

DUNCAN SARA JEANNETTE

HIS HONOUR, AND A LADY

Sara Duncan

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«Public Domain»

Duncan S.

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CHAPTER I

“The Sahib *walks!*” said Ram Prasannad, who dusted the office books and papers, to Bundal Singh the messenger, who wore a long red coat with a badge of office, and went about the business of the Queen-Empress on his two lean brown legs.

“What talk is that?” Bundal Singh shifted his betel quid to the other cheek and lunged upon his feet. This in itself was something. When one sits habitually upon one’s heels the process of getting up is not undertaken lightly. The men looked out together between the whitewashed stucco pillars of the long verandah that interposed between the Commissioner’s clerks and the glare and publicity of the outer world of Hassimabad. Overhead, in a pipal tree that threw sharp-cut patterns of its heart-shaped leaves about their feet, a crow stretched its grey-black throat in strenuous caws, since it was ten o’clock in the morning and there was no reason to keep silence. Farther away a chorus of other crows smote the sunlight, and from the direction of the bazar came a murmur of the life there, borne higher now and then in the wailing voice of some hawker of sweetmeats. Nevertheless there was a boundless stillness, a stillness that might have been commanded. The prodigal sun intensified it, and the trees stood in it, a red and dusty road wound through it, and the figure of a man, walking quickly down the road, seemed to be a concentration of it.

“That signifies,” continued Ram Prasannad, without emotion, “news that is either very good or very bad. The Government *lât* had but arrived, the sahib opened one letter only – which is now with him – and in a breath he was gone, walking, though the horse was still fast between the shafts. Myself, I think the news is good, for my cousin – he is a writing baboo in the Home Office, dost thou understand, thou, runner of errands! – has sent word to me that the sahib is much in favour with the *Burra Lat*, and that it would be well to be faithful to him.”

“I will go swiftly after with an umbrella, and from his countenance it will appear,” remarked Bundal Singh; “and look thou, worthy one, if that son of mud, Lal Beg, the grain dealer, comes again in my absence to try to make petition to the sahib, and brings a pice less than one rupee to me, do thou refuse him admission.”

Bundal Singh ran after his master, as he said. As John Church walked rapidly, and the habitual pace of a Queen’s messenger in red and gold is a dignified walk, the umbrella was tendered with a devoted loss of wind.

“It may be that your honour will take harm from the sun,” Bundal Singh suggested, with the privilege all the Commissioner’s people felt permitted to use. The Commissioner liked it – could be depended upon to appreciate any little savour of personal devotion to him, even if it took the form of a liberty. He had not a servant who was unaware of this or failed to presume upon it, in his place and degree. This one got a nod of acknowledgment as his master took the opened umbrella, and observed, as he fell behind, that the sahib was too much preoccupied to carry it straight. He went meditatively back to Ram Prasannad in the verandah, who said, “Well?”

“Simply it does not appear. The sahib’s forehead had twenty wrinkles, and his mind was a thousand miles hence. Yet it was as if he had lately smiled and would smile again. What will be, will be. Lal Beg has not been here?”

John Church walked steadily on, with his near-sighted eyes fixed always upon the wide space of sunlit road, its red dust thick-printed with bare feet and hoofs, that lay in front of him – seeing nothing, literally, but the way home. He met no one who knew him except people from the bazar, who regarded their vizier with serious wonder as they salaamed, the men who sat upon low bamboo carts and urged,

hand upon flank, the peaceful-eyed cattle yoked to them, turning to stare as they jogged indolently past. A brown pariah, curled up in the middle of the road, lifted his long snout in lazy apology as Church stepped round him, trusting the sense that told him it would not be necessary to get out of the way. As he passed the last low wall, mossy and discoloured, that divided its brilliantly tangled garden from the highway, and turned in at its own gate, he caught himself out of his abstraction and threw up his head. He entered his wife's drawing-room considerably, and a ray of light, slipping through the curtains and past the azaleas and across the cool duskness of the place, fell on his spectacles and exaggerated the triumph in his face.

The lady, who sat at the other end of the room writing, rose as her husband came into it, and stepped forward softly to meet him. If you had known her you would have noticed a slight elation in her step that was not usual, and made it more graceful, if anything, than it commonly was.

"I think I know what you have come to tell me," she said. Her voice matched her personality so perfectly that it might have suggested her, to a few people, in her darkened drawing-room, as its perfume would betray some sweet-smelling thing in the evening. Not to John Church. "I think I know," she said, as he hesitated for words that would not show extravagant or undignified gratification. "But tell me yourself. It will be a pleasure."

"That Sir Griffiths Spence goes on eighteen months' sick leave, and – "

"And that you are appointed to officiate for him. Yes."

"Somebody has written?"

"Yes – Mr. Ancram."

His wife had come close to him, and he noticed that she was holding out her hands in her impulse of congratulation. He took one of them – it was all he felt the occasion required – and shook it lamely. She dropped the other with a little quick turn of her head and a dash of amusement at her own expense in the gentle gravity of her expression. "Do sit down," she said, almost as if he had been a visitor, "and tell me all about it." She dragged a comfortable chair forward out of its relation with a Burmese carved table, some pots of ferns and a screen, and sat down herself opposite, leaning forward in a little pose of expectancy. Church placed himself on the edge of it, grasping his hat with both hands between his knees.

"I must apologise for my boots," he said, looking down: "I walked over. I am very dusty."

"What does it matter? You are King of Bengal!"

"Acting King."

"It is the same thing – or it will be. Sir Griffiths retires altogether in two years – Lord Scansleigh evidently intends you to succeed him." The lady spoke with obvious repression, but her gray eyes and the warm whiteness of her oval face seemed to have caught into themselves all the light and shadow of the room.

"Perhaps – perhaps. You always invest in the future at a premium, Judith. I don't intend to think about that."

Such an anticipation, based on his own worth, seemed to him unwarrantable, almost indecent.

"I do," she said, wilfully ignoring the clouding of his face. "There is so much to think about. First the pay – almost ten thousand rupees a month – and we are poor. It may be a material consideration, but I don't mind confessing that the prospect of never having to cut the khansamah appeals to me. We shall have a palace and a park to live in, with a guard at the gates, and two outriders with swords to follow our carriage. We shall live in Calcutta, where there are trams and theatres and shops and people. The place carries knighthood if you are confirmed in it, and you will be Sir John Church – that gratifies the snob that is latent in me because I am a woman, John." (She paused and glanced at his face, which had grown almost morose.) "Best of all," she added lightly, "as Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal you will be practically sole ruler of eighty millions of people. You will be free to carry out your own theories, and to undertake reforms – any number of reforms! Mr. Ancram says," she went on, after a moment's hesitation, "that the man and the opportunity have come together."

John Church blushed, through his beard which was gray, and over the top of his head which was bald, but his look lightened.

“Ancram will be one of my secretaries,” he said. “Does he speak at all – does he mention the way it has been taken in Calcutta?”

Mrs. Church went to her writing-table and came back with the letter. It was luxuriously written, in a rapid hand as full of curves and angles as a woman’s, and covered, from “Dear Lady” to “Always yours sincerely,” several broad-margined sheets.

“I think he does,” she said, deliberately searching the pages. “Yes: ‘Church was not thought precisely in the running – you are so remote in Hassimabad, and his work has always been so unostentatious – and there was some surprise when the news came, but no cavil. It is known that the Viceroy has been looking almost with tears for a man who would be strong enough to redeem a few of Sir Griffiths’ mistakes if possible while he is away – he has been, as you know, ludicrously weak with the natives – and Church’s handling of that religious uproar you had a year ago has not been forgotten. I need not expatiate upon the pleasure your friends feel, but it may gratify you to know that the official mob is less ready with criticism of His Excellency’s choice than usual.”

John Church listened with the look of putting his satisfaction under constraint. He listened in the official manner, as one who has many things to hear, with his head bent forward and toward his wife, and his eyes consideringly upon the floor.

