

DIVER MAUD

CAPTAIN

DESMOND, V.C.

Maud Diver
Captain Desmond, V.C.

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Diver M.

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Maud Diver

Captain Desmond, V.C

*"One who never turned his back, but marched breast
forward,
Never doubted clouds would break;
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong
would triumph;
Held, we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, Sleep –
to wake."*

– Robert Browning.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In revising and partially rewriting my novel, 'Captain Desmond, V.C.', I have been glad to make good the opportunity afforded me of bringing the Aftermath nearer to my original conception than it was in its first form. The three short chapters now substituted for the one final scene are therefore, in essence, no innovation. They represent more or less what I conceived at the time, but suppressed through fear of making my book too long; and thereby risked upsetting the balance of sympathy, which I hope the fresh chapters may tend to restore.

M. D.

BOOK I

"If we impinge, never so lightly, on the life of a fellow-mortal, the touch of our personality, like the ripple of a stone cast into a pond, widens and widens, in unending circles, through the æons, till the far-off gods themselves cannot tell where action ceases." – Kipling.

CHAPTER I. JUDGE FOR YOURSELF

"Do we move ourselves, or are moved by an Unseen Hand at a game?"
– Tennyson.

Honor Meredith folded her arms upon the window-ledge of the carriage and looked out into the night: a night of strange, unearthly beauty.

The full moon hung low in the west like a lamp. A chequered mantle of light and shadow lay over the mountain-barrier of India's north-western frontier, and over the desolate levels through which the train, with its solitary English passenger, sauntered at the rate of seven miles an hour. Even this degree of speed was clearly something of an achievement, attainable only by incessant halting to take breath – for ten or fifteen minutes – at embryo stations: a platform, a shelter, and a few unhappy-looking out-buildings set down in a land of death and silence – a profitless desert, hard as the nether millstone and unfruitful as the grave.

During these pauses the fret and jar of the labouring train gave place to a babel of voices – shouting, expostulating, denouncing in every conceivable key. For the third-class passenger in the East is nothing if not vociferous, and the itch of travel has penetrated even to these outskirts of empire.

Sleep, except in broken snatches, was a blessing past praying for, and as the moon swung downward to the hills, Honor Meredith had settled herself at the open window, to watch the lifeless wastes glide silently past, and await the coming of dawn.

She had been journeying thus, with only moon and stars, and unfamiliar scenes of earth for company, since eight o'clock; and morning was near at hand. The informal civilisation of Rawal Pindi lay fifty miles behind her; and five miles ahead lay Kushalghur, a handful of buildings on the south bank of the Indus, where the narrow line of railway came abruptly to an end. Beyond the Indus a lone wide cart-road stretched, through thirty miles of boulder-strewn desert, to the little frontier station of Kohat.

For six years it had been Honor's dream to cross the Indus and join her favourite brother, the second-in-command of a Punjab cavalry regiment; to come into touch with an India other than the light-hearted India of luxury and smooth sailing, which she had enjoyed as only daughter of General Sir John Meredith, K.C.B., and now, with the completion of her father's term of service, her dream had become an almost incredible reality.

It was not without secret qualms of heart and conscience that the General had yielded to her wish. For frontier life in those earlier times still preserved its distinctive flavour of isolation and hazard, which has been the making of its men, and the making or marring of its women; and which the northward trend of the "fire-carriage" has almost converted into a thing of the past. But sympathy with her mettlesome spirit, which was of his own bestowing, had outweighed Sir John's anxiety. On the eve of sailing he had despatched her with his blessing and, by way of practical accessory, a handsome revolver, which he had taught her to use as accurately as a man.

And now, while she sat alone in the mellow moonlight of early morning, within a few miles of the greatest river of the Punjab, not even the pain of recent parting could lessen the thrill of independence and adventure, that quickened her pulses, and stirred the deep waters of her soul.

At five-and-twenty this girl still remained heart-whole, as at nineteen: still looked confidently forward to the best that life has to give. For, despite a strong practical strain in her nature, she was an idealist at the core. She could not understand that temper of mind which sets out to buy a gold watch, and declines upon a silver one because the other is not instantly attainable. She would have the best or none: and, with the enviable assurance of youth, she never doubted but that the best would be forthcoming in good time.

For this cause, no doubt, she had failed to make the brilliant match tacitly expected of her by a large circle of friends ever since her arrival in the country. None the less, she had gone cheerfully on her way, untrammelled by criticism, quite unaware of failure, and eternally interested in the manifold drama of Indian and Anglo-Indian life. Her father and four soldier brothers had set her standard of manhood, and had set it high; and although in the past eight years many men had been passionately convinced of their ability to satisfy her needs of heart and brain, not one among them had succeeded in convincing Sir John Meredith's clear-sighted daughter.

But thought of all these things was far from her as she watched the moon dip to the jagged peaks that shouldered the stars along the western horizon. The present held her; the future beckoned with an encouraging finger; and she had no quarrel with the past.

By now the moon's last rim formed a golden sickle behind a blunt shoulder of rock; while over the eastward levels the topaz-yellow of an Indian dawn rushed at one stride to the zenith of heaven. In the clear light the girl's beauty took on a new distinctness, a new living charm. The upward-sweeping mass of her hair showed the softness of bronze, save where the sun burnished it to copper. Breadth of brow, and the strong moulding of her nose and chin, suggested powers rather befitting a man than a woman. But in the eyes and lips the woman triumphed – eyes blue-grey under very straight brows, and lips that even in repose preserved a rebellious tendency to lift at the corners. From her father, and a long line of fighting ancestors, Honor had gotten the large build of a large nature; the notable lift of her head; and the hot blood, coupled with endurance, that stamps the race current coin across the world.

A jolt of unusual violence, flinging her against the carriage door, announced conclusively her arrival at the last of the embryo stations, and straightway the stillness of dawn was affronted by a riot of life and sound. Men, women, and children, cooking-pots and bundles, overflowed on to the sunlit platform; and through their midst, with a dignified aloofness that only flowers to perfection in the East, Honor Meredith's tall *chuprassee*¹ made his way to her carriage window. Beside him, in a scarlet coat over full white skirts, cowered the distressed figure of an old ayah, who for twenty years had been a pillar of the household of Meredith.

"Hai, hai, Miss Sahib!" she broke out, lifting wrinkled hands in protest. "How was it possible to sleep in such a night of strange noises, and of many devils let loose; the rail *gharri*² itself being the worst devil of them all! Behold, your Honour hath brought us to an evil country, without water and without food. A country of murderers and barefaced women. Not once, since the leaving of Pindi, have I dared close an eyelid lest some unknown evil befall me."

A statement which set her companion smiling under the shelter of his moustache and beard, at thought of the many times he had saved her slumbering form from collision against the woodwork of the train. But, with the courtesy of his kind, he forebore to discomfort her by mention of such trifling details.

"It is necessary to cross the river on foot, Miss Sahib," he said: and without more ado Honor fared forth into the untempered sunlight, closely followed by her two attendants, and a string of half-naked coolies bearing her luggage.

From the dreary little terminus a cart-track sloped to the river, which at this point sweeps southward with a strong rush of water, its steep banks forming a plateau on either hand. The narrow gorge was spanned by a rough bridge of boats lashed firmly together; and on the farther side Honor found a lone dak bungalow, its homely dovecot and wheeling pigeons striking a friendly note amid the callousness of the surrounding country.

An armed orderly, who had been taking his ease in the verandah, sprang smartly to his feet and saluted; and behind him, on the threshold, a red-bearded khansamah, who might have walked

¹ Government servant.

² Carriage.

straight out of an Old Testament picture-book, proffered obsequious welcome to the *Major Sahib's Miss*. Honor bestowed a glance of approval upon her new protector, whose natural endowments were enhanced by the picturesque uniform of the Punjab Cavalry. A khaki tunic, reaching almost to his knees, was relieved by heavy steel shoulder-chains and a broad kummerband of red and blue. These colours were repeated in the peaked cap and voluminous turban, while over the kummerband was buckled the severe leathern sword-belt of the West.

The man held out a letter; and Honor, summarily dismissing the khansamah, – who thrust himself upon her notice with the insistent meekness of his kind, – passed on into the one sitting-room, with its bare table and half-dozen dilapidated chairs. Balancing herself on the former, she broke the seal with impatient fingers, for the sight of her brother's handwriting gladdened her like a hand-clasp across thirty miles of space.

Then she started, and all the light went out of her eyes.

"Dearest Girl" (she read), —

"Just a line to save you from a shock at sight of me. The old trouble – Peshawar fever. Mackay has run me to earth at last and insisted on a Board. I'm afraid it's a case of a year's sick leave at home, bad luck to it. But I see no reason to throw up our fine plan altogether. If you would like to wait out here for me, the Desmonds will gladly give you a home. He made the offer at once, and I know I couldn't leave you in better hands. Full details when we meet. It's a hard blow for us both; but you have grit enough for two, and here's a chance to prove it. Hurry up that tonga-driver. – Your loving,
John."

Honor read the short letter through twice, then, with less of elasticity in her step, sought refreshment of mind and body in the hot water awaiting her in the next room.

An hour later the tonga was well on its way, speeding at a hand-gallop over the dead level of road, with never an incident of shade, or a spear-point of green, to soften the forbidding face of it; with never a sound to shatter the sunlit stillness, save the three-fold sound of their going – the clatter of hoofs, the clank and rattle of the tonga-bar rising and falling to a tune of its own making, and the brazen-throated twang of the horn, which the tonga-drivers of Upper India have elevated to a fine art.

And on either hand, to the utmost limit of vision, lay the emptiness of the desert, bounded by unfriendly hills. A pitiless country, where the line of duty smites the eye at every turn; the line of beauty being conspicuous only by its absence. A country that straightens the back, and strings up nerve and muscle; where men learn to endure hardness, and carry their lives in their hands with cheerful unconcern, expecting and receiving small credit for either from those whose safety they ensure, and who know little, and care less, about matters so scantily relevant to their immediate comfort or concern.

Honor had elected to sit in front by the strapping Pathan driver; while Parbutti, ayah, her flow of speech frozen at its source by the near neighbourhood of a sword and loaded carbine, put as much space between the orderly and her own small person as the narrow back-seat of the tonga would permit.

The English girl's eyes had in them now less of dreaminess, and more of thought. The abrupt change in her outlook brought Evelyn Desmond's pretty, effective figure to the forefront of her mind. For ten years, – the period of Honor's education in England, – the two girls had lived and learned together as sisters; and, despite natures radically opposed, a very real love had sprung up between them. They had not met, however, since Evelyn Dacre's somewhat hasty marriage to Captain Desmond, V.C., a brother officer of John Meredith; a soldier of no little promise and distinction, and a true frontiersman, both by heritage and inclination, since every Desmond who came to India went straight to the Border as a matter of course. Honor knew the man by hearsay only, but she knew

every inch of her friend's character, and the knowledge gave her food for much interested speculation. There are few things more puzzling than the marriages of our friends, unless it be our own.

But after the first stoppage to change horses, Honor flung meditation to the winds, and turned her eyes and mind upon the life of the road. For, as day took completer possession of the heavens, it became evident that life, of a leisurely, intermittent sort, flourished even upon this highway to the other end of nowhere.

A line of camels, strung together like a grotesque living necklace, sauntered past, led by a loose-robed Pathan, as supercilious of aspect as the shuffling brutes who bobbed and gurgled in his wake. Or it might be a group of bullock-carts going down to Kushalghur, to meet consignments of stores and all the minor necessities of life, – for in those days Kohat was innocent of shops. At rare intervals, colourless mud hamlets – each with its warlike watch-tower – huddled close to the road as if for company and protection. Here the monotonous round of life was already astir. Women of a remarkable height and grace, in dark-blue draperies peculiar to the Frontier, went about their work with superb movement of untrammelled limbs, and groups of shiny bronze babies shrilled to the heartsome notes of the tonga-horn. There were also whitewashed police *chokhis*,³ where blue-coated, yellow-trousered policemen squatted, and smoked, and spat, in glorious idleness, from dawn to dusk, and exchanged full-flavoured compliments with the Pathan driver in passing. For the rest there was always the passionless serenity of the desert, with its crop of thriftless thorn-bushes, whose berries showed like blood-drops pricked from the hard heart of the land; and beyond the desert, looming steadily nearer with every mile of progress, the rugged majesty of the hills.

As the third hour of their journeying drew to an end, a sudden vision of green, like an emerald dropped on the drab face of the plain, brought a flush to Honor's cheeks, a light into her eyes.

"It is Kohat, Miss Sahib," the driver announced with a comprehensive wave of his hand.

A breath of ice-cool air came to her from an open watercourse at the roadside, and the fragrance of a hundred roses from the one beautiful garden in the station that surrounded the Deputy-Commissioner's house. They passed for a while between overarching trees, but the glimpse of Eden was short-lived. At the avenue's end they came abruptly into the cantonment itself: stony, barren, unlovely, the dead level broken here and there by rounded hummocks unworthy to be called hills. On the east, behind a protective mud-wall, lay the native city; on the north and west, the bungalows of the little garrison – flat-roofed, square-shouldered buildings, with lizard-haunted slits of windows fifteen feet above the ground, set in the midst of bare, pebble-strewn compounds; though here and there some fortunate boasted a thirsty-looking tree, or a handful of rose-bushes blooming bravely in this, the Indian month of roses.

At the foot of the highest hummock, crowned with buildings of uniform ugliness, the tonga-driver drew rein and indicated a steep pathway.

"The bungalow of the Major Sahib is above," he said, "and the Presence must needs walk."

The Presence did more than walk. In the verandah at the path's end a tall figure stood awaiting her; and before Parbutti and the orderly had collected her belongings, she was in John Meredith's arms.

The remarkable likeness between the two was very apparent as they stood together thus; though the man's face was marred by ill-health, and by the distressing prominence of his eye-bones and strongly-marked jaw. He led her into the dining-room with more of lover-like than brother-like tenderness; for despite his forty years no woman had yet dethroned this beautiful sister of his from the foremost place in his heart.

He set her down at the breakfast-table, himself poured out her tea, and dismissed the kitmutgar as soon as might be, Honor watching him the while with troubled solicitude in her eyes.

"It's crushing, John!" she said at length. "And you do look horribly ill."

³ Police stations.

"Well, my dear girl, is it likely I'd desert the regiment, and forfeit a year of your good company unless devils within were pretty imperative?"

She smiled and shook her head.

"But you ought to have told us about it sooner, ... me, at any rate. When did you know the decision of the Board?"

"Yesterday. Desmond was with me at the time. I didn't write before that about things being uncertain, for fear the good old man should take fright and whisk you off home. And I thought that even if I couldn't square the Board, you'd find waiting out here for me the lesser evil."

"Very much the lesser evil. What a barbarian people at home would think me if they knew it! And you must go, ... when?"

"In four or five days; as soon as my leave is sanctioned."

"And, naturally, I stay here with you till then."

"Well, ... partially. But when your heavy luggage came yesterday, it seemed simpler to send it straight to the Desmonds, and that you should settle in and sleep over there. We're all sitting in one another's pockets here, and you and I can be together all day, never fear. Will that arrangement suit your Royal Highness?"

"My Royal Highness is as wax in your hands," she answered, with a swift softening of face and voice. "I won't start being autocratic till I get you back again. Only – sit down at once, please. You don't look fit to stand."

He obeyed with unconcealed willingness, at the same time handing her a note.

"It is from Mrs Desmond. She is expecting you over there this afternoon."

Honor looked mutinous.

"But I want to stay with you. I shall see plenty of Evelyn later."

"Still, I think we must spare her an hour to-day. The little woman's keen to see you, and I'd like Desmond to feel that we appreciate his prompt kindness. He'll be down at the Lines all the afternoon. It's our day for tent-pegging. You might ride down with Mrs Desmond, and bring me news of what my men are doing. I'm mad at not being able to be there myself."

She deserted her breakfast, and knelt down beside him.

"Dear man! Of course I'll go and find out all about it from Captain Desmond. I needn't stay long to do that."

"No. You can say you want to get back to me. Desmond will understand."

"He's rather a fine fellow, isn't he?"

"One of the best I know. The last man who ought to be hampered by a woman."

"I might take that as a dismissal! How about yourself!"

"Ah, that's quite another matter." And he laid a hand upon the soft abundance of her hair. "Mine is only a two years' contract. And, in any case, *I* would never allow myself to be handicapped by a woman – not even by you. But I don't feel so certain about Desmond."

"Poor little Evelyn! Do you mean, ... is there any question of her really hampering him, ... seriously?"

