

**VARIOUS**

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# Various

## The Argosy / Vol. 51, No. 5, May, 1891

### THE FATE OF THE HARA DIAMOND

#### CHAPTER XVIII

##### JANET IN A NEW CHARACTER

On entering Lady Chillington's room for the second time, Janet found that the mistress of Deepley Walls had completed her toilette in the interim, and was now sitting robed in stiff rustling silk, with an Indian fan in one hand and a curiously-chased vinaigrette in the other. She motioned with her fan to Janet. "Be seated," she said, in the iciest of tones; and Janet sat down on a chair a yard or two removed from her ladyship.

"Since you were here last, Miss Hope," she began, "I have seen Sister Agnes, who informs me that she has already given you an outline of the duties I shall require you to perform should you agree to accept the situation which ill-health obliges her to vacate. At the same time, I wish you clearly to understand that I do not consider you in any way bound by what I have done for you in the time gone by, neither would I have you in this matter run counter to your inclinations in the slightest degree. If you would prefer that a situation as governess should be obtained for you, say so without hesitation; and any small influence I may have shall be used ungrudgingly in your behalf. Should you agree to remain at Deepley Walls, your salary will be thirty guineas a-year. If you wish it, you can take a day for consideration, and let me have your decision in the morning."

Lady Chillington's mention of a fixed salary stung Janet to the quick: it was so entirely unexpected. It stung her, but only for a moment; the next she saw and gratefully recognised the fact that she should no longer be a pensioner on the bounty of Lady Chillington. A dependent she might be—a servant even, if you like; but at least she would be earning her living by the labour of her own hands; and even about the very thought of such a thing there was a sweet sense of independence that flushed her warmly through and through.

Her hesitation lasted but a moment, then she spoke. "Your ladyship is very kind, but I require no time for consideration," she said. "I have already made up my mind to take the position which you have so generously offered me; and if my ability to please you only prove equal to my inclination, you will not have much cause to complain."

A faint smile of something like satisfaction flitted across Lady Chillington's face. "Very good, Miss Hope," she said, in a more gracious tone than she had yet used. "I am pleased to find that you have taken so sensible a view of the matter, and that you understand so thoroughly your position under my roof. How soon shall you be prepared to begin your new duties?"

"I am ready at this moment."

"Come to me an hour hence, and I will then instruct you."

In this second interview, brief though it was, Janet could not avoid being struck by Lady Chillington's stately dignity of manner. Her tone and style were those of a high-bred gentlewoman. It seemed scarcely possible that she and the querulous, shrivelled-up old woman in the cashmere dressing-robe could be one and the same individual.

Unhappily, as Janet to her cost was not long in finding out, her ladyship's querulous moods were much more frequent than her moods of quiet dignity. At such times she was very difficult to please; sometimes, indeed, it was utterly impossible to please her: not even an angel could have done it. Then, indeed, Janet felt her duty weigh very hardly upon her. By nature her temper was quick and passionate—her impulses high and generous; but when Lady Chillington was in her worse moods, she had to curb the former as with an iron chain; while the latter were outraged continually by Lady Chillington's mean and miserly mode of life, and by a certain low and sordid tone of thought which at such times pervaded all she said and did. And yet, strange to say, she had rare fits of generosity and goodwill—times when her soul seemed to sit in sackcloth and ashes, as if in repentance for those other occasions when the "dark fit" was on her, and the things of this world claimed her too entirely as their own.

After her second interview with Lady Chillington, Janet at once hurried off to Sister Agnes to tell her the news. "On one point only, so far as I see at present, shall I require any special information," she said. "I shall need to know exactly the mode of procedure necessary to be observed when I pay my midnight visits to Sir John Chillington."

"It is not my intention that you should visit Sir John," said Sister Agnes. "That portion of my old duties will continue to be performed by me."

"Not until you are stronger—not until your health is better than it is now," said Janet earnestly. "I am young and strong; it is merely a part of what I have undertaken to do, and you must please let me do it. I have outgrown my childish fears, and could visit the Black Room now without the quiver of a nerve."

"You think so by daylight, but wait until the house is dark and silent, and then say the same conscientiously, if you can do so."

But Janet was determined not to yield the point, nor could Sister Agnes move her from her decision. Ultimately a compromise was entered into by which it was agreed that for one evening at least they should visit the Black Room together, and that the settlement of the question should be left until the following day.

Precisely as midnight struck they set out together up the wide, old-fashioned staircase, past the door of Janet's old room, up the narrower staircase beyond, until the streak of light came into view and the grim, nail-studded door itself was reached. Janet was secretly glad that she was not there alone; so much she acknowledged to herself as they halted for a moment while Sister Agnes unlocked the door. But when the latter asked her if she were not afraid, if she would not much rather be snug in bed, Janet only said: "Give me the key; tell me what I have to do inside the room, and then leave me."

But Sister Agnes would not consent to that, and they entered the room together. Instead of seven years, it seemed to Janet only seven hours since she had been there last, so vividly was the recollection of her first visit still impressed upon her mind. Everything was unchanged in that chamber of the dead, except, perhaps, the sprawling cupids on the ceiling, which looked a shade dingier than of old, and more in need of soap and water than ever. But the black draperies on the walls, the huge candles in the silver tripods, the pall-covered coffin in the middle of the room, were all as Janet had seen them last. There, too, was the oaken *prie-dieu* a yard or two away from the head of the coffin. Sister Agnes knelt on it for a few moments, and bent her head in silent prayer.

