eight on my last birthday. And remember, I was brought up to this from almost the beginning. My uncle was fond of Sara, but he loved me, and he gave me the very best he had—the best in all the world."

"But what on earth do you call it?" He was completely bewildered.

"The knowledge of *Yoga*. No, I can't tell you now. I never meant to say anything—but it came, and so I suppose it was meant to come. I must go now. Sara is evidently not coming."

He tried to detain her but she slipped away, looking back at him with a vanishing smile. He stood, transfixed, for a moment, then paced up and down alone, recalling her looks, her words, in astonishment. Certainly no one could despise Lord Cheriton—the statesman and philosopher blended in him, and Seton had heard vaguely of his famous book, "The Phantasm of Illusion," but he knew no more. He resolved he would order it the moment he got to Cairo. And India—if he could find in India or in the outermost ends of the earth what her eyes promised, it would be worth a journey on bleeding feet to find it. For Seton, like nearly all the wearied race of the twentieth century, had never known joy. Pleasure, excitement—yes; all the delights of materialism, all the honey of the booths in Vanity Fair—but they cloy on the lips—the soul cries out, "You hurt me!" under their stimulus, or sinks at last into a drugged sleep. He had not even known there was such a secret. Lord Cheriton, of all men—the brilliant, cynical man of the world! And this girl! As he went up to his room that night he felt that life was opening like a strange blossom before him, the petals encurling a hidden heart.

She avoided the subject next day, and especially before Sara. He began to understand the relationship between them much better now. Sara was all matter-of-fact kindliness and practical good sense, sheltering, adoring her sister with the passion of a mother. Venetia, spirit, fire, and dew. He had never known a woman quite like her, though he was a true believer in the possibilities of womanhood. He remembered how, as a boy of twenty, he had written in the fly-leaf of a fashionably obscene novel these words of Defoe—Defoe, who gave "Moll Flanders" to the world and yet sees the far-off sparkle of sunlight through leaden clouds:

> I cannot think that God Almighty ever made women so delicate, so glorious creatures, and furnished them with charms so agreeable and delightful to mankind, with souls so capable of the same accomplishments with men, and all to be only stewards of our houses, coolies and slaves.

But though he had written this, had he used them so very differently? Certain memories lifted sombre eyes and stared him heavily in the face at that question. It was long before he slept.

He scarcely saw her the day after—began to be afraid there would be no chance of a word alone with her before they left—and hung restlessly about the colonnade, afraid to leave it for five minutes. They did not appear at dinner and he was told it had been sent up to their rooms—Miss Grant was unwell. And still he paced the colonnade, desperately anxious to see Venetia.

The desert spread like a sea under the broad light of the moon, rolling through sapphire depths of sky, for the road was lost in shadows and the vast silvery expanse alone remained. Almost one might hope to see it reflect the light in its deep tranquillity. Only the palms of the ravine where the little hotel was built disturbed the illusion, and their fronds hung heavy and still as if carved in marble. It was dull, oppressive, the hot silence and a certain sort of anxiety weighed on his spirits and depressed him. Of course she would not come—just because he longed for it. What luck had he ever had since that cursed tomb was opened? And yet. . . . His eye fell on the ring, and something strange, far-off, quivered in his heart.

But she came, hurrying to look for a book Sara had left in the colonnade.

"She gets these bad headaches, and it's so hot to-night. You look tired, Mr. Seton. What have you been doing?"

"Waiting. There's nothing so tiring as suspense. There's something I want to say to you. Can you stay a minute?"

"Yes—a minute—" she hesitated a little.

"I won't delay you long. You were talking of things last night I want to know more of. I haven't found life so satisfying that I couldn't do with something better. Could you put me in the way in India of hearing more of these things? You know the ropes. I don't."

"If you really wish—" she said, hesitating still, with doubtful eyes.

"Certainly I wish. Might I come to Mianpur?"

"Are you sure you care to?" She looked up at him now, but still perplexed. "I shouldn't have thought——"

"No and *I* shouldn't have thought a short while ago, but such strange things have happened in the last few weeks that I've come to know that whole chapters of life are closed to me, and the very chapters I want to read. But I want to say more than that."

He looked down, frowning a little, as if in deep thought, then swung round and looked her in the face.

"Miss Grant, I must ask you a question that's vital to me. I'm going to India for the change, for these things you speak of, yes—but with a hope behind it which may mean life or death to me later. If you feel there's no chance for me—never could be—quite out of reach—be merciful, and say so now. I don't ask more than that. Just say, 'I can't tell. It's too soon. Some day it might not be utterly impossible.' Do I ask too much?"

Seton never could do things like other men. He made no attempt to approach her, to touch her hand, to say a single word to win compassion. Perhaps it was because the occasion was stripped of decoration that the stark earnestness of his voice struck home.

She stopped and looked as straight at him as he at her.

"I understand you. I can't say more and I won't say less. I repeat your words. It's too soon. I can't tell. Some day it might not be utterly impossible. Yes—I'll add one thing more. I'm glad you're coming to India."

"With all my heart and soul I thank you. This binds you to nothing. But my own mind is absolutely fixed."

Again his eye fell on his ring. It had meant all to him a few days ago. Did it mean nothing now? 'Thou endest the night.' What night was ended? What light was dawning?

If he had known his business, he should perhaps have clasped and kissed her then. The desert was about them—the moonlight silence was expectant. A woman like Venetia does not break that heart-seal on her lips, and the

warmth of it would have throbbed like the stirring of spring in the virginal coldness of her heart. He stood looking at her, and the opportunity went by.

"I must go in now. Sara evidently isn't coming down."

"Shall we meet in Cairo?"

"I'm not sure, but we shall look out for you on board. Good night."

She laid a cool hand in his, smiled a little nervously—and was gone. He stayed alone for half an hour, revolving many things. Somehow his declaration, which was to have brought them nearer, had set them further apart. He saw now, too late, that it put her in a difficult position, one where she must be always a little constrained and on her guard one way or another. Fool!— He had always been a fool where women were concerned. He no more knew how to deal with them. . . ! And this Revel—His brain was wearied, and things loomed large and oppressive in its weariness. He went slowly upstairs at last and leaned out of his window awhile. Two men on a camel, riding swiftly, passed across the low, broad disk of the moon. He dragged the blind down and flung himself on his bed.

He had started next morning before the Grants were downstairs, on his way to Haifa. He would not go with them, and half dreaded, half longed, for what Cairo might bring forth. Life seemed to be opening the strangest new vistas before him, whether of hope or fear, he could not tell.

CHAPTER VII

THE time in Cairo was hectic. Conway, overworked, thwarted, and delayed by the Egyptian Government at every turn, was irritable and inclined to resent Seton's flight to India. He knew he needed the rest, none better—but it was the handiest grievance to pick up and he worked it for all it was worth. Perhaps he, too, was a little used up by this time.

They were together at Shepheard's, in the sitting room where all his business was transacted, and Seton had just laid Revel's information before him.

"And do you expect me to approach these Egyptian Johnnies with a fairy tale like that? If the man had anything sensible to say he could have said it here, instead of going off to you at Abuksa."

"Well, as a matter of fact, he said you were too busy to be bothered. What did you think of him?"

"Didn't think at all. Too busy. But people here make a tremendous fuss of him, though no one seems to know where he comes from. He spends a lot of money, they say. What did you think yourself?"

"Don't know." Seton's tone was doubtful. There was a pause, then he went on: "After all, you know, old man, Alphonse's sounded as like a fairy tale as anything else and it's largely worked out into fact. I'm for examining the throne."

"So might I if I could get at it!" Conway retorted bitterly. "But the latest development of this blithering government is that they claim the whole show, and until they've argued it out with our people at home they'll no more let you or me go near it than they'll pitch it into the Nile. It takes the heart out of a fellow."

Here was a facer. Conway sat drumming impatiently on the table, tense with vexation and irritability. Seton looked moodily out of the window. It was not only the Revel business. It meant delay, vexation, possible failure of every hope. For a minute he rejoiced that the dead queen had escaped the sordid commercialism and exploitation of the cruel day that had awakened her. Brutal curiosity, vulgar advertisement—better a thousand times the clean grey ash, blown on a careless wind to mingle for ever with the lonely desert sands.

"There's nothing we can do then?" he said at last, heavily.

“Nothing, but kick our heels here. I’m half minded to chuck the whole blooming show and go off and let the bigwigs fight it out themselves. Oh, my sainted aunt, what a world it is!”

There was a knock at the door as this discouraging conclusion was reached, and Conway yelled “Come in!” as furiously as if he knew a personal enemy were outside.

The door opened quietly, and Revel stood before them.

“I fear I intrude,” he said.

Both men were on their feet in a moment, with the smile of civilization that means as little as the outstretched hand. Conway was barely civil and no more. He looked rather suspiciously at the visitor as he thrust a chair forward.

Revel took it in his calm way, a little stiffened with haughtiness. He was faultlessly dressed in a suit of light grey. It set off the ivory pallor of his face and the curiously long agate eyes set in such dark lashes as any Western beauty would have coveted. The other two looked war worn, time worn, dulled, beside that amazing clearness and youth and slender strength.

“Thank you. I shall only detain you a few minutes,” he said, then drew out the cigarette case Seton remembered so well and took a small object from it which he kept in his hand.

“Referring to our talk at Abuksa, Mr. Seton—no doubt you have put the matter before your friend—are you likely to go any further?”

“As we’re up against the Egyptian Government, it seems the whole thing is stalled,” Seton said. “I fully appreciate your kindness in running up to Abuksa, but we’re properly done in.”

“To put it in a nutshell,” Conway interrupted, “while the British and Egyptian Governments are quarrelling about dividing the swag, the unlucky finders are—to put it literally—not to have a look in. At the same time, you’ll forgive my saying that they could hardly be expected to raise the blockade for—a ghost story!”

Revel looked at him with cool unconcern.

“I believe I might get you in if you want to investigate.”

“I don’t think!” Conway said grimly. “All the paths of log rolling, palm greasing, and *baksheesh* have been tried out pretty thoroughly. No can do!”

“Those are not exactly my methods.”

Revel was still looking steadily at Conway, his shoulder turned to the other.

“May we know them?” Conway demanded. Seton still was curiously silent, his eyes fixed narrowing on Revel.

“To be frank,” the latter said coldly, “neither your words nor manner are encouraging, Mr. Conway. If you will not think it discourteous, I prefer to discuss them with Mr. Seton.”

Conway got up, shrugging his shoulders, and lounged slowly out of the room. He flung a warning word over his shoulder as he went.

“As you please. But remember, Seton, it’s my business as well as yours.”

The door shut upon him, and there fell a long silence, broken only by the noises from the street outside. There was a sense of expectancy in the air. It was growing dark and there was a cold flare of electric light on the wall from without that enabled them to see each other fairly well. Seton put out his hand to the switch, but the other held it back. His voice, very low and quiet, was dominating:

“I have a very reliable servant, a Lahori Indian. No—don’t trouble yourself to speak. I know what you would say—that unless you see the thing done yourself you have no guarantee against fraud.”

Why was it an effort to speak? Why did the splash of light on the wall contract and focus to a hard white circle whirling giddily? It dazzled him—it held his eyes—his tongue felt like lead in his jaws. The cool voice threaded his stupor.

“Fix your eyes on this.” Revel was holding out a small, glittering object, very dazzling. “You’re not well—you’re ill—faintness coming on. This will help you to steady yourself. Look at it.”

He surrendered and could not tell how.

“So—so! Lean your head back. Watch the light steadily. Now—quiet!”

Seton heard a man’s voice in the far distance. It seemed to say: “Ibn ul Farid.”

Suddenly there was another man—but how? Now the light appeared to circle his face. Every sense of Seton’s was absorbed in staring at this face with the giddily revolving light about it. He could not move his eyes, could not tell what Revel was doing. The glittering thing had vanished. Then something seemed to burst in his brain and all the light went out in darkness and quiet. It was as if he had sunk leagues deep into the night. A hand held his now. He was walking—where? A huge vaulted room, with what appeared to be a low groined ceiling, solid and dark, lit by a faintly flickering light carried by a man in front. Strange objects, half veiled in shadow, wholly grotesque and terrible, surrounded them; stiff figures, some

swathed in bandages like mummies, some boarded up to the shoulders; great chests; still vaguer shapes beyond melting into invisibility.

They turned to the left and into a recess. Suddenly the man in front whirled his light sharply. It fell on an object very familiar to him—the throne of the dead Queen Nefert.

For one wild moment he believed he saw her loveliness enthroned—the crowned head, the white features composed in that unutterable calm. Illusion, illusion! That vanished like a dream. There was the throne, gold and ivory, beautiful exceedingly. The man with the light had disappeared somehow. Things came and went, blurred and vanished. There were the uncertainties of dream about it all.

The light struck upward on the bossed ivory back. It strengthened. He noted the great sun disk that centred the ornamentation, the sun with rays about it. Memory sprang awake instantly and stormed his brain: "Revel—the papyrus! I'm here for that."

It seemed to him that he went up the steps which before he had almost dreaded to touch with a finger, lest the burden of the ages should come upon them and they too crumble into dust. Kneeling on one knee at the top he pressed his finger firmly on the great sun at the back, in the very middle. Something was loose under his hand! It revolved slowly, but smoothly, as when the workman passed it complete, sliding over the flattened surface of design to one side. There was a cavity that went down the length of his arm behind. He ran round the back and plunged his hand in and brought up a roll, tried again, to the utmost length of his fingers, found nothing more, and, as he withdrew his arm, saw the disk slide smoothly back into position once more.

"It's done. That's what I came for!" he said, exulting, the roll clasped firmly in his hand, and even as he said it, the swimming giddiness seized him again, he became conscious of the whirling circle of light on the wall—but there was no face in it now, he noted that—and suddenly he was again sucked down into the vortex of the night and knew no more. Time ceased to be.

A smell of brandy, a wet towel on his forehead, a sickening faintness slowly clearing off—the lights lit in the hotel sitting room, himself lying on the atrocious red velvet couch, and Revel and a stranger standing beside him made up his first consciousness. He lifted heavy eyelids and struggled to his elbow.

"What is it? What happened?"

The stranger advanced blandly and took possession of his wrist.

"Ah, pulse much better now. That's good! You've had a fainting fit, sir. I am Dr. Moore. This gentleman summoned me from downstairs. Quiet—for a bit, and you'll be as right as rain."

He closed his eyes again, feeling strength returning with every breath now, but still unspeakably bewildered between the real and the unreal. Was it a dream? Every detail was photographed on his brain in sharpest outline. Good God, what an extraordinary thing!

The two talked in low voices at the window while he recovered and still the processes of thought went on. But he was there—*there*—a while ago, as truly and really as he lay here now. He had never been in the vaults of the Museum, but if ever he got in and could compare them with this vision, he could swear the place would be the same. He remembered one great seated figure of Thothmes the First, with a singular break in the forehead that gave the effect of an ax driven down and cleaving the granite like a wedge. That that was there in verity he needed no assurance—how could he imagine a thing he had never seen? It was as real as the chairs and tables about him now. But the roll—he fumbled on the sofa for that. He pushed his hand under the red velvet pillow. Nothing. He sat up stark and searched hurriedly about him, felt under the sofa—nothing. The doctor came up again at the movement.

"Feeling better? That's good. It was the merest nothing and you won't have any return. Mr. Revel tells me you had an illness not so long ago, and no doubt this was just a little reminder not to go too fast. That's all. Well, well! Glad to be useful."

He bowed himself out, and Seton sat up and looked about him. Revel came and stood by him, looking down at him kindly.

"What happened?" he repeated.

"Very soon told. We were speaking about the papyrus roll and the throne, and quite suddenly, without any warning whatever, you fainted off. I did my best with water from your room and brandy, but after a minute or two I 'phoned down for a doctor. And, as you see, he succeeded. Have you ever done it before?"

"Never, and I'm all right now. Extraordinary! But I can't get the thing clear. Did you speak to your servant before—I went off?"

"Certainly. I said I had a very useful servant, a Lahori man, and that I should employ him to get us what we want. Why?"

"I remember that. Is his name Ibn ul Farid?"

Revel looked at him in the utmost surprise.

"No. How did you get hold of that? His name is Saad."

"They told me in the hotel at Abuksa."

"They were entirely wrong. But again, why?"

"I thought I heard you call—Ibn ul Farid."

Revel shook his head, laughing a little.

"What else did you think?"

Seton got up and threw himself into an armchair.

"The most astonishing—amazing thing! I was in the vault of the Museum here. . . ."

"Do you know it? Have you ever been there?" the other interrupted.

"Never. But there it was. And I went through all the junk stored there, and there was the throne, and, by George! I found the pin in the sun disk and shoved it back and got the papyrus, and I'm as certain the thing happened as that I sit here."

Revel looked at him good humouredly.

"As I have been with you ever since you fainted, I'm afraid I'm not open to that solution. It was suggested to you by our talk. The last conscious impression you had was of the throne, the papyrus, and the Museum. The horse went on galloping when the bit and bridle of reason were withdrawn. I have seen it before."

It appeared so insane to contradict this that for a moment Seton was dumb. Then he gathered his forces again.

"Have you ever been in the vaults?"

"Certainly."

"Then answer me this: Is there or is there not a red granite statute of Thothmes the First, with a wedge-shaped chunk cut out of the head and running right down, the nose?"

He waited for the answer so eagerly that Revel smiled a little before replying.

"Certainly there is, and you may see a picture post card of it in the lounge downstairs and in every shop of the kind in the city. That is the famous Thothmes which was said years ago to be a Greek reproduction, and they have removed it to the vaults till the question is settled. You must have seen the picture a thousand times."

Seton was silenced. That was undeniable, however much of his own conviction defied it. He considered a minute and tried again.

"I saw the throne standing in a deep recess to the left, near the top of the room as I came up by the statue of Thothmes. If it's standing in that exact position that's a proof. . . ."

"Of what? You certainly never left this room. I did not even leave you to 'phone. What are we arguing about when that certainty confronts us?"

Revel was perfectly courteous. Indeed, he was humouring the fancies of an invalid, but Seton began to be conscious that to persist in face of this assertion would be gross rudeness. He apologized with a good grace, and yet could not shake off his rooted conviction.

"You must pardon me, Mr. Revel. Time and space cease to be when one is unconscious and one is at the mercy of the unknown. I owe you many thanks for your kindness while I was helpless. It convinces me that I badly want a sea voyage to put me completely on my legs again. By the way. . . ."

He stopped a moment and looked with bewilderment at his hand.

"Where's my ring!"

The carbuncle was missing! In a moment he was on his knees by the sofa, hunting distractedly in every corner. Revel stood above him.

"Are you certain you had it on when you fainted?"

"Certain? Why, it has never been off my finger day or night since I had it. There's *nothing* I wouldn't sooner lose."

"Then let me help you. I never saw it fall."

Revel was on his knees, too, in spite of Seton's adjurations. They hunted in every direction. Finally Revel uttered a cry of triumph, holding it up in his hand, where it glowed with sullen fire.

"It had rolled into the extreme corner. But if it's as loose for you as that, you should certainly have it looked to."

"Thanks awfully! But it isn't loose!" Seton protested. "Look here, see! I can only just get it on."

He twisted it slowly on to his finger, Revel watching with interest.

"I don't understand it at all," he said good humouredly. "However, it's found, and that is the important point. I suppose there's no break in it? I once knew a jade ring split clean through the band, without any cause apparently."

"Split? Why, that ring has lasted for ages and may last ages more. Not it! But thank you very heartily for this and for all you've done for me. I apologize for all the trouble I've given you, and all I can say is, I'll do as much for you if ever you need it. The sea voyage and a rest is all I want to put me right."

"A very wise conclusion!" Revel said, smiling. "And I look forward to many pleasant hours on board. Now I shall take myself off. But to repeat what I was saying—I have my own methods, and with Saad's help I think there is a prospect of success with that roll. I'll let you know the result when we meet on board. Indeed, if there were any way in which you could help, I should call upon you before we sail."

Nothing could be franker and fairer. The two men shook hands cordially and Revel went off.

Seton looked at his watch—a quarter to eight—and deciding against dinner, he sat down by the window. Five minutes later Conway came in.

"Not coming down to feed? What's gone wrong? You look as if" . . . he searched for a word, "as if you'd been on the razzle-dazzle."

"So I have, in a way. Conway, what time was it when you went off?"

"Nearly seven. Why? I went off to see Achmet Bey and have another shot at the vault. Not that I believe in the papyrus, and of course I never hinted at such a thing—but I'd rather do it ourselves than be cut out by the Levantine gentleman. But look here! What's gone wrong?"

Seton told his story, and even in the telling realized that he was making an ass of himself in Conway's eyes.

"I can't hope to make you see how real it all was!" he said at last, stopping helplessly.

"If the bridge had been stronger, my tale had been longer," quoted Conway, yawning. "Well, old man, you were always the imaginative member of the firm, but you've beaten your own record this time. What had you for lunch? Revel seems to have behaved very decently, staying with you after the doctor came, and so forth."

"But, Lord bless me! I must have been fainting for nearly an hour! That never struck me before!" cried Seton. "You say you went at seven, and now it's nearly eight. I never heard of such a thing! How could that be?"

"It evidently was." Conway was getting bored. "I'm not certain of the time anyhow, and I expect you and Revel were yarning indefinitely before you went off. Shall I send you up anything?"

Seton shook his head and, as the papers say, the incident was closed.

But not in his mind. His thoughts went round and about it with worrying persistency. Even to himself he was obliged to admit it was a dream, but what an amazing one! Now suppose—suppose he could get into the vault, and suppose again that all was as he had seen it, suppose that without any guidance he could find that ivory pin and shift the sun disk and disclose the opening—what would he believe then? That was the question he could not settle.

Next day, of course, the impression had weakened, it was becoming blurred in the strong light of common sense. He remembered a gas experience in the dentist's chair and a vivid hallucination while he was coming to. Just the same sort of thing! He began to put it from him and to be a little ashamed of the subsequent talk with Revel, who, by the way, came very kindly to ask after him next morning but did not come up.

He was quite well then. He went with Conway to have a last try at Achmet Bey, it having occurred to him that an excuse for getting at the throne might be made on the ground that he was leaving for India and wished to make a drawing to submit to the Amir of Mianpur, who was an enthusiast for Egyptian antiquities and would not be circumspect in the lakhs of rupees he would offer the Egyptian Government for such a treasure. It was on the cards that Achmet Bey might refuse to receive them, but there was the chance, if he became interested, that he might be accessible.

He did not refuse. They were ushered into the office of the white-bearded director, semi-European in frock coat and red fez, entrenched behind his table with a secretary in attendance.

"You tackle him," Conway had said. "I'm so sick of the sight of that oily smile and the everlasting obstacles that I shall go off like a bomb if I talk to him any more. It'll be as much as I can do to hold my tongue decently."

So Seton was the spokesman, in his impeccable French, and old Achmet Bey smiled impenetrably, with his hands folded on the European waistcoat and the fulness thereof, whilst Seton dilated on the reckless wealth of the Amir. Let a guard be sent with them, let any precaution be taken, so only Seton might sketch the throne before he sailed. And still Achmet smiled and said nothing.

The door opened, and a card was brought in. It seemed to unloose his tongue.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen, but Mr. Revel wishes to enter our conference. I have already had a visit from him this morning on this subject.

He placed your point of view very clearly before me, and I am inclined to think a point may be stretched in consequence of his representations. Show the gentleman in."

Conway's back was up in a moment.

"If the representations of a stranger who had nothing to do with the find . . ." he began haughtily. Seton checked him with a glance. What matter how —whom—so long as they got in!

"We are very much indebted to Mr. Revel," he said politely. "Is it allowed to ask why his good offices are so powerful?"

"He is a skilled Egyptologist, for one thing," returned Achmet Bey placidly, "and for another, my Government has had dealings with him very creditable to Mr. Revel. Allow me to welcome you, *Effendi*!"

He rose as the door opened and waddled to meet the arrival, bowing profoundly. Not thus had his dealings been with the excavators. That back had never bent earthward for them in the degree in which it now abased itself. It was very clear that whatever they might be, Revel was *persona grata*, a magnate in all ways to be conciliated. They could not tell what to make of it. He looked younger than ever in the fresh midday sunshine, but yet with that air of distinction and command that sat so well on his clear, dark face.

At once he came to the point, addressing Achmet Bey with an easy superiority that he certainly took lying down.

There was no need, he pointed out, to repeat his arguments of the morning. There was no question of the Amir. That might or might not be, but could not affect the justice of the application of these two gentlemen.

"But I have agreed, *Effendi*, I have agreed!" protested Achmet Bey, rubbing his fat hands. "They have but to descend with the custodian. It is just, it is undubitably just, and my Government is a light of justice. Will it please you to descend with these distinguished gentlemen, or to favour me with your company so agreeable?"

"Let that be as they please," returned Revel, with the utmost indifference.

What could they do but invite him to come along, thought Seton. They owed the whole show to him, the roll itself, Achmet's consent, everything. Common courtesy demanded it. He accepted with a careless smile, and the custodian and his satellite being summoned, they all descended to the vaults, leaving Achmet Bey to a comfortable idleness.

“You saw nothing this morning, then?” said Conway, leading the way. “What made you think of coming about it?”

“A feeling that you were being very badly treated, and the knowledge that I have some little influence with these people. I told you yesterday I have my methods. But of course I should not have dreamed of coming down without you, however deep my interest might be, and is!”

“You stake the truth of your vision on the result?” said Conway.

“Pardon me, no. What I saw, I saw, and my faith in it is unwavering, whatever the result now. But naturally I am keenly interested. This may be a find such as even you have not achieved. I believe it to be the history of the queen.”

“But what about these people?” Seton pointed to the custodian and his attendant. “If they see us take anything it will be reported and taken from us.”

“That can be arranged,” said Revel confidently. “Have no fear!”

It is no exaggeration to say that Seton’s heart beat like a trip-hammer when they stood on the cement floor amidst the vast shadows of that mysterious place. The man switched on the electric lights, and with startling suddenness all the strange contents leaped into being. There was nothing august or beautiful. It poignantly recalled to Conway a long-ago visit with his mother to a furniture repository, and though the objects belonged to the ages instead of to suburban families, the comparison was excellent.

But Seton’s whole being was concentrated on observation. Was this the way he had seen last night? Had he gone up by this alley between preposterous cat-headed goddesses, dog-headed gods and blank stone faces gazing blandly into eternity? Painted mummy cases heaped on one another —did he remember these? Ha! What was that? The red granite Thothmes, towering above the rest, with the wedge cut clean out of the brow! Now he remembered. This was the way!

Leaning forward, he touched Revel’s arm and pointed silently. He looked up and laughed.

“The famous Thothmes! You recognize him, of course! There isn’t a street Arab in Cairo but knows him.”

True. Seton drew back again. But if the throne should be in the recess he remembered, on the side he remembered, in the exact position—what then? What words could explain that mystery?

The custodian turned off to the *right*. He rounded the great broken capitals of two pillars, he passed the statue of a basalt queen with the heavy

wig of the later dynasties and drew up before the throne.

Seton caught his breath sharply. It was not on the left side of the room. It was not in any recess. In a word, it was in an entirely different position from where he had seen it in his dream—for so even he himself must call it now.

"Has it been moved?" he asked the man, with pretended indifference.

"Moved, *Effendi*? No. Here it has stayed and will stay, until a decision is made by the Government."

He switched on another light above the throne and it stood there in all its slender beauty. Revel turned and addressed him.

"We wish to examine the ornaments at the back. We have permission from the authorities."

"Certainly, certainly, *Effendi*. Do what you will. Our duty compels us to remain, but do what you will."

Conway led the way to the back of the throne, the other two following. It screened them from the two men, who remained in front talking idly to one another, and instantly Revel motioned Seton forward.

He fixed his eyes with passionate eagerness on the great embossed disk, unheeding the noble designs of ibis and lion that decorated the shaft of the back with splendour. Now—now was the test! With unerring accuracy he put his finger on the pin that formed the centre of the disk, and—the ivory began to slide! He flung a glance of triumph at Revel. Back, back it slipped over the ibises—now the lions were hidden—now the palm trees—and a cavity in the ivory was before them. With the other two eagerly watching, he dipped his arm up to the elbow in the hole and grasped a roll. Even Conway's stolidity was shaken. His face flamed with red as he bent over, Revel craning above his shoulder. The latter had the presence of mind to grasp Conway and put his finger on his lip in a swift gesture. Then he began to talk in a high voice for the benefit of the men in front.

"This carving is of wonderful excellence. In my opinion it surpasses much of the work of the so-called best period of Egyptian art. What do you say, Mr. Conway?"

"I quite agree. I say, Seton, sit down here, and take a few notes of these ibises."

With a lightning gesture he caught the roll from Seton and thrust it inside his coat, talking and laughing incessantly. Revel slipped the disk back and went round to the custodian.

"Switch on the lights and come round."

They came round and stood watching while Seton, with shaking hands, made notes rather than sketched. He was not equal to more. His brain was whirling again—how had he known the secret of the disk and yet be wrong—wrong about the position of the throne? The other two stood chatting behind him and he heard not a word they said. Presently Revel stepped forward, and in full sight of the custodian, began to touch the disk, as if in idle curiosity.

"Very singular. This moves!" he said, in French.

"Careful! Careful, I entreat!" cried the man, moving forward. But too late, for the disk had slipped noiselessly back over the ibises and the cavity was open once more. Conway tumbled to Revel's idea in a moment. Seton jumped up.

"Astonishing!" Conway said loudly. "It may be a receptacle for treasure! What should we do?"

"We should inform the Director of the Museum at once," Revel answered. "Send one of your subordinates up for him and we will all wait here."

The man was sent off in white-hot haste, and the remaining five stood grouped at the back of the throne in a tense silence, Revel quiet as marble, Seton red with shame and annoyance. How he hated the lie—the whole thing! Yet what else was to be done? It meant far more to him even than to Conway, and whether it meant much or little, he certainly could not give Revel away after all his kindness. Besides, he was right in a way. If the roll fell into the hands of the Egyptian Government, heaven only knew what might happen to it. The custodian stood with his eyes fixed on the cavity, fussily guarding it.

Hurrying feet, voices, questioning and replying, and scarcely ten minutes had gone before Achmet Bey was beside them, puffing and almost speechless from his unwonted haste. He flung up his fat hands in astonishment as he saw the cavern and Revel with his cool correctitude put the story before him. The custodian corroborated it. The gentleman had called him, he had seen the whole disk slide forward for the first time in ages and disclose its secret.

"It is I who should investigate!" said Achmet Bey grandly, as he stepped forward.

All made respectful way. He plunged a none-too-clean cuff and coat-sleeve into the mystery, felt about with seeking fingers, his face growing longer and blanker, and finally drew out his hand again.

“Empty! The tomb-robbers have been before us. May Allah have no mercy on their tombs and consider them not in the Day of Smiting!”

“Tragic, but unfortunately too common!” said Revel, looking as grave as befitted the occasion.

“Once more I try,” said the Bey, and repeated the operation, slowly shaking his head as he did so. Failure. He next invited the custodian, then Revel, then the two others to try their fortune. When all was done, and in vain, he examined the mechanism curiously, invited Seton to make a drawing of it, and waited patiently while it was done. Then they all went upstairs together and the doors were locked behind them.

“We have shared a disappointment!” Achmet Bey said, with the lustre of the smile a little dimmed as he bowed good-bye.

“Let us, however, reflect that this may open the way to the examination of other celebrated objects. It has at all events revealed to us that the Egyptians did not scruple to use them as hiding places,” Revel suggested, beginning the ceremony of bows to authority with which the three departed.

On the steps he paused.

“That old fox may have us watched,” he said. “Let us part here, and I will join you at Shepheard’s in a couple of hours. Pray do not look at the papyrus until I come.”

They promised, and went off together, touched by his confidence, Conway all agog with excitement, Seton desperately ill at ease. He flung himself down in a chair when they got back, entirely unable to join in Conway’s songs of triumph. He hated the deception, the mystery, the whole business. The only thing he could do was to sit down and do the sketches from his shaky and ill-informed notes. They neither of them left the room until Revel’s quick, light step came along the passage outside.

“Now!” he said, as he closed and locked the door. “If we had come away together he might have suspected. We’re safe now.”

Almost solemnly Conway put his hand in his inner breast pocket and drew out the roll. It was short and evidently there could be but little in it, but its look of age was stupendous. He bent forward over the table and began to unroll it with the tenderest caution, for with the lapse of centuries and the hot, dry air of the tombs, these records may easily split and crack into ruin. The other two leaned over his shoulders.

Blank. Not a sign, not a character. Emptiness.

Conway straightened up first, and struck his fist on the table.

“Well . . . if that isn’t. . . ! I swear I’ll never go excavating again! The whole thing has been one damned disappointment from beginning to end. Not a thing out of it but annoyance!”

“On the whole,” said Seton, quietly, “I’m not sorry it’s turned out like this. We were trusted to go down into the vault, and I consider we were in honor bound to report it if it had been anything valuable.”

“I don’t see it!” cried Conway. “What? And let it get into their clutches like all the rest that we shall never touch again? Not me! What do you say, Mr. Revel?”

“It is not much use to give any opinion now,” Revel said, critically examining the papyrus. “The secret of hidden writing was not known to the Egyptians so far as we can tell, so this is useless. But I don’t think you should feel as you do, Mr. Conway. You have added to knowledge. You have raised questions of the utmost interest, and your names have become known all the world over. And there’s more to come—much more!”

He smiled enigmatically.

“I want no more. I’m fed up with the whole business!” Conway said, reaching for his hat.

“One word before we part,” Revel continued. “This must, of course, be kept a dead secret. My responsibility in the matter. . . .”

They pledged themselves all round. Seton could not but feel that Revel had done his utmost on their behalf. There was no more to be said.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER much consideration, Seton ventured to the Continental that evening, meaning to walk casually through the place and do no more unless he happened to see the Grants. Judgment prompted him to wait for an invitation; longing—a spirit in his feet—led him in spite of himself to her presence.

Sara Grant was knitting in a corner and beckoned to him at once, exclaiming with pleasure that he looked much better—all sympathy and kindness.

"I declare, I was frightened about your coming to India—you looked as if you'd been through such a bad time. But now, I foresee, we shan't be able to keep pace with you at all, and the sea will finish the cure. Won't it be heavenly after these winds? I never can tell whether they're hot or cold when they scorch you—and the dust and sand! I love Egypt—can't keep away from it, but I'm glad to go. Can you wait to see my sister? Oh, here she comes!"

Venetia came gliding along the great room. She had a silvery gown which fell closely about her, and the pillar of her throat, bare of ornament and lovely, rose warmly white from the shimmering metallic lustre. The weight of hair, very simply garlanded about her head and shining with the glossed smoothness of polished bronze, was supported by barbaric silver pins. A gracious figure.

"Lovely," his heart said, even while his reason denied it. Some of the women in the place, smoking, lounging, could easily outmatch her features, but who had that divine tranquillity? She was like a quiet sea on a grey day, fathomlessly at peace, touched with a sparkle of silver hiding brooding deeps of calm. Her voice, too—he had always had the fancy that voices have colours and perfumes. An edged soprano might be a metallic blue. Hers was a melting amber, with the scent of a summer rose. Lover's nonsense. He almost blushed for himself—and yet knew that, even as she came, troubles fled before her and all happy things seemed possible and near. He might have expected a trace of consciousness in her manner from the memory of their last talk at Abuksa—but there was none. All was simple, natural, friendly, no more, and whether to draw hope or fear from her attitude he could not tell.

"I saw Mr. Revel in the street to-day," Sara said after a while. "He never saw me. He was walking quickly along with his servant behind him, and the two were evidently on business bent. I noticed people turning to look at him. He certainly is worth looking at!"

"He's too beautiful for this matter-of-fact age," Venetia said, laughing. "He really belongs to a very different time and country."

"How do you place him?" Seton never was uninterested when she spoke of Revel. He drew her on.

"Oh, a young king, splendid in robes and jewels, sitting on a throne with adoring, despairing multitudes before him. He should have been the lover of your beautiful lady who crumbled into dust. I'm certain he belongs to four or five thousand years B.C. Look at him! We don't matter to him. He hears what we say, he sees us—but we're like tiny figures seen through the reversed telescope of thousands of years. We mean no more to him than ants."

Yes, that was his own feeling too. Something remote, unhuman, about Revel. Courteous, pleasant, but one never got further. Friendship was unthinkable—how could it exist where one could never tell how a man's mind worked—where something startling, amazing, might suddenly flash into being and leave one gasping. She had implied that herself in speaking of him before at Abuksa, so it was not his own feeling only.

"I wonder what his history is, where he comes from?" Sara said. "What can you know of a man if you don't know that? If I can scrape up courage, I shall ask him, some moonlight night in the Indian Ocean when we all get confidential."

"You might ask and he answer, but you would never know," Venetia said. "He couldn't make you understand if he tried, and he wouldn't try. But he interests me. I like to watch the curious power he has with people. The servants cringe if he looks at them. People have a startled look when they first see him. I wonder what he was in his last incarnation. If he comes to Mianpur, I shall ask Jadrup Gosein."

"Does he live there?"

"If he is alive still, certainly."

"Then could I speak to him?"

"He sees very few English people—but I think he would see you if he thought it would serve you in any way. He speaks a sort of English, rather beautiful, I think."

"I never could imagine what my uncle saw in that man!" Sara said, with her little air of finality. "A thriftless person, supported on the offerings of people nearly as poor as himself, and a heathen of the deepest dye."

"But you never saw him, Sara dear. You never would!" Venetia protested. "And you know he cares nothing for money, he has none; and as for food, he lives on what a Western workingman would despise. He's a very learned man."

"Well, what good that sort of learning does himself or anyone else, I have yet to hear. Take my advice and don't go near him, Mr. Seton. But what's this about your coming to Mianpur? I didn't know you thought of that."

He felt his face grow warm under the quick look through her gold eyeglasses.

"How can I resist the chance of being sheltered by the skirts of your protection, as Masoud puts it? I may get a chance to see the real thing there, if you'll waste an hour on me sometimes. And it must be almost unique in India."

"It's certainly that. A most beautiful place. And Mahmud Mirza is resolved to keep it so. Yes, I think you're wise to have a look at it. You could go on to Kashmir later, and our servant Ramnath, who meets us in Bombay, can get you a good man. You must have some one who knows the ropes."

Seton thanked her, and asked why the place was called Mianpur.

"Because of all the little green parrots flying about. But you must get a permit to travel all over the State, for there are some other delightful towns, and there's very fine shooting if you care for that."

She went on talking and describing, while Venetia sat silent. When Sara went across the room to speak to a friend, he turned to her.

"You say Revel has a strange influence. I don't know about that, but I've spoken so harshly of him that I think I should make the *amende honourable* and tell you how kind he can be when he chooses."

He told her the story of his fainting and the life-like, poignant dream of the Museum, omitting, of course, according to promise, the visit with Revel and Conway and the failure of the search in the throne. She listened with fixed interest.

"It was very strange," she said at last slowly. "*Very.* Has it struck you—But no. I suppose it's the unusual things I've known in India which put such thoughts into my head. Of course you've not quite recovered yet. It was all quite natural."

Seton leaned forward eagerly.

"Do, please, tell me what you think! You know these Orientals so much better than I, and for all his perfect English and white skin, I never feel Revel is a European. There's always a something that checks one and says 'Thus far and no farther'—the boundary of race which we can never cross. What is in your mind?"

"Oh, nothing!" she said lamely. "It just occurred to me— Suppose that curious feeling one has of *influence* about him were true, and it were a kind of hypnotic influence——"

"But he never hypnotized me—never dreamt of it. Why, he was so frightened he sent for a doctor at once. Oh, no, there's nothing in that."

She agreed hastily.

"Nothing—of course there couldn't be! But I have seen and heard such amazing things. Jadrup Gosein himself has most extraordinary powers, and my uncle learnt one or two things through him which you would hardly believe if I told you."

"I would believe anything on earth you told me. Tell me now."

"Not until we are in India and I have Jadrup Gosein's permission. He always said that these things were not to be lightly gossiped about. There were reasons. . . ."

But she pulled herself up there and changed the subject somewhat abruptly compared with her usual grace of manner.

"Have you quite made up your mind about India?"

"Quite. I secured my passage on board the *Akbar* the first day I reached Cairo. I shall go up through Delhi and Agra and see the sights there, and then join you in Mianpur."

She looked at him, smiling a little, and he believed he might have asked her then and there if she were glad or sorry, but that Sara returned and settled down, as if the talk had never been interrupted, to the beauties of Mianpur. He had not another chance of a word alone with Venetia that night and what had been said about Revel passed entirely from his mind. What filled it was the wish that he had had the courage to press his suit a little further, tempered with a certainty that delay would serve him best in the end. After all, this budding understanding had its charm too—a charm seldom to be tasted in the present day. For all her knowledge of the world and its deeper things, on these points she was shy and sensitive, eluding capture even while her sweet eyes invited it, swaying softly aside as a willow bough from the grasping hand and whispering delight that no ear as yet must hear.

He left late and reluctantly, and, stepping outside into the warm and jewelled night, met Revel going the opposite way.

"I'll turn and walk with you, Mr. Seton," he said, offering a cigarette from that strange case with its scarab gleaming in the hotel lights. The ring glowed on his finger with its legend, "Thou endest the night." He glanced at Seton's.

"I always feel that that queer coincidence of the inscription makes a kind of blood brotherhood between us. I wonder what it means," he said.

"Less than nothing, I daresay. I never asked where you were staying. Is this on your way?"

"I'm staying with a friend. He and I have business to settle, and it suited me better. I don't know how long I may be in India, you see."

They walked in silence a few moments, the moonlight and city lights alternately throwing their shadows, black as ebony, before them.

"By the way, you never used your servant after all in that papyrus business. I thought you intended to."

"Ah, it turned out so simple that I had no need of Saad. I had been able to do a little stroke of business for the Egyptian Government, and you saw how it worked out. Saad is a different proposition."

"I gathered from your story at Abuksa that he was a very unusual person. You remember you said you saw that vision through his intervention."

Revel stopped and looked at him in astonishment.

"That was not my servant. That was Ibn ul Farid. You have mixed up the thing."

"May I ask who Ibn ul Farid is?"

"I told you. A Persian with very remarkable occult powers. I hate the word 'occult.' It has been utterly misused and vulgarized, but I know no other. He is a descendant of the ancient Persian Magians and carries on their strange traditions and powers. Do you remember how often the Magians are spoken of in the Oriental story as magicians?"

"Has your servant any such powers?"

"You seem very curious about him. No, none. He has two relations connected with the Museum. That was what I had thought of, but for the other short cut. But Ibn ul Farid is a very remarkable man."

"Tell me more about him if you will."

“I hardly know how to begin. He has wonderful telepathic powers, can create illusions that would astonish you. Has much influence over the minds of men. If he should ever come your way, I will ask him to show you some of his feats.”

“Then—forgive me suggesting it, but how do you know your vision in the Khar Valley was not one of his illusions?”

“You forget that I knew him very intimately and that he is perfectly frank with me as to his doings. Also, you will admit that it worked out in fact about the hiding place in the throne.”

“Certainly. But in failure also. How do you account for that?”

“I should think it self-evident that the original papyrus was stolen at some time or other. Who is to say when? It was a great disappointment, but let us hope it may be recovered some day.”

Another pause. Then Seton asked a question for which he himself could not account. It certainly was not suggested by anything that had been said.

“Is Ibn ul Farid coming to India?”

Revel naturally looked surprised.

“Not that I know of. But I have not asked his plans further than that I know he is coming to Azerbajan. That is the ancient Atropatene, a most interesting part of the world. Have you never heard the wonderful Syrian hymn of the second century—

> “ ‘Median gold it contained and silver from Atropatene,
> Garnet and ruby from Hindustan and Bactrian agate!’

Ah, if you could get him to talk to you about Atropatene as it was in days he can remember!”

“Remember? Are you joking?”

“Not I! When a man reaches a certain stage of knowledge he can remember his incarnations. Ibn ul Farid remembers—but he talks of it to few. But why do you ask if he goes to India?”

“I don’t know. It just occurred to me.”

Another pause. Then Revel said in a friendly way, “If it would interest you to meet Ibn ul Farid before we sail, I think I could manage it. He speaks no English, but I believe you would find it interesting. He is an extremely devout Mohammedan.”

Seton agreed eagerly, and with the feeling that he had been somewhat discourteous to a man whose own manners were irreproachable. They

parted, after Revel had arranged to call for him at Shepheard's next day at three.

"It's exceedingly kind of you," he said, "to do so much for a man you know so little as me."

"Not at all, not at all!" Revel hastened to assure him. "More than one little circumstance has drawn us together—the ring coincidence, the disappointment about the throne— No, I could never feel you were a stranger."

Seton tried to say something gracious, to infuse a little warm blood into his reply, but there was always that cold, translucent wall in his mind between him and Revel. He felt himself *gauche*, ungracious, typically insular, as he looked at the calm, beautiful face before him, covering its deep reticence with a mask of graceful ease and delicately tempered warmth.

"Well, it's very kind. I'll be ready to-morrow at three." That was the best he could do.

As he went in, he saw a man in native dress join Revel and they went off together.

CHAPTER IX

REVEL came next day with most courteous punctuality and they very soon left the streets he knew, which, as a matter of fact, were not many, and plunged into the Oriental section of the city, with narrow ways and the indefinable odours that the eastern end of the Mediterranean brings as a foretaste of the true Orient. Little but Arabic was heard about them now, though some turbaned figures here and there were unintelligible even to the native Egyptians, and yet again, mingling with the mass of humanity, were unmistakable Far Easterns, more at home in their stolidity than Seton or any European would ever be.

"They understand each other in a way we don't," he said reflectively. "If ever they all join hands—and they may!—the day of the Nordic race is done, and the white man's empire will take a seat on the shelf with Assyria and Egypt."

"They may," Revel agreed, leading on swiftly and looking straight before him. "Well, we shall see what Egypt does with her freedom. After all, Mr. Seton, the white man has not done all that was hoped with his civilization. The life in big cities has drawbacks, and from the religious aspect. . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders and said no more. They turned down a narrow side street, then two more, and, passing several large houses, stood in front of one that had the air of an even more closed and shuttered secrecy than the rest. The windows looking into the silent street were covered by the most closely carved wooden lattices imaginable, a tracery of the greatest beauty and delicacy, but so fine that it seemed it must be almost as nearly impossible to see out as to see in. Evidently a very old house. The huge two-leaf doors were extraordinarily massive, ornamented with beautifully wrought iron bars and bolts, with a fine stone arch above them in intricate designs of palms and flowers.

Age, wealth, and secrecy—these were the photographs it flashed on the mind as Seton looked up at the exquisite workmanship of the lattices, pentagons, and geometric shapes of solid ivory carved in relief in arabesque and set in frames and interlacings of what appeared to be true ebony. He halted a moment to admire, and Revel said appreciatively, "Ah, I see you know a good thing! These screens came from the ruined Jama of Darut on the edge of the Libyan desert. There is really nothing like them in Cairo to-

day. This is a very ancient house, a fine type of the rich merchant's of the 'Arabian Nights' who desires to keep his concerns to himself and lives very retired. All his interests are antiquarian. He is called Sayyid Hasan. Ibn ul Farid is visiting him."

He took the iron pendant rod as he spoke and set in motion a very large and jangling iron bell hung above the gate, and immediately, as if at attention, a Nubian opened the doors, flinging them wide and saluting as if for highly honoured guests. They entered a great courtyard, so beautiful in the sudden transition from the grimy street, that Seton could hardly forbear an exclamation of astonishment.

Acacia trees stood about the black and white marble-tiled pavements, and vines loaded with exquisite blossom swung from one to the other, garlanding them with trails of lavish beauty. They were trees indeed, for the pavement had been laid down around them when the house was built; birds of dazzling plumage flew about the branches, apparently as free as in the wild woods. As he looked in astonishment, Revel, laughing, pointed upward, and he saw that at the utmost height of the house wonderfully transparent glass roofings closed the great courtyard in and gave the birds their freedom—with a reservation. Three fountains cooled the air, springing from marble pools of exquisite grace, where white nenuphars laid their ivory chalices on the crystal surface that was broken only by the falling plash of water, and about them, forming green recesses for languid hours of ease, were huge receptacles of marble, with palms, tree-ferns and every loveliest exotic that money can buy. Magnificent rugs from Bokhara and Samarcand lay here and there, their subdued splendour showing up against the white marble, and low divans were beneath the trees.

