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THE FATE OF THE HARA DIAMOND

CHAPTER XIV

DRASHKIL-SMOKING

"It must and shall be mine!"

So spoke Captain Ducie on the spur of the moment as he wrote the last word of his translation of M. Platzoff's MS. And yet there was a keen sense of disappointment working within him. His blood had been at fever heat during the latter part of his task. Each fresh sentence of the cryptogram as he began to decipher it would, he hoped, before he reached the end of it, reveal to him the hiding-place of the great Diamond. Up to the very last sentence he had thus fondly deluded himself, only to find that the abrupt ending of the MS. left him still on the brink of the secret, and left him there without any clue by which he could advance a single step beyond that point. He was terribly disappointed, and the longer he brooded over the case the more entirely hopeless was the aspect it put on.

But there was an elasticity of mind about Captain Ducie that would not allow him to despair utterly for any length of time. In the course of a few days, as he began to recover from his first chagrin, he at the same time began to turn the affair of the Diamond over and over in his mind, now in one way, now in another, looking at it in this light and in that; trying to find the first faint indications of a clue which, judiciously followed up, might conduct him step by step to the heart of the mystery. Two questions naturally offered themselves for solution. First: Did Platzoff habitually carry the Diamond about his person? Second: Was it kept in some skilfully-devised hiding-place about the house? These were questions that could be answered only by time and observation.

So Captain Ducie went about Bon Repos like a man with half-a-dozen pairs of eyes, seeing, and not only seeing but noting, a hundred little things such as would never have been observed by him under ordinary circumstances. But when, at the end of a week, he came to sum up and classify his observations, and to consider what bearing they had upon the great mystery of the hiding-place of the Diamond, he found that they had no bearing upon it whatever; that for anything seen or heard by him the world might hold no such precious gem, and the Russian's letter to Signor Lampini might be nothing more than an elaborate hoax.

When the access of chagrin caused by the recognition of this fact had in some degree subsided, Ducie was ready enough to ridicule his own foolish expectations. "Platzoff has had the Diamond in his possession for years. For him there is nothing of novelty in such a fact. Yet here have I been foolish enough to expect that in the course of one short week I should discover by some sign or token the spot where it is hidden, and that too after I knew from his own confession that the secret was one which he guarded most jealously. I might be here for five years and be not one whit wiser at the end of that time as regards the hiding-place of the Diamond than I am now. From this day I give up the affair as a bad job."

Nevertheless, he did not quite do that. He kept up his habit of seeing and noting little things, but without any definite views as to any ulterior benefit that might accrue to him therefrom. Perhaps there was some vague idea floating in his mind that Fortune, who had served him so many kind turns

in years gone by, might befriend him once again in this matter—might point out to him the wished-for clue, and indicate by what means he could secure the Diamond for his own.

The magnitude of the temptation dazzled him. Captain Ducie would not have picked your pocket, or have stolen your watch, or your horse, or the title-deeds of your property. He had never put another man's name to a bill instead of his own. You might have made him trustee for your widow or children, and have felt sure that their interests would have been scrupulously respected at his hands. Yet with all this—strange contradiction as it may seem—if he could have laid surreptitious fingers on M. Platzoff's Diamond, that gentleman would certainly never have seen his cherished gem again. But had Platzoff placed it in his hands and said, "Take this to London for me and deposit it at my bankers'," the commission would have been faithfully fulfilled. It seemed as if the element of mystery, of deliberate concealment, made all the difference in Captain Ducie's unspoken estimate of the case. Besides, would there not be something princely in such a theft? You cannot put a man who steals a diamond worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in the category of common thieves. Such an act verges on the sublime.

One of the things seen and noticed by Captain Ducie was the absence, through illness, of the mulatto, Cleon, from his duties, and the substitution in his place of a man whom Ducie had never seen before. This stranger was both clever and obliging, and Platzoff himself confessed that the fellow made such a good substitute that he missed Cleon less than he at first feared he should have done. He was indeed very assiduous, and found time to do many odd jobs for Captain Ducie, who contracted quite a liking for him.

Between Ducie and Cleon there existed one of those blind unreasoning hatreds which spring up full-armed and murderous at first sight. Such enmities are not the less deadly because they sometimes find no relief in words. Cleon treated Ducie with as much outward respect and courtesy as he did any other of his master's guests; no private communication ever passed between the two, and yet each understood the other's feelings towards him, and both of them were wise enough to keep as far apart as possible. Neither of them dreamed at that time of the strange fruit which their mutual enmity was to bear in time to come. Meanwhile, Cleon lay sick in his own room, and Captain Ducie was rather gladdened thereby.

M. Platzoff rarely touched cigar or pipe till after dinner; but, whatever company he might have, when that meal was over, it was his invariable custom to retire for an hour or two to the room consecrated to the uses of the Great Herb, and his guests seldom or never declined to accompany him. To Captain Ducie, as an inveterate smoker, these *séances* were very pleasant.

On the very first evening of the Captain's arrival at Bon Repos, M. Platzoff had intimated that he was an opium smoker, and that at no very distant date he would enlighten Ducie as to the practice in question. About a week later, as they sat down to their pipes and coffee, said Platzoff, "This is one of my big smoke-nights. To-night I go on a journey of discovery into Dreamland—a country that no explorations can exhaust, where beggars are the equals of kings, and where the Fates that control our actions are touched with a fine eccentricity that in a more commonplace world would be termed madness. But there nothing is commonplace."

"You are going to smoke opium?" said Ducie, interrogatively.

