

Warner Anne

The Tigress



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CHAPTER I

On a Moonlight Night in Simla

"I do hope you are not going to weep!" said Nina.

She and he sat on a far-sheltered corner of the terrace in the gray shadow, and she had just told him that "everything was over."

As "everything" had been going on for the best part of three months, it was, perhaps, only natural that she should experience some concern as to how he meant to take it.

He was slow to reassure her, and she was impatient. "Because," she explained, "I never know just what to say or do when they weep. I'm never at a loss at other times; but –"

"Of course I shall not weep," he protested at length, with something of indignation in his tone. "Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"It isn't unusual," she explained. "Sometimes they storm. I've known them to swear most awfully. But when they are young, as you are, they so often just melt; and it is very trying, you know. Perhaps you'll swear. I'd much rather have it so. There was Emborough, for instance. He –"

"If you don't mind," he cut in, "I'd prefer not to hear."

"Ah, I see!" she exclaimed quickly. "You are neither going to weep nor storm. You are going to be just plain disagreeable. And if there is anything I hate it is a man who mopes."

He was thinking very hard, and for the moment he had failed to follow her. Disaster had dropped upon him like a bolt from the blue at the moment of his greatest confidence.

It was at Simla where, Kipling says, "all things begin and many come to an evil end;" and something, it seemed, had come to an end – evil or otherwise – as well as the season and the last of the dances at Viceregal Lodge.

Ten minutes ago he had been so convinced that the end was to be "otherwise" that even now he couldn't believe it was to be evil.

"Why," he managed to say after a brief pause, "I don't understand you at all. I –"

"No one ever has understood me," she assured him. "Even when I've gone to the trouble of explaining they manage somehow to get the explanation all upside down. It's very tiresome – very."

"I really thought you loved me! You –"

"They all think I love them. That's the odd part of it. I'm sure I never told any one. And yet they are so conceited – Oh, why can't you men appreciate being petted and amused, without imagining that it must be inspired by adoration and coupled with a desire for life-long attachment?"

"You promised to bolt with me," he asserted boldly.

Nina's chair jumped back three inches, impelled by the reflexes of a slim but sturdy pair of long legs. Hers, not the chair's.

"I abominate a liar!" she announced firmly.

"So do I," he came back. "You did promise me. It was during that last waltz."

"I am never responsible for what I say when waltzing."

"You admit it, then?"

"I admit nothing. I neither confirm nor deny. I don't know."

"But we came out here to arrange it. Or don't you remember that, either?"

"I fancied it was because you wished to smoke."

"God!" he exclaimed suddenly. "How can you be so bitterly cruel!"

She may have been a reincarnated tigress – in after years there was a man who always declared so – and then again she may not. It is quite possible that circumstance and environment made her what she was.

Certainly at heart Nina Darling was not a bad woman. There were times when she tried very hard to be a very good woman according to her lights. And yet, somehow, somewhere within her she seemed to possess a faculty for making men wretched.

The world – or a very large part of it – regarded it as an insatiable craving, an unappeasable appetite – a sort of lust for personal aggrandizement, growing out of personal vanity. But then the world knew nothing of Nina Darling's secret – which made all the difference.

For right judgment a few facts will not serve. Unless we have them all we are likely to fall into error. To argue from effect back to cause is a very risky undertaking. And that was what most people did in Nina Darling's case.

Young Gerald Andrews, of the civil service, the most recent victim, whom she had had in leading strings ever since he came to Simla, fancied her from the very first the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Now, stung by the lash of her scorn, the sheer fact of her unattainableness seemed to redouble her charm.

There was something wraithlike about her. She appeared to hold kinship with the moonlight, which in its loveliness overspread lawns and flowerbeds near at hand and turned to opal the mists that hung and swayed over the valley beneath them, where the lovely Annandale roses were blowing.

Until now he had always thought that her big eyes were violet-blue. But suddenly he saw opal lights in them and opal flame. And her gown was not white and silver, as he had fancied, but spun of moonbeams and studded with opals.

Her long, sinuous figure, more revealed than hidden by its gauzy investure, suggested to him Lilith, and the medieval conception of an angel as well.

He hardly expected an answer to the exclamatory question wrung from him by the torture of her words, but she had it ready.

"Because I eminently prefer my matrimonial frying-pan to the blistering coals of the illicit," she said coolly.

The boy – for he was scarcely more, big and handsome and strong though he appeared – looked terribly wobegone. But on the comparison floated a straw, and like the proverbial drowning man, he clutched at it.

"You admit it's a frying-pan," he reminded her.

"Sizzling hot," she told him. "I'm scorched through and through. My heart's a cinder."

The straw went under, carrying him with it, but he still clung on. "Let me take you out of it," he pleaded desperately.

But her shapely shoulders rose in a discouraging shrug.

"Into the fire?" she asked calmly.

"Into Elysium."

She laughed at that. "Worse," she said with a touch of cynicism. "The home of the blessed dead! I'm not blessed and I'm not dead – and I don't want to be!"

"You know I didn't mean that," he objected.

"The only other Elysium I know is Elysium Hill, with its doleful deodars. A most distressing –"

Young Andrews interrupted her by springing up. "Oh, don't be so frightfully literal!" he cried, annoyed to a point of misery. "You know very well what I meant."

"If you're going to be rude –" she began threateningly. And on the instant he was in his chair again, leaning forward, groping for her bare hand.

"No, you mustn't!" she warned, drawing both hands out of reach. "You'll only declare that I encouraged you."

At that he gasped audibly. "Encouraged me!" he exclaimed when he breathed normally again. "Aren't you a little late with your caution? I suppose I never have been encouraged."

"There! I knew you'd say it."

"Well, I've held your hands dozens of times, haven't I? More than that, I've held you in my arms, and I've kissed your lips and your eyes and your hair. Isn't that encouragement?"

She smiled calmly and whimsically.

"Yes. Encouragement for me. I couldn't resist you."

"Your heart isn't a cinder at all," he growled, frowning. "It's a stone! How many other men have you treated like this?"

"None," she answered boldly. "I never treat two alike. I have too much imagination for that. There are always variations."

His voice was very bitter as he said: "You'll meet your match some day. I hope to God you will!"

"I've met him already," she returned. "He's the only man I care a straw about."

"Your husband?" he hazarded.

"Good Heavens! No! Poor Darling! He doesn't deserve the life I lead him. I'm charitable enough to wish him a better fate."

"What happened to your match then?"

"Now you are asking riddles," she said. "That question has never been satisfactorily answered."

"You mean you don't wish to tell me, I suppose."

"I'd give anything in the world if I could. He was reported dead eight years ago, but – "

"He isn't?"

"He wasn't then."

"How do you know?"

"He was heard from after."

"Then he's alive still – you know that much?"

"No," she replied languorously. "I don't know that much. He may have died since, don't you see?"

"Let me find out for you," he proposed abruptly. "I'll – "

"You're very kind, but you'd have your trouble for your pains. He doesn't want to be found, wherever he is, dead or alive, and I'll back him against the world when it comes to having his own way."

She shivered slightly and drew the filmy scarf closer over her bare shoulders. "Besides," she added, "when the message was sent he was starting for 'the world's end,' and 'the world's end' is a big place to find a man. The needle and the hayrick are child's play to it."

"I'm terribly interested," said young Andrews. "I am really. I didn't believe you'd admit any chap was your match. Do you mind telling me what he was like?"

"He was more than my match," she confessed. "He was something else, and that is why no other man ever will be able to please me after his newness has worn off."

"As mine has?"

"As yours has."

"Gad! But you're frank, Nina."

"I know it. It's my one admirable quality. I'm tired of you, Gerald. I always get tired in the same place."

"The same place?" he repeated, puzzled.

"When they're not satisfied with a day and want to make it forever. The mere thought of forever wearies me. I feel like killing a man when he so much as hints at it."

"You haven't killed your husband," he reminded her.

"Ah, but how I have been tempted!" she laughed. "Some day I may."

"I know something of what a beast Darling is," he ventured. "I've heard it at the club. They say –"

"Don't!" she begged. "I won't listen. It may all be true, but I'd rather not hear it. I'm sorry for him. I'd only kill him to put him out of his misery – to put us both out of our misery."

"Of course you don't mean that. You shouldn't say it."

She didn't contradict him, and for a little there was silence between them. His thoughts reverted to the man who was her match – and more.

"And the other man?" he queried. "You said he was something else. What else?"

"My mate," she said simply. And again the silence fell.

Presently her laugh rang out, clear and bell-like, startling her companion from gloomy reverie. It jarred awfully. It was like dance music at a funeral.

"I can fancy what else you've heard at the club," she began, the opal lights in her eyes suddenly blazing. "They say I'm an angel, don't they?"

"They wouldn't dare say anything else in my presence."

"To be sure" – bitterly – "that's condemnation enough in itself. Before you they pronounced me a good and virtuous wife, I suppose. And behind your back – Good Heavens, what must they not say behind your back!"

"You *are* good and virtuous," he defended with boyish loyalty.

"Of course I am," she agreed. "I've driven one man to drink by marrying him, and more than I can count by not. I'm an angel, truly. But it's so hard to tell just what to do. I am my brother's keeper, and yet I go through life adding each year to the army of the besotted."

It was not at all the trend that young Andrews had foreseen in bringing Nina Darling to this shadowy corner of the terrace. Every fresh lead made the situation more uncomfortable. He had been brimming over with passion and sentiment, and here they had strayed away into a field rife with some of life's hardest facts.

"Promise me," she begged, "that you won't desert the civil service for the army – this army, my army!"

"God knows what I shall do, Nina!" he flung back desperately. "I banked everything on you. I didn't think you'd fail me."

"I've failed every one that ever came into my life," was her candid rejoinder. "Every time I crave and take a little passing pleasure some one suffers, and I haven't a drop of vicious blood in my veins. I believe I was cursed in my cradle."

He started to protest, but she shook her golden head dispiritedly. The blues – rare visitors – had settled down upon her.

"If I had only met you first!" he cried. "If you had married me I would have saved you."

"Don't!" she supplicated. "Please, please don't! I hate the word – marriage. Who was it said: 'Love is a soufflé that marriage changes to a bread-and-butter pudding?' I've seen it borne out scores of times. Soggy, indigestible stuff, without spice or flavor."

The melody of the dance music which all along had seeped to them in harmonic murmur from the distant ballroom was now hushed.