“I am glad of that,” he said nervously when she had finished – “I am glad of that. There is a great deal to be done in Bengal, and matters will be simplified if they recognise it.”

“I think you would find a great deal to do anywhere, John,” remarked Mrs. Church. It could almost be said that she spoke kindly, and a sensitive observer with a proper estimate of her husband might have found this irritating. During the little while that followed, however, as they talked, in the warmth of this unexpected gratification, of what his work had been as a Commissioner, and what it might be as a Lieutenant-Governor, it would have been evident even to an observer who was not sensitive, that here they touched a high-water mark of their intercourse, a climax in the cordiality of their mutual understanding.

“By the way,” said John Church, getting up to go, “when is Ancram to be married?”

“I don’t know!” Mrs. Church threw some interest into the words. Her inflection said that she was surprised that she didn’t know. “He only mentions Miss Daye to call her a ‘study in femininity,’ which looks as if he might be submitting to a protracted process of education at her hands. Certainly not soon, I should think.”

“Ancram must be close on forty, with good pay, good position, good prospects. He shouldn’t put it off any longer: a man has no business to grow old alone in this country. He deteriorates.”

Church pulled himself together with a shake – he was a loose-hung creature – and put a nervous hand up to his necktie. Then he pulled down his cuffs, considered his hat with the effect of making quite sure that there was nothing more to say, and turned to go.

“You might send me over something,” he said, glancing at his watch. “I won’t be able to come back to breakfast. Already I’ve lost three-quarters of an hour from work. Government doesn’t pay me for that. You are pleased, then?” he added, looking round at her in a half shamefaced way from the door.

Mrs. Church had returned to the writing-table, and had again taken up her pen. She leaned back in her chair and lifted her delicate chin with a smile that had custom and patience in it.

“Very pleased indeed,” she said; and he went away. The intelligent observer, again, would have wondered how he refrained from going back and kissing her. Perhaps the custom and the patience in her smile would have lent themselves to the explanation. At all events, he went away.

He was forty-two, exactly double her age, when he married Judith Strange, eight years before, in Stoneborough, a small manufacturing town in the north of England, where her father was a Nonconformist minister. He was her opportunity, and she had taken him, with private congratulation

that she could respect him and private qualms as to whether her respect was her crucial test of him – considered in the light of an opportunity. Not in any sordid sense; she would be more inclined perhaps to apologise for herself than I am to apologise for her. But with an inordinately hungry capacity for life she had the narrowest conditions to live in. She knew by intuition that the world was full of colour and passion, and when one is tormented with this sort of knowledge it becomes more than ever grievous to inhabit one of its small, dull, grimy blind alleys, with the single anticipation of enduring to a smoke-blackened old age, like one of Stoneborough’s lesser chimneys. There was nothing ideal about John Church except his honesty, – already he stooped, already he was grey, sallow and serious, with the slenderest interest in questions that could not express their utility in unquestionable facts, – but when he asked her to marry him, the wall at the end of the alley fell down, and a breeze stole in from the far East, with a vision of palms and pomegranates. She accepted him for the sake of her imagination, wishing profoundly that he was not so much like her father, with what her mother thought almost improper promptitude; and for a long time, although he still stood outside it, her imagination loyally rewarded her. She felt the East to her fingertips, and her mere physical life there became a thing of vivid experience, to be valued for itself. If her husband confounded this joy in her expansion with the orthodox happiness of a devoted wife, it cannot be said that he was particularly to blame for his mistake, for numbers of other people made it also. And when, after eight years of his companionship, and that of the sunburned policeman, the anæmic magistrate, the agreeable doctor, their wives, the odd colonel, and the stray subalterns that constituted society in the stations they lived in, she began to show a little lassitude of spirit, he put it down not unnaturally to the climate, and wished he could conscientiously take a few months’ leave, since nothing would induce her to go to England without him. By this time India had become a resource, India that lay all about her, glowing, profuse, mysterious, fascinating, a place in which she felt that she had no part, could never have any part, but that of a spectator. The gesture of a fakir, the red masses of the gold-mohur trees against the blue intensity of the sky, the heavy sweetness of the evening wind, the soft colour and curves of the homeward driven cattle, the little naked babies with their jingling anklets in the bazar – she had begun to turn to these things seeking their gift of pleasure jealously, consciously thankful that, in spite of the Amusement Club, she could never be altogether bored.

John Church went back to work with his satisfaction sweetened by the fact that his wife had told him that she was very pleased indeed, while Mrs. Church answered the Honourable Mr. Lewis Ancram’s letter.

“I have been making my own acquaintance this morning,” she said among other things, “as an ambitious woman. It is intoxicating, after this idle, sun-filled, wondering life, with the single supreme care that John does not wear ragged collars to church – as a Commissioner he ought to be extravagant in collars – to be confronted with something to assume and carry out, a part to play, with all India looking on. Don’t imagine a lofty intention on my part to inspire my husband’s Resolutions. I assure you I see myself differently. Perhaps, after all, it is the foolish anticipation of my state and splendour that has excited my vain imagination as much as anything. Already, prospectively, I murmur lame nothings into the ear of the Viceroy as he takes me down to dinner! But I am preposterously delighted. To-morrow is Sunday – I have an irreverent desire for the prayers of all the churches.”

CHAPTER II

“Here you are at last!” remarked Mrs. Daye with vivacity, taking the three long, pronounced and rustling steps which she took so very well, toward the last comer to her dinner party, who made his leisurely entrance between the *portières*, pocketing his handkerchief. “Don’t say you have been to church,” she went on, holding out a condoning hand, “for none of us will believe you.”

Although Mr. Ancram’s lips curved back over his rather prominent teeth in a narrow smile as he put up his eyeglass and looked down at his hostess, Mrs. Daye felt the levity fade out of her expression: she had to put compulsion on herself to keep it in her face. It was as if she, his prospective mother-in-law, had taken the least of liberties with Mr. Ancram.

“Does the only road to forgiveness lie through the church gate?” he asked. His voice was high and agreeable; it expressed discrimination; his tone implied that, if the occasion had required it, he could have said something much cleverer easily – an implication no one who knew him would have found unwarrantable.

“The padres say it does, as a rule, Ancram,” put in Colonel Daye. “In this case it lies through the dining-room door. Will you take my wife in?”

In a corner of the room, which she might have chosen for its warm obscurity, Rhoda Daye watched with curious scrutiny the lightest detail of Mr. Lewis Ancram’s behaviour. An elderly gentleman, with pulpy red cheeks and an amplitude of white waistcoat, stood beside her chair, swaying out of the perpendicular with well-bred rigidity now and then, in tentative efforts at conversation; to which she replied, “Really?” and “Yes, I know,” while her eyes fixed themselves upon Ancram’s face, and her little white features gleamed immobile under the halo which the tall lamp behind her made with her fuzz of light-brown hair. “Mother’s respect for him is simply outrageous,” she reflected, as she assured the elderly gentleman that even for Calcutta the heat was really extraordinary, considering that they were in December. “I wonder – supposing he had not made love to me – if I could have had as much!” She did not answer herself definitely – not from any lack of candour, but because the question presented difficulties. She slipped past him presently on the arm of the elderly gentleman, as Ancram still stood with bent head talking to her mother. His eyes sought hers with a significance that flattered her – there was no time for further greeting – and the bow with which he returned her enigmatic little nod singled her out for consideration. As she went in to dinner the nape of Mr. Lewis Ancram’s neck and the parting of his hair remained with her as pictorial facts.