"My visit to this room every midnight," said Sister Agnes, "is made for the simple purpose of renewing the candles, and of seeing that everything is as it should be. That the visit should be made at midnight, and at no other time, is one of Lady Chillington's whims—a whim that by process of time has crystallised into a law. The room is never entered by day."

"Was it whim or madness that caused Sir John Chillington to leave orders that his body should be kept above ground for twenty years?"

"Who shall tell by what motive he was influenced when he had that particular clause inserted in his will? Deeply Walls itself hangs on the proper fulfilment of the clause. If Lady Chillington

were to cause her husband's remains to be interred in the family vault before the expiry of the twenty years, the very day she did so the estate would pass from her to the present baronet, a distant cousin, between whom and her ladyship there has been a bitter feud of many years' standing. Although Deepley Walls has been in the family for a hundred and fifty years, it has never been entailed. The entailed estate is in Yorkshire, and there Sir Mark, the present baronet, resides. Lady Chillington has the power of bequeathing Deepley Walls to whomsoever she may please, providing she carry out strictly the instructions contained in her husband's will. It is possible that in a court of law the will might have been set aside on the ground of insanity, or the whole matter might have been thrown into Chancery. But Lady Chillington did not choose to submit to such an ordeal. All the courts of law in the kingdom could have given her no more than she possessed already—they could merely have given her permission to bury her husband's body, and it did not seem to her that such a permission could compensate for turning into public gossip a private chapter of family history. So here Sir John Chillington has remained since his death, and here he will stay till the last of the twenty years has become a thing of the past. Two or three times every year Mr. Winter, Sir Mark's lawyer, comes over to Deepley Walls to satisfy himself by ocular proof that Sir John's instructions are being duly carried out. This he has a legal right to do in the interests of his client. Sometimes he is conducted to this room by Lady Chillington, sometimes by me; but even in his case her ladyship will not relax her rule of not having the room visited by day."

Sister Agnes then showed Janet that behind the black draperies there was a cupboard in the wall, which on being opened proved to contain a quantity of large candles. One by one Sister Agnes took out of the silver tripods what remained of the candles of the previous day, and filled up their places with fresh ones. Janet looked on attentively. Then, for the second time, Sister Agnes knelt on the *prie-dieu* for a few moments, and then she and Janet left the room.

Next day Sister Agnes was so ill, and Janet pressed so earnestly to be allowed to attend to the Black Room in place of her, and alone, that she was obliged to give a reluctant consent.

It was not without an inward tremor that Janet heard the clock strike twelve. Sister Agnes had insisted on accompanying her part of the way upstairs, and would, in fact, have gone the whole distance with her, had not Janet insisted on going forward alone. In a single breath, as it seemed to her, she ran up the remaining stairs, unlocked the door, and entered the room. Her nerves were not sufficiently composed to allow of her making use of the *prie-dieu*. All she cared for just then was to get through her duty as quickly as possible, and return in safety to the world of living beings downstairs. She set her teeth, and by a supreme effort of will went through the small duty that was required of her steadily but swiftly. Her face was never turned away from the coffin the whole time; and when she had finished her task she walked backwards to the door, opened it, walked backwards out, and in another breath was downstairs, and safe in the protecting arms of Sister Agnes.

Next night she insisted upon going entirely alone, and made so light of the matter that Sister Agnes no longer opposed her wish to make the midnight visit to the Black Room a part of her ordinary duty. But inwardly Janet could never quite overcome her secret awe of the room and its silent occupant. She always dreaded the coming of the hour that took her there, and when her task was over, she never closed the door without a feeling of relief. In this case, custom with her never bred familiarity. To the last occasion of her going there she went the prey of hidden fears—fears of she knew not what, which she derided to herself even while they made her their victim. There was a morbid thread running through the tissue of her nerves, which by intense force of will might be kept from growing and spreading, but which no effort of hers could quite pluck out or eradicate.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DAWN OF LOVE

Major Strickland did not forget his promise to Janet. On the eighth morning after his return from London he walked over from Eastbury to Deepley Walls, saw Lady Chillington, and obtained leave of absence for Miss Hope for the day. Then he paid a flying visit to Sister Agnes, for whom he had a great reverence and admiration, and ended by carrying off Janet in triumph.

The park of Deepley Walls extends almost to the suburbs of Eastbury, a town of eight thousand inhabitants, but of such small commercial importance that the nearest railway station is three miles away across country and nearly five miles from Deepley Walls.

Major Strickland no longer resided at Rose Cottage, but at a pretty little villa just outside Eastbury. Some small accession of fortune had come to him by the death of a relative; and an addition to his family in the person of Aunt Félicité, a lady old and nearly blind, the widow of a kinsman of the Major. Besides its tiny lawn and flower-beds in front, the Lindens had a long stretch of garden ground behind, otherwise the Major would scarcely have been happy in his new home. He was secretary to the Eastbury Horticultural Society, and his fame as a grower of prize roses and geraniums was in these latter days far sweeter to him than any fame that had ever accrued to him as a soldier.

Janet found Aunt Félicité a most quaint and charming old lady, as cheerful and full of vivacity as many a girl of seventeen. She kissed Janet on both cheeks when the Major introduced her; asked whether she was fiancée; complimented her on her French; declaimed a passage from Racine; put her poodle through a variety of amusing tricks; and pressed Janet to assist at her luncheon of cream cheese, French roll, strawberries and white wine.