Meredith hesitated. A half-smile hovered in his tired eyes.

"As I'm strongly against the whole affair, and have hardly forgiven him yet for marrying at all, it is fairer for me to say nothing about her one way or the other. You must judge for yourself."

CHAPTER II. I WANT TO BE FIRST

*"A breath of light, a pulse of tender fire,
Too dear for doubt, too driftless for desire."*

– Swinburne.

Sixteen months earlier, Evelyn Dacre – having come out to India with a party of tourist friends – had chanced to spend Christmas week at Lahore: a week which brings half the Punjab together for purposes of festivity and sport. Here, by some mysterious process, which no science will ever be able to fathom or explain, she had cast an instantaneous and unaccountable spell over a man of rare singleness of purpose, whose heart was set to court action, danger, hardship in every conceivable form: a man for whom a girl-wife fresh out from "Home" seemed as hazardous an investment as could well be imagined.

But with all his fine qualities of head and heart, Theo Desmond was little given to cool deliberation in the critical moments of life. This chance-met girl, fragile as a flower and delicately tinted as a piece of porcelain, full of enthusiasm for her new surroundings and of a delight half shy, half spontaneous in the companionship of a man so unlike the *blasé*, self-centred youths of her limited experience, had, for the time being, swept him off his feet. And men are apt to do unaccountable things during those hot-headed moments when the feet are actually off the ground.

A moonlight picnic; an hour of isolated wandering in a garden of tombs; the witchery of the moment; the word too much; the glance that lingered to a look; – and the irrevocable was upon them. Desmond had returned to the Frontier, to a circle of silently amazed brother officers; and in less than three months from their time of meeting the two had become man and wife.

Honor, having been away in England at the time, had had but a second-hand hearing of the whole affair; and for all the keenness of her present disappointment, a natural spark of interest was aroused in her at the prospect of spending a year with this unequally yoked husband and wife.

She found her friend awaiting her in the verandah: a mere slip of womanhood, in a grey habit.

"Oh, *there* you are at last, Honor!" she cried eagerly. "It's grand to see you again! I'm dreadfully sorry about Major Meredith – I am, truly. But it's just lovely getting you on a long visit like this. Come in and have tea before we start."

And taking possession of the girl with both hands, she led her into the house, talking ceaselessly as she went.

"It's really very charming of you two to be so pleased to have me," Honor said quietly, as she settled herself, nothing loth, in the spaciousness of Captain Desmond's favourite chair. Then, because her head still hummed with the clatter of travel, she fell silent; following with her eyes the movements of this graceful girl-wife, whose engaging air of frankness and simplicity was discounted, at times, by an odd lack of both dimly shadowed in the blue-green eyes.

Evelyn Desmond's eyes were, not without reason, her dearest bit of vanity. The tint of the clear iris suggested sea shallows on a day of light cloud – more green than blue; yet with just enough of the sky's own colour to lend the charm of a constant variability, that harmonised admirably with her iridescent changes of mood.

Honor Meredith, who understood her curious mingling of charm and unsatisfactoriness better than any one else in the world, noted her afresh, inwardly and outwardly, with the result that she desired more than ever to know the man who had been hardy enough to place his life's happiness in the hollow of Evelyn's clinging, incompetent hands.

At this juncture Mrs Desmond sank on to a low stool beside her, set her own cup and plate unceremoniously on the carpet, and laid a caressing hand upon her knee.

"It *does* feel like old times," she said. "And I so badly want to show you to Theo."

The young simplicity of the words brought a very soft light into Honor's eyes.

"I promised John I would go down just in order to be 'shown to Theo,'" she answered smiling. "But you must put off showing me to the rest till another day. I'm a little tired: and I can't keep my mind off John for very long just now."

"You still love him better than any one in the world, then?"

"Isn't the fact of my coming here to stay two years sufficient proof of that?"

"The very greatest proof imaginable!" Mrs Desmond flung out her hands with a pretty, characteristic gesture. "I'm only wondering if you know what you've let yourself in for? I thought India was a lovely placed *till* I came here. Theo warned me it wouldn't be a bit like Pindi or Lahore. But that didn't seem to matter, so long as I had him. Only I am so seldom *able* to have him! The regiment swamps *everything*. The men are always in uniform, and always at it; and the aggravating part is that they actually like that better than anything."

Honor laid her hand over the one that rested on her knee. She saw both sides of the picture with equal vividness.

"What a dire calamity!" she said gently. "I am afraid that on the Frontier, if a man is keen, his wife is bound to stand second; and if only she will accept the fact, it must surely be happier for both in the long-run."

Mrs Desmond looked up at her with pathetic eyes.

"But I don't *want* to accept the fact. I want to be first always: and I ought to be. It's easy enough for *you* to talk, because you haven't a notion how nice Theo is! When you've married a man like that, and buried yourself in a howling wilderness because of him, he ought to belong more to you than to his sacred Frontier Force! But Theo seems to be the private property of half the regiment! There's his chief friend Major Wyndham, and the Boy, his subaltern, he thinks the world of them; and they seem to live in the house. Then there's a tiresome old Ressaldar always coming over to do Persian with him for his Higher Proficiency exam; and I don't find it half amusing to be one of a mixed crowd like that!"

Her whimsical air of woe disarmed all save the mildest disapproval. It was one of Evelyn Desmond's unfair advantages that she always did manage to disarm disapproval, even in her least admirable moments; and the smile deepened in Honor's eyes.

"It seems to me, Evelyn," she said quietly, "that your husband must be a very large-hearted man."

"Why, of course! That's just the trouble, ... don't you see?"

"Yes, I do see; and I am woman enough to sympathise. But it will do you no harm, dear, to be one of a crowd, and to get out of the glass case you have been kept under ever since you were born. Show me this wonderful Theo now. People's faces tell me a great deal, you know; and you have roused my curiosity."

"Look round and see if you can recognise him," was the laughing answer.

There were some half-dozen photographs of men, in uniform and out of it, set about the incongruous room; but the girl's eyes were speedily caught and riveted by a full-length presentment of a Punjab cavalryman, which stood, solitary and conspicuous, on the upright piano. She rose and went quickly towards it.

"I choose here," she said decisively. "Am I right?" And seeing that Evelyn nodded, she went on: "What a very remarkable picture. So extraordinarily alive! One can see how he hates standing still inside that frame!"

Then she fell into a long silence: for she was a practised observer of men and things, and the face before her compelled attention. The keynote of the whole was vigour: not mere impetuosity, though that was present also, but a sustained, indwelling vigour, that keeps endeavour bright.

Evelyn stood watching her in no little wonderment, awaiting further comment.

"Don't you like him?" she asked at length.

"Decidedly; if that picture does him justice."

"Well, come on down to the tent-pegging, and find out for yourself."

From the bungalows crowning the mound a bare road sloped northward to the cavalry lines. Along it the two women rode at a foot's pace; for Evelyn still had much to say, and the girl was a notable listener. But even so the parade-ground below them came rapidly into view – a level expanse of brown earth, hard as a usurer's heart, varied only by lines of featureless mud huts, and backed by the dragon's teeth of the hills, brown also, save where sharply defined shadows broke the prevailing monotony of hue.

But the foreground of this toneless setting vibrated with life, movement, colour.

Groups of native troopers, in blue belted tunics and turbans of blue and gold, occupied the central space. English officers, in undress uniform, rode to and fro among them, criticising, encouraging, and generally directing the course of events. In an open *shamianah*,⁴ eight or ten men divided their attention between a table at the back of the tent and the four ladies of the station, who perforce converted military events into those friendly gatherings which are the mainstay of Anglo-Indian life. Native onlookers, of all races and ranks, formed a mosaic border to the central theme; and a jumble of rollicking Irish airs from the Sikh band set Honor's foot tapping the air with brisk precision.

"Wait, Evelyn," she said. "I would like to see those four Pathans take the pegs from here. One gets the effect better from rising ground."

And Evelyn, whose knowledge of effects was limited to hats and hairdressing, drew rein obediently, her eyes probing the crowd for the one figure, to whom the rest were mere accessories, and rather troublesome accessories at that.

But Honor's eyes and mind were set upon the four Pathans drawn up in line at the starting-point, the sunlight flashing from their lance-heads, and from every link of eight steel shoulder-chains; their faces inscrutable; their eyes points of living fire. A pathway of straw softened the ground for galloping, and in the midst of it four pegs awaited the furious onset.

The horses, all eagerness to be off, tossed impatient heads, straining impotently at the tightened rein. On a given word they sprang forward with a thundering rush of hoofs, swooping down upon the pegs at lightning speed, the men's faces level with the flying manes, their lance-heads skimming the ground. Followed the stirring moment of impact, the long-drawn shout, steadily rising to a yell of triumph, as four lances whirled aloft, each bearing the coveted morsel of wood spiked through the centre.

The girl drew a deep breath, and her face glowed with that pagan exultation in bodily strength and prowess, which all the refining fires of civilisation will never burn out of the human heart. But as she turned with praise on her lips, Evelyn leaned eagerly towards her.

"Theo has seen us. He is coming up here. Look!"

And Honor looked accordingly.

A man on a superb bay "waler" had detached himself from the crowd, and was coming towards them at a swinging trot, sitting the horse as though he were part of the animal. Honor realised at a glance that here was that stimulating thing, a positive personality alive to the finger-tips, realised also with what success the photographer had caught and rendered the living essence of the man. Desmond was dark as his wife was fair, though a hint of chestnut in his moustache, and a peculiar light in

⁴ Marquee.

the hazel-grey eyes, suggested fire not far below the surface. The whole face was stamped with that sovereign quality of sympathy which, even in a world of failure, never fails of its reward.

His wife effected an introduction in her own ingenuous fashion. "There, Theo, ... this is Honor, that you have heard so much about."

Desmond saluted.

"I'm uncommonly glad to meet you, Miss Meredith," he said; but before Honor could reply Evelyn made haste to interpose.

"Theo, ... I can't have you calling her Miss Meredith! She's just like my sister, and you must simply be Honor and Theo, ... d'you see?"

Desmond's eyes showed a flicker of amusement.

"Perhaps you'll allow us to shake hands first," he suggested, and the friendliness of his grasp dispelled the sense of isolation that weighed upon the girl at thought of her brother's departure.

"How did that last performance strike you? Pretty good, wasn't it?"

"Splendid. They went by like a wall. Such magnificent riding."

"They were your brother's men. Wish he could have seen them. He's so tremendously keen. They've tied with my Sikhs, so there'll be an exciting finish. Won't you come down and see it out?"

"I think not, thanks, if it doesn't seem unfriendly. I really only came because John and Evelyn wished it, just to make your acquaintance and see how things were going, and I would honestly like to go straight back to him now, ... if I may. He said you would understand."

"He was right. I'll see you to the gate myself. Go on down to the *shamianah*, Ladybird, the Boy is looking out for you. I'll not be gone long."

And with a rebellious crumpling of her forehead Evelyn obeyed.

"I am afraid the Major's news must have been rather a shock to you, Miss Meredith," Desmond went on, as their horses mounted the slope. "But we've all been expecting it this long while. He takes too little leave and steadily overworks himself, ... that's the truth. But then, ... you should see what he's done for the regiment in the last ten years!"

The spark of enthusiasm in the man's tone struck an answering spark from his companion.

"That's the true way to look at it," she declared warmly. "So many people simply call him a fool. It's the fashion to sneer at enthusiasm in these days."

"We don't sneer at it in this part of the world," Desmond replied with quiet emphasis. "I see now why the Major said I should find you the right sort for the Frontier and a help to ... my Evelyn. I have transplanted her to a very rough soil, I only hope she's fit to stand it."

"I think so. She has been too carefully sheltered till now; and it's just a matter of adapting herself to fresh conditions. You may count on me to do all I can for her while I am here."

"Your name is sufficient guarantee for that!" he answered simply; and the implied compliment to her brother quickened every pulse in her body.

They parted at Major Meredith's gate, Desmond promising to report the result of the final contest on his way home; and the girl sat watching him thoughtfully till a dip in the road hid him from view.

CHAPTER III. THE BIG CHAPS

"Love that is loud or light in all men's ears,

* * * * *

That binds on all men's feet, or chains, or wings."

– Swinburne.

Honor woke early, springing from dreamless sleep to alert wakefulness, as is the way of vivid natures, and the first sight that greeted her was the huddled form of Parbutti, her chin between her knees, her dark eyes bright and watchful.

Honor's smile was answered by a flash of light across the old woman's face as she arose and salaamed to the ground.

"Behold, while the Miss Sahib slept like a little child, I have laid out the riding-gear as of custom, and now I go to prepare the *terail*⁵ for *chota hazri*.⁶ They are not ill folk in this compound, Hazúr; and there goes but one word among them, that our Sahib is a diamond fit for a king's turban, understanding the heart of black men, giving no shame words, neither smiting with his foot as do many officer-sahibs. It is well for us, who come strangers to a country of murderers, to be of the household of such a Sahib. Nay, then, child of my heart, I will cease from idle talk, ... it is an order. Doth not my pearl and the light of my life await her *chota hazri*?"

And the old woman, whose garrulity was as dust in the balance when weighed against twenty years of faithful service, shuffled out of the room.

Half an hour later Honor was in the saddle – a gallant figure in well-cut brown habit and white helmet, the sunlight finding out gleams of bronze in her abundant hair, while all about her shone the uncompromising blue and gold of a mid-March morning – fresh without sharpness, and fragrant with the ethereal fragrance of dawn.

She followed the downward road, noting a landmark here and there for guidance. Her delight was in the rhythm of movement; in the waiting stillness of earth and sky; the momentous pause between all that has been, and all that shall be, which gives a dramatic sense of responsibility to the day's first hours.

Her eyes rejoiced in the least detail of form and light and colour; in the signs of reviving life; the alert ubiquitous sentries, the sharp alternations of sun and shadow on hills naked and unpromising as the harsh face of poverty; hills that for all time have had but one gift for the giving – "not peace, but a sword." From the cavalry Lines behind her the trumpet call to "stables" set the blood stirring in her veins, with that peculiar thrill which no other instrument can produce. The very spirit of battle breathes in the sound.

An expectant interest glowed within her like a star. It was her great good-fortune to be blessed with that poetic understanding which is neither deceived by custom nor dulled by repetition, which sees all things – even the most familiar – virginally fresh, as on the morning of creation.

Her random wanderings brought her to a stretch of un-metalled road, and at the road's edge, some few hundred yards away a man on a white horse had drawn rein at sight of her. Instantly her thought alighted on Evelyn's husband, but nearer view revealed a different type of man – taller, and equally erect, yet lacking in the suggestion of force and virility that emanated from Captain Desmond,

⁵ Tray.

⁶ Small breakfast.

even in repose. With a rapidity born of much practice Honor took stock of him, from his helmet to his boots, as he sat awaiting her, with a coolness which at once amused her and piqued her interest. A slim square chin, indeterminate colouring, and eyes of a remarkable thoughtfulness under very level brows, went to make up a satisfying, if not very striking whole.

"A modest, understanding sort of man," was Honor's mental verdict. "A student every inch of him. I wonder how in the world he comes to be a soldier."

By this time Dilkusha had been drawn up, and the man who ought not to have been a soldier was saluting her with a singularly charming smile, that began in the eyes, and broke up the gravity of the face as sunshine breaks up a cloud.

"You must be Miss Meredith," he said. "One doesn't meet a new face haphazard in Kohat, and ... you are wonderfully like your brother. I am Major Wyndham. You may have heard the name?"

"Why, ... yes. You are Captain Desmond's friend."

"You couldn't give a completer description of me! I hear you are to put up with them till Meredith comes back."

"Yes. They have been quite charming about it, and I am so glad not to be driven away from the Frontier at once. I have been longing to get to it for years."

He watched her while she spoke, his quietly observant eyes missing no detail of her face.

"And now you have got here, I wonder how it will strike you after the imposing official circles of Simla and Lahore. You'll find none of the 'beer and skittles' of the country up here. But the Frontier has its own fascination all the same; especially when a man has the spirit of it in his blood. Desmond, for instance, wouldn't give a brass farthing for life out of sight of those hard-featured hills. Do you know him and his wife at all?"

"I never saw him till yesterday, except in the distance at polo matches. But I have known her since she was quite a child."

"And I have known Desmond since he was thirteen. Rather odd! You can't fail to be good friends with *him* Miss Meredith."

"Are you as rabid as my brother and the Colonel because the poor man has dared to marry?" she asked, with an incurable directness which to some natures was a stumbling-block, and to others her chiefest charm. "It seems to be a part of the regimental creed."