"I am going to smoke drashkil. Let me, for this once, persuade you to follow my example."

"For this once I would rather be excused," said Ducie, laughingly.

Platzoff shrugged his shoulders. "I offer to open for you the golden gates of a land full of more strange and wondrous things than were ever dreamed of by any early voyager as being in that new world on whose discovery he was bent; I offer to open up for you a set of experiences so utterly fresh and startling that your matter-of-fact English intellect cannot even conceive of such things. I offer you all this, and you laugh me down with an air of superiority, as though I were about to present you with something which, however precious it might be in my eyes, in yours was utterly without value."

"If I sin at all," said Ducie, "it is through ignorance. The subject is one respecting which I know next to nothing. But I must confess that about experiences such as you speak of there is an intangibility—a want of substance—that to me would make them seem singularly valueless."

"And is not the thing we call life one tissue of intangibilities?" asked the Russian. "You can touch neither the beginning nor the end of it. Do not its most cherished pleasures fly you even as you are in the very act of trying to grasp them? Do you know for certain that you—you yourself—are really here?—that you do not merely dream that you are here? What do you know?"

"Your theories are too far-fetched for me," said Ducie. "A dream can be nothing more than itself—nothing can give it backbone or substance. To me such things are of no more value than the shadow I cast behind me when I walk in the sun."

"And yet without substance there could be no shadow," snarled the Russian.

"Do your experiences in any way resemble those recorded by De Quincey?"

"They do and do not," answered Platzoff. "I can often trace, or fancy that I can, a slight connecting likeness, arising probably from the fact that in the case of both of us a similar, or nearly similar, agent was employed for a similar purpose. But, as a rule, the intellectual difference between any two men is sufficient to render their experiences in this respect utterly dissimilar."

"It does not follow, I presume, that all the visions induced by the imbibing of opium, or what you term drashkil, are pleasant ones?"

"By no means. You cannot have forgotten what De Quincey has to say on that score. But whether they are pleasant or the contrary, I accept them as so much experience, and in so far I am satisfied. You look incredulous, but I tell you, sir, that what I see, and what I undergo—subjectively—while under the influence of drashkil make up for me an experience as real, that dwells as vividly in my memory and that can be brought to mind like any other set of recollections, as if it were built up brick by brick, fact by fact, out of the incidents of everyday life. And all such experiences are valuable in this wise: that whatever I see while under the influence of drashkil I see, as it were, with the eyes of genius. I breathe a keener atmosphere; I have finer intuitions; the brain is no longer clogged with that part of me which is mortal; in whatever imaginary scenes I assist, whether actor or spectator, matters not; I seem to discern the underlying meaning of things—I hear the low faint beating of the hidden pulses of the world. To come back from this enchanted realm to the dull realities of everyday life is like depriving some hero of fairyland of his magic gifts and reducing him to the level of common humanity."

"At which pleasant level I pray ever to be kept," said Ducie; "I have no desire to soar into those regions of romance where you seem so thoroughly at home."

"So be it," said Platzoff drily. "The intellects of you English have been nourished on beef and beer for so many generations that there is no such thing as spiritual insight left among you. We must not expect too much." This was said not ill-naturedly, but in that quiet jeering tone which was almost habitual with Platzoff.

Ducie maintained a judicious silence and went on puffing gravely at his meerschaum. Platzoff touched the gong and Cleon entered, for this conversation took place before the illness of the latter. The Russian held up two fingers, and Cleon bowed. Then Cleon opened a mahogany box in one corner of the room, and took out of it a pipe-bowl of red clay, into which he fitted a flexible tube five or six yards in length and tipped with amber. The bowl was then fixed into a stand of black oak about a foot high and there held securely, and the mouthpiece handed to Platzoff. Cleon next opened an inlaid box, and by means of a tiny silver spatula he cut out a small block of some black, greasy-looking mixture, which he proceeded to fit into the bowl of the pipe. On the top of this he sprinkled a little aromatic Turkish tobacco, and then applied an allumette. When he saw that the pipe was fairly alight, he bowed and withdrew.

While these preparations were going on Platzoff had not been silent. "I have spoken to you of what I am about to smoke, both as opium and drashkil," he said. "It is not by any means pure opium."

With that great drug are mixed two or three others that modify and influence the chief ingredient materially. I had the secret of the preparation from a Hindoo gentleman while I was in India. It was imparted to me as an immense favour, it being a secret even there. The enthusiastic terms in which he spoke of it have been fully justified by the result, as you would discover for yourself if you could only be persuaded to try it. You shake your head. Eh bien! mon ami; the loss is yours, not mine."

"Some of what you have termed your 'experiences' are no doubt very singular ones?" said Ducie, interrogatively.