To one of these Revel motioned Seton and addressed a few words to the Nubian, who stood like a man's image in black marble to await his orders. He replied, salaaming deeply. Revel translated.

"He says his master is absent for two days and Ibn ul Farid will represent him. Pray be seated while I go for him."

Seton obeyed, looking round upon a scene to be described only in Oriental hyperbole. "For there hung about him vines with grapes of different colours. He sat within a bower and found within it fruits growing in clusters and singly. And the birds were warbling their different notes within the branches, the turtle-dove filling the peace with its cooing, and the blackbird in its singing resembled a human being and the ring-dove a woman exhilarated by wine. There were the camphor apricot and the almond apricot and the apricot of Khorassan, the plum of a hue like the complexion of

beauty, the rose whose blush put to shame the cheeks of the lovely, the myrtle, the gilliflower, the anemone, their leaves be-diamonded with tears. The camomile smiled, displaying its teeth, the narcissus gazed at the rose with its negro's eyes, the limes resembled balls of gold, and above them all languished a perfumed zephyr."

It astonished him. He compared it with the great houses he knew in London, and Cairo had infinitely the advantage. An extraordinary air of romance breathed about it, delighting the soul, awaking the primitive in a man's heart. Would the three adventurous ladies of Bagdad glide in, veiled indeed, but with languishing, provocative glances through a fold drawn aside, attended by their encroaching porter with the kingly laughter in his eyes and hidden behind his curled black beard? Or Harun the Just, with Giafar the Vizier and black Mesrour following at his heels, and Death, a shadow, dogging them silently? He dreamed awake as he sat and looked about him, a dream that beheld Europe faint and far, a little lost star twinkling far down on the horizon.

Such luxury, combined with perfect appreciation of means and results, he had never seen—every object about him was beautiful. The whole wooed him like a strain of passionately muted music. All round the courtyard rose the walls of the house, shadowing it coolly from the sun. There were windows everywhere, but closed in with exquisitely designed wooden lattices, jealous guardians of perhaps a greater beauty within. He wondered what the rest of the house was like where no Western foot was ever invited to tread—were bright secret eyes watching him from those hidden recesses? None could tell.

He looked at the white-clad Nubians standing as guards at the door where Revel had disappeared. Revel then might enter? But he was supposed to be Western! Was he? What was he? Again, who could tell? And who was Ibn ul Farid? Mystery again. He waited in a curious state of suspense, while the white doves cooed above him and a bird like a living sapphire sang its heart out on the boughs of an acacia dripping with trails of perfumed almond pink.

Quiet voices drawing near, and Revel came between the trees with a young man beside him in long *caftan* of richly flowered silk, a white *jubbeh* and a red girdle with a white turban wound about the *tarbûsh*. The dress of the country, nothing more, but of the finest material, and suiting the background so admirably that he fell at once, as it were, into the picture, as even Revel's distinction, hampered by the ugly European dress, failed to do. His face was olive, clear cut, with dark eyes set deep in the thick lashes of

the Orient, languid in repose but singularly swift and far-darting when aroused. His manner seemed dignified and courteous to Seton as they were presented to each other and took their seats on a low divan at a respectful distance apart. Revel interpreted so well that there was hardly more pause than in an ordinary conversation, and after some words had been exchanged, Ibn ul Farid clapped his hands and thick black coffee and pomegranate syrup with sherbet was brought, and, following this, *chibouques* for smoking, handsome pipes with jasmine sticks, according to the Mohammedan saying that "coffee without tobacco is as meat without salt."

Seton looked with full appreciation at the exquisite little porcelain cups and pearl-inlaid tables such as the tourist never sees in the bazaar, the work of the craftsman who loves his work and lingers for love's sake.

"May Allah make it pleasant to thee!" ejaculated Ibn ul Farid politely, as the guest raised his cup.

He clapped his hands then and ordered the music to attend them, and much to Seton's delight, two Abyssinian women slaves came in, unveiled, each carrying a *kânun* or dulcimer, and sat before them on the ground cross-legged in obedient silence until Ibn ul Farid raised his hand with a grave, "Sing, Uns el-Wufud!"

Their crimson and gold garments set off their dark features with a something more emphatic than beauty itself and he could not take his eyes from them as they sang. The first, preluding to the sonorous strings, gave a love-song.

> "Like to the moon would she be, were it not for her raven locks,
> Like to a star, save for her beauty-spot fragrant as musk.
> Her cheeks to the sun I would liken, save that, unlike the sun,
> She needs not to fear an eclipse, she needs not to shrink from the dusk."

Revel clapped his hands softly when the song was done, saying to Ibn ul Farid, "By Allah, her hand on the strings is as the hand of Daood the King! Be thanks to thee, my friend, for this music!"

He turned, laughing, to Seton and asked him whether it had pleased him, and Seton saw the quick dark eyes of the girl, swift as the eyes of a cat, abase themselves in humility as he replied.

The other, with a little silver brazier before her, on which she cast a dark powder from time to time, sang the praises of wine. Her face, seen through the delicate whirls of blue smoke rising from the brazier, had a strange, heavy-lidded, sullen fascination from which he could not escape, with the

guttural, almost masculine tones of her deep voice in the unknown tongue still further to perplex the senses.

> "Bring me the wine that may be called a melted ruby in its cup,
> Or like a scimetar, unsheathed, in the sun's noonday light held up.
> Bring me the cup, not till 'tis drained shall my hand drop or set it by.
> Its sweetness falls as sleep's own balm steals o'er the vigil-weary eye."

And as she finished, she knelt and offered a cup of beaten gold with the rosy wine of her song mantling within it. With a glance at Revel to be sure that he transgressed no etiquette, Seton took it in both hands, according to custom, and drained it, Revel and Ibn ul Farid refusing.

"*Alhamdolillah!* Praise to Allah, Lord of the three worlds, and may his favour and protection rest on the Prophet and his family!" said the latter with dignity, and, making a sign to them, the girls disappeared, leaving only the brazier with its spirals of blue, fragrant smoke behind them. But they had done their work. The music and the strong wine were tingling in Seton's brain. He had not the keen, balanced watch on his senses which he had before. Had that fragrant smoke anything to do with it also? Impossible, with the sunlight bright above them in the square of blue sky framed by the house. Still, he waited the next event with a fainter grip on reality than before.

They smoked awhile in silence, according to the grave dignity of Eastern leisure, into which Seton, in a waking dream, fell like a leaf in softly gliding water. Not a sound from the city outside. The quiet, the stealing, scented blue smoke, were as a veil dropped between him and the world he knew.

Quiet.

CHAPTER X

THE minutes drifted on and finally Revel said gravely, "See, my friend, I have brought this Frankish gentleman to partake of your wisdom. Be pleased to honour us with an exhibition of such skill as Solomon the Wise might have desired to behold."

"*Ay'w'allah!* Yes, by Allah!" returned Ibn ul Farid with composure. "What would he have? There is nothing within my power that is not open to the friend of my lord. Let him speak."

Seton appeared to consider, though he had in reality made up his mind long ago. He looked up with deference, but resolutely, "I desire to know from the master of wisdom when was stolen the roll that was hidden in the throne of the Queen Nefert? And by whom?"

The wish transmitted to Ibn ul Farid, he bowed and sat a while gravely silent, his eyes fixed on the plash of the fountain. Revel, equally silent, was apparently wrapped in his own thoughts. The servants had all disappeared. Seton waited with a throbbing constriction in his throat—a sense of imminent events. Presently Ibn ul Farid rose, and moving up the divan, sat beside him and took his hand in his with slender brown Eastern fingers, cold as a snake's skin.

"You would know a mystery, my friend? Extolled be the perfection of Him who opens the eye to see and the understanding to penetrate! Gaze on the water and be at rest."

He fixed his eyes on the dripping fountain—the sparkling silver monotone. How it glittered, dripped—glittered. . . ! As with a flash, instantly the courtyard, the trees, the fountains, Revel himself, all were gone. His eyes, wide open, staring in amazement, saw a strange sight. The tomb chamber of the Khar Valley, every detail of which was photographed on his mind, dark, silent, lit only by a flickering light that fell on the fair face of the queen as she sat there, dimly beautiful.—Two men in the immemorial undress of ancient Egypt, the cloth wrapped about the loins and legs, no more. Seton could follow every movement as if he were one of them. The elder had a roll of papyrus in his hand. Furtively looking about them and listening, shielding the lamp as if in terror lest the light should betray them, they crept round to the back of the throne—they slipped the ivory sun disk back, they withdrew a roll from the secret place, they substituted the other. Seton saw the stealthy retreat without a word spoken, the heavy door swung

back, barred, secured, sealed, and then—then—the vision thinned as darkness thins before the dawn. He could look through the walls of the tomb chamber, through the men's bodies; and now they fluttered like thin clothes in a wind, dispersed and vanished. The vision was gone, and the courtyard and drip and glitter of the fountains were about him again, the two other men looking quietly at him. He felt perfectly sane, clear, assured. But he had certainly seen. For a moment he had a difficulty in speaking.

"Extraordinary! Was it like that?" he said eagerly.

"Like what? You forget we saw nothing," Revel answered.

He described the vision as well as he could, they listened attentively. Ibn ul Farid took up the word:

"To the eye of wisdom the present and past are one; you have certainly seen a thing which took place."

"But how do you explain it? How can the past be recalled? If this is so, the thing was stolen centuries ago."

"Nothing that ever existed is dead. It exists for ever. It is as with a lost book. You find it and turn the page and read what you will in the future as in the past."

"But how is it done? What does it mean? What happened to me?"

"One portion of the brain is stimulated, another put to sleep, and the veil is thus lifted. And as to the future, be it remembered that the soul of a man is a thing of eternity and casts its light before as behind it."

"But how did you do it?"

"By a secret wisdom, aided externally by this smoke of a precious gum and by the wine and music. These lull the external senses and set the spirit free. It can be done far otherwise, but this is a way opened to us by the Imaum of his Majesty, our lord Mohammed, the lord among mankind."

"I always thought it probable that roll was stolen when the tomb was first robbed," said Revel. "We know it now."

"Will you make me see more? Show me the place where I am going in India. Then, if it agrees with fact, I will believe."

Again the immobile silence of the two. Again Ibn ul Farid took his hand in a close, cold pressure. The courtyard and fountains glided slowly away like a vanishing dream, or as the scenes in a theatre are lifted and disappear, disclosing what lies behind.

He saw a blue lake stretching further than eye could see, balustraded with marble as though for a great king's garden pleasance. Strange trees

waved about it, children of a more torrid sun. Far out in the blue and sparkling water were white palaces, faint and dream-like, built to all appearance on the very bosom of the water, floating as it were like the white lotus flowers of the gods. Surely it was too beautiful to be earthly! A dream barge, with high, curved bow and stern glittering with gold, the rowers in garments of gold and scarlet, hovered near the latticed windows, that the veiled princesses might take their pleasure in the cool water world about them. Now, very softly, that scene glided by, and he saw instead snow mountains that dwarfed his utmost imagining, storming the skies with silver peaks and guarding in their recesses a valley most beautiful, a land of rivers and forests and high, secret passes where the bear and the snow leopard are lords, and above it the very airs of paradise. He saw it, he thirsted for its loveliness, and then—remorselessly—that too was gone. The snowy ramparts drifted away in wreaths of mist and again the courtyard was about him and Ibn ul Farid had dropped his hand and sat with his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" cried Seton, and sat silent for a minute, lost in the memory, his brain still lit up with the same strange sensation of perfect lucidity.

"If you will tell us what you have seen, we may locate it," Revel reminded him.

He obeyed with eagerness.

"That is the water palace of Mianpur. I know it well," said Revel. "You may feel certain that you will be there. For the last, it is the Valley of Kashmir. You will go there also. You will then be satisfied that this is truth."

Seton reflected a minute.

"Yes, but these places are known to you. Have I unconsciously been put in touch with your brain? If so, it is wonderful, but not wholly convincing. Is it possible that my own secret thought can be read and set before me here? Something unknown to any one but myself. There is no sort of belief I could refuse then."

Revel turned to Ibn ul Farid and spoke with him in his own language. At first he shook his head, but Revel persisted, eagerly now, and at last, throwing his hand out as if with a gesture of surrender, Ibn ul Farid evidently agreed. Through Revel he desired Seton to lie back on the divan, and folding his hands on his breast to compose himself in an attitude like death and to abstract his mind completely from all external matters.

“This is more difficult,” he observed, “but what is impossible to the Supreme, the Unchanging? Fix your thoughts on what you desire to see and relax in soul and body as though in sleep.”

And Seton obeyed, finding it at first amazingly difficult to concentrate, for the Western mind has a tendency to ramble, to spill over, as it were, in all directions, and his thoughts fled hither and thither like startled birds. What he determined to think of, however, was the dugout where he had spent so many hours with Alphonse and Conway. That would indeed be a test, since these men could know nothing of that closed chapter in his eventful life. At last he succeeded. The birds had fled away; his mind was like an empty cup. Another sight and hearing flowed into it. He heard the roar of the guns overhead. The corner where Alphonse used to lie on an old rug, smoking, smoking eternally, became visible. Conway was there with his long legs hoisted up before him on a box. It began to take shape, to form almost solidly. Alphonse—was that his voice, high, animated, dramatic? It was going to work—to be successful—he felt it! A strange power was sculpturing, painting the whole scene before his eyes. He saw, he heard, and, even as this happened, a stronger impulse shattered the picture and he saw instead—a woman. Clear as in life, Venetia was before him. A great tree towered above them—a lime tree, surely, with perfumed tassels of blossom filling the air with delight, hummed over by innumerable bees—a soft *bourdon* of sound like the audible dreaming of some divine day in summer. But such a tree his eyes had never seen. It soared aloft carrying the sweet breath of earth into the very sky. Its grey and mighty bole was a fortress, its boughs swept the ground and bowered the grass at its roots with dense layers of shade. Half hidden by the branches, tangled among them, she stood, her hands stretched out entreating, her eyes full of fear and doubt. “I can’t come through. I can’t get to you!” she breathed. “I have tried and tried. You must come to me.” He did his best, but the resolute boughs barred the way. And suddenly a great wind lifted the leaves and flung them apart, and he rushed through the opened way and caught her in his arms with passionate joy. Their lips met; he felt her trembling against him.

It was gone.

He sat up, his mind clear as brilliant daylight. He sprang back to real life. There was no drifting, no gradual recovery. He stood up and looked at them. This was no place for a man among these Oriental enchantments! Well enough for play, he loathed it directly a woman’s name was brought into it—a name he loved. Who could tell how much these men knew, what means they had of bedevilling the brain and forcing it to the revelation of its most

sacred things? No, no more of this for him. He was on guard at once, every sense keen as bared steel.

"Most interesting," he said coldly. "I am very much indebted to your friend, Mr. Revel, and what I thought of, I saw—a dugout in France. The mind is a curious thing, and you have given me a wonderful demonstration of its powers."

He looked at his watch.

"Later than I thought! I must be getting back. Are you coming? No? Then will you express to this gentleman my thanks for a most enjoyable afternoon? I am sorry not to have seen my host. Will you give him my acknowledgments for his hospitality?"

Not a moment would he delay. The beauty had become hateful, and it was as if he had seen an obscene mask grinning among the glowing fruits and flowers. Every minute of delay was unbearable.

He made for the great gates, the other two attending him with the utmost courtesy. He gave a *baksheesh* to the Nubian porter, and the wide leaves swung open, and, closing behind him, shut in the green and sparkling paradise of the courtyard. He strode through the narrow, jabbering streets outside, flushed, furious with disgust at himself for ever having gone there, for having trafficked in these unwholesome byways and possibly exposed Venetia's name to insult. He felt as if he had dragged her in the mud. And yet, not willingly. He had purposely emptied every thought of her out of him and deliberately called up the other for a screen. Strange! Then it must be true that in some stratum far below the conscious will were the thoughts and impulses that really dominate a man and mould his life. Those were the forces to be counted with—not the weak little hopes and wishes that flutter the surface. A man is the slave of his secret being, not of his conscious will. Well might the ancients say "Know thyself," before they added "Rule thyself." But how? He was frightened of his own inmost being as he hurried along with a sense of flight.

The other two turned back slowly into the shade of the trees.

"Extolled be the perfection of the Perfect, who is merciful to his servants! This is indeed a very good subject," the man who had been called Ibn ul Farid said calmly. "And having taken the impression of the ring last time, it was easy to slip the duplicate upon his finger this time. He cannot know, and the true one is now at your disposal, benefactor of the humble. Guard it as the apple of your eye. Great are its powers in inducing the trance and the sight. He spoke also while he saw—that is well. This ring is a priceless gem indeed."

“It is of great virtue, and we shall need it with a greater than he. The plans are laid, Saad; the way is made and the goal in sight. Fortunate indeed was I to secure the ring.”

“Certainly, Oh, dispenser of bounty. Also we have learned that the Frankish woman is the mainspring of his heart, and he who knows this secret rules the man. Praise be to Allah, who has allotted to some wisdom, to other men folly!”

“Praise be to Allah!” echoed Revel mechanically. “It is done—we have him now. Yet I noted his manner changed when he awoke this last time, and, as it were, suspicious and angry. We must risk nothing, for he is our eyes in the camp of the enemy. I will take Umar, not you, with me to India.”

“He also saw and taught us the secret of the throne. He is a glass to read in, praise be to the Eternal!” said the man. He paused and added:

“Oh, prince of wisdom, let him never guess it was your will that moved him. Proceed very slowly and with caution, Oh, hope of the world, and he shall be in your hands to guide as you will. The woman also.”

“The woman is less than the dust in my sight,” Revel said coolly. “In the great game, what is a woman—and a Frankish woman! No, sharer of my wisdom, she is but a means to hold the man. I now depart, and you shall abide in this my house and be answerable for it until I return in joy. May the blessing of the Most Merciful and Beneficent make fragrant your life. Great shall be your reward from the lady and from me. She also works steadfastly to our ends even now.”

“Depart, my lord, in the blessing of the Unity,” the other answered gravely. “Yet stay a moment and worship. It is *el Asr*.”

For the sweet cry of the *Muezzin* rang from the minarets at hand, summoning the faithful to prayer. Revel started as if from a dream, and, following his friend’s example, prostrated himself with face turned to Mecca and recited the necessary prayers.

After this, attended by the man called Ibn ul Farid, he went to the gate, which was opened for him with profound reverence.

CHAPTER XI

THEY were passing down the Suez Canal with the desert sands dreaming into the horizon in golden levels, calm as the sea at sunset, more remote than the mind of man can conceive, with here and there a blue pool of shadows—mirage water to tempt the traveller to hope and death. Long strings of camels were picking their disdainful way through Wonderland, the foremost blending insensibly with the background and vanishing like ghosts into the infinity that stretches beyond—caravans travelling to reach the House of Nothingness, the cold caravanserai where so many have preceded them to rest covered by deeper sands than the desert's own—the sands trickling through Time's hourglass, obliterating all footsteps and covering men's bones with the pall of quiet.

"When first I came down here," said Venetia to Seton as they watched the camels, "the old gods of Egypt were good to me, and I saw a wonderful mirage. I looked over the desert, and there—just where I'm pointing now—was a long stretch of blue water and a great boat with oars passing slowly over it. And I think it was the sun-boat of old Egypt, the boat of Ra, as you see it in the tomb frescoes. Wasn't that wonderful?"

"Wonderful! And what had you done to deserve such a favour?"

"Many things. I've burnt incense before an image of Osiris wearing the *Pshent* and holding the Cross of Life in one stony hand. We had a noble image of him in my uncle's house in Mianpur, given by Mahmud Mirza, who collects beautiful Egyptian things. They told me he was a god, and so I did my best with incense bought in the bazaar and hibiscus flowers from the garden. My uncle never discouraged me. You see, he believed all the gods are One, and that you may name that One as you please. Does the desert give you a feeling of measureless antiquity—more so than the Sphinx, the pyramids, or anything in Egypt?"

"Measureless. It's because it always brings the image of the caravan, and that is life itself. See how those camels blend with the distance and are gone! We shall never see them again—

'They have entered the Valley of Silence and lifted the Triple Veil,'

and it drops behind them. Done!"

She caught his wistful tone instantly.

"Yes—I know. But they are never really gone. They return.

but life is immortal, and they come back, refreshed with sleep for the new life, bringing their sheaves with them.”

“Their sheaves?”

“Things they have done and thought. What they have made themselves.”

“That might be a very terrible business,” he said, staring out over the terrible golden calm. “Suppose a man charged with malignant hatreds, with treasures of knowledge, remembering and using the past as a weapon with which to break the present, not one knowing or guessing his powers—think of the possible wreckage! No, no, let me believe the dead are dead. There’s no safety for us else!”

“Yet that explains some of the world-wreckers and world catastrophes. It does away with the possibility of injustice. Perhaps it’s because I heard that creed so early that all others seem so illogical to me.”

“You rest on it? The thought of birth and re-birth doesn’t weary you? I have been so tired sometimes of this life as to have very little heart for another.”

“Perhaps that proves that you need it all the more. But ask Jadrup Gosein. He will tell you what will make you understand. Do you suppose Mr. Revel can remember his incarnations? He must have had a strange past.”

Her mind hovered over him with a kind of dread. Possibly it touched some deep-seated nerve in Seton’s being, something subconscious that shrank from—was it a memory or a prescience? He had come across Revel standing alone in the bows one evening, where the sea curved aside from the sheer thrust of the ship like cut crystal, breaking into rainbows of spray. The sun had just set and the evening star trembled in dying rose and gold, a perfect chrysolite, with a loveliness unspeakably tender and remote in the awful vastness of sea and sky. His footfall was silent and he had time to note the rigid look with which Revel stared eastward, fixed as fate. It transformed the beauty of the face, made it hieratic, monumental, cold as death. It disowned human sympathy as utterly as the colossal kings of Abu Simbel with their stern gaze on things unutterable to man. It absolutely startled Seton. What could be behind it? What was in the man’s mind? He had always felt that he could make nothing of Revel, could not even analyse his own feeling about him. There were moments when he liked him; at all times he was ready to acknowledge his singular attraction. But for all that, he stood apart. You got no nearer. There seemed always to be something enigmatic about him, as sometimes, in watching a bird or an animal deep in

the interests of its unknown day, a feeling will seize a man weirdly enough —a realization of a world and purpose he can never understand. He would appear, the latest magazine in his hand, immaculately dressed, a figure of to-day (if he were not rather too good-looking for the part), would lounge in his chair discussing the most recent news of the world, the bourses, what not—but all the time there was that something inexplicable about him. And now —that strange, fixed look flashed out a hidden writing in Seton's mind. It was a Revel he had never known, no longer the agreeable sphinx of society, but a man with mysterious power behind him—for good or evil, who could tell? A man with a fixed purpose as mysterious as the preoccupations of an ant or an archangel; it might be above or below humanity, but ordinary humanity it was not.

He was so lost in his sight invisible as to be quite unconscious of Seton's observation until he turned to retreat as quietly as he had come. Then his foot jarred a bolt and Revel swung round on his heel, his face a play of light and colour instantly.

"The only quiet place in the ship," he said. "I come here sometimes to enjoy the sunsets and think ahead in a book I'm writing. It has kept me engrossed more or less ever since we started."

Something had engrossed him. They had only had a glimpse or two of him, and even his meals were served for the most part in his fine cabin. There had been some speculation as to the nature of the business. Perhaps this explained it. The mind is always on the rebound from the mysterious, and already Seton's was questing for the simple explanation Revel supplied. They went aft together, discussing the weather and small events of the voyage, and though the incident could not be forgotten, it blurred and subsided.

That evening, almost as if he felt his seclusion had been noticeable, Revel came on deck after dinner and made his way to the corner where Seton always encamped with the Grants.

It was a glorious night of deep tranquillity, the stars very large and lucent, Venus, like a lesser moon, sending a quivering path of light over the marble blackness of the sea.

"I'm very glad to see you at last!" Sara said briskly. "Where on earth have you been? I thought you must have fallen overboard."

"That really might have been pleasanter! No, I have been at work. Hard work. I got so engrossed that I had even my meals in my cabin."

"And what work are you doing? Interesting?"

He stood, finishing a cigar and looking down on the group with a friendly smile.

"That depends. Interesting to me. A book."

"A book? A novel? I guess—a story of ancient Egypt."

"Quite and utterly wrong! A history."

The young, smooth outline of his face looked so unlike a historian that Sara told him so, laughing.

"How you underrate me, Miss Grant! Why not a history? But not quite the usual sort. A history of the future, drawn from a certain knowledge of the past."

Venetia looked up at him.

"Certain knowledge of the past? That sounds impossible. What do we really know about the past? A few records that may or may not be true, *must* be coloured to the taste of the recorder, a few monuments—and the rest—the real life of the people—dead and gone, for ever out of reach."

He pulled a chair up and sat down by her.

"You are right, and wrong. It is hopelessly gone for those who only live in the surface world about us, the world of the three dimensions; but there are men who can see more than that. I have known them. There is a whole chain of ideas quite different from those which possess the world at large, and these men have access to them."

"Is it possible to believe that?" Seton asked. "They would be inhuman, terrible, possessed of powers we can't even imagine. They might let loose devastating forces. . . ."

Revel lit another cigar before answering.

"They might. But don't you think a higher wisdom demonstrates the futility of such an argument as violence?"

"I like not the security," Seton said, launching his quotation with a final air.

"Like it or not, it's the only one. These men have these powers. I call them four-dimensional men, for they are not deceived by the limits of time and solidity, and, taking them for what they are, they think in totally different terms and can do things which appear miraculous to the ordinary man."

"What things?" Even Sara's knitting went down on her knee and she leaned forward to listen.

“They can make seemingly solid bodies pass through seemingly solid bodies—their own, for instance. They can transfer themselves from one place to another instantaneously, for to them our time-limit means nothing.”

“But how—how?” cried Sara.

“That is impossible to explain clearly to those who are bound by ordinary conditions, so I can only say that such a man might disappear from any enclosure you would understand, by a movement in the fourth dimension.”

Seton had been reflecting while he listened.

“Isn’t it possible,” he asked slowly, “that there may be more dimensions than four, and that one of these omnipotent persons may be cornered at any moment by coming in contact with something as inexplicable to him as his fourth dimension is to us?”

A sort of quick tremor ran over Revel’s face like a ripple on water.

“That is possible,” he said briefly.

“Does this knowledge include the belief in reincarnation?” Venetia asked.

“Certainly, and that is what I meant to say when I began. True history, as against fiction history, can be revived by a man who understands that time is not a line, as we think it, but a plane where an initiate can dwell and move from one event to another as he pleases.”

On an impulse he could not define, Seton asked abruptly, “Is Ibn ul Farid such a man?”

Again the quick ripple of nerve-play in Revel’s face, but he answered composedly.

“Certainly. What I have told you of his vision in the Valley of Khar demonstrates it—and your own experience with him in Cairo.”

Seton winced. He had never mentioned that incident to the Grants. For reasons not entirely clear to himself, he did not wish Venetia to hear of it. But he had only himself to blame for Revel’s reply.

“I believe you thought it remarkable at the time,” Revel added, and it was natural that Venetia should ask eagerly what it had been.

Much against his will, Seton gave a brief account of all but the last vision, ending, somewhat ungraciously, “An experience I should never repeat. I think it extremely unwise to dabble in things one doesn’t understand.”

“Surely that would rather limit one’s horizon?” Revel’s tone was perfectly courteous, but something in his cool, bright glance pointed the implication. It roused Seton into instant opposition.

“Can you explain to me how the thing was done?” he asked doggedly. “For if not, I’m afraid I must persist in thinking that anything that subjects the brain to another man’s will, is distinctly undesirable.”

“Are we sure it was subjected at all? In each case (as I remember what happened) you asked Ibn ul Farid a question and yourself supplied an answer. You asked him to show you where and by whom the theft of the papyrus had taken place. Surely your brain was stimulated, rather than subjected. It was not at his will you saw, but at your own. Again, with your vision of Mianpur—he simply set your brain free.”

“I don’t want another man to have any power over my brain, either to bind or loose,” said Seton, on tenterhooks lest Revel should make any reference to the last vision and eager at all hazards to avert the talk. Revel made the obvious retort, but with his invariable courtesy.

“The easy remedy for that is to abstain from asking questions. Ibn ul Farid is the last man to force his science on any one. People seek him. He does not seek them.”

“That is perfectly true, and I apologize. All I mean is, it is an experience I would not invite again.”

“Feeling like that, you would be well advised to avoid it,” Revel said pleasantly; “but I think if you made a study of it, you would find it very simple. It has nothing whatever to do with hypnotism or suggestion.”

Venetia had listened with breathless attention.

“It’s all profoundly interesting. Do you mean, Mr. Revel, that these things, this knowledge, lies around us for the taking? Because, if so, you are saying exactly what my uncle’s friend, Jadrup Gosein, teaches. Word for word. He says the bonds of time and space in which we live are pure illusion, and that any man who reaches a certain point of knowledge can be free of them.”

“That is true. All wise men see the same truth. The bonds of dogmatic religion are dropped long before a man reaches that higher knowledge.”

“But, according to Jadrup Gosein, that knowledge is open to bad men as to good—and that means ruin,” she added.

“The wise man sits above good or evil, as we know it,” Revel said, coldly. “The phrases of ordinary morality are meaningless in his ears.”

“Then I hope,” Sara put in emphatically, “that none of us will ever attain that so-called wisdom; for to live in the world as we know it, without morality, may be all very well to discuss, but very unpleasant to try. And I must say, Venetia, if that was the teaching of your Jadrup Gosein, the less you have to do with him the better. I never liked your uncle’s taking you there.”

She shattered the speculative tone of the talk into the practical. Revel said gravely, “I agree with you, Miss Grant. These Hindu ascetics are often very dangerous people and very far from the asceticism they profess. They have that worst kind of ignorance, the ignorance which assumes knowledge and misleads innocent people.”

But Venetia flashed, indignant.

“So far from Jadrup Gosein’s ignoring morality, it forms the very ground of his teaching. He lives and teaches the Sermon on the Mount translated into Indian terms, and he declares that that is the only road to the highest knowledge, where the miracles Mr. Revel talks of become nothing because they are lost in light. And when men salute Jadrup Gosein they say only, ‘Praise the indwelling Deity,’ because he is so near attainment.”

Bright tears of emotion glittered in her eyes. She added, impulsively, as she rose, “I think Ibn ul Farid’s powers must be very unlike his.”

Revel’s look was indescribable. Seton thought it was one of repulsion.

“ ‘One star differeth from another star in glory!’ ” he said coolly. “Well, I must say good night, Miss Grant, and return to the grind. How long do you stay in Bombay? Only a night? Exactly my plan. I go on next morning to Ahmadabad, and expect to be at Mianpur in about a fortnight. What do you intend, Mr. Seton? I do wish I could have stayed to show you round Bombay. There are interesting bits still, if one knows where to look.”

Seton thanked him—he would go on the day after they reached Bombay. He knew no one there—had a friend at Poona, and they had planned for Mahabaleshwar. He would see Ahmadabad himself later, on his way to Mianpur, his friend Marriott had settled that.

They separated, and Revel scarcely was seen again until the *Akbar* lay alongside the Ballard Pier. He did not even appear at the Raj Hotel, but sent a chit to say he was leaving so early next morning for Ahmadabad that he would wish them good-bye until the meeting at Mianpur. Seton saw him next morning as he left the hotel, and he waved his hand, laughing.

“Just off to Ahmadabad!” he said. “And you to Poona? *Au revoir!*” He waved his hand and was gone.

Sara and Venetia went off an hour later, and when Seton had seen them go he felt alone in India.

If the voyage had not brought him any mental satisfaction, it had at least restored his health. The morbid cloud of depression had drifted away in the cool sea breezes, and he was himself again, strong and stable in mind and body. Much that he had felt during the past four months seemed sickly dreaming now. He wondered also why he had felt such disturbance about Ibn ul Farid. The man had gone his way, never to be seen again, and the thing itself had been a curious experience and therefore worth while. He regretted his little outbreak of annoyance as something churlish and prejudiced. It certainly might have appeared so to Venetia with her quick interest in such matters. Summing up his relation to her, he believed he had neither lost nor gained ground. There had been nothing to encourage him to a step further, but nothing to discourage him in the friendly position he had gained. He might still hope, but love's thermometer registers changes more sensitive than any mercury's and he had an instinct that it was safer to delay.

Summing up Revel, he began to feel that his estimate of him was overcharged, possibly foolish, and a part of the morbid condition left by his illness. An arresting personality, and with its own reserves, perhaps not especially congenial to himself. Mianpur might reveal more, but he scarcely expected that.

So he labelled Revel and laid him aside, and set himself to the business of sightseeing. There was to be more time than he expected, for word came from Poona that Marriott could not meet him for a week, and then at Ahmadabad. He caught himself wishing that Revel, with his knowledge of the place, might still be there when they arrived.

CHAPTER XII

INDIA is a dark woman, gliding with soft bare feet behind the curtains of the palace. She is the jewelled mystery, the perfume of the rose. Hers is the magic that, if ever it vanishes into the hard light of day, will leave the whole world beggared of its most poignant romance. And on Seton it laid its spell, as it does on the few who tremble lest the time should come when it ceases to be more than a story in a printed book—no longer living and lovely.

That first day when he saw India face to face he never would forget. The goddess in her shrine is not revealed in Bombay, the city of the Sahib, but even the curtains of common life which veil her are splendid with their woven sunshine of light and colour.

> "Behold how Colour, the soul's bridegroom, makes
> The House of Heaven splendid for the bride,"

and he saw colour rained about him from the fervid sky until the rejoicing of the earth was like gongs and cymbals.

It was the evening of that first day of miracle, and he was passing the door of the Hotel Carnatic. The heat was relaxing as the sun sank, and the great glass lounge was thrown open to catch the sea breeze, the lights already lit under the palms. Consequently the people inside were brilliantly visible to passers-by, and he looked up instinctively.

Singular! In the right-hand corner Revel was sitting, in close talk with a man whose face was turned from the street. Revel was facing it full, so it was impossible to be mistaken, in spite of the astonishing fact that he was wearing a turban, though the rest of his kit was European. It certainly altered his face considerably, bringing out a strong Oriental strain that was new and startling. He looked like the handsome, long-eyed men all about the city, who were at present difficult to distinguish, so alike, so romantic did they seem to an unaccustomed eye. But Seton was keen and retentive about faces. He knew his man at once. Singular. He had seen Revel go off with his baggage for Ahmadabad, had heard his very words, yet here he was. Then why—Seton halted.

Certainly a man may change his plans—he had changed his own, but yet—he was always being lulled into confidence about Revel, always being jolted out of it. Possibly there was an underlying distrust that never was

quite asleep, do what he would. Why should he have made a mystery? Nobody cared a damn whether he stayed in Bombay or didn't! What one did hate was the sort of thing that made you feel there were plottings and plannings going on under the surface. If people had nothing to conceal why should they not be open and aboveboard? He resolved he would walk in casually and casually let Revel know that he had seen him. Up the steps he marched and straight to the office.

"Mr. Revel staying here?"

A copper-coloured finger travelled down the list of guests, a beady black eye pursued the finger. The *chichi* English clipped his ear.

"Sartainly not, sar! There is noa gentleman off that name. Oah no!"

"But I saw him in the lounge!"

"Noa, sar! He iss not."

"I will just walk in and look for myself. I saw him."

"Sartainly, sar."

The clerk drew back, but watched him with some curiosity.

He walked into the lounge. The two men were still there, the light was bright, there were not many people about. He walked straight to Revel—and pulled up like a horse on its haunches in sheer astonishment.

Revel, if it was Revel, brushed him with his eyes with the polite indifference of a stranger and went on with what he was saying.

Seton began to doubt his own eyes. His certainty wavered. It must be—it couldn't. . . . He turned on his heel and back to the office.

"Who is that gentleman in the lounge? There in the corner?" He pointed an impatient finger. The bored Babu smiled agreeably.

"There, sar? Yess. Hiss name is Ibn ul Farid. A gentleman from Persia via Cairo."

Seton stared at him, and without another word went down the steps and out into the gathering dusk—for the sun had dropped like a shot bird.

What to make of it, he could not tell for the life of him. He stood outside, secure that he could not be seen in the shadows, and stared in. Revel! Though, if even it were Ibn ul Farid, there was no reason why he should cut him. He stood so for some minutes.

> " 'If I don't know you, Johnny my boy, in spite of all your beard,
> Why, then I am a duller dog than ever has yet appeared!' "

he hummed to himself, turning away contemptuously at last. He hated that kind of thing! Then, as the situation grew clearer in his brain, he halted once more. Up the steps he went again.

"Can you tell me who the gentleman was who was talking with the first one?"

"Sartainly, sar! That is Sir Gobind Srinavastri."

Seton emerged, reflecting deeply. He knew the name—who did not? A wealthy merchant, his firm specializing in the gold brocades of India, the *kincob*, as it is called, which the Indian princes wear when, like birds of paradise, they glitter at state functions. Curiously enough, his name had been mentioned on board the *Akbar*, for Venetia Grant, describing a durbar at Delhi, spoke of the magnificent princes, and added:

"And I have a dress of the very same. Pure woven gold, shot with rose, like a splendid sunset. My uncle brought it from India, and it is guaranteed to last three hundred years. It's the best of all, for it came from the great *kincob* people, Srinavastri."

"Who's that?" Revel had asked. "Never heard of him."

"Oh, every one who knows India has heard of him. Very rich, very charitable. He was knighted because of the big hospital he built at Mianpur. Sir Gobind Srinavastri."

"A Hindu, then?"

"Of course, and very bigoted. He loathes the Mohammedans. We went over the hospital at Mianpur. It is a very fine one."

"Strange I should never have heard of him."

"Yes; but then, you see, he only mixes with his own people. You might be at Mianpur for ever and never see him. He is never there. I believe he lives at Satispur, where he has a palace."

Seton recalled all this now. Odd, for he could take his oath that the two men, talking eagerly and with heads so close together in the lounge, were anything but strangers. Why should Revel have denied that he knew a man held in such high respect in India? If his denial were true, how came they to be on such intimate terms so soon after landing in Bombay? Why should Srinavastri be hand in glove with a Mohammedan like Ibn ul Farid? And why, most of all, should Revel be masquerading as Ibn ul Farid?

Digesting these questions he walked back to the Raj. His mind was by no means a quickly working one when intrigue was concerned, and he could not make head or tail of this. It was contradictory, foolish as a complication

in a dream. How could Revel for one moment suppose he could be unrecognized by a man who knew him well? Childish! That was all there was to it. He should certainly speak frankly on the point when they met at Mianpur, and Revel could take it or leave it as he pleased. Also he should tell Venetia—no, Sara would be better!—exactly what had happened, and leave her to draw her own conclusions. He was beginning to distrust and dread the friendship between those two women and Revel.

These thoughts occupied him a good deal during his solitary dinner and escorted him to the smoking room, where he sat looking out upon the lights of the Apollo Bandar, more than a little irked by them. Suddenly a light figure passed between them and his unseeing eyes, and Revel was drawing up a chair beside him. Instinctively Seton hitched his own back, the white of his eye showing a little like a dog's on guard. Revel was perfectly easy and good-humoured.

"I felt I owed you a little explanation of what must have seemed very odd to you just now, so I ran round on the chance of catching you before you were off to Poona."

"I need no explanations," Seton said stiffly. "If a man cuts one, one doesn't seek his further acquaintance. I really think we needn't discuss it."

"For my own sake you owe me the opportunity. I value your good opinion and can't forfeit it for nothing. I thought you had left for Poona this morning. . . ."

"That was obvious." There was a polite cynicism in the remark.

"It's a part of my explanation. I know no one in Bombay and it allowed me to meet Sir Gobind Srinavastri in the character of a man for whom, although he is a Mohammedan and Sir Gobind a Hindu, Sir Gobind has the highest respect, though they have only corresponded."

A pause. Seton kept a frigid silence but was listening with all his ears. Revel went on.

"The Srinavastri firm has had great business dealings with a firm which employed Ibn ul Farid as an intermediary. It was impossible for Ibn ul Farid to come to India, and I undertook to see him instead, but, as he entirely refuses to meet any Mohammedans but Ibn ul Farid, for whom he has a personal respect, and will have nothing to do with Europeans, I was obliged to use Ibn ul Farid's name in the hotel, and you will see that your coming up to me at the moment would have been most unfortunate. In the hurry of the moment, I was able to think of no better plan than to act as I did. This

explanation is due to you, but also to myself. I detested the necessity, and apologize."

Seton reflected. Nothing could be franker than Revel's manner, and he had spoken with the utmost earnestness. But there was an unpleasant scent of intrigue about the whole business for all that.

"Do I understand that Sir Gobind believed you to be a man you are not?"

"That was an unpleasant necessity of the position."

"Surely it will be uncomfortable for you, to say the least of it, if you come across him later in India?"

"Not at all. He knows the fact already. There never was a thought of concealing it after the interview. He would not have seen me, had not the Persian firm arranged his meeting with Ibn ul Farid. Nothing was said and he took me for granted. Directly the business was done, I explained who I was. I should have done so anyhow, but your dropping in as you did clinched the matter. I saw the position was at the mercy of chance."

Again a pause. Seton burned to ask how the revelation was taken, but would say nothing. Revel went on instantly.

"He was quite pleasant about it, said even an old man's prejudices were not so bigoted as all that came to, and that if any other matters arose while I was in India, he would see me, in view of the circumstances. The thing being done, he accepted it. Then I came away to you. Have I made myself clear?"

Seton felt he could raise no legitimate objection. After all, in business dealings with Orientals you must accommodate yourself to prejudices which seem very unreasonable to the average Western, and there was no question as to the esteem Sir Gobind was held in by the British Government. He thought Revel had certainly cleared up the situation to a great extent. He was just about to speak when one of the servants brought a note in for Revel and handed it with all due ceremony and salaam.

"Excuse me," he said, and opened and read it, immediately afterwards putting it in Seton's unwilling hand. "It's from Sir Gobind, and in his rather ineffective English. I should like you to read it."

> Dear Sir, Our interview. I remitted to speak that the sum half lac rupees creditable from my firm be paid usual interest through respected Ibn ul Farid fourth day of approaching month. Kindly inform him. Signed. Gobind Srinavastri.

"Thank you," said Seton, and handed it back. "You have certainly explained matters, and there is no more to be said. I did not need to read the

note, though I appreciate your motive in giving it to me. Of course I shall say nothing about this to any one. I regard it as confidential."

"Thank you. That will be better. Srinavastri is a very peculiar man. Utterly loyal to the Government of India, one of its strongest supporters, but as bigoted a Hindu as ever stepped, and held away from Europeans by every caste prejudice imaginable. His theory of India is the absolute government of the country by England until the natives have evolved about a century further than they are now, but natives and British to be in watertight compartments as far as any social, religious, or racial mixing up goes. Personally, I rather hold with his view. The two peoples can't mix—fire and water are more possible! You must live in India to understand the depth and passion of the racial and religious hatred."

"I must suspend judgment until I know a little of the country."

The talk became general then. Revel deplored the changed attitude of both the Hindus and Mohammedans to Europeans. It was all since the war, of course, and owing to the senseless agitation being carried on by men who knew no more of Europe than they did of Mars. Knowing India, he strongly advised Seton to be courteous but very guarded with any Orientals he might happen to meet.

"The country is like a powder magazine just now—all sorts of explosive stuff lying about. As far as pleasure goes, I shouldn't have come here now. Nothing but business brought me. And if I had had anything to do with Miss Grant and her sister, I should have advised putting off their trip. Women are in the way unless all is smooth sailing. Still—they know the country, and with time matters may improve, for men like Srinavastri have immense influence. But for the present, the old days are gone."

And so on. He stayed an hour or more, and then went off pleasantly, looking a very striking and handsome young Oriental in his turban. He always wore it in India, he said; his work lay among Orientals, and it made them more at home with him.

"And I like it myself. I'm not ashamed to confess that there is a Mianpur princess a long way back in my family history. A most romantic tale—you shall hear it one day."

It all seemed clear enough when Seton got to bed, having instructed his Indian servant as to the start for Ahmadabad. Somehow his enthusiasms were a little ironed out. He could not tell why.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN SETON reached Mianpur some weeks later, Ahmadabad and his other experiences had given him a new outlook on life. India does that for the favoured few she draws to her bosom. They sleep and wake in her arms, and lo! the former things have passed away and a new heaven and earth lie before them.

He tried often afterwards to remember, to analyse the perceptions and reactions which made him India's, but it was never quite possible, for as often as he neared the goal of comprehension he was hurled back upon the inarticulate. How can delight count, and check, and tabulate? He was obliged to keep it to himself in its deepest, for even Venetia could never quite sound his passion. She had grown up in India; beauty and wonder had rocked her cradle, but they met him like a fountain breaking full in his face, half dazed him with rush and rainbow dazzle. There were moments when he longed to be alone, lost in them, shy and silent for years, to see no one, not even Venetia, until his soul had found itself. They told him that Ahmadabad was still true India and that tourists cared little for it. That was glad news. He almost regretted now that Marriott was to meet him there. It might have been best of all alone, wandering, dreaming, forgetting.

It was a wonderful thing to go down at night to the great station, and board the waiting train and glide into the large moonlight that bathed the sleeping land. Mysterious hints of strange things fled by the windows, the alphabet of an unknown tongue. It seemed hard to wait for clearer vision. When he woke, the grey dawn was beginning and new trees loomed up indistinctly. But he was thinking of the slow gradations of an English dawn, for with a tiger leap the sun was over the horizon, and the gorgeous day begun.

How could he describe the strangeness of it all, the thrilling joy, the groping of the mind to open wide, wide to drink it all in and lose no fragment, to be in tune with the beliefs and ideals that have made it what it is? It was one of the moments when the flame of life burns at its clearest, gathering up every vapour into its own intensity.

Sometimes the fields were home-like for a swift instant, with a silvery bloom of dew. But what was that? By a half-dried marsh stood two great white cranes, stiff and motionless as they stand on the screens from Japan. Were they watching for fish, or did they stand there like the illuminated

letter of a missal, for the first page he was turning in the Eastern Wonder Book? One opened huge vans and flapped heavily away over the rice fields, with rigid legs stretched behind him. He knew that flight. He had seen it hundreds of times in faint grey and black lines, with a bough of plum or cherry blossom, but it was a new thing in the dewy fields and with the sunlight smiting the bird's plumage into gold.

Further on, against the khaki background of a trodden opening, a camel caravan was walking, the long necks, decked with blue bead necklaces and scarlet tassels, swaying here and there, snake-like, in search of food, the men running and shouting, brown and half naked, the smoke of the camp fires rising. He knew the caravan. So they have wandered since Abraham denied his fair wife in Egypt, and earlier—since the pyramids first pointed to the North Star. What were the heavy loads heaped by the camp? "Camels that bare spices and much gold and precious stones?" It matters very little. That was the load they bore for him, and sheaves of dreams as well.

The boughs of some acacia-like trees trembled, and suddenly he saw, swinging from branch to branch, Hanuman's silvery-grey apes, grotesquely beautiful in their miraculous lightness and grace. They had the melancholy of a nobler form that is struggling to evolve itself from the uncouthness of a lower, or perhaps of something human that has reeled back into the beast and plaintively remembers what it has lost. Only at rare moments do they sit and think, with all the weight of the world's sorrows in their wrinkled brows and piteous eyes, and then the beast reasserts itself and all is forgotten, and they swing up into the green cloud of leaves, happy, forgetful, bestial once more.

All was strange, even the little woven nests of withered grass that hang from the twigs, "woven homes for the sky-children." And yet, in a sense, nothing was strange. It was just as it should be, like something remembered across far seas, beckoning, welcoming—his own.

The train stopped at Ahmadabad, and as he and Marriott met on the platform, it was chattering and gay as a parrot-house with the hurrying crowds. The people of India may be poor, but they never seem to lack money for a "tikkut," and it was a kind of festival to see the sweetmeat sellers running to and fro with their shallow baskets of twisted sugar and butter and the flat, crisp cakes with spicy seeds sprinkled over them. They buy eagerly, and a copper coin goes far. Strange rose- and orange-coloured drinks are sold, and the lovely brass *lotas* are filled at the stand of running water in the station; carefully filled, for no one must pollute himself or his neighbour by heedlessly touching the cup of another or the stand itself.