In the distance, at the opposite end of the terrace, figures – single and grouped – moved in silhouette across the glare from the lighted windows. Along the garden paths there passed at intervals sentinel Ghurkas from the viceroy's guard of honor.

Young Andrews's thoughts were long, long thoughts. He was sorry for the woman, but he was still more sorry for himself. He had turned a little away from her. His head was bowed, and his gaze was lowered to the pavement at his feet.

Nina had risen before he was conscious of her movement. Then belatedly he sprang up.

"It is late," she said. "The Ramsays are probably looking everywhere for me. I mustn't keep them waiting."

But he scarcely heeded. He stepped very close to her and gripped her by either arm.
"Tell me," he begged, low-voiced, earnest, "is there nothing in your heart for me?"
"Oh, yes!" she answered quite casually. "Sympathy – oh, ever so much sympathy!"
"And there can never be anything else?"
"There never can be anything else – except – "
She paused, and his hopes fluttered.
"Except – " he repeated.
"Gratitude. I am grateful. I was so afraid you were going to weep. And you didn't."

CHAPTER II

A Psychological Contretemps

Young Andrews was a sensitive soul, but he was not unmanly. He fought off the tears as long as he was conscious, but his pillow was wet in the morning.

His station was "on the Bombay side," as they say in India. To be exact, it was at Junnar. And he started down the next day, after sending Nina a bouquet of Annandale's loveliest roses. But when he alighted from the little branch railway line at Umballa, he halted.

The cantonment here was the home of the Darlings. But it was also the home of Dinghal, a deputy commissioner, who was a friend of young Andrews. So young Andrews lingered, and the deputy commissioner made him welcome.

Hitherto he had regarded Dinghal as rather a bore. And in this he was thoroughly justified. But since his two months at Simla the deputy commissioner had acquired for him a distinct interest.

Dinghal knew the Darlings intimately, and his passion for gathering and disseminating minor gossip, which had once been a fault, became now, in the changed tastes of his visitor, an enviable virtue, especially as the visitor found it the easiest thing in the world to direct the flow into the one desired channel.

As a rule there was nothing vicious about Dinghal's gossip. It was so pitifully tame and pointless that it wearied the listener to extinction; for Dinghal was a kindly man, inclined to gloss over faults and failings and to "play up" the good points of even the most unworthy.

This was another reason why young Andrews was so vastly entertained by all the little talks they had about Colonel and Mrs. Darling. He had heard enough of the other sort of thing in the club at Simla, and had relished it then, in that Nina's husband was the chief victim, and at that time his sympathies were all with Nina.

What he craved most now was unbiased truth. Which is sometimes a panacea – and sometimes not.

"They're not happy, to be sure," Dinghal admitted with evident reluctance. "But I don't know that either is to blame. Just a case of mutual inadaptability that neither discovered until it was too late. I knew Darling long before he married her, and I know people who knew little Nina Calthrop when she was crowing in swaddling clothes.

"There's not a better family in England. Good people all of them. The men have rather run to the army. You know how that goes in families. She's a grand-daughter of old General Buddicombe, who distinguished himself in Egypt in 1882.

"The general's sister, Nina's great-aunt, married the Duke of Pemberwell. Fine people, I tell you. Then there was Kneedrock; a husky young giant – viscount, you know – son of the Earl of Dumphreys, who went to South Africa and never came back."

"Never came back?" echoed young Andrews questioningly.

"Reported killed at Spion Kop, I think it was. Body never brought home, though. May have been Bloemfontein, I'm not sure. At any rate, they say he was Nina's favorite cousin. She certainly took his loss very keenly.

"After her first wild grief she developed a mania for particulars. When peace was arranged and the rank and file were coming home by the shipload she lost no chance of getting every fact she could from every officer she met.

"At the Pemberwell seat – Puddleford – she encountered Colonel Darling. It was he, they say, who identified poor Kneedrock's remains, what there was of them, and, of course, he held for her at that vital moment more interest than any other man, woman, or child in the United Kingdom.

"She annexed him – body, soul, and breeches, as the saying is. And it wasn't Darling's fault that he was flattered and fascinated, for Nina was then barely twenty, and the rarest, flowerlike slip of a girl you can imagine.

"You know what she is now. Beautiful, you think, eh? Everybody agrees that Nina is beautiful; and she is. But five years in India, and – well, let us say, the life of the mismated – haven't failed to rub some of the bloom off the peach."

Mixed metaphors had no terrors for Dinghal, who evidently inherited from somewhere a strain of Irish blood, despite his name, and treated "bulls" as if they were pets.

"Was this fellow, Kneedrock, ever heard of afterward?" his listener questioned. "Reported alive, I mean. It seems to me – "

"Oh, yes," Dinghal answered. "Every now and then a story crops up from somewhere that he's been seen. But nobody believes it. If he's alive there's no reason why he shouldn't go home, is there? The whole thing is ridiculous on its face. Besides Darling saw him. Says he was practically shot to pieces."

"I thought I'd heard it," returned young Andrews casually. And to himself he said: "Kneedrock is the man she meant. Her cousin, her match, and her mate – all in one."

"Yes," Dinghal went on, calmly filling his pipe, "Nina Calthrop was something to covet; and, naturally enough, Darling coveted her.

"Then, on her side, there was gratitude, for the colonel had given her a world of the sort of detail she wanted. She had cross-examined him like a K. C., and he had answered fully and freely out of the overflowing storehouse of his experience.

"If they could have gone on talking forever about that battle – I believe now it was Spion Kop – they might have been happy yet. But in time she pumped the cistern dry. There wasn't a crumb of fact or conjecture left in Darling's larder that hadn't been rolled over and over and stripped to its bare bones."

Young Andrews nearly howled. The mixture of figures was really superb.

"I fancy the pumping was pretty well finished before the wedding," the recital continued; "but I'm not stating that as a fact. You see that was quite six months after their meeting, and two years or more after Kneedrock's taking off. And in that six months they had seen each other, not continuously, but at intervals, for Darling was a very busy man.

"Their honeymoon, such as it was, was spent on a P. & O. steamer. I have been told that they each discovered their wretched mistake before they got to the Gulf of Aden. Take it for what it's worth.

"Conditions weren't all they might have been when they reached Umballa. That is certain. Darling did his best to hide the rift in the lute; but Nina never seemed to care a hang what people thought or said.

"Mind you, I'm not blaming her. I like the frankness of it. Not that she complained or whimpered. Not she. But she just went wild. Flirted like the very devil with anything and everything that came along.

"That was five years ago, mind you; and she hasn't mended her ways since. There are some who say she is possessed of the seven devils that the Lord cast out of Mary of Magdala, but – "

"It's a lie!" broke in young Andrews furiously. "She's – "

"Of course," Dinghal came back heartily. "I know that. She's not a bad woman. But I've heard her painted blacker than the Black Knight of the Black Lands.

"There is no question that more than one young fellow has gone straight to perdition because of her – and some old fellows, too, for that matter. But they were weaker sisters, who hadn't wit enough to save their skins from Hades."

His listener writhed. The deputy commissioner's rhetoric was certainly most trying.

"I don't suppose," he pursued, "that in the history of the world there has ever been a married pair more lied about than the Darlings. Nothing has been too bad for the victims of her charms to say about her; and for years the gossips from here to Singapore have been telling wild tales of the colonel's cruelty, wreaked in vengeance on his wayward *mem-sahib*.

"They've had her drawn and quartered, cut, bruised, and dislocated. To believe the hundredth part of these stories she must, long ere this, if she managed to survive, have been resolved into a more helpless, unsightly cripple than the most distorted *Sadhu* that makes hideous the twice-yearly festivals at Tirupankundram. Yet I know there's not a scintilla of truth in any one of them."

"I heard something of that sort at Simla," said Andrews, frowning.

"You can hear it anywhere. Whenever conversation flags in Anglo-India some ass or knave will introduce the Darlings, and rehearse the latest invention of the prolific and never-failing scandal-makers."

"But he's cruel to her, isn't he?"

"He's only cruel to himself," answered Dinghal. "He's killing his body and soul with strong drink, and he's risking his temporal and eternal future as an officer in his majesty's service and as a Christian gentleman.

"I give you my word, Andrews, he's never spoken a harsh word to her nor laid a heavy hand on her fair person. And yet he suffers the torments of the damned because of her. It's a very painful situation."

Andrews said he didn't pretend to understand the thing, and would like to have the key.

Dinghal hesitated a moment. Then he looked very impressive, and when he spoke it was with lowered voice.

"I can give you the key in three words," he said.

He paused again, and Andrews waited.

"It is this," Dinghal divulged gravely: "He loves her."

The young man from the Bombay side was thoughtfully silent for a space. Then, as the revelation sank in, he murmured, half to himself and out of the abundance of his own recent experience:

"God pity him!"

"That's what I say," agreed Dinghal.

At the time of this conversation Andrews had not seen Darling. He met him a night or two later at the Umballa Club, and a strange emotional mix-up resulted. The young man's sentimental side was oddly stirred. Darling appealed not only to his sympathy, but to his admiration.

It was true that he had been prepared for something of this kind by Dinghal; but he never suspected that he could entertain more than a sort of passive pity for Nina's husband. He had an innate dislike for weak men, physically and morally.

In that respect – and in that only – Andrews was to a degree feminine. Strength appealed to him as it appeals to women. And the fact that Darling had given way to a dulling, deadening indulgence in alcoholic excesses argued for a sort of moral cowardice.

But when he met the colonel he was surprised. It may have been that he pictured him in advance as habitually maudlin, or sodden or morose. Certainly he was no one of these. He had the look of a hard drinker, it was true; but he carried his liquor well. More than that, he gave the unmistakable impression of inherent strength and courage.

Darling was not a large man. He appeared to measure barely five feet nine, and his weight could not have exceeded ten stone – apparently all bone and sinew, with no sign of bloating.

Sandy-haired, pale blue of eye, his firm chin a trifle long, he was not ill-looking. But his age must have doubled Nina's on their wedding day.

Before he and Andrews had chatted for five minutes a mutual liking was established. They were both passionately fond of sport, and the fact developed and was exchanged in that brief period of intercourse.

"If you've nothing better to do to-morrow," Darling suggested, "I'd be glad to show you some of my trophies. What do you say to tiffin with me? My wife is still in the hills, and we can talk big game without fear of boring the other sex. Shall I expect you?"