"They are—very singular," answered Platzoff. "In my last drashkil-dream, for instance, I believed myself to be an Indian fakir, and I seemed to realise to the full the strange life of one of those strange beings. I was stationed in the shade of a large tree just without the gate of some great city where all who came and went could see me. On the ground, a little way in front of me, was a wooden bowl for the reception of the offerings of the charitable. I had kept both my hands close shut for so many years that the nails had grown into the flesh, and the muscles had hardened so that I could no longer open them; and I was looked upon as a very holy man. The words of the passers-by were sweet in my ears, but I never spoke to them in return. Silent and immovable, I stood there through the livelong day—and in my vision it was always day. I had the power of looking back, and I knew that, in the first instance, I had been led by religious enthusiasm to adopt that mode of life. I should be in the world but not of it; I should have more time for that introspective contemplation the aim and end of which is mental absorption in the divine Brahma; besides which, people would praise me, and all the world would know that I was a holy man. But the strangest part of the affair remains to be told. In the eyes of the people I had grown in sanctity from year to year; but in my own heart I knew that instead of approaching nearer to Brahma, I was becoming more depraved, more wicked, with a great inward wickedness, as time went on. I struggled desperately against the slough of sin that was slowly creeping over me, but in vain. It seemed to me as if the choice were given me either to renounce my life of outward-seeming sanctity, and becoming as other men were, to feel again that inward peace which had been mine long years before; or else, while remaining holy in the eyes of the multitude, to feel myself sinking into a bottomless pit of wickedness from which I could never more hope to emerge. My mental tortures while this struggle was going on I can never forget: they are as much a real experience to me as if they had made up a part of my genuine waking life. And still I stood with closed hands in the shade of the tree; and the people cried out that I was holy, and placed their offerings in my bowl; and I could not make up my mind to abnegate the title they gave me and become as they were. And still I grew in inward wickedness, till I loathed myself as if I were some vile reptile; and so the struggle went on, and was still going on when I opened my eyes and found myself again at Bon Repos."

As Platzoff ceased speaking, Cleon applied the light, and Ducie in his eagerness drew a little nearer. Platzoff was dressed à la Turk, and sat with cross legs on the low divan that ran round the room. Slowly and deliberately he inhaled the smoke from his pipe, expelling it a moment later, in part through his nostrils and in part through his lips. The layer of tobacco at the top of the bowl was quickly burnt to ashes. By this time the drug below was fairly alight, and before long a thick white sickly smoke began to ascend in rings and graceful spires towards the roof of the room. Cleon was gone, and a solemn silence was maintained by both the men. Platzoff's eyes, black and piercing, were fixed on vacancy; they seemed to be gazing on some picture visible to himself alone. Ducie was careful not to disturb him. His inhalations were slow, gentle and regular. After a time, a thin film or glaze began to gather over his wide-open eyes, dimming their brightness, and making them seem like the eyes of someone dead. His complexion became livid, his face more cadaverous than it naturally was. Then his eyes closed slowly and gently, like those of an infant dropping to sleep. For a little time longer he kept on inhaling the smoke, but every minute the inhalations became fainter and fewer in number. At length the hand that held the pipe dropped nervelessly by his side, the amber mouthpiece

slipped from between his lips, his jaw dropped, and, with an almost imperceptible sigh, his head sank softly back on to the cushions behind, and M. Paul Platzoff was in the opium-eater's paradise.

Ducie, who had never seen anyone similarly affected, was frightened by his host's death-like appearance. He was doubtful whether Platzoff had not been seized with a fit. In order to satisfy himself he touched the gong and summoned Cleon. That incomparable domestic glided in, noiseless as a shadow.

"Does your master always look as he does now after he has been smoking opium?" asked the Captain.

"Always, sir."

"And how long does it take him to come round?"

"That depends, sir, on the strength of the dose he has been smoking. The preparation is made of different strengths to suit him at different times; but always when he has been smoking drashkil I leave him undisturbed till midnight. If by that time he has not come round naturally and of his own accord, I carry him to bed and then administer to him a certain draught, which has the effect of sending him into a natural and healthy sleep, from which he awakes next morning thoroughly refreshed."

"Then you will come to-night at twelve, and see how your master is by that time?" said Ducie.

"It is part of my duty to do so," answered Cleon.

"Then I will wait here till that time," said the Captain. Cleon bowed and disappeared.

So Ducie kept watch and ward for four hours, during the whole of which time Platzoff lay, except for his breathing, like one dead. As the last stroke of midnight struck Cleon reappeared. His master showed not the slightest symptom of returning consciousness. Having examined him narrowly for a moment or two, he turned to Ducie.

"You must pardon me, sir, for leaving you alone," he said, "but I must now take my master off to bed. He will scarcely wake up for conversation to-night."

"Proceed as though I were not here," said Ducie. "I will just finish this weed, and then I too will turn in."

Platzoff's private rooms, forming a suite four in number, were on the ground floor of Bon Repos. From the main corridor the first that you entered was the smoking-room already described. Next to that was the dressing-room, from which you passed into the bed-room. The last of the four was a small square room, fitted up with book-shelves, and used as a private library and study.

Cleon, who was a strong, muscular fellow, lifted Platzoff's shrivelled body as easily as he might have done that of a child, and so carried him out of the room.

Ducie met his host at the breakfast-table next morning. The latter seemed as well as usual, and was much amused when Ducie told him of his alarm, and how he had summoned Cleon under the impression that Platzoff had been taken dangerously ill.

Platzoff rarely indulged in the luxury of drashkil-smoking oftener than once a week. His constitution was delicate, and a too frequent use of so dangerous a drug would have tended to shatter still further his already enfeebled health. Besides, as he said, he wished to keep it as a luxury, and not, by a too frequent indulgence in it, to take off the fine edge of enjoyment and render it commonplace. Ducie had several subsequent opportunities of witnessing the process of drashkil-smoking and its effects, but one description will serve for all. On every occasion the same formula was gone through, precisely as first seen by Ducie. The pipe was charged and lighted by Cleon (after he became ill, by the new servant Jasmin). Precisely at midnight Cleon returned, and either conducted or carried his master to bed, as the necessities of the case might require. It was his knowledge of the latter fact that stood Ducie in such good stead later on, when he came to elaborate the details of his scheme for stealing the Great Hara Diamond.