A slight sense of disappointment swept across Janet's mind, like the shadow of a cloud across a sunny field. She had been two hours at the Lindens without having seen Captain George. In vain she told herself that she had come to spend the day with Major Strickland, and to be introduced to Aunt Félicité, and that nothing more was wanting to her complete contentment. That something more was needed she knew quite well, but she would not acknowledge it even to herself. He knew of her coming; he had been with Aunt Félicité only half an hour before—so much she learned within five minutes of her arrival; yet now, at the end of two hours, he had not condescended even to come and speak to her. She roused herself from the sense of despondency that was creeping over her and put on a gaiety that she was far from feeling. A very bitter sense of self-contempt was just then at work in her heart; she felt that never before had she despised herself so utterly. She took her hat in her hand, and put her arm within the Major's and walked with him round his little demesne. It was a walk that took up an hour or more, for there was much to see and learn, and Janet was bent this morning on having a long lesson in botany; and the old soldier was only too happy in having secured a listener so enthusiastic and appreciative to whom he could dilate on his favourite hobby.

But all this time Janet's eyes and ears were on the alert in a double sense of which the Major knew nothing. He was busy with a description of the last spring flower show, and how the Duke of Cheltenham's auriculas were by no means equal to those of Major Strickland, when Janet gave a little start as though a gnat had stung her, and bent to smell a sweet blush-rose, whose tints were rivalled by the sudden delicate glow that flushed her cheek.

"Yes, yes!" she said, hurriedly, as the Major paused for a moment; "and so the Duke's gardener was jealous because you carried away the prize?"

"I never saw a man more put out in my life," said the Major. "He shook his fist at my flowers and said before everybody, 'Let the old Major only wait till autumn and then see if my dahlias don't —' But yonder comes Geordie. Bless my heart! what has he been doing at Eastbury all this time?"

Janet's instinct had not deceived her; she had heard and recognised his footstep a full minute before the Major knew that he was near. She gave one quick, shy glance round as he opened the gate, and then she wandered a yard or two further down the path.

"Good-morning, uncle," said Captain George, as he came up. "You set out for Deepley Walls so early this morning that I did not see you before you started. I am glad to find that you did not come back alone."

Janet had turned as he began to speak, but did not come back to the Major's side. Captain George advanced a few steps and lifted his hat.

"Good-morning, Miss Hope," he said, with outstretched hand. "I need hardly say how pleased I am to see you at the Lindens. My uncle has succeeded so well on his first embassy that we must send him again, and often, on the same errand."

Janet murmured a few words in reply—what, she could not afterwards have told; but as her eyes met his for a moment, she read in them something that made her forgive him on the spot, even while she declared to herself that she had nothing to forgive, and that brought to her cheek a second blush more vivid than the first.

"All very well, young gentleman," said the Major; "but you have not yet explained your four hours' absence. We shall order you under arrest unless you have some reasonable excuse to submit."

"The best of all excuses—that of urgent business," said the Captain.

"You! business!" said the laughing Major. "Why, it was only last night that you were bewailing your lot as being one of those unhappy mortals who have no work to do."

"To those they love, the gods lend patient hearing. I forget the Latin, but that does not matter just now. What I wish to convey is this—that I need no longer be idle unless I choose. I have found some work to do. Lend me your ears, both of you. About an hour after you, sir, had started for Deepley Walls, I received a note from the editor of the *Eastbury Courier*, in which he requested me to give him an early call. My curiosity prompted me to look in upon him as soon as breakfast was over. I found that he was brother to the editor of one of the London magazines—a gentleman whom I met one evening at a party in town. The London editor remembered me, and had written to the Eastbury editor to make arrangements with me for writing a series of magazine articles on India and my experiences there during the late mutiny. I need not bore you with details; it is sufficient to say that my objections were talked down one by one; and I left the office committed to a sixteen-page article by the sixth of next month."

"You an author!" exclaimed the Major. "I should as soon have thought of your enlisting in the Marines."

"It will only be for a few months, uncle—only till my limited stock of experiences shall be exhausted. After that I shall be relegated to my natural obscurity, doubtless never to emerge again."

"Hem," said the Major, nervously. "Geordie, my boy, I have by me one or two little poems which I wrote when I was about nineteen—trifles flung off on the inspiration of the moment. Perhaps, when you come to know your friend the editor better than you do now, you might induce him to bring them out—to find an odd corner for them in his magazine. I shouldn't want payment for them, you know. You might just mention that fact; and I assure you that I have seen many worse things than they are in print."

"What, uncle, you an author! Oh, fie! I should as soon have thought of your wishing to dance on the tight-rope as to appear in print. But we must look over these little effusions—eh, Miss Hope. We must unearth this genius, and be the first to give his lucubrations to the world."

"If you were younger, sir, or I not quite so old, I would box your ears," said the Major, who seemed hardly to know whether to laugh or be angry. Finally he laughed, George and Janet chimed in, and all three went back indoors.

After an early dinner the Major took rod and line and set off to capture a few trout for supper. Aunt Félicité took her post-prandial nap discreetly, in an easy-chair, and Captain George and Miss

Hope were left to their own devices. In Love's sweet Castle of Indolence the hours that make up a summer afternoon pass like so many minutes. These two had blown the magic horn and had gone in. The gates of brass had closed behind them, shutting them up from the common outer world. Over all things was a glamour as of witchcraft. Soft music filled the air; soft breezes came to them as from fields of amaranth and asphodel. They walked ever in a magic circle, that widened before them as they went. Eros in passing had touched them with his golden dart. Each of them hid the sweet sting from the other, yet neither of them would have been whole again for anything the world could have offered. What need to tell the old story over again—the story of the dawn of love in two young hearts that had never loved before?

