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# WORLD WITHOUT END

BY  
WINIFRED GRAHAM



LONDON  
ALSTON RIVERS, LTD.  
BROOKE ST., HOLBORN BARS, E.C.

1907

15/11/1907

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# WORLD WITHOUT END

## CHAPTER I

### THE SECOND WIFE

BACK in Piccadilly on a May morning! To the traveller from the East, the old familiar roar of London traffic was like the music of a mother's voice.

Major Marchmont stood at his Club window, after four years' absence—years of vivid colour and hot adventure. Torrid climes had dried up his fresh English complexion, but his frame was still wiry from his passionate love of the chase.

He looked up and down Piccadilly shrewdly; his eyes had all the keenness of a scout; he was observing fashion in her latest guise. Lost in thought, he started palpably when a servant called him to the telephone. There he found the voice of an old friend.

“Hulloa! Is that Jim? How are you,

old chap? Glad you're safely back. Come and lunch with us to-day at the Priory. I'll fetch you in the car. Who's 'us'? Of course I forgot; you didn't know I had married again."

"By Jove!"

Major Jim felt staggered for the moment; he hardly knew what to say. Second marriages, or in fact marriages at all, were somewhat incomprehensible to his bachelor temperament. He felt momentarily disappointed that Arnold Anstey had not remained faithful to the memory of the dear little woman who died just before the traveller left England.

He stammered some words of congratulation, and asked if he happened to know the present Mrs Anstey.

"Rather! Don't you remember Diana Hastings?"

The fair, mystical face of a girl with whom he had danced, and flirted slightly, four years ago, rose before his mental vision. She had strange topsy-turvy ideas, theories which met with good-natured tolerance from Major Jim. Even now he could recall scraps of her conversation, which retained a hold upon some brain cell, and refused to fade away with other trivialities.

He could hardly picture this wild, uncon-

ventional woman in the late Mrs Anstey's place. They were such utterly different types. The dead wife had, in Jim Marchmont's estimation, attained the acme of feminine perfection. The living wife he could think of only as the pretty, puzzling girl with the queer, twisted mind and inexplicable attraction.

He accepted the invitation to lunch, with a warm assurance that he certainly had not forgotten the Miss Diana of former years.

Silence reigned once more. Some invisible hand cut short Arnold Anstey's reply, and Major Marchmont was left again to his own reflections. The news he had just heard set him thinking. Only a few moments ago, nothing had been further from his mind than a desire to see Diana Hastings, but now his curiosity was aroused, and he wanted to see her very much indeed.

He waited impatiently for the car. He had letters to write, but his ideas strayed, and he began wondering how long it would take Arnold Anstey to drive from Roehampton to Piccadilly.

In a surprisingly short time his old friend drew up at the Club door. It was good to clasp hands again, to see how little the years had changed the familiar face. Well as Major Marchmont knew Arnold, he still

found him difficult to understand. There was a strong vein of humour in his nature, sometimes mistaken for sarcasm; he seldom spoke seriously. Possibly in one of his ironical moods he first contemplated marriage with Diana.

"I gave you rather a shock just now on the telephone," he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "but it comes of going away for years and leaving no address. I couldn't stand a lonely life. I had to do it, and she is wonderfully good to Mostyn. He's on the best of terms with his stepmother."

"Ah, my godson. I had been thinking about him. How old is he now?"

"Ten years. We have just got him back from school; an epidemic broke out, so they sent him home."

The conversation was brisk with the arrears of long absence. Major Marchmont had seen and done so much that he carefully avoided travellers' tales—they were for the after-dinner hour—and both men talked sketchily, discussing only the broad outlines of the past few years.

Certainly Arnold Anstey looked happy enough in his new life. He was prospering financially, and this, he remarked, was more conducive to domestic peace than any amount of philosophy. He had bought the house at

Roehampton as a present to Diana. "She took a fancy to the oak panelling, and the mulberry tree in the garden," he said. "She thought Mostyn would like to keep silkworms, so that settled the matter, and the Priory became our own."

Major Marchmont's godson was waiting for him in the drive. To the eyes of young England the traveller was a hero, and Mostyn thirsted for details of adventure and sport. He was singularly like his mother; and just for a moment, as Jim Marchmont caught sight of him, he could hardly believe that the late Mrs Anstey would not appear, shadowing her boy as of old.

The little fellow ran forward eagerly.

"So you've not forgotten me," said his godfather, pleased at the welcome.

"Rather not," declared Arnold. "Mostyn followed your career as well as he could from the press. He cut out an account you wrote of a hunting excursion with the Shah in the Persian mountains. I suppose those mountains are full of ibex, deer, and other four-footed game."

"Yes. Immense tracts of country are preserved for the royal sport; while on the plains they hunt the antelope with hounds, or hawks are flown after quail, herons, francolin, bustards, and partridge."

Mostyn had many questions to ask about birds, and animals, and kings, all of which Major Jim appeared only too ready to answer; but Arnold Anstey cut short the conversation.

"That boy will give you no peace if once you begin telling him about foreign places," he declared. "I shouldn't mind betting that some day Mostyn will be as great a traveller as yourself. He is always studying maps, and winning prizes for geography. He has the roving spirit, too; we shall make him into an explorer, if there is anything left to explore by the time he's grown up."

The joking remark awoke the older man's interest. He believed that any special bent always made itself evident in early years. He liked to think this godson of his might develop the same tastes and ambitions as himself, and resolved to keep an eye on the boy.

"We'll have a real good chat later on, old chap," he said, patting the curly little head. "You can ask me as many questions as you like. It's peculiar to travellers that they never mind talking."

He followed Arnold into the house, while Mostyn rode to the stables on the step of the motor. His face glowed with excitement; he treasured Major Jim's promise with the keen relish of youthful expectation.

"He's an intelligent child. Don't chaff him out of studying maps," said the traveller, sympathetically.

"But it's a perfect craze ; he's gone off on the car now, because I told him I meant to get a new map in town to-day. He will settle on it like a wasp on jam, and he has a most extraordinary bump of locality—never forgets a road. I take him out with me sometimes as a guide. Bother that telephone bell ; it's been going all day ; we get no peace ! Excuse me a moment."

Arnold darted down a passage just as a door opened and Diana Anstey appeared.

Major Jim hastened forward ; their hands met. Diana looked into his eyes and laughed. She was prettier than the girl he remembered ; there was more in her face. She asked him why he had stayed away so long ? What was his grievance against his English friends ?

"Travel," he said, "is a kind of disease. It's taken a hold on me, and I can't shake it off. I meant to come back two years ago."

"But the East called !" she murmured. "Oh, I can understand so well. You spread your wings and think of us at home as caged birds, with our little conventions, and the bars all round."

"Your bars seem very pleasant," he



replied. "I am only sorry I was not at your wedding, but we rolling stones never do the right thing."

"I've always such an immense respect for rolling stones ; they are so free ; they laugh at the stationary rock, rooted in its home-grown moss. I wonder what you thought when you heard I had married Arnold?"

She eyed him curiously, then answered the question herself.