"It is. And I subscribe to it ... *as* a creed. But my belief has not yet been tried in the fire. Desmond is the keenest soldier I know; yet he has seen fit to marry. I have an immense faith in him, and, whatever others may think, I prefer to reserve my judgment."

"If only a few more of us had the wisdom to do that," the girl said softly. "How much easier life would be for every one!"

Wyndham smiled.

"I have a notion that life isn't meant to be easy," he said. "And the fact remains that Meredith and the Colonel are right in principle. Few men are strong enough to stand the strain of being pulled two ways at once, and marriage is bound to be a grave risk for a man whose heart is set on soldiering – Frontier soldiering above all. But then Desmond loves a risk better than anything else in life."

And with an abrupt laugh he dismissed the subject.

"I must be going on now," he added. "But no doubt we shall meet again soon. I am constantly over at the bungalow."

And, saluting her again, he trotted leisurely northward to the cavalry Lines.

His thoughts as he went hovered about the girl. The mere picture she left upon his brain was not one to be lightly set aside by a man with an ardent eye for the beautiful, and a spirit swift to discern those hidden elements which gave to Honor Meredith's beauty its distinctive quality and charm.

Some men are born with a genius for looking on at life, a form of genius not to be despised. They are of the type from which great naturalists, great philosophers are made; men quick to perceive, slow to assert; men whose large patience rests upon freedom from the fret of personal desire. Of such

was Paul Wyndham, and in his accepted rôle of onlooker he fell to pondering upon the new element in his own immediate drama.

If only Desmond had chosen for his helpmate such a girl as Miss Meredith, how different might have been the regiment's feelings in regard to the unwelcome fact of his marriage. Yet Wyndham was aware of an instant recoil from the idea, aware that he personally preferred matters as they stood. With which conclusion he spurred his horse to a canter, as though he could thus outrun the quickened current of thought and feeling which this unlooked-for meeting had set stirring in his brain.

Meantime Honor Meredith had fallen in with another member of her newly-adopted family: – a big, raw-boned Irishwoman, who wore her curling reddish hair cropped short, answered to the name of "Frank," and dressed chronically in a serviceable skirt and covert coat, and a man's shikarri helmet. When riding, the skirt was replaced by that of a country-made habit; and in the simplest evening gown this large-featured, large-hearted woman stood a martyr confessed. For ten years she had been the only woman in a regiment of sworn bachelors; had nursed her "brother officers" whenever need arose; had shared their interests, their hardships, their amusements; till, – in the symbolism of the India she loved, – they and the regiment had become "her father and her mother, her people and her God."

At sight of Honor she hurried her grey country-bred across the road, and held out a square, loosely-gloved hand.

"It's bound to be Miss Meredith!" she exclaimed, in a pronounced brogue, with a flash of white even teeth – her sole claim to beauty. "It's very welcome you are to Kohat and to the regiment. I'm Frank Olliver, ... Captain Olliver's wife. I'll turn now and ride back a bit of the way with you. Then we can talk as we go. 'Tis the worst of bad luck about your brother. When'll he be leaving?"

"In four or five days. He moves across into our bungalow this morning. It was splendid of Captain Desmond to think of it."

"Ah, Theo's just made that way!" Then, noting a glimmer of surprise in Honor's face, her wide smile shone out once more. "Is it shocked you are because I speak of him so? Well, ... truth is, I'm a privileged person since I pulled him through typhoid seven years ago, when by rights he should have died. I'm a rare hand, anyway, at dropping the formalities with them that suit me taste. Though, by the same token, I've taken no liberties with little Mrs Desmond yet. It's queer. We don't seem to get much further with her; though we'd be glad enough to do it for Theo's sake. You mustn't mind straight speech from me, Miss Meredith. Sure I must have been born with the whole truth in me mouth, for as fast as I open me lips a bit of it slips out. I'll be finding she's your half-sister, or first cousin, or some such thing!"

Honor laughed outright. It would clearly be impossible to take amiss anything that this woman might choose to say. The kindness of her soul shone through her plain face, like sunlight through a window-pane.

"Her mother is a distant connection of ours," the girl admitted frankly. "And we were brought up for a time like sisters. It must have been rather a startling change for her from a country town at home to a Border station; and she is very young still, and very devoted to her husband."

"She is that, ... after a queer fashion of her own. But Theo's bound to make his mark on the Frontier, like his father before him; and you know the proverb, 'He travels the fastest who travels alone.' 'Tis hardly meself, though, that should be upholding such a saying as that!"

"No, indeed! No woman ought to uphold it. And, after all," Honor added, with a very becoming touch of seriousness, "there may be better things for a man than to travel fast. He may learn more by travelling slowly, don't you think? And I should imagine that fast or slow, Captain Desmond is bound to arrive in the end – Now I must turn in here, and see if John is awake. I'll come and see you when he is gone. I can spare no time for any one else till then!"

Frank Olliver beamed in unqualified approbation.

"You're just a brick, Miss Meredith," she declared with ready Irish warmth. "An' 'twas a fine wind indeed that carried you up to Kohat."

Honor found her hand enclosed in a grasp as strong as a man's; and three minutes later Mrs Olliver – whose seat on a horse was as ungainly as her hand on its mouth was perfect – had become a mere speck on the wide sunlit road.

Honor entered the hall of her new home pondering many things. She laid aside her sun helmet, and in obedience to the promptings of her interested soul turned her steps toward the drawing-room.

The door was ajar, and passing between the looped gold and white *phulkaris*, she came to a standstill; for the room was not empty.

Captain Desmond, in undress uniform, sat at the piano with his back towards her. His white helmet lay, spike downward, on the carpet; and an Aberdeen terrier – ears rigidly erect, head tilted at a critical angle – sat close beside it, watching his master with intent eyes, in which all the wisdom and sorrow of the ages seemed writ.

While the girl hesitated on the threshold, Desmond struck a succession of soft chords in a minor key; and she stood spellbound, determined to hear more. Music was no mere accomplishment to her, but a simple necessity of life; and this man possessed that rare gift of touch, which no master in the world can impart, because it is a produce neither of hand nor brain, but of the player's individual soul. Desmond's fingers were unpractised, but he gave every note its true value; and he played slowly, as though composing each chord as it came, or building it up from memory. It was almost as if he were thinking aloud; and Honor had just decided that she really had no business to be overhearing his thoughts, when an apprehensive "woof" from the Aberdeen brought them suddenly to an end.

Desmond swung round upon the music-stool, and at sight of her sprang up hastily, a dull flush showing through his tan.

"Amar Singh told me you were out," he said, as they shook hands.

"So I was. I only came in this minute. Won't you let me hear a little more, please?"

He shook his head with good-humoured decision.

"I never play to any one ... except Rob, who, being a Scots Covenanter, disapproves on principle."

"I call that selfish. It's such a rare treat to hear a man play well. I was delighted when you began. I thought pianos were unheard of up here."

"Well, ... they are hardly a legitimate item in a Frontier officer's equipment! This one was ... my mother's," he laid a hand on the instrument, as though it had been the shoulder of a friend. "The fellows sat upon me, I assure you, when I brought it out. Told me it was worse than a wife. But I've carried my point, ... wife and all. And now, perhaps you will reward me, – if I haven't been too ungracious to deserve it?"

He whisked away his solitary photo, and opened the piano.

"How do you know I play?" she asked, smiling. She liked his impetuosity of movement and speech.

"I don't know. I guessed it last night. You carry it in your head?"

"Yes; most of it."

"Real music? The big chaps?"

"Very little else, I'm afraid."

"No need to put it that way here, Miss Meredith. A sonata, please. The Pathetic."

She sat down to the piano with a little quickening of the breath and let her fingers rest a moment on the keyboard. Then – sudden, crisp, and vigorous came the crash of the opening chord.

Honor Meredith's playing was of a piece with her own nature – vivid, wholesome, impassioned. Her supple fingers drew the heart out of each wire. Yet she did not find it necessary to sway her body to and fro; but sat square and upright, her head a little lifted, as though evolving the music from her soul.

Desmond listened motionless to the opening bars; then, with a long breath of satisfaction, moved away, and fell to pacing the room.

The Scots Covenanter, scenting the joyful possibility of escape, trotted hopefully to heel: but, being a dog of discernment, speedily detected the fraud, and retired to the hearth-rug in disgust. Thence he scrutinised his master's irrational method of taking exercise, unfeigned contempt in every line of him, from nose-tip to tail.

The sonata ended, Honor let her hands fall into her lap, and sat very still. She had lost all thought of her companion in the joy of interpretation; but Desmond's voice at her side recalled her to reality.

"Thank you," he said. "I haven't heard it played like *that* ... for five years. If you can do much of this sort of thing you'll find me insatiable. We're bound to be good friends at this rate, and I see no reason why we should not comply with Ladybird's request to us. Do you, ... Honor?"

She started and flushed at the sound of her name; then turned her clear eyes full upon him, the shadow of a smile lifting the rebellious corners of her mouth.

"No reason at all, ... in good time, Captain Desmond."

He returned her look with an equal deliberation.

"Is that a hint to me to keep my distance?"

"No. Only to ... 'go slow,' if you'll forgive the expressive slang. It's so much wiser in the long-run."

"Is it? Bad luck for me. I've never managed it yet, and I doubt if I ever shall. The men of my squadron call me *Bijli-wallah Sahib*,⁷ and I didn't earn the name by going slow, ... Miss Meredith. If I have been overbold, your music was to blame. But Ladybird seemed to wish it; and, believe me, I did *not* mean it to seem like impertinence. Why, there she is herself, bless her; and we're neither of us ready for breakfast!"

⁷ *Bijli*— lightning.

CHAPTER IV. ESPECIALLY WOMEN

*"We are fearfully and wonderfully made – especially women."
– Thackeray.*

The afternoon sunlight flung lengthening shadows across the cavalry Lines, where men and native officers alike were housed in mud-plastered huts, innocent of windows; and where life was beginning to stir anew after the noontide tranquillity of the East.

The eighty horses of each troop stood, picketed with ample lengths of head and heel rope, between the lines of huts occupied by their sowars; while at the permanently open doorways squatted the men themselves, – Sikhs, Punjabi-Mahomedans, Pathans, each troop composed entirely of one or the other, – smoking, gambling, or putting final touches to their toilet in the broad light of day. The native officers alone aspired to a certain degree of privacy. Their huts were detached a little space from those that guarded the horses; and flimsy walls of grass matting, set around them, imparted a suggestion of dignity and aloofness from the common herd.

The hut of Jemadar Alla Dad Khan, of the Pathan troop of Desmond's squadron, boasted just such a matting wall, with a gateless gateway, even as in the bungalows of Sahibs; and withinsides all was very particularly set in order. There was an air of festivity in the open courtyard, on either side of which lay two smoke-grimed rooms, that made up the entire house.

For this was a red-letter day in the eyes of the Jemadar, and of Fatma Bibi, his wife, who had spent a full hour in adorning her plump person, and emphasising its charms according to the peculiar methods of the East. That done, she came forth into the sunlight, attired as becomes a Mahomedan woman who is expecting a visit of ceremony. Above her mysteriously draped trousers she wore a sleeveless coat, adorned with crescent-shaped pockets and a narrow gold braid. A *sari*⁸ of gold-flecked muslin was draped over her head and shoulders, and beneath it her heavily oiled hair made a wide triangle of her forehead. The scarlet of betel-nut was upon her lips; the duskiness of kol shadowed her lashes. Ornaments of glass and silver encircled her neck and arms, and were lavishly festooned around her delicate ears.

Her entire bearing exhaled satisfied vanity like a perfume, as she sat at ease upon a bare *charpoy*⁹ watching her husband's preparations for the expected guests.

He was arrayed in full-dress uniform, even to the two cherished medals on his chest; and his appearance sorted strangely with the peaceful nature of his occupation.

In the midst of the courtyard he had set forth – not without a secret glow of pride – as exact an imitation of the Sahibs' "afternoon tea" as his limited knowledge and resources would permit. From the mess khansamah he had borrowed a japanned tea-tray that had seen much service, a Rockingham teapot, chipped at the spout, two blue-rimmed cups and saucers, and half a dozen plates, which last he had set round the table at precisely equal distances from each other. Two of them were left empty for the use of his guests, and the other four were piled with dainties suitable for so high an occasion – sugar-topped biscuits (beloved of natives throughout the land), raw pistachio nuts, Cabul grapes and oranges. Then, because the central space had a barren aspect, the sugar-bowl was promoted to the place of honour for lack of a more suitable adornment.

The only two chairs the courtyard contained were set opposite to one another, and it was uplifting to reflect that in a short time they would be occupied by his captain's own Memsahib and

⁸ Veil.

⁹ String-bed.

the Generailly Sahib's Miss, they having, of their great condescension accepted his hospitality by the gracious favour of the Captain Sahib himself.

"According to this fashion, are all things made ready, O Fatma Bibi, when there is a tea-drinking in the bungalows of Sahibs," he announced, for the enlightenment of his wife, who had seen little of the world beyond the four mud walls roofed by her private patch of sky, and therefore could not be expected to have accurate acquaintance with the mysterious ways of Sahibs.

Fatma Bibi acknowledged the information with just such a nod as a mother might bestow on a contented child. Despite her limited experience of the outer world, she knew herself many degrees wiser than her husband in matters of far greater moment than the setting out of a few plates and cups after the manner of the Sahib-log, who, in respect of food and feeding are completely and comprehensively "without sense," as all India knows.

"Bear in mind also," the man went on, sublimely unconscious of his wife's indulgent attitude, "that the Memsahib knoweth the simplest words of Hindostani only; but Meredith Miss Sahib will render our speech unto her, making all things clear. Behold – they come."

The sound of hoofs, and the thud of a "dandy" set down outside confirmed his words; and not many minutes later the Jemadar ushered two Englishwomen into the presence of his wife, – Evelyn, looking more flower-like than usual, in a many-frilled gown of creamy muslin and a big simple hat to match.

"By the goodness of the Captain Sahib's heart my house is honoured beyond deserving," the man gave them greeting as they crossed the threshold, while Fatma Bibi's eyes rested in frank curiosity upon the exceeding whiteness and simplicity of the English "Mem," whose appearance was so direct a contrast to her own.

"Without doubt these women of *Belait*¹⁰ possess no true beauty," she assured herself, with a nod of satisfaction, as she resumed her seat and the new-comers accepted their appointed chairs.

It was a strange meal, and Evelyn Desmond was, in all respects, the least happy of the oddly assorted quartette. She made a conscientious, if not very successful, effort to drink the pale block tea, and eat the strange mixture of foods pressed upon her by the Jemadar, who would obviously feel disheartened if his guests did not empty all four plates at a sitting. Nor was this the least of her troubles. Fatma Bibi's valiant attempts at conversation filled her with a bewilderment and discomfort, bordering on irritation. In an impulse of childish wickedness, she caught herself wishing heartily that Theo had never seen fit to distinguish himself by saving the Jemadar's life.

She looked enviously across the table at Honor, who, by a few spontaneous questions, set both at their ease. She spoke of her father, and the man's face glowed.

"How should men forget the Generailly Sahib, who have beheld him, as did we of the *Rissalar*,¹¹ in war time, leading men and horses and guns through the terrible mountain country beyond Peshawur? We that serve the British Raj, Miss Sahib, are not men of ready tongue; but our hearts are slow to forget."

In proof thereof, the good Jemadar – his tongue effectually unloosed for the moment – regaled his guests with tale upon tale of bygone raids and murders and of swift retribution meted out by those watch-dogs of the Border, the Punjab Frontier Force; tales set forth with the Oriental touch of exaggeration which lent colour to a narrative already sufficiently inspiring.

"These things have I seen, Miss Sahib," he concluded, with a sudden deepening of his voice, "and these things have I done, through the godlike courage of my Captain Sahib Bahadur" – the man saluted on the words – "who, in the beginning of my service, when I lay wounded almost to the death, amid bullets that fell like hail, bore me to safety on his own shoulders, earning thereby the Victoria

¹⁰ England.

¹¹ Regiment.

Cross that he weareth even now. True talk, Hazúr. Among all the officer Sahibs of Hind, and I have seen more than a few, there be none like unto my Captain Sahib for courage and greatness of heart."

At this point Evelyn's voice broke in on a note of querulous weariness.

"Do come away, Honor. I've eaten queer things enough to give me indigestion for a week; and I can't understand a word any one is saying. What was he getting so excited about just now?"

"Something that must make you feel a very proud woman, Evelyn," the girl answered; and with a thrill in her low voice she translated the man's last words.