Janet went home that night in a flutter of happiness—a happiness so sweet and strange and yet so vague that she could not have analysed it even had she been casuist enough to try to do so. But she was content to accept the fact as a fact; beyond that she cared nothing. No syllable of love had been spoken between her and George: they had passed what to an outsider would have seemed a very common-place afternoon. They had talked together—not sentiment, but every-day topics of the world around them; they had read together—poetry, but nothing more passionate than "Aurora Leigh;" they had walked together—rather a silent and stupid walk, our friendly outsider would have urged; but if they were content, no one else had any right to complain. And so the day had worn itself away—a red-letter day for ever in the calendar of their young lives.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE NARRATIVE OF SERGEANT NICHOLAS

One morning when Janet had been about three weeks at Deepley Walls, she was summoned to the door by one of the servants, and found there a tall, thin, middle-aged man, dressed in plain clothes, and having all the appearance of a discharged soldier.

"I have come a long way, miss," he said to Janet, carrying a finger to his forehead, "in order to see Lady Chillington and have a little private talk with her."

"I am afraid that her ladyship will scarcely see you, unless you can give her some idea of the business that you have called upon."

"My name, miss, is Sergeant John Nicholas. I served formerly in India, where I was body-servant to her ladyship's son, Captain Charles Chillington, who died there of cholera nearly twenty years ago, and I have something of importance to communicate."

Janet made the old soldier come in and sit down in the hall while she took his message to Lady Chillington. Her ladyship was not yet up, but was taking her chocolate in bed, with a faded Indian shawl thrown round her shoulders. She began to tremble violently the moment Janet delivered the old soldier's message, and could scarcely set down her cup and saucer. Then she began to cry, and to kiss the hem of the Indian shawl. Janet went softly out of the room and waited. She had never even heard of this Captain Charles Chillington, and yet no mere empty name could have thus affected the stern mistress of Deepley Walls. Those few tears opened up quite a new view of Lady Chillington's character. Janet began to see that there might be elements of tragedy in the old woman's life of which she knew nothing: that many of the moods which seemed to her so strange and inexplicable might be so merely for want of the key by which alone they could be rightly read.

Presently her ladyship's gong sounded. Janet went back into the room, and found her still sitting up in bed, sipping her chocolate with a steady hand. All traces of tears had vanished: she looked even more stern and repressed than usual.

"Request the person of whom you spoke to me a while ago to wait," she said. "I will see him at eleven in my private sitting-room."

So Sergeant Nicholas was sent to get his breakfast in the servants' room, and wait till Lady Chillington was ready to receive him.

At eleven precisely he was summoned to her ladyship's presence. She received him with stately graciousness, and waved him to a chair a yard or two away. She was dressed for the day in one of her stiff brocaded silks, and sat as upright as a dart, manipulating a small fan. Miss Hope stood close at the back of her chair.

"So, my good man, I understand that you were acquainted with my son, the late Captain Chillington, who died in India twenty years ago?"

"I was his body-servant for two years previous to his death."

"Were you with him when he died?"

"I was, your ladyship. These fingers closed his eyes."

The hand that held the fan began to tremble again. She remained silent for a few moments, and by a strong effort overmastered her agitation.

"You have some communication which you wish to make to me respecting my dead son?"

"I have, your ladyship. A communication of a very singular kind."

"Why has it not been made before now?"

"That your ladyship will learn in the course of what I have to say. But perhaps you will kindly allow me to tell my story my own way."

"By all means. Pray begin: I am all attention."

The Sergeant touched his forelock, gave a preliminary cough, fixed his clear grey eye on Lady Chillington, and began his narrative as under:—

"Your ladyship and miss: I, John Nicholas, a Staffordshire man born and bred, went out to India twenty-three years ago as lance corporal in the hundred-and-first regiment of foot. After I had been in India a few months, I got drunk and misbehaved myself, and was reduced to the ranks. Well, ma'am, Captain Chillington took a fancy to me, thought I was not such a bad dog after all, and got me appointed as his servant. And a better master no man need ever wish to have—kind, generous, and a perfect gentleman from top to toe. I loved him, and would have gone through fire and water to serve him."

Her ladyship's fan was trembling again. "Oblige me with my salts, Miss Hope," she said. She pressed them to her nose, and motioned to the Sergeant to proceed.

"When I had been with the Captain a few months," resumed the old soldier, "he got leave of absence for several weeks, and everybody knew that it was his intention to spend his holiday in a shooting excursion among the hills. I was to go with him, of course, and the usual troop of native servants; but besides himself there was only one European gentleman in the party, and he was not an Englishman. He was a Russian, and his name was Platzoff. He was a gentleman of fortune, and was travelling in India at the time, and had come to my master with letters of introduction. Well, Captain Chillington just took wonderfully to him, and the two were almost inseparable. Perhaps it hardly becomes one like me to offer an opinion on such a point; but, knowing what afterwards happened, I must say that I never either liked or trusted that Russian from the day I first set eyes on him. He seemed to me too double-faced and cunning for an honest English gentleman to have much to do with. But he had travelled a great deal, and was very good company, which was perhaps the reason why Captain Chillington took so kindly to him. Be that as it may, however, it was decided that they should go on the hunting excursion together—not that the Russian was much of a shot, or cared a great deal about hunting, but because, as I heard him say, he liked to see all kinds of life, and tiger-stalking was something quite fresh to him.

"He was a curious-looking gentleman, too, that Russian—just the sort of face that you would never forget after once seeing it, with skin that was dried and yellow like parchment; black hair that was trained into a heavy curl on the top of his forehead, and a big hooked nose.