"I know exactly. You were very surprised. You said to yourself, 'He is the very last man I should have expected her to marry.'"

She led the way as she spoke through a sunny drawing-room, and out to an old-fashioned garden, somewhat overgrown with massive trees and luxuriant flowering shrubs.

"These trees are our only bone of contention," she continued. "Arnold wants to cut away half the boughs, and I like the wild forest growth. The man who planned this garden had a great imagination ; it satisfies."

The critical eyes of the wanderer travelled over lawn and avenue to the thread of a narrow stream, which made a streak of silver light through the grass. He could hardly have explained the charm of the place, or why it differed so strangely from other gardens, even in old-world houses of historic

fame. There was a touch of enchantment, an original scheme of plantation, a joyousness combined with peace, an essence of talent, which made itself felt.

"The garden is like yourself," he said.

Her face broke into smiles.

"Sometimes I think it must have been designed for me in another life, because it is just what I should have planned. From the first moment I came here it seemed familiar. It appeals to me; it speaks in a thousand ways."

"Are you still a theosophist?" he asked; "a firm believer in the reincarnation of souls?"

Mrs Anstey gave a little start. She forgot that in the old days she had talked of these matters to Major Jim. Now she was more reticent—the outcome, perhaps, of her husband's love of chaff.

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked, shrewdly.

"No. I have an immense respect for every form of belief. There are so many theories, that one cannot help feeling the road is as difficult to tread as the edge of a sharp razor."

"I never talk of it now to scoffers," said Diana, earnestly. "It means too much to me; but I keep it here, hidden in my heart."

I am like the people of old who wanted a sign, and I think it may be given."

"In what way?"

A tender expression came to her eyes; they seemed to look beyond the enchanted garden, to a future yet unfound.

"Some day," she said, "a soul will be born into the world with a recollection of the past: not a mere fleeting fancy such as we all feel, but with definite proofs of previous life."

"It may be already born," he replied, "in another country, but you will never know—some boy or girl, with vivid memories of having once been a great theurgist of the third century, or a Greek philosopher. Possibly the reincarnations of Pindar, Isocrates, Plutarch, or Plato wander unrecognised, being conscious of an existence which is of no help to them to-day."

Diana shook her head.

"No," she said; "it is not born yet."

She spoke with absolute conviction.

Arnold's voice was heard behind them.

"Don't speak of theosophy to him," she whispered. "He calls it a fake religion; I think he's a little afraid of it, really."

"I've been talking to Miss Goodwin on the telephone. I thought I should never get away. She is coming to lunch."

Arnold drew a long face as he spoke.

"I was wrong," said Diana, "when I told you the trees were our only bone of contention," addressing Major Jim. "Ella Goodwin is another bone, only Arnold can't cut her, because she is a connection of mine."

"A tiresome woman, and dangerous into the bargain," declared Arnold. "She calls herself a mystic, and fills Diana's head with the most irrational ideas. If only Diana would treat her as a fool, we could suffer her gladly together; but unfortunately she takes the voluble Ella as a serious and heavy meal, instead of a soufflé, and gets mental indigestion in consequence."

Arnold took his wife's arm affectionately; it was easy to see that they were on the best possible terms.

When Ella arrived she appeared to Major Marchmont a most harmless and unassuming individual. She spoke little at lunch, and was prepared to agree with Arnold in everything. When the men were left to their coffee and smoke, Jim noticed the two women passed arm-in-arm into the garden, and Ella's tongue was instantly unloosed. He could see them vanishing down the sloping lawn, their heads together, the visitor talking animatedly.

"I hope I was not in the way, dear," she said, the moment they were alone. "I didn't know you had an old friend coming. I felt I must look you up some time to-day. Your letter excited me intensely; you can guess why."

Diana felt her hand clasped fondly. She trembled slightly with emotion.

"I promised you should be the first to know—I have not even told my mother yet. Now my task begins. From this hour I shall pray, and hope, and will, that the soul I am to give to the world may have a vivid and continued recollection of some former incarnation. It was a great idea of yours, Ella, to do this from the very first. Perhaps no one has thought of it before."

"Your prayer," murmured Ella, "must be a strong, energetic desire, and that desire will create a form of which it is the life and directing energy. If your thought is clear, strong, and concentrated, you will draw to yourself the kind of subtle matter best suited to your purpose. It will be a deliberate mental effort, a putting forth of your own strength. Never for a moment doubt your power; doubt is fatal to the exercise of the will."

"I have perfect confidence," replied Diana, in low, soft tones, hushed by Ella's mysterious

accents. Involuntarily they spoke in whispers, as if birds and bees were mindful of their speech in that garden of many flowers and varying scents. "I must bring myself into touch with the forces of invisible worlds, selecting those which can aid me, and neutralising all that oppose. It will be a secret process of the mind shared only with you, in silent meditation, an effort to reach the heights above—to set myself at one, as it were, with the Divine. I must recognise myself as a channel rather than a source; an agent, not an actor; a servant working in harmony with influences around me which I can never fully understand."

Ella looked approvingly upon her young disciple. She had originally directed Diana's thoughts to the teaching of esoteric Christianity, the true theosophy, according to her lights. The older woman gave into the hands of the younger numberless volumes produced by the Theosophical Society, and between them they conceived the idea that memory might be implanted in the mind of an unborn child, through the will power of the mother.

"I must teach you some 'Words of Power' to chant daily," said Ella. "They are called 'mantras,' the name given to them in the East, where the science of mantras has

been much elaborated. The effect of chanting is to create vibrations in the physical and superphysical worlds. If our knowledge were wide enough, and our hearts pure, there is scarcely any limit to the powers we might exercise in using these ancient mantras."

She looked towards a summer-house in the centre of the rose garden, built with a dome-shaped roof, and covered in crimson blossoms.

"That always makes me think of a miniature temple. Why not use it as such, at least for the next few months?"

"Mostyn keeps his carpentering tools there, and lots of lumber. It has always been his special little play-house."

"What does that matter?" Ella Goodwin spoke impatiently. "Surely you are of more consequence than a schoolboy, who is only occasionally at home? Tell him to clear them out, and make that your sanctum of silence. You might redecorate the place, and transform it into an ideal bower."

"I shouldn't tell Mostyn to give it up to me, but I might ask him as a favour. He is so kind-hearted, and we are very fond of each other."

Miss Goodwin's brain was busy with plans. She pictured the deep communings they

would hold in the temple, if it were consecrated to Diana's leisure hours. She took out a notebook, and began putting down some utterly unintelligible sentences.

"Couldn't I chant in English?" suggested Diana, guessing the writing was for her edification.

Ella's lips curled slightly; she shot a glance of disdain at her friend.

"If you translated a mantra," she explained, "it would change from a 'Word of Power' into an ordinary sentence. The sounds being altered, other sound-forms would be created. There are hundreds of mantras in the Sanskrit tongue, made by old occultists, familiar with invisible worlds and their laws. These words, chanted in a definite order, have been handed down from generation to generation."