Mrs Desmond flushed softly; praise of her husband being only a few degrees less acceptable than praise of herself.

"It sounds very magnificent," she agreed, without enthusiasm, "but I daresay he doesn't really mean half of it. These natives never do. Anyway, please say the polite and proper things and let's get home as soon as possible. I'm sure we've done enough to satisfy even Theo by this time."

And Honor, who would fain have listened to their host for another half-hour, had no choice but to obey.

"Why, Evelyn," she said, as they left the striped sun and shadow of the lines, "you never told me that Captain Desmond won his V.C. by saving the Jemadar's life. I want to hear all about it, please."

Evelyn smiled, and shrugged her shoulders.

"You probably know as much as I do. Theo never *will* tell about himself. Besides, in my own heart, I think he was rather foolish to risk getting killed several times over just for the sake of a *native*." The scorn that some few Anglo-Indians never lose lurked in her tone. "Of course it's very nice for him to have the V.C., and I suppose he thought it was worth while just for that. But I hope he won't go in for any *more* things of that sort. There's *me* to be considered now."

Such peculiar views on the subject of heroism smote Honor to silence, and with a hurried murmur that Dilkusha seemed impatient to get home she set the mare into a trot.

Arrived in the cool dimness of her own drawing-room, Evelyn Desmond sank gratefully into a chair, her skirts billowing softly about her.

"How refreshing it is here, after that glaring courtyard! This place is getting too hot already. I *do* wish Theo would let me go to Simla again this year. Last season the Walters asked him to let me join them; and it was simply lovely. Though I didn't half like leaving him behind; and I suppose I shan't like it much this year either."

"Then why go at all?" suggested practical Honor. "You're not obliged to. Surely Mrs Olliver stays?"

"Mrs Olliver! She's not a woman! She's a Regimental Institution. I can't think *what* the men see in her to make such a fuss about! A plain, badly-made Irishwoman, who dresses abominably. And she's much too casual with all of them – especially with Theo, even if she *did* save his life from typhoid fever."

Honor made no immediate reply. It was only charitable to suppose that an overdose of sunshine and block tea was responsible for the note of irritation in Evelyn's tone.

"I suppose you think I ought to imitate her," Mrs Desmond went on, after an expectant pause. "Kohat is hateful enough in the cold weather, and with heat and cholera, and flies added, it would kill me outright! Besides, I don't believe a man loves one any better for that sort of thing in the end. He probably gets horribly bored, and doesn't like to say so. Besides – Theo *prefers* me to go, he *said* so; and that settles everything quite comfortably for us both. By the way, I've been planning a sort of introduction picnic for you, only that stupid tea-party put it out of my head. I'll make out a list of people at once and send the invitations out this evening."

She crossed over to her bureau, which, apart from the piano, was the only piece of furniture the room contained that in England would be considered worthy of the name.

While she sat absorbed in her congenial task, Desmond entered equipped for polo, and after a few words with Honor went over to his wife.

"What are you so taken up with, Ladybird?" he asked.

"Something lovely! A picnic – for Honor."

Desmond laughed.

"Six for her and half a dozen for yourself! Let's see who we're inviting."

He ran his eye down the list of guests – twelve in all. At sight of the last two names – Mr Kresney, Miss Kresney – he frowned sharply, and taking up his wife's discarded pencil ran a broad black line through both.

She pushed his hand aside with an unusual display of irritation.

"What did you do *that* for?" she demanded, a ring of defiance in her voice. "I want to ask the Kresneys; and I will – all the same."

"Indeed, little woman, you'll do nothing of the sort."

"Why? What's wrong with them, Theo? They're quite decent people, as far as I can see."

"Which doesn't prove that you can see very far! You must just take my word for it, that whatever else they may be, the Kresneys are not our sort at all."

"I suppose you really mean they're not up to *Frontier Cavalry form!*" she retorted, not without a thrill of fear at her own daring; for the pride of the Frontier Force is a deeply-rooted pride; and, considering its records, not unjustifiable after all.

Desmond's eyes flashed fire, and a sharp retort rose to his lips. But, after a brief silence, he answered his wife with a restraint that spoke volumes to the girl at the tea-table behind him.

"Your taunt is unjust and untrue. In a general way we accept most people for what they are, out here. But one has to draw the line somewhere, even in India. If I were Deputy-Commissioner, the Kresneys would be asked along with the rest. But, in my position, I am free to make distinctions. And I have very good reasons for not asking Kresney to an informal picnic of my particular friends. On neutral ground, such as the club, or the tennis-courts, I have nothing to say; though I should naturally feel pleased if you considered my wishes a little in this matter."

"Well, then, why can't you consider *mine* a little too? I told Miss Kresney about it, and she's expecting to come."

"I'm sorry for that; I don't want to hurt the girl's feelings. But you can't take people up just for once and ignore them afterwards. The truth is, they both see plainly enough that you haven't quite got the hang of things out here yet, and they are naturally taking full advantage of the fact."

Evelyn's passing gentleness evaporated on the instant.

"They're *not!*" she protested wrathfully. "And it's horrid of you to say such things! They like me, I don't see why I shouldn't be nice to them. Besides, this is *my* picnic – I planned it – and if *I'm* the hostess I can ask who I please." The touch of young importance that sounded through the petulance of her tone dispelled the last shadow of Desmond's annoyance and set him smiling.

"Why, of course, Ladybird – within reasonable limits. But after all, the hospitality offered is mine; and what's more, the hostess is mine into the bargain!"

He laid his hand lightly against the rose-flush of her cheek, but she jerked it impatiently aside.

"Oh, well, if you will take it that way," he said, in a tone of resigned weariness, and turning abruptly on his heel came across to Honor, whose cheeks were almost as hot as Evelyn's own.

"I'm glad Alla Dad Khan made himself interesting this afternoon," he remarked conversationally. "Ressaldar Rajinder Singh, who commands my Sikh troop, is very anxious to come and pay his respects some day soon. You see, as your father's daughter and the Major's sister you are a rather special person for us all. But I must be off now. The fellows will be waiting. I'll arrange about the Sirdar to-morrow."

On the threshold he paused and looked towards his wife, who still sat with her back to the room, her head supported on her hand.

"Good-bye, Ladybird," he said, and there was marked kindness in his tone.

She acknowledged the words with a scarcely perceptible movement, and a few minutes later the rattle of hoofs on the road came sharply to their ears.

Honor's anger flamed up and overflowed.

"Oh, Evelyn, how *can* you behave like that to him!"

Still no answer; only, after a short silence, Evelyn rose and faced her friend. Then Honor saw that her cheeks were wet and her eyes brimming with tears.

It is to be feared that her first sensation was one of pure annoyance. Evelyn thoroughly deserved a scolding: and here she was, as usual, disarming rebuke by her genuine distress.

"Now, I suppose he'll go – and get *killed!*" she said, in a choked voice.

"My dear child, what nonsense! He'll come back safe enough. You don't deserve that he should be so patient with you – you don't indeed!"

Evelyn looked up at her with piteous drowned eyes, whose expression had the effect of making Honor feel altogether in the wrong.

"He shouldn't have made such disagreeable remarks about me and the Kresneys, then," she said brokenly. "All the same, I wanted to speak to him. But – I was crying, and I couldn't make a scene – with *you* there. And now – if anything happens to him, and – I never see him again, – it'll be all *your* fault!"

With that finely illogical conclusion she swept out of the room, leaving Honor serenely unimpressed by her own share in the impending tragedy, yet not a little troubled at thought of the man who, for the rest of his natural life, lay at the mercy of such bewildering methods of reasoning.

CHAPTER V. AN EXPURGATED EDITION

*"A little lurking secret of the blood;
A little serpent secret, rankling keen."*

The Kresneys looked in vain for the coveted invitation, and the trifling circumstance loomed largely on their narrow horizon.

Owen Kresney possessed in a high degree that talent for discovering or inventing slights which is pride of race run crooked, and reveals the taint of mixed blood in a man's veins. As District Superintendent of Police he had relieved his predecessor in the middle of the hot weather. His sister being at Mussoorie, he had arrived alone; and, in accordance with the friendly spirit of the Frontier, had been made an honorary member of the station Mess, where he had found himself very much a stranger in a strange land.

The man's self-conceit was unlimited; his sense of humour *nil*; and in less than a month he had been unanimously voted a "*pukka*¹² bounder" by that isolated community of Englishmen, who played as hard as they worked, and invariably "played the game"; a code of morals which had apparently been left out of Kresney's desultory education. The fact revealed itself in a hundred infinitesimal ways, and each revelation added a fresh stone to the wall that sprang up apace between himself and his companions.

Among them all Desmond and Wyndham represented, in the highest degree, those unattainable attributes which Kresney was secretly disposed to envy; and his narrow soul solaced itself by heartily detesting their possessors. This ability to recognise the highest without the least desire to reach it, breeds more than half the pangs of envy, hatred, and malice that corrode the lesser natures of earth. But there were also, in Kresney's case, personal and particular reasons which served to nourish these microbes of the soul.

Toward the close of the hot weather the man's growing unpopularity had been established by an incident at Mess, which brought him into such sharp contact with Desmond as he was not likely to forget.

There had been a very small party at dinner. Several of the older men were absent on leave, and three were on the sick list, no uncommon occurrence in Frontier stations. Thus it had chanced that Desmond was the senior officer present.

The wine had already been round twice when the sound of a lady's name, spoken in passing, had diverted Kresney's attention from his own dissatisfied thoughts.

It chanced that he had met this same lady at Murree a year ago, and that she had roundly snubbed his advances towards intimacy. The unexpected mention of her name revived that sense of injury which smoulders in such natures like a live coal; and on the same instant awoke the desire to hit back with the readiest weapon available.

Forgetful of the restriction imposed by the rigid code of the mess-table, he launched the first disparaging comment that sprang to his mind.

Directly the sentence was out, he could have bitten his own tongue for pure vexation.

It fell crisp and clear into a chasm of silence, as a dropped pebble plashes into a well.

¹² Thorough.

The stillness lasted nearly a minute, and while it lasted Kresney felt the fire of Desmond's glance through his lowered lids. Then some one hazarded a remark, and the incident was submerged in a renewed tide of talk.

When dinner broke up, with a general movement towards the ante-room, Kresney became aware that Desmond was at his side.

"You will be good enough to come into the verandah with me," he had said in a tone of command; and Kresney, feeling ignominiously like a chidden schoolboy, had had no choice but to obey.

Before that brief interview was ended, the man had heard the truth about himself for the first time in his life, with the sole result that he registered in his heart an unquenchable hatred of the speaker.

But Desmond had been in no mood just then to reckon with after-results. All the inborn chivalry of the man was up in arms, less against the spoken words than against the petty spite underlying them – the cowardly hit at a woman powerless to defend herself. In an unguarded moment he gave full vent to the scorn and disgust that consumed him, and lashed the man without mercy.

Then – realising the utter inability to alter the other's peculiar point of view – natural magnanimity checked his impetuous outburst:

"I don't know whether you are aware," he said, "that after to-night I should be justified in asking the Mess President to remove your name from the list of Honorary Members. But that is rather a strong measure, and I decided instead to speak a few straight words to you myself. If they've been a trifle too straight, I am sorry. But remarks of the kind you made this evening are inadmissible at a mess-table; or, for that matter, at any other table where – gentlemen are present. Now, if you give me your word to keep the rules of the Mess strictly in future, I will give you mine that this incident shall never be mentioned to any one by me, or by any one of the fellows here to-night."

Kresney had given the required promise none too graciously. But his effort at perfunctory thanks stuck in his throat; nor did Desmond appear to expect them. With a brief reassurance in respect of his own silence he turned back into the Mess; and there, so far as externals went, the incident had ended.

Yet, on this still March evening, as Kresney strolled back and forth on his narrow verandah, enjoying an after-dinner cigar, every detail of that detested interview darted across his memory for the hundredth time, like a lightning-streak across a cloud. Wounded, in the most susceptible part of his nature, Kresney saw no reason to deny himself the satisfaction of hitting back. Whatever may have been his principles in regard to debts in general, he was scrupulously punctilious in settling debts of malice, – indirectly, if possible; and in this instance personal antipathy added zest to the mere duty of repayment.

Very early in the cold weather Kresney had become aware that an effective weapon lay ready to his hand, and had taken it up without scruple or reluctance. Evelyn Desmond's natural lack of discernment, her blindness to the subtle impertinence of flattery, and her zeal for tennis – a game seldom patronised by cavalymen, – had worked all together for good; and Kresney had gone forward accordingly, nothing loth.

He had looked to the riding picnic to mark a definite step in advance, and Mrs Desmond's intention of inviting them was beyond doubt. Remained the inference that Desmond had used either authority or persuasion to prevent it.

The idea stirred up all the dregs of the man's soul. A sudden bitterness overwhelmed him – a sense of the futility of attempting to strike at a man so obviously favoured by the gods; a man who held his head so resolutely above the minor trivialities of life.

But the will to strike would soon or late evolve a way. There were other means of achieving intimacy with a woman as inexperienced as little Mrs Desmond, and he would get Linda to help him. Linda was a good girl, if a trifle stupid. At least she had the merit of believing in him and obeying his wishes with unquestioning fidelity – a very creditable merit in the eyes of the average man.

These reflections brought him to a standstill by one of the doors that opened into the drawing-room. It was a long narrow room of an aggressively Anglo-Indian type – overcrowded with aimless tables, painted stools and chairs in crumpled bazaar muslins, or glossy with Aspinall's enamel. The dingy walls were peppered with Japanese fans, China plates, liliputian brackets, and photographs in plush frames. Had Miss Kresney taken her stand on each door-sill in turn and flung her possessions, without aim or design, at the whitewashed spaces around her, she could not have produced a more admired disorder. This she recognised with a thrill of pride; for she aspired to be artistic, and some misguided friend had assured her that the one thing needful was to avoid symmetry or regularity in any form.

Her own appearance harmonised admirably with her surroundings. She wore the shapeless tea-gown beloved of her kind – made in the verandah, and finished with dingy lace at the neck and wrists, and even at this hour a suggestion of straw slippers showed beneath the limp silk of her gown. Yet, as Evelyn Desmond saw her on the tennis-courts, she was a neatly clad, angular girl of eight-and-twenty, with a suppressed, furtive air that was an unconscious reflection upon her brother's character. In her heart she cherished a lurking admiration for Desmond, and aspired to become the wife of a cavalry officer – Harry Denvil being the temporary hero of her dreams.

When her brother entered the room she was fitfully engaged in perpetrating a crewel-work atrocity for one of her many chairs.

He did not speak his thought at once, but stood looking down at her critically through the smoke-wreaths of his cigar. The major share of good looks certainly rested with himself; but for eyes set too near together, and the relentless lines that envy and ill-humour pencil about a man's mouth, the face was attractive enough, in its limited fashion. He had the same air of being "off duty" which pervaded his sister, and his Japanese smoking-suit showed signs of being a very old friend indeed.

"Look here, Linda," he began at last, "when are we playing tennis again with little Mrs Desmond?"

"I think it was Tuesday," she said.

"Well, then, ask her to tea here first, d'you see?"

Linda's brown eyes – it pleased her to call them hazel – widened with surprise.

"Oh, my! D'you think she would reallee come? It was nastee of her to leave us out of her picnic like that, after she told me all about it, too."

Miss Kresney's insistence on the consonants and the final vowels was more marked than her brother's; for although three-fourths of the blood in her veins was English, very few of her intimate associates could make so proud a boast without perjuring their souls: and there are few things more infectious than tricks of speech.

"Yes, of course," he acquiesced readily. "But I'm jolly well certain that was not her doing. She'll come, right enough, if you ask her nicely. At all events it is worth trying, if only on the chance of annoying her insufferable husband."

"If you wish it, certainlee. I would like to be better friends with Mrs Desmond. Only, I do not quite see why you dislike *him* so much more than the others."

Kresney hesitated before replying. It was not often that Linda aspired to question either his motives or decisions; and he had begun to suspect that her loyalty wavered, by a hair's-breadth, where Desmond was concerned. After all, why not tell her an expurgated edition of the truth. The idea commended itself to him for many reasons, and even as she was beginning to wonder at his silence he sat down beside her and spoke; the sting of humiliation stimulating his inventive faculty as he went on.

Desmond himself would scarce have recognised the incident, but Miss Kresney was clearly impressed.