Mrs. Daye always gave composite dinner-parties, and this was one of them. “If you ask nobody but military people to meet each other,” she was in the habit of saying, “you hear nothing but the price of chargers and the prospects of the Staff Corps. If you make your list up of civilians, the conversation consists of abuse of their official superiors and the infamous conduct of the Secretary of State about the rupee.” On this occasion Mrs. Daye had reason to anticipate that the price of chargers would be varied by the grievances of the Civil Service, and that a touring Member of Parliament would participate in the discussion who knew nothing about either; and she felt that her blend would be successful. She could give herself up to the somewhat fearful enjoyment she experienced in Mr. Ancram’s society. Mrs. Daye was convinced that nobody appreciated Mr. Ancram more subtly than she did. She saw a great deal of jealousy of him in Calcutta society, whereas she was wont to declare that, for her part, she found nothing extraordinary in the way he had got in – a man of his brains, you know! And if Calcutta resented this imputation upon its own brains in ever so slight a degree, Mrs. Daye saw therein more jealousy of the fact that her family circle was about to receive him. When it had once opened for that purpose and closed again, Mrs. Daye hoped vaguely that she would be sustained for the new and exacting duty of living up to Mr. Ancram.

“*Please* look at Rhoda,” she begged, in a conversational buzz that her blend had induced.

Mr. Ancram looked, deliberately, but with appreciation. “She seems to be sufficiently entertained,” he said.

“Oh, she is! She’s got a globe-trotter. Haven’t you found out that Rhoda simply loves globe-trotters? She declares that she renews her youth in them.”

“Her first impressions, I suppose she means?”

“Oh, as to what she *means*—”

Mrs. Daye broke off irresolutely, and thoughtfully conveyed a minute piece of roll to her lips. The minute piece of roll was Mr. Ancram’s opportunity to complete Mrs. Daye’s suggestion of a certain interesting ambiguity in her daughter; but he did not take it. He continued to look attentively at Miss Daye, who appeared, as he said, to be sufficiently entertained, under circumstances which seemed to him inadequate. Her traveller was talking emphatically, with gestures of elderly dogmatism, and she was deferentially listening, an amusement behind her eyes with which the Chief Secretary to the Government at Bengal was not altogether unfamiliar. He had seen it there before, on occasions when there was apparently nothing to explain it.

“It would be satisfactory to see her eating her dinner,” he remarked, with what Mrs. Daye felt to be too slight a degree of solicitude. She was obliged to remind herself that at thirty-seven a man was apt to take these things more as matters of fact, especially – and there was a double comfort in this reflection – a man already well up in the Secretariat and known to be ambitious. “Is it possible,” Mr. Ancram went on, somewhat absently, “that these are Calcutta roses? You must have a very clever gardener.”

“No” – and Mrs. Daye pitched her voice with a gentle definiteness that made what she was saying interesting all round the table – “they came from the Viceroy’s place at Barrackpore. Lady Emily sent them to me: so sweet of her, I thought! I always think it particularly kind when people in that position trouble themselves about one; they must have so *many* demands upon their time.”

The effect could not have been better. Everybody looked at the roses with an interest that might almost be described as respectful; and Mrs. Delaine, whose husband was Captain Delaine of the Durham Rifles, said that she would have known them for Their Excellencies’ roses anywhere – they always did the table with that kind for the Thursday dinners at Government House – she had never known them to use any other.

Mrs. St. George, whose husband was the Presidency Magistrate, found this interesting. “Do they really?” she exclaimed. “I’ve often wondered what those big Thursday affairs were like. Fancy – we’ve been in Calcutta through three cold weathers now, and have never been asked to anything but little private dinners at Government House – not more than eight or ten, you know!”

“Don’t you prefer that?” asked Mrs. Delaine, taking her quenching with noble equanimity.

“Well, of course one sees more *of* them,” Mrs. St. George admitted. “The last time we were there, about a fortnight ago, I had a long chat with Lady Emily. She is a sweet thing, and perfectly wild at being out of the school-room!” Mrs. St. George added that it was a charming family, so well brought up; and this seemed to be a matter of special congratulation as affecting the domestic arrangements of a Viceroy. There was a warmth and an emphasis in the corroboration that arose which almost established relations of intimacy between Their Excellencies and Mrs. Daye’s dinner-party. Mrs. Daye’s daughter listened in her absorbed, noting manner; and when the elderly gentleman remarked with a certain solemnity that they were talking of the Scansleighs, he supposed, the smile with which she said “Evidently” was more pronounced than he could have had any right to expect.

“They seem to be delightful people,” continued the elderly gentleman, earnestly.

“I daresay,” Miss Daye replied, with grave deliberation. “They’re very decorative,” she added absently. “That’s a purely Indian vegetable, Mr. Pond. Rather sticky, and without the ghost of a flavour; but you ought to try it, as an experience, don’t you think?”

It occurred to Mrs. Daye sometimes that Mr. Ancram was unreasonably difficult to entertain, even for a Chief Secretary. It occurred to her more forcibly than usual on this particular evening,

and it was almost with trepidation that she produced the trump card on which she had been relying to provoke a lively suit of amiabilities. She produced it awkwardly too; there was always a slight awkwardness, irritating to so *habile* a lady, in her manner of addressing Mr. Ancram, owing to her confessed and painful inability to call him “Lewis” – yet. “Oh,” she said finally, “I haven’t congratulated you on your ‘Modern Influence of the Vedic Books.’ I assure you, in spite of its being in blue paper covers and printed by Government I went through it with the greatest interest. And there were no pictures either,” Mrs. Daye added, with the ingenuousness which often clings to Anglo-Indian ladies somewhat late in life.

Mr. Ancram was occupied for the moment in scrutinising the contents of a dish which a servant patiently presented to his left elbow. It was an ornate and mottled conception visible through a mass of brown jelly, and the man looked disappointed when so important a guest, after perceptible deliberation, decisively removed his eyeglass and shook his head. Mrs. Daye was in the act of reminding herself of the probably impaired digestion of a Chief Secretary, when he seemed suddenly recalled to the fact that she had spoken.

“Really?” he said, looking fully at her, with a smile that had many qualities of compensation. “My dear Mrs. Daye, that was doing a good deal for friendship, wasn’t it?”

His eyes were certainly blue and expressive when he allowed them to be, his hostess thought, and he had the straight, thin, well-indicated nose which she liked, and a sensitive mouth for a man. His work as part of the great intelligent managing machine of the Government of India overimpressed itself upon the stamp of scholarship Oxford had left on his face, which had the pallor of Bengal, with fatigued lines about the eyes, lines that suggested to Mr. Ancram’s friends the constant reproach of over-exertion. A light moustache, sufficiently well-curled and worldly, effectually prevented any tinge of asceticism which might otherwise have been characteristic, and placed Mr. Ancram among those who discussed Meredith, had an expensive taste in handicrafts, and subscribed to the *Figaro Salon*. His secretary’s stoop was not a pronounced and local curve, rather a general thrusting forward of his personality which was fitting enough in a scientific investigator; and his long, nervous, white hands spoke of a multitude of well-phrased Resolutions. It was ridiculous, Mrs. Daye thought, that with so agreeable a manner he should still convey the impression that one’s interest in the Vedic Books was not of the least importance. It must be that she was over-sensitive. But she would be piqued notwithstanding. Pique, when one is plump and knows how to hold oneself, is more effective than almost any other attitude.

“You are exactly like all the rest! You think that no woman can possibly care to read anything but novels! Now, as a matter of fact I am *devoted* to things like Vedic Books. If I had nothing else to do I should dig and delve in the archaic from morning till night.”

“The implication being,” returned Mr. Ancram sweetly, “that I have nothing else to do.”

Mrs. Daye compressed her lips in the manner of one whose patience is at an end. “It would serve you perfectly right,” she exclaimed, “if I didn’t tell you what a long review of it I saw the other day in one of the home papers.”

Ancram looked up with an almost imperceptible accession of interest.

“How nice!” he said lightly. “A fellow out here always feels himself in luck when his odds and ends get taken up at home. You don’t happen to remember the paper – or the date?”

“I’m almost sure it was the *Times*,” Mrs. Daye replied, with rather an accentuation of rejoicing zeal; “but Richard can tell you. It was he who drew my attention to the notice.”

Mr. Ancram’s eyebrows underwent a slight contraction. “Notice” did not seem to be a felicitous word.