Andrews knew that he should say he had met Mrs. Darling at Simla, but he was so eager to answer "yes" that the opportunity got away from him at the moment; and as it didn't again present itself, his failure to make the truth clear was a harassing worry from that time on.

Moreover, though he could not repent, he reproached and upbraided himself for having fallen in love with Nina. All that he had learned since arriving at Umballa appeared only to add to her desirability. Absence had indeed, in this instance, made the heart grow fonder.

That he had broken his journey here, not so much for the sake of pumping Dinghal as for the chance of getting one more look at her – possibly one more word with her – he had candidly to admit to his better self. But he wished with all his heart that she was maid or widow, or – if there must be a husband, that he was some other – almost any other than Darling. He would have felt less a brute had it even been Dinghal.

It was a psychological contretemps of the rarest sort, and distinctly uncomfortable. He had found the colonel as infatuating in his way as his wife was in hers, and, naturally, there were no means by which he could reconcile the liking and the loving.

Even when he appeared at the Darling bungalow, the next day, the thing got him by the throat, as it were, at every turn. For the trophies of the sportsman and the all-too-feminine evidences of the chatelaine clashed side by side; every clash echoing in young Andrews's soul.

Again and again he found his attention straying, for instance, from an especially fine tiger-skin or the mounted head of a curiously horned markhor to a dainty writing-desk that he knew at a glance must be Nina's, or to a framed photograph of a group on an English lawn, in which, instinctively, he detected Nina in the tall, girlish figure in the white frock.

Indeed, the drawing-room seemed to be all Nina. He saw her everywhere – in every chair, on every window-seat, and on every couch. The dining-room was more divided; but the gun-room, of course, was all Darling.

They lingered there the greater part of the afternoon. Every rifle, every fowling-piece had its story, and there were many of them; for Darling boasted a veritable armory.

It was here, too, that Andrews got some comprehension of the extent of the officer's unbridled indulgence. He drank and smoked practically continuously. One peg followed another with but the briefest intermissions; and the civil-service man made no attempt to keep pace with him.

If any effect was observable it was merely in a readier flow of narrative, in a more extended and richer vocabulary. But, strangely enough, from first to last, there was no mention of Mrs. Darling. And his visitor, taking this in the nature of a warning, knowing what he did, deemed it not only wiser but safer, now, to guard the fact of his acquaintanceship.

In his closer study of Darling he had made a discovery which accounted, he believed, in a measure, at least, for his strange appeal. Even in his gayest moments there was a certain pathos in his expression.

Andrews had noted this the previous evening at the club, but had failed to trace it. He found it now in a very perceptible droop, at intervals, of the corners of his mouth. And it was as though he knew this and struggled to avoid it which gave the impression of bearing up against odds that were too great for him.

The afternoon was well spent before Darling would listen to his guest's going. They were still in the gun-room when, at length, he rose for departure. And then the colonel delayed it further by a proposal that he consider joining Major Cumnock and himself on a hunting trip they were planning.

"I'd love to, of all things," Andrews returned heartily. "But the fact is my leave ends in another week, and I've got to report at Junnar by the twenty-fifth. Otherwise, I shouldn't hesitate a second. I –"

And there he suddenly paused.

It was something in Darling's expression that arrested him first; something that he couldn't just interpret. Afterward he told himself that it was a most singular combination of rapture and pain.

Then he, too, caught the echo of voices – women's voices – and, the next instant, one woman's voice rose clear above the chorus. It was Nina's.

CHAPTER III

The Cobra in the Corner

"My wife!" said Colonel Darling. And the way he said it was almost reverential.

The tone struck young Andrews dumb. His chance had come again. He should have said: "Yes? I had the pleasure of meeting her at Simla." But he said nothing at all.

In dead silence he followed his host to the front veranda, where he came plump upon Nina Darling and the Ramsays. That is to say, upon Mrs. Ramsay, who was an American devotee of Kipling on a pilgrimage to the shrines, and her daughter, Jane.

Mr. Ramsay, busy in Chicago or Milwaukee, or some other place in the States, was not in evidence, and had not been.

It was clear to Andrews that Colonel Darling was about to greet his wife with a kiss; but she forestalled it. She nodded to him perfunctorily; said: "Oh, there you are, Jack!" in the most matter-of-fact fashion; and turned away to stoop and caress the Irish terrier that was frantically pawing at her skirt.

A lump rose in Andrews's throat at sight of the rebuff. His hope was that the Ramsays hadn't noticed, for their eyes were on him at the moment, and their surprise at seeing him there was manifest.

Darling made to cover up the awkward moment by presenting him all around. Nina, whose astonishment at the meeting must have exceeded even that of her friends, took refuge in the chilliest civility.

From nothing that she said could her husband possibly gather that she and Andrews had so much as ever touched fingers before. And the Ramsays were quick to follow her lead.

Nevertheless, the situation was far from comfortable, and the young man got away at the very earliest opportunity.

Before he had reached the gate of the compound, however, the voice of the colonel caught him up.

"I say, Andrews," he called, "don't forget to bring over that new automatic pistol you were speaking of. I should like to have a look at it if you don't mind."

And this eleventh-hour reminder gave him the excuse which later, in his superconscientiousness, he deemed a necessity. More than ever now honor and duty bade him flee; but a more insistent impulse urged another and final talk with Nina.

For forty-eight hours he fought it, only to yield at the forty-ninth. Having made sure that Darling was safely housed at the club, he rode over to the bungalow with the excuse spoiling the set of his coat.

Nina saw it almost at once and spoke of it. For, the devil being good to him, he had found her at home and alone.

"I knew your nose was out of joint," she said, "but what under the sun has happened to your hip?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, taking the excuse from his hip-pocket and placing it on a table close at hand. "I brought it over for the colonel. He's rather keen about the new safety device and wanted to see it." And he looked a trifle sheepish as he asked: "Does he happen by any chance to be at home?"

"You may thank Heaven he isn't," she answered with a light laugh. "I'm never at my best when he is within hailing distance. And you didn't come to see him. I know that."

Then he looked more sheepish still.

"I dare say you've learned his habits in the last week, and you could have found him at the club, you know," she added.

His laugh was rather mirthless as he said:

"Of course. What's the use of pretending? I saw him go in before I started."

"Then you've forgiven me, I suppose. That is sweet of you."

"It's harder to forgive myself. I feel like a cur."

"I've known some very nice curs."

"But I don't feel like that sort," he insisted. "No, it's the sneaking, thieving mongrel that I –"
" He broke off suddenly.

She had sat down and he dropped into a chair facing her.

"I'll tell you," he went on. "I've been persuading myself that I owed you an explanation of my continued presence in Umballa and the narrowly averted embarrassment of two days ago. I've been trying to make myself believe that in that and that only lay my reason for wishing to see you again."

"And there was another reason?"

"There was another reason," he admitted. "I wasn't honest with myself. Gad! When a chap isn't honest with himself –"

"All men are like that," she told him. "The higher their ideals the less frankly honest they are with themselves. They just won't admit the old Adam in them."

"I haven't any will," he declared. "I haven't any pride."

She lay back in her chair, pleasantly amused.

"Of course you haven't," she said confidently. "I've taken them from you. It was very wicked of me, wasn't it?"

"Do you do that to – to all of us?" he asked seriously.

"I'm afraid I do," she admitted. "But quite unconsciously. I don't mean to. Oh, I never mean to."

"I've been trying to put you out of my mind, out of my heart. I've been trying to kill my infatuation for you; but I haven't even stunned it. When I thought I had my foot on its neck it went on binding me with stronger chains."

And at that she laughed aloud.

"You're too funny," she said. "When did you think you had the horrid thing down?"

"When I met your husband – and – and liked him."

"You did like him, then?"

"Very much indeed."

"What an odd taste! Those pale eyes of his have an uncanny effect on me. It's something that goes through walls and floors; and it makes me quite vicious. It brings out all the cat in me. I have an irresistible desire to claw and rend."

"It must have followed you all the way to Simla, that last night," said Andrews, dropping into a chair that faced her.

But Nina shook her golden head and her violet eyes slowly narrowed. He observed that in the dusk, for the room was in the semi-gloom of a single, red-shaded lamp in a far corner.

"No" – her voice was very low and purring – "I wasn't in the least catty then. I was sorry for you. I was, really; but it couldn't go on. You can see now that it couldn't go on."

"It might have gone on," he qualified, "if I hadn't met Colonel Darling."

"You seem to forget that I had met him already – am married to him."

"Yes," he said; "but with you it's different. You joy in hurting him; whereas I – why, I'd never have a moment's peace if I did anything that would give him pain. I know I shouldn't."

She pretended to be surprised; though, for some reason, she was not in the least.

"You're an odd boy," she drawled. "You mean that if I were to tell you now that I had changed my mind, and was quite ready to go away with you, you'd beg to be excused?"

He didn't answer at once. Candor bulked large in his character. Now that she put it that way he wished to be very sure. It was not a matter to be decided offhand, with Darling absent and Nina there before him, temptingly precious in the magic witchery of the tinted half-light.

"No, I – I couldn't. I couldn't do him that injury," he declared at length.

"And you swore you loved me?"

"I did. I do. I swear it still," he cried with sudden vehemence.

Nina laughed at his protestation.

"Not that I loved Cæsar less, but that I loved Rome more," she quoted. "Is that it?"

"No, that isn't it," he denied earnestly. "I – "

"You love me a great deal, but you are so fond of Darling that you would not pain him to make us both happy," she interrupted. And the sneer with which she did it cut him to the quick.

"I don't think you've any right to put it that way," he returned.

"I am putting it your way, really," she came back. "It is as plain as the nose on your face. You made the choice between us, and you took a minute or so to make it. You didn't answer on impulse; you answered after calm deliberation. I really don't see, Gerald, how you can argue it otherwise."

"But it wouldn't make *you* happy," he caught her up. "You've said it wouldn't."

"Did I?" she asked indifferently. "I don't remember."

"You said it would make you miserable; that you'd never care a straw in your life except for one man. You said that you'd married a man you did not love, and that – "

She lifted a slim white hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't! Don't!" she cried. "No matter what I said. That was then, and this is now. Besides, I don't always tell the truth. I am not as deliberate as you are, you see. Sometimes I say things on impulse; sometimes I lie with a direct purpose. And then, that night, I was not quite myself, you know. I had had a silly dream and I allowed it to affect me."