Seton stood and watched, entranced. Why had he never heard, never known of this wonder world? They talked of India over there in the weary West, but who was to know what it meant? Most of the people who had been there knew it least of all. But he knew. Europe, with its noise, its wars, its clash of competition, its ravenous thirst for the dollar and all its works, glided smoothly away from his mind, like a dissolving dream, and the East took him.

The gods blessed him in his first choice, for Ahmadabad is indeed true East. It has the narrow, crowded, swaying streets, the wild exuberance of gesture and fierce argument and harsh dissonance that go to make up the daily round. The sellers sit cross-legged and apart on their raised wooden stands, and the buyers haggle, entreat, and argue over a few *pice* as if their souls depended upon the result. Sometimes it comes to blows, and the curious crowd surges over the dispute. It has seen so many, and it will be all the same an hour or a hundred years hence. And Marriott was good company. He understood. A man who could be silent before the breaking wave of rapture.

They wandered silently next day into a great mosque, many-pillared like a pine forest, with rich arabesques of carving in the windows, interlaced to shut out the heavy sunshine; the stones worn smooth and polished with the feet and knees of generations and generations of worshippers turning daily to Mecca in utter faith, rapt in the fierce belief that has drenched the world in blood. It was very dark in there. In the huge quadrangle, with its tank for ablution, a few figures passed dreamily in the dusty sunshine. In a corner where the strong shadow was cut like ebony, a wild fakir rocked to and fro in speechless prayer. He was murmuring the Profession of Faith, or "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful," but no sound could be heard. They went in and left the sunshine outside. It was like stepping into the cool of water—

> "Silence, and sudden dimness and deep prayer,
> And faces of carved angels all about."

But no faces of angels, no living thing must be represented, lest they should sin the sin of Israel and follow strange abominations of human and bestial gods. There was a prevailing colour as of old ivory, faintly lit by the pierced stone windows, and beyond that—nothing, nothing but the chanted Koran with its strong guttural cadences that carry the thought of the worshipper to the sandy Arabian deserts and the man Mohammed—a man like himself, yet lifted up, awful, the trumpet-cry of the Unity of God.

He had not known how much it meant, how much it mattered to myriads of men. Egypt is nominally Islam, but venial, greedy, huckstering. Her beliefs are mummied with her ancient gods and wait the clarion call of another resurrection. Here was the true Moslem passion, bowed before a very tangible and comprehensible God, a strong and just Oriental sovereign, not unlike a Mogul emperor in his pride and prime. His rewards are tangible: fair women, fruits of paradise, riches and joys of which the poorest have known the foretaste and craved the fruition. And his punishments are terrible and swift. It is all hard and reasonable, full of the fatalism that lies in wait for all of us at times. And, as Seton watched, he knew with a flash of comprehension what is known to all who are free of East and West, that this is the faith that yet will drench the world in blood and a baptism of fire. It struck a kind of imaginative shudder into him, so fierce and real was the thing before him.

The Mullah called a boy up and bid him repeat the Declaration of the Unity. He led the way himself, and as he recited it with loud, harsh voice, it sounded like the ring of steel on steel, and Marriott whispered the meaning into Seton's ear.

"Say, He is the One God,
The Eternal God.
He begets not nor is He begot,
And unto Him there is no like."

A pause, and then the sonorous close,

> Oh, Allah, bless our lord Mohammed and his family, and give him superiority and high rank according to Thy promise. I deposit before thee, Oh prophet of God, my everlasting profession from this our day to the Day of Judgment, that there is no god but God, and that our lord Mohammed is His servant and His Prophet. Amen, Oh, Lord of the three worlds.

The deep echoes died away, lessening in the roof, and the two men went out silently as the cry of the *muezzin* fell from the minarets, calling the faithful to prayer, to prayer!

"We shall hear of that faith yet. The sword of Islam is never sheathed," said Marriott, half to himself, as the noise and hurry of the city broke on them again.

"Will it be here?" Seton asked, walking as if in a dream.

"Possibly here. Africa first, more likely. But it's coming."

They went on in silence. They passed along the streets where the tom-toms were beating before a house gaily decorated for a wedding. The

garlands and *tulsi* leaves had withered in the blazing sun, yet the joy of the bridegroom was shrill in the strange twanging instruments and the almost unbearable ardour with which they played and played, and would not cease.

A Jain procession, partly riding and partly on foot, came by, for in Ahmadabad the creeds jostle each other, and how the Emperor's peace is kept, God only knows.

But that procession! Horses decked with gold and silver cloths sweeping the ground, plumed and resetted with vermilion and orange, came along the narrow streets, women and children in brilliant litters or on foot following them, gay as parrakeets, chattering like monkeys, all on their way to the gilded Jain shrine to make their bloodless offerings of nuts, grains, and flowers—for the Jains take no life for food or faith.

Seton turned at last, half exhausted, to the other.

"And you've lived in all this for years! You should know something at last. For God's sake, tell me how it strikes you—what you've got out of it. I'm at sea, man, at sea."

Marriott smiled the unmirthful smile of the visionary from deep-set eyes and hollowed cheeks.

"All this," he said, waving his hand abroad, "is hashish, opium, benj. It gets you by the throat, but would scarcely matter except to the artist, if it were not the flower of a most extraordinary root. There's a man at Mianpur—didn't you say you were going there?—who knows so much about it that he has long forgotten what we call knowledge. His name is Jadrup Gosein. Go to him, if you want any kind of an answer worth hearing."

That recurrent name! He heard Venetia's voice behind Marriott's:

"I never saw—I never shall see a human being so full of joy, shining like an ocean calm in sunshine." He said aloud. "It's curious you should speak of that man. I've heard of him from a friend. What and who is he?"

"A great teacher of the ancient wisdom of India. But I never found any one who could describe him. Go and see him."

"My good man, who am I to approach a great teacher? Even if he talked English, I probably shouldn't grasp a word he said."

Marriott laughed a queer little inward laugh.

"You won't find English any difficulty. And it's a secret they don't know in the West, my friend—but the highest reach of wisdom is perfect simplicity. I've heard a man say to Jadrup Gosein—I've said it myself—'Is

that all?'—and suddenly it dawns on you that a door is broken open and you've stepped out into the fourth dimension."

The fourth dimension! Revel had talked of that—but with how different an intention from Jadrup Gosein's. Was all the world hunting these hidden things of the spirit, each in his own way? Was that the meaning at the heart of this busy life about him? Did they care—did they know? He lapsed into reflection again.

As they sat on the veranda that night in intense, silent moonlight, Marriott suddenly spoke again.

"You know, you've got to be on your guard in India. The fraud, the charlatan, wanders at large, tempted by ignorant Westerns who want to wring a secret out of him which he hasn't got. So he fakes it. Beware of that. And worse still: the hashish-eater of sorts, who really has his visions and believes in them. He is enough to deceive the very Elect. He——"

"But what is there really? What can I bank on?" Seton interrupted. "I don't mind saying to you, for you understand, that, what with the war and one thing or another, I'm adrift. Not that I ever had a secure harbour—I grew up without even the thriftless sort of acceptance which some men give the current ideas of the universe—and the war left the choice between a demoniac kind of ruler and blind chance. For why should such a bloody absurdity happen? Why all the rest of the injustices and contradictions? Is there any man in India or the ends of the earth who can say one reasonable word about it? For I want my reason satisfied as well as my emotions. If so, tell me now."

Marriott looked at him slowly, cautiously.

"The teaching is as reasonable as algebra and there's no department of life it doesn't touch. After studying with Jadrup Gosein, I regretted, and shall regret to the end of my days, that we drew our Western faith from a Jewish source and founded our ethics on the Old Testament instead of those of our own kindred in India. What had we to do with a Semitic people? I don't speak of the Christ himself, who was a true Oriental teacher. I speak of the Semitic attitude to life and death, a thing wholly alien to us, and which has failed the thinkers of our people when brought into collision with science."

"And can this Indian teaching stand the test?"

"From the moment that we Westerns made the discovery that the kingdom of Nature is under the rule of inexorable law, which yet is under the master-law of development, we were fitted to join hands with the Indian

conception, for the teaching of India is that the soul of man also is subject to law and to the controlling law of development. And the teaching is the practical application to life of this conception. We have not yet caught up with them in this matter, but the time is coming."

There was a silence, which each man filled according to his nature, seeing the Eternal through the Self. When Seton spoke again, it was on a different subject. He had had enough to think of. He wanted to drag it into his own den and turn it over there. And Marriott, wise in his generation, said no more. He had learnt from Jadrup Gosein that in due season a man comes to what is his own, and neither too soon nor too late.

The faiths of India! Marriott took him next day to the great Jain temple, the Hathi Singh, by the clay and stone walls of the city. Green parrakeets flew about it, and tiny grey squirrels ran over the domed and carven roofs. Flowers grew about it for the daily services, and here the two Europeans were free to come and go in the temple, for the Jains make no mysteries, and exclude none. They worship the Tirthankars, or saints who have been made manifest on earth, and mercy is the guiding star of their faith, mercy to man and everything that has life, from the greatest to the least.

It is a huge temple with a cloister surrounding it, divided into many-domed cells, and in each sits a marble or alabaster Parsenath or Adenath, with folded hands and glittering crystal eyes that have a sort of superhuman life in the immutable calm of the face.

Two men in white robes, and with an air of calm, abstracted thought, led them round and took them everywhere, even into the golden heart of the innermost shrine. There the people were worshipping, swaying to and fro, with loud, almost Gregorian chants, music that could madden with its strong, harsh iteration. It was the shrine of the Tirthankar Darmnath, a most beautiful youth with a sparkling tiara of diamonds that belied his expression of ecstatic calm. The bloodless offering of fruit and rice lay before him. They put a censer in Marriott's hand and enjoined him to swing it before the gracious image until the fragrant gums ascended in blue spirals. And they robed Darmnath in all his splendours, bringing glories from his treasury, until he was breast-plated in gold and crowned with high-filigreed gold, set with jewels shining coldly as his eyes, and in the fretted gold they set small pink roses and yellow marigolds.

"But what does it all mean?" Seton asked, impatiently, as they came out, Marriott carrying a little tight bunch of the sacred pink roses and marigolds. "They can't *all* be right, and you seem to have the same gusto for every one."

“Except the Moslem, where you get the Semite again,” rejoined Marriott, tossing a few crumbs of biscuit to a small grey squirrel perched beside them unafraid upon a twig. “They have all the same root. There is no real quarrel between them, and though the Jain carries certain things to excess, he means what they meant three thousand years ago. No, I have no quarrel with any of the faiths out here. They are children of the same mother. But, for a change—suppose you come and look at the glories of Srinavastri’s *kincobs*. He has a wonderful store of them here, and it’s another side of Mother India.”

Srinavastri! Seton’s thoughts were sent spinning on a very different orbit. Revel—the Carnatic—He turned at once to Marriott.

“You know your India, old man. Should you think it likely that Sir Gobind Srinavastri would be found transacting business in a European hotel with a man of doubtful nationality, probably a Mohammedan?”

“I should think it about as unlikely a proposition as any in the Peninsula.”

“But if you saw it with your own eyes?”

Marriott reflected.

“I should be completely and entirely at sea. D’you mean to say you saw it?”

“I was certainly led to believe so. What do you know of Srinavastri?”

“Super-rich, friend to our Government. Super-devout Hindu. Loathes the Moslem and all his works.”

“Then I give it up,” said Seton. “But you know all sorts and conditions of men. Bear in mind I told you I saw it, and if anything else opens on the trail, keep your eyes skinned and tell me. Remember!”

Marriott promised incredulously, and led the way up dark, toppling stairs into a dark, low-ceiled room, smelling abundantly of garlic and tumeric, with bales of goods piled upon the shelves with less display than the village mercer makes of his tawdry wares. And there four agitated men and a shrieking woman fell upon them. Should it be muslins woven with gold and fine as a floating web of sunset? Or silver saris you could breathe away from the face of beauty? Or should it be *kincob*?

Seton sat down, an emperor for the moment, and suddenly a sea of rippling splendour overflowed the trodden floor, a sea of pure gold shot with noble colour—surely the most splendid work of man in any textile art, brocaded, flowered, silvered, supple as satin. He thought of Venetia, and felt the delight of laying such magnificence before the feet of the beautiful, but

hesitated, afraid. Finally he chose a length, little dreaming to whose service its splendours would be given. And as they turned to go, Marriott put a question to the head man. Had Sir Gobind Srinavastri been lately in Ahmadabad? The answer, given in some surprise, was brief. “He comes this day from Bombay.”

“Apparently you were right,” said Marriott.

And that night in the dark, Seton dreamed—not of Srinavastri, nor even of Venetia. He dreamed of Darmnath and Adenath, with coldly glittering eyes reflecting the slow wheeling of the constellations across the skies—the army of unalterable Law.

CHAPTER XIV

MIANPUR. HE had broken the journey at Delhi and Agra, and turned a few more picture leaves in the Wonder Book of India, and now before him was one of even more startling beauty. For he had arrived the night before at the rest house in the little city of Mianpur.

A wonderful place indeed, and none the less so because the city was small. Its autocrat had decided that it should be, and would not hear of growth and crowd and squalor near his own royal palaces, and therefore the things by which the city lived transacted themselves in the huge ant-heap of the town of Sellore a few miles distant, and all about these precincts lay a lovely quietude of old-world Indian beauty.

A bazaar, yes, where all the many-coloured merchandise of the Orient was sold in stalls that might have come from some theatre where Oriental beauty had been studied by observant artists and all hint of poverty or squalor omitted from the picture. "Theatrically beautiful" was indeed the first phrase that occurred to Seton, as he lounged and wandered along the narrow streets, sheltered from the sunshine which lay hard and brilliant in the open places outside them. He was looking up, then, at the mighty mosque where Mahmud Mirza himself worshipped. The camels were winding their way, laden with bales from the jungle-covered country outside, and here and there wandered the little mouse-grey bulls, sacred to Shiva, snatching, unforbidden, any dainty that caught their eyes on the stalls of the merchants.

The people passed him in crowds, but though a dark face here and there turned in Seton's direction, as a whole they ignored him. He felt rather like a ghost, present, but not of them. People in former days had told him of kindly curiosity, or laughing crowds about the camera, eager to help and share in the fun. There was nothing of that. They went their way and expected him to go his, and though there was no open hostility, there was thunder in the air. Exactly as Revel had warned him, all was changed since the war. It gave him a curious feeling of helplessness. He could not tap one of their means of communication. He was like a child among grown-up people with their secrets to hide. Still, he rejoiced that he had come. It was true India, the India of the pictures and dreams of long ago, as truly as Ahmadabad itself, but of an entirely different type. Bombay, even Delhi and Agra, were nothing as compared to this, for one who wished to study native life. It was small enough to be comprehensible, yet perfect of its kind.

The rest house was uncomfortable enough, the beds apparently stuffed with boulders, and the dinner last night had been a fowl whose haggard bosom and muscular limbs were discouraging in the extreme. But it was worth it, a thousand times over, and also, there was Venetia. He had not seen her yet. A remnant of good sense compelled him not to thrust himself upon them too soon, to meet them accidentally and then act according to his reception. He had a kind of hope that they might be sightseeing this exquisite morning and their paths cross.

But no. He wandered about until tiffin time, supremely blessed, but for the lingering suspense that kept him on the watch at every turn, and then returned, sated with sunshine and colour, to the remnants of the feast of the night before. And the Fates were to meet him at the threshold.

A Colonel Gifford was at the table, the only other occupant of the bungalow, a pleasant-looking man of about forty-five, apparently in a more communicative mood than he had been the night before, when a few reserved courtesies had passed between them. He explained that he had learnt at the palace, where he had been to announce himself, that Mr. Seton, of Egyptian fame, was the new arrival.

"Seeing the world?" he asked, lighting his cigar after tiffin, when they both spread themselves out to rest in the long wicker chairs. The rest house was on the edge of the city, and only a noiseless, barefooted traffic went by in the soft khaki dust.

Seton, too, was communicative. They had discovered a common acquaintance, and, for another thing, he liked the look of the man—a keen, worn face, very frank and good-humoured, the kind of man you could know all about in ten minutes, if you were observant, open as the day, he was sure. Gifford, too—a good old English name.

"Saw you going about the city. Ever been here before?"

"Never. Only out from Egypt a month or so. Wonderful place, isn't it?"

"The longer you stay here the more you'll think so. You see, this is just a bit of the real old India, kept like a curio in a cabinet. That's why Mahmud Mirza won't have the railway within twenty miles, and the number of tourists allowed in the city is fixed at four a month. Wonderful man, Mahmud! A very good specimen of the ruling prince in India. Indeed, they have a fine record down from the days of the Mogul emperors."

"You know him personally?"

"Rather! I was detailed to look after him more or less when he was a youth at the Princes' college, and I often come to have a look at him.

Generally I stay at the palace, but he has some fellow there with whom he's quite a bit taken up, I believe, and there are ladies at the guest house."

"And what is he like personally, and what does he do with himself? I saw the archway of his palace to-day. Magnificent! Like a frowning old fortress."

"Ah, you should see the inside. I'll get you a chit. He's a fine fellow in his way. A devout Mohammedan, never perfectly at home with the infidel. Looks the Amir to the life, dark, tall, with the look of great race these people have. Educated in England and at Ajmere and speaks English well."

"It must be rather hard for a man like that to be in tutelage to us," Seton said meditatively. "I suppose there's a Resident here who tells him exactly what to do?"

"Well, he's called a Commissioner. Natives call him the 'Kumpsioner Sahib.' But there never has been any difficulty. His predecessor was a tower of strength to us in the bad time."

"You've been a long time in India, Colonel, I take it. What's your view of the feeling here now? Any risk of the Mutiny business again?"

The Colonel looked round cautiously and slightly raised his voice, as though for the benefit of possible hearers.

"Risk? Oh, no, no! Little flurries on the surface. No more. Yes, I've been in India more or less all my life. It runs in the family. We all stick out here. You get to like the life and find it a bit dull at home. Besides, things are changed since the war. I was discussing it with that young fellow who's at the palace now—he seems to know his Europe pretty well and more than a bit about Asia. I should say his head was screwed on the right way."

"Young fellow? You don't by any chance mean Revel?"

"That's his name. A very much all-there specimen. He lives at the palace and is very much with Mahmud Mirza. As much as an outsider can be with a real, pukka royalty. Do you know him?"

"Why, yes, rather well in a way. Do tell me what you know and think of him."

"What I know is nothing. He's very attractive, and I'm told by the Diwan—Minister—I haven't yet seen the Amir—that he knows exactly how to please Mahmud Mirza."

"As how?"

"Oh, he's great on Egyptian antiquities, and that's rather a hobby in the palace. By the way, that ought to get you in. Revel is said to have a far-away

strain of the Mianpur blood in him too, and Oriental leanings and tastes. Mahmud Mirza's mother, the Begam, is a Persian princess, and he thinks so much of his blood that a drop of it makes a kind of kinship, whoever the owner may be. I hear that the Begam, a very clever and wonderful old lady, has accorded audience to Revel, with a pretence of a veil and extremely sociable."

"By George! What an interesting time he must have," Seton said enviously.

"I should say! Make interest with him, if you know him, and you may get a look in. By the way—those ladies at the guest house: they can do anything with the Begam. Grant, their name is. Their uncle, Lord Cheriton, was Commissioner here, and a close friend of Mahmud Mirza's father, as well as his own. Now, if you got to know them——"

"I have the good luck to know them too," Seton said with reserve.

"Why, you're in luck's way, indeed. You should see more than ninety-nine out of a hundred. Especially in view of your Egyptian discoveries. I prophesy you'll hear from his Highness before long."

"Will you be my sponsor?"

"Certainly. And as I'm just idling here, as I often do, I shall have plenty of time at your disposal. Would you like to stroll to the Hathi Bagh Gardens to-day?"

The talk took a wider range after that, and Seton picked up a lot of interesting knowledge from the Colonel, who knew his own India like a book. Only his own, and he pretended to no more. India is not one book, but a library, and one that it would take many lifetimes to master. They were sitting, much at their ease, when a tramp of horses was heard, and at a gay speed a gallant cavalcade came by, led by a princely looking man who rode as though part of his horse—a very centaur. His quick, dark eyes swept over Colonel Gifford and his companion, and he pulled up instantly, halting the whole cavalcade. At his left hand rode Revel. Instantly the Colonel was on his feet, saluting, and Seton knew that he saw the ruler of Mianpur, undistinguished by any splendour except the glorious emerald that clasped his turban and the perfect horses that formed his train. He beckoned to Gifford.

"Ah, Colonel Sahib, you here, and not at my guest house? Is that friendly? When do you come to see me?"

"At your Highness' pleasure. The guest house is occupied by ladies, and an old campaigner like myself does better here."

“Come this evening. Who is this gentleman?”

Seton sprang to Gifford’s side, and was presented in due form as the discoverer of the Egyptian treasures which had startled the world. Revel nodded cordially in the background.

“I consider your visit an honour to my dominions,” said Mahmud Mirza; “and I beg you will come with Colonel Gifford to the palace when he visits me this evening. We have a few antiquities there, but nothing to compare with the interest of yours. We are off to the polo ground now. Will not you two gentlemen follow and see a chukker? Bring horses!”

He motioned to an aide-de-camp, who rode back hell-for-leather along the way they had come, while the Amir and his suite swept on, as gallant and chivalrous a picture as you could see, the guard of cavalrymen with pennons fluttering at their lance heads, and one and all riding like the wind.

“By George, that’s a fine sight! It carries one back to the Middle Ages. I feel like a dowdy anachronism,” cried Seton, craning out to catch the last brilliant flare of colour as they took the corner.

“Not bad, and the polo better still. They play the best game in India here. Worth coming from Europe to see it. I never saw such ponies anywhere.”

And Seton agreed heart and soul when, mounted on black Arabs, they took up their post of vantage, and the game began. A splendid sight indeed, both for skill and fire, Mahmud Mirza easily first in both. Seton was by no means a despicable hand at polo himself and would have given his ears to dash into the scrimmage, but even he was doubtful of holding his own with these perfect cavaliers to whom life and limb seemed matters of no account.

At the end of the first chukker, Revel, who was not playing, drew up and greeted Seton warmly.

“I’ve been here ten days,” he said; “and having a very good time. You came yesterday? Yes, fine sight, isn’t it? He plays sometimes at night with a luminous ball, as the Emperor Akbar used to do. That’s even better. Each man carries a light, and it’s really nerve-shaking to watch. You must certainly see that.”

There was more idle talk in the intervals, for speech was impossible in the soft thunder of the ponies’ hoofs and the frantic excitement of the win and lose. When it was done, the Amir, apparently cool as a cucumber, not a fold of his turban awry, got on his horse again and rode up to the two Englishmen.

“Great game, Amir Sahib!” said the Colonel. “The ponies seem even better this year than last.”

“You can hardly say that of their masters, Colonel—we all grow a little older,” returned the ruler, looking the very picture of handsome manhood in its youth. “No doubt Seton Sahib has seen much better work at Ranelagh. But we do our best. You will both dine at the palace to-night.”

He waved a careless hand, and he and his train clattered and jingled off, the other two riding slowly back, far behind the golden dust cloud their swift passage raised as they went.

It was the fitting end to a day of wonders when they entered the frowning fortress gate of the palace in the velvet dark, lit by countless torches and the less romantic glare of electric light. Seton knew his India so little at that time, that he was startled when they were ushered, with Revel, in to a fine European dining room, furnished with old oak panelling and sideboards in the best manor-house fashion, the great carved chairs decorated with Mahmud Mirza’s cipher in dim gold, and heavy brocaded curtains over the long windows. On the walls were portraits of departed rulers, not, perhaps, of the highest artistic merit, in huge gilt frames, and over the great oak mantel two spirited pictures of the King-Emperor and Queen-Empress, in full state costume, each surmounted by an imperial crown. But for the motionless Indian servants in their white and gold, the scene might easily have been some Jacobean hall in England.

And stranger even than this, the host’s chair at the head of the table was empty, and remained so.

“He never eats with Europeans,” said Revel, replying to Seton’s look! “He comes in afterwards, and I am deputed to do the honours.”

He did them very well, and the dinner was perfectly well served, the plate especially being magnificent and the wines of the best. Revel and Gifford talking absorbed Seton’s interest. Each knew a different aspect of India and each knew it well, though Revel deferred perpetually to the Colonel’s longer experience, setting his own aside with the utmost grace and courtesy. Like all else he did, it conveyed the impression of reserved power, and Seton was inclined to wonder whether, in spite of the difference in years, he might not know more than the other. The Colonel’s English diffidence might belie him, however, he decided, and clearly his own part was to listen and pick up what crumbs he might. They all rose as the coffee came in and Mahmud Mirza followed with his chief of staff, a fine, venerable-looking man, who spoke no English.

Polite questions and replies, and the host, standing, raised his glass to the King-Emperor’s health, with due response from his guests, then led the way

to the library, which still further carried out the illusion of seventeenth century England.

"But, Colonel, I want to see the gorgeous East," said Seton. "I've seen this kind of thing in Sussex. Is all the palace like this?"

"Not a bit of it! Wait till you see the cut-glass bed-steads and armchairs and the gold divans and— Yes, your Highness. Mr. Seton certainly hopes for your permission to see the throne room and so forth."

But the royal eyes were fixed on Seton's ring.

"The little I know about Egypt tells me that is a wonderful ring," he said.

Seton immediately drew it off and put it in his hand.

" 'Thou endest the night,' " translated Revel, standing at his shoulder. "And the singular thing is that it matches my ring in the inscription. There is not another ancient jewel known with this inscription."

Mahmud Mirza compared the two.

"This is very surprising," he said. "Have either of them occult powers? It is certain that some of these rings were worn with that view. It appears to me to be a talisman."

Revel answered gravely, "Mine certainly has, your Highness. Of Mr. Seton's I know nothing."

He took the two rings in his hand and held them while he talked, giving descriptions of others that were famous, then returned Seton's, who slipped it upon his finger, Mahmud Mirza asking that he might be informed if ever it should be for sale, a suggestion that Seton negatived instantly.

They were shown the Egyptian treasures after this—a fine gallery set apart for them and filled with the stern images of gods and Pharaohs and all the objects that had been their delight in life and their solace in death. It seemed a strange taste for an Indian ruler, but there were family reasons for it, his Persian mother being, as he told Seton, a direct descendant of the Persian King Darius who ruled in Egypt. He pointed to several rings and vases inherited from him and the starting point of the collection. Darius had adopted the religion of Egypt, he said, and some strange secrets of its wisdom were preserved in his line. Mr. Revel had been able to give him the history of some of these objects, and he hoped for even more light from Seton. His account of the discovery of the body of the Queen Nefert would be of the utmost interest.

Nothing could be more cordial or full of promise, and of a type so new as to be delightful; and Revel, smiling in the background, had the air of

managing the whole occasion and setting it off to perfection with his own attractions.

CHAPTER XV

SETON came away, musing deeply. He seemed to have got into a world of wonders where many strange things might be—whether hoped or dreaded, he scarcely knew. He went as one in a dream until Colonel Gifford guided him through the guarded palace gate, dark and mysteriously shadowed in the blaze of the full moon.

"Come this way for one of the most wonderful sights in India."

He guided him down a little street, now hushed for the night, and so to a flight of broad and very ancient stone steps. Presently they stood beside a great water, balustraded with marble before the town, but stretching away into the bosom of the night, moon-blanched and still. Above it on one side rose the stern and solemn walls of the palace they had just left, and far, far out, where the moonlight met the darkness, were white marble domes, floating as if asleep upon its shimmering bosom, exquisitely beautiful pale shadows, ghost palaces, dream delights to be beheld in silence.

But a shudder that was more than delight shook Seton.

"I have seen them before," he said in his heart; "in a courtyard in Cairo."

The air was full of dim enchantments. That sudden recognition struck a chill among them—they paled and faded. A cloud drifted across the moon.

In his sleep that night was no oblivion, but a maze of sinister figures crossing and recrossing endlessly with dark, averted faces, on secret errands.

It was next morning, before setting out on his morning's walk, that he decided to ask the Colonel about Srinavastri and his hospital. What did he know of him? He had never lost his feeling of curiosity about that strange meeting with Revel at the Carnatic in Bombay.

"Oh, old Gobind Srinavastri! Quite a well-known character. Enormously rich and very charitable in his own way. Has given away lacs of rupees. A Hindu of the old type, as bigoted as he can be, and regards the Mohammedans one and all as children of Shaitan—he will have nothing to do with them. Just as well, too. That hatred between the Hindu and the Mohammedan is the great buttress of our power in India. Divide and rule—you know the old Roman maxim."

"Does Srinavastri make no exceptions?" Seton was turning the Carnatic business over in his mind.

"None. And his caste stands in the way also. I must say, the Mohammedans repay the compliment with interest. They detest and despise the Hindus."

"You don't think, then, he would be likely to do business personally with a Moslem?"

"Not he! Some low-caste clerk would run it. Why, he won't even see Mahmud Mirza, who naturally would be civil to him because of the hospital and other benefactions in his state. There's an armed neutrality, and no more."

"Very odd," said Seton, lost in thought.

"Not a bit odd if you consider the difference of religion, history, politics, everything. The Hindu has never forgotten the fact that the Mohammedans conquered India and ruled it under the Mogul emperors until we stepped in. Resents it still."

"I didn't quite mean that," said Seton, and reached for his sun helmet. Naturally, he could not explain. His promise stood in the way.

He walked slowly out into the khaki-coloured road with the lovely minarets and domes, of the city cutting the hyacinth sky with the lines of beauty. The barefoot people went by him softly through the dust on their unknown occasions, and he neither saw nor heard them. He was thinking of Revel. Like most healthy-minded men, he detested everything that savoured of mystery, and it seemed that nothing but mystery had dogged his steps since that meeting with Revel at Abuksa. He went over it in his thoughts—his was not a swiftly moving mind—item by item, very carefully. The ring, Revel's story of the papyrus, his vision of the Museum vaults, the empty papyrus, the courtyard and Ibn ul Farid, Gobind Srinavastri. It totted up into considerable puzzledom, yet, taken separately, every point might be explained satisfactorily—if one allowed for some Oriental skill in hypnotism or whatever you chose to call it, and possibly a little economy of truth, to put it mildly. Still, Seton knew he hated all that kind of thing: it was as if a mesh, so fine as to be scarcely perceptible, were delicately winding itself about his feet. He half wished that he might break free from it all, going straight off and never seeing or hearing of Revel again. India was wide, the world wider still. There was room for both of them and to spare.

Well enough, but for Venetia. Where she was, he must be, unless and until she drove him from her, and that, he thought, would never be. He knew her enough now to estimate, better than he had done at the time, the value of the encouragement she had given him at Abuksa. Another woman might hint, trifle, and doubt in such a matter, but not she. Even though she did not

understand herself, he understood her, and knew that hesitation was acceptance, unless some turn of fate never to be foreseen should dash the cup from his lips.

So cogitating, he walked slowly along the road under the palms and tamarind trees, for the city was beautifully wooded and the Hoti River, now a little shrunk by the summer, flowed through it under stone bridges finely arched. Before him rose the principal mosque, the Char Minar, with its magnificent arcades opening into the interior. The building was so singular that it arrested him at once. From the four slender minarets at the corners sprang mighty arches, supporting a roof on which was built a small and exquisite mosque, sacred to Mahmud Mirza's private worship—an extraordinary and beautiful feat of architecture, rising in the majesty of centuries from the swarming street.

And as he stood looking at it with delight, footsteps came along the road behind him, and he heard her voice. She was speaking to Sara and had not seen him. His heart leaped like a boy's. He turned and went to meet them, rejoicing.

She flushed delicately, but then she was one of the women who flush at any emotion, and the pale glow was gone in a moment and left her smiling and composed. He thought the shade of her sun hat gave her face the last touch of refinement and grace, and the heat had given a languor to her eyes that stressed their liquid beauty.

"So here you are!" cried Sara. "I thought you must be about due. How well you look—the very picture of health! Do tell us about your wanderings. We have thought of you so often. Come back with us to lunch, and then we shall have time."

Of course he accepted, and they strolled through the great parklike gardens, the glory of Mianpur, by the lesser lake, where doves coo all day above the lotus flowers and the hedges of hibiscus and massed bougainvilleas almost daze the eye with splendid tropic bloom. They sat awhile on a marble bench sheltered from the heat, and exchanged adventures, and keenly as he watched, he could not detect anything more than a little reserve in Venetia's manner. Revel was spoken of and naturally. They had met him several times in Mianpur, and the old Begam, Mahmud Mirza's mother, had spoken of him when they visited her in the zenana.

"She's a really wonderful old lady," said Sara Grant. "I have known her almost since I was a child and she herself was young. She knows everything that goes on in every part of that vast rabbit warren, and uses her tongue like

a whip lash to keep them all in order. She has more influence with Mahmud Mirza than any one and is his chief adviser, I believe."

"I thought the Mohammedan princes treated their women folk more as dolls than anything else."

"Some may—not Mahmud Mirza. He is descended from the great Mogul emperors of India, and they were never too proud to consult their women. Besides—you should see the Begam! Never was any one less like a doll. She has wonderful long black hair and fierce black eyebrows——"

"And a black moustache!" added Venetia. "She may have been beautiful once—they say she was—but one has to take it on hearsay. A most alarming old lady, and hates all foreigners. You know she was a Persian princess."

"And why does she see you?"

"Because, as I told you, she doesn't count us as foreigners. We both speak Hindustani and some Persian, and our uncle was Commissioner here once and she has known Sara from a child and me since I was born. He was a great friend of her husband's, Mahmud Mirza's father, and did him some important services, not the least of which was that he got our Government to grant him a salute of twenty-one guns. That counts, you know."

"I can imagine it would," Seton said grimly. "But why does she see Revel?"

"Oh, he has quite captured her! She has seen him several times and thoroughly enjoyed a good gossip with him. As she truly says, if at her age she mayn't enjoy herself, when may she? She was brimful of his good looks and amusing ways last time we saw her. He is certainly all things to all men—a priceless gift."

"She admires Mr. Revel very much," Sara put in. "She says—'Mashalla! He is a pearl in the eye of beauty, a sword in the eye of men.' She warned him to go out with his eyes on the ground, lest he should steal the hearts of those who were peeping at him from every corner. I've no doubt they were! She told us this herself. Quaint, isn't it? We go there again next week to see her jewels. She's very proud of them."

Seton laughed, and then, as a thought struck him:

"Mahmud Mirza has never been unfriendly to the British rule, has he?"

"Oh, dear, no! Strictly correct and on the best terms with the authorities. He's a striking-looking young man, isn't he? You should see him in all his splendour as I have in the durbar at Delhi—a blaze of magnificence. It's wonderful how Mr. Revel has won him too. Any one might envy him his gift of pleasing."

Yes—under certain conditions, Seton thought, but did not say. Criticism that might savour of jealousy was much to be avoided. But supposing this flash and play of colour on the surface were specially designed to cover secrecies, to dazzle with its glitter until signs and omens were no longer discernible—then the real Revel might be a very different man from the Revel who scattered delight about him like flowers.

And even as this current of thought tingled through him, another followed and swept it away. Baseless suspicion, folly, the habit of watching until the smallest incidents were distorted—that accounted for so much and probably for all. It was much easier to take the happy surface of things for granted in that divine sunshine, with the jewelled peacocks pacing before them like guests at a king's festival, and the marble elephants guarding the rosery flinging up jets of radiant water to catch and imprison the sunbeams in spray and diamonds. He dismissed it, and when Sara strolled off to the roses, he caught at the opportunity and asked Venetia if she had seen Jadrup Gosein. She smiled, as she always did at his name.

"Yes, twice, and I spoke of you. He said he would see you very gladly. That you had been in his mind."

"In his mind? But he never saw, never heard of, me until you told him! He couldn't have meant that."

"He meant it. Perhaps he will tell you when you meet. You have only to send a message."

He resolved he would do that instantly. The man who had so influenced Venetia and Marriott— He spoke of Marriott to her, and again she smiled that inward smile.

"I should like to know him. I know he has been here more than once, but we never had the chance of meeting him. He is a very interesting man himself, a great lover of ancient India."

He grudged it when Sara called them to the roses. Venetia's soft reserve was always promising delights, like the waft of a flower's perfume in the air, to be pursued until the shrine of leaves and hidden heart of sweetness rewarded the seeker. What she said was but a tithe of all she knew and felt, and before her inmost thoughts hung a veil too lovely to be rashly lifted, but hiding things lovelier still. When he came away that afternoon, he felt there had been spiritual sunshine, and his anxieties were dissolved in it like little white clouds melting in blue heaven.

When Sara invited him to come to tea next day and hear their adventures with the Begam, Venetia smiled and said nothing, but it was sufficient—he

knew he would be welcome. And with that knowledge came a fresh thrill of pleasure in the beauty of Mianpur and the mystery of the hidden life about him. He was just beginning to raise the curtain that concealed it all from European eyes and, with the help of the Colonel and the Grants, he might hope to see and hear much. As for Revel, what did he matter? He might be playing some little game of his own, but what then? It only concerned himself. He need not trouble his head about it. The usual seesaw of his thoughts where Revel was concerned!

But a letter from Conway, destined to raise fresh questions, awaited him at the rest house. "After compliments," as the diplomats say, he dashed into his grievances. Things were still dragging along, the British and Egyptian Governments fighting over the find.

> I believe [wrote Conway], that if Queen Nefert had survived, they would have torn her in pieces between them. I'll never go exploring again, if I have to sweep a crossing for my living! There's a rumour flying over Cairo now that the real document was stolen from the throne in the Museum and was sent to India. Ask Revel if he has heard anything. And they say that a Persian has declared it contained not only the history of Queen Nefert's love affairs with an Egyptian king, but a prophesy about the Bolshies collaring India. Did you ever hear such rot? Isn't that Cairo all over?

There was more, but that is all that matters. Seton read it carelessly at first—then closely. Revel! Was his mind never to be at ease about Revel? It recalled that horrid affair at Shepheard's, his dream of the Museum, his fainting fit, Revel's presence.

Perhaps it was because of this that he slept villainously badly that night, and in a brief sleep before dawn dreamed the whole thing over again, but now with the addition that Revel glided through it all, menacing, sinister, a figure of dark possibilities. He woke, furious with himself, in the morning, and cursed Conway's letter, which had started him off again on these bewildering uncertainties. Still, he would tell Revel when they met what Conway had said. And meanwhile he sent his message to Jadrup Gosein.

CHAPTER XVI

HAVING sent the message of request before him, Seton started next morning in a dewy quiet to his interview with Jadrup Gosein. Life begins early in India, and it was scarcely five o'clock as he rode slowly under the neems and tamarinds and saw the thin smoke rising blue from many small homes where the morning meal was being prepared, after due sacrifice and worship. It was a day of divine beauty, still and golden as an antechamber of heaven, the leaves diamonded with a frail glitter of dew, the world in a great silence drinking at the pure chalice of the dawn. Presently the silence stirred into happy life. The palm fronds hung on blue air like seaweed in a translucent ocean, and through them darted flights of little green parrots like the fish of that sleeping sea. The "Seven Sisters" chattered, the bell birds echoed their eternal note one to the other, all rejoicing in the returning stride of the Golden God over the horizon.

He rode slowly for joy in the beauty around him. To lose one permitted pulse of it would be sacrilege. Yet it was no time for the intricacy of thought. The deep calm of ecstatic feeling, welling up from hidden depths, was the only harmonious response that man could make to Nature in her divinity—that, and that only, was union.

So riding, he came at last to a little, low house, withdrawn among the trees from the highway. It opposed a white blank to curiosity, with only a small arched doorway for entrance, its only ornament the purple splendour of bougainvilleas bowering magnificently about it. Here he dismounted and threw the reins to a bright-eyed boy salaaming to the Presence. A young man in white appeared at the doorway, and in courteous silence led the way within. A strange feeling possessed Seton, half suspense, half awe. Forgotten words from a very different world of thought rose in his heart, like a small spring of clear water bubbling through moss—

> And he looked before him and seeth the house of a hermit and his chapel in the thick of the forest, and a spring flowed forth in front of the chapel, right clear and fresh, and above it was a tree full broad and tall, that cast a shadow over the spring.

The quest of the Grail—the Grail that hovers, rayed and mysterious, in the jungles of India, the dread Himalayan heights, as in the forests of Broceliande and Britain.

It was a place of quiet, and the more so because a voice was speaking within, words unknown, the words of a most ancient language, but charged like a great music with power. He would have delayed, but the man led onward, and thus they came into a very small courtyard, surrounded by whitewashed walls above the height of a tall man and shaded by boughs of the trees outside. No place could be simpler or poorer. It was neatly sanded, and at one side sat an old man with a white robe thrown about him, a white turban, barefooted—a sight to be seen any day and anywhere in India. A young man, grave-faced and reverent, stood at his shoulder, looking calmly at the advancing stranger. It was nothing new to him—many men, of all ranks, from the highest to the lowest, had crossed the little sanded floor and had gone away the richer. For himself, he lived and breathed in that clear air and knew no other. He salaamed and brought a small European chair for the visitor as the old man raised his head from the book he held and looked his guest in the face. It was then that Seton became aware that whatever Jadrup Gosein might be, his face was the perfection of human beauty for the eye that can pierce the unessential to the soul. It was like the golden image of an ancient god seeing the worlds he had made in their archetypal beauty, even as he had conceived them, and rejoicing therein in a calm more blissful than any joy. But who can describe the soul's work upon the body, the delicate, imperceptible chiselling of great thought and emotion which refine away the flesh until it is but a lamp through which the indwelling spirit may shine? It seemed there was nothing at all left but that hovering beauty, nothing to distract eye or thought from the Indweller, the Essential. It seemed to Seton that never before had he seen a *man* face to face.

"You are come, my son," he said. "Be seated and let us speak of glad things."

Nothing could have been more unexpected. Seton had prepared an explanation—allusions to Venetia, to Marriott, hopes, apologies. They vanished. He sat down, as a son sits in the presence of his father, and waited the next words in content. The old man spoke English—the English achieved by reading great books—spoke it freely and masterfully.

"I have expected you. Your longing came before you, telling me your need. You desire to find yourself. Is this not so?"

In profound amazement at words which he had never yet spoken to human being, Seton replied, "I desire to find God."

"And in the discords of the life about you He is lost?"

"So deeply lost that I have lost belief in His existence."

"Then have I not said truly that you desire to find yourself, for thus only can you find God?"

"Myself? What am I?" Seton said, with a tinge of bitterness. The austere inwardness of the eyes which met his constrained him to a stark candour. "Is that all?" he added. "All you can tell me—to find myself? But I am not worth the finding! The teaching of Christianity is to lose yourself. That seems nearer my need. I am sick of my own follies."

"That also is true. But how can a man lose what he has never found? Find yourself first, my son; and since you are a part of the Divine, though the Divine is not you, you will, in finding yourself, lose yourself, and so find what you seek, and with it—the Peace."

Seton leaned forward. Here was a flaw. He would not be subjugated, he would reply, argue, repel.

"Is not that a contradiction? If I am It, It is me."

"The wave is of the ocean, but the ocean is not the wave. But you, no doubt, have studied many things at your University. Have you ever studied yourself?"

"Never. I felt that the less a man thinks of and dissects himself the better."

"You think, then, that all life should be objective, not inward?"

"I have certainly thought so."

"And yet you seek God? Where then?"

"In life."

"And life has thwarted you by its injustice and cruelty, and He is lost?"

"Lost."

There was a pause. The sun, rising higher through the leafy bowers, made a shining mist of myriad particles of gold in the little courtyard, beautiful with the shadows of floating leaves. As Seton faced the east this shining dazzled him and at the same time seemed to light up a spiritual perception which had hitherto slept within him. He gathered himself and sat re-collected and aware.

"Then if you lost Him by looking outward, is it not reasonable to look inward before you abandon the search? Is it not in virtue of having done this that the wise man, who does not blind himself to the daily discords of the world about him, can gaze on them undisturbed, knowing that they, in spite of their loud insistence, are but as mist rising from the marshes at evening fall? The time will come, my son—it is indeed nearing rapidly—when you

will look at these wreathing mists with interest, nay, with amusement at their portentous shapes, deceived no longer by your eyes and ears."

"If that could be— But how?"

"By taking the Bow of great Love and the Arrow of Wisdom—by knowledge and experience. By finding the right way of life and walking faithfully in it. And if this seem small to you, remember that heights of experience must be reached before the vast conception of the truth can be absorbed by any man, and that the average man is incapable of receiving it. Have patience, therefore. Do certain things, and the next step will become a little clearer, and, that attained, the next. And though you cannot as yet see, you will in time know that the mists rolling away disclose an untroubled heaven and an eternal sunshine. This is certain."

There was another pause. Then Seton said, with hesitation, "And can you give me such a rule of life?"

"Most certainly. A rule that may be practised in the market place as in the forest. And as your spiritual forces expand, you will gain vision, and vision is peace. It is because you were not wholly blind in a former existence that here and now you desire the higher. This is your reward. Deserve a greater, and you will receive full measure."

"Then am I to suppose that you can see what befell me in a former existence, if such there was?"

He would have disbelieved the assertion fiercely had it not been for certain things in the man's look which compelled belief. For when the voice authentic speaks, the soul must hearken whether it will or no, being of the same immortal kindred.

"My son, I have a gift. All, I do not know. Some has reached me. And in a strange country of cold grey seas and beaten rocks, where a great fortress clings to a precipice hidden in spray and mist, rising from tossing abysses beneath, with white birds wailing about it, I behold you living a stern life, but in certain matters a dutiful and courageous, your consciousness unsunned by beams of the Divine, but faithful to a little. You cannot remember but one day you will know, and if you recall a certain day when you beheld and loved that home of your heart, my words will reach you."

Seton sat rigid. The castle that hung to the crags of Morven had passed from his people. Once, long ago, he had visited the ruins, half hidden in spray and mist from the boiling Atlantic abysses beneath. He had stood there, with the crying of the sea mews about him that seemed the crying of his own heart for things that had been a part of him, now dead and vanished,

unreal as the cloudy shapes that veiled the mountains behind it. He had never forgotten that day and the mute appeal of the deserted home of men for love and memory, the dead voices that death cannot silence. He never spoke of it—could not, for it lay beneath, or above, the plane of speech, an encysted grief—his own.

He stared dumbly at Jadrup Gosein. The old man looked into his eyes with calm too deep for a smile, yet with all its sweetness.

"Let us talk together with trust, my son," he said. "And come when you will, or rather, when you can, for there is close at hand a trial and a test wherein your manhood will be tried to the uttermost. And since the knowledge that I would share with you is a sword and a shield for others as for yourself, come freely, for the clouds are gathering."

Before that look, that warning, something in Seton's heart seemed to soften, to melt, to dissolve in warm human sympathy. He drew nearer to Jadrup Gosein, looking up with a hope unutterable.

"Teach me!" he said.

They talked until the sun stood over the little courtyard, and, to aid the shielding of the boughs, the chela spread an awning of canvas above them, and still they talked, the one confessing, the other hearing and counselling with untiring patience.

As Seton stood outside at last, remembered the words of Marriott—"I have heard a man say to Jadrup Gosein, 'Is that all?' I have said it myself. But suddenly it dawns upon you that a door is broken open, and you have stepped out into the fourth dimension." True. He felt like a man taken to the heart of a god, and restored to earth with new thoughts, emotions. A new birth—that was what the old phrase meant, meaningless then, surcharged with meaning now. And so simple that it seemed incredible he should ever have been ignorant. The way lay before him. He had even taken the first steps long ago, although unconsciously.

Onward—onward.

Not even to Venetia could he speak of that breaking of dreams. He told her of the meeting and thanked her. And she was silent, with the silence of perfect comprehension. He went again and yet again, to the House of Knowledge. It was as though a thing familiar had become divine in the utterance.

CHAPTER XVII

IT was a very curious and characteristic room in which the Begam received Sara and Venetia a week later, a large cool hall with closely latticed windows open to the faint breeze that blew off the lake, and furnished with great divans covered with exquisite Persian and Indian brocades and cushions stiff with gold and embroideries. The hangings were such as great queens might choose for a coronation robe, but before each divan stood an ordinary round table, covered with a European cloth of the most ordinary fringed tapestry, and on all these tables and in every available corner were European clocks, ticking so loudly as to form an accompaniment to the Begam's remarks. There were cuckoo clocks, mechanical clocks with marionette figures that danced in and out at the quarters, there was a clock where Time with his scythe mowed down each hour as it showed its innocent head in the shape of a flower, and there were erections of gold and crystal that filled the air with silvery chimes, the more frequent because every clock went at its own sweet will and kept up no sort of connection with the rest.