Her tone implied disapproval of Diana, who had betrayed ignorance of these ancient rites.

To the younger woman, Ella's outward appearance of plain, unassuming respectability was made dazzling and attractive by the mind-power she was supposed to possess. Her grip of a strange and complex theme, as contrasted with her outward guise of commonplace nonentity, was a bewildering puzzle to the sensitive, emotional Diana. She had drawn comfort, inspiration, and strength



from many of the theories laid before her. She was quite ready to be led by Ella, and trusted her with a childlike faith peculiarly flattering to the spinster.

"I shall stay down here, and seclude myself as much as possible," Diana said. "You must be with me a great deal."

Ella promised to remain her constant companion, adding that she wished Mr Anstey were more in harmony with their views.

"That is impossible. He would always ridicule our theories; so why enlighten him, why force bread on those who are not hungry?"

Diana spoke with a certain weariness. It fretted her to hide anything from her husband. She would have liked him to take part in the great experiment she and Ella had evolved, but she knew he could never accept the theory that by their concentrated powers the child to be born might throw light upon a great question, by retaining impressions of a past life in some tangible form.

When Arnold rejoined them, he found Ella expatiating on the beauties of Mostyn's improvised workshop.

"You might make this summer-house a dream of beauty," she said. "Diana was thinking of converting it into a sanctum for herself."

"If Mostyn would give it up to me," added his stepmother, quickly.

"Why, of course," declared Arnold, "the boy could keep his tools just as well in the stables. I have often thought of doing something with the place, and, oddly enough, the idea occurred to me again only this morning. It shall be a shrine to Diana; the dome suggests Eastern decoration. I should like it fitted up in Oriental style. We will have tapestry on the walls, and improvise a divan, with heaps of cushions. Jim is here fresh from Persia; he shall advise. For the moment, however, he and Mostyn are so wrapped up in each other, it's impossible to get a hearing."

Ella nodded approval, and took her leave. She was never quite comfortable in Arnold's presence. He sighed with relief when her back was turned.

"I had a hideous presentiment that the white rat would stay on all the afternoon," he said.

Diana winced at the name, given to Ella by reason of a colourless skin and two protruding teeth which pinned her under lip.

"It's a pity you don't like her, as she is my best friend."

"Oh, you'll grow out of that in time."

He spoke with breezy assurance, and dismissed the subject.

Involuntarily Diana decided to keep her own counsel. She would sit at Ella's feet in secret; her friendship should be the stolen fruit reserved for lonely hours.

"Tired?" he queried.

"Just a little."

He bent over her tenderly. She caught in his eyes the expression of the lover, and a glad knowledge woke in her heart that romance was still young for them both, though behind him lay that other life with the one he had loved before, with the mother of his firstborn. She tried to shut out the picture, to forget. Men, she told herself, live in the present; the woman who holds their affections for the moment holds all.

He kissed her, with a joyful sense of her youth and his mastery. He fancied he read her mind like an open book; he dreamed of no barrier to the communion of their lives.

## CHAPTER II

### WORDS OF POWER

DIANA's temple became one of the features of the Priory garden at Roehampton. Arnold took a delight in making it beautiful, and on the foundation of what had once been a shed for Mostyn's tools there now stood a mysterious place of rest. Dazzling colours met the eye—warm, rich, and curiously blended. The shelves held Eastern ornaments, while above the door hung a magnificent sword, studded with jewels, brought by Major Marchmont from Japan. The small windows in the dome were freshly filled with exquisite stained glass, which threw purple and crimson rays on the luxurious divan and Persian carpeted floor. Nothing had been omitted which made for ease and harmony. This shrine, sacred to Diana's solitude, meant much to the woman who had no wish to mix with the busy world till her mission of motherhood should be fulfilled.

When the summer days drew to autumn, and the first chill warning of winter cut down the weak leaves from boughs which had held them strongly since the dawn of spring, Diana began to realise how dear her temple had grown. No change of year, she told Arnold, should drive her away. The place must be properly heated, that in the coldest weather she might read, write, and work there, finding it as warm as summer. Her husband felt flattered that his efforts to make her sanctum attractive were so evidently appreciated, and fell in with the idea readily enough. Sometimes her passion for the spot mildly surprised him, but he knew that Diana was a woman of moods, and felt sure that, when once she took up her old society life again, the temple in the garden would be deserted, its glories left to bloom unseen.

In Arnold's absence, Ella Goodwin, her frequent companion, came stealthily through a side-gate to seek Diana and meditate with her upon the secret theory they had evolved together. Future events, to which they looked, were entirely dependent, so far as their belief carried them, upon the constant state of Diana's mind and the strength of her concentration.

Ella's teaching daily took greater posses-

sion of the younger woman's thoughts, controlling them by an agency she in no way understood, making her feel that she must and would be the instrument of some great experiment. It gave her a thrill of pride to know she was sitting at the feet of her beloved Ella, and growing daily almost as wise as her instructress. They were careful to conceal from Arnold the close communication established between them. Ella, proud in her boasted reason, standing on a pedestal of her own importance, could afford to pretend to this scoffing husband that her visits were for the ordinary purposes of feminine gossip. To her he was the veriest earthworm, a Philistine of the first order. Impossible to explain to him the significance of their uncanny work; such a problem would altogether fog his limited intelligence. His standard of possible and impossible could never coincide with the working of a miracle, or grasp the agencies and influences at the white rat's command.

During these months of endeavour Ella became even paler than of old. Not a pang of Diana's but she suffered it in sympathy, intensified by imagination. She followed every emotion of her friend, to impress upon her the vital importance of identity of purpose, believing herself clairvoyante

for the time, and declaring that she could see the soul forming, which should, on its birth, throw back the wings of memory and enter the world with a dual nature, to draw together past and present.

It was a cold December day when, at her usual hour, Ella crossed the frost-bitten grass *en route* for the temple. She was conscious of a vague sensation that something unusual would occur that afternoon. Very prosaic she looked in her knitted Tam o' Shanter cap, drawn low over a hairless forehead, her hands thrust deeply into the pockets of a grey frieze coat, beneath which no soft feminine lines made the fall of her clothing graceful. The very last figure to suspect of witchcraft or evil, a graceless twentieth-century spinster cast in the mould of the masculine.

Diana opened the door of her shrine. There were lights rosy and golden, while the warm glow of a perfectly regulated temperature mingled with the scent of hothouse flowers.

"I have something new to show you," she said, as she kissed Ella. "Major Marchmont has sent me a deliciously weird Christmas present; it quite fascinates me."

She pointed to an image seated cross-legged at the head of the divan, with long, narrow eyes, and a marvellously cunning

expression. Its hands were folded on its breast, and parts of the body were bare.

"Why, it's an idol; and what a horrible look!" exclaimed Ella. "I call it very ugly and disgusting. I do hope you won't keep it here to desecrate your shrine."

Diana looked disappointed at the unappreciative words.