He drew his chair nearer and bent forward. He was by no means so sure of himself as he had been a moment before. It was wonderful – those tones in Nina's voice. They swayed his feelings against his better impulses. Her voice had always been her most effective weapon. Even her beauty was secondary to it.

He was conscious that his heart was pounding. It seemed to rise up chokingly with every bound. And so he stammered:

"You – you mean – you – would reconsider?"

"Ah!" she murmured. "I don't know what I mean. Only – "

"Yes, yes," he hurried her. "Only – only – "

She turned her head aside and covered her face with the hand that had checked his arraignment.

"I am so wretched!" It was little more than a whisper.

"No, no," he pleaded. "Nina, I beg of you."

His emotion swept him away, overriding all law, vaulting honor, trampling scruples. The possibility of possession revived, and the pathetic figure of Darling was forgotten.

He reached out for her, clasped her in his long, hungry arms; and, yielding, she let him draw her close to him, her head nestling against his shoulder.

"There, there," he murmured, smoothing her cheek with a hand nearly as soft as a woman's. "I did not mean it – I swear I didn't mean it. I – I love you more than anything in life."

Her arms wound about his neck, and he drew her up again until her gaze was level with his own. But, even at that moment, he saw her eyes stray across her shoulder and then suddenly grow wide as with alarm.

He felt, too, her whole figure tense, and instinctively there was conveyed to him a contagious sense of lurking danger. He was about to speak, to question, when, between lips barely parted, breathed rather than whispered even, came:

"A cobra – in the corner – where I'm looking! The pistol – quick – and don't miss!"

The pistol lay at his left hand, and he must needs swing quite around to aim after getting it. But she slipped swiftly away from him to give him free play, and he managed it very well indeed.

In the dim light he marked the cobra instantly, for a ray had been caught by its glistening brown, upreared body, and its spread hood stood out fairly distinct against the glazed panes of the long casement which stood partly ajar.

Andrews fired, and the report echoed sharply against the dead silence of the room. But there echoed, too, two other sounds, both puzzling and disconcerting. One was a metallic ring, as of a struck gong, only sharper and shorter, and the other was a hoarse, but muffled and evidently restrained, cry of pain.

Man and woman were on their feet instantly. Three strides took Andrews to the spot, and there he halted in amaze with a little exclamation of astonishment. For the cobra had toppled over, not limp and outlying, but stiffly; its coils intact, facing him, disklike.

It was an admirably modeled bronze.

In the perplexity following the discovery he turned questioningly to Nina, who was close behind him. But she only lifted a warning finger and made a sibilant sound with her lips, adjuring silence. And he noticed, strangely enough, that the look of alarm which he had detected was – in a lesser degree perhaps – still present.

She passed him, stepping over the bronze reptile; and, spreading wider the casement, went out onto the veranda.

In the act of following, the fact of the muffled cry recurred to him. Was it possible that the bullet, ricochetting from the metal casting, had found a mark beyond the window?

With one foot across the sill a scream seemed to stop his heart from beating. Certainly it held him motionless for a second or more. Yet he recovered himself in time – just in time – to catch Nina in his arms as she staggered backward, stunned and half-fainting. Nor was it any wonder that she screamed and was stunned and half-fainted.

For fate chose that moment for making her "silly dream" come true. She had seen a ghost on the veranda.

CHAPTER IV

A White Slipper and a Red Stain

The native servants, startled by the pistol-shot, flocked in haste to the veranda. In the lead was Jowar, the Darlings' *khitmatgar*, whom Nina hated. And he saw her in Andrews's arms.

It was only for an instant, however. The presence of Jowar revived her like a cold shower, and she stood on her own feet with her chin in the air.

"I saw a man running," she explained. "It must have been he that shot through the window. Oh, how frightened I was!"

The *khitmatgar* inquired as to which way the miscreant had run, and Nina pointed in exactly the opposite direction from that in which she had been facing when she staggered back into young Andrews's embrace.

Jowar set off in pursuit instantly, and the others followed. All, that is, save Nina's *ayah*, who opportunely produced a bottle of smelling-salts and passed it to the *mem-sahib*.

Sniffing at it, Mrs. Darling dismissed her.

When Nina and Andrews were back in the drawing-room and again quite alone he saw that she was still trembling. Moreover, in spite of the ruddy glow from the single lamp in the corner, she was as pallid as ashes.

"Dearest," he murmured, hastily encircling her slim waist with a supporting arm, "you are wonderful! Any other woman would be in hysterics."

Very gently she extricated herself from his embrace.

"I haven't lived five years in India for nothing," she said.

"But what was it?" he asked. "Why did you want me to shoot? Why –"

"I fancied that devilish *khitmatgar* was spying again," she hastened to answer, slipping into a chair. "I saw something move – out there."

"And so you made me shoot at the bronze?"

"It's a very realistic bronze, isn't it?" she asked.

But he didn't answer. "Was it the *khitmatgar*?" he pressed.

And now she didn't answer.

"The bronze was a present," she went on instead. "Do you mind setting it upright again?"

He did so. "Odd I never saw it before," was his comment. "I thought I'd seen everything in this room. When I was here two days ago it seemed to me that every object spoke of you. I missed nothing. And yet –"

"That came this morning," she told him. "A gift without a card."

Young Andrews frowned.

"It's a horrid thing," he said. "I don't like it."

"It's beautiful!"

"It's ill-omened. I feel it is."

He saw her shiver again, but she tried to smile. Her pallor had grown no less.

"Tell me," he insisted, "was it the *khitmatgar*, do you think?"

"Who else could it have been? He will tell Jack Darling he saw me in your arms. And then – Hadn't you better be going? Aren't you overdue in Junnar?"

"And leave you? Never!"

"But you must," she said calmly.

"When I go you go with me. Now that I know you love me –"

"I never said I loved you. I don't. I can't. I love but one man. I know it now as never before. For just a moment I thought –" And there she stopped.

"You thought?" he questioned, suddenly agitated.

"I thought I might forget. I thought perhaps you could make me forget. I was, you see, so utterly weary of everything."

"You were right," he cried earnestly. "I can make you forget. I'll give my whole life to it. I'll –"

He bent over her, but she drew away quickly with a gesture of repulsion, which Andrews was quick to note. It cut him cruelly, and he stepped back, pained and crestfallen.

In the instant of silence that ensued he swept her with a devouring gaze from head to foot. Was he to lose her again – now, when for a second time he had been so sure?

One dainty, white-shod foot was stretched out from beneath her skirt, and as his eyes reached it a dark, smearlike stain across the toe arrested his attention and awoke a question. Impulsively he dropped to one knee and swept a finger across it.

"Nina!" he cried, springing up again, a note of alarm in his voice. "Look! There is blood on your slipper. It couldn't have been the *khitmatgar*. The bullet ricocheted and wounded some one. Who was it?"

She leaned forward, her heart pounding with sudden horror, and saw it for herself.

"But how –" she queried, her breath short and quick.

"From the shrubbery at the side of the veranda. Your foot must have touched the leaves. If it had been the *khitmatgar* who was bleeding like that he couldn't have hidden it."

She was up in an instant, crying: "What have I done? Oh, what have I done?"

"Between us," said Andrews, "we've managed to wing some prowling beggar of a native, I fancy. That's all." He said it in an effort to pacify her, but he knew in his heart that it was no native.

He had known from the first that Nina's scream, emotion, and pallor were results of the unexpected. Now he was more certain than ever that he was right.

For quite a minute she paced the floor, wringing her hands. Then there was a rap on the glass of the long window, and the tall, dusky, white-clad Jowar stepped into the room. His expression was unusually grave.

"The *mem-sahib* is mistaken," he said. "The fleeing *sahib* goes the other way. He is wounded. We follow the *sahib* until we see him enter the compound of the hotel. All the way the *sahib* leave trail of blood behind."

Nina had halted, her hand clutching a curtain as if to stay herself. At the words of the *khitmatgar* she swayed, and but for Andrews would have fallen, for the curtain stuff broke from its rings under her weight.

It was her companion who signed to Jowar that he might go. Then he supported her to a settee and eased her down upon it.

The cantonment at Umballa, which is four miles from the native town, boasts several hotels.

In a large upper room in one of these, not far from the bungalow of the Darlings, a burly, bearded gentleman – who had registered a few hours before as Henry Scripps, of Bombay – was at that moment impatiently and in no little pain awaiting the appearance of the English surgeon who lived nearest.

Around Mr. Scripps's left wrist was an improvised tourniquet, and the water which filled the basin on the wash-stand was claret-colored.

Mr. Scripps had just succeeded in filling a brier pipe with his right hand unaided, and was in the act of striking a match when his room door was swung hurriedly ajar to admit Mayhan, of the Buff Hussars, with his kit of surgical instruments.

"You've taken the devil's own time it appears to me," growled Mr. Scripps. "Now you're here, for God's sake, make haste!"

The greeting took the young surgeon somewhat aback.

"Sorry you think so," he returned, leisurely opening his bag and pretending that the catch had caught by way of retaliation. "As a matter of fact, I came on the instant."

Scripps rumbled under his breath and emitted a volume of gray smoke.

"Shot in the hand, I understand," Mayhan went on, wrenching the bag open at length with considerable fuss and feather.

Scripps grunted an affirmative.

"How did it happen?" the surgeon inquired, taking out a probe.

But the wounded man didn't answer. He dropped into a chair under the light and said: "Come now, make haste."

Mayhan emptied the blood-stained water from the basin, poured some fresh, and mixed an antiseptic in solution. Then he began cleaning the wound.

"Rather nasty, that," he commented. "The bullet has dug in here between the two outer metacarpal bones, and I'm not sure it hasn't shattered the trapezium."

"Get it out," cried Scripps impatiently, "and talk about it afterward. I'll grant you know the anatomy of the hand and the name of every bone in it. That's about the first thing you're taught."

Mayhan gritted his teeth. The man was certainly a boor. Still there was perhaps provocation in the pain he was suffering. Nevertheless, the surgeon rather enjoyed the probing. He knew how he was hurting, yet his victim wouldn't give him the satisfaction of wincing.

He drew it out at last and held it up to the light.

"I know that," he said, inspecting it. "A forty-five of the sort they use in those new American automatics. Has yours the new safety device?"