But as yet his scheme was in embryo. His visit was drawing to a close, and he was still without the slightest clue to the hiding-place of the Diamond.

CHAPTER XV

THE DIAMOND

Captain Ducie had been six weeks at Bon Repos; his visit would come to a close in the course of three or four days, but he was still as ignorant of the hiding-place of the Diamond as on that evening when he learned for the first time that M. Platzoff had such a treasure in his possession.

Since the completion of his translation of the stolen MS. he had dreamed day and night of the Diamond. It was said to be worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. If he could only succeed in appropriating it, what a different life would be his in time to come! In such a case, he would of course be obliged to leave England for ever. But he was quite prepared to do that. He was without any tie of kindred or friendship that need bind him to his native land. Once safe in another hemisphere, he would dispose of the Diamond, and the proceeds would enable him to live as a gentleman ought to live for the remainder of his days. Truly, a pleasant dream.

But it was only a dream after all, as he himself in his cooler moments was quite ready to acknowledge. It was nothing but a dream even when Platzoff wrung from him an unreluctant consent to extend his visit at Bon Repos for another six weeks. If he stayed for six months, there seemed no likelihood that at the end of that time he would be one whit wiser on the one point on which he thirsted for information than he was now. Still, he was glad for various reasons to retain his pleasant quarters a little while longer.

Truth to tell, in Captain Ducie M. Platzoff had found a guest so much to his liking that he could not make up his mind to let him go again. Ducie was incurious, or appeared to be so; he saw and heard, and asked no questions. He seemed to be absolutely destitute of political principles, and therein he formed a pleasant contrast both to M. Platzoff himself and to the swarm of foreign gentlemen who at different times found their way to Bon Repos. He was at once a good listener and a good talker. In fine, he made in every way so agreeable, and was at the same time so thorough a gentleman that Platzoff was as glad to retain him as he himself was pleased to stay.

Three out of the Captain's second term of six weeks had nearly come to an end when on a certain evening, as he and Platzoff sat together in the smoke-room, the latter broached a subject which Ducie would have wagered all he possessed—though that was little enough—that his host would have been the last man in the world even to hint at.

"I think I have heard you say that you have a taste for diamonds and precious stones," remarked Platzoff. Ducie had hazarded such a remark on one or two occasions as a quiet attempt to draw Platzoff out, but had only succeeded in eliciting a little shrug and a cold smile, as though for him such a statement could have no possible interest.

"If I have said so to you I have only spoken the truth," replied Ducie. "I am passionately fond of gems and precious stones of every kind. Have you any to show me?"

"I have in my possession a green diamond said to be worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds," answered the Russian quietly.

The simulated surprise with which Captain Ducie received this announcement was a piece of genuine comedy. His real surprise arose from the fact of Platzoff having chosen to mention the matter to him at all.

"Great heaven!" he exclaimed. "Can you be in earnest? Had I heard such a statement from the lips of any other man than you, I should have questioned either his sanity or his truth."

"You need not question either one or the other in my case," answered Platzoff, with a smile. "My assertion is true to the letter. Some evening when I am less lazy than I am now, you shall see the stone and examine it for yourself."

"I take it as a great proof of your friendship for me, monsieur," said Ducie warmly, "that you have chosen to make me the recipient of such a confidence."

"It is a proof of my friendship," said the Russian. "No one of my political friends—and I have many that are dear to me, both in England and abroad—is aware that I have in my possession so inestimable a gem. But you, sir, are an English gentleman, and my friend for reasons unconnected with politics; I know that my secret will be safe in your keeping."

Ducie winced inwardly, but he answered with grave cordiality, "The event, my dear Platzoff, will prove that your confidence has not been misplaced."

After this, the Russian went on to tell Ducie that the MS. lost at the time of the railway accident had reference to the great Diamond; that it contained secret instructions, addressed to a very dear friend of the writer, as to the disposal of the Diamond after his, Platzoff's, death; all of which was quite as well known to Ducie as to the Russian himself; but the Captain sat with his pipe between his lips, and listened with an appearance of quiet interest that impressed his host greatly.

That night Ducie's mind was too excited to allow of sleep. He was about to be shown the great Diamond; but would the mere fact of seeing it advance him one step towards obtaining possession of it? Would Platzoff, when showing him the stone, show him also the place where it was ordinarily kept? His confidence in Ducie would scarcely carry him as far as that. In any case, it would be something to have seen the Diamond, and for the rest, Ducie must trust to the chapter of accidents and his own wits. On one point he was fully determined—to make the Diamond his own at any cost, if the slightest possible chance of doing so were afforded him. He was dazzled by the magnitude of the temptation; so much so, indeed, that he never seemed to realise in his own mind the foulness of the deed by which alone it could become his property. Had any man hinted that he was a thief, either in act or intention, he would have repudiated the term with scorn—would have repudiated it even in his own mind, for he made a point of hoodwinking and cozening himself, as though he were some other person whose good opinion must on no account be forfeited.

Captain Ducie awaited with hidden impatience the hour when it should please M. Platzoff to fulfil his promise. He had not long to wait. Three evenings later, as they sat in the smoking-room, said Platzoff: "To-night you shall see the Great Hara Diamond. No eyes save my own have seen it for ten years. I must ask you to put yourself for an hour or two under my instructions. Are you minded so to do?"

"I shall be most happy to carry out your wishes in every way," answered Ducie. "Consider me as your slave for the time being."