"It is the sole duty of one slave to wind them," announced the Begam with becoming pride as they were admired. "Many indeed are new in this last year. Behold the elephant who trumpets the hours and the driver who attends him! It is true the Faith forbids images, but the Prophet—may Allah honour his face in paradise—was gracious to the weakness of women. Be seated, delights of my heart." She pointed to two glittering cut-glass armchairs, decorated with pineapple knobs of dazzling brilliance and cushioned with gold and blue brocade.

The old lady was short and immensely stout, and as she sat embedded in cushions, a splendid robe of silk and a short coat of mulberry satin flowered with gold seemed quite inadequate to contain her overflowing outlines. She wore a curious cap of gold and jewels, stiffened into a kind of peaked diadem in front, and a gold gauze veil flowing over her abundant grey-streaked hair, which fell in two thick tails, braided with jewels, below her waist—a romantic dress, no doubt, for a young beauty, but scarcely suited to the Begam's years. Her ponderous face was full of shrewdness and humour, and the black brows could frown or smile with an astonishingly quick transition from one mood to the other. She had risen and salaamed charmingly as the two sisters were ushered in, for the moment a great princess.

"You are welcome, Miss Sahibs, a thousand times welcome!" she cried, in a hearty guttural which told of years of good living. "Laili, where are the garlands for the necks of my heart's children? Run, fetch them with speed. Our old custom to be forgot!" She turned and continued, "Here in the seclusion of the zenana talk is as refreshing to the soul as roses to the nose. Be seated in these two armchairs and allow Laili to put on these pearl slippers that your feet may rest. Is it possible you walked across the courtyards? Barik Allah (Blessing of Allah)! Such little feet, and to walk so far! Very wonderful are the women of the Feringhis."

Cigarettes were offered in approved European fashion, while the Begam enjoyed her own chilum like a man, inhaling the scented smoke with the utmost enjoyment. It did not in the least, however, interrupt her flow of talk. Sara and Venetia, who knew her ways, settled themselves back in their glittering seats and prepared to be amused.

"And the King-Emperor is well, and the Empress (this was the invariable beginning)? Allah be praised! Wondrous are His blessings. And the Shahzada (the Prince)? It is the power of God! And so you are come again to see the old woman, Miss Sahibs? It makes my face to shine to have your company, and that of the beautiful Miss Sahib, who is indeed a consumer of hearts. It is known to Allah that if my son sees such beauty, the ladies of his palace will please him no more!"

This was, of course, a mere compliment, and to be received as a flower of speech only. Venetia then tendered an offering, a beautiful box of European candies, for the Begam's sweet tooth was known to all her world. She threw up her hands in exaggerated astonishment.

"In the name of the Most Merciful and Compassionate, what a gift! May your condescension never decrease! Wah, wah! It is accepted. Laili, call Gulbadan Begam (Queen Rose-Body), that she also may savour this honey of delight."

The young wife of Mahmud Mirza was here ushered in with some ceremony, which, however, soon collapsed into ease, and she curled up on a divan, devouring candies and listening languidly enough. A lovely girl, black-haired as night, with a golden fruit-face most delicately narrowing to the chin, her mouth like a crimson pomegranate bud, and hands and feet fine and small as a fairy's. Almost a child to look at, but for the stormy dark eyes with their hidden world of passion and pain.

"And will you see the jewels again, children of my soul?" said the Begam, with her mouth full of sugarplums. "Do I forget your pleasures? May the stoned devil remember me when I do! And there are new ones since

you beheld, splendid as the treasures of Suleiman, son of Daood. Laili, delay not, go fetch Maryam Khanam and bid her instruct the keeper of the jewels —and delay not, according to your sinful custom!"

Laili fled like an arrow from the bow and the jewels were presently brought in—the famous emeralds, known to the connoisseurs of all the capitals, great table emeralds, lakes of pure green, set flat in heavily chased gold, and the embossed pendant the largest, an inch every way. The pigeons' blood rubies from Burma came next, and the mighty diamond known as the Glory of the Universe. Venetia, who had seen most of them before—for the jewels were a favourite amusement of the zenana—handled them reverently, though it must be owned their splendours almost paled before the glass knobs of the chair in which she sat, cunningly illuminated by small hidden electric lights at the back!

But the ancient jewels in the marvellously wrought settings were really interesting, especially as the Begam threw in romantic histories attaching to each one of them.

"And this," she said finally, poising in the air a great chain of strung black opals flashing sinister flame from their mysteries, "came from the Great Emperor, the Conqueror of the world, who ruled in Russia two hundred and fifty years since. May the Peace be upon him, though an infidel! He sent an embassy to the Mogul emperors, the forefathers of my son, with precious jewels from the Ural Mountains, and this was the least. The rest are in the palace treasury. Is it not beautiful, Miss Sahib? But it is an evil thing."

Beautiful indeed, but ominous, Venetia thought. Laili put it about Sara's neck, that it might be the better seen, and all exclaimed in delight.

"Jewels remain when empires vanish," said the shrewd old lady. "Love also! Therefore secure jewels, Miss Sahib, as I have done, to comfort your old age. In Russia now the base-born rule, and the emperors are no more. Have you heard talk of this new beauty who pulls the heartstrings of Orsinoff, who rides the country with whip and bit? They tell me she is the wonder of the age, and none knows whence she comes. Have you not heard?"

Venetia saw the younger Begam alert, her eyes brilliant in a moment.

"No. Pray tell us. Your Highness has all the knowledge! Can there be beauty more beautiful than the Lady Rose-Body?" she said, indicating the young wife crouching on the divan.

"Thu!" cried the Begam, spitting on the ground. "She is but as the handmaiden of the Russian beauty, who is the moon of the world and the burner of hearts. But what should a Miss Sahib know of the loveliness that melts the hearts of men like water! Lamb of my heart, you are young and foolish!"

Venetia digested the rebuke while Sara implored the old lady to continue, which she did with immense relish.

"Orsinoff—may his face be cold before Allah!—was plundering a palace of one of the princes, four months since—I have it from Inayet Khan, who came down the passes a month past—and there in the deserted palace, seated alone, he found this girl, and took her to be his. Her hair lay on the ground as she sat, and her face was heart-shaped, and her great eyes were lakes of blackness, and the beauty of her mouth was like the flower of the rose-apple, and her teeth were more white and even than the pearls on the knees of my daughter. Tall she was and graceful as a swaying willow. And before Orsinoff, whom all view with terror, she neither abased her eyes nor feared, but met him like a queen."

"It sounds like a romance of the 'Arabian Nights,' " said Sara, enjoying the old lady's gusto.

"Not Scheherazade herself told such a tale!" was the rejoinder. "But hear further. He married her, for her pride bent to necessity, and this is the way of women, but, as is also their way, she only stooped to conquer, and it is the word of Inayet Khan and of all who know that the man is as a child in her hands, and is but the wax she presses with her own image for a seal. Therefore it is she, and she only, that rules Russia."

"She must be a woman nearly as clever as yourself, Hazrat (Majesty)."

The old lady chuckled consumedly at this.

"A few things I know, a few things I have seen, and the hearts of men are not unknown to me. But though I was a comely girl, I had not the sword of this woman's beauty in my hand. When they oppose her will, she has but to smile and—ya Allah—it is done. This, Miss Sahib, is a very great power over the very enemies of Orsinoff. She has thus drawn the teeth and cut the claws, and they follow her like tame cats. Would I were young and beautiful again! There is no joy like power! Out on the women who cannot enchant their husbands!" She cast a vindictive glance at Gulbadan.

"Before your Highness all tremble!" said Venetia politely. "What would you have more?"

"A Miss Sahib cannot tell what I would have more!" cried the Begam, who invariably put Venetia in her right place, worlds below that of a wife and mother. "Her day will come and then she will understand. But, to resume. The marvel is that none knows this woman's name. She said no more than that she was a companion to the princess they had killed, and since her people were all dead, why speak their perished name? Natalia—that is what they call her, and Inayet Khan reports that Orsinoff himself knows no more. Ya Allah! A man will take a dog to his bosom if it be beautiful! But since Inayet Khan knows I love to hear and to tell, he brought for my acceptance a—how do you say it?—a sun-picture of the beauty, that my eyes may feed and be satisfied. Bring it hither, Laili."

Laili, a slim brown creature robed in crimson and green, fled again obedient, and in a moment a fine photograph of unusual size was in Sara's hand. Venetia leaned over her as she unwrapped it from the silk it had travelled in to the Begam's hands. They expected a corpulent, *café-chantant* type of beauty at best, dark-browed and sensuous. Both stared in astonishment. In a great chair, richly carved with the dead symbols of imperial power—doubtless a possession of the ruined dynasty Orsinoff had succeeded—sat a young woman, pale, with large calm eyes fixed on some thought beyond the reach of the artist who had pictured her. Her long hair, unbound, fell in two solemn rivers of blackness to the ground on either side of her marble face. The curled lashes shadowed the eyes with heavy darkness, her beautiful mouth was firm and sad as Destiny, the hands resting lightly on the arms of the chair were exquisitely fragile and fine. She wore a simple flowing dress of some Eastern stuff, clasped at the bosom with an Egyptian scarab set between the widespread wings of the Egyptian Mother-Goddess, Mut—familiar to all who know the art of Egypt. No picture was ever more innocent of adornment. None ever more arresting. Underneath was written in a clear, small handwriting, "Natalia."

"Wonderful!" said Sara at length. "I never saw a more exquisite face. Sad, to a degree, but no wonder! There is black tragedy in that woman's life. It is written all over her face."

"Did I not say so!" cried the Begam. "But, protection of Allah, what beauty! The perfection of the Creator's handiwork. This is a woman indeed! Pity that He is not more lavish with His gifts, say I! If all women were like her, no one of them would hold the sword of destruction in her hand. As to this one, she could let loose the hordes of Russia upon the world to-morrow, if she so willed. The men about her are mad as Mejnoon for love. Beauty like this is mischief incarnate."

“Is her influence on Orsinoff said to be good or bad, Hazrat?” asked Venetia. Even while she spoke she could not take her eyes from the face, exquisite and heart-moving in its tragic calm.

“Inayet Khan reports that the talk is of great events stirring, so that men hold their breath, but as yet none know what her share in it may be. Coffee, Laili, and my offerings for the Miss Sahibs.”

The thick black coffee was brought, and a little gold tray filled with trinkets that the guests might choose for themselves. This choice was courteously refused with overflowing thanks, and the Begam herself chose and presented to each a pierced gold case containing a bottle of attar of roses, the cover set with small turquoises and garnets. Profuse acknowledgments were made, which the Begam waved off, superior.

“What is this between friends? There is no strength nor power but in the High, the Great, to give, and this is but a grain of dust!”

She actually rose and waddled a few steps to the door in their honour as they prepared to go, and still Venetia delayed.

“The lamb of my soul has a wish unsatisfied! Let her speak, and it is done. Barik Allah—blessings of Allah, we are not so poor but that we can gratify a friend!” said the Begam graciously. “Fetch again the tray of trinkets, Laili, that the Miss Sahib may choose.”

“Highness, it is not that—far from it!” Venetia said earnestly. “Your generosity is bottomless as the ocean! It is—if my prayer may be heard—that I may make a picture of that beautiful face. The sun-pictures do not give the tints of lip and cheek, and the face is but a dead rose. May I do this as a gift for your Highness? I have a little skill with the brush.”

“Excellent, excellent!” clapping her hands. “Wrap it up, Laili, in a covering to protect it and give it to the Miss Sahib whose knowledge is like that of Aflatoun (Plato)! Now depart in the Peace of Allah, guests of my heart, and in His safety return shortly to bless mine eyes.”

Amid profuse adieux, they departed, not daring to remove the heavily scented garlands until they reached the guest house and sank into luxurious European chairs. A cut-glass armchair is more splendid than restful, and an hour with the Begam as four with a lesser woman, so ceaseless was her flow of conversation.

“She’s a dear old thing!” said Sara, looking kindly at the perfume bottle; “but I really think half an hour is as much as I can stand in a general way. Did you ever see such jewels? Those emeralds!”

“Wonderful! But this photograph and the story were what I found most thrilling. What a face! What can be the history behind it? Did you notice Gulbadan’s look of jealousy? Poor little thing! Lucky the beauty is not here.”

She had unwrapped the photograph and was looking at it again.

“Where’s your magnifying glass, Sara? I want to see her scarab better. It looks to me like the one Uncle Cheriton gave the Museum. I suppose it was among the imperial treasures. I like those wonderful narrow outspread wings. Are they diamonds?”

The glass was found and Venetia studied the portrait. Suddenly she laid it down.

“Sara! Unless I’m a perfect idiot, that inscription is the same as Miles Seton’s ring. Though I can’t read the hieroglyphs, I think they look very much like the others. Let us send for him!”

They did, and two hours later he came, eager as a boy because he had been summoned before the appointed meeting. They were sitting in the softly shaded veranda that overhung an arm of the marble tank, and the west was blushing before the sun-setting, the lotus flowers dreaming asleep in the rosy water.

“This doesn’t mean, I hope, that you don’t want me to-morrow,” he began. “I waited outside the palace gates in hopes of catching you as you came out of the zenana, and I don’t know now how I missed you.”

“Really? No, of course we want you to-morrow, but Venetia has something to show you, and she never can wait.”

He turned with interest.

“A photograph,” she said. “But though the woman is so beautiful, that isn’t the point. She’s wearing a scarab which strikes me as very like your ring, though I believe it’s modern. Look! Inayet Khan brought the picture to the Begam from Russia.”

She put it in his hand and sat watching him triumphantly. Indeed, she thought herself exceedingly clever to have noticed the likeness, and expected nothing but praise and astonishment. The astonishment was hers, however. Seton went dead white; the picture slid from his hand. He stooped and picked it up mechanically. Silence.

“It is some one he knows and cares for!” was the thought that flashed through Venetia’s mind. With rather a forced smile, she said slowly: “Don’t you admire her? I never saw a more beautiful woman. Sara thinks so too.”

Sara looked keenly at him. No mysteries for her where Venetia was concerned!

"Do you know her?" she asked curtly.

He found voice at last, but not his usual one. It sounded strained and odd.

"Know her? You won't believe what I'm going to say, for I can't believe it myself. This is the Queen Nefert, as I saw her in the tomb chamber. Then she was dead. Now she is alive. That is all."

"Good heavens! Impossible!" cried Sara. "It's one of those amazing likenesses, but surely——"

"Of course it's no more." Seton was recovering himself. "But a more astonishing likeness I never saw. It isn't only the likeness— The whole *effect* is the same, if you know what I mean. I often wished you could have seen what we saw. Now you know. Only the jewels are gone."

"The scarab!" Venetia reminded him.

He caught up the magnifying glass now and looked eagerly at the photograph. Then at his ring.

" 'Thou endest the night,' " he read, almost in a whisper, and laid down the glass.

Silence again. Presently:

"Good God! What is a man to think?"

Neither of them disturbed his thoughts for a few moments—if indeed he could be said to think, so confused was his brain. It must surely be illusion, a dream that would vanish at the touch of reality. At last he roused himself.

"How did you get it? Forgive my amazement, and tell me the story. I suppose quite an ordinary one and this Natalia is just some new actress. Perhaps in the eternal round of being, the same face must recur sometimes. One would like to know the facts."

Venetia told him all they had heard from the Begam, and he listened with ever-growing amaze. Then, be-thinking himself, he pulled out his notebook and showed them the rough duplicate of the sketch Conway had made of the dead queen. Though very imperfect, it left Venetia and Sara silent with astonishment. The coincidence of likeness and attitude was enough, but, taken with the scarab, it was overwhelming.

"You are sure—*sure* of the scarab?" asked Venetia searchingly. "How would it be to send for Mr. Revel? He knows them both so well. And then there is his own——"

Seton revolved this rapidly. There could be no concealment. Revel, in the palace, in touch with the Begam, would certainly see the photograph, if he had not seen it already. As well sound him as not. On the other hand, he wished to do nothing that would bring Revel into the company of the Grants. There was a deep instinct that cried “Beware!” and he would not thwart it.

“That’s a good suggestion. I haven’t met him for a week, and I want him for another reason,” he said, rising. “I’ll see him, and you shall hear everything that happens. There may be nothing to it, but it’s curious, and you never can tell. I’ll take the utmost care of the picture, Miss Venetia.”

He had quite recovered his composure now.

“Do!” she said, laughing. “The Begam will have me bowstrung if anything happens to it, and besides, I want to copy it.”

Seton went off, and straight to the palace guard-house to ask if Revel could be seen. A fine old officer was on duty, who knew a few words of English and told him that Revel Sahib was boating on the lake with Inayet Khan.

“If it pleases the Presence, a boat shall be sent.”

“No, no. Ask him to come to the rest house as soon as it is his pleasure.”

And the stately old man salaamed and saluted. Inayet Khan! Then certainly Revel would have the latest news from Russia.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was nine o'clock that night when Revel rode up through the moonlight and dismounted by the bungalow, tethering his horse to the gatepost. India had mysteriously Orientalized the man, and he looked a slim and splendid young Eastern in his smartly tied turban, as he strode up, spurred, to the veranda. Seton, watching from behind the bougainvillea blossoms, noted this, and was subtly glad. That dark-browed beauty was the mark of a division that cut to the very soul of things. He had no desire now to approach Revel.

He rose, however, and went out to meet the guest, and led him to the veranda where the long chairs and the long drinks were in readiness. Colonel Gifford was spending the evening with Mahmud Mirza, to discuss a tiger-shooting expedition at the Hizar hunting palace, and they had the place to themselves.

Revel lit the proffered cigar, and apologized with all his usual courtesy.

"I'm so sorry to have delayed you, but I could not get away until after dinner. Mahmud Mirza wanted me even then to stay and discuss the hunting business. What is it, Mr. Seton?"

"Have you seen this photograph?" He pulled the lamp nearer Revel's elbow.

"Certainly. The Begam showed it to me. It is this woman who seems to be coming rapidly to the front of Russian politics. Very handsome woman, don't you think so? She has only been heard of lately."

"Very. But what interests me, is this. Look here!"

He laid Conway's sketch in Revel's hand. The latter regarded it calmly.

"You mean— Oh, I see! Yes, the pose is very much the same. How very odd! Has the sketch been reproduced anywhere?"

"Nowhere. But it is much more than the pose. The likeness is perfect."

"You don't say so! That is very remarkable. But come, Mr. Seton, the beautiful Natalia must have seen that sketch somewhere, and posed accordingly. She saw the likeness, and it has suited her—what do you call it? —style. Women are quick in that way."

"I tell you," Seton repeated obstinately, "it has *not* been reproduced. She could not have seen it any more than she can have shaped her face into the

likeness. But there's more to it than that. Have you examined the scarab?"

"No—beyond thinking it a handsome ornament, set in those wings of Mut."

"Look at it now."

He pushed the magnifying glass across the table. Revel scrutinized the photograph keenly and curiously.

" 'Thou endest the night,' " he read aloud. "I own this is a very strange coincidence. We shall have to revise our opinion as to the rarity of this inscription. We now know of three. But I believe this is a copy."

Seton was about to exclaim, but checked himself resolutely.

"Could you tell me," he asked composedly, "what is known of this woman?"

With equal composure Revel repeated the Begam's story.

"I believe no more is known," he added. "The ignorant Russians declare that she has some charm which makes her irresistibly beautiful. Inayet Khan told me she harangues the troops, and with an eloquence that no one can resist. She speaks three European languages perfectly."

"Does no one know where she comes from?"

"They say not. She was found by Orsinoff in Prince Zouroff's palace on the Volga when it was plundered. Every one else was dead or fled. Orsinoff may know, but no one is likely to ask him."

"Is it known at all what she is driving at with Orsinoff in public affairs?"

Revel laughed lightly.

"Oh, nothing of any consequence, I gather. The usual hot-air stuff about Russia ruling the world and imposing her codes on all the rest of mankind. Nothing in it at all! A woman as pretty as that may say what she pleases."

He flicked the ash off his cigar and looked at his watch.

"I wonder," said Seton thoughtfully, "if it strikes you as strangely as it does me, that a woman with the face of the Queen Nefert should have chosen the queen's inscription?"

"Did you ever know for certain it belonged to the queen?" Revel countered neatly.

"No—no! But the place where I found it, certainly suggested the idea."

"The place?"

But Seton was silent. That was not for Revel's ears. The latter rose to go.

"If you want me no more, I will get back to Mahmud Mirza. I believe he intends to ask you to be one of the hunting party."

"Very good of him. But, before you go— Do you think the situation is worse or better in India?"

"Better. Infinitely better. There is growing up again the warm, kindly feeling toward the British Government. Of course, the personal liking for men who work the machinery in India has never died out, but the other is coming back too. I hear a great deal in the palace and can answer for that. After all, why shouldn't it? These people appreciate justice and care for them as well as any one else, and they know what they owe to your Government."

" 'Your?' And what is yours, Mr. Revel?"

"Mine?" The clear dark eyes looked straight into his. "My grandmother was Persian, my mother Greek, my father English. How do you define me?"

He turned laughing away, and Seton could scarcely press the question. Yet once more he detained him. This time to speak of Conway's letter. He read the passage about the lost document aloud, casting keen glances at his listener to see how he took it. With becoming interest, nothing more.

"Cairo is always a hot-bed of gossip. It may not be a bad guess as to the contents of the document. I have always believed it contained the queen's story. As to Russia, that is obviously inspired by the horrors going on there now. There is nothing in that. The idea of the document being in India is as reasonable as any other, and might easily be true. But I see no evidence of it, do you?"

Seton, baffled as always, admitted he saw none. Could Revel name any one in India likely to be interested?

"I could name dozens. This is the land of occult beliefs and superstitions, and, as an antiquity, no doubt Mahmud Mirza himself would covet it. But I have heard not a word at the palace. I'll keep my ears open, however, and you shall know if I hear anything at all. Remember me to Mr. Conway."

That was all. A minute later and his horse was cantering down the road. He turned and waved his hand as he went.

Seton sat there in the moonlight. He had much to think of.

It was near midnight when Colonel Gifford came in from the palace, looking tired and depressed. He flung himself into the chair by Seton. His manner was so marked, that Seton presently roused himself from his own thoughts and began to wonder whether the Colonel also had his anxieties,

and if so, whether he might venture to question or sympathize. He tried the ice cautiously first.

"A touch of sun, Colonel? You don't look as chirpy as usual to-night. Or was the dinner dull?"

"No—all as usual. I'm quite fit, thank you. But——"

"But what? Anything I can do?"

"I wonder!" said Gifford, and was silent.

His sensible, resolute face looked dark and overcast, and Seton studied it curiously for a moment. He liked the Colonel—an honest, straightforward fellow. You knew where you were with him, not like these Levantine mongrels! No secrets, no mysteries here, all clear as daylight.

After a while Gifford broke silence, but with an odd preliminary. He hitched his chair nearer to Seton's and spoke in French. To say the latter was astonished is to put it mildly, especially as the Colonel's French was not such as it is a delight either to speak or to hear, though laboriously correct. Each sentence involved thought and trouble, and a little suspense to the listener.

"Two things have happened to-night which have rather startled me. Can I speak to you in confidence? I have a reason for wishing to."

"Certainly. Absolute. I give you my word."

"I was inclined to speak before, but I did not know you well enough. Even now, I hardly know. You are real English, aren't you?"

"Certainly." Seton was lost in amazement.

"Well, I'll risk it, and the more so as I like you, if you'll pardon my saying so. But I'm going to surprise you. There is trouble brewing, I could swear—apart from the general tangle of Indian affairs as they are now. And, like charity, it seems to be beginning at home—here in Mianpur."

"Trouble? Disaffection?"

"Hard to say. Beyond me at present, but perplexing. Mahmud Mirza has always been most loyal, and though there has lately been some bad trouble from agitation in his outlying dominions, he has always done his best to suppress it. The home authorities feel they can count upon Mianpur, and he has told me he is consulted on almost every important step that is taken out here. One felt one could talk without reservation before him, and so forth. Of course we have a Commissioner here (what the natives call the Kumpsioner Sahib), and he knows all that goes on—Sir Edward Fairfax. He had a bad accident in the jungle a year ago and went back to England to

recover, and a deputy, known as 'the Dipty Sahib' by the people, is doing his work. To tell the truth, the Dipty Sahib, Kincaid, is a fool, and the worst sort—a conceited one. No doubt they thought Mianpur such a safe place that any one could do the routine. I thought so too. Now I am not sure."

"Why?" Seton was profoundly interested.

"First, I don't like that Revel. Where has he come from? Why has he such influence with Mahmud Mirza? I've never seen a European or a semi-European (whichever he is) living at the palace before or received by the Begam. If you knew the way things are done here, you would appreciate that point."

Seton was tense with listening now. Revel! The cloud loomed nearer and nearer.

"And Revel is intimate with Inayet Khan, Mahmud Mirza's distant cousin. And Inayet Khan I would trust as far as I could throw him, and no farther."

The French was involved here, but still intelligible. The Colonel helped it out with an English word now and then, comic enough if either of the men had been in the mood for comedy.

"Inayet Khan has been in Russia lately, the second or third trip within eighteen months. The reasons given are excellent, *if* they are the true ones. But, you may say, this is all suspicion, no more. Well, to-night I was waiting for Mahmud Mirza and I overheard two men talking. They did not see me—I was in one of the bay windows overlooking the lake—and they spoke, of course, in their own tongue. To summarize: Mahmud Mirza has more or less lost his heart to the portrait of the Russian beauty who is supposed to lead Orsinoff by the nose, and Inayet Khan's last errand was to make overtures. Now, that woman. . . ."

"Yes, yes!" cried Seton.

He had the sense of being on the verge of some vast and awful discovery, something that would fuse all the mysteries and present them as a connected whole. He could scarcely endure the Colonel's painstaking French.

"Go on, for God's sake!" he cried.

"That woman is a danger to the world. She has urged Orsinoff on to all the cruelties and madnesses he has perpetrated, and now—if she should come here. . . ."

"But they say Orsinoff is madly in love with her. Do you suppose Mahmud Mirza could get her? And if so—he has a wife already."

"*Cela n' empêche!*" the Colonel quoted with grim humour; "and one more or less scarcely counts. The point in harem life is—which has the influence? That, and that only. And as to Orsinoff's life—do you think that is worth an hour's purchase if this woman wants to get rid of him? They say Barikoff is her creature, and he has been wanting to step into the other man's shoes for the last two years."

"I see—I see."

"I heard more—but this part I am not sure of. The two men spoke of a paper which predicts that this woman should return from a previous incarnation and bring ruin to Europe, and Empire to India and the Orient. Of course, this seems nonsense to you, but remember, reincarnation is the commonplace of India. If that woman has been able to get that story believed here, there is *nothing* she may not do, and we are in for big trouble."

"Of what sort?" the other man asked, his thoughts racing. A paper—Revel—the lost document! He could scarcely concentrate enough to ask the question.

"A general rising. The 1857 Mutiny will be a fool to it, especially if Russia is in the game also. It may mean the end of everything out here. However—the second thing is that, as I came away, I swear I saw old Gobind Srinavastri in the library in talk with the Prime Minister."

"But that must be impossible! You said yourself. . . ."

"I know I did, but I saw it. Now, if that be so, it means that the most bigoted, fanatical, wealthiest Hindu is in touch with the Mohammedan party, and in secret. I don't think I need explain what that means, and especially in the present temper of the people. Now, the question is—what am I to do, how am I to know? I would give all I'm worth for some one who could tell me what the women in the palace are thinking—the Begam and Mahmud Mirza's young wife. It might save the Empire! As I said before, Kincaid, the 'Dipty Sahib,' is a fool. He will start the birds too soon. Oh, for real knowledge!"

"Keep it to ourselves and watch," suggested Seton. "And look here, Colonel; I know something of that paper you speak of. If you can in any way enable me to lay hands on it, we may know a great deal more than we know now."

In the talk that followed the two men grew to know and understand each other well, and the uncertainties cleared up into a determination to watch in silence for a time and compare notes. The chief question in Seton's mind

was whether it would be well to induce the Grants to leave Mianpur, in case there were any possibility of a rising, and on this he consulted the Colonel. He advised against it for the present.

"Do nothing, say nothing, yet. I cannot and will not believe that Mahmud Mirza would do anything against his salt in a case of that kind, and remember the Begam knows and likes the ladies. I think they are probably safer here than they would be in any part of India near about, and we are here to protect them. But keep them away from Revel. I distrust that gentleman entirely. If only we could know what is going on in the palace!"

"Would you stay on here indefinitely then?"

"For the present, yes. If things are coming to a head, there may be deadly danger in the thousands of miles between us and Bombay. Besides, if there is anything in all this, the authorities may find a man on the spot useful."

So they parted for the night, little guessing how soon the avalanche would be upon them.

It was perhaps a result of Seton's disturbed state of mind, that he went off next morning to see Venetia. The excuse was that he must tell her of his meeting with Revel, the truth being that he was desperately in need of the peace and sunshine her presence always mysteriously brought with it. Her voice, her smile, seemed to lay all the ghosts, to call the flowers into bloom, the birds into song, and make the world wholesome and simple once more.

Sara had gone out for a stroll, and Venetia was sitting in the veranda, already at work, with the photograph of Natalia before her. She laid her brushes down as Seton came up and looked up in his face, her eyes brimming with light and pleasure.

"Well? I have been longing to hear. What happened? Is it the same inscription?"

"Yes. You were perfectly right. But there was nothing more. It's a mystery. Don't talk of it. This is the first time I've found you alone for ages, and I won't waste a minute. Talk to me—let me look at you."

His tone said much more than his words. He put his hand out beseechingly, moved beyond himself suddenly and irresistibly. With the same impulse she laid hers in it, and so they sat for a moment, rapt in the new wonder of love and beyond all need of speech. The distance, the little shadows, had all melted like clouds in a deep blue zenith, and they sat in a golden sunshine of perfect peace and comprehension. Better things might come, but nothing again could be like that first rapture.

“You love me!” he said at last, not questioning but asserting, in a kind of wonder of quietude, and without any word she smiled, as he put his arms about her and drew her to his breast. Love is a stormy dawn for many hearts, blood-tinctured with passion and unrest, brother to pain. For these two it was a divine and perfect tranquillity, like the calm rising of a windless tide from the heart of the boundless ocean of being. She lay against his shoulder with closed eyes, lost in an inward dream of bliss, looking neither backward nor forward, utterly content. So love is justified by love.

But with him it could not last. Even in that perfect moment he remembered. In the background were the dark presence of Revel, the mystery of the theft of the document from the Museum in Cairo—a matter in which he began to guess explanations—and its possible terrible connection with events in India. Not even love itself could for long shut out the phantoms which waited, pale and menacing, at the gate.

CHAPTER XIX

THE minutes drifted by. It seemed a long time since they had spoken, but at last they touched the lower level of words again in the sweet give and take of lovers, retracing together all the steps of knowledge and understanding that had brought them to the exquisite revelation.

"I know now that I meant it even when we talked at Abuksa," she said at last.

"It was to be from the beginning," he answered, touching with wondering fingers the beautiful hair that lay against his shoulder. "But why, why, Venetia, do you care for such an ordinary sort of fellow as I am? I simply don't grasp it!"

"The 'celebrated explorer'!" she said, smiling up at him under her long lashes.

"The celebrated idiot!" he retorted. "What have I done but burrow? Any rabbit can do that. Here's the prophecy lost on which the whole interest turned, and the queen a heap of dust, and. . . ."

"But she seems to have been reincarnated!"

She pointed, laughing, to the photograph. It sobered Seton instantly. He tightened his grasp about the slender body and spoke gravely. It pressed on him that he must prepare their minds for the possibility of a retreat from Mianpur. They should take no risk he could avoid for them.

"Venetia, now you are all mine, my wife to be, I want to talk to you seriously, and with the certainty that what I say won't even reach Sara unless I agree. I know I can trust you, darling."

"Utterly," she replied, and there was that in Venetia which made her word equal to another woman's asseverations.

"It has to do with the lost document—and more."

As briefly as possible, he repeated the story of what had happened at Shepheard's, and added to that Conway's letter and what Colonel Gifford had told him of Revel's influence with Mahmud Mirza. With his fears of a general rising he would not trouble her. He spoke of the matter merely as a thing to be watched, lest it should one day shape itself into a danger. He felt her little grasp tighten on his hand as he talked.

“It is your first confidence to your wife,” she said; “and she won’t fail you. I quite understand. You want the document. You distrust Mr. Revel. I distrust him myself; there is something inhuman under all his beauty and courtesy, something that says ‘Beware,’ every time I talk to him—long ago I told you that. I think he’s at the bottom of the loss of the prophecy, and that he is using it with Mahmud Mirza in some way we don’t understand. Now, what can I do to help? Remember, we are intimate in the palace.”

Till that moment it had never occurred to Seton as possible that she should help in any way. He wanted to secure her against any friendliness with Revel which could possibly reveal the precautions he and Colonel Gifford might take, and, above all, he yearned for her sympathy and confidence. But help? No, he had not considered that. It flashed on him, however, now, in remembering Gifford’s words, that a woman of her calm intelligence and unusual position with the Begam might be much more than a looker-on. A man could do nothing in that vast intricacy. A quick intuition might make priceless observations, not only for him but for the whole British power in India. He looked her straight in the face, conscious that he had a comrade as well as a sweetheart, and ready to speak fully now.

“You would like to help me, darling? Then I believe you could.”

She rippled into delight at once, eager and attentive.

“Tell me exactly,” she said, and settled herself to listen.

He spoke now as frankly as Colonel Gifford had done to him. He told her of the fear of a general rising and a combination of the Mohammedan and Hindu interests, reserving, of course, the points that Gifford had given him in confidence and mentioning neither the “Dipty Sahib” nor Srinavastri. Indeed, it was also better in every way that they should have her unbiased observations. He asked her earnestly whether she thought it better she and Sara should retreat to Bombay instantly, while the way was still open, since Gifford believed the blow might fall at any moment.

“I, of course, shall stay here with Gifford in Mianpur, for the Government must have people it can depend upon, and with all my heart I should rejoice to know you were safe at Bombay,” he said, looking at her wistfully. Her answering smile was full of gaiety and courage.

“What! Go and leave you here, if there were danger? You don’t think me such a miserable craven as that? No. Tell me what you think I can do, and then I’ll tell you my own ideas.”

It came to this. To visit the Begam as usual and learn, if possible, whether anything was known of the prophecy, for Seton believed that

prediction might throw light on any plans made in Mianpur. Still more would it be necessary to learn whether anything further was known of Natalia and any negotiations between her and Mahmud Mirza. The Begam was an unguarded talker. Her volubility might drop invaluable hints as to Revel's influence with her son, the chain of intrigue with Russia, and so on.

"I could do that," Venetia said slowly. "She thinks of me as a child. And I see from what you say that there is danger to the whole British rule out here. You may trust me, Miles. I will be wise. I know her well. I can do it better than Sara—she is so outspoken, and believes every one to be honest as she is. I won't say one word to her. But when the danger comes near, don't be afraid to tell me. The Begam would protect us, and I have no fear. In the Mutiny year Mahmud Mirza's grandfather sheltered many English refugees here, and it is their pride."

Her quiet good sense and courage steadied him enormously. If he had needed anything to make him realize the value of the treasure he had gained, it was this. She would not fail nor falter, nor be a dead-weight on her husband, whatever troubles life might bring them, but always a bright light ahead, a shining strength in grief and joy, a crown of courage and pride to the man she loved.

"You see," she went on earnestly, "this is work that only a woman can do. A man hasn't even a look in in the intrigues of these palaces, and don't you think I must be thankful and proud that my knowledge of India may be useful now? And this too—I have liked Mahmud Mirza and the Begam ever since I can remember, and have really an affection for poor little Gulbadan. I shall simply rejoice if I can prove they are innocent of any plotting at all. Personally, I am sure they are. I would not undertake this, even for you, if I thought it would injure my friends. It will all blow over."

Seton shook his head. Where Revel had influence, trouble would follow inevitably. He told her so.

They sat for half an hour more, forgetting even the troubles at last in their newborn joy in each other, drowned in the mystery of love, which, laying its finger on humanity, burns all to white heat in the authentic fire of heaven, the Mystic Rose of Oneness, leaning over and reflected in the narrowed pool of life, but yet the true likeness of that which sits enthroned in the Inmost. So they clung together.

Later Sara came in, and all the story must be told again to her, and the happiness redoubled in her delight.

"You know, I just saw from the first what was coming, and if I hadn't approved—well, you would never have seen us again!" she said. "Venetia is

all I have, and her safety is more to me than my own. She will be safe with you, I know."

Those words of perfect confidence were ringing in Seton's ears as he went away. Safe? But was he putting his own treasure and Sara's on a service of danger? Had the country the right to demand such a sacrifice as that? A man's life—a million men's lives, yes! But a woman's? He trembled as he thought of all it might mean. He walked through the gardens unconscious of their beauty and of the glorious sunshine of the Indian winter, resolving, hesitating, trembling—a horrid moment of uncertainty, and even as he neared the town gateway, he saw Gifford coming towards him and determined to consult him. He was really faint with the inward struggle by this time, and Gifford saw at once that something was amiss.

"Sit down here," he said, leading to a seat by the fountain. "What's wrong? Bad news?"

"No, but I want your advice about as badly as a man could want it. In the strictest confidence."

He told the Colonel the events of the morning and besought his counsel as to whether the ladies should be sent at once to Bombay, and whether, if they stayed, Venetia's help should be accepted.

"We are just engaged," he added, "and I know you'll understand how I feel about it all."

For all answer the Colonel drew a letter from his pocket and laid it in Seton's hand. It was very brief, and he read it with the utmost astonishment, for it seemed to have no reference to anything he had said.

> DEAR COLONEL [it began], the young man you kindly recommended for the position of secretary to Mr. Dalrymple writes to say he is unable to take it on account of serious illness. It is a great disappointment, especially as time presses and Mr. D. leaves India shortly. If you think of any one else, please write at once. It is urgent.
>
> In haste, Very truly yours,
> H. D. WISE.

"But this. . . ."

"I see I must take you into my full confidence now. The time has come, and that being so, I am thankful I have a man to depend upon. I am here on secret service. That note is from a man—a link in the chain—at Fyzapur. It is the agreed signal that they are on the eve of a dangerous rising there. Now, that answers one part of your question. You will see for yourself that if the Fyzapur district is up, the women cannot travel to Bombay. I fully agree with Miss Venetia Grant. I think whatever Mahmud Mirza may do, that

Englishwomen, and especially Lord Cheriton's nieces, are safe with him. The Begam also. The last sentence in that note—'If you can think of any one else,' etc., means, 'Send us all intelligence possible. Great events at hand.' I leave you to say whether Miss Grant may not be able to do the Government priceless service. As to danger—Let her write nothing, speak no word of importance, to any one but you (your engagement will cover that), and I see no danger. Mohammedans are disposed to take women as pretty, chattering dolls. Let that be her *rôle*."

They talked for an hour of what the secret service meant and how far it threw its tentacles; and the more he heard, the more Seton admired its choice of the Colonel. The easy transparence and good nature of his manner, his perfect knowledge of things Indian and command of at least three languages of the Peninsula, armed him at every point, and none the less because the native world at large gave him credit for speaking Hindustani only, and was therefore likely to be careless before him in other languages.

"But I, of course, could have done nothing with the women," he ended, "and very much more important gratitude than mine will be due to Miss Venetia Grant for even her intention. It is an invaluable public service. One word before we part: if Mahmud Mirza should press you to take up your quarters at the guest house, refuse. Say it is not etiquette in view of your engagement. That always appeals to the Oriental. You and I must be together, but not too much. Only at the dak-bungalow or the palace."

So they parted, and Seton, relieved in mind by the sense of a strong presence, but strung to a tense watchfulness, went on his way to the House of Knowledge. As a traveller in the desert for water, he craved for the peace of the little courtyard. A man hid with the Divine and looking down from starlit spaces of quiet.

Jadrup Gosein was alone in the deeper shadows of the sheltering trees. No book lay before him. He sat like the golden images of the Buddha, lost in a timeless ecstasy, his hands folded in each other in the attitude of contemplation. The soul was withdrawn inward to its source, and Seton waited by the doorway until the life which united him with lesser men should creep back and fill the beautiful face with something that might obliterate the sense of separation. As he waited, tranquillity fell upon him, like dew from clear skies. His mind was cleansed from foolish fears and hurries, and it seemed to him that even in the contemplation of that contemplation, he made his peace with life.

Did life indeed wrong him with its cares, or had it all the profound inward meaning of a mysterious something which his soul needed

unutterably, if he could but teach it to agree nobly with that necessity, to trust it and be glad? Joy. That was the secret. He knew that the soul behind the face he watched was

> "Singing at a work apart
> Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm
> As sings the lark when drawn up out of sight
> In vortices of glory and blue air."

After a while the closed eyelids thrilled, a faint flicker ran across the nerves, the hands unfolded and lay open as though to receive the human impulse, and when this happened Seton stirred almost noiselessly, as one may with a waking child, but still stood fixed by the doorway.

In a few moments more the old man was looking at him through the dim, unearthly sweetness left from his communion with the Unseen. He beckoned, but did not speak for a moment. At last:

"You have come from a great bliss to a greater. Speak as freely to me as you will."

In words as brief, Seton told him of Venetia. From the meeting reticences of the Oriental and the Englishman, she had never been mentioned between them, though there had been a certainty in his mind that the old man comprehended and sympathized.

"It is well," he said slowly, "and better than well. Marriage is the gate of manhood, and fatherhood the gate of understanding. And you have chosen as a man should choose—" (he quoted from the ancient Sanscrit injunction) " 'A wife beautiful, well born, chaste in mind and body, of courage and piety.' But even this, my son, will not hold you for ever, nor can it hold her. The freed soul asks more, and she leads you on the way. This love is a part of the journey, it is not the goal. Be glad that for a time you may walk together, but look steadfastly to the heights where there awaits you a union beyond all that can now be comprehended."

He ceased, and Seton stood silent, absorbed in listening. Presently he resumed:

"But what I would say is this: great sorrows, great troubles are at hand. Much I must not utter, some I may. Hear, therefore, with attention, for I will instruct you. You shall not be deserted. It is truth that no man, no creature in the universe is ever deserted, and sure help pursues him if he will but stretch his hand to hold it. But there is more for you than this, since you have reached the point where it becomes possible. In your sorest strait you shall sensibly know you are remembered, and succour shall come to you. I cannot

now tell you how. It is not yet revealed to me, but this gift is given. Believe it."

To believe it was not difficult in the light of those eyes. Seton ventured one question.

"Is it lawful that I should hear whence the danger comes?"

"From a woman and a man burdened with the karma of an evil past. A woman and a man most pitiable."

"And with what weapons shall I meet it?"

"My son, is that question needed? What weapons are there but courage and truth, and loyalty to the enemy as to the friend? This is an old wisdom, but ever new."

"May I be strengthened!" Seton said slowly, and his tone was as much promise as aspiration.

"That wish is fulfilment," was the answer.

They sat together in a silence all words, and presently Seton rose and went quietly away.

CHAPTER XX

IT was with a trembling heart that Venetia, utterly unused to secrecy of any kind, praiseworthy or otherwise, walked into the Begam's reception room beside the unsuspecting Sara a day later, and it was almost a relief to find that the Begam was not present and that only Gulbadan Begam was to entertain them. Laili brought a message with profound salaams, to the effect that the Begam had eaten too freely of a dish of pilau with pistachio nuts the night before, and that if the elder Miss Sahib would visit her in her bed-chamber and advise some noble medicine that would remove the weight (comparable only to that of mountains) which lay upon her chest, her heart would be dilated and her eyes enlightened; Gulbadan Begam would meanwhile solace the younger Miss Sahib with sweetmeats and a hearing of the new instrument which shouted like a man or a woman through a silver trumpet according to the desire of the hearers.

Sara immediately followed the messenger, well used to the Begam's touching faith in "European medicines" and her own knowledge of their use, and the two girls were left together with only Gulbadan's devoted foster mother in attendance.

The young Begam looked the part of the Fair Persian to perfection that day in her trousers of dark green and gold and coat of mulberry silk embroidered with golden flowers. She wore about her neck the magnificent peacock in gold and jewels, with outspread tail, which Venetia knew as a famous jewel of the house, and in this splendid setting, though she glowed darkly beautiful like a velvet damask rose hiding in leaves of shadowy green, her eyes were heavy and languid, her mouth sullen. She pointed silently to the glass armchair, but Venetia sat down beside her on a cushion of the divan and asked whether her head ached, that being a frequent result of the sickly sweet stuff eaten all day in the zenana.

"It is my heart that aches," was all the reply vouchsafed, and Gulbadan drew her hand away from any possible contact.

Humouring her like a child, old Zaynab, her foster mother, set the gramaphone going, and very strange it was, in those rooms sacred to women, to hear a raucous man's voice shouting "My Pickaninny Love." It did not shout for long. In a sudden fury, Gulbadan sprang at the braying trumpet and flung the whole thing to the ground. Silence.

“It is broken, the devil’s voice! I am glad—I am glad!” she cried, stamping and glaring at Zaynab.

“So am I,” said Venetia calmly.

Her serenity fell like cold water on Gulbadan’s rage. She pulled off her long gloves and took off her hat, the girl staring at her half in envy, half in a kind of fascination. She could never understand the foreign women—they were strong with strength of which she knew nothing, their sorrows and joys incomprehensible. Venetia saw clearly that the poor child was suffering either in mind or body, and she took the frail brown hand and pressed it with affection. Instantly Gulbadan flung herself on her knees at Venetia’s feet, and burying her face in her lap, sobbed wildly, great rending sobs which seemed to tear their way out of her slender body, bruising and torturing it as they came. Venetia looked in alarm over her head at Zaynab, who shook hers sadly.

“It is not naughtiness, Miss Sahib. My child is gentle as the blessed Lady Fatmeh. But it is the lot of women to suffer, and she suffers.”

Venetia laid her hand tenderly on the lovely dark head, and the quiet touch seemed to soothe the girl. The sobs grew quieter and ceased presently with a convulsive trembling that ran through her whole frame.

“Forgive me, Miss Sahib,” she said brokenly. “I suffer. Oh, that I could die and be at rest? But how should you understand, who love no man? Wise indeed are you to keep your heart locked and sealed, for if it passes from one’s own bosom. . . .” She sobbed again, then raised her heavy dark eyes, brimming with tears. “You have seen me in my glory and happiness. Three years ago I was married, and the paradise of Allah was not so glorious to me as this palace. And now, what am I—a childless wife, a wife forgotten! Pity me, lady, whose heart is cold and safe.”

Naturally Venetia had before this known that the root of Gulbadan’s tragedy would one day be her childless state. That is the curse of woman in India, and doubly so in a royal house. She had had three years’ grace as the only wife. Now . . . ! It needed no words to explain the miserable future of the woman who loves her husband and sees her day done.

“You are so young! Indeed, indeed all will be well yet. Have patience.”

“Patience?” she laughed bitterly, then went on. “No, it is finished for me. If you pity me, Miss Sahib—and I know your heart is gentle—pray to your gods for me, that I may die and be forgotten. In a few days comes the new wife, and then I shall see his face no more. And once he loved me as the heart of his heart!”

“See his face no more? Do you mean he will divorce you because you have no children?”

“He could do that, for our law allows it,” said Gulbadan somberly, “but my people are great in the land. No, Miss Sahib. Our law permits a man to have four wives. I shall be forgotten, that is all. He loves me no more. The other women I could endure. But a wife!”

She said it with such a fury of concentrated bitterness that Venetia stared at her in dismay. Here was a wound beyond all healing, and no word occurred to her that did not seem insultingly inadequate. Her own new gladness made her even more tender to the hopeless girl at her feet. She put her arm round the slim shoulders and was silent. Suddenly the torrent broke forth again.

“And if it had been a woman of my own people, perhaps I might have borne it, for surely in her heart she would have known that her day, too, might pass, as mine. But this is a woman of a race I never saw, of a tongue I never heard, and their beauty lasts when they are old women and ours is all withered and gone. It is sorcery; it is the great Shaitan’s work. I know it!”

“Who is she?” asked Venetia, so bewildered by the suddenness of the whole thing that she had not time to consider. “Is she English?”

“No, no, Miss Sahib. For your sake and your sister’s I trust the English. This is a woman from Russia. Her husband died a few weeks ago and they kept it secret, and now, when she should be weeping for him, she takes my lord from me. An accursed woman! You saw her picture and did not know.”