Scripps's teeth let go his lip long enough to growl: "No! That was the devil of it!"

As the young surgeon proceeded with his work of cleansing he continued to chatter:

"I was hoping it had. I wanted to see it. Colonel Darling was speaking of it last night at the club. There's a friend of his here – a young fellow named Andrews, from over on the Bombay side – who has one. He's promised Darling to show it him."

Scripps was pale from pain, but his grit was indomitable. He choked back a groan and said:

"Darling? Colonel Darling? I think I know him."

"I dare say."

Scripps relapsed into silence again. The wound still hurt abominably.

"Darling distinguished himself at Spion Kop, you know," Mayhan gave tribute as he unwound some iodoform gauze. "Fine chap, the colonel."

But his patient only grunted.

"Same man you know?" the other pressed.

Scripps nodded.

"I'll mention you're here."

There was no reply.

"Know him well?" inquired the surgeon guardedly.

Scripps had his lip in his teeth again, and it was bleeding; but he let it go.

"Better than he knows me, apparently," he said with a grim smile.

"He'll remember your name, I suppose?"

"I'm sure he won't. He won't know who Scripps is from Adam."

Mayhan, mollified now in a measure by the man's fortitude, used the cocain that he had denied him at first and proceeded with the dressing.

"If you're so keen on telling the colonel, just say you've seen Nibbetts," the brusque one suggested.

"Nibbetts?"

"Yes. He'll know then."

"I'll remember. I'll probably see him to-night at the club. He may look you up at once, if you don't mind. Fine fellow, the colonel."

The relief from the cocain was instantaneous, but Scripps's manner showed no change.

"That's twice you said that," he rumbled. "There are some that don't agree with you."

"I know," returned Mayhan. "Some never agree with any one. That's where the word disagreeable comes from."

Scripps made no retort, and the dressing continued in silence. When it was finished and Mayhan was repacking his kit, he ventured: "Nibbetts, you said, didn't you?"

The merest movement of the tawny, leonine head gave assent.

"I'll tell him." And then the surgeon took a closer look. Scripps's bearded chin was on his breast. His face, in spite of its tan, was deathly white. "By the way," he added, "you'd better have a brandy peg. You've lost some blood, you know, and –"

"That's my business," the other interrupted roughly. "You're a sawbones, not a medical man. And a sawbones *sans merci*, at that. Otherwise you'd have begun with the cocain, instead of ending with it."

Mayhan turned away without another word and made a wry face behind the savage's back. Two minutes later he was down the stairs and in the hotel porch, where he was confronted by young Andrews.

"I saw you go in," lied the latter nervously. "And I've been waiting for you. What happened? I've a reason for asking."

The young surgeon, whose faculty for putting two and two together was as acute as the next man's, sensed the reason at once.

"He won't die," he answered – "if that's what you want to know."

"Who won't die?" Andrews came back evasively. He had volunteered to get what information he could for Mrs. Darling, and he was distinctly uncomfortable under the attitude taken by this man whom he had started to question.

"The boor upstairs who got in the way of someone's forty-five-caliber automatic. It wasn't by any chance yours, I suppose?"

The blood rushed to Andrews's face, but in the dim light of the porch it is probable that Mayhan failed to observe it.

"I don't indulge in indiscriminate pistol practice," he defended weakly. "I heard a man had been wounded and came in here, and I strolled over to inquire out of idle curiosity."

"He won't die," said Mayhan again, and prepared to move away.

"But who is he?" asked Andrews, following a step.

"The most insufferable beast I've met in years – name of Scripps."

"Army man?"

"No; civilian. Or uncivilian, rather."

"Badly hurt?"

"Hand torn up a bit. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Andrews hesitated. Then: "Say how it happened?"

Mayhan grinned toward the shadows.

"Oh, yes," he answered wickedly, "of course! Naturally, I asked him."

"Well –"

"You are curious, Andrews, aren't you?"

"Oh, if there's any secret about it – why, I –"

Mayhan laughed irritatingly; so irritatingly that his questioner was tempted to silence him with his fist.

"No secret at all," the surgeon said, starting off. "It happened – purely by accident."

Then young Andrews, nettled and thoroughly uncomfortable, hastened back to Nina with his scant news. The name "Scripps" meant nothing to her.

But Mayhan, meanwhile, dropping into the club, exploded a bombshell. He found Colonel Darling alone and brooding in his chosen corner, a tall glass of Scotch and soda at his right hand.

"I say, colonel," he blurted, "just came from a chap who says he knows you – or did. Name of Nibbetts."

Darling started so violently that his arm struck the table, jarred it, and sent over the whisky glass, splashing.

For a moment his face flamed and the veins in his neck swelled to the danger point. He gripped the chair-arms, and his throat emitted an inarticulate gurgle.

The next minute he relaxed suddenly, pale as paper.

CHAPTER V

The Question of the Dead Alive

Colonel Darling's courage had never been questioned. But physical courage is one thing and moral courage is another – very much another; and it was physical courage in which Darling was strong.

It was beyond question that he could face overwhelming odds in the field without "batting an eye-lash," as the saying goes. He had proved that time and time again. Yet from unhappy wedlock he had fled like a craven wolf and sought surcease in the bottle.

This should have spoken his type of weakness for all to hear. But his fellow officers were deaf to the truth, forbearing to view the situation from the only right and real standpoint, though the condition was undeniably plain.

For the tidings brought by Mayhan the colonel was not in the least prepared. Again moral courage was demanded, and again he exhibited the white feather. To Mayhan's faith in his commanding officer the exhibition was an astonishing setback. Darling had been bowled over by a mere name.

Others, too, had heard and witnessed with much the same amazement. It was very clear to them all that Colonel Darling had been thrown into a white funk by the mere mention of the odd word "Nibbetts."

They could get it from no other angle, and they could reconcile it with nothing they knew of their man. In view of subsequent events, their attitude at this moment is important.

Darling was quite five minutes in pulling himself together. Then he caught the doubt in Mayhan's eyes, and his first impulse was to explain – or try to. But on second thought, realizing that there was nothing for him to say, he ordered whisky and soda and held his peace. And no man asked a question.

The clock pointed to five to eleven. At ten past Colonel Darling left the club and walked to the hotel, which was less than a quarter of a mile away. But there his cowardice caught him again, and he paused at the gate of the compound.

The broad, shaded roadway was deserted, so that what followed went unobserved. Back and forth, torn by indecision, he irritably and fearsomely paced. For the uplift of his flagging, flaccid will he seemed likely to require either the Archimedean lever or the Archimedean screw.

Fifteen awful minutes dragged torturously by before, in sheer desperation, he entered the hotel and faced the clerk in charge, his card in his hand.

"Send that to the Visc – " he began, only to pull himself up with a sharp jolt.

The clerk in charge, not overburdened with wits, failed to catch the significance of the abbreviation. He only stared and waited.

"Send that to Mr. Mayhan's patient," corrected the colonel, the sweat beading on brow and chin, and turned to pace the floor as he had paced the roadway.

The wait, though seemingly interminable, ended too quickly for his wish, and his rap on the door of Mr. Scripps's room was hesitant and feeble.

There came in answer an inarticulate rumble, and an instant later across ten yards of floor space he gazed on the confronting Nibbetts, and paused, speechless. But the confronting Nibbetts – the nickname by which the Viscount Kneedrock had been best known to relatives and close friends – was eminently more composed.

"I am indeed deeply honored," he said and bowed stiffly. The irony of his tone was withering.

Darling, fighting himself for words, advanced a step or two. Then: "I should never have known you," he ventured unfortunately.

The other laughed with a hoarse, grim bitterness.

"No?" he queried. "How odd!" And his caller colored to his eyebrows.

"Would you care to sit down?" the viscount continued, pushing a chair forward with his uninjured right hand. The left, bandaged, was supported by a sling. "It may help you to some self-possession."

But Colonel Darling, irritated, shook his head.

"I sha'n't detain you," he said. "But – I – you see – you see, I had to make sure. I should never have believed, otherwise."

"You're quite sure you believe now?"

"Quite. Still, I can't understand. I would have sworn – "

"You did swear," Kneedrock interrupted. "That was the devil of it."

The colonel's lip twitched under his mustache.

"I never had a doubt," he averred. "I – I am unspeakably sorry."

"Much good that does. Still, it's no end decent that you should say so. Yet, on the whole, I fancy you got rather the worst of it. Will you sit down to oblige me? I've something I'd like to say to you."

Jack Darling, wretched as never before in his wretched life, slid limply into the chair that waited.

"Can't I offer you something?" asked Kneedrock, his hand on the bell.

In spite of his pride and because of his misery the colonel accepted.

Certainly the viscount's was the more commanding presence. He seemed to have taken the situation in hand at once. Darling was still the reverse of composed. His eyelids twitched and his lips quivered.

The two men were nearly of an age. If there was any advantage here it, too, was on the side of Kneedrock, who had just turned forty-four. But in general appearance the colonel contrasted strongly for the better.

He was especially well groomed, whereas Nibbetts was at once leonine, rugged, and nearly shabby. His tawny hair and beard were ragged and uncared for. He gave the impression of having been out of the world in which such things mattered. And this was true.

Having dispensed his hospitality, he reverted to his sneer. He was still standing when he said:

"I assume Mrs. Darling never showed you my letter of six years ago."

His voice aroused the officer, who was in a reverie.

"Your – your letter?" he queried uncertainly.

"My letter from Zanzibar, in which I said I was starting for the world's end."

"Yes, I saw that."

"And still you refused to believe? How often our wishes guide our reason."

Something of resentment, of indignation, struck a light in Darling's pale eyes, but his voice held to a monotone.

"I couldn't. I – " He hesitated, took a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his perspiring brow. "You see, I – I didn't know your hand, and – well, the signature might have been any one's. It was, if I remember, your Christian name only."

"You mean you suspected that Nina was playing you a trick?"

"I – I didn't say so."

"Others saw it, I suppose? Others that knew me? Those that did know my hand?"

"Yes, I fancy they did. I heard the question discussed."

"What question?"

"The question of the miracle. The question of the dead alive."

Kneedrock's lip curled and his huge shoulders stretched their sinews.

"Huh!" he grunted. "After all, it didn't matter. You'd already married her. You'd already begun to reap tares."