"Attend, then, if you please. This evening you will retire to your own rooms at eleven o'clock. Precisely at one-thirty a.m., you will come back here. You will be good enough to come in your slippers, because it is not desirable that any of the household should be disturbed by our proceedings. I have no further orders at present."

"Your lordship's wishes are my commands," answered Ducie, with a mock salaam.

They sat talking and smoking till eleven; then Ducie left his host as if for the night. He lay down for a couple of hours on the sofa in his dressing-room. Precisely at one-thirty he was on his way back to the smoke-room, his feet encased in a pair of Indian mocassins. A minute later he was joined by Platzoff in dressing-gown and slippers.

"I need hardly tell you, my dear Ducie," began the latter, "that with a piece of property in my possession no larger than a pigeon's egg, and worth so many thousands of pounds, a secure place in which to deposit that property (since I choose to have it always near me) is an object of paramount importance. That secure place of deposit I have at Bon Repos. This you may accept as one reason for my having lived in such an out-of-the-world spot for so many years. It is a place known to myself alone. After my death it will become known to one person only—to the person into whose possession the Diamond will pass when I shall be no longer among the living. The secret will be told him that he may have the means of finding the Diamond, but not even to him will it become known till after

my decease. Under these circumstances, my dear Ducie, you will, I am sure, excuse me for keeping the hiding-place of the Diamond a secret still—a secret even from you. Say—will you not?"

With a malediction at his heart, but with a smile on his lips, Captain Ducie made reply. "Pray offer no excuses, my dear Platzoff, where none are needed. What I want is to see the Diamond itself, not to know where it is kept. Such a piece of information would be of no earthly use to me, and it would involve a responsibility which, under any circumstances, I should hardly care to assume."

"It is well; you are an English gentleman," said the Russian, with a ceremonious inclination of the head, "and your words are based on wisdom and truth. It is necessary that I should blindfold you: oblige me with your handkerchief."

Ducie with a smile handed over his handkerchief, and Platzoff proceeded to blindfold him—an operation which was rapidly and effectually performed by the deft fingers of the Russian.

"Now, give me your hand and come with me, but do not speak till you are spoken to."

So Ducie laid a finger in the Russian's thin, cold palm, and the latter, taking a small bronze hand-lamp, conducted his bandaged companion from the room.

In two minutes after leaving the smoke-room Ducie's geographical ideas of the place were completely at fault. Platzoff led him through so many corridors and passages, turning now to the right hand, and now to the left—he guided him up and down so many flights of stairs, now of stone and now of wood, that he lost his reckoning entirely and felt as though he were being conducted through some place far more spacious than Bon Repos. He counted the number of stairs in each flight that he went up or down. In two or three cases the numbers tallied, which induced him to think that Platzoff was conducting him twice over the same ground, in order perhaps the more effectually to confuse his ideas as to the position of the place to which he was being led.

After several minutes spent thus in silent perambulation of the old house, they halted for a moment while Platzoff unlocked a door, after which they passed forward into a room, in the middle of which Ducie was left standing while Platzoff relocked the door, and then busied himself for a minute in trimming the lamp he had brought with him, which had been his only guide through the dark and silent house, for the servants had all gone to bed more than an hour ago.

Ducie, thus left to himself for a little while, had time for reflection. The floor on which he was standing was covered with a thick, soft carpet, consequently he was in one of the best rooms in the house. The atmosphere of this room was penetrated with a very faint aroma of pot-pourri, so faint that unless Captain Ducie's nose had been more than ordinarily keen he would never have perceived it. To the best of his knowledge there was only one room in Bon Repos that was permeated with the peculiar scent of pot-pourri. That room was M. Platzoff's private study, to which access was obtained through his bed-room. Ducie had been only twice into this room, but he remembered two facts in connection with it. First, the scent already spoken of; secondly, that besides the door which opened into it from the bed-room, there was another door which he had noticed as being shut and locked both times that he was there. If the room in which they now were was really M. Platzoff's study, they had probably obtained access to it through the second door.

While silently revolving these thoughts in his mind, Captain Ducie's fingers were busy with the formation of two tiny paper pellets, each no bigger than a pea. Unseen by Platzoff, he contrived to drop these pellets on the carpet.

"I must really apologise," said the Russian, next moment, "for keeping you waiting so long; but this lamp will not burn properly."

"Don't hurry yourself on my account," said Ducie. "I am quite jolly. My eyes are ready bandaged; I am only waiting for the axe and the block."

"We are not going to dispose of you in quite so summary a fashion," said the Russian. "One minute more and your eyesight shall be restored to you."

Ducie's quick ears caught a low click, as though someone had touched a spring. Then there was a faint rumbling, as though something were being rolled back on hidden wheels.

"Lend me your hand again, and bend that tall figure of yours. Step carefully. There is another staircase to descend—the last and the steepest of all."

Keeping fast hold of Platzoff's hand, Ducie followed slowly and cautiously, counting the steps as he went down. They were of stone, and were twenty-two in number. At the bottom of the staircase another door was unlocked. The two passed through, and the door was shut and relocked behind them.

"Be blind no longer!" said Platzoff, taking off the handkerchief and handing it to Ducie, with a smile. A few seconds elapsed before the latter could discern anything clearly. Then he saw that he was in a small vaulted chamber about seven feet in height, with a flagged floor, but without furniture of any kind save a small table of black oak on which Platzoff's lamp was now burning. The atmosphere of this dungeon had struck him with a sudden chill as he went in. At each end was a door, both of iron. The one that had opened to admit them was set in the thick masonry of the wall; the one at the opposite end seemed built into the solid rock.