"Well, your ladyship and miss, away we went with our elephants and train of servants, and very pleasantly we spent our two months' leave of absence. The Captain he shot tigers, and the Russian he did his best at pig-sticking. Our last week had come, and in three more days we were to set off on our return, when that terrible misfortune happened which deprived me of the best of masters, and your ladyship of the best of sons.

"Early one morning I was roused by Rung Budruck, the Captain's favourite sycee or groom. 'Get up at once,' he said, shaking me by the shoulder. 'The sahib Captain is very ill. The black devil has seized him. He must have opium or he will die.' I ran at once to the Captain's tent, and as soon as I set eyes on him I saw that he had been seized with cholera. I went off at once and fetched M. Platzoff. We had nothing in the way of medicine with us except brandy and opium. Under the Russian's directions these were given to my poor master in large quantities, but he grew gradually worse. Rung and I in everything obeyed M. Platzoff, who seemed to know quite well what ought to be done in such cases; and to tell the truth, your ladyship, he seemed as much put about as if the Captain had been his own brother. Well, the Captain grew weaker as the day went on, and towards evening it grew quite clear that he could not last much longer. The pain had left him by this time, but he was so frightfully reduced that we could not bring him round. He was lying in every respect like one already dead, except for his faint breathing, when the Russian left the tent for a moment, and I took his place at the head of the bed. Rung was standing with folded arms a yard or two away. None of the other native servants could be persuaded to enter the tent, so frightened were they of catching

the complaint. Suddenly my poor master opened his eyes, and his lips moved. I put my ear to his mouth. 'The diamond,' he whispered. 'Take it—mother—give my love.' Not a word more on earth, your ladyship. His limbs stiffened; his head fell back; he gave a great sigh and died. I gently closed the eyes that could see no more, and left the tent crying.

"Your ladyship, we buried Captain Chillington by torchlight four hours later. We dug his grave deep in a corner of the jungle, and there we left him to his last sleep. Over his grave we piled a heap of stones, as I have read that they used to do in the old times over the grave of a chief. It was all we could do.

"About an hour later M. Platzoff came to me. 'I shall start before daybreak for Chinapore,' he said, 'with one elephant and a couple of men. I will take with me the news of my poor friend's untimely fate, and you can come on with the luggage and other effects in the ordinary way. You will find me at Chinapore when you reach there.' Next morning I found that he was gone.

"What my dear master had said with his last breath about a diamond puzzled me. I could only conclude that amongst his effects there must be some valuable stone of which he wished special care to be taken, and which he desired to be sent home to you, madam, in England. I knew nothing of any such stone, and I considered it beyond my position to search for it among his luggage. I decided that when I got to Chinapore I would give his message to the Colonel, and leave that gentleman to take such steps in the matter as he might think best.

"I had hardly settled all this in my mind when Rung Budruck came to me. 'The Russian sahib has gone: I have something to tell you,' he said, only he spoke in broken English. 'Yesterday, just after the sahib Captain was dead, the Russian came back. You had left the tent, and I was sitting on the ground behind the Captain's big trunk, the lid of which was open. I was sitting with my chin in my hand, very sad at heart, when the Russian came in. He looked carefully round the tent. Me he could not see, but I could see him through the opening between the hinges of the box. What did he do? He unfastened the bosom of the sahib Captain's shirt, and then he drew over the Captain's head the steel chain with the little gold box hanging to it that he always wore. He opened the box, and saw there was that in it which he expected to find there. Then he hid away both chain and box in one of his pockets, rebuttoned the dead man's shirt, and left the tent.' 'But you have not told me what there was in the box,' I said. He put the tips of his fingers together and smiled: 'In that box was the Great Hara Diamond!'

"Your ladyship, I was so startled when Rung said this that the wind of a bullet would have knocked me down. A new light was all at once thrown on the Captain's dying words. 'But how do you know, Rung, that the box contained a diamond?' I asked when I had partly got over my surprise. He smiled again, with that strange slow smile which those fellows have. 'It matters not how, but Rung knew that the diamond was there. He had seen the Captain open the box, and take it out and look at it many a time when the Captain thought no one could see him. He could have stolen it from him almost any night when he was asleep, but that was left for his friend to do.' 'Was the diamond you speak of a very valuable one?' I asked. 'It was a green diamond of immense value,' answered Rung; 'it was called *The Great Hara* because of its colour, and it was first worn by the terrible Aureng-Zebe himself, who had it set in the haft of his scimitar.' 'But by what means did Captain Chillington become possessed of so valuable a stone?' Said he, 'Two years ago, at the risk of his own life, he rescued the eldest son of the Rajah of Gondulpootra from a tiger who had carried away the child into the jungle. The Rajah is one of the richest men in India, and he showed his gratitude by secretly presenting the Great Hara Diamond to the man who had saved the life of his child.' 'But why should Captain Chillington carry so valuable a stone about his person?' I asked. 'Would it not have been wiser to deposit it in the bank at Bombay till such time as the Captain could take it with him to England?' 'The stone is a charmed stone,' said Rung, 'and it was the Rajah's particular wish that the sahib Chillington should always wear it about his person. So long as he did so he could not come to his death by fire by water, or by sword thrust.' Said I, 'But how did the Russian know that Captain Chillington carried the diamond

about his person?' 'One night when the Captain had had too much wine he showed the diamond to his friend,' answered Rung. Said I, 'But how does it happen, Rung, that you know this?' Rung, smiling and putting his finger tips together, replied, 'How does it happen that I know so much about you?' And then he told me a lot of things about myself that I thought no soul in India knew. It was just wonderful how he did it. 'So it is: let that be sufficient,' he finished by saying. 'Why did you not tell me till after the Russian had gone away that you saw him steal the diamond?' said I. 'If you had told me at the time I could have charged him with it.' 'You are ignorant,' said Rung; 'you are little more than a child. The Russian sahib had the evil eye. Had I crossed his purpose before his face he would have cursed me while he looked at me, and I should have withered away and died. He has got the diamond, and only by magic can it ever be recovered from him.'