Now the pale eyes of Darling flashed ominously. "You've no right to say that," he said shortly with irritation.

"I'm not alone in saying it," returned the honorable viscount calmly. "I've heard it in the islands of the south seas. You didn't fancy it was a secret, I hope?"

Colonel Darling was silent.

"She's led you a pretty dance, I dare say."

Still Colonel Darling was silent.

"I understood, too, that the worm had turned? Pray pardon the simile."

Colonel Darling being still silent, Kneedrock smiled.

"I was fool enough to come all the way back here with the idea of punishing you," he pursued. "But I've changed my mind about that. You're getting punishment enough, that's plain. So I am going to thank you instead. I know now what was spared me. Darling, you have my sympathy; you have really."

Darling got suddenly to his feet. "Damn your sympathy!" he cried. "I don't know what you've heard. But I do know it isn't true."

And at that the viscount laughed. "I haven't heard anything," he retorted. "I've seen. And I'm like you – I believe what my eyes tell me. Your eyes told you I was butchered to death at Spion Kop, and you couldn't be convinced I wasn't until you saw me here to-night resurrected. You wouldn't take my written word, and I can't take your spoken word. The evidence to the contrary is too strong."

The colonel was again silent. He lifted his glass and drained it.

"I'm glad you called," Kneedrock continued. "Not that I needed any further conviction, but –"

"Further conviction?" Darling broke in. "I thought –"

"That you were yourself the only conviction. Oh, no. I knew before you came. I saw before you came. I had already made up my mind to go back without seeing you."

Darling gazed at him in mingled amazement and perplexity.

"I – I don't understand," he faltered. "You – you've seen Nina, perhaps?"

"I've seen Nina."

"And it was she who told you?"

"She hasn't spoken to me. I am going away without so much as a word from her or to her."

The colonel's perplexity waxed greater. "Will you kindly tell me what under Heaven you're driving at? It's all a riddle to me – a damned –"

"I'll not tell you another word," the other answered. "You must know all I do – and more, I dare say. Why should I add anything to the bare fact that I know where the fault lies, and that it is not in you?"

"Because you've said too much to leave it where it is," Darling insisted. "You must say it. You must say what you saw, and where and when you saw it."

But then Kneedrock laughed again in his grim, bitter fashion.

"You're not my superior officer here, remember," he came back. "I obey no commands but my own; and I refuse to submit to dictation."

The red flag of anger overspread Darling's visage.

"I infer that you have been spying," he charged.

"You may infer what you please – even that if it gives you any satisfaction. I shall not presume to dictate to you, either."

At that instant the bandaged hand protruded by chance a bit beyond its sling, and Darling's gaze rested upon it.

"I begin to see," he said more calmly.

The other noted the look and caught the inference. "Oh, this!" he exclaimed, holding it up. "Rather nasty."

"How did you get it?" asked the colonel boldly.

"Man-eater," was the answer. "Vicious beast!"

"You've been in the jungle, then?"

Kneedrock calmly began refilling his pipe. "Didn't Mayhan tell you?" he queried.

"Not a word."

"Ah! Yes, I've been in the jungle, and I stumbled on a she-tiger's lair." It was not intentional, but the manner of the speech gave it a significance aside from the phrasing.

Darling was standing by a table, and as he dropped his eyes musingly they rested on a small object that lay beside the tray of decanters and glasses. In an instant he was holding it up.

"May I have this?" he asked. It was a .45-caliber bullet, and the blood on it was still damp.

"No," refused Kneedrock flatly.

"I fancied not," rejoined the colonel. "You're keeping it as a souvenir, I suppose."

"I'm keeping it as evidence," the viscount said, lighting his pipe.

Later that night Jack Darling did an utterly unheard of thing. He knocked loudly on the door of his wife's bed-chamber and demanded admittance.

Nina, who had not yet fallen asleep, sat up in alarm, gathered herself together with an effort, and then, strangely enough, admitted her husband without protest. And if there can be a comparison in unheard of things, this was still more utterly unheard of.

She had turned up the reading-lamp, which, being shaded and its glow directed toward a limited area, did little more than make the general darkness of the room visible. Then she sat down on the bed's edge within the glow's circumference and waited.

Jack Darling didn't sit down. He stood in the shadow biting the ends of his mustache, his hands behind him, and his gaze, which was fixed on Nina, narrowed. She felt in her heart that something momentous was about to transpire; and it would be idle to say she was without suspicion of the underlying cause. For the report brought her by young Andrews had fallen far short of either satisfying or giving adequate relief to her anxieties.

Still she was not prepared for her husband's first and deliberately spoken sentence, which was:

"I have just come from Harry Kneedrock."

Nina wanted to scream then, but she couldn't. Her breath came too short. And she needed every bit of breath she could draw, because her heart had grown suddenly big in her breast and was pounding fearfully.

She felt, too, that if she opened her mouth it must pop out. It was only by breathing rapidly and keeping her lips tight-closed that she kept it in.

"He arrived in Umballa this evening early," Jack Darling pursued. "He saw you and got an ugly shot in the hand from – this."

He held something up which caught and reflected all the diffused light that had stolen outside the illuminated circle; and she saw it was the Andrews automatic. Still she couldn't have spoken had death threatened her for her silence.

"I found it in the drawing-room. Its magazine lacks a single cartridge. I've talked to Jowar, and everything fits. But there's something that Kneedrock won't say and that Jowar doesn't know. So I've come to you for it, and you'll tell me. You must."

He waited a moment for her to say something, but she was still mute. Her eyes were all pupils. They appeared like two black holes in a face devoid of any tint of color, for her lips were blanched and her lifted brows were hidden behind her drooping hair.

"I must know what it was that Kneedrock saw," he pressed.

Her hands were gripping the mattress on either side of her – gripping it until her finger-nails doubled and then broke.

"And I must know why he was shot at," he added.

And then Nina, who had been doubling all the while, broke, too. Before Darling could reach her she pitched forward, a hunched heap on the floor.

CHAPTER VI

A Hard Man and Bitter

It was the next morning, and Nina's *ayah* sat on a chair in the passage, guarding the door of her mistress's room. To all comers she gave the same answer – her *mem-sahib* was sleeping after a night of wakefulness and must not be disturbed.

She gave it to Colonel Darling no less than three times – once before breakfast, once after, and again before he rode away for parade, his eyes bloodshot and his hands all a-tremble.

And all the while the room behind the door was as empty of life as a hatched egg-shell. For in the darkest hour of a gray dawn, closely veiled, Nina had stolen away with her *ayah* escorting, and had taken refuge with the Ramsays, who had a small bungalow within the hotel compound – the same hotel, be it added, which sheltered "Mr. Henry Scripps, Bombay."

Of course she told the Ramsays her story – or, which is closer to fact, a story. Some of it was truth, but it was neither all the truth nor nothing but the truth. She believed dissemblance necessary, and so she had no hesitation in dissembling.

Her main purpose was to escape for a while from Darling and his unanswerable questions, and in the meantime to obtain at all hazards an interview with Kneedrock. She hadn't the faintest idea what the viscount purposed doing, but whatever it was she must stop him.

She knew from what young Andrews had told her that he was masquerading under the name of Scripps. So as Scripps she spoke of him in relating her tale of embarrassment to her American friend, Sibylla Ramsay, while Sibylla's daughter, who should have been fast asleep, sat by and listened with apparently adult understanding.

She implied without actually saying so that she had once had a more or less violent flirtation with Mr. Scripps; that her husband knew of it, and that she feared the consequences of his present presence in Umballa. Therefore it was imperative that she see him and urge his departure at the very earliest possible moment.

She couldn't receive him in her own home, but she'd like to receive him in theirs; and she did hope they would not regard it as an imposition on their friendship and good nature.

"Well, I should say not," returned Sibylla. "I think it's just the loveliest thing. I'm mad over romance, Nina, you know. And this is *so* romantic."

"Do you mind if I peep at him, dear Mrs. Darling?" asked Jane, nervously gathering her kimono more closely about her slim limbs. "I know he's handsome from his name. It isn't beautiful. Men with beautiful names are always so disappointing."

"You may peep all you care to, my dear," said Nina, "but you mustn't listen. Otherwise I'd suggest that you hide behind the piano or under the sofa. May I write him a note, Sibylla, and bribe your maid to deliver it?"

"You may serenade him from my front veranda if you care to, dear, and I'll beckon him when he comes to his window. But if you think the note idea more discreet, adopt it by all means."

So Nina wrote the note and then sat in a fever of impatience until the dawn grew brighter and the hands of the watch on her wrist circled to a more reasonable morning hour.

She had recovered some measure of poise, but the experience of the night had left its marks upon her, and the uncertainty as to whether Kneedrock would come or refuse to do so, coupled with the prospect of the meeting, which she both longed for and feared, filled the waiting period with a nervous tension that fretted and rasped.

She had begged him to send her an answer, if only verbal. But the maid returned without so much as a syllable. And so her waiting in uncertainty was prolonged. Meanwhile she drank the black

coffee with which Sibylla plied her with the assurance that its sustaining power was superior to her habitual tea.

At ten minutes to nine, by the watch on her wrist, just as the fourth cup had been placed in her somewhat steadied hand, the maid who had carried the note brought proof of its delivery by announcing that Mr. Scripps awaited Mrs. Darling's pleasure in the bungalow drawing-room.

Sibylla and Jane were both wonderfully pleased and excited, and Nina, who had expected this moment, if it ever came, quite to overcome her with emotional agitation, surprised herself with a calmly self-contained placidity which she naturally attributed to the stimulation of the caffeine.

Even the shock of Kneedrock's changed appearance – for he was almost unrecognizably changed in the nine years since their parting – failed to disturb her inner tranquillity. Only her voice betrayed her. It quavered just the least bit as she spoke the old name.

"Hal!" No one but she had ever called him that.

For his part he husbanded his words. He had taken a place with his back to the mantel and stood there in unmoving silence with his hands clasped behind him – the one still bandaged, but the sling discarded – and his brow drawn with a half frown.

Nina put out a hand tentatively and drew it back when he continued motionless.

"Perhaps you did not wish to see me," she said, nettled.

"You might have thought of that before sending me your extraordinary message." Those were the first words he spoke.

"It would have made no difference," she returned, pausing by the piano and steadying herself by resting a hand on its top. "I had to see you, whether you wished it or not. If you had not come here I should have gone into the hotel."