"I thought you would admire it so much," she said. "Dear Major Jim wrote that he knew I loved curiosities, and he was parting with one of his greatest treasures, because he felt that it was odd and original enough even for me. It has a story, which he promises to write out for my benefit when he has time. At present he is very busy with some Government work. He calls the idol 'Billy,' and hopes it will prove a mascot to me and mine."

Ella stood contemplating Major Marchmont's gift with her upper lip drawn down so far that for once it almost covered the two sharp protruding teeth. Then she shook her head with a dolefulness that dispelled Diana's childlike pleasure in a new toy.

"It's bad," she said, "altogether bad. I believe it has the evil eye! All I know is, I wouldn't keep it in my house."

Diana bent down and touched the smooth head, tracing her finger over the glass eye,



and down the flat nose, to the grinning mouth.

"He's so cold and clammy," she said, smiling. "I know Arnold will be quite delighted; he loves these ugly, uncommon things, and envies Jim Marchmont his wonderful collection of curiosities. Certainly Billy looks as if he ought to go to the British Museum, but I can't help feeling he is happier here all alone with me."

Diana's levity upset Ella. She took a large blue handkerchief from her pocket, and threw it over the idol's face.

"There!" she said, "leave him covered up; it's foolish for you to stare at such an unprepossessing object. I knew something was going to disturb our harmony as I came across the lawn, because I wanted you to be in a specially good mood to-day."

"Why?"

"I have kept back one of the most important mantras which I had hoped to teach you this afternoon. It must be the last effort, and is for use at sunset during this coming month. Always chant it as the day is dying, and be sure you are alone. Even my presence might affect its efficiency."

Diana's interest was at once roused by the absorbing subject. She left Billy with the handkerchief over his face, while she

listened to Ella's words of exalted confidence in her own wisdom, tacitly consenting to commit the new mantras to memory. Miss Goodwin gave the lesson with stern, inflexible insistence upon detail. The slightest falter in the voice, the quavering on a note which should be shrill and sharp, was met with impatience, almost anger. At last Diana's pure soprano caught the ring of it, with strange intensity. These antiquated notions, so utterly apart from the spirit of the age, appealed to the mystic in her. The meaning had already been explained by the zealous Ella, in the full and comprehensive manner which never failed to impress Diana with a sense of admiration for the magnitude of her friend's research.

"There!" murmured Ella at last, "I really believe you are letter and tune perfect. I am not going to stay, as the day is drawing in, and it's most important you should be absolutely undisturbed. Kneel by the window, and keep your eyes fixed steadfastly on the setting sun. This bright frosty night is the very time to begin."

She touched Diana's forehead lightly with her lips, and not looking again at the idol, hurried away, convinced she had done an excellent afternoon's work.

The solitary woman in the warm, luxurious

temple drew aside the blind from a diamond-shaped window, and watched the sky. Ever since those early days of May she had spent her time in the hard mental task of willing and training her own mind upon certain lines, practising a regular self-hypnotism, fatiguing and restful in turns, according to the mood and physical condition of the thinker.

The frosty sun shone forth in a sinking ball of gold. The fiery west blazed its crimson sheet upon beds of drifting amber. It was a glorious scheme of good-night colour, sent down by a radiant heaven to cheer the wintry world.

The moment had come to send forth those metallic notes of curiously un-English sound. Diana threw all her soul into the musical and half-delirious wail. Her eyes saw nothing of the Priory garden: they looked beyond, they pierced the sky. Her hands were raised, and tightly locked together; she swayed slightly as she chanted. There was something fearsome, almost diabolical, in her manner of rendering the strain.

So far away in the land of fancy had this strange practice lifted her, that she neither heard nor saw Arnold Anstey approach the door of the temple, open it softly, and stand on the threshold transfixed by his wife's inexplicable attitude.

The chanting made his blood run cold.

What words were those she used, so oddly unfamiliar to her native tongue? For the moment he believed her mad, and quickly planned a course of action.

"Good God," he thought, "and she was here alone!"

He advanced very softly, whispering :

"Diana!"

She started slightly, and then the old smile came back. In a moment he saw she was herself again, blushing slightly at having been discovered in so eccentric an attitude.

Instantly his fears were replaced by a sense of annoyance.

"What on earth were you doing?" he asked.

She hesitated, making him repeat the question.

"Well, if you really want to know," throwing caution to the winds, "I was chanting an Eastern mantra; it's a sort of science—to do with vibrations and things. Those were 'Words of Power,' and have an effect on invisible worlds."

"Words of fiddlesticks!" muttered Arnold, and for once his merry eyes wore a dark, almost sinister look. "Who taught you the rubbish? Tell me at once."

"It isn't rubbish. I won't have it laughed

at. You turn everything into fun, and I may tell you this is not a joking matter to me."

"Quite so. I was never further from making 'fun,' as you call it; that is why I demand to know who has been filling your head with this damned twaddle."

Diana grew pale with sudden rage, which leapt up to meet his in open combat. How dared he use such language in her presence? What right had he to criticise her actions? Were they not matters of belief sacred to herself alone? She asked the questions inwardly, while she said aloud:

"Please don't swear."

Her cold, unemotional voice gave him no warning of the tempestuous feelings surging beneath her outward calm. Manlike, he believed the grievance was all on his side, forgetting the woman's weakness and highly-strung temperament. He little knew the struggle she was making to keep back the tears which burnt behind those bright, defiant eyes.

"I should like to know," he said, bitterly, "what heathen oracles you were addressing, and how you suppose these 'words' are going to affect your life? Perhaps it may surprise you to hear that both your attitude and language appeared so utterly ridiculous; that I feared you had gone stark, staring

mad. Do you often chant these pagan prayers by way of diversion? I should have thought you might employ your time better."

Never before had he spoken to her in such terms of disgust. She noted the cynical curl of his lip, his attitude of dignified strength and belief in his own power to kill with disdain any germs of superstition which were not altogether to his liking.

The wild blood in Diana grew hot with rebellion. She blamed herself now for concealing Ella's frequent visits.

"Miss Goodwin taught me those sentences of the ancient occultists," she said, momentarily glad to throw the name in his face. "She comes here every day to instruct me. We are trying a certain experiment together, an exercise of will-power. Our work may become manifest in your child. We are striving that he or she may retain some of the memories of a previous incarnation, to help us in our study of theosophy."

The words were spoken in slow, calculating accents, carrying a sharp sense of shock. If only Arnold could have laughed! But for once he saw no humour in his wife's folly. He regarded her with an open disdain, inexpressible—almost unthinkable.

"So that creature," he said at last, "has been here every day against my wishes and

advice, cramming your head full of this lamentable nonsense, and bringing you down to her own level. Once and for all, understand, I forbid you to see her, or to have any further communication with her whatever."

A proud smile parted Diana's lips.

"It's too late to interfere," she said, triumphantly; "the work is done."

He did not try to fathom the meaning of her words.

"I suppose you think," she continued, coldly, "that Ella is an utter fool?"

"Yes, the kind of fool that 'rageth and is confident.' She has found a willing victim in you, and it will take time to escape her influence, to get clear. Of course I know, Diana, you look upon me as a scoffer. What if I told you that in reality—I am nothing of the kind?"