With a flash, knowledge and certainty shot through Venetia—a horror also that the poor girl should run the risk of betraying her husband’s secrets. What dark and dreadful fate might not befall her if that were guessed! She must stop her instantly, however valuable the knowledge might be.

“Highness, you should not tell me this. I cannot listen,” she said earnestly. “If your husband had wished it known, he would have spoken himself. Let us speak of it no more.”

The girl rose instantly to her feet, and with a tragic look at Venetia, as of one utterly forsaken, walked out of the room and she did not see her again. Zaynab delayed.

“You are right, Miss Sahib, a thousand times right. It is great danger that my bird should speak. A woman must take what Allah sends her and endure, there is no other way. The Begam speaks out, for she neither fears her son nor any other, but a mother may dare what a wife may not. Shall I call Laili to ask her pleasure about you?”

Laili brought word that the Begam would now see the Miss Sahib, and Venetia was escorted with pomp to the state bedroom whither the Begam had herself conveyed from a less ceremonious and more comfortable resort when visitors were expected. The room was panelled with looking-glass, and as the Begam sat up in bed, her grey-black hair wildly dishevelled, a thousand stout, elderly ladies sitting up among pillows in a brocaded garment highly unsuited to repose, stared at her from every angle and repeated the eccentricities of her toilette. They all salaamed to Venetia on her entrance as gracefully as circumstances allowed, and one voice for the thousand mouths poured forth greetings.

"Surely my heart is dilated already by the welcome company of my friends," cried the Begam. "It is not for nothing that I held this lovely one in my arms when she was but a month in the world. And now I hear that she takes to herself a husband! Ah, it is time, my heart's delight! Already should I have held children of yours in my old arms. But it will come, it will come. And the fortunate one—your lord—is he worthy of such a jewel? High born? A soldier? With riches and beauty?"

Assurances were tendered that all was satisfactory and most cordially received.

"How should it be otherwise?" cried the old lady. "Your uncle, who was indeed your father in spirit, was a great lord. May the protection of Allah encircle his tomb! And now, beloved of my soul, rejoice with me also. My son, the Sword of the Faith, chooses a wife!"

She looked at them brightly, triumphantly, and both were, of course, far too well skilled in Indian ways to make any inconvenient comment. Sara, who knew and guessed nothing beneath the surface, was as friendly and sympathetic as could be desired, and Venetia did her best to follow suit.

"Doubtless a daughter of a great house, who will strengthen the power of Mianpur, if that were possible," said Sara, after due congratulation. "Is it permitted to ask the name of the favoured lady?"

The Begam surveyed them with exultation.

"Her name, Oh, friends of my soul, is Shirin, which in your noble language signifies Sweet, and she is distantly allied to me, being of royal Persian blood. She travels even now through Afghanistan and arrives next week, when the marriage will be celebrated. It is as though I received a daughter to my old arms."

Her eye on them was keen as a parrot's. Sara met it with perfect innocence, Venetia with what passed very well for it.

“And Gulbadan Begam?” she asked, gathering her courage.

“Thu!” cried the old lady, spitting on the ground with huge scorn. “What is she? A useless, childless woman that never should have entered the palace. Still, she knows her duty and is prepared to meet Shirin like a sister. It is the will of Allah. He gives and withholds sons at his pleasure.”

She closed her eyes devoutly for a moment, then dived her hand beneath the uncomfortable but gorgeous pillow of stiff gold brocade.

“Here is the portrait of Shirin Begam. Scarce can my son eat or sleep for looking on her beauty, which indeed resembles the immortal houris of the paradise. What is your thought?”

“Beautiful indeed!” said Sara, regarding the small water-colour picture with as much admiration as voice and gesture could express. Friendship demanded no less, and indeed it represented a pretty, almond-eyed girl of the languid Persian type, who could be commended without untruth, no more.

“Two most beautiful ladies has your Highness shown us, this time and the last,” said Sara. “Varied are the gifts of heaven, in that two should be so lovely and so unlike.”

“The other is indeed beautiful, but of her we know nothing,” the Begam replied gravely. “This is our daughter, the pillar of our house.”

Venetia heard and was silent while the talk drifted away to the old lady’s ailments and the “draught of power” which Sara had promised to send from her medicine chest. It was a simple effervescing draught, but faith is might, and its fizzing was as music in the ears of the Begam.

As they came away, Venetia looked about her for Gulbadan Begam or Zaynab, but all was silent. Only Laili and the ordinary women in attendance were on duty, and not a word did she breathe to Sara of that strange interview.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN she laid it before Seton next day as they sat in the gardens, it was very clear to them both that the news was important, and that the Europeans in Mianpur were to know nothing of the origin of Mahmud Mirza's new bride. In their deep pity for the forsaken Gulbadan, it was resolved that, though Gifford must know the facts, he need know nothing of the person who had revealed them to Venetia. That secret, wrung out of agony, should remain a secret so far as they were concerned. It was safe with her foster mother and might be entirely ignored.

"She shall tell me nothing more," said Venetia. "I mean to stop her instantly, whatever we lose."

And Seton agreed. It had been settled between him and Colonel Gifford that any talks they held should be in the gardens, and when Venetia had gone he waited about for him to pass, getting out the papers which were to be the pretext for the next discussion. He came, quiet and cheerful as usual, but evidently with much to say, and plunged into it straightway.

"Orsinoff was murdered a month ago and they've kept it dark. The woman Natalia is supposed to have done it. I've just heard through the Secret Service. Keep it dead dark."

"I will, indeed. Listen here!" said Seton, and told Venetia's story.

Gifford's eyebrows drew together.

"Then she's coming. Look out for trouble. They're foisting this woman on Mahmud Mirza—some plot of Revel's—for he loves his wife, whatever the old lady may say. You see how it all fits in? The Begam's ruse with the pictures was childish, for I can't see how they hope to hide where she comes from for long. Probably she knew too what I have just heard; that the rising in Fyzapur is begun. We have arrested the man who is supposed to be the leader, but that's no good now. Ah, if we could only lay our hand upon the man who is the mainspring of it all—the man who is the bond between the people in Europe and here!"

"Is it known who he is?"

"Certainly. A young man, a very wealthy one, believed in India to have extraordinary occult powers. He was last seen in Cairo. His name is Ibn ul Farid."

Seton recoiled as if he had been shot.

"But, good God, I know him! I've seen him. In Cairo."

Nothing could shake the Colonel's outward composure. It was too long a habit, and any one might be studying their faces from behind the trees. He never moved an eyelash.

"Be quiet, control yourself," he said, in his usual even voice. "This is most important. Hold hard! Here comes one of Mahmud Mirza's Jemadars."

The officer saluted as he passed, with the strictest punctilio, and it served better than anything else to recall Seton to the instant needs of the situation. His careless manner matched Gifford's as he spoke again, swinging his walking stick.

"I was a fool. I'll be careful in future. Yes, Revel made me known to him in Cairo and he gave me a taste of his art."

"Go on. Miss nothing," Gifford threw in. "We can walk here safely for about twenty minutes more, and then I go to the palace. There's a review in the grounds."

Without a minute's loss of time Seton detailed the scene in the courtyard in Cairo, describing Ibn ul Farid's appearance, his manner, his words—everything.

"Had he been mentioned before by Revel?"

"Certainly."

"Tell me every word about that."

Seton began with the first meeting at Abuksa and the story of the revelation that the prophecy was hidden in the throne. He went on to his fainting fit at Shepheard's, his extraordinary dream of the Museum vaults, the visit later with Revel and the finding of the empty papyrus. When he had finished with the meeting at the Carnatic (for he considered that necessity absolved him now from his volunteered promise to Revel of silence on that head) and Revel's assumption of Ibn ul Farid's name for the purpose of meeting with Srinavastri, the chain he laid before Gifford was complete as far as he could make it.

"You've forgotten nothing?"

"Nothing. What do you deduce?"

"Firstly, that that prophecy is the key of the situation so far as you are concerned. It's evidently been of vital importance to their plans, and therefore it's of the same importance to us to collar it. You were hocused—or rather hypnotized—at Shepheard's. Now, let's think that out. How did they do it? Had you anything on connected with the document in any way?"

"Nothing. By George, yes, though. That ring!" He held the ring under Gifford's eyes. "But what's the connection?"

"Why, in the Orient far more than in the West, though it's known there, too, an object connected with the subject is used for suggestion. I've had to study these beliefs as part of my Secret Service work. They come into a lot of things out here. One of these fortune-tellers will say—'Give me a ring of the Missy Baba's, anything she touch, and I seeing.' That first visit of Revel's to Abuksa was made to find out if you had anything Ibn ul Farid could use in that way. He found out you had. Then came the same at Shepheard's. They used your mind and ring as a mirror, saw where the document was hid, and one or both went off while you were unconscious and secured it. You say you missed the ring when you woke?"

"Yes. Revel gave it back to me."

"You see? Pretty clear, I think. I wonder if it's the right ring or a fake! Let me look."

In deep anxiety, Seton pulled it off, and first Gifford, then he, looked it over keenly. Impossible to be sure. That must be kept for later investigation. Gifford went on:

"The visions at the Cairo house were, of course, to get you under the spell again and make you talk. They were searching and tabulating your mind. I needn't tell you, of course, that once done, hypnotism and suggestion open the way to further mastery by the hypnotizer. You must be careful never to allow such a thing again."

No need for warning there, Seton told him grimly. He had made that resolve long ago.

"Yes—but it's very quickly done, you know. I've seen a man hold up a glittering object and the other fellow go off as if he were shot. Be on your guard."

They walked a minute in silence, then Gifford went on:

"From what you say, there seems a kind of mystery about Revel's servant. I suppose Ibn ul Farid is not passing himself off in that way?"

"I don't know. How should I? Heavens, what a fool I've been! You make me feel like a child."

"Very far from that," the Colonel said heartily. "You've given me some of the most useful information I ever had in my life. You've brought me to close quarters with the elusive Ibn ul Farid and connected him direct with Revel, and you've told me what may lead to putting salt on his tail. It was a lucky day when I opened my mind to you, Seton. Now we must get hold of

the prophecy, as I said before. I'd wager a hundred to one Revel has it in the palace, and we shall never know why until we get it. Don't change a hair in your manner to him. He's the nucleus of the plot, and something in that document is being used in India. Mahmud Mirza is as loyal a man as breathes, and if Ibn ul Farid were here, I should suspect that this influence Revel has gained over him is based on some of their occult tricks. I don't suspect Mahmud Mirza, but I fear they may use and then discard him—possibly murder him. I wish we could net the prophecy!"

He strode away, whistling carelessly. It seemed to Seton that everything that had happened was falling now into a harmony of event and consequence. It would never have been in Revel's power to deceive him any more. Henceforth it would be an equal encounter of wits.

It may be said, however, that neither he nor Gifford knew all the cards in Revel's hand.

Ten days later the city was *en fête* for Mahmud Mirza's marriage. The bride had reached the palace in the night, escorted by a guard of honour, and the bazaar was ringing with stories of her beauty and grace, the Hindus as keen as the Mohammedans. Sara and Venetia had a special invitation from the Begam that when the marriage was over they might be presented to the bride, now described as Shirin Begam, daughter of Sultan Husain Mirza. They had already visited the palace to see the magnificent jewels presented by the bridegroom, which the old Begam showed off with truly Oriental pride. All was excitement and pleasure, and, as the poor Gulbadan did not appear, there was no jarring note to mar the triumph.

Beneath the surface, however, things were very different. News came in to the Colonel of sporadic risings from various parts of India; and of risings in Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan more alarming still, if possible. It was undoubtedly the working of a new and terrible fermentation in Asia, and who could predict the underground ramifications? As a bonfire may blow its sparks abroad and kindle new flames, so it seemed that the Fyzapur outbreak had given the signal. There was nothing to alarm the most timid in the Indian papers, nor yet in such English papers as reached them, but, as Gifford explained, the Government was in absolute control there, and not a word was published but under the censorship. In reality, the women and children were all being got into safety so far as possible, and troops were pouring in at Bombay and Karachi.

"Should I warn Miss Grant?" Seton asked Gifford.

"What use? There is nothing to be done. The way out of Mianpur is closed. Her anxieties will begin soon enough, and the less they are believed

to know, the safer they will be. You are asked to Mahmud Mirza's wedding reception, I suppose!"

Not only Seton, but all the Mianpur world, including the "Dipty Sahib," Kincaid, were at that gorgeous reception in the palace gardens, where Mahmud Mirza received them standing in a shamiana (tent) of the utmost splendour, surrounded by his staff, his breast covered with orders, including the Indian Constellation. A very kingly figure, though both Gifford and Seton noticed that his eyes were haggardly brilliant and that he looked ill and weary. He accepted their congratulations with perfect graciousness, and, according to Eastern etiquette, no allusion whatever was made to the bride; they referred simply to a joyful event in his Highness' household. Revel stood at Mahmud Mirza's shoulder, and the two Europeans observed how often the latter glanced at him, as if at a prompter, as the little talk went on.

Revel was cordiality itself. Sugary sweet champagne was served, in which the guests drank their salaams to the bridegroom, and the ceremony closed with the usual "God Save the King," rendered by the palace band.

"I would give more than a little to see the bride and know what underlies all this show," said the Colonel, as they came away together. "Men, soldiers, are trickling quietly away out of the city and joining the enemy forces at Fyzapur. This state is so far off the beaten track that they can hold it with comparatively few men and send off the rest where they are more needed. I am not afraid of the loyalty of the ruling princes. The fear is that men like Revel, whom I believe to be agents of the Russians, may worm in and get the reins. If so, the lives of such men as Mahmud Mirza will be no safer than our own. There is an ominous stirring in the bazaar. The next event will be an invitation to us all to put ourselves under Mahmud Mirza's protection. I heard this morning that the mails are no longer safe and only verbal messages will reach me. Things are going badly for us at Fyzapur."

"Will any native be found loyal and brave enough to risk his life as a messenger?"

"Thousands. They did it in the Mutiny; they will now. When you were at Delhi, didn't you see the monument commemorating the gallantry of those who fought and died there with us? There were natives in the gallant little band that blew up the Kashmiri Gate. I shall send and receive news regularly. When do your friends visit the bride?"

"In four days. Is it safe?"

Seton's face was pale with anxiety. Those days and their suspense were wearing enough, but every hour of them added to his love and his trust in Venetia. He could not have imagined a more courageous, sweeter nature

than she showed in these straits. Never a cloud on her brow, never a word of fear. It did not surprise him later when Sara, who, of course, knew nothing of the hidden terrors, said to him one day:

"I always thought Venetia the dearest, happiest girl in the world, but she seems happier and brighter than ever now. I can't tell you, Miles, how grateful I am to you for that. You know what I've always felt about her."

Yes, he certainly knew that, but *grateful*! Would Sara be particularly grateful to him if she guessed the weight of anxiety he had forced Venetia to share with him? "The lives of the English people in the whole State of Mianpur may depend very much on your courage and observation." That was the message he had carried to her from Colonel Gifford—a heavy burden for such slender shoulders, though she received it with a smile. Sitting with her hand in his, she would talk of none but happy things, the good days to come when all the troubles were over, and, resting under the beech trees on some quiet English lawn, they would intensify the peace by the memory of Mianpur and its tragedies. He forgot all anxieties when she talked like that, in a voice sweet as a blackbird's song. Those were the hours of rest and hope. And then, just as he was going, she would lay her velvet-soft cheek to his and say in a whisper, "Miles, I don't forget my work. No, not for a minute," her bright eyes shining like two stars in clouds. That was heroism, he knew, and knew also how much he owed it.

She saw him before she went to the palace to visit the bride. Sara was putting the last touches to an imposing toilette, and the lovers had a moment together.

"But, Miles, supposing she isn't the woman of the picture, what shall you think then? And supposing she is, will it mean that the troubles begin here at once? Will you come over to-morrow morning? I don't like you to be walking about at night now the bazaar is so much disturbed. Promise me not to."

"As far as I can, sweetheart; but I don't know what may be necessary, and I am absolutely at Gifford's disposal. You mustn't grudge me my share!"

"That's the only part I don't like," she sighed, and as Sara came in the sigh vanished in a smile, and the closest watcher could have seen no trouble in the summer blue of her eyes. He went away marvelling at her, marvelling even more at the strange fate which had given the love of such a woman to him, unworthy.

The Begam received them with her usual blending of pomp and somewhat down-at-heel comfort. It was never possible to forget she was a great lady, but it was also impossible not to feel sometimes that it was

greatness tempered by such manners as made it extremely human. Her coat of glorious gold kincob was, for instance, on this bridal occasion, ruthlessly slashed with a pair of scissors up the sides, on account of a sudden and poignant realization that a garment which had fitted her Highness' slenderness as a young bride, had not increased with the years as she herself had done. And, moreover, it could not be denied that the tight plum-coloured satin trousers would have become the august lady better in the days when her grace was so celebrated that all over India men spoke of the "Pearl of Mianpur."

But Sara and Venetia were used to these contradictions—indeed, the oddities of the Begam were among their earliest memories.

"Subhan Allah (praise be to Allah)! Oh, raisers of my heart, we meet this day in joy!" she cried, motioning them to the glass armchairs. "May the blessing of the Prophet and the twelve Imaums be upon it! Have I not pined for it, until my shadow was attenuated and my countenance darkened? But now, Mashalla! I shall nurse a grandson on my knees, and my friends rejoice in my joy."

"The joy of a friend is better than our own joy," said Sara. "And in token thereof have we not brought a mean offering, totally unworthy of the bride of the son of our friend? May it be accepted!"

"May your condescension increase!" cried the Begam, curious as a child to see what the silk-wrapped box might contain. "Laili, summon here my daughter the bride, and inform her that the two pearls, the Angriz (English) ladies, peerless as the sun in beauty, generous as our ancestor, Babar the Conqueror, are here with a noble gift for her satisfaction. Haste, child, haste!"

Her look as Laili fled was peculiar—even Sara noticed it. Venetia at once made up her mind as to the result of the mission, and was therefore not in the least surprised when Laili returned, breathless and unsuccessful. She spoke rapidly with the Begam in Persian, and the latter threw up her hands in a most expressive gesture.

"Compassion of Allah, what a misfortune! Well is it said that every light has its shadow. Here is my bride, and but this morning did she say to me that her whole soul panted to behold my two moons of delight and hear their mellifluous voices. And now has she been eating too many jalebis (a sweetmeat), and her head aches to bursting, nor can she raise it. May your favour and forgiveness be upon her!"

They both sympathized, Sara sincerely, for she knew the habits of the zenana too well to feel any surprise at the statement.

“Carry in this box to the women of Shirin Begam,” ordered the old lady. “But, oh, my doves, my little lambs, tell me what it contains, and so shall my heart be at peace, for surely a closed box is a mote in the eye of curiosity until the lid is raised.”

She was gratified with a peep at the really beautiful smelling bottle of gold, the stoppers set with pearls and coral, which Sara had spared from her treasures, and amid her exclamations of delight and wonder, Venetia cautiously intruded a question.

“The world has heard of the beauty of the Begam herself when she was a bride. Is her new daughter as lovely?”

The delight of the old lady broke into a flood of reminiscence and comparison. Her daughter-in-law was a peri, an houri, but she herself had certainly had hair that touched the ground, whereas the bride’s did but reach her ankles.

“Still, her beauty is comparable only to the full moon, and the sweetness of her voice to honey. She . . . But what is this, Laili?”

For Laili, called by some mysterious signal to the door, returned with a deep obeisance and a missive bound with silk, which the Begam tore open and read at once. She flung it on the divan and began to weep loudly and demonstratively.

“Ya Allah, who can say what a day shall bring forth? Surely He raises and abases, and who shall question? Favoured of my soul, these words are from my son, the Sword of the Faith. He says—‘Say to the ladies, the nieces of the great Commissioner Sahib whom we loved, that there is danger. There is a rising among the low persons of the bazaars, and it is necessary, until these are dealt with, that the two ladies should abide under the protection of my mother, the Shah Begam, and there shall they be entertained in safety and magnificence, and when the danger is past they shall depart in peace and gratitude. It is an order.’ ”

“Do you mean that we are not to leave here now?” asked Venetia, her very lips blanching at the thought of this sudden separation from Seton. Could any one have guessed, have suspected, that she was watching, and was this the means taken to cut off information? She stood up instantly. “Hazrat, we must go. It is impossible I should stay here. You know that Seton Sahib and I are betrothed, and if there is any danger I cannot be separated from him. He will protect my sister and me. Sara, come! We must go at once.”

Sara, utterly perplexed for the moment, looked from Venetia to the Begam in consternation, and said nothing. The Begam wrung her hands.

"Ya Allah, what are we to do with her? Verily, love is a fever in the young, and even the aged are not exempt. Miss Sahib, lamb of my heart, my son must be obeyed. The gates are closed and none may leave or enter without his seal. Would he say there was danger if there was not? The budmashes (scoundrels) of the bazaar have broken loose, and it can but be a day or more before they are restrained, the owls, the cut-off ones, the cold of countenance!"

"I will go to Seton Sahib!" Venetia repeated immovably.

"My own dear, have you considered?" Sara entreated in English. "You know how kind and loyal these people have always been. If they say it is unsafe, do you suppose Miles would wish you to run into danger? Be patient."

"Sara, you don't understand. You don't know. I must go, I will. You must stay here if you wish, but I shall go."

"Run, Laili, run, and have word sent to Mahmud Mirza that the young Miss Sahib is run as mad as Mejnoon and declares she will not stay in safety, no, not if they massacre her in the bazaar! Represent to him that all her talk is of Seton Sahib and his danger, and ask his commands."

She turned to Sara.

"Friend of my soul, vein of my heart, quiet your sister until Mahmud Mirza shall have spoken. I will depart a moment and leave you to reason with her. Oh, day of misfortune, how is our face blackened that shone with delight! Extolled be the perfection of Allah, in whom is no change! Attend me, Laili!"

She waddled off and the two were left together. Sara put her arm about Venetia and tried to draw her to her, but she was cold and unresponsive as marble, her thoughts fixed in sternest concentration. It was not her own danger, nor even Sara's that occupied her mind.

"Hush, Sara, don't talk for a minute. I want to think," she said, and stared over her sister's shoulder at the window.

How—how could she get word to Seton? How would this affect his plans and Gifford's? Her deadly fear was lest her dropping out might affect the whole chain of communication. And yet—if that could be held intact, there might be opportunities for knowledge in the palace that she could never get elsewhere. How should she know?

“Sara,” she said, so suddenly that Sara started back, “I should not mind staying here if you think it best;—if I could know what has happened to Miles. Do you suppose Mahmud Mirza would see us for a moment? That would set my mind at rest.”

“He might,” Sara said doubtfully. “Of course, we have always known him. Whom should we ask?”

Oddly enough, though Sara had invariably led hitherto, it was Venetia who was taking command now. At the moment it seemed quite natural; neither of them realized the change. She thought a moment, then clapped her hands to call one of the zenana women. It was Laili’s younger sister, Aziza, who ran in. They knew her well.

“I desire that word be sent to his Highness Mahmud Mirza that the nieces of his friend thank him for his hospitality, and desire to speak with him, that they may ask a question.”

Venetia spoke with a kind of stern gravity, her face so unlike a girl’s in its expression at the moment that Sara, who understood nothing but what lay on the surface, thought she had never seen her so dignified and collected. Aziza, listening with the wondering dark eyes of some little woodland creature, salaamed and ran off to seek the Begam and lay this new and startling development before her.

CHAPTER XXII

MEANWHILE, GIFFORD and Seton at the rest house were considering a message, written in faultless English and brought by a guard of Mahmud Mirza's Sowars, gallant figures on their reined-up black horses, the little pennons fluttering on their lances. It was from the Diwan, the minister whom they had often seen in attendance, and conveyed the intimation of danger and promise of safety in the palace. The Miss Sahibs were already under the Begam Shah's protection, and if any other European ladies were in the Mianpur principality, they would be brought in. Kincaid Sahib had also been notified, but had preferred to retire to Sellore, much against the advice of the Mianpur court.

The two men spoke French in discussing it.

"What is your opinion? Are we most useful inside or outside?" Seton asked.

"Inside," the Colonel replied promptly. "All my information is that there is no real danger yet in Mianpur. Revel is pulling the strings and has frightened Mahmud Mirza about his responsibility for European lives. He and the new wife are plotting for all they are worth, and they want to make us prisoners in the palace so that we shall not know what goes on. They will send us to the Summer Palace on the lake, on pretence of greater safety. Easy to row guard there, you know, and we shall not be able to see the Russian lady. We are all as right as rain, unless Revel and the woman bedevil Mahmud Mirza body and soul. But my diagnosis is that, as they are out to make India a Russian community, Mahmud and the other ruling princes will have as short a shrift as they can devise, and then, of course, we are in the deuce of a tight place."

"But," asked Seton, listening breathlessly, "can you carry on there? Can you get information when you're interned in the middle of the lake?"

Colonel Gifford smiled a little.

"I was prepared for this some time ago. Moreover, do you suppose that if they lay a finger on Mahmud Mirza we shall not have partisans all over Mianpur to avenge him? Even then I don't give up hope altogether. India can never be Bolshevik. We shall have a fearful catastrophe, no doubt, but the people will come to their senses as a man does after a debauch on drugs. Revel and his allies are drugging the country into madness now."

"Will it be possible for us to see the ladies?"

"I think so. That was allowed when Mahmud's predecessor sheltered our folk before. Now, are you content? I must write."

Seton agreed, and the message was written and dispatched, half the guard remaining, with two led horses, to conduct them to the palace. They hurried through their packing and then rode off, noticing as they went that, though the selling stalls were closed, there was hardly any one about and not a sign of disturbance in the city.

They were received in the great reception room by the Diwan, a stout, elderly man with a stubbly black beard, who looked thoroughly disturbed and uneasy. He salaamed profusely and seemed to hesitate in introducing the subject.

"I beg to represent," said Gifford, very erect and on strict service, "that we have come to place ourselves under your master's august protection, according to his counsel. It is now proper that we should have the reasons for his proposal."

There was the note of authority veiled in the courtesy of the little speech. The Diwan certainly could not be surprised by it, but he hesitated painfully.

"On general lines, Colonel Sahib," he said at last, "it is known to you that there is a deplorable tension in the public mind. His Highness cannot guard you and the ladies as he wishes in the town, and therefore". . . (another marked hesitation) "he has had preparations made in the Farhat Bakhsh (Giver of Joy) Palace for your honourable reception, Huzoor."

"The Lake Palace? We thank his Highness. We understand the ladies are with her Highness the Begam Shah now?"

"Certainly, Colonel Sahib, and they will also be provided for."

Seton's heart lifted on hearing this. To be under the same roof with Venetia, possibly to see her walking in the little lovely rose garden, shaded with sweeping trees—he felt that all things were endurable while that was possible, and he and the Colonel might guard them.

"The ladies desired to see my master, for the information startled them," the Diwan went on, "but he judged it would be more agreeable if he communicated with them through the Sahibs."

"No doubt—no doubt," the Colonel agreed. "Then may we expect to see his Highness now?"

"Unfortunately he slept ill and is indisposed. I beg to represent the pleasure is only postponed. If. . . ."

An almost noiseless step interrupted him, and, starting violently, the minister turned to meet Revel. Seton thought he had never seen him look so handsome, so cool and unembarrassed.

"I have just heard what has happened," he said gravely. "If you gentlemen are inconvenienced in any way by such a hurried move, all I have is at your disposal. His Highness has commissioned me see that everything is done for your comfort."

"Do I understand that you represent his Highness?" asked the Colonel amiably.

"By no means. But he imagined that, being a European, I should be more likely to understand your requirements. You have only to name them, as far as possibilities go."

"We are very grateful. When do we embark for the Farhat Bakhsh?"

"In half an hour, I believe. The ladies go in the same boat. You will wish that?"

"Certainly. One other matter— Does his Highness ensure us free communication by mail and otherwise with the outer world?"

"As far as his powers go. But you are aware that the Fyzapur State is in a very disturbed condition, and on the southern border Chilanbad is impassable with roving bands of dacoits. It is almost impossible to get things through now. For the last two days he has been trying and has failed."

"It is most unfortunate," the Colonel said, in a tone of annoyance very natural in the circumstances, "for I wish to communicate with my relatives and lawyer. But after all, if his Highness is in the same predicament, we should not complain. Well, Mr. Revel, we are ready when the boat is."

Revel went away, and they were left once more with the Diwan. The little stout man walked up and down the room, evidently perturbed beyond all bounds of Oriental etiquette. Gifford followed him.

"Kwaja Hussein!" he said; "I have known you for many years and have ever found in you the heart of honesty and the tongue of truth. Has Revel Sahib authority here or has he not?"

"Do not ask me, Huzoor. It is not for the servant to speak when the master is silent. But I fear for my master. Very greatly do I fear."

He escaped without another word, and Gifford resumed his French, as he strolled to the window with an air of ease that would have deceived any listener.

“You see, Seton? Mischief’s afoot. Remember, now, in case we are separated (but we shall not be yet), that the prophecy is the point, and all Miss Venetia can hear through the women is invaluable. The view from this window is unrivalled, is it not?”

Seton answered, little suspecting that through a grille contrived in the ornament of the great door, watchers on the floor above could observe every one in the reception room at their ease. A pair of eyes, dark and beautiful, strained to see his every movement and each detail of his face. A voice he had never heard murmured, “Thou endest the night,” while white fingers clasped over a carbuncle ring he would have recognized very readily.

“Bored?” asked the Colonel, coming back to him.

“Well, just a bit!” he admitted. “Don’t like the wait between the acts.”

The Colonel chuckled under his moustache.

“You may come to be thankful for even that, Seton Sahib,” he said.

In half an hour’s time there was spectacle enough to content the greediest, for, as they walked down the courtyard which opened to the lake, a very striking scene met their eyes. The sunset was burning on the water in the splendour of gold and rose, and on its fiery reaches a mile away lay the white marble palace, flushed like an Alp with the sun’s last kiss. It looked as unreal, as visionary, as the palace of a dream. The Sleeping Beauty might have dreamed beneath those exquisite cupolas, the Queen of Fairyland might have embarked in the magnificent barge, curved and high and golden, with fretted carving at bow and stern, its rowers glittering in gold and crimson above their gilded oars and its canopy and curtains of rose dragon brocade from China. But it was not the splendour that struck Seton dumb. It was that he had seen it all before—in a courtyard in Cairo.

Sara and Venetia, very quiet and controlled, were sitting hidden under the canopy as the men stepped aboard. They said nothing, but it was not difficult to understand the look of relief as they appeared. Seton set the time at once by greeting them in French, touching Venetia’s hand furtively as he spoke. It was good to be near her again.

“Are we prisoners or guests? I can’t quite make out,” said Sara. “I interviewed the Begam before we started, but as she was alternately weeping and devouring Turkish delight, I made very little headway. Venetia was much more enterprising. She demanded to see Mahmud Mirza, but was told he was ill.”

“So were we,” said Seton. “Isn’t this the most unexpected turn of fortune? Never mind—so long as we’re together. Colonel Gifford says

there's nothing to fear."

Venetia looked into his eyes.

"I wasn't afraid in the ordinary way, Miles. I was only afraid of not being able to see you."

He understood the double meaning of her words, and so did Colonel Gifford. They knew they had a fearless ally in her.

It was a strange moment when they landed at the lovely marble pier of the Farhat Bakhsh and crossed a lacework bridge to the rose garden. Seen from there across the water, the palace of Mianpur loomed dark and threatening, like a thundercloud overhanging the town. The lights were being lighted, the large one on the western tower among the first, known as the Moon of the Amir, and always lit when Mahmud Mirza was in residence. They stood a moment or two looking back and then turned to the palace, Venetia following with Seton, to the Hathi Pol, the Elephant Gate, where several officers of the Household waited to receive them. The women were led to the zenana and given into the care of two of the Begam's ladies, the men to their rooms, looking sheer over the water, the windows only about twelve feet above it; having seen these, they were taken to the Pleasure Hall, a beautiful little chamber of carved marble, white, blue, and veined with grey, the effect being marvellously delicate and refined.

"Here," said the Ressaldar who escorted them, "the Madam Sahibs will also sit when it pleases them. They have, indeed, a divan room of their own, but it may be their pleasure to come hither."

Mahmud Mirza had certainly left them nothing to complain of in their accommodation so far as lay in his power. The luxury was endless, but, as the Colonel remarked, a little less marble and a few more bathrooms would have been acceptable, a sentiment that Sara and Venetia echoed on seeing their beautiful rooms. Yet this was ungrateful, for in all the world could be found no more exquisite bath than the one set apart for them of white marble sunk to the floor level, the edge carved with great lotus flowers and their leaves, so beautiful that the absence of hot water and the fact that it must be emptied and filled by hand should count for little to the aesthetic mind.

Their Indian experience and knowledge of the language served them well, and Seton, as envious of the power as he was ready with languages, spent every spare moment in learning Hindustani with the Colonel's help. It gave an explanation, too, for endless conferences over the outspread books.

Some quiet days followed—another wait between the acts, and it was impossible to guess what was happening in the beautiful city across the lake.

It might have been another planet for all they knew—all, that is, except Gifford. It was on the sixth day, as Seton and he had been smoking in the rose garden under the shade of the pippala and neem trees with a book before each of them, that, speaking in French, he said laconically:

"What would you make of the message I have had this morning? Any good at guessing riddles?" He paused a moment, then added: "This did service once in Indian history, but my informants of course have altered the numbers. 'A great pearl has been dissolved, two gold mohurs have been lost, and of the silver and copper coins are vanished ten.' Is that decipherable?"

"Not to me. I know a gold mohur means a coin."

"It means simply this: Mahmud Mirza has been murdered, with two of his ministers and ten of the minor officials."

The Colonel was leaning on the marble balustrade, looking down into the placid water that lapped against it. With a violent effort Seton repressed a start of horror. He glanced furtively over his shoulder. No one was in sight, but the rose bushes and hibiscus might hide a listener. The beauty that veiled such happenings was terrible in that moment, as he looked across the blue serenity to the city of the tragedy and the sullen palace dominating it.

"Go on," he said in a stifled voice.

"Not much more to tell. I have been expecting this, as you know. It means that Revel and the woman are in the saddle, and what their next move will be, who can tell? I wish we knew who that woman is. It might throw some light on her future doings. Does she belong, I wonder, to one of the small states that has such wrongs to avenge on the greater powers? Is she an Armenian, Czech, Russian, or what?"

"If I told you what I think, you would say I was a raving lunatic. You would never trust me with a secret again."

"My dear fellow, in the Secret Service what most men call lunacies are the mainsprings of great events. I shall laugh at nothing you say. It may be of vital consequence at this terrible time. For I must tell you that the Nawab of Fyzapur has also been murdered with his ministers, and two other ruling princes. You will see that the Russians are breaking up all the loyalties which might help the British Raj. This is steadily spreading throughout the land. Now, light your cigar and chat as it were, but tell me."

Seton sat on top of the balustrade, his long legs swinging carelessly as he talked. Any one looking at the little group of two would have supposed they were loafing in the delicious laziness that had given its name to the fairy palace and gardens. The sound of the water was like a kiss against the

marble, the faintest breeze breathed in their faces, ineffably sweet with rose perfume, as Seton's grim tale unfolded itself from point to point, and Gifford listened, yawning now and then, and flinging rose petals into the lake, but with the bright of his eye on the speaker.

"And this was the prophecy Alphonse had copied: 'The great white people (of Atlantis) shall put on again the garment of flesh, and their sinews shall be iron and their strength terrible. They shall dwell in a cold land of the north and come out from it like locusts, and run over the earth with wings and wheels, and the nations shall tremble and abase themselves. And the sign shall be that the dead queen Nefert, she whose body lies in the land of Egypt, shall return from the Land of the Dead. She shall glory in her beauty. She shall live and triumph.' "

"Interesting! Go on," said the Colonel, feeling for another cigar.

"Then there were the hieroglyphics we found with the body. Walworth read them for us: 'The Queen, Nefert. She went down to the grave with scorn and loathing. With scorn and loathing shall she return. Break not down the door. Cast not down the stone, lest she arise and come, very terrible in hatred. In the same form shall she come, and her sign is war and terror.' Then there was a curse on those who broke the seal. And we broke it."

"Go on. Give me every point," said the quiet voice. "Light a cigarette—let's look as casual as we can."

Seton gave every point, conscious all the time that it sounded far more like a fairy tale than sober information for the Secret Service. He ended almost despairingly, "Do you think there's anything in reincarnation, Gifford? I never gave it a thought until I came to India—but now. . . ." He paused, thinking of Jadrup Gosein, and added hastily, "In short, I'm a convert. You won't agree with me, but there it is."

" 'The geography of that country is written only by those who have never visited it,' " Gifford quoted. "How can we know? But I'll go as far as this—I have found it more than once a very sufficient working hypothesis in India. Let us work on it now."

Seton looked at him gratefully.

"By George, you're a broad-minded fellow! One isn't afraid to bring anything to your notice."

"I should be little fit for my job if you were. Tell me—do you associate Revel with this woman's past?"

"Ah, we must wait for the lost prophecy to tell us that. I do associate him with it of late, but I have no reason for it as yet. But hush—here's Venetia.

Must we tell her about Mahmud Mirza?"

"No, no. She'll know it soon enough. We want to keep their hope and courage going."

She came, walking leisurely and daintily under her white sun-umbrella lined with pink. It spread a lovely glow on her face, and her eyes were blue and deep as the lake. A charming woman in white, come out without a care on her mind, to enjoy the roses exhaling their hearts in perfume in the sunshine, she added the last touch of beauty and security.

"She has something to tell us. I know, because she looks so happy," Seton said, with a lover's intuition, and the two men turned to meet her, as care-free as she.

For a few minutes she spoke of the view of the city, the flowers, anything. Then, quietly:

"The Begam is coming here to-day, and the women have a rumour that Mahmud Mirza is ill. Doesn't it seem strange she should come away when he is ill? I believe he is dead. Sara and I remember when the other son, Ahmad Mirza, died, and it was hidden for a fortnight. There is something mysterious."

Seton looked at Gifford with a kind of triumph. His face said, Trust her altogether, she will not fail. Gifford responded at once. He was too good a judge of human stuff to be mistaken either in man or woman, given the opportunity of judging. With brevity and simplicity he told her all he knew.

"You can't be too guarded, Miss Venetia. The Begam will not know, but Mahmud Mirza is dead. For your life, watch any hints she lets drop about Revel. That may be her salvation, as well as our own. And, of all things, win Gulbadan Begam's confidence. Don't scruple, for you will probably save her life if we are armed with knowledge. At present I should say it is scarcely worth an hour's purchase, with that devil in the palace. Gulbadan's jealousy will have kept her alert."

"If it is dangerous for her to do this, even now I forbid it," Seton interposed. "Is it fair—is it fair, I ask you, now we have come to this, to put a woman in the post of danger? I never guessed it would be a service of blood and ruin like this when it began. Venetia——"

"My dear fellow, when I said Gulbadan's life was not worth an hour's purchase, I might have said the same of Miss Venetia's and all our lives and of the British Raj in India. She is a brave woman, and, being a woman, can do what we cannot. She is fighting for her life and for us all. Let her judge."

"Miles agrees with you absolutely, Colonel Gifford, and so do I," Venetia answered with her fearless smile. "I shall be thankful for this chance of helping to the last day of my life, whether it comes to-morrow or fifty years hence. And so will he. Now, walk about with me a little, and then I will go in. Sara has a bad headache."

They walked awhile, Seton marvelling at her as men marvel at the woman they love—the inward harmony which had shaped lips and eyes into finer, more sensitive lines than those of other women. He and she had never spoken together of his meeting with Jadrup Gosein, but now, before she went in, she turned to him suddenly.

"The less you said, the more I knew what you had felt about Jadrup Gosein. How could one be afraid in the world he has opened to one? The true world. You feel that?"

"I feel it entirely," Seton said gravely. "And I must tell you, Venetia, what he said of the trouble that is before us now."

He repeated it.

"Have you tried yet?"

"No. I am waiting for a sharper pinch than this."

"If you were meant to have tried, you would have had the signal," she said, gathering a rose and pressing it against her lips. There might be watchers.

"What signal? How?"

"It is different at times, but one always knows. Sometimes like a drift of music—but not music that one hears. One feels it. Like strange, beautiful vibrations. How can I put it into words? Sometimes like a sudden silence where one can hear one's heart beat. I always know."

"Does it come often?"

"Not very—but when it does, you will understand. It's quite unlike anything else. I have had it once since all this began."

"And what was it? Can you tell me?"

"A vision of the end of it all. Quiet, under great trees, with blue mountains seen through tracery of leaves, and—well, Victory. Something well done and laid aside for ever. Not that anything ends, but yet finished and good."

"It sounds like heaven. Where?"

"How can I tell? It *is* heaven wherever one feels such things. Heaven is within one, the rest matters nothing. Now I must go."

She went contented away, and Seton paced up and down, for the moment contented also.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN the afternoon they saw the state barges put off, and the Begam came, attended by Laili and her favourite ladies. A few were left at the palace to serve Shirin Begam, she told Venetia. Always voluble, she was so hurried and flurried by the sudden removal, that at first she was scarcely coherent, but after a while she settled down in comfort and gossip and the most hospitable satisfaction that Venetia and her sister were at the Farhat Bakhsh.

"For indeed, lamb of my soul, the budmashes (scoundrels) of the city are very insolent persons, and it is credibly told me that they have plundered the guest house and murdered the keeper—may Allah not have mercy on their graves and may the stoned devil possess them! Therefore it is understood by you that my son, the Sword of the Faith, judged wisely in sheltering you and your sister here. Great is his wisdom!"

"Great indeed!" Venetia repeated, sick at heart to see the poor mother in ignorance of her loss and ruin. "May God be good to him in all his comings and goings."

"It is certain that he will," the Begam said proudly, "for it is noticeable that the worthy are under the Protection. But seat yourself by me, my full moon, and tell me of your sister. A pain in the temples, her head like a coal of fire? What words are these, my child? Ya Allah, this must not be neglected! Run, Laili, fly for the prescription that hakim (doctor), wise as Aflatoun (Plato), gave me to drink when I ailed at Sikanderbagh. Lose not a moment in foolish chatter, according to thy wont, oh, daughter of Shaitan."

Laili, who little deserved this rebuke, darted off like a hare, and in less than five minutes the precious paper was in the Begam's hand.

"It will cure aught but the pangs of childbirth, or unrequited love. Now hearken, oh, brightener of my countenance."

She read aloud with immense enjoyment——

" 'In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful; and blessings and peace be on our Lord the Prophet, and his family and his companions one and all. But afterwards let him take bees' honey and cinnamon and chob-chini (ginseng), of each half a part, with gum mastic, which, let him pound and mix with honey and form boluses, each bolus the weight of a small nut, and of it let him use every day a nut on the saliva (fasting). Verily, wonderful are its effects. And let him abstain from flesh, fish, vegetables,

sweetmeats, flatulent foods, acids of all description, as well as the greater ablution, and live in perfect quiet. So shall he be cured, by the help of the One, the Healer, and the Peace.' "

She folded it and looked triumphantly at Venetia.

"Maryam Khanam, whose skill is known, shall compound the boluses, and fear not but you see the face of the sister shining with health the morn's morrow. Run, Laili, give this to Maryam Khanam, and desire that she be speedy. And now, to talk, dil khushar (heart's delight)."

Venetia had but to listen as it poured on, a torrent of the little affairs of the zenana—and indeed her attention wandered, until a name arrested it.

"And the wise exult not in the morning, but when the day is done, and had I known what now I know, I had not given my chain of opals to Shirin Begam."

"And why not, Highness?"

The old lady lowered her voice and glanced about her. For the moment they were practically alone, for Laili was preparing her pipe at the end of the hall and the newly arrived ladies were all making arrangements for their own and their mistress' comfort.

"Lamb of my soul, the Frankish women are not as the women of Hind. To them one may speak and it is as if a stone were dropped in a well: it is no more heard. To you, then, I say thus—Natalia Begam unveiled her face this day to a man, to Revel Sahib, for she received him in the Garden Pavilion Hall and there spoke with him with only one woman in attendance, Hamada Khanan (may her countenance be cold before Allah!), and this lasted for half an hour and Laili brought me word."

The eyes she fixed on Venetia were round with horror, and the girl knew it must have been a terrible shock for the Begam.

"It is very strange, Oh, Mother!" was all she dared to say.

"It is so strange that if my son hear it, he has the right to pack her back to her own people—or worse," said the Begam ominously.

"But surely, a lady of your Highness' own family would not act so amiss?" Venetia ventured cautiously.

"Of my own family, girl? Thu!" cried the Begam, spitting in disgust and totally forgetting her former assertion. "It is foolishness to anoint a rat's head with oil of jasmine, and to treat a Kafir (an infidel) as one of the princes is no less folly. She is. . . ."

But Laili approached with the pipe, and the Begam, receiving it, made a gesture of understanding common to all countries. She winked, unroyally but peremptorily. Laili withdrew to the window.

With all the air of indifference she could muster, Venetia attempted a step further. The name of Natalia had sounded as the stroke of doom.

"Has your Highness known who this Revel Sahib is? Surely his rank and worth must be high if Shirin Begam thus honours him? And was he not as the right hand of the Amir Mahmud Mirza?"

Again the Begam lowered her voice.

"Oh, Mahi-alum (moon of the world), surely it is known to you that Revel Sahib is a mighty magician, comparable only to Suleiman the Wise. Great seeings has he shown my son of his wealth and advancement even to heights I name not, and who can resist the power of the Djinns (evil spirits)? Have not I myself seen wonders at the hands of Revel Sahib—such things as caused my heart to burn within me for pride? The future is as an open page before him."

The fear and awe in her face were so great, the superstition of the Oriental vibrant and conquering, that Venetia, to recall her to herself, recited the great Moslem formula, "There is no power save in God, the Supreme, the Compassionate," and it calmed the old woman, who devoutly repeated it after her.

"True, Oh, young and wise, most true. Yet the heart of my son was swayed like a creeper in the wind. Revel Sahib and this woman Shirin— But what do I, a talkative old woman, wasting the time of the consumer of hearts, that would be sitting by her sister or talking with her lord to be? Go, my child, in the protection of Allah, and may the bolus (taken on the saliva) bring health to the sister who is even as your mother."

Venetia rose obedient at the signal of dismissal, and asked but one question more.

"Gulbadan Begam, Hazrat? Is she also come?"

"She is come, but sits silent. I bethink me that I was hasty with the child. This at least I know: *she* would be hewn in pieces ere she would show her face to Revel Sahib, or any man. Talk with her, dove of my soul, and bid her be comforted. Tell her a man's heart may make a day's journey and yet return to his home."

This was an unheard-of concession from the Begam, who had never owned herself mistaken within the memory of man or woman. It touched Venetia inexpressibly, knowing that the royal heart she spoke of had set out

on a journey, longer than that to any woman's heart, from which there is no return.

"Indeed, I will see her," she said warmly, "now—this minute—if I may."

"Run, Laili, conduct the Miss Sahib to Gulbadan Begam."

And the old lady composed herself to her pipe.

Venetia could never forget the scene that followed. Laili brought her through devious passages to a small room of purest marble, white as the heart of a deep-sea shell, with a long window, jealously latticed with marble trellises of sea-foam beauty, looking toward the city and the palace over a mile and more of water, with the evening rising like mist from its hushed surface. Lights were lit in the palace. It glittered like a constellation, and above it shone on the western tower the great light, Moon of the Amir, which denoted the presence of Mahmud Mirza in his city. Gulbadan Begam sat, darkly beautiful, on a pile of cushions, a dim lamp burning at her elbow, her head pressed against the lattice, her eyes steadfastly fixed on the far-away light that spoke of her lord. She neither turned nor moved when Venetia entered, and Laili made a frightened little salaam and vanished. No lady was in attendance. The young Begam was absolutely alone.

There was silence for a minute, and then, gathering her failing courage—for grief is more terrible than sovereignty—Venetia advanced very softly and knelt on a cushion by the girl. And still she neither spoke nor moved, and the minutes went by, each, as it were, frozen in her attitude.

Suddenly, as they watched, the brilliant light, the Moon of the Amir, was extinguished, and from the city came the sound of a great multitude, mixed, as it were, with the wailing of women, and as this happened, the young queen threw her head backward and covered her face with her hands.

"My sister, my sister!" cried Venetia, all the founts of pity broken up and pouring from her eyes.