"I can't for the life of me see what is to be gained by it," he protested.

"There may be nothing gained unless you will believe me."

It was scarcely possible that he could miss the pathos of the words, even if he missed the pathos in the tone. Yet his only answer was a cynical smile.

"I want you to know that the shot which hurt you was not intended for you."

Then he laughed cruelly. "No?" he questioned with feigned surprise. "Still, you must admit that your lover's habit of firing at random through drawing-room windows isn't a perfectly safe amusement at best. He's liable to pot some one, you know."

Her face was crimson. "He's not my lover," she denied indignantly.

"Pardon me. I judged only from what I saw. It was quite evident he was not your husband. I am curious, seeing that he is not your lover, or one of them, what privileges you reserve for them."

"I have no lover or lovers," she protested.

"Dear me!" he said with mock astonishment. "How dreary your poor life must be! I had fancied quite the contrary."

"It was I who told him to shoot," she confessed. "He shot at a bronze cobra in the corner."

"Then he's a worse shot than I thought."

"Oh, he hit the cobra, nevertheless. The bullet glanced."

"Yes," he agreed. "I know. It glanced at me and caught my hand. I suppose the possibility of such a thing didn't occur to either of you."

"I didn't want him to kiss me," she defended at some sacrifice of truth. "In another second he would have, and I told him there was a cobra in the corner to distract him. Besides I meant to frighten our *khitmatgar*. I thought it was he who was spying. And it happened to be you."

"Yes," he admitted calmly. "I came all the way from Melanesia to spy. But I'm rather a novice at it, and got winged the first time. Too bad, I say."

"Then I'm not sorry. You deserved it."

"At all events," he told her, "I saw enough to send me back. I'm not fitted for civilization. I prefer the real savage to the counterfeit. I infinitely prefer the original tigress with her stripes to the reincarnated creature with her soft hands and her rose-leaf cheeks."

She didn't hear the last. It was quite lost upon her.

"You – you are going back?" she questioned, her breath short.

"To-night," he told her. "I've had enough. I'll get the boat at Calcutta that brought me."

She tried to realize the situation, but she couldn't in the least. It was all most extraordinary – she knew that. Nine years ago she had been tumultuously in love with this hulking cousin of hers.

Then, on sheer impulse, instigated by the devil within her, yet without the faintest thought of disloyalty, she had flirted riotously with the new curate, and Nibbetts had gone away to war in South Africa in a pet, without so much as a word of farewell.

In an incredibly short time had come the tidings of his death, and what with her crushing sense of irreparable loss and her ravaging conscience all the world changed its colors from gay to dun.

Now the nine years of intervening space had rolled themselves into a pellet and dropped out of the actual. There was nothing real in time or place but this – he was there across the little room, alive, whole; and she was here, and they were talking as if yesterday had dated their parting. It was most extraordinary.

He was going so soon, too, and she had so much, so very much, to say.

"But you mustn't," she said simply.

In his answering look was amused amazement. "Oh, I mustn't, eh? And why mustn't I?"

"Do I have to tell you?" But her eyes were turned away.

"Yes, if you wish me to understand."

"Have – have you forgotten – everything?" And still she did not face him.

He turned sidewise and laid his left arm along the mantel-shelf to rest his injured hand.

"Most things," he answered, "thank God!" And when she did not speak he added: "You set me so fine an example in expeditious forgetting, remember, I had to profit by it."

"I never forgot," was her denial.

"For one who never forgot, you managed to mess things up a great deal, it seems to me."

"I think I was mad," she admitted, her eyes on the floor.

"I doubt if you were ever anything else," he told her bluntly. "And a man's a fool to trust a mad woman."

"Oh, I'm sane now," Nina told him. "Quite, quite sane. And I was hoping – " She paused, uncertain of her phrasing.

"Yes," he encouraged dubiously.

"That you might help me to put things straight," she finished.

He was not altogether sure of her meaning, but he chose to put upon it the worst possible construction.

"Why not let your friend of last night assist?" he asked coolly. "He seems rather expert with firearms. Mistakes are so easy, you know. He could shoot at the bronze cobra again, for instance, and aim a little high."

And at that she faced him.

"You never used to be so bitter," she said. "You can't think what you're saying."

"I've fed on bitterness. I always think the worst, and I'm usually justified. I can't see any way to undo your tangle except by murder!"

Nina shivered, and Kneedrock saw it; but she said nothing.

"I'm glad you didn't pretend to be shocked," he told her. "Only as a rule you're not very keen on quick deaths. You prefer the cat-and-mouse process. You like to play with your victim before adding the final finishing stroke."

"Who's catty now?" she asked simply.

But he made no answer. He moved over to the sofa where lay his hat and walking-stick and took them up.

"Better wait until I'm out of India," he went on cynically. "I might be brought back to testify, and that would be awkward."

"You're going now?" she asked distressfully.

"Only to the hotel. I can't sail until the twenty-seventh. Would you mind waiting until after the first?"

"But you haven't told me a thing," she deplored, ignoring his cruel implication. "Where have you been all the years? What have you been doing? Why have you hidden yourself? There is so much I want to know."

"There is so much you'll never know," he returned. "Why bother with any of it? The title dies with me. I'm not robbing any one, remember."

"You're robbing me," she said desperately, and took a step toward him. "Oh, Hal, if you only knew!"

He retreated a pace, smiling grimly.

"I'll have to ask you to stop that sort of thing, Nina," he said gravely. "You may as well know at once that I won't listen to it."

She sank down upon the sofa where his hat and stick had been, a red lip held by white teeth to check its quivering.

Kneedrock moved toward the door.

Abruptly, swept by a wave of impetuosity, she sprang up and ran to him.

"Hal! Hal! Take me with you. I won't – I can't let you go from me again!"

Already he had swung the door ajar and stood now in the opening.

"I'm afraid you'll have to," he said, his tone cold and hard as steel. "Still I'm glad you asked me. It has paid me for coming half-way round the world."

The door swung sharply shut with Kneedrock on the outside.

At the same moment the door at the opposite end of the room opened, and Jane Ramsay stood on the threshold.

"I was peeping," she cried. "He's homelier even than his name. And – and I hate him!"

"So do I," cried Nina, bracing herself. But she didn't in the least; and Jane Ramsay knew she didn't.

When Colonel Darling returned from parade the *ayah* was gone from the passage-way outside his wife's room. He entered to find Nina up and dressed. And he found her quite ready to answer his questions.

She told him truthfully what Kneedrock saw through the window, and she told him with equal truth why Andrews fired the shot.

More than that, she told him that his false identification of Kneedrock at Spion Kop had wrecked three lives, and that it was a dear price to pay for one man's carelessness or stupidity.

And that night there was a tragedy in the Darling bungalow.

CHAPTER VII

The Cross and the Crown

It was the very last thing Nina expected – to see Kneedrock again; but she did. He called that night after dinner on his way to the railway station, and the motor-car waited for him at the porch. For a minute she fancied he might have relented and was really, after all, going to take her with him. But, if so, he had planned in the worst possible way, the day for Lochinvar enterprises having long since passed and gone, and Colonel Darling – miracle of miracles – being still at home, not having gone to the club.

She rushed into the drawing-room expectant, or half so, and then at a sight of her caller knew that her expectancy was without grounds. For Kneedrock with his well hand was holding out something to her, which she saw almost immediately was a small jewelry box.

"I came very near forgetting it," he said, "though I brought it with me all the way just to see it safe in your hands. It is a gift from my poor dear mother."

The poor dear marchioness had always been very fond of Nina, but she had died just before the breaking out of the Boer War and at the period of Nina's flirtation with the curate.

Nina Darling opened the jewelry box and took out a curiously fashioned ring. The setting was a cross of diamonds and the band was shaped like a crown of points.

"It is lovely," she said.

"It is symbolic," he contributed. "Still I don't see that it applies very appositely to your state. You don't bear your cross at all gracefully, and you certainly don't deserve a crown."

"I should like to know who does," she retorted.

"Oh, there are some martyrs left. There's your husband, for instance. You might turn the ring over to him."

"Jack is a saint," replied Nina. "I'm busy wondering all the time how he keeps his temper."

"And he does, then?"

"Always. He's so good to me I hate him."

"There's something wrong with you. You're not normal."

"I know it. My emotions are all reversed. I'd give anything to be like other women; but I can't be."

Kneedrock was smiling incredulously. "You fool yourself, I believe," he said, "just as you fool others. You are an odd creature."

He looked at his watch and sat down on one end of the settee. She was already occupying the other.

"Jack's going away in the morning," she told him; "to be gone a month. Why don't you stay?"

"Because I mean never to give you a chance to make a fool of me again. Now you have the truth of it."

"He's off on a shooting trip."

"I wonder he doesn't shoot himself, poor beggar."

"That's the only goodness he could do me that I'd appreciate," she said with a light laugh.

Kneedrock's hulking shoulders gave a clumsy shrug.

"You ought to be flayed," he declared.

She was silent for a brief moment. Then she said: "Hadn't I better tell Jack you are here? The *khitmatgar* will if I don't; and I've no desire to add to the sins I should be flayed for."

"I suppose it would only be civil. Though I'm not keen on seeing him again," was the answer. "I'd no notion he was at home."

Nina stood. "He's in the gun-room. I sha'n't be a moment." And she was gone.

The seconds ticked into a minute and she was not back. Two, three, five minutes followed without bringing her. Kneedrock's time was slipping away, and he had none too much to spare.

In some impatience he got to his feet and sauntered across the room. Then, seeing the bronze cobra, which was not altogether unfamiliar, he stooped interestedly to examine it; and he found the bullet-mark.

But still Nina remained absent. To miss his train meant to miss his boat. Yet he felt that he could not go without at least a final word. He would, he must, therefore, make an effort to find her.

The door through which she had gone stood open before him. Of the plan of the bungalow he knew nothing; but he left the room and turned in haste down a dim-lit passage.

It may have been a few seconds later or it may have been minutes – Kneedrock swore afterward that it was at that very instant – that Jowar, the *khitmatgar*, busy in his pantry cleaning silver, was startled by a muffled detonation that shook the frail dwelling as might an earthquake.

He had been bent over his work; but the report brought him to the upright with a jerk. The soup tureen he was handling turned over and rolled to the floor. For the briefest moment he stood dazed, irresolute.