"You see, Linda," her brother concluded, "a fellow can't be expected to stand that sort of thing without hitting back, and I am trying to hit back a bit now. It is only fair. These Frontier Force chaps need a lot of setting down, I can tell you. They fancy they hold all India in their hands. And what

is it they do after all, except play polo like maniacs, and play all manner of foolish pranks at Mess? They make a god out of this Desmond, here; and the fellow is as proud as the devil. He will be jolly well mad if his wife gets really friendly with me. As he will not ask us there, we will ask her here – you see? And you must be as nice as you can. Say pretty things to her – that pleases her more than anything: and make yourself useful, if you get the chance. She's not half a bad little woman; and if you help me, Linda, I shall get in with her yet in spite of her conceited prig of a husband."

The smile that accompanied the words was not a pleasant one, but the girl returned it with an uncritical fervour of affection.

"You know I am always glad to please you, Owen. I am onlee sorree you did not tell me all about it sooner."

Her ready championship put him in high good-humour with himself and the world at large.

"You really *are* no end of a good girl, Linda," he said, as he rose to his feet. "I shall ask Denvil to tea for you on Tuesday; and you shall have a new frock as soon as ever I get next month's pay. Not a thing made in the verandah; but a good style of frock from Mussoorie or Lahore, whichever you please; and you can ask Mrs Desmond to help you choose it. Her dresses are always first class, and she is interested in such things."

CHAPTER VI. GENIUS OF CHARACTER

*"For still the Lord is Lord of Might,
In deeds, in deeds, He takes delight."*

– R. L. S.

Evelyn Desmond's picnic was an accomplished fact. At four o'clock, in the full glare of a late March sun, a business-like detachment of twenty horses, and one disdainful camel, proceeded at a brisk trot along the lifeless desolation of the Bunnoo Road. The party kept in close formation, straggling of any sort being inadmissible when the bounds of the station have been left behind. Ten of the riders were English, and an armed escort guarded them in front and rear; the camel, in gala trappings of red and blue, being responsible for provisions, enamelled iron tea-things, and the men's guns.

Notwithstanding the absence of the Kresneys, Evelyn Desmond was in a mood of unusual effervescence. Harry Denvil rode at her side, and the two kept up a perpetual flow of such aimless, happy nonsense as is apt to engender vague regret in the hearts of those who have arrived at greater wisdom.

Three miles of riding brought them to the welcome refreshment of a river running crystal clear over a bed of pebbles. Beside the river rose an isolated plateau – abrupt, inconsequent, and, like all things else in the tawny landscape, unsoftened by a blade of living green.

The face of the rock was riddled with rough, irregular holes, as though Titans had been using it for a target. Around and above it a bevy of blue rock-pigeons – circling, dipping, and darting with a strong rush of wings – shone like iridescent jewels, green and blue and grey, against the unstained turquoise of the sky, whose intensity of colour made generous atonement for the lack of it on earth. At the foot of the cliff a deep pool mirrored the calm wonder of the sky.

Here the camel was brought to his knees, and the escort, dismounting, formed a wide circle of sentries round the little party, the undernote of danger suggested by their presence giving a distinct flavour to the childishly simple affair. The white man's craze for carrying his food many miles from home, in order to eat it on the ground, remains a perpetual bewilderment to the natives, who express their opinion on the matter in all frankness and simplicity by christening it the "dinner of fools."

Pigeon-shooting was the established amusement of afternoons spent under the cliff; and, the meal being over, sport was soon in full progress, Frank Olliver and Mrs Jim Conolly handling their guns as skilfully as any man present.

While Honor stood watching them, Wyndham drew near and remained by her for a few seconds without a word. Then: "Shall we go and sit over by the river, Miss Meredith, and leave them to their sport?" he asked suddenly, his eyes and voice more urgent than he knew.

"Yes; I'd far rather watch the birds than shoot them. They are too beautiful to be killed for the sake of passing the time. But you probably don't see it that way – men seldom do."

"I must be the eternal exception, then!" he answered, as they turned away. "It's not a creditable confession for a right-minded man: but I shrink from taking life, even in the exigencies of my profession."

At that she turned upon him with a spontaneous frankness of interest, which had lured many men to their undoing.

"Will you think me very ill-mannered if I ask how you ever came to choose such a profession at all? I wondered about it the first time I saw you."

"Do I look as hopelessly unsoldier-like as all *that*?"

"No – a thousand times, no!" And the quick colour flamed in her cheeks.

"Well, then?"

"I only meant – I see a good deal in faces, and – yours gave me a strong impression that you would prefer reading and thinking to acting and striving."

His smile had in it both surprise and satisfaction.

"You were not far out there. Let us sit down on this rock for a bit. I would like to answer your question. May I light a cigarette?"

"Do."

He took his time over the simple operation. His impulse towards unreserve puzzled him, and several seconds of silence passed before he spoke again; silence, emphasised by broken snatches of talk and laughter; by the sharp crack of guns; and the whirring of a hundred wings, like the restless murmuring in the heart of a shell.

"It may sound strange to you," he began, not without an effort, "but the truth is that my choice of a profession was simply the result of my friendship with Desmond. I think I told you we were at school together. *His* future was a foregone conclusion, and when it came to the point – I chose just to throw in my lot with his. I am quite aware that many people thought me a fool. But we have had twelve years of it together here, he and I; and it has certainly been good enough for me."

He spoke in a tone of great quietness, his eyes set upon the shining reaches of the river which, by now, ran molten gold in the westering sunlight.

"Thank you for telling me," she said; and the simple words set his pulses travelling at an unreasonable rate of speed. "I had no idea friendship could ever mean quite so much."

"It doesn't in nine cases out of ten. But I think that's enough about myself. It isn't my habit to entertain ladies with egotistical monologues!"

"But then, properly behaved ladies don't ask you direct personal questions, do they?"

"Well – no – not often."

And they exchanged one of those smiles that ripen intimacy more speedily than a month of talk.

"I'm quite unrepentant, all the same!" she said. "And I'm rather wanting to ask you another. It's about Captain Desmond this time. May I?"

"Ask away!"

"Well, I want to know more of how he won his V.C. Evelyn could give me no details when I asked her; and it struck me just now that you were probably there at the time."

"Yes, indeed, I *was*," he said, with a new ring in his voice. "There were a few bad minutes when we in the valley felt morally certain we had seen the last of him."

She turned on him with kindling eyes.

"Oh, tell me – please! Tell me everything. I am soldier enough to understand."

"I verily believe you are! And, since you wish it, you shall have it in full. It happened during a rising of the Ghilzais six years ago. They had given us rather a stiff time of it for some weeks, and on this occasion a strong body of them had to be dislodged from a height where they were safely entrenched behind one of their stone sangars, ready to pick off any of us who should attempt the ascent. But the thing had to be done, like many other hopeless-looking things, and a party of infantry and cavalry were detailed for the duty, – a company of Sikhs, and twenty-five dismounted men of Desmond's squadron, led by himself. Our main force was stationed in the valley, you understand, and the advance was covered by three mountain guns. The men were deployed in an extended line at the foot of the hill, and began a careful ascent, taking advantage of every scrap of cover available, the Ghilzais picking them off with deadly certainty whenever they got the smallest chance. About two-thirds of the way up Alla Dad Khan was bowled over and lay out in the open dangerously wounded, under the full brunt of the enemy's fire. In a flash Desmond was out from under the rock he had just reached. He crossed that open space under a rain of bullets it made one sick to see, and got the poor

fellow up in his arms. It seemed a sheer impossibility for him to get back under cover alive, hampered as he was by the wounded man, who – as you know – is a much bigger fellow than himself. I gave up every shred of hope as I watched, and one or two of the sowars near me broke down and cried like children. But if ever I beheld a miracle it was during those few astounding minutes – the worst I've ever known. His clothes were riddled with bullets; two of them passed clean through his helmet; yet except for a flesh wound in the left arm, he was untouched."

Wyndham paused, and the girl drew in a long breath.

"Oh, I can see it all!" she said softly. "But isn't there more?"

"A little more, if you want it."

"Please."

"Well, the hill was successfully cleared, and you may imagine the welcome we gave Theo, when at last he got back to camp, with his uniform in ribbons and his helmet gone. I don't know when I've heard such cheering from natives. Besides saving the Jemadar, the success of the whole affair had been due to his leadership and example. He wouldn't hear of it, of course; but when the account came out in the 'Gazette,' he found himself belauded from start to finish, with a V.C. conferred on him to crown all. One couldn't say much to him even then. He's not the sort."

Honor's cheeks were on fire, her eyes like stars; and it is characteristic of Paul Wyndham that he noted these facts without a shadow of envy.

"The genuine modesty of genius," she said; and Paul bent his head in acquiescence.

"Theo's genius is of the best kind," he added; "it is genius of character, of a wide sympathetic understanding of men and things. And on the Frontier, Miss Meredith, that sort of understanding counts for more than anywhere else in the country. We control our fellows here as much by love and respect as by mere discipline. Get a native to love you, and believe in you, and you are sure of him for good. That is why officers like Theo and your brother, who hold their men's hearts in their hands, are, without exaggeration, the pillars on which the safety of India rests. It is when the cry of 'Jehad' runs like fire along the Border, and the fidelity of our troops is being tampered with, that we get the clearest proof of this. At such times pay, pension, and Orders of Merit have no more power to restrain a Pathan than a thread of cotton round his ankle. But there's just one thing he will *not* do – he will not desert, in his hour of need, an officer whom he has found to be just, upright, and fearless, and whom he has praised as a hero to his own people."

Wyndham's unwonted eloquence, and the glow of feeling underlying it, lifted the girl to fresh heights of enthusiasm.

"Oh, how glad I am to have come here!" she said with sudden fervour. "Captain Desmond was talking in much the same strain just before we started; and one cannot listen to him without catching the fire of his enthusiasm, which is surely the best kind of fire that ever came down from heaven!"

Just as she finished speaking, Desmond himself strode up to them.

"I say, Paul, old man," he remonstrated, "isn't it some one else's turn for an innings by this time? Mrs Conolly is keen to have a talk with Miss Meredith before we start. You both looked so absorbed that she begged me not to interrupt! I ought to have introduced her to you before starting, Miss Meredith. She's the wife of our acting Civil Surgeon and quite an old friend of yours, it seems. Will you come?"

The girl rose and turned to Wyndham with a friendly smile. "You and I can have our talk out another time, can't we?"

"By all means."

He sat watching her as she left him, with a tender concentration of gaze, his brain stunned by a glimpse into undreamed-of possibilities; into a region of life whereof he knew nothing, and had believed himself content to know nothing all his days.

Mrs Jim Conolly was a large woman, nearer forty than thirty. Twenty years of India, of hot weathers resolutely endured, of stretching small means to the utmost limit and beyond it, had left

their mark, in sallowness of skin, in broken lines of thought between her brows, and of restrained endurance about her firmly-closed lips. She had the air of a woman who has never allowed herself to be worsted by the minor miseries of life; and in India the minor miseries multiply exceedingly. Unthinking observers stigmatised her face as harsh and unprepossessing; but it was softened and illumined by a glow of genuine welcome as she greeted Honor Meredith.

"I wonder if you have the smallest recollection of me?" she said. "My last glimpse of you was in a dak gharri at Pindi, when you were first starting for home nineteen years ago, and the sight of what you have grown into makes me feel a very old woman indeed! Do you remember those Pindi days at all?"

"Bits, here and there, quite vividly. I had been wondering already why I seemed to know your face. It was you who had the two nice babies I loved so dearly. Haven't you any for me to play with now?"

"Yes, my two youngest are still with me. But they are rather big babies by this time. You must come over and see them soon, and we will pick up the threads of our dropped friendship, Honor. Your father and mother were very good to me in the old days, but you were my chief friend from the start. You have grown into a very beautiful woman, dear," she added, in a lower tone; "and if you ever want help or advice while you are here alone, I hope you will turn to me for it as readily as you would to your own mother. I haven't seen Lady Meredith for years. Sit down under the cliff with me, and give me some news of them all."

By the time dusk had set in the little party was back again in Desmond's compound, the escort deserting them at the gate; and as Honor Meredith prepared to dismount, Paul Wyndham came forward, a certain restrained eagerness in his eyes.

"May I?" he asked, with the diffidence of a man unused to making such requests.

"I generally manage all right, thanks."

"You might make an exception, though – just this once."

For an instant of time his hands supported her – an instant of such keen sensation that, when it was passed, he pulled himself up sharply – called himself a fool, and in the same breath wished that she had been a few degrees less skilful in springing lightly to the ground.

Ready-made talk was, for the moment, beyond him; and he departed something hastily, leaving Honor and his friend alone together in the darkening verandah.

Voices and laughter came out to them from the drawing-room, where Evelyn and Denvil were carrying on their young foolishness with undiminished zeal; and Desmond turned upon the girl the irresistible friendliness of his eyes.

"You enjoyed yourself, I hope, – Miss Meredith?"

"Immensely, thank you, – Captain Desmond."

Her tone was a deliberate echo of his; and their eyes met in mutual laughter.

"Aren't we good friends enough now to drop the formality?" he asked. And at the question a lightning vision came to her of the scene on the hillside, so vividly described by his friend.

"Yes – I think – we are," she said slowly.

"That's right. I think so too."

"I seem to have made quite an advance in that direction this afternoon," she added, in no little surprise at her own boldness.

"How's that? Paul?"

"Yes."

"Oh! so that was the engrossing subject. I might have known Paul wasn't likely to be expatiating on himself."

"He gave me a stirring account of a certain day in October, six years ago," she went on, with an unconscious softening of her voice.

Desmond's short laugh had in it a genuine touch of embarrassment.

"Did he? That was superfluous of him. The good fellow would have done no less himself in the circumstances. Listen to those two children in there! How finely they're enjoying themselves! I say, Harry!" he shouted to the invisible Denvil, who came forth straightway; – a squarely built, chestnut-haired boy, his sea-blue eyes still full of laughter; "have you quite decided to invite yourself to dinner?"

"*Rather*– if you'll have me?"

"Of course I'll have you. Cut away and make yourself respectable."

And as the boy vanished in the darkness Desmond turned to find his wife's figure in the open doorway, its purity of outline thrown into strong relief by the light within.

She stood on the threshold balancing herself on the tips of her toes in a light-hearted ecstasy of unrest, and flung out both hands towards her husband.

"Oh, Theo, it was delicious! I had lovely fun!"

She came and nestled close to him with the confiding simplicity of a child; and Honor, under cover of the dusk, slipped round by the back of the house to her own room.

CHAPTER VII. BRIGHT EYES OF DANGER

*"My mistress still, the open road;
And the bright eyes of danger."*

– R. L. S.

By mid-April, life in the blue bungalow had undergone an unmistakable change for the better; and Theo Desmond, sitting alone in the congenial quietness of his study, an after-dinner pipe between his teeth, a volume of Persian open before him, and Rob's slumbering body pressed close against his ankles, told himself that he and his wife, in befriending Honor Meredith at a moment of difficulty, had without question entertained an angel unawares. Evelyn had blossomed visibly in the pleasure of her companionship; while he himself found her good to talk with, and undeniably good to look at.

There was also a third point in her favour, and that by no means the least. Her sympathetic rendering of the great masters of music had renewed a pleasure linked with memories sacred beyond all others. Althea Desmond bid fair to retain undivided supremacy over the strong son, who had been the crown and glory of her life. Death itself seemed powerless to affect their essential unity. Her spirit – vivid and vigorous as his own – still shared and dominated his every thought; and her photograph, set in a silver frame of massive simplicity, stood close at his elbow, while he reviewed the changes wrought in the past few weeks by the unobtrusive influence of John Meredith's sister.

The mere lessening of strain and friction in regard to the countless details of an Indian household was, in itself, an unspeakable relief. During the first few months of his marriage he had persevered steadily in the thankless task of instructing his cheerfully incompetent bride in the language and household mysteries of her adopted country. But the more patiently he helped her the more she leaned upon his help; till the futility of his task had threatened to wear his temper threadbare, and to put a severe strain on a relationship more complex than he had imagined possible.

Now, however, the tyranny of trifles was overpast. The man's elastic nature righted itself, with the spring of a finely-tempered blade released from pressure, and as the passing weeks revealed his wife's progress under Honor's tuition, he readily attributed her earlier failures to his own lack of skill.

As a matter of fact, her power to cope with Amar Singh – Desmond's devoted Hindu bearer – and the eternal enigmas of charcoal, *jharrons*,¹³ and the *dhobie*,¹⁴ had not increased one whit; and she knew it. But the welcome sound of praise from her husband's lips convinced her that she must have done something to deserve it. She accepted it, therefore, in all complacency, without any acknowledgment of the guiding hand upon the reins.