It was some minutes before Gulbadan spoke, and then with a cruel self-control more touching than any demonstration. She held Venetia's hand in a tight, cold clasp all the while.

"My sister, strengthen me! Weaken me not with tears, for my task is before me. What now you see, I knew yesterday, and have endured alone, but for my foster mother, Zaynab—may Allah approve her, for she is a good woman! And now, since it is not possible for me to see Gifford Sahib and Seton Sahib, will my sister be my tongue and my heart and bear my words to them?"

Her eyes were burning into Venetia's with a fearful earnestness, her grip strengthened until it hurt.

"What you tell me, I will faithfully repeat."

"Then bend your ear while I whisper."

They sat cheek to cheek as the passionate whisper went on.

"This man, this woman, have murdered my lord. For this reason she came. They are brother and sister, and of all things most evil; and because the people about him were faithful and therefore Revel Sahib could not slay him, he brought the woman, that my lord might trust her and die. But this is not all; for my lord's heart was mine, but Revel Sahib made him see this woman in waking dreams and visions, until her beauty so possessed him that he could dream of nothing else, waking or sleeping. And in these visions also he showed him how he might be emperor of India and of the world, so that he might be called Alumgir, World Conqueror, like his fore-father, Aurungzib. It is a great and fearful magic, Miss Sahib, and he does it through the power of a certain ring, brimming with red fire and full of enchantments, for when that ring is on the hand of any man or woman, they must see as Revel Sahib wills. And they are lying visions! Also he gave him such things as destroy the soul, hashish, benj—horrible things that break a man into worse than death."

She paused for a moment, shaking from head to foot as if her slight frame could not sustain the weight of the passion that poured through. Venetia, trembling also, clung to her. Presently she went on.

"Thus, by these two, all power was taken from my lord, and the Diwan saw it and could do nothing, for what are men to fight against the evil spirits? And all my lord's soldiers were sent forth to slay and murder in Fyzapur and throughout the provinces, and there is a great fire kindled in India, and it is the work of these two."

Again a tense silence, and over the water came the sound of the multitude, like the cry of a wild beast that seeks its prey; and close at hand in the Palace of the Lake where they sat, arose a piercing cry of the lamentation of women.

"At last his mother knows," said Gulbadan sombrely. "I had thought, when an only child died, the very winds would carry the news to a mother. But no—she did not know until they put out the light as they had put out the light of his life. The love of a wife is more! But, speak for me, beloved lady, all I have said, and tell them this: that while these two live, the world goes

down to hell. Let them slay them, as they would slay the very Shaitan! This is my word. I have spoken. Now leave me to my anguish."

Venetia still clung to her and kissed the cold cheek.

"My sister, have comfort. Shall not death restore what death has taken?"

Gulbadan did not hear. Her mind was weary miles away, beside a dead man in the palace of Mianpur. Then once more she roused herself.

"Yes, and add this also to my words. They have a charm, very ancient, written on a paper whereof I have not seen the like, and this also they use for the bewilderment of men. Let it be burned with them."

She spoke with a cold concentration that was fearful in its intensity, and then drew her hand away and turned once more to the lattice. Again the dreadful silence. It lasted so long that at last Venetia broke it.

"One last word: Where do they hide that paper?"

"Revel Sahib wears it about his neck."

The voice seemed to come from a great distance. Her thoughts were already out of reach. There was no more to be done or said.

At the door she met Zaynab, white as a sheeted ghost, standing on guard.

"The Amir. . . . May the lights of Allah be his testimony!" she said.

"She should not be alone," Venetia whispered, the tears falling from her eyes. "Oh, go to her, and do not leave her for one moment. The water is too near."

The curtain fell across the doorway, and she saw them no more. But as she passed alone along the passages, she heard the sound of bitter weeping from the rooms of the mother.

Food was brought to the party of three in the marble hall as usual, but it was hurriedly eaten, for the news of the catastrophe was now spread openly through the Lake Palace, and grief and fear were in every face. Sara, too, was worse, and Venetia, though anxious to be with her, yet felt she must not lose a moment in giving the terrible message of Gulbadan Begam.

They went out into the veranda afterwards to watch the path of glory on the water that led to the tragic city with the palace, and there the Colonel considerately left them and strolled down, a black figure, to the balustrades that overhung the lake, while Venetia, in the fewest, barest words, told her story, trembling lest even the leaves should be listeners, and then glided away to her post in the upper rooms. The name of Natalia, revealed by the old Begam, was all in all.

Seton immediately went down to the Colonel. He listened with the utmost attention to the story, making a few laconic comments here and there, and when it was finished, stood a moment considering.

"This clears up a good deal, Seton. I think it certain now that your ring was stolen in Cairo, and that they use it for the purpose of hypnosis. He gave it back to you after the Museum business, no doubt, but it was taken again while they had you under influence in that house in Cairo. You know the Indian superstition of the Doubles? A pair of amulets is made, exactly alike, and the wearer of the one is called the Giver, and the wearer of the other the Taker, and neither can act without the other. They took your ring from you there to use on Mahmud Mirza in conjunction with Revel's. What you are now wearing is a fake. Knowing this, I don't fear they can hypnotize you any more, unless, indeed, he gets the real ring back to you now Mahmud Mirza is done for."

"But why should he want me? What good can I be?"

"A renegade Englishman—one who knows things they cannot, may always be useful," returned Gifford gravely. "Be on your guard—especially against the woman."

"You don't think she will break purdah (be seen openly)?"

"Certainly. Now, for *my* news. The whole Peninsula is breaking into flame, and at Cawnpore and Meerut the horrors of 1857 have been repeated, and Mongolia is certainly on the move. Russia is pulling the strings and the loyal princes are all either slaughtered or marked for death. The Hindus have united with the Moslems, and officers from Russia are leading them. In Mianpur Srinavastri is Revel's right-hand man and finding huge sums of money, and behind him is a man named Pir Khan, a Sayyad, a descendant of the Prophet, and he is preaching a holy war, in which all parties and beliefs can unite. If indeed your wild fancy were true, you let loose a scourge worse than Attila upon the world when you opened that tomb."

Seton clenched his hand as it lay on the marble of the balustrade.

"If I did, I'll close it again, Colonel! He shall not find me the fool he has always made me. Gulbadan Begam is right. The death of those two devils is the only remedy."

"They will not be easy to get at. But make your plans—that can do no harm. Now, for another matter. All our lives are pretty uncertain. I think you should give the ladies this little packet and tell them a few grains on the tongue will put them painlessly and swiftly beyond the reach of danger. It is an easier way than shooting. You had better have some too, in case you are

disarmed—otherwise you and I would naturally prefer shot or steel. And, another thing: you should know how I communicate, in case I go first. Swimmers brave the alligators and bring news under my window, and there are signals from the town which I shall show you. The password here or on land is the old Thug password—*Ali Khan bhai salaam*, the Peace to Ali Khan my brother. Now I must dispatch my message."

When they parted the way was straight before them as far as human foresight could straighten it. But the unreckonable, the unforeseen was at hand.

Next morning Seton gave Venetia the packet and the instructions, his lips set and white, and yet half disbelieving in the reality of the horror that was upon them. She accepted it without any show of emotion that could weaken either of them—even smiling a little.

"I'll take care of it, and I know it will make your mind easier that we have it," was all she said, and then turned to another subject. "Sara is worse this morning. I'm afraid she's very ill. I wish we had a doctor. The Begam is prostrate, Laili tells me. I pity her with all my heart. As for Gulbadan. . . ."

Her look finished the sentence. Gulbadan still sat by the window. Zaynab had moistened her lips with milk, but still she neither spoke nor moved, looking steadfastly toward the city.

Towards two o'clock in the afternoon the two men, watching, saw the state barges putting out once more from the palace of Mianpur, to which they had returned after bringing the Begam. Revel? Natalia? It was a moment of strained suspense, and when Venetia left them to return to Sara, her hand was hovering over the packet in her bosom, and the men knew it might well be they should never meet again. At such moments little is said, nor is it well to think overmuch. Venetia was perhaps the best off of the three, for the time she could spare from Sara the Begam demanded, that she might have her sympathy and a listener to the endless lamentations and recitations of her son's worth and perfect loyalty to the British Raj. The girl could not be certain whether she accepted the story of cholera which was spread about, or guessed the blacker tragedy which lay beneath.

Then, leaving her to her ladies, Venetia went and stood, solitary, by Sara's lattice, to see the proud and beautiful boats come over the water with the freight that must mean life or death to the watchers.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE state barge neared the Farhat Bakhsh in a dead silence. There was no sound of voices on board. The canopy hid whoever might be siting within it, and Colonel Gifford, standing by the balustrades with Seton, used his field glasses in vain. Neither showed any strain of anxiety. The Colonel had always his little air of frankness and good humour which concealed his thoughts so effectually, and Seton really felt almost relieved that the long suspense was ended and they were face to face with the worst Revel could do. From the zenana wing of the palace, in which were the sisters' rooms, there came no sound at all. Indeed, the silence was oppressive. Their last news from Venetia had been that no one might see or speak with the Begam, that Gulbadan Begam also was invisible, and that Sara seemed rather better. They had warned Venetia to keep to her room unless they sent for her.

Colonel Gifford shut up his glasses and turned to Seton.

"They will have landed in ten minutes."

"Yes. Have you formed any idea of what is likely to happen?"

"To a certain extent. I was watching then for a signal from the city. They have murdered Kincaid, the Deputy Commissioner. Revel is on board with Shirin Begam, as the natives call her. And I had word a while ago that all is over at Fyzapur and the Russian party in power. In Satispur also. Srinavastri has pulled the strings there for them. There is a heavy account against these gentlemen piling up. Our Government will pay it off one day. But not yet."

No, not yet. And where would they all be when that deferred day of reckoning came? thought Seton. Not that his individual fate affected him particularly; the men who have gone through the war have little to learn, either of fear or hope, and Death has been a neighbour so long that he has lost all strangeness—almost all terror.

For the Colonel, too, things would be well. For many years past he had walked with his life in his hand, and looking in his quiet eyes, any one might read how little it would cost him to open the hand and let it slip away like water, if only it were, as it would be here, a part of his undertaking.

That was all right, and Seton dismissed it from his thoughts once and for all. But Venetia—the women. How strange it all seemed! As if Fate had taken a hand in it and led them deliberately and of set purpose into this snare. It came about so naturally, so inevitably, and now it had ended in this.

Revel must have planned it from the first, with ruthless disregard for their lives, but what indeed were their lives likely to count in the fearful holocaust that was being offered up in India now?

The Colonel caught his sad, fixed look and answered it.

"Don't fret about them, boy. Her courage is of a finer quality than any woman's I've ever known. I have known women as brave, but she has something behind it all that—that *shines*. Besides, she has the means of safe and swift deliverance for her sister and herself. Need one so bitterly regret a thing like that, even for the people one loves? Death lays an ungentle hand on us sooner or later; what I have given her is a gentle one. Besides, hope is not over. We don't know what Revel's plans are. The women's lives may be essential to them. A man doesn't want to damn himself unnecessarily. The whole world would ring with it if he injured them."

Who could tell what Revel might do? Seton shook his head and did not speak. The silent barge was drawing close to the pier. One last word Gifford uttered as they turned to meet it.

"Revel is Ibn ul Farid. The man in Cairo was only a fake—a nobody. Revel is the man. But keep his identity to yourself, and remember, that if in any way you can rid the world of him, you will have rid it of a monster that deserves hell as well as death. That is my own fixed determination, and if I snuff out, I leave it to you."

Seton put out his hand quietly and gripped the Colonel's. It was the seal of a covenant that needed no seal. But Fate has her own secrets. Did the revelation startle him? He could not tell. The moment was too strained with its own revelation, now so near.

A moment, and the boat was at the pier. They stood watching as the rowers tossed oars in salute, and the curtains of the canopy parted and Revel came out, leading a woman. Revel! But at first they doubted, and with reason, for he was dressed in a uniform unknown to either of them except by name, a red uniform, frogged and decorated with silver, and a cap of the German type with the peak pulled forward over his eyes; a sword by his side.

"Russian," said the Colonel serenely.

Seton nodded.

The woman was dressed as a native lady and the sari thrown over her head hid her face completely. She walked with a light, strong step beside Revel along the pier where a guard was formed up, and behind them followed four men, evidently acting as staff. Seton recognized three of them

as officers he had seen in attendance upon Mahmud Mirza. Now they wore the alien uniform, and apparently without shame. The group advanced towards the two men who waited there so silently.

Revel leaned lightly on his sword as he spoke.

"You're my prisoners—the women also," he said. "You expected that."

"Certainly," the Colonel agreed. "We have no means of resistance, but you know what you will have to answer for to our Government."

Revel put that aside, smiling, as a matter of no importance.

"What are your intentions as regards the ladies?" Seton demanded.

"No decision has yet been come to," was the answer. "For yourselves, you are under arrest. You are responsible for them, Azaf Khan."

"Will you have the goodness to tell me what Government, what power you represent?" the Colonel said calmly, with a touch of contempt.

"The Free Brotherhood, the principles of which, starting in Russia, have overflowed the world. Against this there is no appeal. It is supreme at this moment in eight of the principalities, and the British are being driven into the sea in Bombay, Karachi, Calcutta, and Madras."

Seton flushed up to the ears with fury. He started forward, but the Colonel waved him back, calm as ever, though he plainly did not relish the implication.

"The truth is best, however unpleasant. Are we to recognize any overlord of this new order of things, Mr. Revel?"

"Certainly, but he prefers to remain unknown for the time being. All that concerns the conquered power in India is that orders coming from Ibn ul Farid shall be obeyed. The State of Mianpur is in the hands of Shirin Begam, to whom her late husband left absolute authority. The Deputy Commissioner representing the British Government has fled."

The veiled woman stood rigidly by his side while he spoke. Seton had a sense of eyes upon him, but no breath stirred the veiling sari. Revel turned to Azaf Khan.

"Take them to their rooms. They overhang the water on the west side, and see that boats row guard there night and day."

They were led off without any further notice. It was a respite, however short, and already the Colonel's brain was busy with plans for the future. It would not cut off his communication, for he had foreseen all possibilities, and though the swimmers' messages must cease, he had a complete code of signals with the city. His first concern was to transmit these new

developments. As to Revel's words, he discounted a good deal. The Government in India is like a majestic oak—the attention concentrates on the splendour and strength of the waving branches, but none save those in the secret know how far and deep the massive roots go below the surface, gripping into the very rock. He almost smiled as he thought of Revel's assertion. Driven into the sea? Yes, but even if so, that is our native element, and to touch it is to feel life and vigour rushing in our veins, said he in his heart. He knew the men whose hands were on the wheel, their tested strength and cool endurance. They are never beaten because they will never believe they are, he thought again, smiling a little as he went, and remembering Salway, Outram, Conington, Fane, and many more. In a way, Revel seemed to him a very poor creature, even as men despise the writhing cobra, though his fang is death.

The guard led them into their two communicating rooms, dropped the purdahs before the entrance, and stationed sentries.

Revel and the veiled woman walked slowly through the rose garden.

"So that is he!" she said in modern Greek, and her voice was sweet as dropping honey. "Send him a dream to-night, Ibn ul Farid, my brother, that shall make him desire me—for he shall be mine! I swear it, by this new-fangled Allah of the Moslems."

Revel looked at her keenly.

"He is yours, my sister, body and soul. I have bedevilled him with dreams already in Cairo, so that he knows not truth from falsehood. Was it not through him we have the prophecy and the story of Nefert, the Queen? And we have made your beauty like to her beauty that he might believe and be ruined. Very cunning have I been in the service."

"Forget not also to commend Ibrahim the Jew for his fabrications of the scarab," she said, touching the scarab on her breast set in the outspread wings of Mut. "It was a mind, a great and mighty mind, that compelled the dead queen of the ancient land into our service and made her our slave. But now, Oh, brother, Oh, wise one, what is your heart's desire?"

"Power. Conquering and to conquer!" he said sternly. "To raise Asia against the West and trample it under our feet, and to set free the delights and glories of the ancient days to rule the world once more and flood it with love and colour and pomp and music for the great ones who know and desire. Down with these grey, dull nations that toil for gold and know not its use when they have it! Down with the weeping saints, the martyred ascetics, and up once more with the days when men were great indeed, with the

peoples as slaves below them! Fear not, my sister! We will let loose the armies of Asia on the West, and very greatly shall we triumph."

"It is a noble dream, my brother," the soft voice returned from beneath the veil. "But what woman shall sit beside the Emperor of Asia? What is life without love? Is it the Western woman?"

"What? With her cold, frank eyes like a boy's, and the ice that runs in her veins for blood? No, my sister! She is my hold on the Englishman. To bind her, to break her were a day's sport, no more. It is Gulbadan, the wife of the dead man. I have seen her eyes like wells of darkness and her mouth of crushed roses, and for every stroke I gave him when he died, I counted a kiss from her. I go now to her."

"What? And he but just dead! Brother, it will make trouble. Be patient. These veiled women. . . ."

"Must obey their masters, my sister. And now the queen's rooms are made ready for you. Go in and wait."

He took her by the hand and led her ceremoniously into the palace, to the wonderful suite of white and jewelled rooms set apart for the chosen of the king. Already the second barge had brought her women, and the slaves and attendants of the old Begam were in waiting. There was concentrated the splendour of the dynasty that had sprung from the loins of the Mogul emperors, and even as they built at Delhi and Agra, jewelling their marble with jade and malachite and lapis-lazuli and cornelian, so had their sons built here. And in the midst of the chambers was a throne room, where, seated on a throne carved from marble into miracle, and inlaid with lilies of lapis and cornelian, the queen might give audience with even her king a subject at her little rosy feet.

To Gulbadan Begam, crouching by her lattice and looking always toward the dark palace of the city, her foster mother, Zaynab, brought word of all that had been said and done, and having finished this, she added, stammering and trembling, "And Oh, my child, my Queen, my darling, this new ruler whom we called Revel Sahib, but who now has another name, desires to speak with you."

"He cannot speak with me," she answered, looking away over the water. "Let him speak with my mother, if he must break into our grief."

"Alas, my daughter, it is you—you only."

"And why? Has he not killed my lord? Would he kill me also? But if it be this, he is welcome indeed."

“There was a pause, and the woman said, in a veiled voice, very low and breathless——

“My child, it is not anger but love.”

Gulbadan turned a speechless look upon her, then fixed her eyes once more upon the darkening water and the dim palace. Presently the lights sprang into being and starred it all over and only the Moon of the Amir was unlit. The golden reflections rippled in the water, as if the sky had dropped its largesse into its dark bosom.

The silence was so deep that Zaynab believed her mistress had forgotten in the stupor of grief. She laid a hand timidly on her arm and spoke once more.

“Child of my bosom, the man desires you very greatly. If you refuse, it is death, as I well believe. Consider, therefore. In the name of the Merciful, consider!”

“Death is my heart’s desire.”

There was another long silence, and Zaynab could not see the hidden face. Then Gulbadan roused herself to speak, but still with face averted.

“Speak to me, my mother. This horrible thing is true?”

“It is true. He would enter now.”

For a veiled woman, especially of rank, the very suggestion was outrage. Another heavy silence. Gulbadan covered her face with her hands and remained so long a bowed and speechless figure of woe, that at length her foster mother, in terror lest the blow had stricken her to death, laid a hand on her arm and forced her to look up.

“My daughter, my Queen, may I be your sacrifice! I will die at the door sooner than he shall break the purdah (the curtain) of a Mogul princess. Do not fear. There are loyal hearts still to rally about the wife of their king.”

She raised her head slowly.

“I am no wife. I am a miserable widow, and my life is worthless as the dust of the desert. Draw the curtain, that I may see no more the place where I was glad, and make beautiful my hair and eyes that I may please my new master. The time for weeping is done.”

The woman stood staring and terrified as she rose, stretching her arms upwards, as if to shake off a weight of grief. At her command Zaynab summoned two of the women attendants, and they unloosed the silk-soft coils of black hair until it fell about her like the veils of night. They bathed her lovely limbs and choosing among the stores of splendour, they

garmented her in supple silver cloth, with the great rubies her husband had given her glowing on her breast. They braided her hair with pearls, and it hung below her knees, and they darkened her heavy eyelids with soorma until the perilous long eyes shone like stars in clouds and her cheeks were like burning roses. And Zaynab, drawing back, said, "Never have I seen my Queen so beautiful, no, not even on the day of her marriage."

"That day is forgotten. Let me see myself, then veil me, and dismiss the women and send for the man."

Zaynab led her before the great glass set in silver enriched with jade and jasper, and the princess stood looking at her own beautiful image, as if it had been a picture, with eyes of cold judgment.

"Paint my lips. Crimson, like a rose of Shiraz. Put the silver tassels on the ends of my braids of hair. Bring the veil of Dakka muslin seeded with pearls and put it upon my head. And my arm-rings. Now it is enough. I am content."

The women who had robed her looked with horror at her as they withdrew. That a woman widowed but a few hours should be dragged shrieking to the conqueror, they could understand, but that she should dress herself out to win his heart, made her viler in their eyes than any outcaste. There was no well deep enough for such infamy! They almost shuddered to touch her as they added the last exquisiteness to her beauty with the veil that half concealed it.

"And now," she said, turning to Zaynab, "I am ready."

But the faithful woman judged her better than the others had done. She caught her by the wrist, and then flinging herself on the ground, clasped her knees.

"Have pity on yourself, my Queen! Have pity on the woman in whose bosom you lay and smiled as you will never smile again. It is too much! It is too hard for you! His fate will find him elsewhere, in field or chamber, but never in the arms of a Mogul queen—he, the infidel dog, the scum of the people! Take death from his hand, not love."

"Be at peace, my nurse, and help me as one woman may another, for in Allah is no help at all. I have prayed, I have besought, for the poor I have made offerings and have kept all the precepts, and what is come but death and dishonour? And as for death, it is not difficult, but listen. . . ."

She stopped a moment, as if to collect her thoughts, and went on swiftly, "In the old days there was a gallant Raja of the Hindi people, and he had a wife most beautiful and desirable and of a great family, and, like me, a

curtained woman. So his enemies took him and tortured him. And as the sun set he lay dead in the cage where they had killed him. Then that evening to the tent where sat the enemy prince, drinking among his lords, came a dancing girl, beautiful and shameless, and demanded admittance that she might sing and dance before them. So it was allowed, and before those lords she danced the foul bee-dance of the bazaars—

" 'If my love loved me, he should be a bee,
I the yellow jasmin, love the honey of me.'

Not a step, not a motion of that dance did she miss, and they gazed on her enraptured, and most of all the Prince. And when his lords were gone, he demanded that she should lie in his arms, and she smiled. And when he bowed to kiss her, she flashed a dagger from her breast and stabbed him, and, as he wallowed at her feet, with her own hand she cut his head from his neck, and with this terrible thing grinning in her clutch, she came to her own people in the night, and they took her husband's body and she entered the fire with him and they were burned together. And to this day her people tell of her great deed and rejoice in her nobility. Now, my mother, if this could be done by a Hindi princess, what shall not be expected from one of the Mogul blood? And there is more too—matters that you know not. Send to me the younger Miss Sahib, the fair and good, for I would speak with her."

CHAPTER XXV

IF anything could have amazed Venetia further, it would have been the sight that struck her eyes when she followed Zaynab and entered the chamber of Gulbadan. She had known her for many a day, but yet the woman who met her now was a stranger. Gone was the crouching girl, sullen and grieving, the half-spoilt, half-pettish creature of most changeable moods, uncertain of herself and others, subjected alike by her husband and the Begam. The woman who now took her hand and drew her to a seat beside her was clothed like a great queen, composed and stately; her voice had the ring of command and assurance, her beautiful mouth was firm, her speech calm. It was as though she had risen, a new birth, from the ashes of her grief.

Venetia, pale and startled, lifted anxious eyes to her face. It seemed for the moment as if they had changed places and characters.

"We have gone through much, my sister, since I saw you. It has made your beauty pale. The elder Miss Sahib—has the sickness left her?"

"She is not well," said Venetia mournfully. "And you, Gulbadan Begam, you have suffered also. My heart has wept for you and for my friend."

"I know it. Better are old friends than new. But for me, I weep no more. I go on a long journey soon. Presently I return to my own people."

This appeared very natural to Venetia. She knew the Begam had been more of a despot than a mother to the girl, and for a childless widow there is little place at an Indian court. She was even glad to hear it, knowing that Gulbadan had been an only daughter of the court at Gondwana. She would at least be sheltered and loved there, for her mother was still living.

"Pleasant is the road that leads home, my sister," she said softly.

"My sister, yes," returned the young Begam, and was silent. Presently she began again, with perfect calm of manner.

"My beautiful sister, we have for many years been friends. I came here a child of nine, and for nine years your face has been dear to me, though I had not many words, because the Shah Begam (may her name be great!) has so many."

She even smiled a little in saying this, but Venetia could not answer the smile. There was something ominous in the atmosphere of the quiet room. She clasped the slim golden hand closer.

“But before I depart, there is one thing I would say. Seton Sahib is a good man. I have seen him through the purdah, and I know. Gifford Sahib also, a true friend of my lord. My sister, the danger is great. What can I do as a gift to my friends before I go? Speak with me, heart open.”

Venetia rushed at the opportunity.

“My sister, there is a paper, a very ancient paper, which Gifford Sahib needs sorely. It holds the plotting of these alien people who have struck down the mighty. This is the paper to which you spoke to me formerly, saying that Revel Sahib wears it about his neck. If there are still loyal people in the palace, with whom you can speak, that paper is all our hope.”

“What I can, I will do,” said the princess slowly. “If it is much, my sister will rejoice. If little, she will forgive. And now we part. But remember this, beloved sister, whose heart is high and whose words are truth—If what you hear of me is hateful, still believe I am true. If they tell you I am vile, say this in your soul: ‘Still I believe.’ You swear this to me?”

“I swear,” Venetia said solemnly. “But as for the paper, put yourself in no danger! Not one of our lives is more precious than yours, and Seton Sahib would die sooner than you should risk a hair of your head. And there are happy days before you, my sister.”

“Many,” the princess agreed gravely. “And very certainly the jackals who now lie in the lair of the tiger will be driven out in shame and confusion. Farewell.”

With the same calm she laid her cheek against Venetia’s, then, drawing apart, clapped her hands for Zaynab and stood watching while the heavy curtain was lifted. Venetia turned then, and with a last look saw her standing, a lonely and beautiful figure in her splendid dress. She waved her hand, and they had parted.

With her mind full of doubts and fears, she looked forward to the time of the evening meal, that she might consult Seton and Gifford. Sara had been too ill to take any interest in affairs, and in any case was to be kept in ignorance of the undercurrents, and it was a very great burden to bear alone. But when she entered the Hall of Meeting, it was empty save for the servants, and when in deadly anxiety she questioned them, a blank wall of ignorance opposed her everywhere—they did not know. Were the Sahibs still in the palace? They did not know. Had they left any message for her? They could not tell. This was the worst blow, and but for the utter need to keep herself well and strong, since all now must fall on her, she could not have touched a morsel. To add to her terrors, when the meal was finished and she was rising to go back to Sara, the great curtain was drawn aside, a

man entered, and she found herself alone with Revel. The breath was almost dashed from her lips by astonishment when she saw him in the uniform that all Europe began to know and to dread. It altered him in the most extraordinary way, hardening and coarsening his face and accentuating the Oriental strain which before had only been a most elusive mystery in the background. It altered his manner even more. The graceful, yielding courtesy was gone. He spoke almost brusquely, like a man who means to be obeyed and chooses that you shall know it instantly. His sword clanked as he walked up to Venetia.

"I am glad of the opportunity of a word with you, Miss Grant. There are one or two matters really necessary to be discussed. Please be seated."

It would not do to show any fear. No, she must be ordinary and natural, and of course appear to expect the treatment they had always had from him. She sat down quietly.

"Thank you. I have not seen you for some time, and so much has happened since then."

"Yes, the death of Mahmud Mirza. The State of Mianpur is now ruled by my sister, his widow, Shirin Begam. She is anxious to take you under her protection, for, as you know, the whole country is terribly disturbed."

"It is very considerate of her, and I beg you will convey my thanks; but I hope for the protection of my future husband, and my countryman, Colonel Gifford."

"Unfortunately," Revel said inflexibly, "both those gentlemen have been discovered plotting against the Government represented by my sister, and they are to be deported. You and your sister will remain under the protection of Shirin Begam."

"Deported? And where? Then my sister and I demand to be deported with them."

"That is impossible. The journey they are to undertake is to Kashmir, whose ruler remains constant to the British Government. But the way lies through fearfully disturbed country and is quite unfit for ladies."

Venetia's quick wit at once saw it was of no use contesting and arguing at this point, especially as she did not believe a word he said. He would simply counter her all along the line. Better, far better, wait for the communication she was certain would come from her men, and then act as they told her. She sighed a little, hesitated, and said gravely, "You make me very anxious. But I know you will do whatever is possible. As for Shirin

Begam, it is a great honour, but if we remain here, may it not be with our old friends the Shah Begam and Gulbadan Begam?"

With the utmost difficulty she repressed her start of amazement when he replied, looking full in her eyes:

"The Shah Begam, who has behaved in such an extraordinary way that she cannot be in her right senses, is to be sent in guardianship to the Gukserai palace."

He undervalued her knowledge of history and custom, and Venetia heard and shivered inwardly. She knew the evil reputation of that little palace in the jungle. Its history was long and tragic, for in the troubled centuries of the Mogul reign in India it was there that the deposed rulers of Mianpur had always been imprisoned, and they had never once emerged alive.

With a great effort, she controlled her face and voice.

"Gulbadan Begam . . ." she began.

"Gulbadan Begam is to become my wife," he said, still looking coldly and steadily in her eyes.

"But. . . ."

She was on the point of protesting that the girl had said she was returning to Gondwana, of crying out against the hideousness of the thing, when his cool stare arrested and froze the words on her lips. A sense of her loneliness and the dreadful danger that confronted them all suddenly swept over her, and to her own bitter shame, the tears brimmed in her eyes and spilt helplessly down her cheeks, as her whole heart cried out for her lover and his support and protection. In that moment Revel was terrible to her. She could no more comprehend how his mind worked than she could comprehend any of the dark, impassive faces about her, and it was an added terror that she had once thought him so fascinating an acquaintance. She remembered saying to Seton at Abuksa that there was a mystery about Revel, things hidden and delightful that lay behind his charming manner and might be revealed surprisingly at any moment. They were beginning to be revealed, but they were hideous, paralysing. One knew now that if one saw them as they truly were, the sight would strike one speechless.

She rose trembling.

"Mr. Revel, I must go to my sister. I feel sure that when you have considered, you will see it is desirable that we should leave with Mr. Seton and Colonel Gifford, who are our natural protectors. There is no danger we would not face with them rather than remain here without them. I don't know Shirin Begam. . . ."

"Who speaks of me, I am here!" said a soft voice at her elbow, and turning hurriedly, she saw a slender, veiled figure beside her. She had entered so noiselessly that neither of them noticed her coming and Revel turned as sharply as Venetia.

She slid into a chair with the limp grace that these tall slender women have, especially those of Oriental strain, and the veiled eyes looked up at Venetia, appraising her from head to foot even while the voice sounded like the sighing of angels. Angels, for instance, who speak Hindustani perfectly, but with a slight foreign accent.

"My brother tells me that the dangers outside the city make it impossible for you to leave, Miss Sahib. I will do my utmost to see that you have all you need. Ask for what you desire, and your wishes shall be obeyed."

"Your brother has probably told you, your Highness, that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Seton. You will understand, therefore, how impossible it is I should be happy where he is not and. . . ."

Suddenly she stopped. It was terrible pleading to that veiled face, and Revel's impassive stare behind it. A sudden hopelessness made words seem useless. They died on her lips. Her hands fell by her side. She gave up the battle for the moment.

"May I go to my sister?" was all she could say.

"*May* you?" Revel's voice was suavity itself. "It is we who are at your command."

She moved slowly away in a kind of terror that weakened her very knees. The veiled figure made a graceful salutation with head and hands, and Revel held the curtain aside for her to pass out. It was a horrible travesty of their former relations.

Before she went in to Sara she stopped a while outside to steady her face and voice, for her body was shaking like an aspen and she felt withered and old. The terror had struck into her very veins.

From the wing of the palace where they were imprisoned, Seton watched every evening to see the light spring up in the rooms he knew for Venetia's, but never a word or a sign from her reached him, and he dared not attempt a signal, lest it should bring danger to her. A silence like death had fallen between them, except that sometimes the Colonel received a mysterious word to the effect that Sara was well again and that the sisters had nothing to complain of as to any lack of care or attention. He heard also that in the dead of night the old Begam had been conveyed away to the Gukserai, the lonely palace in the woods—which explained the sound of muffled oars they once

heard at midnight when all the world was still. Seton could only wonder if Venetia had heard it also and guessed its dreadful significance. The Colonel had now taught him his code, so that he too could read when cloths of various colours hung out by daytime in certain windows of the city, and he knew what it meant when Ismail, the clouter of shoes, worked late with a couple of lamps to aid his failing eyes. He knew how to send in return the messages which told exactly what word must be sent to the outer world from the city, how the troops of Mahmud Mirza had been marched and railed to other States and strangers drafted in who were absolutely at the bidding of Revel and Shirin Begam. And he knew exactly which among the palace servants responded to the salutation of "*Ali Khan bhai salaam* (the Peace to Ali Khan, my brother)," and could therefore be trusted. And the day was very near at hand when this knowledge would be necessary.

It was about a fortnight later when two important items reached them. The Shah Begam, shortly after reaching the Gukserai, had been seized with an attack of cholera and was dead. Colonel Gifford had given her a month's lease of life, but the murderers were swifter than his guess, and, as he said, nothing could show better their fearlessness of any public opinion. Public opinion indeed existed no longer in the city of Mianpur, whatever it might do in the outer parts of the State, for the alien troops held the people down and used and abused them as they pleased. Still, when the marriage of Gulbadan Begam to himself was announced, Revel apparently thought it as well it should be celebrated in the Lake Palace. The people would hear less, see less there, and the thing be done more quietly.

"I doubt," said the Colonel in his precise French to Seton, "whether that poor girl's life will be much longer than the Shah Begam's. He is marrying her simply because she was Mahmud Mirza's cousin, and her people have a claim on the Mianpur throne. You see, it will conciliate the Mianpur people, for they hold by the old stock. But when he has secured that right as her husband, I should be sorry to predict what will happen."

"The whole business is so ghastly that one almost begins to have the feeling about life that one had in the war. There seems no hope of relief or help, no light at all on the horizon," Seton said, looking despairingly at Venetia's distant window.

"There's a sort of light in holding on to the end," the Colonel said reflectively. "I should like to put the job through, if possible. All my training has prepared me for this kind of thing, though we none of us guessed exactly the shape it would take. But I doubt if I shall see it through. The slightest slip by one of my colleagues, and Revel will know my business. Then. . . ."

He slightly shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER XXVI

SO the preparations for the marriage went on, and neither Venetia nor the men heard a word of the bride. In the city decent men and women shuddered when they spoke of her, so foul a traiteress did they think her to the memory of her noble husband.

"Was the lake not deep enough for her to find death in it? If they deprived her of poison, could they prevent her from swallowing broken glass? What were her fingers for, if not to strangle herself in the night when none watched?"

So they asked in the city, and spit when they named her name.

Perhaps Gifford did not understand Revel's feelings entirely. Even his cold nature must have been warmed a little by thoughts of the beauty of the girl, for it is certain that he was reported to be restless and excited as he had never been before. The jewels of the Shah Begam were brought to the Lake Palace and many of them sent to Gulbadan, and the tidings ran round the palace and reached even the prisoners, that she had received them with delight and profuse thanks to the new lover.

"Women are extraordinary creatures," said the Colonel. "What do you think of one who forgets her husband in a month—a very noble young fellow too, before Revel besotted him—and is not only prepared to hand herself over to the man who murdered him, like the Lady Anne in Shakespeare's play, but also to rejoice over the spoils of his poor old mother? What do you deduce from that, Seton?"

"Why, that Shakespeare knew an incredible side of women's natures. What else? She must either be utterly vile or utterly brainless. You can't make more of it than that."

"As a matter of fact, I think I can," Gifford answered, staring out over the lake through his field glasses. "As I said before, women are extraordinary creatures. Have you ever seen a Mohammedan marriage? The Mullahs come to-morrow, I hear, to perform the *Nika*. I wonder what religion Revel favours among his many accomplishments!"

No more was said, for a red cloth was hanging from more than one window in the city, and they were soon absorbed in question and answer.

The news of the marriage was a shock under which even Venetia's faith might have staggered at first, but for her meeting with Gulbadan. Of the

Begam's death she knew nothing. That news was for none of the prisoners, and she had no informants, which perhaps was as well for her and for Sara, for the old woman was a cherished friend, a memory of many years, and the knowledge that she was doomed to the Gukserai palace overshadowed the sisters like a cloud. But when Sara heard of Gulbadan's intended marriage, her wrath broke out in flame, and no words were strong enough to express her contempt for the girl who was false to every bond of honour and duty. Possibly Venetia might have agreed but for a quiet voice in her ear——

"If what you hear of me is hateful, still believe I am true. If they tell you I am vile, let some word in your soul say: 'Still I believe!' "

And Venetia believed, and trembled, and was silent.

The day of the marriage dawned in cloudless beauty, the lake the very azure of heaven, and the sunny sparkles dipping in it like a golden laughter. The air was heavy with perfume from the rose garden and the garlands that made the zenana beautiful with scent and colour, but all was done so quietly, so secretly, that none of the prisoners but Gifford and Seton knew the great day was come. The latter knew that it would be announced publicly in the city next day and there would be illuminations, a review, and the usual feastings and alms. As far as Sara and Venetia could remember afterwards, there was no sound or sign to mark the day off from any other, unless it were a little more hurry than usual of feet and voices from the women's quarters so close to theirs. So the day wore on, and the night came, soft and lucent, with moon and stars reflected in glory in the water.

Venetia sat by the window long after Sara slept, drawing tranquillity from the midnight beauty. In that large serenity all human passions seemed to dwindle and become insignificant. How many scenes of joy and terror had those stars watched in the Lake Palace? How many would they watch when all the anxious hearts that beat within it now were dust? She sat there late and long, then, drawing the curtain open between her room and Sara's, she crept beneath her mosquito net and slept deep and sound. It was a night of peace, even for prisoners and captives.

Afterwards, she could never be certain at what hour she awoke to the sound of a long and frightful cry. She flung herself half out of bed, sitting upright, the cold perspiration on her forehead and her heart racing. Something that had been pushed into her breast dropped on the ground beside her, and even the light noise of its falling turned her sick with fear. A flat envelope, very thin, bound with a twist of floss silk and stained in one part with a red stain. It was daylight, full daylight, and Sara calling fretfully from the next room.

“The noise they make! Those women are impossible. What is it, Venetia? Do come!”

“Presently. Wait a minute!”

It was a muffled voice that answered her, for thought and reason had come back to Venetia now and she saw the instant need for secrecy. She passed another ribbon through the loop and slung the paper about her neck, hiding it securely; then ran to the room where the huge earthenware tub stood that supplied them with water and plunged her face in the cool water and shook the drops out of her hair and eyes. And so, white, but clear-eyed and clear-headed, she went in and stood by her sister.

“Was that a cry, Sara? I was sound asleep and something waked me.”

“I suppose they let something drop. What o’clock is it? I forgot to wind my watch.”

Venetia would have looked, but suddenly there was a rush and hurry of feet and men’s voices speaking. Men? In the zenana! Impossible! They both listened, every sense concentrated into hearing.

“Somebody must be ill!” Sara said at last. “It may be the hakim (doctor). They let him feel their pulses through the curtain. I hope it’s Gulbadan. She deserves it!”

Again they waited, and nothing more happened, and at last the terror faded away into the normal; and at the appointed time the women came to attend them, and food was brought; and the sunlight was gay in the ripples of the lake, and the white cranes stood in the reeds, and Sara, sitting by the window, yawned and knitted alternately; and Venetia might have believed it all a nightmare, but for the stained paper that lay on her heart. But that was a terrible burden. It was certain she must get it to Seton—but how—but how? Even yet she scarcely dared to speculate in what dreadful straits it had been gained. It might not even be what she had hoped for—the last thing it suggested was an important document. It was easy to guess how it had reached her. The entrance to her room was guarded only by a curtain and the half-door, latched across in the way known to every dweller in India, and nothing could be easier than for any one to creep in, slide the paper in her breast, and disappear like a shadow. Could it be the bride? It seemed madness to suppose such a thing, but then who?—who else would dare? Oh, hateful place of mysteries and tragedies! She felt she would give half her life for freedom and clean living again, if only those who suffered with her could share them.

It was in the hour of the afternoon siesta that enlightenment came. Sara, completely reassured as far as reassurance could go in their imprisonment, was asleep in her room, and Venetia sat by her window pretending to read, but thinking in a weary round of repetition. And as she sat, the curtain at the entrance seemed to waft a little, and a figure crept in very noiselessly and stood salaaming before her. It was Zaynab. Her face was enough.

"I know—I know!" Venetia said, shrinking as if from a blow. "She is dead."

"Subhan Allah! Praise be to the Merciful, the Compassionate! She is dead. Listen, Miss Sahib, for it is death if they find me here—but all are busy now. She stabbed him in the night, and as I lay at the door, she came to me and said—'Take this where you know,' and in your breast I put it as she willed. And when I returned she said—'Go now, in the protection of Allah, and be far from this accursed room when the day dawns.' And her eyes were dreadful. And—Oh, coward that I am—I fled. And when they came in the morning he was dead and she was gone. They do not know, but I know. In the lake, where now I go! Miss Sahib, I have lived too long, that have seen the House go down in the dust."

"Oh, Zaynab, Zaynab," Venetia cried in a tragic whisper, "do not go yet! One moment! How shall I get this paper to Seton Sahib? Gulbadan Begam's work is not done—she has died in vain if this is left undone."

Her eyes entreated for her, although she said no more. It seemed that her very life hung on the issue.

"Give it to me," the woman said at last, and wrapped it in the folds across her breast and drew her veil about her face. Without another word or look she went out, and Venetia, in cruel uncertainty whether she had saved or lost the treasure for which two lives had paid, crouched half fainting in her chair, for the moment unable to bear any more or even to try and estimate the forces she had set in motion. But Gulbadan—Gulbadan! Her heart cried the name; her lips almost shaped it aloud, thinking of the warm, living, fragrant beauty cold in the arms of Death.

So Zaynab, hurrying by chambers and passages far from the zenana, came at last to where the sentry paced before the door leading to the rooms of the prisoners. He was a tall, black-bearded man, very splendid in the dress of the palace guard, and glanced an eye of contempt at the huddled figure as she hurried by. As she passed, she breathed rather than whispered, "The Peace to Ali Khan, my brother! The death message of Gulbadan Begam": and, dropping the paper on the floor at his feet, was gone like a shadow.

With a terrified glance right and left, he pounced on it, flashed it up and hid it in his breast, just as steps came along the passage and his Jemadar passed and found the sentry stiff at the salute.

"All well, Mir Ali?"

"All is well, Jemadar Sahib."

"Shabash—well done! Pir Khan relieves you in ten minutes. If the Kafirs (infidels) say anything you can understand, report it."

"May I be your sacrifice, Jemadar Sahib! I will not fail. But they speak a language I know not."

Ismail Jemadar loitered, adjusting the hilt of this sword, and the soldier stood bolt upright, a bronze image, until he passed along the passage and out of sight. Then, with another swift glance up and down the way, he lifted the corner of the curtain that covered the entrance to the prisoners' rooms and with a quick twist of his arm sent the envelope skimming along the tiled floor inside, and instantly resumed his noiseless march up and down, within hearing of their voices. The Colonel was well served, even within the palace.

Seton stood by the window, looking with longing eyes at the water and blue, far hills of Seranji beyond. So short a way and then a good horse between his knees and freedom ahead, and if his friends were safe and Venetia beside him, he felt at the moment as if crowns and empires might go hang for him! They would go away up into Kashmir, into some exquisite fastness of the mighty Himalaya, and let the mad world rage on its mad way, forgetting it all in peace and the beauty that man made not, neither can he mar. To forget—to rest—that seemed the highest happiness the universe could offer. He looked at the Colonel, with his steadfast field glasses watching for the bi-weekly hanging out of Giaffar Khan's laundry in the city, his shoulders stooped a little, the grizzled hair showing over his ear; and that too seemed vanity and vexation of spirit. And as he watched, the envelope came spinning along the smooth tiles to his feet, and the dream was done. He gathered it up, hiding it under his arm, and went into his own room, the inner one.

"Colonel, on guard!" he said coolly in French.

In a moment he had unfastened the envelope, for that room, having no entry of its own, was safe, provided one of them watched in the outer one. The Colonel was on duty there now, moving about rather noisily to cover any rustle of paper. What Seton expected he scarcely knew, for at the moment the prophecy was not in his mind, but he saw this was of

consequence, and the red seal of blood on it stamped it. Whatever it was, it was not ancient; the paper, thin but good, was such as could be bought in any European shop in Calcutta or Bombay. He unfolded it rapidly and ran his eye down the sheet enclosed in the first empty one.

"Verbatim," it was headed. And then . . . then . . .

"Good God!" said Seton under his breath.

To the great goddesses of Bast and Sais I make my worship, for though they have betrayed and forsaken me, yet is their day everlasting and the wings of their power sweep the uttermost East and West. And to their justice do I commit Nefert, the Queen, that her wickedness be not forgotten, and that in her waking she shall meet the wrath of the goddesses and be again dashed swiftly down to the gates of Hell. For thus hath she sinned. (Here [this was written in English], is a break that must cover a long paragraph. It then continues.)

So, seeing her beautiful above all the daughters of Egypt, I loved her, and I put my heart in her hand. And she took my good gifts that I gave her, the gold, the jewels and the slaves and the peoples, and my heart, even the heart of the King, and she did evil mightily. For she drew her brother, the Prince Mer-Sekt, from his loyalty and made him king beyond the river, and she gave him gold and armies and sent him forth conquering among the peoples between the two rivers (Mesopotamia), and further, to a country in the North, and me she took and put in chains and in prison. But to me by night came secretly the priest of the goddesses, and he said thus and thus: "This is the word of the Winged, the Eternal, Who sees, but not with eyes, and hears, but not with ears—Behold, Nefert, the Queen, has troubled the world with a great trouble, and to her is a certain time given that she may do evil, and then the end." So I said, "Oh, holy one, what is her time?" And he said, "Eight years." And I said, "For six years now have I groaned in darkness." And he answered, "Endure for two more and it is done." And I said, "I cannot."

(Here is another break. It then continues.)

So when I was set free secretly I met her alone in the Valley of Khar, promising her word of great treasures, and in her greed she came, and she knew me not. So I stabbed her to the heart, and she died, and again I took the throne, and my heart was glad. But in the day of my rejoicing there came to me the priest of the goddesses, and he said thus and thus: "Seal down the Queen. Bar the door with strength and bolt it with might and set upon it the fearful names of the great gods, for her time is not ended. And if she breaks loose as the lion from his lair, great and terrible mischiefs are in her hand." So I said, "For how long?" And he answered, "For four years, and blood shall flow in rivers and kingdoms shall break down before her, and she shall shake the great people that as yet is not, upon the throne they have made in the East, and they shall flee before her to the West, and with her shall be her brother, the Prince Mer-Sekt. And because of them very fearful shall be the calamities of the earth and very great their triumph." And I said, "Shall these things be in Egypt?" And he said, "No, but in a land of the North where is the white rain and water hard as glass. And with them she shall come conquering and to conquer, and they shall trample the world before them. But because they despise the gods and know not mercy and justice." . . . (Here were stains that obliterated the rest.)

Seton read to the end, his brain almost refusing to grasp the magnitude of the thing—then began again at the beginning and read it carefully twice more. There was a note in shorthand overleaf. He could read that:

> Original at the States Bank in Nimuegen.

That was in Holland, of course. Having mastered it, he went quietly into the outer room and told Gifford in as few words as possible what had happened, taking his place by the window while he went inside in his turn. It seemed a short time before he came back and, with his usual careless air, pulled up a long chair and lit his pipe. No one looking at the two could have imagined they were discussing anything of special interest, for they spoke slowly and with intervals of reflective smoking, speaking English, but very low.

"First, Colonel: how was that got, and whose is the blood?"