Then, kicking the tureen aside, he shot out of the pantry, ran through the dining-room, the drawing-room, the passage – all empty – until he came of a sudden to the open door of the gun-room, against the jamb of which, pressed close, with pallid face and wide, wild eyes, was Mrs. Darling.

Above her head rolled a little cloud of gray smoke. In his nostrils was the acrid smell of gunpowder.

In the room Lord Kneedrock was on his knees, and Jowar's first impression, as he gave it at the investigation, was that it was he who had been injured. On the floor beside him lay a double-barrel shot-gun, which the *khitmatgar* picked up. And as he stooped to do this he saw that over which the caller was bending.

Between a table and a chair, one leg gruesomely resting across a stool, stretched grimly stark and still the form of his master, Colonel Darling.

The head was in the table's shadow. But as Jowar drew closer he got sight of that which drove all the blood from beneath the dark pigment of his features. Whatever had happened it had made it impossible that he should ever look upon his master's face again.

There was no face there. It had been quite demolished.

At the same instant Kneedrock, sick at the sight, turned away to meet the *khitmatgar's* sinister gaze. Already it seemed the room was swarming with pressing, curious, excited native servants.

Nina had vanished, led away by her *ayah*. Later he learned that the gun found by Jowar had been examined. Both barrels were empty; but there was only one discharged shell.

The motor-car, waiting at the porch to take him to his train, was speeded for surgeons and medical men, as if, under the circumstances, there could be one faint ray of hope even. The garrison was advised, and the whole cantonment knew as if by magic.

Mr. Scripps, of course, couldn't go to Calcutta or anywhere else. He was as fast in Umballa as if there were chains on his hands and feet.

And it stood to reason, coming thus conspicuously before practically the whole British population, he could not hope to escape recognition.

Dinghal, the deputy commissioner, for instance, knew him at once as Viscount Kneedrock; and with Dinghal's fund of memory-stored fact and gossip, it was natural enough that he should put two and two together.

And when it is said that figures never lie, the sum of two and two is the exception that proves the rule. By adding these you can get about any result you choose.

Of Colonel Darling's tragic taking off there followed a rigid investigation.

The one person who knew the exact facts, or should have known them, was his widow. But Nina didn't and couldn't remember. The shock had wiped her memory as clean as a sponged slate.

For days she lay in a state between stupor and coma. When she came out of it she recalled that she had dreamed, but she couldn't remember the dream. It was awful, terrible, she knew that. But that was all she did know.

They had to tell her that Darling was hurt. She treated the tidings with indifference. Then they told her that he had been shot and that it wasn't certain how it happened. She thought he had gone on a shooting trip with Major Cumnock, and that the accident had happened in the jungle.

In the end they made her understand that he was dead; that his brains had been blown out in the bungalow gun-room, and that she was with him at the time. But she convinced them that she knew no more of it than she did of the fourth dimension, which was nothing at all.

Kneedrock, after frankly admitting his identity, swore to the facts as he knew them.

The native butler, Jowar, however, persistently contradicted him in one particular by averring that the viscount was in the gun-room when the shot was fired, as he himself was the first to enter it afterward, when he had found the Englishman bending over Darling's body and had picked up the gun which was lying at the viscount's right hand.

The word of a *khitmatgar*, however, had little weight against the sworn testimony of a British nobleman. The court agreed that death was the result of accident.

Those who knew certain matters which were aside from admissible evidence took the verdict with several grains of salt, and pointed out that in the matter of seeking motives for murder the authorities had been criminally remiss.

These knowing ones were about equally divided in opinion. The dissenting feminine element was inclined to believe that Mrs. Darling was the slayer. Whereas the doubting Thomases of the community would not put the responsibility past Kneedrock, who, they argued, had returned from hiding in a far corner of the globe, intent upon getting Jack Darling out of the way.

And for both of these views Dinghal, with his long tongue, innocent of venom still perhaps, but poisonous nevertheless – was largely responsible.

Young Andrews, risking everything, was still delaying his return to his post at Junnar. He simply must see Nina before going. He refused to abandon hope.

Once, after repulsing him, she had more than half-yielded. She had repulsed him a second time, it was true; and he did not overlook the significance of the return of Kneedrock, whom she had called her "match" and her "mate."

The odds were overwhelmingly against him. That he knew. But there might still be a chance. And he would make certain before – No, he questioned whether he could return to Junnar with that last hope gone. It might be that he – He didn't know. He wasn't going to face it until it was before him.

Then, in some roundabout way a whisper got to him that Mrs. Darling was much better. The Ramsays, for example, had been to see her.

He had all along been leaving a card for her every day or so. Now he scribbled a line on the card, asking that she would give him a few – just a very few minutes.

He hardly dared fancy that she would. But she did.

Except for her mourning, he found her very little changed.

"I thought you were at work ages ago," was how she greeted him.

He spoke then of the cards he had left. He had sent her some flowers, too.

"I've had no interest in anything," she told him. "There are hundreds of cards here. Some day I may look at them, and still I may not. Every officer in Umballa has sent me flowers, and some of the enlisted men as well. But I do thank you."

"You've never once thought of me, I believe," he reproached.

"That's true," she replied, "I haven't. I've had so much to think of, and it hurts me to think. So I've let Lord Kneedrock do most of the thinking for me."

"It hurts to be forgotten so quickly," he said, his big brown eyes suddenly misty.

"I've been trying to forget so much," Nina confessed.

"And me – did you have to try very hard to forget me?"

"I hadn't begun on you yet. You see, you didn't even occur." She noticed the mist, and added: "I'm sorry."

"You're not a bit," he declared. "You like to hurt me, I believe. But I'll make you remember."

She felt like laughing for the first time since the news of Darling's death was brought to her.

"Please don't," she pleaded.

"Don't make you remember?"

"Oh, you can't do that! I mean, please don't weep. You promised me once you wouldn't, you know."

He rose, frowning, the last hope dead, and she sat regarding him through drooped lashes.

"Good-by!" he muttered, and began backing toward the door.

She waited until his hand was on the knob. Then:

"Good-by, Gerald!" she said, smiling. "I'm so glad I had strength enough not to bolt with you when you asked me."

"Why?" he asked, desperately seizing an excuse to linger.

"Because you are so good-looking, and I do get so tired of looking at good-looking men."

When he got back to Dinghal's quarters young Andrews tried to cut his own throat, mainly to make Nina remember him. That he didn't succeed in the act was due primarily to a nervously irresolute hand, and secondarily to his friend Dinghal, who suspected and arrived in the nick of time.

In the excitement of the ensuing moment the young man told Dinghal every word of the conversation with Mrs. Darling; and the deputy commissioner, as he clumsily drew the edges of the shallow cut together and fastened them with court-plaster, waxed more and more indignant; for he was very fond of Gerald Andrews, and declared that if she didn't kill her husband it was not because she was not capable of it.

It seems probable that he did not confine the expression of this opinion, either, to the privacy of his own dwelling. For guests at a dinner-party which he attended that same evening quoted him to the same effect – exaggerated, possibly, in the retelling – and the report in time trickled into the hearing of Kneedrock.

Thereupon the viscount called upon the deputy commissioner, and some hot words passed between them. Dinghal, it seems, made no attempt whatever to disguise his opinion.

"I don't care a damn what you think," returned Nina Darling's cousin. "That's your own business; the inalienable right of man and beast is to think whatever they please. But when a man gossips or a dog snarls, that changes the matter. They both deserve correction."

Dinghal was not the most robust of men, but he was no coward. As has been said, he was rarely malicious. As a rule, he rehearsed his story, and left it to his hearers to draw their own conclusions.

This time, through sheer loyalty to young Andrews, he had erred, and he knew it. But he was far from admitting this to Kneedrock.

"And in the present instance the correction is to be administered – how?" he asked.

"By me – with this," was the viscount's answer, holding up his doubled right hand.

"You mean your purpose is to punch my head?"

"Precisely," returned the other.

"You must be mad, Lord Kneedrock. Remember that I am a civil officer in his majesty's service. If you feel that I have injured you or yours in any way, there is a recognized means of adjustment. There are the courts."

"The courts are too slow and indecisive."

"Nevertheless, if you dare lay a hand on me I shall test them. I give you fair warning."

Kneedrock laughed his irritating laugh.

"You are quite meeting my opinion of you," he said. "You are a cur and a poltroon."

The deputy commissioner's face flamed. "If you dare repeat that," he snapped, "I shall – "

"Go to the courts, I assume."

The viscount saw his fingers double into his palms. "You are a liar and a scandalmonger!" he flung at him. And at this Dinghal drew back his fist.

"Although you have the advantage," he flared, "no man may blackguard me and go unpunished!"

"My left hand is crippled," said Kneedrock. "I shall not use it." And as Dinghal aimed a blow at his chin, he guarded with his right.

The bout lasted something over four minutes, during which Kneedrock landed at will. There was no instant when he did not command.

Now and again, to encourage his adversary to face further punishment, he permitted him to get in a body blow, or accepted a glancing tap on neck or cheek. And by way of finale he broke Dinghal's somewhat protuberant nose.

Three days later he and Nina took ship at Bombay and sailed for England.

CHAPTER VIII

In a World Within a World

"I'd rather have a whole cab-driver to myself than share a peer of the realm with another woman," said Mrs. Darling.

She had been in England eighteen months, and the shadow of her tragedy, which never bore very heavily, had lifted.

She sat in a basket chair on the lawn at Puddlewood, dressed all in filmy white, and sipped tea with the Duchess of Pemberwell, her great-aunt, in the shade of one of Puddlewood's ancient oaks. In her lap lay an unopened copy of the *Times*.

"Is he a cab-driver, then?" inquired the duchess, taking her literally.

"Yes," Nina laughed, "a heavenly cab-driver. He threads the milky way. Some say aviator."

"Oh, Nina!"

"He's very nice, I assure you, my dear. Not an ounce of fat on him. All bone and sinew and nerve."

"And – a Yankee," added the duchess belittlingly.

"A free-born American," corrected her great-niece, "and with the loveliest accent. You should hear him say: 'Evah at you' se'veice, Miss' Dahling.' You'd fall in love with him yourself."

"And this aviator person is yours exclusively?"

"Undividedly. Isn't it nice?"

"I think I should prefer Nibbetts myself; or Sir George Grey, or – well, scores I could name."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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