“Oh, thanks,” he said. “Never mind; one generally comes across those things sooner or later.”

“I say, Ancram,” put in Mr. St. George, who had been listening on Mrs. Daye’s left, “you Asiatic Society fellows won’t get as much out of Church for your investigations as you did out of Spence.”

Ancram looked fixedly at a porcelain cherub that moored a boatful of pink-and-white confectionery to the nearest bank of the Viceregal roses. “Sir Griffiths was certainly generous,” he said. “He gave Pierson a quarter of a lakh, for instance, to get his ethnological statistics together. It was easy to persuade him to recognise the value of these things.”

“It won’t be easy to get this man to recognise it,” persisted St. George. “He’s the sort of fellow who likes sanitation better than Sanscrit. He’s got a great scheme on for improving the village water-supply for Bengal, and I hear he wants to reorganise the vaccination business. Great man for the people!”

“Wants to spend every blessed pice on the bloomin’ ryot,” remarked Captain Delaine, with humorous resentment.

“Let us hope the people will be grateful,” said Ancram vaguely.

“They won’t, you know,” remarked Rhoda Daye to Mr. Pond. “They’ll never know. They are like the cattle – they plough and eat and sleep; and if a tenth of them die of cholera from bad water, they say it was written upon their foreheads; and if Government cleans the tanks and the tenth are spared, they say it is a good year and the gods are favourable.”

“Dear me!” said Mr. Pond: “that’s very interesting.”

“Isn’t it? And there’s lots more of it – all in the Calcutta newspapers, Mr. Pond: you should read them if you wish to be informed.” And Mr. Pond thought that an excellent idea.

When a Lieutenant-Governor drops into the conversational vortex of a Calcutta dinner-party he circles on indefinitely. The measure of his hospitality, the nature of his tastes, the direction of his policy, his quality as a master, and the measure of his popularity, are only a few of the heads under which he is discussed; while his wife is made the most of separately, with equal thoroughness and precision. Just before Mrs. Daye looked smilingly at Mrs. St. George, and the ladies flocked away, some one asked who Mrs. Church’s friends were in Calcutta, anyway: she seemed to know hardly any one person more than another – a delightful impartiality, the lady added, of course, after Lady Spence’s favouritism. The remark fell lightly enough upon the air, but Lewis Ancram did not let it pass. He looked at nobody in particular, but into space: it was a way he had when he let fall anything definite.

“Well,” he said, “I hope I may claim to be one. My pretension dates back five years – I used to know them in Kaligurh. I fancy Mrs. Church will be appreciated in Calcutta. She is that combination which is so much less rare than it used to be – a woman who is as fine as she is clever, and as clever as she is charming.”

“With all due deference to Mr. Ancram’s opinion,” remarked Mrs. Daye publicly, with one hand upon the banister, as the ladies went up to the drawing-room, “I should *not* call Mrs. Church a fine woman. She’s much too slender – really almost thin!”

“My dear mummie,” exclaimed Rhoda, as Mrs. St. George expressed her entire concurrence, “don’t be stupid! He didn’t mean that.”

Later Ancram stepped out of one of the open French windows and found her alone on the broad verandah, where orchids hung from the roof and big plants in pots made a spiky gloom in the corners. A tank in the garden glistened motionless below; the heavy fronds of a clump of sago palms waved up and down uncertainly in the moonlight. Now and then in the moist, soft air the scent of some hidden temple tree made itself felt. A cluster of huts to the right in the street they looked down upon stood half-concealed in a hanging blue cloud of smoke and fog. Far away in the suburbs the wailing cry of the jackals rose and fell and recommenced; nearer the drub-drubbing of a tom-tom announced that somewhere in the bazar they kept a marriage festival. But for themselves and the moonlight and the shadow of the creeper round the pillars, the verandah was quite empty, and through the windows came a song of Mrs. Delaine’s about love’s little hour. The situation made its voiceless demand, and neither of them were unconscious of it. Nevertheless he, lighting a cigarette, asked her if she would not come in and hear the music; and she said no – she liked it better there; whereat they both kept the silence

that was necessary for the appreciation of Mrs. Delaine's song. When it was over, Rhoda's terrier, Buzz, came out with inquiring cordiality, and they talked of the growth of his accomplishments since Ancram had given him to her; and then, as if it were a development of the subject, Rhoda said:

"Mrs. Church has a very interesting face, don't you think?"

"Very," Ancram replied unhesitatingly.

"She looks as if she cared for beautiful things. Not only pictures and things, but beautiful conceptions – ideas, characteristics."

"I understand," Ancram returned: "she does."

There was a pause, while they listened to the wail of the jackals, which had grown wild and high and tumultuous. As it died away, Rhoda looked up with a little smile.

"I like that," she said; "it is about the only thing out here that is quite irrepressible. And – you knew her well at Kaligurh?"

"I think I may say I did," Ancram replied, tossing the end of his cigarette down among the hibiscus bushes. "My dear girl, you must come in. There is nothing like a seductive moonlight night in India to give one fever."

"I congratulate you," said Miss Daye – and her tone had a defiance which she did not intend, though one could not say that she was unaware of its cynicism – "I congratulate you upon knowing her well. It is always an advantage to know the wife of the Lieutenant-Governor well. The most delightful things come of it – Commissionerships, and all sorts of things. I hope you will make her understand the importance of the Vedic Books in their bearing upon the modern problems of government."

"You are always asking me to make acknowledgments – you want almost too many; but since it amuses you, I don't mind." Rhoda noted the little gleam in his eyes that contradicted this. "Sanskrit is to me now exactly what Greek was at Oxford – a stepping-stone, and nothing more. One must do something to distinguish oneself from the herd; and in India, thank fortune, it's easy enough. There's an enormous field, and next to nobody to beat. Bless you, a Commissariat Colonel can give himself an aureole of scientific discovery out here if he cares to try! If I hadn't taken up Sanskrit and Hinduism, I should have gone in for palæontology, or conchology, or folk-lore, or ferns. Anything does: only the less other people know about it the better; so I took Sanskrit." A combined suggestion of humour and candour gradually accumulated in Mr. Ancram's sentences, which came to a climax when he added, "You don't think it very original to discover that!"

"And the result of being distinguished from the herd?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, they don't send one to administer the Andamans or Lower Burmah," he said. "They conserve one's intellectual achievements to adorn social centres of some importance, which is more agreeable. And then, if a valuable post falls vacant, one is not considered disqualified for it by being a little wiser than other people. Come now – there's a very big confession for you! But you mustn't tell. We scientists must take ourselves with awful seriousness if we want to be impressive. That's the part that bores one."

Mr. Ancram smiled down at his betrothed with distinct good-humour. He was under the impression that he had spontaneously given his soul an airing – an impression he was fond of. She listened, amused that she could evoke so much, and returned to the thing he had evaded.

"Between the Vedic Books and Mrs. Church," she said, "our future seems assured."

Ancram's soul retired again, and shut the door with a click.

"That is quite a false note," he said coolly: "Mrs. Church will have nothing to do with it."