Great peace dwelt also in the compound, where a colony of servants and their families lived their unknown lives apart; and great pride in the heart of Parbutti, since Amar Singh had so far unbent as to prophesy that the Miss Sahib would without doubt become a Burra Mem before the end of her days.

While Desmond sat alone in this warm April evening, studying the fantastic Persian characters with something less than his wonted concentration, the sound of the piano came to him through the half-open door.

For a few moments he listened, motionless, to the first weird whispering bars of Grieg's Folkscene, "Auf den Bergen," then the book was pushed hastily aside and the lamp blown out. Rob

¹³ Dusters.

¹⁴ Washerman.

– rudely awakened from a delectable dream of cats and the naked calves of unsuspecting coolies – found himself plunged in darkness, and his master vanishing through the curtains into the detested drawing-room.

Evelyn was installed on the fender-stool of dull red velvet, her hands clasped about her knees, her head raised in expectation. A dress of softly flowing white silk, and a single row of pearls at her throat, intensified her fragile freshness, as of a lily of the field, a creature out of touch with the sterner elements of life. It was at such moments that her husband was apt to suffer a contraction of heart, lest, in an impulse of infatuation, he had undertaken more than he would be able to perform.

She patted his favourite chair; then, impulsively deserting her seat, crouched on the hearth-rug beside him and nestled her head against his knee.

"I told her to play it! I knew it would bring you at once," she whispered, caressing him lightly with a long slim hand.

"You shall sing to me afterwards yourself," he said, "a song in keeping with your appearance to-night. You look like some sort of elf-maiden in that simple gown and my pearls. Only one touch wanted to complete the effect!"

With smiling deliberation he drew out four tortoise-shell pins that upheld the silken lightness of her hair, so that it fell in a fair soft cloud about her neck and shoulders.

"Theo! How dare you!"

And as she turned her face up to him, in laughing remonstrance, he was struck anew by the childishness of its contour, in spite of the pallor, which had become almost habitual of late. Taking it between his hands he looked steadfastly into the limpid shallows of her eyes, as though searching for a hidden something which he had little hope to find.

"Ladybird, what a baby you are still!" he murmured, "I wonder *when* you mean to grow into a woman?"

Then with a start he became aware that Amar Singh, having entered noiselessly through the door behind him, stood at his side in a pose of imperturbable reverence and dignity.

"Olliver Memsahib *ghora per argya*,"¹⁵ he announced with discreetly lowered lids; while Evelyn, springing up with rose-petal cheeks and a small sound of dismay, must needs try and look as if ladies in evening dress habitually wore their hair hanging loose about their shoulders.

Honor swung round upon the music-stool as Frank Olliver, in evening skirt and light drill jacket strode into the room.

Before she could bring out her news, a blare of trumpets, sounding the alarm, startled the quiet of the night, and Desmond leapt to his feet.

"There you are, Theo, man," she said. "You can hear for yourself. It's a fire in the Lines. Geoff and I caught sight of the flare just now from our back verandah. He's gone on ahead; but I said I'd look in here for you."

"Thanks. Tell 'em to saddle the Demon, will you? I'll be ready in two minutes."

And Mrs Olliver vanished from the room.

As Desmond prepared to follow her, his wife's fingers closed firmly on the edge of his dinner-jacket.

She was sitting now in the chair he had left; and turned up to him a face half beseeching, half resentful in its frame of soft hair.

"Why must *you* go, Theo? There are heaps of others who – aren't married."

"Don't be a little fool, child!" he broke out in spite of himself. Then gently, decisively, he disengaged her fingers from his coat; but their clinging grasp checked his impatience to be gone.

He bent down, and spoke in a softened tone. "I've no time for arguments, Evelyn. I am simply doing my duty."

¹⁵ Has come on a horse.

He was gone – and she remained as he had left her, with hands lying listlessly in her lap, and a frown between her finely pencilled brows, – mollified, but by no means convinced.

Honor had hurried into the hall, where Frank Olliver greeted her with impulsive invitation.

"Why don't you 'boot and saddle' too, Honor, an' ride along with us?"

"I only wish I could! I'd love to go! But I *must* stay with Evelyn. She is upset and nervous about Theo as it is."

"Saints alive! How *can* you put up with her at all – at all!" muttered irrepressible Frank. "But hush, now, here's the blessed fellow himself!"

Theo Desmond strode rapidly down the square hall, hung with trophies of the chase and implements of war – an incongruous figure enough, in forage cap and long brown boots with gleaming spurs, his sword buckled on over his evening clothes. He snatched a long clasp-knife from the wall in passing, and the Irishwoman, with an nod of approval, hurried out into the verandah, where the impatient horses could be heard champing their bits.

Desmond had a friendly smile for Honor in passing.

"Pity you can't come too. Be good to Ladybird. Don't let her work herself into a fever about nothing."

For eight breathless minutes the grey and the dun sped through the warm night air, under a rising moon, their shadows fleeing before them, long and black, – two perspiring saïses following zealously in their wake; – till their riders drew rein before a pandemonium of scurrying men and horses, silhouetted against a background of fire.

The great pile of sun-dried bedding burnt merrily: sending up fierce tongues of flame, that shamed the moonlight, as dawn shames the lamp. A brisk wind from the hills caught up shreds and flakes from the burning mass, driving them hither and thither, to the sore distraction of man and beast.

Lithe forms of grass-cutters and water-carriers, in the scantiest remnants of clothing, leaped and pranced on the outskirts of the fire, like demons in a realistic hell.

In valiant spurts and jerks, alternating with ignominious flight, they were combating that column of flame and smoke with thimblefuls of water, flung out of stable buckets, or squirted from mussacks. They were beating it also with stript branches, making night radiant with a thousand sparks.

But the soaring flames jeered at their pigmy efforts; twinkled derisively on their glistening bodies; and assailed the vast composure of the skies with leaping blades of light.

To the bewildering confusion of movement was added a no less bewildering tumult of sound, whose most heart-piercing note was the maddened scream of horses; and whose lesser elements included shouts of officers and sowars; high-pitched lamentations from the audience of natives; the barking of dogs; and the drumming of a hundred hoofs upon the iron-hard ground.

During the first alarm of the fire, which had broken out perilously close to the quarters occupied by Desmond's squadron, the terrified animals in their frenzied efforts to break away from the ropes, had reduced the Lines to a state of chaos. Those of them, and they were many, who succeeded in wrenching out their pegs, had instinctively headed for the parade-ground beyond the huts; their flight complicated by wandering lengths of rope that trailed behind them, whirled in mid-air, or imprisoned their legs in treacherous coils; while sowars and officers risked life and limb in attempting to free them from their dilemma.

The restless brilliance gave to all things a strange nightmare grotesqueness: and a blinding, stifling shroud of smoke whirled and billowed over all.

As the riders drew up, there was a momentary lull, and before dismounting Desmond flung a ringing shout across the stillness.

"*Shahbash*,¹⁶ men, *shahbash*! Have no fear! Give more water – water without ceasing!"

He was answered by an acclamation of welcome from all ranks.

¹⁶ Well done.

"*Wah! Wah!* Desmin Sahib *argya!*"¹⁷ the sowars of his squadron called to one another through the curling smoke; and the new arrivals were speedily surrounded by a little crowd of officers and men: Wyndham, Denvil, Alla Dad Khan, and Ressaldar Rajinder Singh, in the spotless tunic and vast silken turban of private life.

The Jemadar took possession of the Demon's bridle, and Desmond, leaping lightly to the ground, hurried straightway to the relief of a distressed grass-cut. The man had been rash enough to attempt the capture of two horses at once, and now stood in imminent danger of being kicked to death by his ungrateful charges.

Desmond took both horses in hand, holding them at arm's length, and soothing them with his voice alone.

"Here you are, Harry!" he said, as Denvil came to his assistance. "This poor fellow will go with you now, quietly enough."

Handing over his second horse to the grass-cut, he vanished into the darkness; where, betwixt stampeding horses and the incredible swiftness of fire, he found more than sufficient scope for action.

He came to a standstill, at length, for a second's breathing space; – and lo, Rajinder Singh emerging suddenly from the heart of pandemonium, breathless with haste, a great distress in his eyes.

"Hullo, Ressaldar!" Desmond exclaimed. "What's up now?"

The tall Sikh saluted.

"The knife, Sahib! Give me your knife! It is *Sher Dil*,¹⁸ fallen amongst his ropes. He is like to strangle – "

"Great Scott! I'll see to it myself."

And he set out, full speed, Rajinder Singh after him, protesting at every step.

The great black charger, the glory of the squadron and of his owner's heart, was in a perilous case. So securely had he entangled himself in the head-rope that, despite the freedom of his heels, and spasmodic efforts to regain his feet, he remained pinned to earth, not many yards from where the fire was raging, – his fear and misery increased by wind-blown fragments of lighted straw, by the roar and crackle of the burning pile.

Desmond saw at a glance that his rescue might prove a dangerous business, but Rajinder Singh was beside him now, still hopeful of turning him from his purpose.

"Hazúr – consider – the horse is mine – "

"No more words!" Desmond broke in sharply. "Stay where you are!"

He plunged forthwith into the stinging, blinding smoke; dexterously avoiding the hoofs of *Sher Dil*, subduing his terror with hand and voice, though himself half choked, and constantly forced to close his eyes at the most critical moments; while the task of avoiding the burning fragments that fell about him seemed in itself to demand undivided attention.

Rajinder Singh, stationed at the nearest possible point, anxiously watched his Captain's progress; and here Paul Wyndham joined him hurriedly.

"Who is that?" he asked. "The Captain Sahib?"

"To my shame, your honour speaks truth," the old man made answer humbly. "His heart was set to do this thing himself – "

"Have no fear," Wyndham reassured him kindly; and, with a sharp contraction of heart, ran to his friend's assistance.

Desmond had already stooped to slit the rope that pressed so cruelly against the charger's throat; and, as Wyndham reached him, the animal gave a last convulsive plunge; threw out his forelegs in an ecstasy of freedom; and struck his deliverer full on the shoulder.

¹⁷ Has come.

¹⁸ Lion Heart.

"Damnation!" Desmond muttered, as he fell to the ground, and Sher Dil staggered, panting, to his feet.

Rajinder Singh sprang forward with a smothered cry. But, quick as lightning, Desmond was up again, and had secured the morsel of rope dangling by the horse's head. Only his left arm hung limp and helpless, the droop of the shoulder telling its own tale.

"Collar-bone," he said laconically, in reply to the mute anxiety of Paul's face. "Same old spot again!"

"It might just as well have been – your head," Paul answered, with a twist of his sensitive mouth. He had not quite got over his few moments of acute suspense.

Desmond laughed.

"So it might, you old pessimist! But it wasn't! Here you are, Ressaldar Sahib! Never have I seen a horse so set on killing himself. But it was needful to disappoint him on your account."

Rajinder Singh, who had come forward, plucking the muslin scarf from his shoulders for a bandage, saluted in acknowledgment of the words.

"How is it possible to make thanks, Hazúr...?"

Desmond laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"No need of thanks," said he. "This fine fellow hath already thanked me in his own rough fashion, clapping me on the shoulder, – forgetful of his great strength, – because he had no power to say 'Shahbash!'"

The old Sikh shook his head slowly, a great tenderness in his eyes.

"Such is the gracious heart of the Captain Sahib, putting a good face even upon that which is evil. Permit, at least, that we make some manner of bandage till it be possible to find the Doctor Sahib."

It was permitted; and the useless arm having been strapped into place, Wyndham insisted upon his friend's departure; a fiat against which Desmond's impetuous protests were launched in vain. For, like many men of habitually gentle bearing, Paul Wyndham's firmness was apt to be singularly effective on the rare occasions when he thought it worth while to give proof of its existence.

"I'll ride back with you myself," he announced, in a tone of finality, "and go on to the Mess for Mackay afterwards. The worst is over now, and you'll only let yourself in for a demonstration if your men find out that any harm has come to you." The diplomatic suggestion had the desired effect; and they rode leisurely back to the bungalow, under a moon no longer robbed of its radiance.

Few words passed between them as they went; but on arriving at the squat, blue gate-posts Wyndham drew rein and spoke.

"Good-night, dear old chap. Take a stiff 'peg' the minute you get in. I'm in need of one myself."

"Sorry if I gave you a bit of a shock, old man," Desmond answered smiling, and rode at a foot's pace toward the house.

"Here I am, Ladybird!" he announced, on entering the drawing-room; and Evelyn, springing from the depths of his chair, made an eager movement towards him.

But at sight of his bandaged arm and damp dishevelled appearance she halted with lips apart. A curious coldness crept into her eyes and entirely banished the young look from her face.

"Theo – you're hurt – you've broken something."

"Well, and if I have?" he answered laughing. "It's a mere nothing. Only a collar-bone."

"Your collar-bone isn't nothing. And I can't *bear* to see you all hideous and bandaged up like that. I knew something would happen! I was sure it would!"

The light of good-humour faded from his eyes.

"Well, well, if you knew it all beforehand, no need to make so many words about it now. Let me sit down. It's been stifling work and – I'm tired."

He sank into the chair and closed his eyes, his face grown suddenly weary. His wife drew near to him slowly, with more of pained curiosity than of solicitude in her face, and laid a half-reluctant hand on the arm of his chair.

"Does it hurt, Theo?" she asked softly.

"Nothing to bother about. Mackay will be here soon."

"Won't you tell us how it happened?"

"There's not much to tell, Ladybird. Rajinder Singh's charger kicked me while I was cutting his head-rope – that's all. The good old chap was quite upset because I wouldn't let him do it himself."

"Well, I think you *ought* to have let him. It wouldn't have mattered half so much if *he* – "

"That's enough, Evelyn!" the man broke out in a flash of genuine anger. "If you're only going to say things of that sort, you may as well hold your tongue."

And once again he closed his eyes, as if in self-defence against further argument or upbraiding.

His wife stood watching him with a puzzled frown, while Honor, a keenly interested observer, wondered what would happen next.

Her sympathy, as always, inclined to the man's point of view. But a passionate justness, very rare in women, forced her to acknowledge that Evelyn's remonstrance, if injudicious, was not unjustifiable. The girl saw clearly that the sheer love of danger for its own sake, which Frontier life breeds in men of daring spirit, had impelled Desmond to needless and inconsiderate risk; saw also that his own perception of the fact added fire to his sharp retort.

He stirred at length, with an uneasy shifting of the damaged shoulder.

"This bandage is hideously uncomfortable," he said in a changed tone. "Could you manage to untie it and fix it up more firmly till Mackay comes?"

Thus directly appealed to, Evelyn cast a nervous glance at Honor. The girl made neither sign nor movement, though her hands ached to relieve the discomfort of the wounded man; and after a perceptible moment of hesitation, Evelyn went to Desmond's side, her heart fluttering like the heart of a prisoned bird.

With tremulous fingers she unfastened the knot behind his shoulder, and, having done so, rested her hand inadvertently on the broken bone. It yielded beneath her touch, and she dropped the end of the bandage with a little cry.

"Oh, Theo, it *moved*! I can't touch it again! It's ... it's horrible!"

Her husband stifled an exclamation of pain and annoyance.

"Could *you* do it for me, Honor?" he asked. "It can hardly be left like this?"

She came to him at once, and righted the bandage with deft, unshrinking fingers, rolling part of the long scarf into a pad under his arm to ease the aching shoulder.

"Thank you," he said. "That's first-rate."

And as he shouted for a much-needed "peg," Honor passed quietly out of the room.

Evelyn remained standing a little apart, watching her husband with speculative eyes. Then she came and stood near him, on the side farthest from the alarming bone that moved at a touch.

"I'm sorry, Theo. Are you very cross with me?"

Her lips quivered a little, and the pallor of her face caught at his heart.

"No, no. We won't make mountains out of molehills, eh, Ladybird? Kiss and be friends! like a good child, and get to bed as fast as possible. Mackay will be here soon, and you'll be best out of the way."

He drew her down and kissed her forehead. Then, as she slipped silently away through his study, and on into the bedroom beyond, he lay back with a sigh in which relief and weariness were oddly mingled. He was devoutly thankful when the arrival of James Mackay dispelled his disturbing train of thought.

CHAPTER VIII. STICK TO THE FRONTIER

"We know our motives least in their confused beginning."
– *Browning.*

Honor sat alone in the drawing-room, a basket of socks and stockings at her elbow, her thoughts working as busily as her needle. This girl had reduced the prosaic necessity of darning to a fine art; and since Evelyn's efforts in that direction bore an odd resemblance to ill-constructed lattice windows, Honor had taken pity on the maltreated garments very early in the day.