His attitude had changed suddenly. He grew calmer, while his wife revealed for the first time her own tremulous excitement. She took one step towards him, then steadied herself with an effort.

"You—Arnold—you!"

"Yes. If I thought it all such child's play, should I have lost my temper? It's because I am half inclined to believe this may be devil's play that I want you to break with Ella Goodwin. Your practices

are probably as innocent as the spinning of a top. On the other hand, who knows you are not lending yourself to a satanic agency, by a process gradual, stealthy, and subtle?"

This was a new view. It startled Diana to hear her husband speak seriously upon matters he had always ridiculed.

"How do you mean?" she gasped. Already she was fearful of what she had done.

"We know," he replied, "that meddling with the supernatural is always dangerous and unnecessary. You cannot gauge what you bring upon yourself through invoking mysterious powers opposed to God. In so doing, you, or your child, may become possessed by one of the many wandering spirits at the command of the devil."

Could this be Arnold speaking? The idea he propounded was so unlike him that she fancied he was purposely trying to alarm her. It was a clever way of severing her friendship with Ella, a ruse to gain his own will. Yet his suggestion filled her with terror. What if some evil influence had fastened on the child even before its soul was given to the world, and this through the machinations of its mother?

"Arnold," she whispered, "put your arms round me. Hold me, or I shall fall."



She clung to him faintly. In a moment the sharp words were forgotten, the storm of their first quarrel already drifted away, under the influence of her weakness and submission.

"I wish," she faltered, "I wish, Arnold, I had told you before. I believe it was wrong, but we can't go back, can we? That's the awful part of life; what is done—is done. If this scheming has influenced the child, a little repentance now is of no avail, or even a great repentance; the consequences will be just the same."

He smoothed her hair softly; he felt he had been hard, yet he knew he was forgiven.

Diana had something of the wild uncertainty of the elements in her nature, for storm and shine came in quick succession; he often called her April, and she liked the name.

"You just played about with Ella Goodwin because you had nothing else to do," he said, leniently; "let us hope she has worked you no great harm. For the next month I will stay down here, if possible, and try to amuse you. I always thought you were too much alone, but you said you liked it, and I didn't guess——"

He broke off, not wishing to wound her with further reproofs. He noticed she made no movement, no reply.

"You are not well," he said quickly, seeing a change in her face.

She gripped him suddenly in a vice; the pressure of her fingers caused him actual pain.

"No," she gasped. "Call somebody."

He laid her on the divan and piled cushions beneath her head. He was too startled by her ghastly pallor to notice Major Marchmont's idol, with Ella's handkerchief concealing its face. He took some water from a vase and damped her wrists.

"Fetch somebody," she murmured again, feebly. "I am not afraid to be left."

"Let me carry you back to the house."

"No—no," she entreated, "don't move me. I must stay here till I am better."

He felt the wisdom of the words, and, knowing his own helplessness, moved quickly to the door. He glanced back, as she made a sign to him to go. He started to run across the lawn, shouting to a gardener in the distance to fetch the doctor at once.

Diana heard his voice, though to her it sounded miles away, like the distant echo of a dream. She drew the handkerchief from the idol's face and wiped her forehead. Then she turned and stared fixedly at the grotesque image, with its sly, unholy smile.

With a little cry she covered her eyes that

she might not see its saturnine expression. She was losing count of time ; the light in the temple burnt low. She fancied she was really in the East, and that the sun blazed down upon her fiercely. A few snatches of the mantra rose involuntarily to her lips, but she checked herself—remembering.

Arnold came breathlessly back, followed by a troop of startled servants ; the first sight which greeted his eyes as he opened the door was the diabolical face of the idol, grinning in hideous silence upon a world of pain.

## CHAPTER III

### THE THEOSOPHIST AT THE WINDOW

ELLA called to inquire after Mrs Anstey and the child. She had heard strange rumours in connection with the sudden illness. Two nurses were in attendance, one of whom she met upon the doorstep of the Priory.

"All going on well?" she inquired, trying to hide her anxiety under a hardness of manner which concealed from the stranger that she was a woman of fantastic imagination.

The nurse wore the usual smile befitting the occasion.

"Mrs Anstey is much better this morning, and the baby, though very small and weakly, will live, I think. Of course, under such circumstances, a boy is always more difficult to rear."

"So I have heard. Do you think I might see him? I am Mrs Anstey's greatest friend, and take a deep interest in all that concerns

her. I have been her daily companion for the last eight months."

"I am afraid it is too early yet. The day nurse is in charge."

"What time was he born last night?"

"Just after sunset, before his mother could be removed to the house. Not many children can claim such a strange birthplace. That temple, or whatever they call it, in the garden, makes me feel quite uncanny; it looks like a place consecrated to some heathen idol. There's an awful figure in it, and a model of a Mohammedan shrine with a light burning. The servants tell me it has not been put out since the summer."

"Oh! that's just a fancy of Mrs Anstey's; she is very artistic, and likes weird effects. But how terrible that the child should have been born there; yet how strange, how fateful!"

Ella murmured the last words almost to herself; instinctively her heart-beats quickened, while her hopes rose high. At sunset the mantra was to be sung. All their desires and meditations had taken place in Diana's shrine; surely this climax was a culmination which pointed to success.

"What is the child like?" she asked.

"Well, at that age," replied the nurse, "there is scarcely a pin to choose between

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them, except in size, and this is perhaps the smallest baby I have ever seen. All eyes it looks for the moment." She paused. "Now I come to think of it, there is certainly something peculiar in those very large dark eyes."

"The father and mother are both fair," said Ella, quickly.

"Yes, but possibly they have foreign ancestors. The child looks to have an Eastern strain in him."

Miss Goodwin tried to conceal the start she involuntarily gave.

"You've got that in your mind, nurse, because of the temple. I suppose Mr Anstey is very proud of his son?"

"He seems rather worried still, as if he couldn't believe his wife was going on satisfactorily. You see they had a pretty bad shock, and really I believe he would like to call in a dozen nurses, to make up for our late arrival."

As she spoke, Arnold appeared, walking slowly from the stables, with a letter in his hand, which he was reading so intently that he did not observe Ella or the nurse. It was a long, ecstatic epistle in Mostyn's round, sprawling fist, detailing the delights of a visit he was paying his godfather, who, though busy with Government work, had found time to invite the boy for the Christmas holidays.

The praises of 'Uncle Jim,' as he called Major Marchmont, covered three or four sheets. To the boy he was still the greatest hero in the world, a giant of wisdom, a living example of all that was marvellous and commendable, a person to be worshipped and, if possible, imitated when time should bring young Mostyn Anstey to years of discretion.

"An excellent influence," thought the father, approvingly; "and, oddly enough, those two are a couple of cranks together. I wouldn't mind betting they talk travel—morning, noon, and night. Mostyn already makes me feel pretty shaky in my geography. If he has startled his masters in the past, they will think him a positive prodigy when he goes back to school, after satisfying his thirst for knowledge at the feet of good old Jim."