CHAPTER III

It became evident very soon after Miss Rhoda Daye's appearance in Calcutta that she was not precisely like the other young ladies in sailor hats and cambric blouses who arrived at the same time. For one superficial thing, anybody could see that she had less colour; and this her mother mourned openly – a girl depended so entirely for the first season on her colour. As other differences became obvious Mrs. Daye had other regrets, one of them being that Rhoda had been permitted so absolutely to fashion her own education. Mrs. Daye had not foreseen one trivial result of this, which was that her daughter, believing herself devoid of any special talent, refused to ornament herself with any special accomplishment. This, in Mrs. Daye's opinion, was carrying self-depreciation and reverence for achievement and all that sort of thing a great deal too far: a girl had no right to expect her parents to present her to the world in a state of artistic nudity. It was not in the nature of compensation that she understood the situation with the Amir and the ambitions of the National Congress; such things were almost unmentionable in Calcutta society. And it was certainly in the nature of aggravation that she showed, after the first month of it, an inexplicable indifference to every social opportunity but that of looking on. Miss Daye had an undoubted talent for looking on; and she would often exercise it – mutely, motionlessly, half hidden behind a pillar at a ball, or abandoned in a corner after dinner – until her mother was mortified enough to take her home. Presently it appeared that she had looked on sufficiently to know her ground. She made her valuation of society; she picked out the half-dozen Anglo-Indian types; it may be presumed that she classified her parents. She still looked on, but with less concentration: she began to talk. She developed a liking for the society of elderly gentlemen of eminence, and an abhorrence for that of their wives, which was considered of doubtful propriety, until the Head of the Foreign Office once congratulated himself openly upon sitting next her at dinner. After which she was regarded with indulgence, it was said in corners that she must be clever, subalterns avoided her, and her mother, taking her cue unerringly, figuratively threw up her hands and asked Heaven why she of all people should be given a *fin-de-siècle* daughter.

Privately Mrs. Daye tried to make herself believe, in the manner of the Parisian playwright, that a *succès d'estime* was infinitely to be preferred to the plaudits of the mob. I need hardly say that she was wholly successful in doing so, when Mr. Lewis Ancram contributed to the balance in favour of this opinion. Mr. Ancram was observing too: he observed in this case from shorter and shorter distances, and finally allowed himself to be charmed by what he saw. Perhaps that is not putting it quite strongly enough. He really encouraged himself to be thus charmed. He was of those who find in the automatic monotony of the Indian social machine, with its unvarying individual – a machine, he was fond of saying, the wheels of which are kept oiled with the essence of British Philistinism – a burden and a complaint. In London he would have lived with one foot in Mayfair and the other in the Strand; and there had been times when he talked of the necessity of chaining his ambition before his eyes to prevent his making the choice of a career over again, though it must be said that this violent proceeding was carried out rather as a solace to his defrauded capacity for culture than in view of any real danger. He had been accustomed to take the annually fresh young ladies in straw hats and cambric blouses who appeared in the cold weather much as he took the inevitable functions at Government House – to be politely avoided, if possible; if not, to be submitted to with the grace which might be expected from a person holding his office and drawing his emoluments. When he found that Rhoda Daye was likely to break up the surface of his blank indifference to evening parties he fostered the probability. Among all the young ladies in sailor hats and cambric blouses he saw his single chance for experience, interest, sensation; and he availed himself of it with an accumulated energy which Miss Daye found stimulating enough to induce her to exert herself, to a certain extent, reciprocally. She was not interested in the Hon. Mr. Lewis Ancram because of his reputation: other men had reputations – reputations almost as big as their paybills – who did not excite

her imagination in the smallest degree. It would be easy to multiply accounts upon which Mr. Ancram did not interest Miss Daye, but it is not clear that any result would be arrived at that way, and the fact remains that she was interested. From this quiet point – she was entirely aware of its advantage – she contemplated Mr. Ancram’s gradual advance along the lines of attraction with a feeling very like satisfaction. She had only to contemplate it. Ancram contributed his own impetus, and reached the point where he believed his affections involved with an artistic shock which he had anticipated for weeks as quite divinely enjoyable. She behaved amusingly when they were engaged: she made a little comedy of it, would be coaxed to no confessions and only one vow – that, as they were to go through life together, she would try always to be agreeable. If she had private questionings and secret alarms, she hid them with intrepidity; and if it seemed to her to be anything ridiculous that the wayward god should present himself behind the careful countenance and the well-starched shirt-front of early middle-age, holding an eyeglass in attenuated fingers, and mutely implying that he had been bored for years, she did not betray her impression. The thrall of their engagement made no change in her; she continued to be the same demure, slender creature, who said unexpected things, that she had been before. That he had covetable new privileges did not seem to make much difference; her chief value was still that of a clever acquaintance. She would grow more expensive in time, he thought vaguely; but several months had passed, as we have seen, without this result. On the other hand, there had been occasions when he fancied that she deliberately disassociated herself from him in that favourite pursuit of observation, in order to obtain a point of view which should command certain intellectual privacies of his. He wondered whether she would take this liberty with greater freedom when they were one and indivisible; and, while he felt it absurd to object, he wished she would be a little more communicative about what she saw.

They were to be married in March, when Ancram would take a year’s furlough, and she would help him to lave his stiffened powers of artistic enjoyment in the beauties of the Parthenon and the inspirations of the Viennese galleries and the charms of Como and Maggiore. They talked a great deal of the satisfaction they expected to realise in this way. They went over it in detail, realising again and again that it must represent to him compensation for years of aridity and to her a store against the future likely to be drawn upon largely. Besides, it was a topic upon which they were quite sure of finding mutual understanding, even mutual congratulation – an excellent topic.

Meanwhile Ancram lived with Philip Doyle in Hungerford Street under the ordinary circumstances which govern Calcutta bachelors. Doyle was a barrister. He stood, in Calcutta, upon his ability and his individuality, and as these had been observed to place him in familiar relations with Heads of Departments, it may be gathered that they gave him a sufficient elevation. People called him a “strong” man because he refused their invitations to dinner, but the statement might have had a more intelligent basis and been equally true. It would have surprised him immensely if he could have weighed the value of his own opinions, or observed the trouble which men who appropriated them took to give them a tinge of originality. He was a survival of an older school, certainly – people were right in saying that. He had preserved a courtliness of manner and a sincerity of behaviour which suggested an Anglo-India that is mostly lying under pillars and pyramids in rank Calcutta cemeteries now. He was hospitable and select – so much of both that he often experienced ridiculous annoyance at having asked men to dinner who were essentially unpalatable to him. His sensitiveness to qualities in personal contact was so great as to be a conspicuous indication, to the discerning eye, of Lewis Ancram’s unbounded tact.

Circumstances had thrown the men under one roof, and even if the younger of them had not made himself so thoroughly agreeable, it would have been difficult to alter the arrangement.

It could never be said of Lewis Ancram that he did not choose his friends with taste, and in this case his discrimination had a foundation of respect which he was in the habit of freely mentioning. His admiration of Doyle was generous and frank, so generous and frank that one might have suspected

a virtue in the expression of it. Notwithstanding this implication, it was entirely sincere, though he would occasionally qualify it.

“I often tell Doyle,” he said once to Rhoda, “that his independence is purely a matter of circumstance. If he had the official yoke upon his neck he would kow-tow like the rest of us.”

“I don’t believe that,” she answered quickly.

“Ah well, now that I think of it I don’t particularly believe it myself. Doyle’s the salt of the earth anyhow. He makes it just possible for officials like myself to swallow officialdom.”

“Did it ever occur to you,” she asked slowly, “to wonder what he thinks of you?”

“Oh, I daresay he likes me well enough. Irishmen never go in for analysing their friends. At all events we live together, and there are no rows.”

They were driving, and the dogcart flew past the ships along the Strand – Ancram liked a fast horse – for a few minutes in silence. Then she had another question.

“Have you succeeded in persuading Mr. Doyle to – what do the newspapers say? – support you at the altar, yet?”

“No, confound him. He says it would be preposterous at his age – he’s not a year older than I am! I wonder if he expects me to ask Baby Bramble, or one of those little boys in the Buffs! Anyway it won’t be Doyle, for he goes to England, end of February – to get out of it, I believe.”

“I’m not sorry,” Rhoda answered; but it would have been difficult for her to explain, at the moment, why she was not sorry.

CHAPTER IV

“I don’t mind telling you,” said Philip Doyle, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, “that, personally, His Acting Honour represents to me a number of objectionable things. He is a Radical, and a Low Churchman, and a Particularist. He’s that objectionable ethical mixture, a compound of petty virtues. He believes this earth was created to give him an atmosphere to do his duty in; and he does it with the invincible courage of short-sightedness combined with the notion that the ultimate court of appeal for eighty million Bengalis should be his precious Methodist conscience. But the brute’s honest, and if he insists on putting this University foolishness of his through, I’m sorry for him. He’s a dead man, politically, the day it is announced.”