"I imagine," said Gifford, with a yawn that might have deceived the very elect, "that the bride has murdered the bridegroom. It comes from her. I knew a daughter of her house would not sell her honour. We shall get news of his death to-day or to-morrow, though they'll keep it dark."

"I hope to God you're right," Seton said, pulling a spray of jasmine from the window and tossing the little flowers into the water below.

"You'll find I'm right. These women are like that. Of course, you can see that a prophecy like this, used in India as they would use it, would set the Peninsula alight from one end to the other. It was a prophecy that the East India Company's rule would end in 1857 that made the Mutiny possible and terrible. It was fulfilled, too, by the way, by Queen Victoria's taking over the rule from the Company then. These prophecies have a knack of fulfilling themselves. But, Seton, this four years' business is important. Say something—anything! I don't want to seem to be holding forth, and then I'll tell you something."

Seton talked insanely about the weather, polo, anything he could think of for the next five minutes, Gifford throwing in appropriate remarks at the proper intervals. Then he returned to business.

"I must get away from here and get back to my base. The moment I'm certain Revel is done for, I shall start, and you must carry on the communications instead of me. You can do it now, and. . . ."

"Must start? But how in the world can you get out?"

"I should have been out long ago but for the importance of being where this precious pair were. Now I shall go, and you'll let us know any

outstanding events. This is a specially good time for me to get a move on, because, if I'm right, there will be a good deal of confusion in the palace and Barikoff is not here yet."

"Barikoff? Who's he?"

"If Revel was the right hemisphere of the brain of the conspiracy, Barikoff is the left. A very dangerous person. But your part is this. You'll hear a splash in the middle of the night—an almighty loud one! Rush out instantly and rouse the sentry and tell him you think I've drowned myself. I've been despondent, and so forth. That's all. It's better you should know no more. And then, of course, keep your eyes skinned and let us know all you hear."

A pause, and once more he spoke.

"And now the most important thing of all—a thing I never told you even up to now, for secrecy is vital." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "The keynote of our hopes is this." His voice was like a thread—Seton strained his ears to catch it. "The Maharaja of Junwar is absolutely loyal, though he outwardly accepts the Russian rule and is serving as honorary general in their army in Junwar. His soldiers will follow him to a man when he rises, and, Hindu though he is, the Moslems will rise with him. We have brought them in touch with Gulbadan Begam's people in Gondwara, with the Nizam of Bipur and also with Prince Hazrat Sultan, Mahmud Mirza's cousin, who is hidden in Mianpur city in disguise as a seller of jewels. Thus you will see that Hindus and Moslems are waiting in several parts to cast off the Russian yoke, and naturally we're backing them for all we're worth. But if this particular connection breaks I fear all is lost. Hazrat Sultan is at the back of the signalling from Mianpur. Take word, take orders from him—from no one else. Keep in touch with him all you can and guard this secret with your life. On him all depends. If he goes, all goes."

"I understand," Seton said earnestly. "And now, one question. Have you a chance for your life?"

"Only a fighting chance, and I wouldn't risk it, for I have my uses here, but that this paper has opened new avenues of attack and defence. I see now how they're working, and we can counter. If that poor child could know, she would think it worth her life. Don't worry about me, Seton. I leave a good man behind me, both for the work and looking after the women, and this paper is my signal to march. Could you possibly memorize it, and so will I, for we must not have it about us."

It was long since either had mastered a task at school, but Gifford first, and Seton after, set to work with a will, and after some trouble both were

letter-perfect. Then, dividing the blood-stained paper, they rolled it into cigarettes and smoked them composedly while they talked of matters the whole world was welcome to hear. The last shreds they swallowed with their next meal—an old trick in the East. No ashes must betray them.

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT evening the cobbler was very busy with his clouting and the weaver in the next street was late at his loom. Gifford and Seton read their news together without needing to exchange a word. Revel was dead. His body had been taken secretly to the mainland. Barikoff was expected in two days from Sellore.

"That settles it," said Gifford, getting out of his pocket the cards with which he played solitaire. "Everything is watched, and we had better not seem to be in serious talk. One last word. If you come to grief, the people in the city will carry on, but, as your life is valuable, don't get knocked on the head unless you must."

Not a word more of consequence did he say, but settled down to his cards with his usual absorption, while Seton his thoughts far enough away, pretended to be buried in the second of their books. Not a sound of the life of the palace reached their wing, and, except for the barefoot tread of the sentry and the soft lap of the water outside, they might have been in a tomb. Even the windows were dark that night, and he perplexed himself with wondering why Venetia's should be so and whether she knew or guessed what had happened.

Then his thoughts turned to Revel. As yet he could scarcely believe that that secret, evil personality had ceased to be. A scratch from a dagger driven by a hand like a child's, and all over! The bitter irony of life! And what would it lead to? What would be the driving force behind Shirin Begam now? Or was she capable of standing alone, and, not only that, but of guiding the whirlwind she and her brother had raised? Had she originally been the secret poison working in the heart of Russia since the war? If so, anything was possible of the woman who had set that venom flowing in the veins of the world. Four years! If one believed in prophecies, she and her brother might well seem terrible. How strangely history repeated itself! He whispered under his breath the lines he had memorized: "And with her shall be her brother, Mer-Sekt, and very fearful shall be the calamities of the earth because of them and very great their triumph." Frightfully true—but surely only because they had found and used the prophecy for their evil ends? Dared he believe otherwise? Could this be what Jadrup Gosein had shadowed forth in his words, "A man and a woman burdened with the Karma of a most evil past," or had he merely inferred the past from the wicked present, as any Indian teacher must do? If he could but enter the

House of Knowledge, sit at his feet and entreat the aid of his great wisdom, there might be some solution to these dark mysteries—but how otherwise? He wondered if the woman were as like to the dead queen as her photograph made her. Probably not: in life there would be many subtle differences to mark the imposture. Should he ever see her, he wondered, and if he did, would she have the impudence to refer to the ring? In that case he would meet effrontery with contempt, and so. . . .

"And now, good night," said Gifford, rising, and driving his thoughts sharply into a new channel. "In case anything should go wrong with me, you'll hear it as usual. But, whatever happens, carry on."

That was all, and after that what sleep could be possible? The night went on noiselessly. The sentries relieved each other, but so quietly that only a straining ear could catch any sound through the curtain. There was nothing, nothing to hinder sleep but the ceaseless working of his brain, until. . . .

Suddenly and most awfully the silence was rent by a loud splash in the water and a stifled cry, and Seton, startled out of his wits, although prepared, leaped from his bed and made for the window in something uncommonly near a panic. As he reached it, he realized his folly, but utilized it instantly and shouted for the sentry.

"Puna-i-Khoda, God protect us! What was that?" cried the man, rushing in at the same instant. "Where is the Colonel Sahib?"

For all answer Seton pointed to the window, and the man, wild with terror of punishment, ran out of the room shouting, "Swords out!" like one mad, until there was a rush of bare feet along the marble and several other men arrived, headed by the Jemadar. They rained questions on Seton, whose newly acquired skill in Hindustani stood him in better stead than he expected. The Colonel must have leaped from the window. He had been despondent, had spoken of death, and now. . . . Seton was silent, and then the officer, leaning out, yelled for a boat, and the splash of oars was not long in answering.

Up and down they rowed, they searched, they shouted, but nothing could they find, and Seton, almost distracted with real anxiety, had no difficulty in playing the part assigned him. He was really unable to form the slightest idea of how the Colonel had got off, and was in such obvious misery of mind that not one of them suspected him of complicity. At last, doubling the sentries, they went off for the night, assuring him he would be strictly questioned next day, and leaving him to such a weight of loneliness as he had thought a man could scarcely suffer and live. Oh, for a word with Venetia—or even Sara! The sense that some one depended on him would

energize him and make everything endurable. It was the helpless captivity that lay like a leaden weight upon him as he envied Gifford far off in the bright clash of danger. Surely, surely, if there were truth in the word of Jadrup Gosein, now was the time that help should reach him! Could loneliness be lonelier, helplessness more helpless? But nothing came. The darkness of the night weighed on him like a pall and for a while hope lay dead beneath it.

With the earliest morning light he watched for signals, but only the black veil of the cobbler's wife was drying in the breeze. "No news,"—and the long day was before him.

It was, however, to be more exciting than he supposed. After he had eaten his breakfast, the Jemadar, with a file of men, marched up the passage and ordered him to follow. It might be to execution; he judged that very likely, and if it were so, so far as he was concerned he did not fear to meet it. But Venetia! That was what tore at his heart. He thought of Bombay and the free open sea and the English ships, like towers of safety, riding at anchor, and his whole soul was one sick longing that she could be there, if twenty lives like his could buy her freedom.

But they led him by a way he did not know, and through the rose garden, and by a pavilion, and into a marble chamber of coldest, most exquisite purity, like the heart of a pearl, shimmering into milky rose and ivory, and there the guard opened out to either side and he saw a woman, seated on the marble seat which might well pass for a throne.

Instantly the scene recalled to him the great fresco in the outer chamber of the tomb of Queen Nefert. There were the men, all silent, all gazing toward the figure raised above them. The narrowing lines seemed to converge on that, to exalt it into a mysterious power. But there were differences. In the fresco there had been no prisoner bound before the throne, and this woman was not crowned, but covered with a very ample and semi-transparent black veil which wrapped her from head to foot and hid her face. He was only conscious of hidden eyes that watched him intently.

The men saluted, and she acknowledged the salute with an imperial wave of the hand, and then, in a voice of thrilling sweetness, addressed some words to Seton in Hindustani. He shook his head. What she said escaped him. It sounded unlike the Hindustani he knew. She tried Russian. He shook his head again. Then French. Apparently she spoke that as fluently as he did, and so communication was established.

She questioned him first on the Colonel's disappearance, and there he could answer—that he believed he had leaped from the window. Suicide? It

might be; but if he were wrong in this guess, he would be only too thankful for any news of him. Her next question was whether he had any reason to think Gifford was sending information out of the palace? None whatever, he replied without hesitation. How was it possible in a place so strictly guarded? To which she briefly answered that it would certainly be madness, but Allah was witness that men were often mad and rushed on their own destruction.

He tried to decide whether she were European or Oriental, and could not. The French had an extremely foreign accent, though perfectly correct, and she made the frequent references to Allah that a Moslem woman indulges in as a mark of formal piety. They sounded odd enough in French. Afterwards he found that every one to whom she spoke had thought her accent foreign, whatever language she used. Hindustani, Persian, French, Russian—all men and women bore witness that she was none of their people.

It was the strangest interview. Not one word that they said was comprehensible to the men on duty. They stood impassive, and what their thoughts were, who could say?—though Seton knew enough of India by this time to be certain that for a woman so recently deprived both of her husband and her brother to receive a man, even with her face veiled, must be anathema. Power, however, makes its own laws, and in every line of her figure, in every tone of her voice, in every queenly gesture, power spoke its own unmistakable language.

"You have thought," she said at length, very slowly and gravely, "that I took no heed of my prisoners, but it is not so. The sentry on your door last night was I, and had you spoken French. . . ."

He started violently and stared at her, the hair almost rising on his head with deadly anxiety. She continued, unruffled, her voice sweet as calmly flowing water.

"But it was your own tongue and I could not know. Will you now tell me when and how the Colonel Gifford escaped? It will be better for you if you do."

The threat was uttered as gently as all the rest, the meaning of the words scarcely credible in the tone.

"I know nothing of when and how he escaped," Seton said defiantly. "I waked in the night, hearing a loud splash in the water, and that is all I know. I believe he threw himself in. If you know more, I entreat you to tell me. I would give my right hand to know whether he is alive or dead. He is a brave man, whom even his enemies must respect."

“We never respect our enemies,” the gentle voice said. “Why should we? They are our enemies; that is enough. And as to your question; you cannot think I should tell you even if I knew. One thing I can tell you, however. I have to-day put a stop to all communication with the city from a certain window. The cobbler will cobble, the weaver weave no more. You will always see the black veil of the cobbler’s wife when you look across the water, as you did this morning. At last we have discovered it.”

His arms dropped by his side in despair. All was ended then. What use could he be to his country, to Venetia, to the Colonel—any one? In that moment he wished himself dead in sincerest, cruellest truth. She was silent, watching him, and finally he raised his head and faced her.

“Have so much pity as to tell me whether he is dead or alive.”

“Your own fate concerns you more than his, and I have sent for you to tell you it depends on your revealing what passed between you and your friend yesterday. Nothing can save you otherwise.”

“Then nothing shall save me, for I can tell you nothing. You must do with me what you please. I can add nothing to that.”

“Do you mean that you have nothing to tell, or that you will not tell it?”

“I mean both. If there were anything, I should refuse to tell it. But there was nothing.”

Again she was silent, studying his face, then spoke with the same gentleness.

“You must go back to your prison and think the matter over. You may change your mind. Meanwhile I have one thing for your hearing.”

His lips shut in a firm, close line. Instinctively he braced himself to meet a blow. She continued calmly.

“I have resolved that the women shall leave to-day for Kashmir. That state is still friendly to the English and they will find a refuge there. Because I will not give a handle to my enemies, I have decided to be rid of them in this way. Where is your gratitude?”

For he was struck dumb. All that the Colonel had told him of the danger of passing through the disturbed and rebellious states rushed upon him how, with miserable memories of the terrible experiences of the women and children who even in the Mutiny year of 1857 had to face perils less dreadful than those to be expected from an enemy who feared neither God nor man and made Science herself the procuress of cruelty.

“I entreat, I beseech your Highness, to keep them here in safety, if you will not send me with them,” he said at last. “You are a woman, you must know and pity the miseries and risks of such a journey. Why, even the railways are impassable, they say, and Kashmir is in the far north! Your brother told me the women should stay here.”

“The railways are impassable in parts, yes. But no matter. It is an order. For yourself, if you change your mind, send word to me. You certainly cannot expect to go with them. You are a prisoner of too much importance to be set free. And there are reasons. You must content yourself here.”

Then suddenly, in Hindustani, turning to the Jemadar, she ordered him to leave her alone with the Englishman.

“But be within hearing, and when I clap my hands, return swiftly.”

They filed out, and in the silent hall were left only the woman and her prisoner.

With slow hands, almost languidly, she began to unwrap the transparent veil from the zenana garment of rich Bokhariot silk brocaded with flowers, which she wore beneath it. Of a sudden she blazed with kingfisher blues, royal purples, humming bird crimsons and subtle greens, all blended in a harmonious and confused splendour, sumptuous as a heap of jewels.

He watched her, fascinated by the lovely movements of her slender hands and arms. Without a word at last she drew the veil from before her face and let it drop backwards over her shoulders, then, leaning her head against the marble, she looked full at him. On each side of her face flowed two solemn rivers of black hair, her full lips, most delicately cut and shaped, were of a dark vermilion, her eyes fringed with the glooms of night, were like shadowed pools of darkness, and on her fair breast she wore the scarab set in the outspread wings of Mut. At last her lips parted and she spoke.

“Thou endest the night.”

He stared at her in speechless wonder.

“*That* is the reason why you stay,” she added, and slowly drew the veil about her, eclipsing her splendours in its cloud.

Before he could move or speak, she had clapped her hands sharply, and the soldiers marched in and surrounded him.

“Take Seton Sahib back to his rooms,” she commanded. “Give him all he needs. Treat him with honour, but watch him night and day. For if he escapes, I swear by the Prophet of God that every hair of your heads shall answer it.”

They marched him out, leaving her, a veiled figure seated on the throne.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT was very difficult for Venetia or Sara to remember afterwards the details of that dreadful journey so suddenly thrust upon them. They were awakened one morning with the news that they must be prepared to start in two hours for Kashmir and their knowledge of India and its way, so far from helping them, terrified them the more with the sure knowledge of the dangers and miseries which lay ahead of them. Sara, not yet quite recovered from her illness, broke down into helpless tears, and perhaps it was the best thing for Venetia that she must put her own griefs aside and devote herself entirely to consoling Sara and doing what was necessary. She could not even guess whether Seton and the Colonel knew their fate, and though she ransacked her wits again and again, could think of no way of communicating with them. She asked the silent ayah who waited upon them whether she could see Zaynab, but had only a deep salaam and the assurance that Zaynab was gone to her own people. Finally, in despair, she wrote a message to Shirin Begam to ask whether Seton Sahib, "who will be my husband," would travel with them, and, failing that, if they might see him, according to the English custom, before they went. An hour passed without answer and the ayah brought a verbal message from her Highness.

"The custom of the palace did not permit that ladies in the zenana should talk with any man, and Seton Sahib had decided to remain in Mianpur. This was his free decision. The Colonel Sahib had already gone. If the Miss Sahib chose to write to Seton Sahib, her message would be sent, and if he made any answer she should have it."

That was all. Feeling utterly lost and abandoned, Venetia sat down and wrote a few words.

> "It is suddenly decided that we are to be sent to Kashmir, and you will know the danger is very great. They tell me it is your wish to stay here and that Colonel Gifford is gone already. How all this can be, I don't understand, but my faith in you is unshaken, as it has been all through this terrible separation. We may never meet again—indeed, it seems likely we never shall, but I want you to know that I have no real fear for myself, whatever happens. You know why and how. If I can get Sara through I shall be satisfied. I shall think of you and love you to the end, whenever that may come. Your Venetia."

She folded it only, knowing it would probably be read whatever precautions she took, and with wistful eyes watched the ayah as she went out with it. They were standing by the boat, ready to begin their perilous

journey, before the answer was brought, written hurriedly on the back of her own.

"He might have kept it!" her heart said, with a throb of pain, then rebuked her and steadied to the need.

> "It is best I should stay. Colonel Gifford will meet you at Sellore and explain. I am assured you will have a safe and comfortable journey. Good-bye."

That was all, and at the moment it seemed a cruel brevity, even though the reasons for saying as little as possible were good. She knew that, clung to it—not for one instant did her faith falter, but it was a ray extinguished which might have brightened the darkness. She tore the paper into little bits and saw her words and his float away on the transparent water where the lotus leaves soon hid them. There was, indeed, scarcely time for thought, for the boat, comfortable and roomy enough, but very different from the ceremonious barge of former days, was waiting and she helped Sara in; and then, sitting in the stern with her chin propped on her hand, looked back at the Lake Palace of so many memories, well knowing that neither in life nor death should she ever see it again.

She had been a child of six when she could first remember it and the *fête* it had been to visit the kind old Begam and receive her presents and flatteries. She remembered the coming of Gulbadan nine years ago, a lovely child, opening like a damask velvet rose in the shadows of the zenana. She remembered the eagle face of Mahmud Mirza when he met her galloping one day on her little pony, her hair flying in the wind, and heard him call to the prince who rode at his bridle rein, "Ya Allah—extolled be His perfection! This girl-child knows not fear! She rides like the son of a warrior. Shabash (well done), small lady! You shall have a horse of horses from my stable." And the horse had come, a creature so beautiful, so gorgeously caparisoned, that her uncle had taken her to the palace to make a carefully rehearsed speech of thanks to the noble-looking young man who received her so kindly and answered in such perfect English. And now—all those kind friends were gone, and the home of their joy and magnificence was in the hands of enemies and their people faithless to them and their place knew them no more.

Through brimming tears she looked along the many lines of windows for a wave, a signal of some sort from Seton. That it might be possible was but a fading hope, and she had no real expectation of it. But they were all empty, except that at one she imagined she saw a veiled figure standing. And soon they were beyond reach of signals and the palace receded into the unreal and

cloudy loveliness that fascinated all eyes from the farther shore—a dim white swan floating on a lake of heaven.

A rough cart with curtains was waiting by the landing place and a strange ayah beside it, and that was all the preparation. Sara's heart sank when she saw, for it was a dreadful foretaste of what might be expected on the long northward journey, and though Venetia tried to speak cheerfully, she also realized the slight intended. There was nothing to be done, however, but to get in as soon as possible, to avoid the curious eyes staring at the humiliated Englishwomen, for ten or twelve people had collected at the landing stage.

"Allah Akbar, God is great!" said one old man. "And I remember their uncle, the great Kumpsioner Sahib, a prince in his own land and here and the friend of the King—and now it is thus and thus. Who shall covet the greatness of this world? It is gone like a breath!"

That voiced the general feeling, for there was no active insult, and then the curtains were drawn and with much creaking and jolting they rolled into the unseen streets, and the journey was fairly begun.

It is needless to dwell on the fears and hardships of the next two months. It was a changed world that they passed through. Gone were the British troops, the orderly and dignified Sikh police, the faces of the tourists hurrying from Bombay, bored or curious, northward. It was only in places that they struck a train, and then they were hurried into it with the ayah and it seemed that they were handed on from one man to the other. The larger stations appeared all to be held by Russian troops, with native soldiers under their officers' orders, and very often Sara and Venetia were taken from the trains and the troops would crowd in and the cars disappear, and a long, weary wait at the station follow, with a night or more spent in some miserable room until a half-broken-down ekka like the first could be had to drag them a few miles further on their way. The route was chiefly by small and poverty-stricken villages that they had never heard of, and it was clear that the large towns were to be avoided. They had little or no money, but what they had was never called upon, except for a baksheesh here and there, for all their expenses were paid.

The Russians would sometimes drag the curtains aside and look into the cart, with rough, coarse jests in their unknown language, but even from them there was no worse molestation, and the Hindus and Mohammedans alike respected the zenana ekka. Venetia soon learnt to be glad it was so rough and unpretentious, for it was so clearly not worth robbing that its very poverty took them safe through many a danger.

She had felt certain they must pass through Lahore or Pindi and that some sort of news might be picked up there. Not a fragment had reached their ears hitherto, and the woman with them was silent as death, except for her necessary service, and time seemed to have resolved itself into an endless jolting in the half-dark of the cart, as if all their former life had vanished and this were an eternal journey in some strange, inhospitable planet, amid cruel, careless faces that took no heed of what they suffered. A terrible experience for two lonely women.

The last night in the train she fell into a restless sleep, as wearying as wakefulness—the only sleep she had known since she left the Lake Palace. And first as she entered the confines of dream, she was still conscious of the rough jolting, the clash, the rattle, and Sara sighing and moaning in her unquiet sleep. Gradually these faded and deep night was about her, without moon or star, dark as the nameless beginnings of things, and there for a time she groped, lost, bewildered, her heart burdened with a nameless pain. The darkness thinned, as it does before greyest dawn—still more, more—it was transparent now as thin water, the victory of the light was sure. A bird darted through it, arrowy, charged with a message—but what? The air breathed roses, charged with a message—but to whom? The air was full of vibrations, subtle, interweaving, thrilling, crossing—not music, but the inmost soul of it, which at last, over-brimming in beauty, is sound to the ears of men. She knew then, and rising, as it seemed, prepared to hear, stilling every earthly cry within her, awaiting the choral rush of light from the dark, profoundly withdrawn from life and filled with a measureless content. Out of the dark flowed blue skies—a meadow of grass and flowers, a gently gliding stream with grass beneath it flowing, as it were, with the water—a place of unutterable sweetness and rest. A towering tree, a lime tree, fragrant with blossom, with the dream-sound of innumerable bees hovering about it to plunder its sweetness, raised mightier boughs than ever earthly growth into the divine depths of azure. Seton stood by it, his face perplexed and pale, his eyes closed. He groped, more like a man in darkness than in the supernal sunlight turning the very leaves to glitter and glory of refulgent green. She could not hold away, she stretched her hands to guide him, ran to him, hid her face in his breast, wept upon him tears of radiant joy. The grief was past, the time of the singing of birds was come.

Were one writing fiction, at this point it would be easy to describe a visible assurance, actual work of supernatural direction, a celestial fingerpost pointing a way that cannot be missed. But in all the universe is nothing supernatural, though there is not seldom the super-normal, which is, indeed, the normal of enlightenment.

It was sufficient. They were together in a deeper sense than any earthly meeting. He bent his head, their lips met. They were one, not only with each other but with all the beauty about them and some more bewildering beauty behind it. For the moment she was herself pure spirit, comprehending the language that unites all visible nature with spirit invisible, and inevitably as the majestic resurgence of the sun from the rim of the ocean, assurance blossomed within her that in all the wide universe is no room for fear or dismay, that parting and grief are but the flying garments of the departing dark, and that human events, happen as they will, are the germ-bearers of eventual perfection. It was enough, and more than enough. By slow gradations of lessening bliss, her spirit glided down the heights of paradise to the colder levels, but the atmosphere of the higher countries was still about her when she woke in content to the toils of the day, healed, refreshed, shielded, and sworded against grief and fear. Sara looked at her in astonishment.

"You look as if you'd been sleeping for weeks! I was awake nearly all night, the noises were so frightful."

Venetia smiled. What was there to say—though all the world to feel?

At long last, at a wayside station with a name utterly unknown to them, they were bundled into the train once more, in a third-class carriage like a cattle-pen, the windows curtained to show it was occupied by women, the rest of the cars filled with shouting soldiers. And then an endless journey of misery and anxiety followed. Sara almost collapsed. She was utterly worn out with fear and fatigue, and nearly all day long sat with her head resting on her sister's shoulder in a kind of stupor.

Venetia looked for a halt at Lahore or Pindi, having entirely lost knowledge of where they were, but though they passed through a city which might have been Lahore, she could not be certain, and they never halted. Nothing but that invisible strength sustained her when, after having disgorged the rabble of soldiers at another wayside station, the train went on some miles further and stopped at a small wayside halt where they were then told curtly to get out—a carriage was waiting.

A carriage! She could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw a landau and pair drawn up on the dusty road where the train had pulled up. She put her arm round Sara, her last instinct to protect her sister to the end, as a smartly turned-out native officer came to meet the official who had them in charge.

"I now hand over in health, the English ladies who have travelled from Mianpur," said the man sullenly and without any salaam.

He turned away roughly and the officer struck him with the flat of his sword on the back.

“Do homage, dog and son of a shameless mother, to the officer of his Highness the Maharaja of Kashmir, and lick the ground before the feet of these ladies. And take this vile woman with you—we have other attendants for the friends of his Highness.”

The voice rang gay and clear in mastery, the very note of freedom. The man, salaaming like a slave, bent down his head to the earth before their feet, his cruel face ash-colour with terror.

“Let the eye of mercy behold the repentant, Huzoor,” he cried. “It was an order, and I have but obeyed it,” and so, almost licking the dust indeed, crawled away like a serpent and was gone.

Safety had come at last with a clash of steel, and the long strain snapped and Sara slipped through Venetia’s grasp and fell fainting to the ground.

“May the curse of Maheshwara and the vengeance of Durga light on those Moslem dogs!” said the Hindu officer. “You are safe, Huzoor, and welcome as roses in summer.”

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was little wonder that Venetia saw nothing of Seton at the window. By Shirin's orders he had been moved into a room that looked to the north during that half hour, and at his window she herself leaned, watching, until the boat had pulled a considerable way to the city and she was assured the foreign women were gone for good. The letter he had neither seen nor answered.

He guessed very well why he was moved and his very soul rebelled against his helplessness. The Colonel was either playing the part of the man or dead on the field of honour, the woman he loved was facing danger, and, he could swear, facing it gallantly. He alone was shut up like a sick sheep in a pen, useless, outwitted, and the world went on without him. A trust had been left in his hands and he could not fulfil it. If only he could get one word through to tell the friends outside that communication was cut, and through no fault of his! And then the thought that he might be believed faithless burst like madness into his brain. What stories might not be spread and believed of the English Sahib who had chosen to remain safe and alone in the Lake Palace of Mianpur with the beautiful Shirin Begam, when all his friends were gone?

When they took him back to his rooms and left him alone, he focused the field glasses at once on the windows that had been the only voices from outside. Blank, empty. He made the agreed signal, flashing with a light on a small mirror. No answer. He waved the white cloth inside the window, careless now if he were seen, so long as it could be known he had tried to get through, so long as he could reach the disguised Prince Hazrat Sultan. No answer. And at last he sat down to face the frightful loneliness, an almost broken-hearted man.

Three, four weeks dragged on leaden feet, and he knew nothing, could not even guess whether Hazrat Sultan might not be taken or dead, and all lost with him. Had Barikoff, the terrible Barikoff, come, he who was said to be the queen's lover? He remembered now that she had spoken of "my commands," "my will," and had made no reference to Barikoff, who was certainly not a man to be left out of the events he and Revel had set moving. But there was no change in the life of the palace so far as he could tell, and no word ever reached him.

Once or twice when the sentries were changed he tried the Thug password in a low voice, leaning against the wall carelessly as if to watch the ceremony. It was a frightful risk, because there were always two on guard now, and even if one were loyal, the other might be a spy, so he hummed the words "The Peace to Ali Khan, my brother," as if it were the snatch of a song. Not the twinkle of an eyelash responded. The men stared curiously and rather contemptuously at the prisoner and that was all. He gave it up after the third trial, and two days later the sentries were changed for Russians, tall and heavy brutes of men who jabbered in their unknown tongue and kept no discipline whatever and completely ignored the prisoner.

Afterwards, he thought he must have gone mad in that confinement, with no companion, nothing to read (for he knew the two books from cover to cover), and the sense of loss and shame to haunt him, if it had not been for the Colonel's solitaire cards, which he discovered in his deserted room. Half the day, and more, he played, inventing new stunts, working out the chances of loss and gain, anything, anything to keep his mind out of the rut of self-accusation and contempt. Often he weighed the possibility of letting himself down from the window and taking the chances of a swim to the city, in spite of the alligators, for after all there were worse things than death, and this particular sort of life was one of them. The thing that delayed, though it did not deny, this project, was simply the Colonel's words on that last night, "Don't get knocked on the head unless you must. Your life is valuable."

He scarcely saw how that could be, but it delayed him—only delayed, however, for he was enduring the Dark Night of the soul, the entire eclipse of faith. He had waited, waited; no sorer strait than this could be, and Jadrup Gosein's promise had melted into thin air, had failed him utterly. It seemed incredible to him now that he could ever have believed in it and rested on such a flimsy assurance. What had he been but the dupe of his own desire? He might at least have known better—he who knew the world so well. For a few days he raged and rebelled and scorned himself and the man who had misled him into a false peace, and then came another and more dangerous mood. He sank into exhaustion of spirit. He saw life through the veil of a listless indifference, the phantasmagoria of the soul cradling him into apathy. After all, what did this or anything matter? It would soon be over. The best way was to hold to life so lightly that it passed over one like fugitive clouds, and worth as little. Kismet—and a broken ship drifting on eternal waves of an illimitable ocean. He laid even his cards aside then, his books were closed. All day he sat by the window, watching but not seeing, idle and emptied in mind and body, having attained that false and numbing peace which is the mimic of the Peace that is the goal of all the faiths.

One night, as he lay in the waking lassitude that took the place of sleep, he watched the pattern of moonlight filtering through the marble tracery in beautiful shadow patterns on the tiled floor. The shadow is often more lovely than the reality, and so it seemed to him then. It made a dream-story in his mind at last, a pattern of whimsical, meaningless grace, to be watched idly like the play of irresponsible children, a miniature world with events of its own possibly as great to them as in the world he himself had once thought so worth while. The futility of it all! And a passing cloud blotted it out—gone—and what matter? Now the emerging moon lit it into defined figures again. A pattern; and life itself no more.

Suddenly, as he watched, there came an overpowering sleep. It struck him like a blow on the head, submerged and held him fast as a man anchored in tangled weeds at the bottom of a great ocean. Dead, dumb, he lay, as it seemed to him, passive in the arms of the Mighty, with weights of ages and oceans pressing him down, down, into darkness. Dim green light, such as may filter down through miles of green water—it thrilled, quivered—No, how strange! He was mistaken. It was light, dappling through the boughs of a towering lime tree—an uprushing fountain of earth, gladness, rejoicing, bloom and leafage, and the humming of happy bees about it. With delight his eyes followed the smooth grey bole that lost itself in the heaven of moving, whispering life far, far above where it mingled with the sky. Such a glory of verdure he had never seen. Soft winds and odours breathed about it. They seemed the life of the tree, exhaling in dewy sighs of content. He turned, and at the other side of the towering trunk Venetia stood, her eyes shining through the leaves like misty stars.

"I thought—I thought you were gone! They told me so," he said, stammering with excess of bliss, unable to move hand or foot. "Where have you been?"

She smiled, still standing apart.

"It was only because you were in prison that you thought I was gone. How could I go away from you? They caught you, and you let your mind slip into prison with your body. I remember a song—we all knew it—

> " 'Stone walls do not a prison make,
> Nor iron bars a cage.'

But you thought they did, and so now—I can't tell you how hard it has been to get in through the bars. I have been trying for weeks. I could see you through them, but as for getting in! I belong outside!" She laughed, like the softest note of a bird. "But at last I squeezed through. Of course, Jadrup

Gosein helped me—how could I have done it else? One has to know the word."

"And what is it? For God's sake, tell me! And come nearer. I can only see your eyes through the leaves."

"I'm not allowed to break the rules. You're still in prison. You see, you're only dreaming this tree and the blue air. You dreamed it long ago, in Cairo. Don't you remember?"

"And am I only dreaming you, heart of my heart?"

"No—you see, I was able to get in. I'm real. I learnt the way, but you can't get out. If you could, I could come round the tree, and that would be real too. It's only a dream-tree, painted on the blue sky you looked at so hopelessly yesterday over the lake. And presently I shall escape through the bars again and you will have to stay. Oh, if I could only tell you!"

"But I beseech you to tell me!" he cried, in wild anxiety lest she should vanish in a creeping mist. "See, the tree is going—the grass! Oh, Venetia, stay!"

For the tree was fading like a dissolving view, the grass was drifting away like water. Through both he saw the marble walls and floor of his loathed prison.

"I told you," she said, now standing apart by the window. "Why will you believe the stupid thing is real? If you would only see what is pretence, you could take my hand and we could float away out of the window and be free together. There's nothing real between us."

"But the word—the word?" he cried, almost distracted.

"The word is of no use unless you know what lies behind it and you keep on believing this."

She struck with her soft hand lightly on the walls and they melted—the lake lay in dipping moonlight, a boat was gliding into the heart of the night, the immense freedom of midnight skies was about them, beyond the lights of the city were a galaxy of stars far down on the horizon.

"You see," she said. "Nothing! If one knows how. . . ." She thought a moment and added, "When you know the way to the fourth dimension, you can rise out of the prison of the three dimensions with a wish, pass through them, step out of them. They are make-believe when one knows."

"Teach me—I implore you!" was all he could say, entreating as if for life itself.

She stood with the liquid glory of the lake for a background, and beyond it the night leaning over it, jewelled like an Ethiop queen, the moon for her crest-jewel.

"It's difficult," she said, "because your mind stands in the way of your real self, which is stronger than all the strengths if you would but set it free. Your mind believed they could put the real you in prison, but they never could unless you had believed it. That was playing into their hands. Throw that false belief away, and they can never do it again. Do you believe me *now*?"

"I believe you with all my soul," he said passionately, and even as the words left his lips, the room was gone and they stood again on grass, green and living, with the tree, a tower of bloom and greenery, between them, the broad lower branches sweeping the grass with layers of frondage.

"Touch it. You think it's real?"

He pressed the leaves to his lips and breathed in the dewy odour.

"I know it. Painted—not it!"

"Then hold as fast to *my* belief and I can come to you," she said, laughing for delight. "Look! Watch!"

She parted the clustering boughs and cleared the leaves from her sweet eyes and came through the path she made, nearer, nearer. He saw her feet on the grass—the little feet sunk in moss. Nearer. He stretched his arms and they caught her living warmth, thrilling, against him. He felt the beating of her heart against his. Her lips touched him, divinely warm and sweet. The tree lifted and blew softly away, a cloud in the breeze. There was a cold sighing, like rain, in the air—like dewdrops shaken from overladen boughs. His arms were empty. He woke as suddenly as he had slept, and stretched his hands to desolation.

No, not desolation. The message breathed from her living presence was warm about his heart, the perfume of her hair was on his lips. The man she loved in prison—a slave? Impossible! Healing, new life, flowed warmly through his veins. He stood up and looked out into the rejoicing world, himself rejoicing, renovated, knowing beyond all reason that his joy rested on foundations unshakable as the roots of the hills melting in blue veils of light in the lovely distance.

It was some days before that high certitude left him. He had believed it never could or would, but the mind dominates the average man, and the sails flapped in the stagnant calm and apathy gripped his heart in its cold tentacles again. A dream! What wise man would build on anything so false

and fugitive? Childish! How could any strength sustain itself on that flimsy food? The prison walls closed about him once more, body and soul.

Two weeks later the Queen sent for him, and the guards who escorted him were Russians. This time, in utter defiance of custom, he was taken to a great room in the zenana, where the old Shah Begam and the long line of dead and gone princesses and queens of the great house of Mianpur had held their court of women. Perhaps Seton did not know enough of India to realize the full horror of the proceeding, but even he could guess (what the Colonel would have known) that the arms of Russia had triumphed far and wide in the Peninsula or the woman would never have dared to break the purdah of so many centuries in Mianpur and in the zenana show her face unveiled to a man. Furthermore, she was attended by two ladies of the old Begam's, women of rank and hitherto of decency also, who, unveiled, stood on either side of her chair, displaying bold, handsome faces and trying very unsuccessfully to stand Seton's astonished gaze without flinching. The Colonel could have told him a little of what this would mean in the city, of the rage and shame that would fill the hearts of the native-born, whether Mohammedan or Hindu, at the new license imported by the people they had called in to redress their wrongs and who were now their conquerors. In India the conquerors have been many, and many and differing the manners they brought with them to impose on the conquered. Yet, when the legions have thundered past, she has returned to her immemorial quiet, and her customs, trampled down for the moment, have grown up mysteriously, impenetrable as the jungle once more. What the English have never dared in India, could the Russians dare with any hope of prosperity? The sword is the lightning of a moment. The heart of a people endures.

She motioned him to a seat in front of her and dismissed the guards. He sat listlessly, almost humped in his chair; the long weeks had told upon him and his tongue was stiff in his jaws with silence. It had become such a habit that he scarcely cared one way or another now. If she sentenced him to death, let her—he did not care. If she set him free, what chance was there that he could ever regain the treasures he had lost? And any interest as to her history, her future, was dead in him. To the over-sexed women who stood beside her it appeared incredible that a man so privileged should never even lift his eyes to the beauty of the Queen, but he stared at the marble before his feet and said nothing. It was certainly not the drama they had promised themselves. The time had seemed long when she spoke to him in French.

"Again we meet. You have not sent for me. I send for you. I have pitied your sufferings with a full heart, but I could not spare you until the time came. If you have thought me cruel——"

“I have not thought of you at all,” he said, and it was all but true. “Why should I? You are nothing to me.”

He did not even look up. She waited a moment and then said, so quietly that the listening women, who knew not a word, believed her to be speaking of indifferent matters:

“But you are much to me.”

He made no reply. He was watching a patch of sunshine shift almost imperceptibly along the floor where it filtered in through the jealously carved lattices, making a pattern like the one he knew in his prison. At the moment it interested him more than anything she was likely to say.

“You are much to me,” she repeated. “It was you whose hand opened my prison and gave me back to the light of day—to the beautiful world of life and sunshine and love. ‘Thou endest the night!’ Oh, the long and frightful night in the hot, stagnant dark, with the years dropping by endlessly as the grains of sand that sifted from the rocks! What prison on earth was ever so frightful as that prison? And you delivered me. Look up to my face and see in my eyes the thanks I can never utter.”

It was utterly unexpected. He had believed her first word would be a threat of death if he did not reveal Gifford’s secret. In amazement, he looked up at her for the first time. She was beautiful—unspeakably beautiful, the deep eyes shining through unshed tears, the lips parted, revealing the little pearls within, the glorious hair, like clouds about the moon of her pale sweet face, where every emotion showed like the flame within a lamp of alabaster. Most dear, most desirable, though not to him. She leaned forward a little, like an apple-blossom bough swaying in a wind of spring; a subtle perfume from her garments reached him. Every pulse in his body cried Danger, and he turned his eyes from her again. Suddenly she drew back and stiffened in her seat. With a few words she dismissed her women. The curtain dropped behind them, and they were alone.

She leaned forward again, and in a voice of exquisite sadness, as it seemed with the simplicity of a child, she whispered, “My words beat against you in vain. Can I find any that will touch your heart?”

He said violently, “None. What you wish me to believe, I don’t believe. To me you are only an adventuress who has seized upon an amazing likeness to serve her own ends. Terrible ends, too. If your face matched your soul, it would be so hideous that you yourself would shudder at it. I am not your dupe.”

She opposed no violence to his. She only sighed bitterly.

"I am my own dupe. I believed—with all my heart and soul I believed—that when we met you must love me because you saved me. And now you look me in the eyes and hate me. I, who have known death, think life more terrible of the two."

"I agree with you."

"And yet I must speak with you and you must trust me," she said earnestly, "for there are tremendous things in hand and you and I are part of them. You must make a great decision, and very soon. But first, I want to restore this to you."

She drew from her thumb a carbuncle ring and held it out to him. With a cry of amazement he saw it. His ring—but which was which, for so far as he knew, his ring was already on his hand? He looked sharply at both and could see no difference, then up at her and at the scarab on her breast between the wings of Mut.

"What does it mean?"

And even as he spoke, he recalled Gifford's suggestion that Revel had stolen the ring from him at the house in Cairo for some mysterious purpose of his own. Instantly he guarded his lips with silence. She should speak, and he would draw his own conclusions.

"The one I give you is your own ring. Of that ancient inscription there are but two in the world. The one is on my breast, the other in your hand. Both were a love gift to me in the dim ages that are forgotten, and in the dust of death I carried the ring on my finger. You found it where I sat waiting. Now this ring, for reasons you shall not know, is charged with power, and this is so with certain amulets and jewels, and my brother, in this life called Ibn ul Farid, had need of one. Therefore he went to Abuksa, that he might see this ring, for the fame of it had reached him. And he took it from you in Cairo, and after that had power over you to make you see what he would. But the ring he gave you in its place is nothing—a toy made by a Jew."

She spoke as calmly as if robbery and cheating were in the common order of things. Seton could have ground his teeth with rage to think how he had been fooled. Probably she was fooling him again in some way he could presently decipher. He watched her with keen, suspicious eyes.

"And why do you give it back to me?"

"Because its power over you died with him, and, for myself, I desire no power but what comes from your own heart. Your love is what I pray for. Long, long ago in Egypt you loved me, though that is a tale I will not tell you now; and surely, since in the world our lives touch again, again you will

love me as I love you. But take the ring, for my brother is dead, and now I desire but the power of every woman—my beauty and love."

He slipped the ring on his finger in place of the other.

"No doubt you set a price upon it. Speak plainly. What is it?"

She looked at him proudly.

"I set no price. My gift is free. Being given, let us forget it. But there is more to say. In your prison you did not know the world outside. In northern and central India there is scarcely a place that our armies have not overflowed, as the Nile floods the land for the sowing, and our harvest is near. And in the lands above the Himalayas is a great stirring for the rising of the sun, and though the dawn be red with blood, the day shall be glorious."

Her voice was like a song, she spoke with a majesty that was eloquence itself, her beautiful face glowed with inspiration. Seton dimly understood the wild and passionate enthusiasm she might rouse in the hearts of men who heard and saw her, but she left him cold as steel. He said not a word, but only looked steadily at her. The Angel of the Revolution type of woman had no attraction for him.

"But because we are winning so many hearts and swords, we need more, and surely all the ways of Fate have brought you and me together that we might go hand in hand along the ways of hope. Your people have misruled and trodden down where they might have raised and gladdened. Your people, do I say? But the term of one short life cannot make an alien people yours, and long ago you were a king in Egypt. Take my hand in yours, as you did once in the dead years, and let us make a great throne, and rule in righteousness and justice. Long, long ago you loved me. Love me again, heart of my heart! Come back to your own people!"

Her voice was like the wooing of a dove in a drowsy, golden afternoon, as she stretched her arms to him, incredibly sweet and winning. But it did not win Seton. Behind it he heard the boom of guns, the cries of miserable, despairing wretches whom her frightful gospel had deprived of all hope. He remained steadfastly silent, watching for revelations.

Her arms fell at her side; there were tears in her voice.

"If you could know my heart! If you could only guess that though I am a queen and have great power, I am a woman, and wholly at your mercy! Could you not pity me then?"

She glowed upon him with hope and entreaty.

“I could never pity you,” he said sternly. “Wherever you go, your steps are marked in blood. The men who trust you, you ruin. Beneath your angel face you have the heart of a fiend, and your teachings wither the world. Send me back to my prison! Shoot me, if you will, but never ask me to hear your voice again. I loathe you.”

He expected that she would rise, a quivering Fury, and let loose her wrath upon him. But no, only the great eyes looked darkly and pitifully at him, the soft mouth murmured its plea.

“Once, long ago in Egypt, you were angry for a while, but you forgave me, you loved me, you came to my heart. See—if our gospel displeases you, I will leave it all! What is it to me compared with you? We will escape together and far, far away, in a land I know well, we will forget the mad world and be happy in each other’s arms.”

Then the pent-up truth flashed out of him. He sprang to his feet.

“And if I could believe your Egyptian lies, do you think I would trust you? I have seen the prophecy. I know how the queen betrayed the miserable king who trusted her. I know that at last he drove his dagger into her false heart, and sealed her down, lest she should escape and ruin the young world as she did the old. Are you not afraid, here alone with me, lest I should choke the breath out of you and rid the world of a monster? You are no queen, you are the refuse of some base Parisian faubourg, where women such as you grow like weeds in the ditches. Now at last I have spoken. Do what you will.”

And still she looked at him with a lingering sweetness.

“Even those cruel words cannot turn my heart from you,” she said. “The day will come—must come, when you will know what I say is truth, and then all will be well. Now you shall go, and before many days are over I will set you free, because I love you. I would do it now, this moment—I would say, ‘Go, forget me if you will, but be free,’ but that is not in my power, and I must act with caution. You have no word for me. My last word to you is this: When we were king and queen in Egypt, you loved me. You will love me again.”

He stared at her in confused bewilderment—at her amazing generosity—the last thing he had dreamed of.

She clapped her hands very softly and the two women returned from their post outside the curtains of the entrance.

“Call the guard,” she said briefly, and so sat, with her chin in her hand, gazing away into the dim horizon beyond the lake, while the guards strode

clanking in and marched him back to his prison with rough jests and mockery. In that strange moment, he almost believed her. He looked back through the curtains, and his last glimpse of her was a seated figure, brooding over some thought she could not utter. She looked a great queen.

An hour later she wrote to Barikoff in the city of Mianpur, and dispatched it by boat with orders to be speedy. And what she wrote was this:

"I have done my best, and failed. There is no hope—none at all—of getting the secret from him through me. The men of his people have hearts of stone. They cannot be set alight. But one thing I achieved; the ring is on his finger again. Since Ibn ul Farid, the only man who could make him speak, is dead, it is necessary that he should be at the mercy of some one who can hypnotize him into speech, for not only is there the secret, but he has seen the prophecy. And with that ring on his hand he is at your will. Now I will set him free, and you shall know the day and hour. The rest is to you, my friend, and well do I know that Ibn ul Farid himself had not more skill in the arts that break the will than you."

And when Barikoff read the letter, he struck his hands together, laughing, and said, "I have him."

She sat very still long after she had written, and then, calling a woman with her sitar, she lay listening to the languorous, throbbing music and the strange muted song, until day died on the lake and the waning moon floated dimly on its bosom.

But Seton, in his room alone, leaned out of the window and dropped the ring she had given him into the deep blue water below and watched until the last watery circle had died away into the unruffled surface. He would have none of their witchcrafts—no, not though his heart was softened by the melancholy kindness of her eyes. In its place he slipped on the worthless ring that Revel—Ibn ul Farid—had given him for a cheat, and after that he slept heavily, as a man may on the brink of the grave.

CHAPTER XXX

EIGHT days went by, and one day a little folded paper skidded along the floor to his feet as he sat silent at the window, wondering how to endure the long empty hours of the day. No one spoke to him now. His food was slid in under the curtain as if to a wild beast. He heard the sentries changing, and that was all. Venetia, Gifford, all the world might be dead for all he knew. Communication had entirely ceased with the outer world. No clothes were hung out, no lights flashed.

He picked up the paper listlessly. It was written in French, and at the first words the blood shot into his face and his heart leaped.

> What I promised, shall be done. You are free. At twelve o'clock to-night a boat will be outside your window. They will send you up a rope. Use it—and go your way. But when you think of me, remember that I gave you your freedom. Mine is not the love that would imprison. It gives all and asks nothing. Yet in this life or another, you will return to me, for our bond is eternal. Destroy this with care. It is my danger. N.