"Your ladyship and miss, I hope I am not tedious nor wandering from the point. It will be sufficient to say that when I got down to Chinapore I found that M. Platzoff had indeed been there, but only just long enough to see the Colonel and give him an account of Captain Chillington's death, after which he had at once engaged a palanquin and bearers and set out with all speed for Bombay. It was now my turn to see the Colonel, and after I had given over into his hands all my dead master's property that I had brought with me from the Hills, I told him the story of the diamond as Rung had told it to me. He was much struck by it, and ordered me to take Rung to him the next morning. But that very night Rung disappeared, and was never seen in the camp again. Whether he was frightened at what he called the Russian's evil eye—frightened that Platzoff could blight him even from a distance, I have no means of knowing. In any case, gone he was; and from that day to this I have never set eyes on him. Well, the Colonel said he would take a note of what I had told him about the diamond, and that I must leave the matter entirely in his hands.

"Your ladyship, a fortnight after that the Colonel shot himself.

"To make short a long story—we got a fresh Colonel, and were removed to another part of the country; and there, a few weeks later, I was knocked down by fever, and was a long time before I thoroughly recovered my strength. A year or two later our regiment was ordered back to England, but a day or two before we should have sailed I had a letter telling me that my old sweetheart was dead. This news seemed to take all care for life out of me, and on the spur of the moment I volunteered into a regiment bound for China, in which country war was just breaking out. There, and at other places abroad, I stopped till just four months ago, when I was finally discharged, with my pension, and a bullet in my pocket that had been taken out of my skull. I only landed in England nine days ago, and as soon as it was possible for me to do so, I came to see your ladyship. And I think that is all." The Sergeant's forefinger went to his forehead again as he brought his narrative to an end.

Lady Chillington kept on fanning herself in silence for a little while after the old soldier had done speaking. Her features wore the proud, impassive look that they generally put on when before strangers: in the present case they were no index to the feelings at work underneath. At length she spoke.

"After the suicide of your Colonel did you mention the supposed robbery of the diamond to anyone else?"

"To no one else, your ladyship. For several reasons. I was unaware what steps he might have taken between the time of my telling him and the time of his death to prove or disprove the truth of the story. In the second place, Rung had disappeared. I could only tell the story at secondhand. It had been told me by an eye-witness, but that witness was a native, and the word of a native does not go for much in those parts. In the third place, the Russian had also disappeared, and had left no trace behind. What could I do? Had I told the story to my new Colonel, I should mayhap only have been scouted as a liar or a madman. Besides, we were every day expecting to be ordered home, and I had made up my mind that I would at once come and see your ladyship. At that time I had no intention of going to China, and when once I got there it was too late to speak out. But through all the years I have been away my poor dear master's last words have lived in my memory. Many a thousand times

have I thought of them both day and night, and prayed that I might live to get back to Old England, if it was only to give your ladyship the message with which I had been charged."

"But why could you not write to me?" asked Lady Chillington.

"Your ladyship, I am no scholar," answered the old soldier, with a vivid blush. "What I have told you to-day in half-an-hour would have taken me years to set down—in fact, I could never have done it."

"So be it," said Lady Chillington. "My obligation to you is all the greater for bearing in mind for so many years my poor boy's last message, and for being at so much trouble to deliver it." She sighed deeply and rose from her chair. The Sergeant rose too, thinking that his interview was at an end, but at her ladyship's request he reseated himself.

Rejecting Janet's proffered arm, which she was in the habit of leaning on in her perambulations about the house and grounds, Lady Chillington walked slowly and painfully out of the room. Presently she returned, carrying an open letter in her hand. Both the ink and the paper on which it was written were faded and yellow with age.

"This is the last letter I ever received from my son," said her ladyship. "I have preserved it religiously, and it bears out very singularly what you, Sergeant, have just told me respecting the message which my darling sent me with his dying breath. In a few lines at the end he makes mention of a something of great value which he is going to bring home with him; but he writes about it in such guarded terms that I never could satisfy myself as to the precise meaning of what he intended to convey. You, Miss Hope, will perhaps be good enough to read the lines in question aloud. They are contained in a postscript."

Janet took the letter with reverent tenderness. Lady Chillington's trembling fingers pointed out the lines she was to read. Janet read as under:—

"P.S.—I have reserved my most important bit of news till the last, as lady correspondents are said to do. Observe, I write 'are said to do,' because in this matter I have very little personal experience of my own to go upon. You, dear mum, are my solitary lady correspondent, and postscripts are a luxury in which you rarely indulge. But to proceed, as the novelists say. Some two years ago it was my good fortune to rescue a little yellow-skinned princekin from the clutches of a very fine young tiger (my feet are on his hide at this present writing), who was carrying him off as a tit-bit for his supper. He was terribly mauled, you may be sure, but his people followed my advice in their mode of doctoring him, and he gradually got round again. The lad's father is a Rajah, immensely rich, and a direct descendant of that ancient Mogul dynasty which once ruled this country with a rod of iron. The Rajah has daughters innumerable, but only this one son. His gratitude for what I had done was unbounded. A few weeks ago he gave me a most astounding proof of it. By a secret and trusty messenger he sent me—But no, dear mum, I will not tell you what the Rajah sent me. This letter might chance to fall into other hands than yours (Indian letters do *sometimes* miscarry), and the secret is one which had better be kept in the family—at least for the present. So, mother mine, your curiosity must rest unsatisfied for a little while to come. I hope to be with you before many months are over, and then you shall know everything.