“He is,” replied Ancram, concentrating his attention on a match and the end of his cigar. “There’s – no doubt – about that.”

The two men were smoking after dinner, with the table and a couple of decanters between them. Roses drooped over the bowl of Cutch silver that gleamed in the middle of the empty cloth, and a lemon leaf or two floated in the finger-glass at Ancram’s elbow. He threw the match into it, and looked across at Doyle with his cigar between his teeth in the manner which invites further discussion.

“In point of political morality I suppose he’s right enough – ”

“He generally is,” Ancram interrupted. “He’s got a scent for political morality keen enough to upset every form of Government known to the nineteenth century.”

“But they see political morality through another pair of spectacles in England. To withdraw State aid from education anywhere at this end of the century is as impracticable as it would be to deprive the British workman of his vote. It’s retrogressive, and this is an age which will admit anything except a mistake of its own.”

“He doesn’t intend to withdraw State aid from education. He means to spend the money on technical schools.”

“A benevolent intention. But it won’t make the case any better with the Secretary of State. He will say that it ought to be done without damaging the sacred cause of higher culture.”

“Damn the sacred cause of higher culture!” replied Ancram, with an unruffled countenance. “What has it done out here? Filled every sweeper’s son of them with an ambition to sit on an office stool and be a gentleman! – created by thousands a starveling class that find nothing to do but swell mass-meetings on the Maidan and talk sedition that gets telegraphed from Peshawur to Cape Comorin. I advertised for a baboo the other day, and had four hundred applications – fifteen rupees a month, poor devils! But the Dayes were a fortnight in getting a decent cook on twenty.”

“Bentinck should have thought of that; it’s too late now. You can’t bestow a boon on the masses in a spirit of progressiveness and take it away sixty years later in a spirit of prudence. It’s decent enough of Church to be willing to bear the consequences of somebody else’s blunder; but blunders of that kind have got to take their place in the world’s formation and let the ages retrieve them. It’s the only way.”

“Oh, I agree with you. Church is an ass: he ought not to attempt it.”

“Why do you fellows let him?”

Ancram looked in Doyle’s direction as he answered – looked near him, fixed his eyes, with an effect of taking a view at the subject round a corner, upon the other man’s tobacco-jar. The trick annoyed Doyle; he often wished it were the sort of thing one could speak about.

“Nobody is less amenable to reason,” he said, “than the man who wants to hit his head against a stone wall, especially if he thinks the world will benefit by his inconvenience. And, to make matters worse, Church has complicated the thing with an idea of his duty toward the people at home who send out the missionaries. He doesn’t think it exactly according to modern ethics that they should take

up collections in village churches to provide the salvation of the higher mathematics for the sons of fat *bunnias* in the bazar – who could very well afford to pay for it themselves.”

“He can’t help that.”

Ancram finished his claret. “I believe he has some notion of advertising it. And after he has eliminated the missionary who teaches the Georgics instead of the Gospels, and devoted the educational grants to turning the gentle Hindoo into a skilled artisan, he thinks the cause of higher culture may be pretty much left to take care of itself. He believes we could bleed Linsettiah and Pattore and some of those chaps for endowments, I fancy, though he doesn’t say so.”

“Better try some of the smaller natives. A maharajah won’t do much for a C. I. E. or an extra gun nowadays: it isn’t good enough. He knows that all Europe is ready to pay him the honours of royalty whenever he chooses to tie up his cooking-pots and go there. He’ll save his money and buy hand-organs with it, or panoramas, or sewing-machines. Presently, if this adoration of the Eastern potentate goes on at home, we shall have the maharajah whom we propose to honour receiving our proposition with his thumb applied to his nose and all his fingers out!”

Ancram yawned. “Well, it won’t be a question of negotiating for endowments: it will never come off. Church will only smash himself over the thing if he insists; and,” he added, as one who makes an unprejudiced, impartial statement on fatalistic grounds, “he will insist. I should find the whole business rather amusing if, as Secretary, I hadn’t to be the mouthpiece for it.” He looked at his watch. “Half-past nine. I suppose I ought to be off. You’re not coming?”

“Where?”

“To Belvedere. A ‘walk-round,’ I believe.”

“Thanks: I think not. It would be too much bliss for a corpulent gentleman of my years. I remember – the card came last week, and I gave it to Mohammed to take care of. I believe Mohammed keeps a special *almirah* for the purpose; and in it,” Mr. Doyle continued gravely, “are the accumulations of several seasons. He regards them as a trust only second to that of the Director of Records, and last year he made them the basis of an application for more pay.”

“Which you gave him,” laughed Ancram, getting into his light overcoat as the brougham rolled up to the door. “I loathe going; but for me there’s no alternative. There seems to be an Act somewhere providing that a man in my peculiar position must show himself in society.”

“So long as you hover on the brink of matrimony,” said the other, “you must be a butterfly. Console yourself: after you take the plunge you can turn ascidian if you like.”

The twinkle went out of Philip Doyle’s eyes as he heard the carriage door shut and the wheels roll crunching toward the gate. He filled his pipe again and took up the *Saturday Review*. Half an hour later he was looking steadily at the wall over the top of that journal, considering neither its leading articles nor its reviews nor its advertisements, but Mr. Lewis Ancram’s peculiar position.

At that moment Ancram leaned against the wall in a doorway of the drawing-room at Belvedere, one leg lightly crossed over the other, his right hand in his pocket, dangling his eyeglass with his left. It was one of the many casual attitudes in which the world was informed that a Chief Secretary, in Mr. Ancram’s opinion, had no prescriptive right to give himself airs. He had a considering look: one might have said that his mind was far from the occasion – perhaps upon the advisability of a tobacco tax; but this would not have been correct. He was really thinking of the quantity and the quality of the people who passed him, and whether as a function the thing could be considered a success. With the white gleam on the pillars, and the palms everywhere, and the moving vista of well-dressed women through long, richly-furnished rooms arranged for a large reception, it was certainly pretty enough; but there was still the question of individuals, which had to be determined by such inspection as he was bestowing upon them. It would have been evident to anybody that more people recognised Ancram than Ancram recognised; he had by no means the air of being on the look-out for acquaintances. But occasionally some such person as the Head of the Telegraph Department looked well at him and said, “How do, Ancram?” with the effect of adding “I defy you to forget who I am!”

or a lady of manner gave him a gracious and pronounced inclination, which also said, “You are the clever, the rising Mr. Ancram. You haven’t called; but you are known to despise society. I forgive you, and I bow.” One or two Members of Council merely vouchsafed him a nod as they passed; but it was noticeably only Members of Council who nodded to Mr. Ancram. An aide-de-camp to the Viceroy, however – a blue-eyed younger son with his mind seriously upon his duty – saw Ancram in his path, and hesitated. He had never quite decided to what extent these fellows in the Bengal Secretariat, and this one in particular, should be recognised by an aide-de-camp; and he went round the other way. Presently there was a little silken stir and rustle, a parting of the ladies’ trains, and a lull of observation along both sides of the lane which suddenly formed itself among the people. His Excellency the Viceroy had taken his early leave and was making his departure. Lord Scansleigh had an undisguised appreciation of an able man, and there was some definiteness in the way he stopped, though it was but for a moment, and shook hands with Ancram, who swung the eyeglass afterwards more casually than he had done before. The aide-de-camp, following after, was in no wise rebuked. What the Viceroy chose to do threw no light on his difficulty. He merely cast his eyes upon the floor, and his fresh coloured countenance expressed a respectfully sad admiration for the noble manner in which his lord discharged every obligation pertaining to the Viceregal office.