"Heartiest congratulations!" said a voice which instantly robbed Arnold of his smile. He looked up, startled out of a deep reverie, to find himself face to face with Ella Goodwin. The nurse hurried away, eager for exercise, and the two were left together by the open door.

Naturally Ella expected he would ask her in. Though she looked upon him as a bear, he had always treated her with civility. He eyed her a moment in silence, for the sight of her was peculiarly distasteful to him.

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She was struck by the stiffness of his attitude.

"I came with the hope of seeing Diana, but I suppose it would be unwise," she said.

"Very unwise," he answered. "May I be candid with you, Miss Goodwin?"

"Of course," speaking a little nervously. "I like candour, and always say exactly what I think. It is one of my rules."

"I only discovered yesterday, to my great surprise and indignation, the injurious effect your society has had on Diana's mind. She confessed to me that she received you daily with a set purpose, one which so evidently preyed upon her nerves that, in a great measure, I hold you responsible for yesterday's alarming situation. I firmly believe everything would have gone on in the ordinary course but for your being the cause of a heated discussion between us. I had no idea how greatly I was exciting her when I ventured to suggest that these ancient divinations—these thoughts, chants, and beliefs—implanted by you in a pliable and sensitive mind, might attract evil spirits to work harm. I spoke strongly, fancying you had hypnotised her, and that by fear alone I might force her scattered senses back into a reasonable groove."



Ella set her lips.

"How like a man," she said, "to be hard and cruel at such a time!"

"I regret my action, and I am not defending myself; but that takes none of the blame from you. I consider you have been a false friend to Diana, a disturbing influence, which has had a most injurious effect upon her health. In the future I forbid you to hold any communication with her."

The stern masculine authority was more than Ella could stand. Instantly she was on the defensive, bristling with the smothered indignation of past and present scores.

She smiled superciliously, and thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her tweed coat.

"I am afraid," she said, "like all ignorant persons, you put down what you cannot understand to 'besotted superstitions and old wives' fables.' You jump to the conclusion that because I have given up my time to the intellectual development of a very dear friend I am an evil genius in disguise. To make clear to you the tie between Diana and myself would be waste of breath, and a matter entirely beyond your comprehension. As you lack penetration, you fall back on the easy sneer, and the bully's threat: 'Thou shalt not.' Your opinions,

your standard of ideas, are far removed from mine, and now — thank goodness! — from Diana's. In your estimation there are, of course, no influences which may not be scientifically accounted for, and explained away. It is your creed to pooh-pooh everything you cannot investigate. I've often talked of your limitations to your wife, and we have laughed about them together."

The last words rang with a spiteful emphasis, intended to wound, but Arnold made no sign of feeling the venomous dart.

Perhaps he was steeled by the armour of self-esteem, perhaps he saw through the transparent attempt to sow deeper mischief between husband and wife.

"In the future," he said, calmly, "these opportunities for merriment won't occur. I am sorry to appear a spoil-sport, but I shall give very strict orders that you are not admitted to Diana's room; and as soon as she is well enough I shall take her away. We hope to spend some months abroad."

The fact that after all her keen anticipation she was now to be cruelly severed from her pupil and disciple, suddenly broke upon Ella with the full force of realisation. She clenched her fists in her pockets, and a wild desire seized her to strike Arnold. She

stared at him with wide, extended eyes, her teeth pressed hard upon her lower lip.

"Let me see her once, only once!" she muttered, fiercely. "You couldn't be so revengeful as to refuse me just five minutes in her society. And the child, I must look at the child; it means more to me than you can guess. I know I have rather a sharp tongue, and I don't mind apologising if I've let my feelings run away with me. Possibly we've all been at cross purposes, and it's a queer time to ask a favour of you, but I do ask it, as man to man."

She looked up fearlessly into his face; for the moment it was hard to believe she was one of the gentler sex. She put herself upon a level with him, and he accepted her at her own valuation.

"I am obliged to refuse," he answered. "When I make up my mind definitely, I never change."

He saw the strength in Ella's face; it told how she had worked successfully upon Diana.

"Never," she said, "is a long word. Do you really mean it?"

He nodded his head abruptly.

"You will find other fields for your influence," he assured her, consolingly, and the tone was more galling to Ella than any sign of anger. "You see I shall now try to

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undertake the development of Diana's mind, with possibly little or no success. Once she is strong again she won't need you—or me—to guide her fancies. She will go her own way—joyfully, I hope, and bring up her child to be simple, open, and sincere.”

These were words of dismissal. Ella would fain have stayed and argued out the matter still further, but Arnold made it impossible. He turned away, with the coldest salutation of farewell.

Ella felt stunned as she moved down the drive. Something had literally been torn out of her life. She was conscious of a certain numbness, an acute sense of loss. The world had grown suddenly narrow. She was hedged in by circumstances, and dared not make her own laws, or fight her way to Diana's side. How often had they spoken of the time when together they would scan the infant face, year by year, watching, waiting, observing, trusting to the miracle, with all the confidence of enlightened savants! Now the prison walls of fate shut her out; Arnold Anstey stood sentinel, guarding the wife and child.

“It can't last,” Ella told herself; “it will be like that for a time, but things blow over, and old scores are forgotten. We didn't spare our words, but perhaps that is all the

better ; only it's so difficult to be patient, and so hard to be thwarted."

She paused ; the numb feeling changed to a warm glow from head to foot. She stood quite still, staring at a commonplace object. The article which so suddenly fascinated her gaze was merely a medium-sized ladder, set up against a wall, from which some overhanging ivy had been cut for Christmas decorations. No gardeners were in sight, and the wall simply divided a portion of the drive from the rambling garden beyond.

Diana's room in the south wing would be easy of access by way of the window. Ella knew her muscular arms could carry the ladder without difficulty. Why not take one peep at her friend, if only through the glass, and thus defy the mandate of an irascible husband ?

After all, should Arnold discover the ruse, he couldn't hurt her. The thought held consolation and excitement ; the desire for adventure grew. In this way she might catch a sight of the child's face, the baby with the Eastern eyes, the outcome of Diana's thoughts and deep communings in the temple.

Swift to act, she shouldered the ladder, making her way boldly to the house, and not allowing her mind to dwell upon risk. Depression faded away ; for once Ella's

face appeared radiant. She remembered the small balcony which encircled Diana's window; that would serve well, and lend itself to her purpose. She could almost have sung for joy, so entirely had her attitude changed.

The Priory appeared quite deserted. Arnold's study, she knew, was the other side of the house; the thought made for security.

She placed the ladder at the side of the balcony where it could not be seen from the window, and glancing once more from left to right, put a stealthy foot on the first rung. The garden, in winter, retained much of its charm, for sombre fir trees and funereal yews clothed it in mystic garments. Ella had an eye for the beauty of the scene even while she scanned the terraces and lawns in anxious search for an undesired onlooker.

As she mounted cautiously, the thought that every step brought her nearer to the mother and child made the moment one of destiny.