Once more he read it, and then destroyed it carefully and sat lost in thought. Her words rang true, her face reflected them. Could she be utterly vile? It was not the act of a vile woman to let her prey escape, and by a way that might well mean danger to herself. He wished he had not spoken so harshly. He wished he could see her for a moment, that her last memory of him might be a word of gratitude. All day, if there were a breath, a movement outside his door, he fancied he heard the rustle of silken draperies, the light footfall of a woman. But she never came, and of all the long days in his weary prison, this seemed the longest. He grew so restless at last that he could sit no longer, but walked up and down desperately, trying to still the mind by the activity of the body. Suddenly he halted and caught up the field glasses. A cloth—two cloths were drying on a window sill in the city. Not the old one, but another.

"We will meet you," they said, and full of restless eagerness, he threw down the glasses and walked and walked till his head was dizzy.

As night drew on, he made a small bundle of the things he must have, and then, to evade any watching eyes, he lay down on his bed and shut his eyes, and the night began.

The long dark! It weighed on him like lead. Would the end never come?

It came in the most unexpected way. There was a fall, like as the brushing of a bird's wing on the marble inside his window. He crept along cautiously, and lo, there lay a little arrow, such as a child may shoot from the baby bows he had often seen in the streets of Mianpur, and that was all! No—as he looked closer he saw it carried a thin silken thread attached, and then, leaning out, in the velvet dark of night and water under his window a deeper shadow—the boat. Instantly he understood. With trembling fingers he drew the silk tenderly in until it ended in a knot and a slender twine followed. He reeled it in until a strong new rope of bullock's hide appeared, ending in a strong hook of iron. He tied the bundle about his neck, hooked the rope into a bar of the marble ornamentation at the side of the lattice, and was ready. One last look around the hateful room, and he mounted the window sill and let himself down, hand over hand, towards the water. If they were cheating him and the boat was not there, he would swim for it.

But they were there. A man's voice whispered beneath, "This way, Khodawund (my lord), Alhumd-ul-Illah, God be praised, all is well."

Willing hands received him, and softly, noiselessly, the muffled oars pushed them ahead, and the Lake Palace was a thing of memory.

Seton straightened himself, his nostrils dilated to breathe the clear air again. He could not see his rescuers, for it was the night of no moon, when evil things move in the dead dark, but he could hear their breathing and the tension when they gave way on the oars.

It seemed a very short time when the shingle grated under the bow, and he stood up and shook himself like a dog, as if to scatter the last taint of prisondom to the wind. There were two men on the shore, two tall men, turbaned, and with cloaks thrown about them.

"Friend, Khodawund, friend!" one said in a soft guttural. "To the right, and swiftly."

He followed without a minute's delay. One grasped his coat to guide him, for it was pitch dark, and so they went wordless, until they reached a door that opened as if automatically in their faces. A bright light flashed dazzling, a cloth was thrown over his head.

With hands and feet bound and blinded by the cloth, Seton was carried along what sounded like endless passages. It is useless to dwell on the agony of disappointed hope, the sick helplessness that was heavier than the hands of his gaolers. Then she must have meant to betray him all along! But no, she had risked freeing him—perhaps she would pay as dear for it as he. But he could not think connectedly, his mind was a mere vortex of whirling odds

and ends of thought and dread. He submitted, for it was hopeless to resist—that was all.

A halt. They let him down awkwardly on the floor, they dragged the cloth from his face, and now he recognized the room. It was the English-furnished library of Mahmud Mirza, but Mahmud Mirza's no longer.

The soldiers unbound his hands and feet presently—big, hairy, savage-looking men, stupid and loutish as beasts, a contrast indeed to the slim golden soldiers of the dead ruler. They were laughing coarsely among themselves at his plight, and one of them went and kicked at a door and called in his unknown jabber, and another man put out his head and retreated, and a few minutes passed, and Seton struggled up into a sitting position and stared about him confusedly. But his brain was clearing. Now that he knew where he was, he could guess pretty well what lay ahead of him.

The door opened again and a stout, dark man in civilian's dress walked in, eyes as sharp as gimlets, sensual jowl blue with a twenty-four hours' beard, nose broad and fleshy at the base, with retracted nostrils like a Tartar's. Seton knew the face: not a few of the illustrated journals had presented it to the world. Barikoff, the most important man for the moment in the Indian Empire.

He fixed his eyes on Seton and bowed slightly, then motioned to his men to push him a chair and took one himself. He glanced at a paper and gave an order. The men filed out at the door and he opened the talk in perfect French the moment they were alone.

"I am sorry to incommode you, sir, but military necessity has no law, and you have been caught in the act of escaping. You will almost anticipate my next words."

"Death," said Seton.

"Precisely."

A pause. Then Seton said coolly, "Then why delay? I am ready."

"Because a few questions are necessary first, and if I find you in the right frame of mind, it is possible we may suggest another way. Did any one in the palace help your escape?"

Naturally he could not give her away.

"No one."

Barikoff laughed a little, softly, as if a relishing thought were in his mind.

"Well, well! We must not ask too closely where a woman and a good-looking young man are concerned. Our teaching is not hard upon little human peccadilloes. But we must not let her tenderness lead us into forgetfulness of political needs. I will come to the point at once. When Colonel Gifford left you, we have reason to believe he confided a military secret to you. We want it."

"I have no secret."

Barikoff yawned ostentatiously.

"Surely," he said, "we can get past all the inevitables and to business? Can I speak plainer? You hold the key to a situation that delays and puzzles us. We mean to have it. And there is a further matter. A paper has disappeared which Mr. Revel carried about with him. Do you know anything of it?"

"Nothing."

"You will be wise to reconsider that reply."

"You have my answer."

"I hope you will not put us to the pain of drastic measures? Contrary to the world's belief, the Free Brotherhood is merciful. What we should like best of all is that you should throw in your lot with ours frankly——"

Seton did not waste a word. He laughed.

"Ah, I imagined that would be your reply. Then we must take the other line. Understand clearly, we must have that secret. The want of it is halting us all along the line. Have you ever realized that there is such a thing as torture, and that it did not end with the Middle Ages?"

"I realize what you say."

"Then—still, no?"

"No."

A great quiet was in the huge room. He could hear Barikoff's heavy breathing, he could hear his own heart beats. He raised his hand, and saw the ring on his finger.

That ring—it had been the centre of so much. Why had she given it back so generously? Was there more than lay on the surface in the gift? He was wandering in a maze of deceit, but was it possible that this could be a clue? Now he went over her words in his mind, while Barikoff stared at him. "And Ibn ul Farid took it after he had used it on you in Cairo, and after that because it had power to make you see what he would." Power? Then had she given it back that some one else might succeed to that power, might use him,

might. . . . Surely this was a folly of the Dark Ages—it could not be! Yet again—Cairo. What had he done in Cairo when he believed he was in the vaults of the Museum? Where had he been during that lost hour? Why had Gifford said to him, "Beware lest they hypnotize you again—it is always easier after the first time"? They should not. He swore it to himself, with Barikoff's unwavering stare upon him.

And then—then, like a flash of light in the darkness, a thought came to him, a resolution.

"You see," Barikoff went on, "the hard necessity of the case. We have no wish to kill you. If we could get what we need, you are perfectly at liberty to make your way out of Mianpur and to your friends. If you *can*!"

The last sentence was sinister. Seton put his hand to his head wearily.

"I don't ask for mercy, and I will not tell you what I know—but may I ask this much? I can't collect my thoughts, I am dead tired—even while I speak, my brain is whirling and aching, the pain is almost unbearable: may we postpone this talk until to-morrow? I hope then to show myself a man."

Barikoff leaned toward him, looking straight into his eyes.

"I was once a physician. Yes, I see you are exhausted—the pain is in the temples—I know. Look up at me—I may magnetize it away. We want your brain clear for our own purposes."

Seton fixed his eyes on Barikoff's, with a weak motion of his hands as if to repel something he dreaded. They stared at each other for what seemed more than a minute, then he said feebly, "Yes—that's better—that rests me. The relief is extraordinary. How do you do it?"

Barikoff, without relaxing his gaze, drew a small, glittering object from his pocket and held it up.

"Look at this!"

Seton obeyed mechanically, with the dull movements of a man drowsing awake. In a minute more his eyes had closed, his head fell back upon the chair, he was apparently in a deep sleep. Barikoff whistled softly, scarcely above his breath, and a tall, thin man came in. He had a dry, precise manner and gold spectacles fixed on a hawk's beak of a nose.

"Test his eyes, Doctor. I want to be sure."

Seton held to his resolution with a grip of iron while the man rolled his eyelid back between his finger and thumb.

"Ja, es geht gut," he said, in German. "But I'll try the pin trick too. Better be sure."

He took a pin from the lapel of his coat and ran it right into the patient's arm. There was not a flinch or a wince. It might have run into putty.

"Ach so! You can go on. He is off. I should not say he was a good subject, but according to Ibn ul Farid, the ring is a hypnotic charm, especially once it has succeeded. He said it would react instantly."

"Absolutely. And we can get him afterwards whenever we want. Now, watch. I ask him."

He leaned forward.

"Can you see?"

A dull voice from Seton's lips, but unlike his own, answered, "Nothing."

"I make you see a room in the Lake Palace, and yourself and Colonel Gifford. Do you see now?"

"I see."

"Do you hear?"

"Yes—his voice."

"Repeat to me exactly what Colonel Gifford told you of the plans you were to remember. You are now in that room, you hear him."

A struggle in the throat—the voice hoarse and whispering, as if in agony:

"I cannot—I cannot!"

"You must. Begin at the beginning. I wait."

The voice faltered, stammered. There was a long wait. Barikoff remained deep-still, his eyes fixed greedily on the working face before him. Then the voice made way, as if through some impediment in the throat, and flowed on in a weak, faltering rill of sound.

"He said this, this— 'The most important thing of all, the thing I never told even you up to this. It's vital. We counted on the Maharaja of Junwar, and he sold us. He is hand and glove with the Russians. Trust him no longer. Rao Singh has taken his place. He is in Sellore now. All the wires run through him. He is to give the signal for the rising. We have powerful friends among the Russians and Barikoff himself is sold to us. Barikoff! We can get him directly the signal is given. Others also. We have spent much money among the Russians. At the end Ibn ul Farid was playing our game. Get yourself kept in Mianpur. On no account leave. If you are killed Rao Singh will take on and Weardale will go in. He can pass as a native anywhere. They will never trap him. The signal for the rising is a rocket from the Hathi Bagh.' "

The voice stopped for a moment, and Barikoff put another question.

"Does he say who had betrayed Barikoff?"

"No. A secret for the heads, and I never knew."

Then, suddenly——

"My God, have I said? Oh, the hell of having to remember—to have it dragged out of me! Stop, stop! Let me go!"

"He's beginning to come to," the doctor said, leaning over him.

"Is there any more?" Barikoff demanded ruthlessly, but with lips ash-white.

"Nothing. Nothing." The head fell back. He was sinking into a sleep or stupor. "Oh, the lake and the prison and the endless days!" he muttered.

The doctor rolled up his eyelid again.

"Test him quick, if you want to, or I will. How did Gifford escape? Was he drowned?"

"He planned it to look like suicide. He said, 'Stay there. Say nothing.' I stayed."

"You see!" the doctor said coolly. "He wouldn't have revealed that willingly. Yes, we have had an authentic revelation, undoubtedly. Ask quick. This will be the last chance."

"Where is the paper? Was it destroyed?"

"No, no. In a cylinder. In the lake. Under our window. Oh, wake me! I am in agony. Wake me!"

"By the holy Trinity!" said Barikoff, using a very obsolete Russian oath, and then fell silent.

He looked suspiciously at the doctor. The doctor looked with equal suspicion at him.

"Friends? If I knew their friends they should have a short shrift and a long rope. If it were conceivable. . . ."

"The entirely damnable thing is that this Gifford has escaped, and no one knows how," said the doctor, meeting the glance resolutely. "What will you do with this man? Is it any use to shoot him? If so. . . ."

"Use? Are you a fool?" Barikoff was furious. "No, no. Didn't you hear what he said? Set him free and watch him. See whom he gets in touch with. See who helps him. Get him out of the place, or we shall have Weardale, who is a real danger; we shot for the sake of shooting at first, and were the devil's own fools for our pains. No, no. Track the dog every inch of his way.

It concerns me more at this moment to know who are the traitors among us than even to trace the Junwar plot. Who is Rao Singh? We must know. We must warn Junwar. Will this man remember anything he has said when he wakes?"

"Nothing. I'll wake him now. First you tell him he's to wake."

"Wake, it's over. Wake!" said Barikoff in a tone of command.

Seton's eyelids did not move.

"I tell you—Wake!"

Still he lay immovable.

"Sometimes it affects the heart," said the doctor. "Hold hard, I'll try this. But first—do you want the ring again?"

"Not I. While he wears it we can affect him even at a distance. Ibn ul Farid said so. We may want him yet."

The doctor opened his little medicine case and broke a capsule of nitrate of amyl under Seton's nose. The pungent smell brought the blood rushing to his face and his eyelids flickered, opened feebly, closed, opened again on Barikoff.

"You sent me to sleep," he said feebly. "A heavenly rest. My head's better already. You gentlemen are not perhaps quite so black as you're painted."

"We could scarcely be as black as that," Barikoff replied, with a laugh that attempted *bonhomie* rather unsuccessfully. "But I hope you will sleep well to-night. You have a long journey before you to-morrow."

"A journey? Where? Are you going to shoot me?"

"No—why should we? I do assure you we are not devils incarnate. You can do us no harm and there's no object in shooting you. Indeed, we respect your courage in refusing to betray your secret."

He showed wolf's teeth as he smiled amiably. Seton thanked him gravely and briefly.

"Show the gentleman where he is to sleep, Doctor."

And as the doctor left the room with Seton behind him, Barikoff said under his breath, "I always distrusted that devil, the doctor. He was Orsinoff's creature. I dare swear he's one of those in the British pay, and a doctor has a lot in his power. A pinch of stuff in a man's food, and pouff!—the thing's, done. I'll have him watched night and day."

Precisely the reflection passing through the doctor's mind as he led Seton away, talking with the utmost courtesy. And Seton, half an hour later, lying in a comfortable European bed, said to himself in the dark:

"Not a bad inspiration on the spur of the moment! Gifford would have liked it, I think. They'll have some trouble in finding Rao Singh—can't think how the name came into my head. And Weardale—Conway used to rag me about being an imaginative fellow, but it comes in useful sometimes. And if they shoot me to-morrow, at least I've set them by the ears. I wish to God I could have understood what they said to each other! That was the only blot—but a man can't have everything in this world."

He turned on his side and slept the sleep of the just.

Thus it befell that next morning Seton, on a good horse, and a safe-conduct in his pocket, was passed out at the Sikanderbagh Gate, with the world before him where to choose. He said incidentally that he inclined to make for Kashmir, and parted, quite pleasantly, with Barikoff, who, begging him to observe that Russians were much the same as other men when it came to human feeling, returned to keep an eye on the doctor in return for the doctor's eye on him, and to detail a spy to look after Seton. And the incident thus closed pleasantly and profitably for all concerned.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIX weeks went by, and nearly all India was aflame. Kashmir and one or two other states were unseduced by the Russian lure, and to a man the princes themselves were loyal, in spite of terrible sufferings and dangers. In the south one great state was pulling itself together shamefacedly after its debauch of Russian thought and action and its ruler had been entreated to return. This formed a rallying point for the British. But frightful, unforgettable things had been done there and elsewhere under Russian inspiration, the people themselves having suffered worst of all for their misplaced trust. And the sky was black with thunder.

Venetia, in Srinagar, heard the news from the Resident, a very old family friend—such news as he judged well to tell. Much it was as well to keep from women's ears. He came there each day with his gazette of selections.

"Colonel Gifford is the hero of the Secret Service," he announced, sitting in the comfortable cabin of the houseboat *Dilkushar*, which the sisters had rented. "He brought them priceless news from Mianpur, where most of the Russian bigwigs concentrated. But his escape was the record for all time."

"How did he do it?" Sara asked eagerly. "Can it be told?"

"Certainly, for it's the kind of thing that might always be repeated by the right man. He followed the plan by which Burton made his famous journey to Mecca. He became a Pathan from Rahmat Ullah, skilled in medicine. His friends in Mianpur dyed his hair and stained his face, and the rest was easy. He knows every trick, every turn of the lingo, and was doctoring the Russian soldiers all along the route and made his way into Chester's camp at Diglao, simply chock-full of information. You know him, Miss Grant. Is it true that he has an air that is childlike and bland? They say he looks like an especially frank schoolboy."

"I should think so! I don't—I won't believe he's a Secret Service man!" cried Sara. "There's nothing secret or tricky about Colonel Gifford. Don't ask me to believe it. He was a man without guile."

"I don't know about guile, but he certainly had friends all over Mianpur, and even in the Lake Palace."

A pause, and Mr. Deeping added:

"I wish the other man had been like him. That was a bad business."

"You mean Mr. Seton?" Venetia asked quietly.

"Yes; that's a sad story."

"I haven't heard it. May I hear?"

Sara made a frantic sign to him, which, man-like, he never noticed, "Yes. The Russians either forced or beguiled him into betraying some of our secrets—something very important, which may alter the whole turn of events. They say Gifford turned as white as a sheet when he heard they were boasting that Seton had given the show away. It may even incline the balance against us. The beautiful Begam was the bait, they say. Anyhow, he's betrayed his salt, though no one yet knows what he revealed."

She turned and walked out of the cabin, her throat very stately and erect. Sara rounded instantly upon the Resident.

"She was engaged to him. Surely even a child could have seen I was trying to make you stop."

He stared at her, utterly abashed.

"The blithering ass that I am! But why didn't you tell me?" he cried. "Engaged to that miserable creature! I don't believe it even now."

"If I know Venetia, she won't be engaged to him long! I wish she never had seen him. I was very fond of him, I own, but if this is true, the sooner she forgets him the better."

The Resident was silent, and Sara added mournfully, "The worst of it is, she doesn't forget. Things go so dreadfully deep with her."

"She is young," Mr. Deeping said consolingly; "and there's something in that kind of treachery that turns one a bit sick. It should revolt any woman. I should rub it in about the Begam, Miss Grant. I should, indeed. No woman could forgive that, even if she could pardon the other. I'll let you know all I hear."

And now the night of grief closed down on Venetia. Sara, every one about her, believed that Seton was a renegade. Human reason protested it. Faith must borrow eagle wings to soar through and above the thick atmosphere. For he was utterly lost to sight. There was no breath, no word or sign of communication—had been none since the day their boat left the palace. And though death or imprisonment might have accounted for his silence in nobler ways, that could hardly be when their own friends in Mianpur reported that he had been closeted with Barikoff, had been seen walking unmolested in the city, and finally riding out, well attended, on his way to Sellore, whence he had returned, they said, to the Lake Palace and the company of Shirin Begam.

Such stories grow, and this assumed terrible proportions. He had adopted the faith of Islam. He had been seen in native dress as an officer with the troops. He had enriched himself with the plunder of the Amir's treasury. And as many Europeans, fleeing northward, took refuge in Srinagar, the town, both native and European, was an exchange for the most circumstantial rumours in the Peninsula. Therefore, though her faith remained a pure and perfect chrysolite, she suffered infernal agonies, and in ways people could scarcely be expected to protect. Sara could not restrain her contempt for the renegade and felt it almost a duty to express it, since it might seal his doom with Venetia—if such a thing as wavering could be imagined. She ventured on the subject two days after Deeping's comments.

"Venetia, I know how you must suffer in hearing these terrible things. I can hardly endure it myself, and what must it be for you! A man we loved and trusted. . . ."

Venetia, with quiet hands laid in her lap, looked up at her.

"You can never have loved him, Sara, if you believe these horrors."

"Do you mean that you don't? When Colonel Joyce—when Mr. Deeping—when Captain Leigh, who was almost *in* Sellore—all say— Oh, Venetia, surely, surely. . . ."

"I believe not one word of it."

"You accuse them of falsehood? Your own countrymen—honourable men? You must be mad!"

"I know they believe what they have heard. I don't. That is the difference."

"But they have grounds for their belief. You. . . ."

"I have stronger grounds for my belief."

"Simply that you loved him! Love is blind, but I never could have imaged that. . . ."

"Love is the clearest-sighted thing in all the world. Listen, Sara—would you believe that I could do a base, lying, cowardly thing? Would you ever believe that?"

Sara made a feeble gesture with her hands.

"No, no. But then I've known you always. I know you to the bone. We've only known him a few poor months—it takes years to understand a man's character. I know he must have been in frightful straits. I pity almost as much as blame him. But there it is."

There was silence. Venetia, sitting by the cabin window, looking out upon the swiftly gliding river, crystal pure from the deep springs in the mountains, turbid from the long journey through the soilure of human life, to be purified again in the infinite bosom of the eternal sea. So illusions fall thick about the soul and cloud its transparence until, resumed into the Infinite, pure with the pure, it finds its home at last.

It was impossible to combat Sara's belief, impossible to stem the torrent of opinion around her. It was therefore useless to speak. And why blame them? They thought they knew, and though she herself knew better, her assurance was based on things she could never make clear to them. So it must be endured, with the same courage as that with which Seton, somewhere out of sight, was enduring—unless, indeed, he were dead. But if he were, then she believed some sign, some sound from the invisible must have reached her.

Presently, looking up, she said, "Please try to let us go on as if nothing had happened. I can't speak of this. We'll wait, and I know one day you'll be glad as little was said as possible. Do this for me, dear."

Something in her face made Sara stoop and kiss her almost passionately. She never willingly alluded to the subject again, and shielded where it was possible, though she understood nothing of Venetia's real mind and thought she understood all, with the perfect miscomprehension that sometimes falls between people closely allied in blood and yet at planetary distances of spirit—distances that no unwinged love can bridge.

There were agonies to be endured also in ways people could scarcely be expected to understand. Mr. Deeping would come in with tales of courage and endurance in the beleaguered cities and lonely villages. His voice thrilled as he told of men, despairing of help, fighting to the end, shooting their women when no more could be done sooner than let them fall into the hands of the enemy, and then, at the last, turning their guns on themselves. He looked round eagerly for sympathy, Sara in tears, Venetia cold as stone. He began to dislike her—a girl who had no heart for her country's glories and sorrows. After all, a woman who could love a man like that beast Seton could have no high sense of what either men or women should be!

There was one day when he brought the story of a young Indian officer, a son of the great house of Gondwara, who had lost his life in a desperate *sortie*—an attempt to dynamite the Saranpore Gate of Sellore—a tale that rang like a trumpet call with all its pride and glory of heroism, which for the moment is failure, but shines like a star for ever and ever in the dimmed eyes of humanity.

"Of the men," Mr. Deeping read monotonously, "only two escaped, horribly wounded. The rest. . . ."

Venetia rose, looking straight before her, and walked out of the cabin. He stared in amazement after her, laying down his glasses and speaking not unkindly.

"Miss Grant, can it be possible—I scarcely like to hint at such a thing—but can it be possible that your sister's sympathies are with the enemy? Such extraordinary conduct surely. . . ."

"Oh, can't you see—can't you understand her? She's half dying of shame because he failed when others are so glorious. And now, this young prince—men of *all* nations do nobly, only he failed. Mr. Deeping, you have daughters of your own. Try to pity her a little; but for God's sake, never show your pity, for I think it would kill her."

She clasped her hands in despair, looking pleadingly at him. He shook his head gravely.

"It seems a very incomprehensible state of mind to me. Such a man is best forgotten. And indeed, my dear Miss Grant, I have spared her all I could. News reached me yesterday that all communication has ceased with Mianpur owing to Seton's defection, and that Colonel Gifford is compelled to risk his precious life again in going there to complete some necessary link in the chain."

"But perhaps he is dead. Let us pray that he may be," said Sara passionately. "You none of you seem to consider that possibility. He may have killed himself for shame."

"I wish we could think so. No, he was seen riding out of the Hathi Bagh Gate, with that scoundrel Barikoff bidding him a friendly farewell, evidently all on the best of terms."

"Has anything more come through?"

"Only that he showed Barikoff's safe-conduct to a party of men, one of whom was in our interest. That speaks for itself. The rumour goes that he's working with them now in Sellore. After all, Miss Grant, horrible as it is, such cases have been known before. Shall I continue my reading?"

"I think not to-day, please," Sara said faintly.

The thing would have sickened her, even apart from Venetia. As it was, she trembled at the very thought of Seton. Heroism and victory, the only things to lift the burden of those anxious days, were changed into terror for her now. She dreaded lest Venetia should hear anything, for all was leavened with pain, and to save her from it was impossible.

But for the time it alienated the sisters. It set a gulf between them which kind words could not cross. Venetia withdrew into herself, and what Sara mistook for shame was a very humanly wounded pride. And because that pride too was a lack of understanding, it darkened her own inward light, and she moved in a dark land of besieging pains and fears, though she never lost faith in the man she loved. She lost it in much else—in Sara's lifelong affection, in the attempted tenderness of friends, in her own courage. Night after night she shut herself in her cabin, imploring a word, a sign from the implacable darkness, and none came. The midnight sky was as iron above her, the stars followed their cruelly remote, transcendent law, the human love and sorrow seemed of as little consequence as the crossing of flies in the air. She paled and waned under the burden, shut herself away and endured proudly and repellently, closing all approaches.

It was worse when, a month later, came news so important that she must meet it wherever she went, since it was a triumph in every one's mouth. Mianpur had fallen—Mahmud Mirza was avenged.

"I think, Venetia, you had better go for a row in the shikara this morning," Sara said, quaking inwardly. "It is such a lovely day."

"Why should I go?"

"But—but. . . ." Then, desperately: "Mianpur is taken."

"Well, what of that?"

"I can't keep Mr. Deeping away. He has the news."

"Why should you?"

"I don't want you to hear."

"Why shouldn't I hear, like every one else? I don't understand you. Of course I shall stay!"

There was no more to be said. Mr. Deeping came with his budget, and Venetia received him coldly and courteously and then sat looking out of the window, her profile clear against the strong sunlight.

"The great significance of the fall of Mianpur is not only that it was the chief stronghold of the enemy, but that it was brought about by treachery among the Russian leaders. A man, a doctor, they say, betrayed their plans to our people. It is a confused story, but it appears Barikoff had some reason for suspecting this man, and intended to have him shot. The man did a bolt and gave himself up to Colonel Gifford, and the rest followed. He apparently suspected that Barikoff himself had already sold the pass! Not much honour among thieves in Mianpur, you see."

"Then have they got Barikoff?" Sara asked.

"Certainly. And that's the beginning of the end, I suppose, Ibn ul Farid being dead, he was the backbone of it all."

"And Shirin Begam?"

It was Venetia's voice, very quiet and cold.

"No. Her whereabouts is not known."

Mr. Deeping could never expand with Venetia. She chilled him in every nerve. Even now, she never turned her head his way.

"But," he went on to Sara, "the Maharaja of Junwar has done splendidly. It seems they had forced him to hold some nominal office in their army, and there he kept his eyes open. Barikoff sent him word from Mianpur that they had heard a man named Rao Singh was at the back of all the attempts against Mianpur. It appears that there is no such person, and the Maharaja knew it but tumbled to the idea at once, saw it was a blind for them and worked up a long story with all sorts of embellishments about the activities of Rao Singh, keeping them so busy on these false trails that our friends in Mianpur were able to get a good deal done under cover. I feel certain we shall hear all this invaluable work was run by Colonel Gifford. He knows Mianpur State like a book. There are splendid rewards in store for him, and well he deserves them all!"

"Well, indeed!" cried Sara. "I know Mianpur enough to know what it means, and it rejoices my heart to think that Mahmud and Mirza and the two queens are avenged. Will they shoot Barikoff?"

"They'll be fools if they don't!" Deeping said grimly.

In the silence that followed, Venetia spoke clearly.

"Was any trace found of Mr. Seton, when Mianpur was taken?"

"None at all. He had been seen leaving it long before."

She said not another word while he remained, and he noticed when he shook hands with her how coldly handsome she looked. It seemed as if the whole character of her face was changing. The sparkle, the life of it were gone. Perhaps for the first time some glimmer of pity and understanding entered his mind.

"He has fled with the woman," was Sara's thought.

And again the weeks went by, separating her from Venetia with words and looks almost imperceptible, but dividing as death. They were never alone together now if they could avoid it, and when they could not, the frontiers of both were guarded, and no messenger from either heart could

pass with true tidings. There were the courtesies of combat, or an armed neutrality, no more.

It was one day when Sara had gone with a party to the Peri Mahal, that Venetia was sitting alone in the cabin of the *Dilkushar*. She was doing nothing but thinking—she seldom did anything else now—for when she was alone the mask could be dropped, and she looked what she was—a woman in bitter trouble.

The relief of that relaxation was so enormous that sometimes she thought she should never be able to bear even Sara's companionship again, and that she must plan a life for herself where she could be alone in some beautiful place of quiet and endure her wounds in loneliness, like an animal that crawls stricken from its kind to suffer and die in peace. She looked away to the white line of the mountains, remote in peaceful skies where even the voices of shame and misery could not pierce, and a longing that was anguish filled her to climb to those pure heights and forget and be forgotten. These were the moments that kept her alive—and even Sara would not—could not understand, but pressed her always to distract her thoughts, to fill her days with little things and reconquer happiness. Grief is easier to bear than spiritual loneliness, but both together sap the very life.

And as she sat looking up to the great height of the Takht-i-Suleiman, sleeping in the silence of the everlasting hills, bathed in sunshine, looking down, from purer air upon the Happy Valley beneath it, a longing seized her to be lifted on wings to the blue height whence she herself could look down upon all the tangle and trouble, raised out of it, no longer a part of it, but freed, secure, gaining a true perspective, seeing it only a picture painted on dissolving mists, itself to dissolve in light.

The air about her began to thrill, to tremble, to vibrate, as though tuning itself to the music of an unseen harmony—not music, but rather the very meaning of music, which is one with light and colour. It flowed about her like water, separating and covering her with the limpid serenity of a most divine quiet. Her eyelids closed in an exquisite peace. It seemed that she slept only a few tranquil minutes, then awakened suddenly to the inexpressible weariness of her daily life. Too soon—too sadly! But—most strange—was it a dream, or truth? Had she climbed—had she moved, all unknowing—for the boat, the river, were gone. She sat on the steps of the little temple on the brow of the mighty hill, above her, the Throne of Solomon—the temple dedicated to the great God of the Himalayas, and called by the Hindus Shankarachara. It was a still and moonless night, rain falling about her like ceaseless weeping. That temple is so ancient that all

history of its first beginning is lost in the dust of time, and in grey and weather-beaten solitude it dominates the Happy Valley, ramparted with stainless snows. The unbeliever may not enter the little holy cell, but all must reverence the symbol of an age-old faith, holding in its heart the utmost spiritual wisdom that the soul of man has grasped in all the revolutions of time. And as she sat on the rock below the plinth, wearied as if she had climbed the height on bleeding feet, the never-opened door opened, and a figure stood within it, the figure of Jadrup Gosein, lit by a dim light from the cell behind him.

He looked down upon her with the tenderest sympathy.

"Your feet bleed, my daughter—your heart also—yet you have struggled up this height. That was well done."

She looked up, exhausted, and put out one hand faintly towards him. He came down the steps and bent over her.

"You must have shelter from the rain. Follow me into the temple."

She rose and stood bewildered.

"It is not allowed. That door is shut."

"The door stands open. What temple door was ever closed to need? Follow me, my daughter."

He turned and went slowly up the steps, and, trembling before the terror of some imminent revelation, she followed.

In the little grey cell the air was warm and still as in the heart of a bird's nest. There was a sense of brooding wings, of peace and protection. A small altar with flowers and holy vessels and the symbol of the god—no more—and Jadrup Gosein standing beside it. The sound of the rain outside falling gently, incessantly, resembled the sands of time dropping into the abyss of Eternity.

Presently, in a voice that seemed a part of the silence, he said slowly and as if in meditation, "My daughter, why have you forsaken the light?"

"It left me," she answered proudly.

"You know better. When did the light leave what is of its own essence? Even those who hate it, walk in glory if they would but open their eyes to see. From the feet of the murderer, the traitor, are scattered flakes of radiance, though they will not know. And you—how have you forgotten?"

Arraigned before a justice indisputable, she could only stammer, "They disbelieved what I knew, they distrusted, despised what is better than they. How could I forgive it?"

“And because you were wiser, and therefore happier than they, you withdrew yourself and your love from them and shut yourself into the darkness? Daughter of the Highest, you fell far.”

She trembled. There was a silence of infinite healing. The falling of the rain was full of lovely things: the stirring of seeds in spring, the mute growth of beauty to blossom in season. It seemed that her eyes were suddenly opened, and the sealed channels of her heart thawed in a warmth like spring.

“I fell far,” she repeated with sobbing breath, the tears overflowing her eyes. “Can I climb again, as I have climbed this hill?”

“It is a steeper way, my daughter. Human relations quiver on so fine a balance that once disturbed it may take more lives than one to readjust them. But you can climb—and hope. There are no wings for that journey. The wrong done is done, but to know it is to set one’s face to the ascent. And—the night is far spent. Behold the dawn.”

She saw the cresset on the altar dwindle and pale before the invading armies of a great light without. He moved slowly to the door, and with one majestic gesture flung it wide.

Oh, sight of wonder and bliss! The city slept below. From all its glittering waterways rose a silvery mist, veiling the houses, little and great, in a concealing beauty. It lay afloat on a sea of cloud, uplifted to the divinity of the encircling mountains with their pure pinnacles of snow, a thing more of heaven than earth, mystic, wonderful.

He stood on the aged, broken steps, looking down upon it, and she a step below him.

“It is beautiful indeed, my daughter, but more beautiful by far to him who has eyes to see. Behold!”

And as he spoke, the sun rose above the serrated line of the eastern mountains and the snows flushed into the glory of a great dawn. Rose or gold? What human eye could comprehend or tongue record that immense wave of flowing life and light? The rolling billows of glory broke upon the mountains and drowned them and the valley beneath in an ocean of divinest day. The mists, dissolving, floated down the river like empty garments of departing dark, and the city, revealed, lay sleeping and beautiful beneath the broad and generous sunlight of the risen dawn.

She turned, rejoicing, for sympathy. He was gone. The sheltering door of the temple was closed and only a faint scent of marigolds and incense was in the air. It drifted from her like a dream, and she woke in the little cabin, with

the gleaming river gliding in netted sunshine by the windows, in a gladness deeper than all the springs of speech.

CHAPTER XXXII

SARA'S first thought in the change was that Venetia, casting aside the past and her unworthy lover, had turned her face to life again with a resolute courage worthy of all honour. She could understand that mood and commend it, and did so, with a gently persistent miscomprehension deserving of a worse cause. But Venetia was impregnable. Content, unaffected, unrestrained, spoke in every look of her bright eyes, every note of her voice. It was Sara now who, when undeceived, found the matter too painful for discussion. What was it possible for her to reply when Venetia was so hopelessly confirmed in a perversity which to her mind brought disgrace upon them both? She felt it the more because her *rôle* had always been more that of mother than of sister and Venetia had deferred to her in trifles without a thought of resistance. It was hard to shut her heart against the lovingness which was the dearest thing in her life, but she achieved it outwardly, hoping, as so many hope, that harshness might be the sharp-toothed hound to drive the sheep back to the fold. It might have done, though it seldom succeeds, but that the sheep was shielded in another fold, where the pastures were free and the living water stilled to reflect the shining of a diviner light.

She needed the safeguard, for, as the news of her persistent loyalty spread, it gained her the reputation of disloyalty to the common cause. A woman who still considered herself engaged to a traitor, condoning, excusing the horrors of which he had been guilty—what was there to be said for her? That was a crime that even men could apprehend and condemn in a young and attractive woman, and, in spite of courageous efforts, she was at last forced to see they would have none of her.

She caught Sara alone one day and offered to go on a camping expedition by herself in the mountains.

"I think I need a change," she said wistfully, "and it would be much, much easier for you, Sara. Every day I see how hard it is, and how bravely you bear it. Let me go."

Sara burst into tears. It was very unlike her, but she was frayed, irritated, wearied at every turn, for every arrival of news brought the same miserable friction, and the pity she received on all hands fostered her belief in her own rectitude and certainties.

"Oh, Venetia," she sobbed, "*can't* you change? Can't you give it up? It puts us in such a frightful position. It is like having to do with Germans during the war. It stamps you—ruins you."

A long silence. At last——

"Sara—let me go. You can't understand, nor I explain. If I could love a man capable of what you believe, I should be all you think. But I don't. Let me go. It's the only way. You and I have loved each other so many years, and this is hurting it. It's too precious to be hurt. You'll think of me more kindly when I'm away."

Sara wept and protested and wasted herself in entreaties, but in her heart she knew it was best. They had come to the parting of the ways—they would meet again, but not now. So a little houseboat was chosen, and the faithful ayah, Jamala, who had rejoined them in Kashmir, with the man who had served them from Venetia's birth, elected to follow her fortunes. They loved Sara, but Venetia they adored, and, since the story of Seton Sahib had percolated through the bazaars, they also knew it and were prepared to die in defence of his honour. What!—the Presence—the Sahib, *he* join with defiled beef-eating Moslems? They knew better! And their belief was a little earthly light among the great stars that lit her way.

The *Roshanara* had dropped down to Gunderbal and lay there at rest in solitude, for the concentration of news at Srinagar made a great concourse of Europeans there. It was at Gunderbal, among the trees, under the shadow of the mighty hills, that Venetia first tasted the healing of outward peace. She rode, attended by one silent syce, she walked, while he followed at her heels, dutifully within reach of call, no more. She read in the quiet evenings in the lonely cabin, or lost herself in thoughts more sweet—and she knew that daily her inner self strengthened and grew. Sara wrote tenderly and expressed no wish for her return, and never made the faintest allusion to news from India. It was a time of great peace—a time like autumn, when the earth, laying aside her loveliness petal by petal, leaf by leaf, prepares herself for the tranquil sleep of winter, the hope of spring in her bosom. She had begun to believe that Seton was dead on the field of honour. That might well be, and if so, she knew what her course would be. India—and the work for which her meditations had fitted her.

So she sat one evening by the window, watching the evening star trembling in the water outside, broken in the gentle swaying of tall reeds. A night bird cried in the shadows. Softly from the distance came the splash of approaching paddles—the leaf-shaped paddles of Kashmir. A light shikara was gliding up the waterway.

She rose and began to arrange her books and writing for the night. There was the soft splash of oars outside, and a voice that spoke to Ramdas. No—no, it could not be! She started up, with one hand instinctively to her heart, pale with joy—the other leaning on the table gripping the paper she had tried to read, and waited—waited!

"The Miss Sahib is here?" the voice said, and steps came along the little passage.

He came in.

His arms were stretched out, he made a wild step towards her, his face all broken up into light and hope and quivering joy.

"Venetia! Darling! The tree!—I've got through at last!"

She sprang forward, radiant, rejoicing, and even as she touched him, he collapsed, staggering against a chair and slipping down to the floor. In her utter joy she had not seen how worn, how ill he looked, with a great seamed scar that crossed his forehead, his clothes worn and almost in rags, a pitiable figure. It was he—that was enough. Then, suddenly, she saw, and as when a freshet tears through the barrier of ice in spring and grinds it to fragments and sweeps it wildly away, terror and pity burst up in her heart. She threw herself on the miserable heap that lay there, the mere wreck of a man, and the tears rushed from her eyes in torrents as she clasped her arms about him.

"I love you, I would die for you! I care only for that. We'll go away together from all their cruelty and forget it all. Oh, look up and love me, my dear, my very dear! You are well—you're only tired, exhausted, and no wonder. Oh, look up—look up! I'm with you, my own dear heart."

Is it needful to write the end of the story? Love is enough. But there are things that must be understood. He had gone through so much.

The boat was hurried back to Srinagar with a doctor on board, summoned in haste, but life ebbed very low, and for many days it seemed that the tide surging from the boundless ocean was drawing back to it once more in the peace of a deep unconsciousness. Gifford had arrived in Srinagar by the Pir Panjal route the day after Seton came in by Baramula, and he was charged with news which dissipated the flying rumours once and for all. At last the whole gallant story could be told, while the hero of it lay in the dark no man's land between life and death, unknowing even that Venetia was with him, forgetting all alike in the silence of the great Presences who make clear the way for the Lords of Life and Death.

Gifford told the story first to Venetia, rising on a wind of wrath and scorn as he told it, scorn of the men and women who had been willing to believe the worst of a man who had no voice with which to defend himself. She listened in a deep delight, the joy of faith lost in sight, of hope exalted into victory. It was known and told, partly from Barikoff's revelations before they shot him, partly from the reports of the faithful few in Mianpur, who knew the whole story as they knew everything that went on in the Palace. But there was more. Of the little group led by Gulbadan's cousin, the young Prince of Gondwara—those who had tried to dynamite the Sellore Gate—Seton was one. He and another were the only survivors, and the scar across his forehead would be the witness of it while he lived.

"We owe Mianpur entirely to him," Gifford said in his quiet way. "His dealing with Barikoff was an inspiration, for, once the Russian leaders suspected treachery among themselves, the game was up. I should never have thought of that. And then his work at Sellore—not to mention the blowing up of the gate with that splendid young Gondwara! Nothing's good enough for Seton. I bless the day we met at Mianpur. Not only that, but his dealings with the Maharaja of Junwar and the whole counter-plot were masterly. I can carry a web of intrigue through as well as most men. I can't see ahead and plan like that. And he did it alone—alone, without one of us to help him, his life in his hand night and day for months."

His audience, when he spread this abroad, had the grace to be ashamed. The usual excuses were made:

"After all, what could we think? It was as circumstantial as could be. We even heard you had corroborated it. . . ."

"I may be a fool, but not such a fool as that," Gifford said coolly. "No, gentlemen, you made a bad break in Seton's business. Have the grace to admit it. And moreover he heard it all as he came up country. If he dies. . . ."

They turned away, silent.

There were moments when Sara felt she could never forgive herself, but Venetia would hear no word of forgiveness.

"We love each other. We always did. Forget it, Sara. I am so happy that it's all lost in sunshine, whether he lives or dies."

"If he dies, I shall never have the courage to see you again," Sara said, sobbing.

"And break my heart? Oh, Sara, no. I should want you more than ever then. Kiss me—I can't do without you for one second. Come now and help me. Come."

But how could Seton die with such love about him? Sara fought for his life if possible more passionately than Venetia, and, fighting together night and day, they won their victory.

One day, when he was lying languidly on deck in the shade of a big canvas, Venetia sitting where a stray sunbeam touched the bronze of her hair to gold, Gifford came up the steps. They had been married a week before, by the English chaplain at Srinagar—a dawn of new life and hope, though both bore tragic traces of suffering still. Gifford looked at them kindly as he pulled up the chair he always sat in.

"You're pounds better to-day. It won't be long before you're off to the mountains for your honeymoon, you two. Mrs. Seton, I shall take you for a pull presently—you never leave him."

"I don't want to," she said, her lip trembling.

"But you must. Now, wait a minute and then get your hat. I've a bit of news."

"Good or bad?" she asked with instinctive terror.

"Good. Listen, Seton. Shirin Begam is dead."

He started up half sitting and fell back again.

"Yes. It appears she had been hidden in a house in Mianpur, a house belonging to that old villain, Srinavastri. His women gave her shelter. Rumours got about, however, and our people searched the place. She must have got wind of it, for when they entered the room, she was sitting in a great chair, stone dead. It is said she had poisoned herself. Now, it's a curious thing—of course you remember the prophecy?—that it should be just four years since she first appeared in Russia and began her mischiefs."

"Do you think," Venetia asked earnestly, "that there was any truth in that theory of reincarnation, or was it all fraud? Did she believe it all herself, or were they more than they knew?"

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows the secrets of the Lords of Life and Death? The Orient believes such things with unquestioning faith, and what is our knowledge compared with theirs? If she and her brother used it as fraud, even believed it all their own fabrication, still it may have been true. There are truths beyond what we ourselves know, and they make us their puppets. But if it was all a fake, she knew the game was played out; and if she had any belief in herself, she knew from the prophecy that four years were her allotted span, and that was out too. The truth is probably quite independent of what they believed, and it is utterly beyond our ken. I have lived too long in India

to deny the improbable flatly. I simply don't know. What do you think, Seton?"

"It's beyond me," said Seton.

That was always his answer. True, Revel and she, plotters all through, might only have seized the prophecy and used it villainously among a superstitious people for vile ends. They were capable of that and more. But if the tree falls as it lies, might not the evil spirits of ancient days come back armed with evil, even as the prophecy had foretold? There were things he never could account for, even to himself, incredible, mysterious, to be felt rather than known, that made him doubt. Life and death—who knows their secret cycles? He had learnt to believe that the soul of man obeys the law of stars, going and returning in a mysterious orbit, unknown to the wanderer himself until a higher enlightenment is reached at last. And therefore those miserable souls might have been working out the doom they had themselves imposed on ancient Egypt, before passing on to the next act of their age-long drama, and this all unknown to their blindness. Terrible is the law to the evil-doer—the law of which he is at once the judge and the victim. But she was so beautiful. Had she loved him a little? Were their lives still to touch in some dim future? Should he think of her again as he had thought when he saw her, coldly beautiful and apart in the tomb, when she stirred his blood into fever? He remembered the passion of desire that followed his strange illness in the desert. Dead—dead. Lying in grey ash. Would this or another life revive it, or was it dead for ever? In dreams he believed he should see her sitting there again in the thick darkness, waiting—for whom? "Thou endest the night." And the night had closed about her once more—impenetrable. What was true and what false? Oh, for the wisdom of Jadrup Gosein to answer the unanswerable!

He closed his eyes wearily. At present oblivion was the greatest good. Later he could think.

"You'll be glad to see Conway when he turns up. And it's good news that the Egyptian Government will share your finds with the British Museum. What with all that, and the coming decoration, you'll be a bit of a hero, old man! Now, come along with me, Mrs. Seton."

Venetia lingered a moment. She said with a shiver, as of sudden cold, "I think the Arabs are right. I think those old tombs of dead dreadful things should never be opened. Let the dead bury their dead."

The flames subsided. The fire died out in India and left desolation behind and a sad quiet. The sullen tide of the Russian armies rolled back, shattered, among the terrible mountain passes, and the peace of the world was secure for a decade, if no more. Had they learned their lesson? The question was beyond even the wiseacres of the daily press. It lay on the knees of the gods.

But in the green uplifted quiet of the Himalayan heights, with the stark and steadfast pines about them, Seton completed the one lesson of life worth learning. And he owed it to a man of the ancient Aryan people, who knew not where his next meal would come from if not from the hand of charity. He had learnt the possibility of touching hands with the Divine Consciousness which man carries with him from birth to birth. And whoso has learnt that secret is invulnerable. All darts fly past him, all swords are blunted.

As he sat one day by the tent opening, his feet deep in moss, a mountain stream, clear as broken diamonds, running beside him with its singing message from the heights of snow outsoaring the clouds, he saw a man making his way up the small winding trail from the rushing river—a man with a cotton dhoti wrapped about him, a thin coat of cotton to shield his breast from the mountain breezes, his feet bare—no poverty could be poorer. But his eyes were aflame with the joy of the mystic, who, seeing through all illusion, beholds the hidden heart of peace. He stopped, salaaming before the Sahib.

"Presence, I bring a word from the Holy One. Is it your pleasure to hear?"

Seton rose, as to a king's messenger. There was a moment's silence, filled by the crystal rippling of the stream, while the man collected himself to speak.

"This is the word of the Holy One to the Presence. 'My son, for him who has found the real self within him, desire fades away and temptation is no more temptation, but becomes even as a shadow effaced by the glory of the noonday sun. And the Wise Ones will aid him as it is needful, for when the disciple is ready, the Master appears, and when the next link of the chain is wanted, lo, suddenly it is at hand. Free is that man who has laid aside illusion. And in the light of life and death is none other freedom.' "

The voice ceased, and salaaming humbly, the man turned to depart. With an effort, Seton delayed him.

"You return to the Holy One?"

“I see him no more. I go on my way to the shrine of the Great God in the mountains. Hari—Aum—Hari!”

He understood, and, moving aside, watched as the steadfast figure parted the pine boughs and without a look earthward, took the way to the eternal snows.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Way of Stars* by Elizabeth Louisa Moresby (as L. Adams Beck)]