Evelyn herself was at the tennis-courts, with the Kresneys and Harry Denvil, a state of things that had become increasingly frequent of late; and a ceaseless murmur of two deep voices came to Honor's ears through the open door of the study, where Desmond was talking and reading Persian with his friend Rajinder Singh.

Honor enjoyed working to the accompaniment of that sound. It had grown pleasantly familiar during the past week, in which Desmond had been cut off from outdoor activities. When the Persian lesson was over, he would come in to her for a talk. Then there would be music, and possibly a game of chess; for Desmond was an enthusiastic player. They had spent one or two afternoons in this fashion already, since the night of the fire; and their intimacy bid fair to ripen into a very satisfying friendship.

To the end of time, writers and thinkers will continue to insist upon the impossibility of such friendships; and to the end of time, men and women will persist in playing with this form of fire. For it is precisely the possibility of fire under the surface which lends its peculiar fascination to an experiment old as the Pyramids, yet eternally fresh as the first leaf-bud of spring.

In the past five years Honor had established two genuine friendships with men of widely different temperaments; and she saw herself now – not without a certain quickening of heart and pulse – in a fair way to establishing a third.

The hum of voices ceased; there were footsteps in the hall; a few hearty words of leave-taking from the Englishman, and two minutes later he stood before her, his left sleeve hanging limp and empty; the arm and shoulder strapped tightly into place beneath the flap of his coat.

"Not gone out yet?" he said, a ring of satisfaction in his tone. "Going to join Ladybird at the club later on?"

"No. As she had this engagement I stayed at home in case you might be glad to have some one to 'play with' after your long lesson was over."

"Just like you!" he declared, with a touch of brotherly frankness, which was peculiarly pleasing to this brother-loving girl. "I've been rather overdoing the Persian this week. You must give me some Beethoven presently. And if you really mean to 'play with' me you must also leave off looking so aggressively industrious."

His eyes rested, in speaking, on the rapid movement of her needle, and he became suddenly aware of the nature of her work.

"Look here, Honor," he exclaimed. "I draw the line at that! Ladybird ought not to allow it. We've no right to turn you into a domestic drudge."

"Ladybird – as you so delightfully call her – knows me far too well to try and stop me when she sees I mean to have my own way! Shall you mind if I go shares in your special name for her? It suits her even better than her own."

"Yes, it seems to express her, somehow – doesn't it?"

An unconscious tenderness invaded his tone, and his glance turned upon a panel photograph of his wife in her wedding-dress that stood near him on the mantelpiece. Watching it thus, he fell into a thoughtful silence, which Honor made no attempt to break. Speaking or silent his companionship

was equally acceptable to her: and while she awaited his pleasure a great hole, made by the removal of one of Evelyn's "lattice windows," filled up apace.

Of a sudden he turned from the picture, and, drawing up a low chair, sat down before her, leaning a little forward, his elbow resting on his knee. The urgency and gravity of his bearing made her at once lay down her work.

"Honor," he began, "I'm bothered ... about Ladybird, ... that's the truth. I wonder if I can speak without fear of your misunderstanding me?"

"Try me! I am only too glad to help her in any way."

His intense look softened to a smile.

"You've made that clear enough already. I begin to wonder what she will do when John comes back to claim you again. You so thoroughly understand her, and thoroughly – love her."

"She is a creature born to be loved."

"*And* to be kept happy," he added very quietly. "But the vital question is whether that is at all possible in Kohat, or in any other of our stations; for Kohat is by no means the worst. She hates the place, doesn't she? She's counting the days to get away to the Hills. You know you can't look me straight in the face and say she is happy here."

The unexpected attack struck Honor into momentary silence. Desmond was fatally quick to perceive the shadow of hesitation, transient as a breath upon glass; and when she would have spoken he silenced her with a peremptory hand.

"Don't perjure yourself, Honor. Your eyes have told me all I wanted to know."

Distress gave her a courage that surprised herself.

"Indeed they have done nothing of the kind! You ask a direct question, and you are bound in fairness to hear my answer. The life here is still very new to Evelyn, and she has not quite found her footing yet; – that is all. I have had it from her own lips that the place matters very little to her so long as she is – with you; and you go too far in saying that she is not happy here."

But her words did not carry conviction. He was still under the influence of his wife's curious aloofness since the night of the fire.

"You're trying to let me down gently, Honor," he said, with a rather cheerless smile. "And you may as well save yourself the trouble. Only – this is where you must *not* misunderstand me, please, – no shadow of blame attaches to Ladybird if she isn't happy. I had no right to bring her up to this part of the world, knowing it as I did; and I've no right to keep her here. That's the position, in a nutshell."

"Do you mean you ought to – send her away?"

"No – *take* her away."

Honor started visibly.

"But – surely – that's impossible?"

"I think not," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone that distressed her more keenly than any display of emotion. "It's merely a question of facing facts. If I had money enough, I could throw up the Army and take her home. But, as matters stand, I can only do the next best thing, and give up – the Frontier, by exchanging into a down-country regiment."

"*The Frontier...!* Theo! Do you realise what you are saying?"

"Perfectly."

"Oh, but it's folly – worse than folly! To give up what you have worked for all these years – the men who worship you – your friends, the regiment – "

"They would survive the loss. I don't flatter myself I'm indispensable. Besides, this isn't a question of me or my friends. I am thinking of Ladybird."

The coolness of his tone, and the set determination of his mouth, chilled her fervour like a draught of cold air.

"Oh, if only Major Wyndham were here!" she murmured desperately.

"Thank God he is not! And if he were, it would make no difference. I shouldn't dream of discussing such a matter with him or – any of them. When my mind is made up, I shall tell him; that is all."

He rose as though the matter were ended; but Honor had no mind to let him shut the door upon it – yet.

"It is strange that you can speak so," she said, "when you must know, better than any one, what your leaving the regiment would mean – to Major Wyndham."

"Yes – I know," he answered quietly, and the pain in his eyes made her half regret her own daring. "The only two big difficulties in the way are my father – and Paul."

"I see a whole army of others almost as big."

"That is only because you are always in sympathy with the man's point of view."

"A matter like this *ought* to be looked at first and foremost from the man's point of view. The truth is, Theo, that you have simply appealed to me in the hope of having your own Quixotic notion confirmed. You want me to say, 'Yes, go; you will be doing quite right.' And – think what you will of me – I flatly refuse to say it!"

He regarded her for a few seconds in an admiring silence, the smile deepening in his eyes. Then:

"Don't you think you are a little hard on me?" he said at length. "It is not altogether easy to do – this sort of thing."

Honor made no immediate reply, though the strongest chords of her being vibrated in response to his words. Then she rose also, and stood before him; her head tilted a little upwards; her candid eyes resting deliberately upon his own. Standing thus, at her full height, she appeared commandingly beautiful, but in the stress of the moment the fact counted for nothing with either of them. All the hidden forces of her nature were set to remove the dogged line from his mouth; and he himself, looking on the fair outward show of her, saw only a mind clear as crystal, lit up by the white light of truth.

For an instant they fronted one another – spirits of equal strength. Then Honor spoke.

"If I *do* seem hard on you, it is only because I want, above all things, to convince you that your idea is wrong from every point of view. You have paid me a very high compliment to-day. I want you to pay me a still higher one: to believe that I am speaking the simple truth, as I see it, from a woman's standpoint, not merely trying to save you from unhappiness. May I speak out straight?"

"As plainly as you please, Honor. Your opinion will not be despised, I promise you."

"Well, then – is it fair on Evelyn to make her upbringing responsible for such a serious turn of the wheel? Would you give her no voice in the matter – treat her as if she were a mere child?"

"She is very little more than a child."

"Indeed, Theo, she is a great deal more. She is a woman, ... and a wife. The woman's soul isn't fully awake in her yet; but it may come awake any day. And then – how would she feel if she ever found out – "

"She never would – "

"How can you tell? Women find out most things about the men they – care for. It's a risk not worth running. Would she even acquiesce if you put the matter before her now, child as she is?"

"Frankly, I don't know. Possibly not. She isn't able to see ahead much, or look all round a subject."

"Shall you be very angry if I say that you haven't yet looked thoroughly round this one? The idea probably came to you as an impulse – a very fine impulse, I admit; and, instead of fairly weighing pros and cons, you have simply been hunting up excuses that will justify you in carrying it out; because, for the moment, Evelyn seems a little discontented with things in general."

The hard lines about his mouth relaxed.

"You *are* speaking straight with a vengeance, Honor!"

"I know I am. It's necessary sometimes, when people are – obstinate!" And she smiled frankly into his troubled face. "Oh, believe me, it's fatal for the man to throw all his life out of gear on account of the woman. It's putting things the wrong way about altogether. In accepting her husband, a woman must be prepared to accept his life and work also."

"But, suppose she can't realise either till – too late?"

"That's a drawback. But if she really cares, it can still be done. I am jealous for Evelyn. I want her to have the chance of showing that she has good stuff in her. Give her the chance, Theo; and if she doesn't quite rise to it, don't feel that you are in any way to blame."

"I'd be bound to feel that."

"Then I can only say it would be very wrong-headed of you." Her eyes softened to a passing tenderness nevertheless. "Let the blame, if there is any, rest on my shoulders; and we'll hope that the need may never arise. Now, have I said enough? Will you —*will* you leave things as they are, and put aside your impossible notion for good?"

The urgency of her request so touched him that he answered with a readiness which surprised himself.

"No question but you're a friend worth having! I promise you this much, Honor. I will think very thoroughly over it all, since you accuse me of not having done so yet! And we'll let the matter rest for the present, anyway. I'd like to get you both to the Hills as soon as possible. These Kresneys are becoming something of a nuisance. It's past my comprehension how she can find any pleasure in their company. But she has little enough amusement here, and I'm loth to spoil any of it. She'll enjoy going up to Murree, though, sooner than she expected; and as Mackay insists on my taking fifteen days before getting back to work, I can go with you, and settle you up there in about a week's time. You'll see after her, for me, won't you, Honor? She's a little heedless and inexperienced still; and you'll keep an eye on household matters more or less?"

"Of course I will, and make her see to them herself, too; though it seems rather like expecting a flower to learn the multiplication table! She is so obviously just made to be loved and protected."

"*And kept happy,*" he insisted, with an abrupt reversion to his original argument.

"Yes – within reasonable limits. Now, sit down, please, and light up. You've been all this time without a cigar!"

But the cigar was hardly lighted before they were startled by a confused sound of shouting from the compound; – a blur of shrill and deep voices, punctuated by the strained discordant bark of a dog; – a bark unmistakable to ears that have heard it once. Desmond sprang out of his chair.

"By Jove! A mad pariah!"

Lifting Rob by the scruff of his neck, he flung that amazed and dignified person with scant ceremony into the study, and shut the door; then, judging by the direction of the sound, hurried out to the front verandah, snatching up a heavy stick as he passed through the hall. Honor, following not far behind, went quickly into her own room.

Desmond found his sun-diffused compound abandoned to a tumult of terror. Fourteen servants and their belongings had all turned out in force, with sticks, and staves, and valiant shakings of partially unwound turbans, against the unwelcome intruder – a mangy-coated pariah, with lolling tongue and foam-flecked lips, whose bones showed through hairless patches of skin; and whose bared fangs snapped incessantly at everything and nothing, in a manner gruesome to behold. A second crowd of outsiders, huddled close to the gates, was also very zealous in the matter of shouting, and of winnowing the empty air.

As Desmond set foot on the verandah, a four-year-old boy, bent on closer investigation of the enemy, escaped from the "home" battalion. His small mother pursued him, shrieking; but at the first snap the dog's teeth met in the child's fluttering shirt, and his shrieks soared, high and thin, above the deeper torrent of sound.

In an instant Desmond was beside him, the stick swung high over his head. But a low sun smote him straight in the eyes, and there was scant time for accurate aim. The stick merely grazed the dog's shoulder in passing; and Desmond almost lost his balance from the unresisted force of the blow.

The girl-mother caught wildly at her son; and prostrating herself at a safe distance, babbled incoherent and unheeded gratitude. The dog, mad with rage and pain, made a purposeful spring at his one definite assailant; and once again Desmond, half-blinded with sunlight, swung the heavy stick aloft. But before it fell a revolver shot rang out close behind him; and the dog dropped like a stone, with a bullet through his brain.

A shout of quite another new quality went up from the crowd; and Desmond, turning sharply on his heel, confronted Honor Meredith, white to the lips, the strong light making an aureole of her hair.

The hand that held the revolver quivered a little, and he caught it in so strong a grip that she winced under the pressure.

"It would be mere impertinence to say 'thank you,'" he murmured with low-toned vehemence. But his eyes, that sought her own, shamed the futility of speech. "The sun was blinding me; and if I'd missed the second time – "

"Oh, hush, hush!" she pleaded with a quick catch of her breath. "Look, there's Rajinder Singh coming back."

"He must have seen what happened; and by the look of him, I imagine *he* will have no great difficulty in expressing his feelings."

Indeed, the tall Sikh, whose finely-cut face and cavernous eye-bones suggested a carving in old ivory, bowed himself almost to the ground before the girl who had saved his admired Captain Sahib from the possibility of a hideous death.

But in the midst of an impassioned flow of words, his deep voice faltered; and squaring his shoulders, he saluted Desmond with a gleam of fire in his eyes.

"There be more things in the heart of a man, Hazúr, than the tongue can be brought to utter. But, of a truth, the Miss Sahib hath done good service for the Border this day."

Desmond flung a smiling glance at Honor.

"*There's* fame for you!" he said, with a lightness that was mere foam and spray from great deeps. "The whole Border-side is at your feet! – But what brought you back again, Rajinder Singh?"

"Merely a few words I omitted to say to your Honour at parting."

The words were soon spoken; and the crowd, breaking up into desultory groups, was beginning to disperse, when, to his surprise, Desmond saw his wife's jhampan appear between the gate-posts, and pause for a moment while she took leave of some one on the farther side. Instinctively he moved forward to greet her; but, on perceiving her companion, changed his mind, and stood awaiting her by the verandah steps.

The dead dog lay full in the middle of the path; and Honor, still holding her revolver, stood only a few yards away. At sight of these things the faint shadow of irritation upon Evelyn's face deepened to disgust, not unmixed with fear, and her voice had a touch of sharpness in it as she turned upon her husband.

"Who on earth put that horrible dog there, Theo? And why is Honor wandering about with a pistol? I met a whole lot of natives coming away. Has anything been happening?"

"The dog was mad, and Honor shot him," Desmond answered, with cool abruptness. Her manner of parting from Kresney had set the blood throbbing in his temples. "I only had a stick to tackle him with; and she very pluckily came to my rescue."

While he spoke, Honor turned and went into the house. She was convinced that Evelyn would strike a jarring note, and in her present mood felt ill able to endure it.

Evelyn frowned.

"Oh, Theo, how troublesome you are! If the dog had bitten a few natives, who'd have cared?"

"Their relations, I suppose. And there was a child in danger, Evelyn."

"Poor little thing! But you really can't go about trying to get killed for the benefit of any stray sort of people. I am thankful I wasn't here!"

"Yes – it was just as well," her husband answered drily, as he handed her out of the jhampan. "What brought you back so early?"

"The sun was too hot. I had a headache; and we were all playing abominably. I'm going in now, to lie down."

She paused beside him, and her eyes lingered upon his empty coat-sleeve. Lifting it distastefully between finger and thumb, she glanced up at him with a droop of her delicate lips.

"When is it going to be better? I hate to see you looking all one-sided like that."

"I'm sorry," he answered humbly. "But Nature won't be persuaded to hurry herself – even to please you." He scrutinised her face with a shade of anxiety.

"You do look white, Ladybird. How would it be if I took you to Murree in a week's time?"

"It would be simply lovely! *Can* you do it – really? Would you *let* me go so soon?"

"*Let* you go? Do you think I want to keep you here a moment later than you care to stay?"

"Theo!" Instant reproach clouded the April brightness of her face. "How horrid you are! I thought you liked to have me here as long as possible."

He laughed outright at that. He was apt to find her unreasonableness more charming than irritating.

"Surely, little woman, that goes without saying. But if the heat is troubling you, and headaches, I like better to have you where you can be rid of both; and as the notion seems to please you, we'll consider the matter settled."

Between nine and ten that evening, when the three were sitting together in the drawing-room, the outer stillness was broken by a sound of many footsteps and voices rapidly nearing the house. No native crowd this time. The steps and voices were unmistakably English; and Desmond rose hastily.

"This must be Rajinder Singh's doing! It looks as if they meant to overwhelm us in force."