The fact that she dwelt in ordinary suburban surroundings, unloved and unadmired by man, had first tempted this imaginative woman to seek for excitement in strange practices and research. At variance inwardly with the prosaic and orthodox, she gloried in emancipation of ideas, and

vowed that Arnold Anstey's rule should not entirely abolish her power over Diana. To the very last she would defy and outrage his authority. A spirit of dogged perseverance overmastered her sense of justice to the father of the child, to the husband of her friend.

She reached the window and scrambled to the balcony, when suddenly a tall masculine figure threw its reflection on the pane. In a moment she recognised the shadow as Arnold Anstey's. He turned, conscious of her glance fastened on him fearfully. Her eyes, all unwillingly, had drawn upon her the Nemesis she was most anxious to avoid. The courage which had previously buoyed her now vanished. No burglar caught house-breaking could more eagerly have desired escape. Arnold put up his hand to open the barrier between them. He almost laughed to think that this wilful woman should plot such an ingenious intrusion, yet her very daring touched him strangely.

Before he had time to speak, however, she drew back, with one foot on the ladder.

"Look out," he whispered softly, that Diana might not hear. "You will fall if you don't take care!"

Noting the clumsy movements, his own knowledge of climbing warned him there

was danger. He flung the window open quickly, in order to lend a hand ; but, mistaking his action for pursuit, Ella merely hastened her retreat.

How it happened he never quite knew, but the ladder appeared to slip backwards, as if pulled by an invisible agency, and in horrified silence he watched Ella Goodwin falling through the air—down—down—to the stone terrace below. The thud of the helpless body reached his ear. A dull horror gripped him.

“What is it? What’s happened?” asked a voice from the bed.

Diana woke with a start, conscious something was wrong.

Arnold closed the window.

“Nothing,” he whispered, moving breathlessly to the door ; “only a part of the balcony has given way.”

Without further explanation, he beat a hasty retreat. Diana’s frightened question roused the child, and a fitful cry broke upon the air. She stretched out her hands to draw him to her ; she wanted to soothe his fears. The small face had something unchildlike in it, which chilled her ardour, a melancholy that made her silent and ashamed. The wail caught an echo from her own heart, and instead of the comforting



word, she let a hot tear fall as a baptism upon his brow. She fancied he knew the meaning of the tear.

The nurse pulled down the blind. Her white face alone betrayed that in doing so she shut out the secret of one more tragedy in the outside world.

## CHAPTER IV

### YOUR BROTHER IS A BRITISHER

As Diana grew stronger, she began asking for Ella.

"I should like her to come," she said to Arnold, "though I have made up my mind not to talk of the old subjects. Still, I think she would be very disappointed not to see the child."

Arnold replied that poor Miss Goodwin was unfortunately laid up, from some slight accident, he thought. The nurse had been to inquire, and gathered it was a sprained ankle.

"Even then," said Diana, "she might have sent me a line. It isn't like Ella not to write."

Every day Arnold found himself parrying similar questions and remarks.

"I can't understand Ella's silence," Mrs Anstey declared. "I feel sure you haven't forbidden her to write to me, Arnold, because

I notice you always speak kindly of her now, and perhaps look more leniently on her strange ideas. Only the other day you said you were sorry you had been so hard on her."

"Yes," he replied, "it's possible I treated her follies too seriously; and yet, Diana, they have left that unpleasant effect upon me, I am always thinking there is something wrong with the child. So far he has no characteristic of our family on either side; but I suppose it is early days to judge, and my fancy may have much to do with it."

"Oh! Then you are angry with me still?"

She spoke plaintively, and he was quick to contradict her.

"Angry? No, no; how could I be?"

He kissed her reassuringly, already regretting his words.

"Then may I see Ella for a few minutes? I could call on her when I take my first drive, if she is unable to come to me. How did she sprain her ankle? Nurse seemed very vague about it; so much so, I really wondered if she had been to the house at all."

"As a matter of fact she didn't go," said Arnold, drawing his chair nearer to his wife's couch, and laying his hand gently on her

shoulder. "We were afraid of upsetting you while you were so weak and ill, but it is better to tell you now—your poor friend Ella is dead."

Diana stared at him incredulously. Just for a moment she could not grasp the words. Then as she repeated them slowly to herself, she felt as if all along she had been familiar with the news.

"Ella died quite a long time ago," she said; "very soon after the child was born."

"Yes, the following day."

Diana buried her face in the cushions, and lay silent with her grief.

"So often," she murmured at last, "I have fancied she came into my room. I thought I saw her standing by my bed that afternoon, when part of the balcony broke, and startled me so. That was the day of her death. How did it happen? At what time did she die?"

Arnold replied he would rather tell Diana all the details later on, when she was quite well, and they were away abroad. He expected she would protest, and ply him with further questions, but instead she appeared quite willing to fall in with his advice. He knew that she guessed some peculiarly painful circumstances were connected with the event.

It was not till they were far from the Priory and its associations that Diana learned how Ella, in climbing to her window, had fallen and broken her back on the terrace below. For a time this knowledge made all memory of the enchanted garden distasteful to Diana. Those two swift succeeding days in which it had been the scene of birth and death haunted her. The place became one of superstitious dread. But as strength and vigour returned, as outside influences crowded in once more upon her life, the past became dream-like, almost unreal. The woman who sat at Ella's feet was a different self to the one who found again the happy freedom of health.

Arnold watched with supreme relief the gradual return of his wife's girlish spirits. He felt sure that, had Ella lived, Diana would not have been the first to joke about the weird practices in the temple and the occult imaginings of that lonely time.

During their prolonged tour they noticed that the child attracted unusual attention.

His marvellous eyes were commented upon by strangers at every turn. Often the nurse was questioned as to his origin, and on hearing that Mr and Mrs Anstey were the parents, general surprise was expressed.

They christened him Harwood, a family

name on his mother's side, and no little tender baby names were supplemented. From the very first, Diana felt an instinctive awe of her infant son. She dared not think what the future would bring—she feared the development of his character.

Would he grow up like Mostyn, a strong, healthy-minded boy, typically English? Her heart told her no. She could see, despite his beauty, a certain sickliness of frame; she guessed he would always be delicate, and possibly peculiar. She realised that her state of mind under Ella's sway must have affected him. She still treasured her old belief in theosophy, though she never spoke of it; she still held the theory that he would remember, where others failed.

Eventually they returned to Roehampton, fresh from pleasant wanderings in sunny lands, with the early promise of spring just softening the air. The temple, after long disuse, looked less attractive than of yore. The little touches which made it so home-like were missing; the flower-vases stood empty, for no one had thought to fill them, and 'Billy' was covered in brown paper to preserve him from the damp.

"I shall be so much in town, I really shan't want the place," she said. "It will do for nurse and baby; they can come and

sit here for a change. Harwood is always happy surrounded by bright colours, and this shall be his temple now, the place where he was born."

So, instead of the mantras, infant lullabies were sung by a young and musical nurse, who told her mistress that the baby's love for music rivalled his obvious joy at the sight of a rich hue.