"The value of the Rajah's present is something immense. I shall sell it when I get to England, and out of the proceeds I shall—well, I don't exactly know what I shall do. Purchase my next step for one thing, but that will cost a mere trifle. Then, perhaps, buy a comfortable estate in the country, or a house in Park Lane. Your six weeks every season in London lodgings was always inexplicable to me.

"Or shall I not sell the Rajah's present, but offer myself in marriage to some fair princess, with my heart in one hand and the G.H.D. in the other? Madder things

than that are recorded in history. In any case, don't forget to pray for the safe arrival of your son, and (if such a petition is allowable) that he may not fail to bring with him the G.H.D.

"C.C."

"I never could understand before to-day what the letters G.H.D. were meant for," said Lady Chillington, as Janet gave her back the letter. "It is now quite evident that they were intended for *Great Hara Diamond*; all of which, as I said before, is confirmatory of the story you have just told me. Of course, after the lapse of so many years, there is not the remotest possibility of recovering the diamond; but my obligation to you, Sergeant Nicholas, is in no wise lessened by that fact. What are your engagements? Are you obliged to leave here immediately, or can you remain a short time in the neighbourhood?"

"I can give your ladyship a week, or even a fortnight, if you wish it."

"I am greatly obliged to you. I do wish it—I wish to talk to you respecting my son, and you are the only one now living who can tell me about him. You shall find that I am not ungrateful for what you have done for me. In the meantime, you will stop at the King's Arms, in Eastbury. Miss Hope will give you a note to the landlord. Come up here to-morrow at eleven. And now I must say good-morning. I am not very strong, and your news has shaken me a little. Will you do me the honour of shaking hands with me? It was your hands that closed my poor boy's eyes—that touched him last on earth; let those hands now be touched by his mother."

Lady Chillington stood up and extended both her withered hands. The old soldier came forward with a blush and took them respectfully, tenderly. He bent his head and touched each of them in turn with his lips. Tears stood in his eyes.

"God bless you, Sergeant Nicholas! You are a good man and a true gentleman," said Lady Chillington. Then she turned and slowly left the room.

## CHAPTER XXI

### COUNSEL TAKEN WITH MR. MADGIN

After her interview with Sergeant Nicholas, Lady Chillington dismissed Janet for the day, and retired to her own rooms, nor was she seen out of them till the following morning. No one was admitted to see her save Dance. Janet, after sitting with Sister Agnes all the afternoon, went down at dusk to the housekeeper's room.

"Whatever did you do to her ladyship this morning?" asked Dance as soon as she entered. "She has tasted neither bit nor sup since breakfast, but ever since that old shabby-looking fellow went away she has lain on the sofa, staring at the wall as if there was some writing on it she was trying to read but didn't know how. I thought she was ill, and asked her if I should send for the doctor. She laughed at me without taking her eyes off the wall, and bade me begone for an old fool. If there's not a change by morning, I shall just send for the doctor without asking her leave. Surely you and that old fellow have bewitched her ladyship between you."

Janet in reply told Dance all that had passed at the morning's interview, feeling quite sure that in doing so she was violating no confidence, and that Lady Chillington herself would be the first to tell everything to her faithful old servant as soon as she should be sufficiently composed to do so. As a matter of course Dance was full of wonder.

"Did you know Captain Chillington?" asked Janet, as soon as the old dame's surprise had in some measure toned itself down.

"Did I know curly-pated, black-eyed Master Charley?" asked the old woman. "Ay—who better? These arms, withered and yellow now, then plump and strong, held him before he had been an hour in the world. The day he left England I went with her ladyship to see him aboard ship. As he shook me by the hand for the last time he said, 'You will never leave my mother, will you, Dance?' And I said, 'Never, while I live, dear Master Charles,' and I've kept my word."

"Her ladyship has never been like the same woman since she heard the news of his death," resumed Dance after a pause. "It seemed to sour her and harden her, and make her altogether different. There had been a great deal of unhappiness at home for some years before he went away. He and his father, Sir John—he that now lies so quiet upstairs—had a terrible quarrel just after Master Charles went into the army, and it was a quarrel that was never made up in this world. He was an awful man—Sir John—a wicked man: pray that such a one may never cross your path. The only happiness he seemed to have on earth was in making those over whom he had any power miserable. It was impossible for my lady to love him, but she tried to do her duty by him till he and Master Charles fell out. What the quarrel was about I never rightly understood, but my lady would have it that Master Charles was in the right and her husband in the wrong. One result was that Sir John stopped the income that he had always allowed his son, and took a frightful oath that if Master Charles were dying of starvation before his eyes he would not give him as much as a penny to buy bread with. But her ladyship, who had money in her own right, said that Master Charles's income should go on as usual. Then she and Sir John quarrelled; and she left him and came to live at Deepley Walls, leaving him at Dene Folly; and here she stayed till Sir John was taken with his last illness and sent for her. He sent for her, not to make up the quarrel, but to jibe and sneer at her, and to make her wait on him day and night, as if she were a paid nurse from a hospital. While this was going on, and after Sir John had been quite given up by the doctors, news came from India of Master Charles's death. Well, her ladyship went nigh distracted; but as for the baronet, it was said, though I won't vouch for the truth of it, that he only laughed when the news was told him, and said that if he was plagued as much with corns in the next world as he had been in this, he should find Master Charles's arm very useful to