"Before we go any farther," said Platzoff, "I may as well explain to you how it happens that a respectable old country house like Bon Repos has such a suspicious-looking hiding-place about its premises. You must know that I bought the house, many years ago, of the last representative of an old North-country family. He was a bachelor, and in him the family died out. Three years after I had come to reside here the old man, at that time on his death-bed, sent me a letter and a key. The letter revealed to me the secret of the place we are now exploring, of which I had no previous knowledge; the key is that of the two iron doors. It seems that the old man's ancestors had been deeply implicated in the Jacobite risings of last century. The house had been searched several times, and on one occasion occupied by Hanoverian troops. As a provision against such contingencies, this hiding-place (a natural one as far as the cavern beyond is concerned, which has probably existed for thousands of years) was then first connected with the interior of the house, and rendered practicable at a moment's notice; and here on several occasions certain members of the family, together with their plate and title-deeds, lay concealed for weeks at a time. The old gentleman gave me a solemn assurance that the secret existed with him alone; all who had been in any way implicated in the earlier troubles having died long ago. As the property had now become mine by purchase, he thought it only right that before he died these facts should be brought to my knowledge. You may imagine, my dear Ducie, with what eagerness I seized upon this place as a safe depository for my diamond, which, up to this time, I had been obliged to carry about my person. And now, forward to the heart of the mystery!"

Having unlocked and flung open the second iron door, Platzoff took up his lamp, and, closely followed by Ducie, entered a narrow winding passage in the rock. After following this passage, which tended slightly downwards for a considerable distance, they emerged into a large cavernous opening in the heart of the hill.

Platzoff's first act was, by means of a long crook, to draw down within reach of his hand a large iron lamp that was suspended from the roof by a running chain. This lamp he lighted from the hand-lamp he had brought with him. As soon as released, it ascended to its former position, about ten feet from the ground. It burned with a clear white flame that lighted up every nook and cranny of the place. The sides of the cave were of irregular formation. Measuring by the eye, Ducie estimated the cave to be about sixty yards in length, by a breadth, in the widest part, of twenty. In height it appeared to be about forty feet. The floor was covered with a carpet of thick brown sand, but whether this covering was a natural or an artificial one Ducie had no means of judging. The atmosphere of the place was cold and damp, and the walls in many places dripped with moisture; in other places they scintillated in the lamplight as though thousands of minute gems were embedded in their surface.

In the middle of the floor, on a pedestal of stones loosely piled together, was a hideous idol, about four feet in height, made of wood, and painted in various colours. In the centre of its forehead gleamed the great Diamond.

"Behold!" was all that Platzoff said, as he pointed to the idol. Then they both stood and gazed in silence.

Many contending emotions were at work just then in Ducie's breast, chief of which was a burning, almost unconquerable desire to make that glorious gem his own at every risk. In his ear a fiend seemed to be whispering.

"All you have to do," it seemed to say, "is to grip old Platzoff tightly round the neck for a couple of minutes. His thread of life is frail and would be easily broken. Then possess yourself of the Diamond and his keys. Go back by the way you came and fasten everything behind you. The household is all a-bed, and you could get away unseen. Long before the body of Platzoff would be discovered, if indeed it were ever discovered, you would be far away and beyond all fear of pursuit. Think! That tiny stone is worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

This was Ducie's temptation. It shook him inwardly as a reed is shaken by the wind. Outwardly he was his ordinary quiet, impassive self, only gazing with eyes that gleamed on the gleaming gem, which shone like a new-fallen star on the forehead of that hideous image.

The spell was broken by Platzoff, who, going up to the idol, and passing his hand through an orifice at the back of the skull, took the Diamond out of its resting-place, close behind the hole in the forehead, through which it was seen from the front. With thumb and forefinger he took it daintily out, and going back to Ducie dropped it into the outstretched palm of the latter.

Ducie turned the Diamond over and over, and held it up before the light between his forefinger and thumb, and tried the weight of it on his palm. It was in the simple form of a table diamond, with only sixteen facets in all, and was just as it had left the fingers of some Indian cutter, who could say how many centuries ago! It glowed with a green fire, deep, yet tender, that flashed through its facets and smote the duller lamplight with sparkles of intense brilliancy. This, then, was the wondrous gem which for reign after reign was said to have been regarded as their choicest possession by the great lords of Hyderabad. Ducie seemed to be examining it most closely; but, in truth, at that very moment he was debating in his own mind the terrible question of murder or no murder, and scarcely saw the stone itself at all.

"Ami, you do not seem to admire my Diamond!" said the Russian presently, with a touch of pathos in his voice.

Ducie pressed the Diamond back into Platzoff's hands. "I admire it so much," said he, "that I cannot enter into any commonplace terms of admiration. I will talk to you to-morrow respecting it. At present I lack fitting words."

The Russian took back the stone, pressed it to his lips, and then went and replaced it in the forehead of the idol.

"Who is your friend there?" said Ducie, with a desperate attempt to wrench his thoughts away from that all-absorbing temptation.