The most privileged hardly cares to make demands upon his hostess as long as she has a Viceroy to entertain, and Ancram waited until their Excellencies were well on their way home, their four turbaned Sikhs trotting after them, before he made any serious attempt to find Mrs. Church. A sudden and general easefulness was observable at the same time. People began to look about them and walk and talk with the consciousness that it was no longer possible that they should be suspected of arranging themselves so that Lord Scansleigh *must* bow. The Viceroy having departed, they thought about other things. She was standing, when presently he made his way to her, talking to Sir William Scott of the Foreign Department, and at the moment, to the Maharajah of Pattore. Ancram paused and watched her unperceived. It was like the pleasure of looking at a picture one technically understands. He noted with satisfaction the subtle difference in her manner toward the two men, and how, in her confidence with the one and her condescending recognition of the other’s dignity, both were consciously receiving their due. He noticed the colour of her heliotrope velvet gown, and asked himself whether any other woman in the room could possibly wear that shade. Mentally he dared the other women to say that its simplicity was over-dramatic, or that by the charming arrangement of her hair and her pearls and the yellowed lace, that fell over her shoulders Judith Church had made herself too literal a representation of a great-grandmother who certainly wore none of these things. He paused another second to catch the curve of her white throat as she turned her head with a little characteristic lifting of her chin; and then he went up to her. The definite purpose that appeared in his face was enough of itself to assert their intimacy – to this end it was not necessary that he should drop his eyeglass.

“Oh,” she said, with a step forward, “how do you do! I began to think – Maharajah, when you are invited to parties you always come, don’t you? Well, this gentleman does not always come, I understand. I beg you will ask a question about it at the next meeting of the Legislative Council. The Honourable the Chief Secretary is requested to furnish an explanation of his lamentable failure to perform his duties toward society.”

The native smiled uncomfortably, puzzled at her audacity. His membership of the Bengal Legislative Council was a new toy, and he was not sure that he liked any one else to play with it.

“His Highness of Pattore,” said Ancram, slipping a hand under the fat elbow in its pink-and-gold brocade, “would be the very last fellow to get me into a scrape. Wouldn’t you, Maharaj!”

His Highness beamed affectionately upon Ancram. There was, at all events, nothing but flattery in being taken by the elbow by a Chief Secretary. “Certainlie,” he replied – “the verrie last”; and he laughed the unctuous, irresponsible laugh of a maharajah, which is accompanied by the twinkling of pendant emeralds and the shaking of personal rotundities which cannot be indicated.

Sir William Scott folded his arms and refolded them, balanced himself once or twice on the soles of his shoes, pushed out his under-lip, and retreated in the gradual and surprised way which would naturally be adopted by the Foreign Department when it felt itself left out of the conversation. The Maharajah stood about uneasily on one leg for a moment, and then with a hasty double salaam he too waddled away. Mrs. Church glanced after his retreating figure – it was almost a perfect oval – with lips prettily composed to seemly gravity. Then, as her eyes met Ancram's, she laughed like a schoolgirl.

“Oh,” she said, “go away! I mustn't talk to you. I shall be forgetting my part.”

“You are doing it well. Lady Spence, at this stage of the proceedings, was always surrounded by bank-clerks and policemen. I do not observe a member of either of those interesting species,” he said, glancing round through his eyeglass, “within twenty yards. On the contrary, an expectant Member of Council on the nearest sofa, the Commander-in-Chief hovering in the middle distance, and a fringe of Departmental Heads on the horizon.”

“I do not see any of them,” she laughed, looking directly at Ancram. “We are going to sit down, you and I, and talk for four or six minutes, as the last baboo said who implored an interview with my husband”; and Mrs. Church sank, with just a perceptible turning of her shoulder upon the world, into the nearest armchair. It was a wide gilded arm-chair, cushioned in deep yellow silk. Ancram thought, as she crossed her feet and leaned her head against the back of it, that the effect was delicious.

“And you really think I am doing it well!” she said. “I have been dying to know. I really dallied for a time with the idea of asking one of the aides-de-camp. But as a matter of fact,” she said confidentially, “though I order them about most callously, I am still horribly afraid of the aides-de-camp – in uniform, on duty.”

“And in flannels, off duty?”

“In flannels, off duty, I make them almond toffee and they tell me their love affairs. I am their sisterly mother and their cousinly aunt. We even have games of ball.”

“They are nice boys,” he said, with a sigh of resignation: “I daresay they deserve it.”

There was an instant's silence of good fellowship, and then she moved her foot a little, so that a breadth of the heliotrope velvet took on a paler light.

“Yes,” he nodded, “it is quite – regal.”

She laughed, flushing a little. “Really! That's not altogether correct. It ought to be only officiating. But I can't tell you how delicious it is to be *obliged* to wear pretty gowns.”

At that moment an Additional Member of Council passed them so threateningly that Mrs. Church was compelled to put out a staying hand and inquire for Lady Bloomsbury, who was in England, and satisfy herself that Sir Peter had quite recovered from his bronchitis, and warn Sir Peter against Calcutta's cold-weather fogs. Ancram kept his seat, but Sir Peter stood with stout persistence, rooted in his rights. It was only when Mrs. Church asked him whether he had seen the new portrait, and told him where it was, that he moved on, and then he believed that he went of his own accord. By the time an Indian official arrives at an Additional Membership he is usually incapable of perceiving anything which does not tend to enhance that dignity.

“You have given two of my six minutes to somebody else, remember,” Ancram said. For an instant she did not answer him. She was looking about her with a perceptible air of having, for the moment, been oblivious of something it was her business to remember. Almost immediately her eye discovered John Church. He was in conversation with the Bishop, and apparently they were listening to each other with deference, but sometimes Church's gaze wandered vaguely over the heads of the people and sometimes he looked at the floor. His hands were clasped in front of him, his chin was so sunk in his chest that the most conspicuous part of him seemed his polished forehead and his heavy black eyebrows, his expression was that of a man who submits to the inevitable. Ancram saw him at the same moment, and in the silence that asserted itself between them there was a touch of

embarrassment which the man found sweet. He felt a foolish impulse to devote himself to turning John Church into an ornament to society.

“This sort of thing – ” he suggested condoningly.

“Bore him. Intolerably. He grudges the time and the energy. He says there is so much to do.”

“He is quite right.”

“Oh, don’t encourage him! On the contrary – promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“When you see him standing about alone – he is really very absent-minded – go up and make him talk to you. He will get your ideas – the time, you see, will not be wasted. And neither will the general public,” she added, “be confronted with the spectacle of a Lieutenant-Governor who looks as if he had a contempt for his own hospitality.”

“I’ll try. But I hardly think my ideas upon points of administration are calculated to enliven a social evening. And don’t send me now. The Bishop is doing very well.”

“The Bishop?” She turned to him again, with laughter in the dark depths of her eyes. “I realised the other day what one may attain to in Calcutta. His Lordship asked me, with some timidity, what I thought of the length of his sermons! Tell me, please, who is this madam bearing down upon me in pink and grey?”

Ancram was on his feet. “It is Mrs. Daye,” he said. “People who come so late ought not to insist upon seeing you.”

“Mrs. Daye! Oh, of course; your – ” But Mrs. Daye was clasping her hostess’s hand. “And Miss Daye, I think,” said Mrs. Church, looking frankly into the face of the girl behind, “whom I have somehow been defrauded of meeting before. I have a great many congratulations to – divide,” she went on prettily, glancing at Ancram. “Mr. Ancram is an old friend of ours.”

“Thank you,” replied Miss Daye. Her manner suggested that at school such acknowledgments had been very carefully taught her.

“My dear, you should make a pretty curtsy,” her mother said jocularly, and then looked at Rhoda with astonishment as the girl, with an unmoved countenance, made it.