lean upon. Two days later he died, and the title, and Dene Folly with it, went to a far-away cousin, whom neither Sir John nor his wife had ever seen. Then it was found how the baronet had contrived that his spite should outlive him—for only out of spite and mean cruelty could he have made such a will as he did make: that Deepley Walls should not become her ladyship's absolute property till the end of twenty years, during the whole of which time his body was to remain unburied, and to be kept under the same roof with his widow, wherever she might live. The mean, paltry scoundrel! Perhaps her ladyship might have had the will set aside, but she would not go to law about it. Thank Heaven! the twenty years are nearly at an end. Deepley Walls has been a haunted house ever since that midnight when Sir John was borne in on the shoulders of six strong men. And now tell me whether her ladyship is not a woman to be pitied."

At a quarter before eleven next morning, Mr. Solomon Madgin, Lady Chillington's agent and general man-of-business, arrived by appointment at Deepley Walls. Mr. Madgin was indispensable to her ladyship, who had a considerable quantity of house property in and around Eastbury, consisting chiefly of small tenements, the rents of which had to be collected weekly. Then Mr. Madgin was bailiff for the Deepley Walls estate, in connection with which were several small farms or "holdings" which required to be well looked after in many ways. Besides all this, her ladyship, having a few spare thousands, had taken of late years to dabbling in scrip and shares in a small way, and under the skilful pilotage of Mr. Madgin had hitherto contrived to steer clear of those rocks and shoals of speculation on which so many gallant argosies are wrecked. In short, everything except the law-business of the estate filtered through Mr. Madgin's hands, and as he did his work cheaply and well, and put up with her ladyship's ill-temper without a murmur, the mistress of Deepley Walls could hardly have found anyone who would have suited her better.

Mr. Solomon Madgin was a little dried-up man, about sixty years old. His tail-coat and vest of rusty black were of the fashion of twenty years ago. He wore drab trousers, and shoes tied with bows of black ribbon. His head, bald on the crown, had an ample fringe of white hair at the back and sides, and was covered, when he went abroad, with a beaver hat, very fluffy and much too tall for him, and which, once upon a time, had probably been nearly as white as his hair, but was now time-worn and weather-stained to one uniform and consistent drab. Round his neck he always wore a voluminous cravat of unstarched muslin fastened in front with an old-fashioned pearl brooch, above which protruded the two spiked points of a very stiff and pugnacious-looking collar. A strong alpaca umbrella, unfashionably corpulent, was his constant companion. Mr. Madgin's whiskers were shaved off in an exact line with the end of his nose. His eyebrows were very white and bushy, and could serve on occasion as a screen to the greenish, crafty-looking eyes below them, which never liked to be peered into too closely. The ordinary expression of his thin, dried-up face was one of hard, worldly shrewdness; but there was a lurking bonhommie in his smile which seemed to imply that, away from business, he might possibly mellow into a boon companion.

Mr. Madgin had to wait a few minutes this morning before Lady Chillington could receive him. When he was ushered into her sitting-room he was surprised to find that she and Miss Hope were not alone; that a plainly-dressed man, who looked almost as old as Mr. Madgin himself, was seated at the table. After one suspicious glance at the stranger, Mr. Madgin made his bow to the ladies and walked up to the table with his bag of papers.

"You can put all those things away for the day, Mr. Madgin," said her ladyship. "A far more important matter claims our attention just now. In the first place I must introduce to you Sergeant Nicholas, many years ago servant to my son, Captain Chillington, who died in India. (Sergeant, this is Mr. Madgin, my man of business.) The Sergeant, who has only just returned to England, told me yesterday a very curious story which I am desirous that he should repeat in your presence to-day. The story relates to a diamond of great value, said to have been stolen from the body of my son immediately after death, and I shall require you to give me your opinion as to the feasibility of its recovery. You will take such notes of the narrative as you may think necessary, and the Sergeant

will afterwards answer, to the best of his ability, any questions you may choose to put to him." Then turning to the old soldier, she added: "You will be good enough, Sergeant, to repeat to Mr. Madgin such parts of your narrative of yesterday as have any reference to the diamond. Begin with my son's dying message. Repeat, word for word, as closely as you can remember, all that was told you by the sycee Rung. Describe as minutely as possible the personal appearance of M. Platzoff; and detail any other points that bear on the loss of the diamond."

So the Sergeant began, but the repetition of a long narrative not learnt by heart is by no means an easy matter, especially when they to whom it was first told hear it for the second time, but rather as critics than as ordinary listeners. Besides, the taking of notes was a process that smacked of a court-martial and tended to flurry the narrator, making him feel as if he were upon his oath and liable to be browbeat by the counsel for the other side. He was heartily glad when he got to the end of what he had to tell. The postscript to Captain Chillington's letter was then read by Miss Hope.

Mr. Madgin took copious notes as the Sergeant went on, and afterwards put a few questions to him on different points which he thought not sufficiently clear. Then he laid down his pen, rubbed his hands, and ran his fingers through his scanty hair. Lady Chillington rang for her butler, and gave the Sergeant into his keeping, knowing that he could not be in better hands. Then she said: "I will leave you, Mr. Madgin, for half-an-hour. Go carefully through your notes, and let me have your opinion when I come back as to whether, after so long a time, you think it worth while to institute any proceedings for the recovery of the diamond."

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