"I am not sufficiently learned in Hindu mythology to tell you his name with certainty," answered Platzoff. "I take him to be no less a personage than Vishnu. He is seated upon the folds of the snake Jesha, whose seven heads bend over him to afford him shade. In one hand he holds a spray of the sacred lotus. He is certainly hideous enough to be a very great personage. Do you know, my dear Ducie," went on Platzoff, "I have a very curious theory with regard to that Hindu gentleman, whoever he may be. Many years ago he was worshipped in some great Eastern temple, and had priests and acolytes without number to attend to his wants; and then, as now, the great Diamond shone in his forehead. By some mischance the Diamond was lost or stolen—in any case, he was dispossessed of it. From that moment he was an unhappy idol. He derived pleasure no longer from being worshipped, he could rest neither by night nor day—he had lost his greatest treasure. When he could no longer endure this state of wretchedness he stole out of the temple one fine night unknown to anyone, and set out on his travels in search of the missing Diamond. Was it simple accident or occult knowledge, that directed his wanderings after a time to the shop of a London curiosity dealer, where I saw him, fell in love with him, and bought him? I know not: I only know that he and his darling Diamond were at last re-united, and here they have remained ever since. You smile as if I had been relating a pleasant

fable. But tell me, if you can, how it happens that in the forehead of yonder idol there is a small cavity lined with gold into which the Diamond fits with the most exact nicety. That cavity was there when I bought the idol and has in no way been altered since. The shape of the Diamond, as you have seen for yourself, is rather peculiar. Is it therefore possible that mere accident can be at the bottom of such a coincidence? Is not my theory of the Wandering Idol much more probable as well as far more poetical? You smile again. You English are the greatest sceptics in the world. But it is time to go. We have seen all there is to be seen, and the temperature of this place will not benefit my rheumatism."

So the lamp was put out and Idol and Diamond were left to darkness and solitude. In the vaulted room, at the entrance to the winding way that led to the cavern, Ducie's eyes were again bandaged. Then up the twenty-two stone stairs, and so into the carpeted room above, where was the scent of pot-pourri. From this room they came, by many passages and flights of stairs, back to the smoking-room, where Ducie's bandage was removed. One last pipe, a little desultory conversation, and then bed.

M. Platzoff being out of the way for an hour or two next afternoon, Captain Ducie contrived to pay a surreptitious visit to his host's private study. On the carpet he found one of the two paper pellets which he had dropped from his fingers the previous evening. There, too, was the same faint, sickly smell that had filled his nostrils when the handkerchief was over his eyes, which he now traced to a huge china jar in one corner, filled with the dried leaves of flowers gathered long summers before.

CHAPTER XVI

JANET'S RETURN

"There he is! there is dear Major Strickland!"

The tidal train was just steaming into London Bridge station on a certain spring evening as the above words were spoken. From a window of one of the carriages a bright young face was peering eagerly, a face which lighted up with a smile of rare sweetness the moment Major Strickland's soldierly figure came into view. A tiny gloved hand was held out as a signal, the Major's eye was caught, the train came to a stand, and next moment Janet Hope was on the platform with her arms round the old soldier's neck and her lips held up for a kiss.

The publicity of this transaction seemed slightly to shock the sensibilities of Miss Close, the English teacher in whose charge Janet had come over; but she was won to a quite different view of the affair when the Major, after requesting to be introduced to her, shook her cordially by the hand, said how greatly obliged he was to her for the care she had taken of "his dear Miss Hope," and invited her to dine next day with himself and Janet. Then Miss Close went her way, and the Major and Janet went theirs in a cab to a hotel not a hundred miles from Piccadilly.

Janet's first words as they got clear of the station were:

"And now you must tell me how everybody is at Deepley Walls."

"Everybody was quite well when I left home except one person—Sister Agnes."

"Dear Sister Agnes!" said Janet, and the tears sprang to her eyes in a moment. "I am more sorry than I can tell to hear that she is ill."

"Not ill exactly, but ailing," said the Major. "You must not alarm yourself unnecessarily. She caught a severe cold one wet evening about three months ago as she was on her way home from visiting some poor sick woman in the village, and she seems never to have been quite well since."

"I had a letter from her five days ago, but she never hinted to me that she was not well."

"I can quite believe that. She is not one given to complaining about herself, but one who strives to soothe the complaints of others. The good she does in her quiet way among the poor is something wonderful. I must tell you what an old bed-ridden man, to whom she had been very kind, said to her the other day. Said he, 'If everybody had their rights in this world, ma'am, or if I was king of fairyland, you should have a pair of angel's wings, so that everybody might know how good you are.' And there are a hundred others who would say the same thing."

"If I had not had her dear letters to hearten me and cheer me up, I think that many a time I should have broken down utterly under the dreadful monotony of my life at the Pension Clissot. I had no holidays, in the common meaning of the word; no dear friends to go and see; none even to come once in a way to see me, were it only for one happy hour. I had no home recollections to which I could look back fondly in memory, and the future was all a blank—a mystery. But the letters of Sister Agnes spoke to me like the voice of a dear friend. They purified me, they lifted me out of my common work-a-day troubles and all the petty meannesses of school-girl existence, and set before me the example of a good and noble life as the one thing worth striving for in this weary world."

"Tut, tut, my dear child!" said the Major, "you are far too young to call the world a weary world. Please heaven, it shall not be quite such a dreary place for you in time to come. We will begin the change this very evening. We shall just be in time to get a bit of dinner, and then, heigh! for the play."

"The play, dear Major Strickland!" said Janet, with a sudden flush and an eager light in her eyes; "but would Sister Agnes approve of my going to such a place?"

"I scarcely think, poverina, that Sister Agnes would disapprove of any place to which I might choose to take you."

"Forgive me!" cried Janet; "I did not intend you to construe my words in that way."

"I have never construed anything since I was at school fifty years ago," answered the Major, laughingly. "Can you tell me now from your heart, little one, that you would not like to go to the play?"