Ancram looked uncomfortable, but Mrs. Church cried out with vivacity that it was charming – she was so glad to find that Miss Daye could unbend to a stranger; and Mrs. Daye immediately stated that she *must* hear whether the good news was true that Mrs. Church had accepted the presidency – presidentship (what should one say?) – of the Lady Dufferin Society. Ah! that was delightful – now *everything* would go smoothly. Poor dear Lady Spence found it *far* too much for her! Mrs. Daye touched upon a variety of other matters as the four stood together, and the gaslights shone down upon the diamond stars in the women’s hair, and the band played on the verandah behind the palms. Among them was the difficulty of getting seats in the Cathedral in the cold weather, and the fascinating prospect of having a German man-of-war in port for the season, and that dreadful frontier expedition against the Nagapis; and they ran, in the end, into an allusion to Mrs. Church’s delightful Thursday tennises.

“Ah, yes,” Mrs. Church replied, as the lady gave utterance to this, with her dimpled chin thrust over her shoulder, in the act of departure: “you must not forget my Thursdays. And you,” she said to Rhoda, with a directness which she often made very engaging – “you will come too, I hope?”

“Oh, yes, thank you,” the girl answered, with her neat smile: “I will come too – with pleasure.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?” Mrs. Church exclaimed a moment later.

Ancram looked meditatively at the chandelier. “We are not exactly a demonstrative couple,” he said. “She likes a decent reticence, I believe – in public. I’ll find them presently.”

They were half a mile on their way home when he began to look for them; and Mrs. Daye had so far forgotten herself as to comment unfavourably upon his behaviour.

“My dear mummie,” her daughter responded, “you don’t suppose I want to interfere with his amusements!”

CHAPTER V

A bazar had been opened in aid of a Cause. The philanthropic heart of Calcutta, laid bare, discloses many Causes, and during the cold weather their commercial hold upon the community is as briskly maintained as it may be consistently with the modern doctrine of the liberty of the subject. The purpose of this bazar was to bring the advantages of the piano and feather-stitch and Marie Bashkirtseff to young native ladies of rank. It had been for some time obvious that young native ladies of rank were painfully behind the van of modern progress. It was known that they were not in the habit of spending the golden Oriental hours in the search for wisdom as the bee obtains honey from the flowers: they much preferred sucking their own fingers, cloyed with sweetmeats from the bazar. Yet a few of them had tasted emancipation. Their husbands allowed them to show their faces to the world. Of one, who had been educated in London, it was whispered that she wore stays, and read books in three languages besides Sanscrit, and ate of the pig! These the memsahibs fastened upon and infected with the idea of elevating their sisters by annual appeals to the public based on fancy articles. Future generations of Aryan lady-voters, hardly as yet visible in the effulgence of all that is to come, will probably fail to understand that their privileges were founded, towards the end of the nineteenth century, on an antimacassar; but thus it will have been.

The wife of the Lieutenant-Governor had opened the bazar. She had done it in black lace and jet, which became her exceedingly, with a pretty little speech, which took due account of the piano and feather-stitch and Marie Bashkirtseff under more impressive names. She had driven there with Lady Scott. The way was very long and very dusty and very native, which includes several other undesirable characteristics; and Lady Scott had beguiled it with details of an operation she had insisted on witnessing at the Dufferin Hospital for Women. Lady Scott declared that, holding the position she did on the Board, she really felt the responsibility of seeing that things were properly done, but that henceforth the lady-doctor in charge should have her entire confidence. "I only wonder," said Mrs. Church, "that, holding the position you do on the Board, you didn't insist on performing the operation yourself"; and her face was so grave that Lady Scott felt flattered and deprecated the idea.

Then they had arrived and walked with circumstance through the little desultory crowd of street natives up the strip of red cloth to the door, and there been welcomed by three or four of the very most emancipated, with two beautiful, flat, perfumed bouquets of pink-and-white roses and many suffused smiles. And then the little speech, which gave Mrs. Gasper of the High Court the most poignant grief, in that men, on account of the unemancipated, were excluded from the occasion; she would simply have given anything to have had her husband hear it. After which Mrs. Church had gone from counter to counter, with her duty before her eyes. She bought daintily, choosing Dacca muslins and false gods, brass plaques from Persia and embroidered cloths from Kashmir. A dozen or two of the unemancipated pressed softly upon her, chewing betel, and appraising the value of her investments, and little Mrs. Gasper noted them too from the other side of the room. Lady Scott was most kind in showing dear Mrs. Church desirable purchases, and made, herself, conspicuously more than the wife of the Lieutenant-Governor. On every hand a native lady said, "Buy something!" with an accent less expressive of entreaty than of resentful expectation. One of the emancipated went behind a door and made up the total of Mrs. Church's expenditure. She came out again looking discontented: Lady Spence the year before had spent half as much again.

Mrs. Church felt as she drove away that she had left behind her an injury which might properly find redress under a Regulation.

She was alone, Lady Scott having to go on to a meeting of the "Board" with Mrs. Gasper. The disc of pink-and-white roses rolled about with the easy motion of the barouche, on the opposite seat. It was only half-past four, and the sun was still making strong lines with the tawdry flat-roofed yellow shops that huddled along the crowded interminable streets. She looked out and saw a hundred gold-

bellied wasps hovering over a tray of glistening sweetmeats. Next door a woman with her red cloth pulled over her head, and her naked brown baby on her hip, paused and bought a measure of parched corn from a bunnia, who lolled among his grain heaps a fat invitation to hunger. Then came the square dark hole of Abdul Rahman, where he sat in his spectacles and sewed, with his long lean legs crossed in front of him, and half a dozen red-beaked love-birds in a wicker cage to keep him company. And then the establishment of Saddanath Mookerjee, announcing in a dazzling fringe of black letters:

PAINS FEVER AND DISEASES CURED
WHILE YOU WAIT

She looked at it all as she rolled by with a little tender smile of reconnaissance. The old fascination never failed her; the people and their doings never became common facts. Nevertheless she was very tired. The crowd seethed along in the full glare of the afternoon, hawking, disputing, gesticulating. The burden of their talk – the naked coolies, the shrill-jabbering women with loads of bricks upon their heads, the sleek baboos in those European shirts the nether hem of which no canon of propriety has ever taught them to confine – the burden of their talk reached her where she sat, and it was all of *paisa*¹ and *rupia*, the eternal dominant note of the bazar. She closed her eyes and tried to put herself into relation with a life bounded by the rim of a copper coin. She was certainly very tired. When she looked again a woman stooped over one of the city standpipes and made a cup with her hand and gave her little son to drink. He was a very beautiful little son, with a string of blue beads round his neck and a silver anklet on each of his fat brown legs, and as he caught her hand with his baby fingers the mother smiled over him in her pride.

Judith Church suddenly leaned back among her cushions very close to tears. “It would have been better,” she said to herself – “so much better,” as she opened her eyes widely and tried to think about something else. There was her weekly dinner-party of forty that night, and she was to go down with the Bishop. Oh, well! that was better than Sir Peter Bloomsbury. She hoped Captain Thrush had not forgotten to ask some people who could sing – and *not* Miss Nellie Vansittart. She smiled a little as she thought how Captain Thrush had made Nellie Vansittart’s pretty voice an excuse for asking her and her people twice already this month. She must see that Captain Thrush was not on duty the afternoon of Mrs. Vansittart’s *musicale*. She felt indulgent towards Captain Thrush and Nellie Vansittart; she give that young lady plenary absolution for the monopoly of her lieutenant on the Belvedere Thursdays; she thought of them by their Christian names. Then to-morrow – to-morrow she opened the *café chantant* for the Sailors’ Home, and they dined at the Fort with the General. On Wednesday there was the Eurasian Female Orphans’ prize-giving, and the dance on board the *Boetia*. On Friday a “Lady Dufferin” meeting – or was it the Dhurrumtollah Self-Help Society, or the Sisters’ Mission? – she must look it up in her book. And, sandwiched in somewhere, she knew there was a German bacteriologist and a lecture on astronomy. She put up both her slender hands in her black gloves and yawned; remembering at the same time that it was ten days since she had seen Lewis Ancram. Her responsibilities, when he mocked at them with her, seemed light and amusing. He gave her strength and stimulus: she was very frank with herself in confessing how much she depended upon him.

¹ Halfpence.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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