Evelyn had risen also, with a slight frown between her brows.

"Can't I go to bed before they come, Theo? I'm very tired, and they're sure to make a dreadful noise."

"I'm afraid that won't do at all," he said decisively, a rare note of reproof in his tone. "They probably won't stop long, and you must please stay up till they go."

As he spoke, Harry Denvil in white Mess uniform, scarlet kummerband, and jingling spurs, plunged into the room.

"I'm only the advance guard! The whole regiment's coming on behind – even the Colonel – to drink Miss Meredith's health!" He turned upon the girl and shook hands with her at great length. "All the same, you know," he protested laughing, "it's not fair play for *you* to go doing that sort of thing. Wish I'd had the chance of it myself!"

Such speeches are impossible to answer; and Honor was thankful that the main body of troops arrived in time to save her from the futile attempt.

But she was only at the beginning of her ordeal.

By the time that Mrs Olliver and six men had wrung her hand with varying degrees of vigour, each adding a characteristic tribute of thanks and praise, her cheeks were on fire; and a mist, which she tried vainly to dispel, blurred her vision.

Through that mist, she was aware of Frank vigorously shaking hands with Desmond, scolding and blessing him in one breath. "Ah, Theo, man, you're a shocking bad lot!" was her sisterly greeting. "Never clear out o' one frying-pan till you're into the next! Thank the Powers Miss Meredith was handy." And swinging round on her heel she accosted the girl herself. "No mistaking the stock *you* come of, Honor, me dear!"

Submerged in blushes, Honor could scarce command her voice. "But really – I only – "

"You only hit the bull's eye like a man, Miss Meredith," Captain Olliver took her up promptly. "The Major never told us he was adding a crack shot to the regiment!" And he swept her a bow that reduced her to silence.

More overwhelming than all were the few direct words from Colonel Buchanan himself; a tall, hard-featured Scot, so entirely absorbed in his profession that he never, save of dire necessity, set foot in a lady's drawing-room.

Paul Wyndham introduced him, and moved aside, leaving them together. For an instant he treated the girl to the quiet scrutiny of clear blue eyes, unpleasantly penetrating. He had scarcely looked at her till now. Still unreconciled to Desmond's marriage, he had resented the introduction of a third woman into the regiment; and he found himself momentarily bewildered by her beauty.

"I ought to be better acquainted with you, Miss Meredith," he said a little stiffly, sincerity struggling through natural reticence, like a light through a fog. "I'm no lady's man, as you probably know, but I had to come and thank you to-night. Desmond's quite my finest officer – no disrespect to your brother; he knows it as well as I do –"

"Here you are, Colonel!" Geoff Olliver thrust a long tumbler into his senior's hand. "We're going to let off steam by drinking Miss Meredith's health before we go back."

Honor looked round hastily, in hopes of effecting an escape, and was confronted by Desmond's eyes looking straight into her own. He lifted his glass with a smile of the frankest friendliness; and the rest followed his example.

"Miss Meredith, your very good health."

The words went round the room in a deep disjointed murmur; and Frank Olliver, stepping impulsively forward, held out her glass to the girl.

"Here's to your health and good luck, with all my heart, Honor, ... the Honor o' the regiment!" she added, with a flash of her white teeth.

Uproarious shouts greeted the spontaneous sally.

"Hear, hear! Well played, indeed, Mrs Olliver! Pity Meredith couldn't have heard that."

Olliver laid a heavy hand on Desmond's shoulder.

"Tell you what, old chap," he said. "You must come back with us; and, by Jove, we'll make a night of it. Finest possible thing for you after a week's moping on the sick list; and we'll just keep Mackay hanging round in case you get knocked out of shape. I'll slip into uniform myself and follow on. That suit you, Colonel?"

"Down to the ground; if Mackay has no objection."

But Mackay knew his men too well to have anything of the sort; and Desmond's eyes gleamed.

"How about uniform for me, sir?" he asked. "I could manage it after a fashion."

Colonel Buchanan smiled.

"No doubt you could! But I'll overlook it to-night. The fellows want you. Won't do to keep them waiting!"

Followed a babel of talk and laughter, in the midst of which Honor, who had moved a little apart, became aware that Desmond was at her side.

"Never mind them, Honor," he said in a low voice. "They mean it very well, and they don't realise that it's a little overwhelming for us both. I won't pile it on by saying any more on my own account. *Wait* till I get a chance to repay you in kind – that's all!"

His words spurred her to a sudden resolve.

"You have the chance now, if it doesn't seem like taking a mean advantage of – things."

"Mean advantages are not in your line. You've only to say the word."

"Then *stick to the Frontier!*" she answered, an imperative ring in her low voice. "Doesn't to-night convince you that you've no right to leave them all?"

His face grew suddenly grave.

"The only right is to stand by Ladybird – at all costs."

"Yes, yes – I know. But remember what I said about her side of it. Give her the chance to find herself, Theo; and give *me* your word now to think no more about leaving the Border. Will you?"

He did not answer at once, nor did he remove his eyes from her face.

"Do you care so much what I do with the rest of my life?" he said at last very quietly.

"Yes – I do; for Ladybird's sake."

"I see. Well, there's no denying your privilege – now to have some voice in the matter. I give you my word, and if it turns out a mistake, the blame be on my own head. The fellows are making a move now. I must go. Good-night."

The men departed accordingly with much clatter of footsteps and jingling of spurs; and only Mrs Olliver remained behind.

Evelyn Desmond had succeeded in slipping away unnoticed a few minutes earlier. She alone, among them all, had spoken no word of gratitude to her friend.

CHAPTER IX. WE'LL JUST FORGET

"Les petites choses ont leur importance; c'est par elles toujours qu'on se perde."

– *Dostoievsky.*

"So the picnic was a success?"

"Yes, quite. Mrs Rivers was so clever. She paired us off beautifully. My pair was Captain Winthrop of the Ghurkas; an awfully nice man. He talked to me the whole time. He knows Theo. Says he's the finest fellow in Asia! Rather nice to be married to the 'finest fellow in Asia,' isn't it?"

"Decidedly. But I don't think we needed *him* to tell us that sort of thing." A touch of the girl's incurable pride flashed in her eyes.

"Well, I was pleased all the same. He said he was never so surprised in his life as when he heard Theo had married; but now he had seen me, he didn't feel surprised any more."

"That was impertinence."

"Not a bit! I thought it was rather nice."

A trifling difference of opinion; but, in point of character, it served to set the two women miles apart.

Evelyn's remark scarcely needed a reply; and Honor fell into a thoughtful silence.

She had allowed herself the rare indulgence of a day "off duty." Instead of accompanying Evelyn to the picnic, she had enjoyed a scrambling excursion with Mrs Conolly – whose friendship was fast becoming a real possession – and her two big babies; exploring hillsides and ravines; hunting up the rarer wild flowers and ferns; and lunching off sandwiches on a granite boulder overhanging infinity. This was her idea of enjoying life in the Himalayas; but the June sun proved a little exhausting; and she was aware of an unusual weariness as she lay back in her canvas chair in the verandah of "The Deodars," – a woodland cottage, owing its pretentious name to the magnificent cedars that stood sentinel on either side of it.

Her eyes turned for comfort and refreshment to the stainless wonder of the snows, that were already beginning to don their evening jewels – coral and amethyst, opal and pearl. The railed verandah, and its sweeping sprays of honeysuckle, were delicately etched upon a sky of warm amber, shading through gradations of nameless colour into blue, where cloud-films lay like fairy islands in an enchanted sea. Faint whiffs of rose and honeysuckle hovered in the still air, like spirits of the coming twilight, entangling sense and soul in a sweetness that entices rather than uplifts.

Evelyn Desmond, perched lightly on the railings, showed ethereal as a large white butterfly, in the daintiness of her summer finery against a background of glowing sky. She swung a lace parasol aimlessly to and fro, and her gaze was concentrated on the buckle of an irreproachable shoe.

Honor, withdrawing her eyes reluctantly from the brooding peace of mountain and sky, wondered a little at her pensiveness; wondered also where her thoughts – if mere flittings of the mind are entitled to be so called – had carried her.

As a matter of fact, she was thinking of unpaid bills; since human lilies of the field, though they neither toil nor spin, must pay for irreproachable shoes and unlimited summer raiment.

The girl's own thoughts, as they were apt to do in leisure moments, had wandered to Kohat: to the men who were working with cheerful, matter-of-fact courage in the glare of the little desert-station; and to the one brave woman, who remained in their midst to hearten them by her own indomitable gladness of soul.

The beauty of the evening bred a longing – natural in one so sympathetic – that they also could be up on this green hill-top, under the shade of the deodars, enjoying the exquisite repose of it all.

"Have you heard from Theo this week, Ladybird?" she asked suddenly. It was the first time she had used the name, for habit is strong; and Evelyn looked up quickly, the colour deepening in her cheeks.

"Don't call me Ladybird!" she commanded, with unusual decision. "It belongs to Theo."

Honor noted her rising colour with a smile of approval.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said gently. "I quite understand. But – have you heard lately?"

Evelyn's face cleared as readily as a child's.

"Oh, yes; I forgot to tell you. I had quite a long letter this morning. Perhaps you would like to read it."

And drawing an envelope from her pocket she tossed it into Honor's lap.

The girl glanced down at it quickly; but allowed it to lie there untouched. She knew that Desmond wrote good letters, and she would have dearly liked to read this one. But a certain manly strain in her forbade her to trespass on the privacy of a letter written to his wife.

"Thank you," she said; "I think I won't read it, though. I don't suppose Theo would care about his letters being passed on to me. I only want to know if things are going on all right."

"Oh, yes; in the usual sort of way. They've had trouble with those wretched Waziris. Two sentries murdered last week; and some horses stolen. Oh! and Mrs Olliver has had a bad touch of fever; and there's cholera in the city, but they don't think it'll spread. What a gruesome place it is! And what a mercy we're not there now. By the way," she added, working her parasol into a crack between two boards, "I met the Kresneys as I was coming home."

"The Kresneys! Here?"

Honor sat suddenly upright, all trace of weariness gone from her face.

"Yes. They're up for six weeks, and they seemed so pleased to see me that – I asked them in to dinner to-night."

"Evelyn!"

"Well – why not?" A spark of defiance glinted through the dark curves of her lashes.

"You know Theo would hate it."

"I daresay. But he isn't here; so it can't matter to him. And he need not know anything about it."

"My dear! That would be worse than all!"

Evelyn frowned.

"Really, Honor, for a clever person, you're rather stupid. It would be simply idiotic to tell him what is sure to annoy him, when the thing's done and he can't prevent it."

The girl leaned back with an impatient sigh.

"If you feel so sure it will annoy him, why on earth do you do it? He is so good to you in every possible way."

A great longing came upon her to disclose all that he had been ready to relinquish five weeks ago.

"I know that without your telling me," Evelyn retorted sharply. "But I think I might do as I like just while I'm up here. And I mean to – whatever you say. The Kresneys came here, instead of going to Mussoorie, chiefly to see me. I can't ignore them; and I won't."

"Well, for goodness' sake, don't ask them to the house again, that's all." Then, because she could scarcely trust herself to say more on the subject, and because she had no wish to risk a quarrel, she added quickly: "A parcel came while we were out. Perhaps you'd like to open it before dinner."

Evelyn was on her feet at once – the Kresneys forgotten as though they were not.

"It must be my new dress for the General's garden-party. How lovely!"

"Another dress? Your almirah's choked with them already."

"Those are only what I got at Simla last year."

"You seem to have gone in rather extensively for dresses last year," Honor remarked, a trifle critically. Since their arrival in Murree she had become better acquainted with the details of Evelyn's wardrobe; and the knowledge had troubled her not a little. "How about your trousseau?"

"Mother gave me hardly *any* dresses. She said I wouldn't need them on the Frontier. But I *must* have decent clothes, even in the wilderness."

"Yes, I suppose so. Still you will find continual dresses from Simla a terrible drain on a limited allowance."

A delicate flush crept into Evelyn's cheeks, and her eyes had an odd glitter that came to them when she felt herself hard-pressed, yet did not intend to give in.

"What do *you* know about my allowance?"

"I happen to know the amount of it," Honor answered quietly. "I also know the cost of clothes such as you have been getting in Simla, and – I am puzzled to see how the two can be made to fit. You do *pay* for your things, I suppose?" she added, with a flash of apprehension. She herself had never been allowed to indulge in bills.

Evelyn's colour ebbed at the direct question; and she took instant refuge in anger and matrimonial dignity, as being safer than truth.

"Really, Honor, you're getting rather a nuisance just lately. Scolding and preaching never does me a scrap of good – and you know it. What I do with my allowance isn't anybody's business but my own, and I won't be treated as if I were a child. After all" – with a fine mingling of dignity and scorn – "*I'm* the married woman. You're only a girl – staying with me; and I think I might be allowed to manage my own affairs, without *you* always criticising and interfering."

By this time Honor had risen also; a line of sternness hardening her beautiful mouth. Beneath her sustained cheerfulness lay a passionate temper; and Evelyn's unexpected attack stung it fiercely into life. Several seconds passed before she could trust herself to speak.

"Very well, Evelyn," she said, at length, "from to-day there shall be an end of my criticism and interference. You seem to forget that you asked for my help. But as you don't need it any longer I will hand over the account books to you to-morrow morning; and you had better give Nazar Khan some orders about dinner. There isn't very much in the house."

Only once before had Evelyn seen her friend roused to real indignation; and she was fairly frightened at the effect of her own hasty words.

"Oh, Honor, don't be so angry as that!" she pleaded brokenly. "You know I simply can't –"

But with a decisive gesture Honor set her aside, and walking straight past her, mounted the steep staircase to her own room.

Arrived there, she stood still as one dazed, her hands pressed against her temples. There were times when this girl felt a little afraid of her own vehemence; which, but for the heritage of a strong will, and her unfailing reliance on a Higher Judgment, might indeed have proved disastrous for herself and others.

With controlled deliberation of movement, she drew a chair to the hired dressing-table, which served as davenport, and began to write.

She set down date and address and the words, "My dear Theo," – no more. What was it she meant to say to him? That from to-day Evelyn must be left to manage her affairs alone; that she could no longer be responsible for her friend's doings, social or domestic; but that she was willing to remain with her for the season, if he wished it? How were such things to be worded? Was it even possible to say them at all?

Her eye fell upon the envelope containing his last letter. Mechanically she drew it out and read it through again very slowly. It was a long letter, full of their mutual interests; of the music and the Persian, – which she was now studying under his tuition; – of Wyndham, Denvil, Mrs Olliver, and his men; very little about himself. But it was written as simply and directly as he spoke, – the only form of letter that annihilates space; and it was signed, "Always your friend, Theo Desmond."

Before she reached the signature the fire had faded from her eyes. She returned it to the envelope, took up the sheet on which three lines were written, and tearing it across and across, dropped it into the cane basket at her side.

"I can't do it," she murmured. "What right have I to let him call himself my friend, if I fail him the first time things take an unpleasant turn?"

She decided, nevertheless, that Evelyn might well be allowed to realise her own helplessness a little before the reins were again taken out of her hands. Then she went downstairs and out into the golden evening, to cool her cheeks and quiet her pulses by half an hour of communing with the imperturbable peace of the hills.

Evelyn, standing alone in the drawing-room, bewildered and helpless as a starfish stranded by the tide, heard Honor's footsteps pass the door and die away in the distance. An unreasoning fear seized her that she might be going over to Mrs Conolly to stay there for good; and at the thought a sob rose in her throat. Flinging aside her parasol, which fell rattling to the floor, she sank into the nearest chair and buried her face in the cushion.

She knew right well that her words had been ungrateful and unjust; yet in her heart she was more vexed with Honor for having pushed her into a corner than with herself for her defensive flash of resentment. More than all was she overwhelmed by a sense of utter helplessness, of not knowing where to turn or what to do next.

"Oh, if only Theo were here!" she lamented. "He would never be unkind to me, I know." Yet the ground of her woe reminded her sharply that if her husband had knowledge of the bills lying at that moment in her davenport, he might possibly be so unkind to her – as she phrased it – that she did not dare tell him the truth. He had spoken to her once on the subject of debt in no uncertain terms; and she had resolved thenceforth to deal with her inevitable muddles in her own way, – the simple fatal way of letting things slide, and hoping that they would somehow come right in the end. But there seemed no present prospect of such a consummation; and for a while she gave herself up to a luxury of self-pity. Tides in her mind ebbed and flowed aimlessly as seaweed. Everything was hopeless and miserable. It was useless trying to be good; and she supposed Honor would never help her again.

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