"I should like very, very much to go, and after what has been said I will never forgive you if you do not take me."

"The penalty would be too severe. It is agreed that we shall go."

"To me it seems only seven days instead of seven years since I was last driven through London streets," resumed Janet, as they were crawling up Fleet Street. "The same shops, the same houses, and even, as it seems to me, the same people crowding the pathways; and, to complete the illusion, the same kind travelling companion now as then."

"To me the illusion seems by no means so complete. To London Bridge, seven years ago, I took a simple child of twelve: to-day I bring back a young lady of nineteen—a woman, in point of fact—who, I have no doubt, understands more of flirtation than she does of French, and would rather graduate in coquetry than in crochet-work."

"Take care then, sir, lest I wing my unslaked arrows at you."

"You are too late in the day, dear child, to practise on me. I am your devoted slave already—bound fast to the wheel of your triumphant car. What more would you have?"

The hotel was reached at last, and the Major gave Janet a short quarter of an hour for her toilette. When she got downstairs dinner was on the point of being served, and she found covers laid for three. Before she had time to ask a question, the third person entered the room. He was a tall, well-built man of six or seven and twenty. He had light-brown hair, closely cropped, but still inclined to curl, and a thick beard and moustache of the same colour. He had blue eyes, and a pleasant smile, and the easy, self-possessed manner of one who had seen "the world of men and things." His left sleeve was empty.

Janet did not immediately recognise him, he looked so much older, so different in every way; but at the first sound of his voice she knew who stood before her. He came forward and held out his hand—the one hand that was left him.

"May I venture to call myself an old friend, Miss Hope? And to trust that even after all these years I am not quite forgotten?"

"I recognise you by your voice, not by your face. You are Mr. George Strickland. You it was who saved my life. Whatever else I may have forgotten, I have not forgotten that."

"I am too well pleased to find that I live in your memory at all to cavil with your reason for recollecting me."

"But—but, I never heard—no one ever told me—" Then she stopped with tears in her eyes, and glanced at his empty sleeve.

"That I had left part of myself in India," he said, finishing the sentence for her. "Such, nevertheless, is the case. Uncle there says that the yellow rascals were so fond of me that they could not bear to part from me altogether. For my own part, I think myself fortunate that they did not keep me there *in toto*, in which case I should not have had the pleasure of meeting you here to-day."

He had been holding her hand quite an unnecessary length of time. She now withdrew it gently. Their eyes met for one brief instant, then Janet turned away and seated herself at the table. The flush caused by the surprise of the meeting still lingered on her face, the tear-drops still lingered in her eyes; and as George Strickland sat down opposite to her he thought that he had never seen a sweeter vision, nor one that appealed more directly to his imagination and his heart.

Janet Hope at nineteen was very pleasant to look upon. Her face was not one of mere commonplace prettiness, but had an individuality of its own that caused it to linger in the memory like some sweet picture that once seen cannot be readily forgotten. Her eyes were of a tender, luminous grey, full of candour and goodness. Her hair was a deep, glossy brown; her face was oval, and her nose a delicate aquiline. On ordinary occasions she had little or no colour, yet no one could have

taken the clear pallor of her cheek as a token of ill-health; it seemed rather a result of the depth and earnestness of the life within her.

In her wardrobe there was a lack of things fashionable, and as she sat at dinner this evening she had on a dress of black alpaca, made after a very quiet and nun-like style; with a thin streak of snow-white collar and cuff round throat and wrist; but without any ornament save a necklace of bog-oak, cut after an antique pattern, and a tiny gold locket in which was a photographic likeness of Sister Agnes.

That was a very pleasant little dinner-party. In the course of conversation it came out that, a few days previously, Captain George had been decorated with the Victoria Cross. Janet's heart thrilled within her as the Major told in simple, unexaggerated terms of the special deed of heroism by which the great distinction had been won. The Major told also how George was now invalided on half-pay; and her heart thrilled with a still sweeter emotion when he went on to say that the young soldier would henceforth reside with him at Eastbury—at Eastbury, which was only two short miles from Deepley Walls! The feeling with which she heard this simple piece of news was one to which she had hitherto been an utter stranger. She asked herself, and blushed as she asked, whence this new sweet feeling emanated? But she was satisfied with asking the question, and seemed to think that no answer was required.

When dinner was over, they set out for the play. Janet had never been inside a theatre before, and for her the experience was an utterly novel and delightful one.

On the third day after Janet's arrival in London they all went down to Eastbury together—the Major, and she and George. But in the course of those three days the Major took Janet about a good deal, and introduced her to nearly all the orthodox sights of the Great City—and a strange kaleidoscopic jumble they seemed at the time, only to be afterwards rearranged by memory as portions of a bright and sunny picture the like of which she scarcely dared hope ever to see again.

Captain Strickland parted from the Major and Janet at Eastbury station. The two latter were bound for Deepley Walls, for the Major felt that his task would have been ill-performed had he failed to deliver Janet into Lady Chillington's own hands. As they rumbled along the quiet country roads—which brought vividly back to Janet's mind the evening when she saw Deepley Walls for the first time—the Major said: "Do you remember, poppetina, how seven years ago I spoke to you of a certain remarkable likeness which you then bore to someone whom I knew when I was quite a young man, or has the circumstance escaped your memory?"

"I remember quite well your speaking of the likeness, and I have often wondered since who the original was of whom I was such a striking copy. I remember, too, how positively Lady Chillington denied the resemblance which you so strongly insisted upon."

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