When Mostyn returned at Easter, his delight in Harwood rather surprised Arnold. The older boy appeared infatuated with his stepbrother, and would spend hours in the company of this five-months-old baby.

"You see, he isn't like other stupid babies," Mostyn informed his father, by way of apology. "He is such a puzzling little chap; he seems to understand what you say. Perhaps Uncle Jim will be able to tell us what country he really belongs to."

Arnold Anstey looked sharply up at his son. The boy had spoken quite simply, apparently unaware he had offended.

"You don't know what you are talking about! Of course your brother is a Britisher like yourself. He can't help having those large Oriental eyes. They're a great beauty, I am told, and his mother is very proud of them."

Still Mostyn felt sure, though he made

no reply, that Uncle Jim would have some enlightening theories on the subject of the newcomer.

Diana, seeing her stepson's affection for his baby brother, encouraged it at every turn. Mostyn seemed older than his years, made so, perhaps, by his wonderful gift of observation. She often found herself talking to him as if he were grown up, and already, under Major Jim's guidance, he was mapping out his future.

"Whatever happens," she said, "I want you always to look after Harwood for me. He may not be strong and big like you; perhaps he won't be so quick in making friends. Of course, ten years is a great difference between brothers. You will have that length of experience on your side, which he can profit by, if you are good enough to watch over him."

Mostyn's young heart swelled with pride at the tone adopted by Diana. Early she was playing upon that masculine vanity which, to some degree, must lurk in the strongest nature.

With this boy it was but the veriest germ, hidden away under a frank, engaging manner. He warmly promised from that hour to give the little weakling upstairs the protection of his superior age.



"If anything should happen to Arnold or me," thought Diana, "Mostyn may remember my words in time to come."

She saw in her stepson the promise of a full, active life, and possibly a notable career.

His teachers had marked him out as peculiarly bright and intelligent, while Major Marchmont spoke highly of his quick grasp of facts and amazing memory.

"If Harwood follows in his steps I need have little anxiety," Diana said, when talking of Mostyn. "He's as courageous as a young lion; it is impossible to frighten him."

She recalled as she spoke her own child's peculiar nervousness, remarkable from earliest days, conscious that she had handed down the highly-strung temperament which fell so easily beneath the rule of the friend who had loved and victimised her. Perhaps it was as well for Ella Goodwin that death drew her securely to the shores of peace, before she read in Diana's eyes sorrowing reproof and disillusionment, so bitter to the children of men.

## CHAPTER V

### FOR A NOVEL EXPERIENCE

MAJOR MARCHMONT'S days of travel were over. He felt the touch of age upon him, and gave in with a good grace. He laughed when his friends told him he had seen everything, aware that his appetite was still unappeased.

Since Mostyn's childhood he had been far afield, never forgetting his godson, and corresponding regularly with the boy. He watched young Anstey's growth and intellectual development with all the interest of a father, meeting none of those sharp disappointments peculiar to paternal affection.

Arnold, successful in money-making, and ever popular in society, had no pretensions to any special learning. His first wife came of a book-loving family, and from her Mostyn inherited his thirst for wisdom, as well as the private fortune which made him independent.

It was something of a puzzle to Diana and her husband to observe his rapid progress in natural history, languages, astronomy, politics, theology, and general science.

Determined to waste no time, he joined an Arctic expedition as soon as he was of age, which for years kept him from the social world. On his return, he confessed to his godfather that exploration was in his blood, and together the two started for a tour round the world. The older man thus finally impressed the breadth and scope of his own ideas upon the younger, and few could guess all such wanderings meant to Mostyn, in the company of his enlightened and sympathetic companion.

"I shall probably never leave England again," declared Major Marchmont, in a tone which held regret and resignation, as he spoke of that last journey with his godson.

"Why?" asked an eager voice, and a pair of bright, girlish eyes turned upon him inquiringly.

"Because," he replied, smiling, "what could a man want more than a chair under these shady trees, and the companionship of a charming young lady, in the undisturbed atmosphere of his own free country?"

"Now you are laughing at me," cried Candida Whitechurch, putting down her

parasol with a little snap, and poking at the grass. "You know in your heart you think there is nothing so ridiculous as Church Parade. Only last Sunday you announced that we women merely came to show off our frocks and talk banalities. Quite true, perhaps, but we don't like to hear it said."

"Then, if I really offended, how doubly grateful I should be for your kindness this morning in sitting with an old tactless fogey who has forgotten his manners!"

The blushing young face appeared suddenly concerned.

"Oh no! I didn't mean that. I am sitting here entirely to please myself, because I enjoy talking to you. I got sick of walking up and down. Mamma has a positive craze for exercise."

He looked at the girl, who only a few years ago had been a short-frooked child in the schoolroom, and marvelled at the striking change. Now his tomboy friend was a be-chiffoned society butterfly, with just a little more heart and human nature than the majority of her sisters. It was right, of course, that she should flourish in the midst of all the season's joys, yet he felt instinctively that she was made for something better. Though old and grey-haired, Major Marchmont was keenly sensitive to the

pleasurable influence of feminine beauty. He judged her from the standard of long experience, finding little lacking in the fresh bloom, the indisputable grace, of 'sweet and twenty.'

"Do you know," she continued, lowering her voice to a confidential key, "I am rather interested in those friends of yours, the Ansteys. Of course the one who has travelled so much is tremendously clever, and well worth meeting; I could talk to him for hours——"

"So I have observed, and I don't think he would object either. How many dances did you have together the other night?"

"Oh, don't be unkind; our friendship is entirely intellectual. If you think I am flirting with him——"

"I said nothing of the sort."

"But you implied——"

"Those manners of mine again! I have told you more than once, Candida, I lost them thirty years ago among the savages. But your frequent impatience shows me it is necessary to remind you of the fact."

"Do you think," she said, "that travelling a great deal makes people restless and disinclined to settle down?"

"Yes. A wandering life leads many a man to old bachelorhood."

He read her thoughts, though she little dreamed how transparent she could be when off her guard. She sighed as she caught his answer, and traced patterns again on the grass.

"It would be a pity," he continued, "if Mostyn Anstey were to follow directly in my steps. I can't quite recommend the ending of a life in pottering about from club to club, paying country-house visits, and generally boring one's neighbours. To build up a home in youth is the one rational thing for a man to do."

Candida grew thoughtful. She was quite sure Major Marchmont never bored people, but at the same time she applauded his sentiments, wondering if he had expressed them to his godson. For fear she might be suspected of any ulterior motive in approaching such a subject, she spoke quickly of the younger brother.

"You know," she said, with rather unnatural emphasis, "I admire the artistic one; he is so utterly different to anybody I have met before. Why do they call him Haroun?"

"He was christened Harwood, but as soon as he could talk he converted the name into Haroun. His people took it up, and somehow it has clung to him ever since."

"He paints so beautifully!" continued Candida, enthusiastically. "He can't be a day older than I am, yet he tells me he has exhibited for the last two years. He asked if I would sit to him."

"So I heard. Mostyn suggested it; he is very interested in Haroun's work, and believes he has a great future as an artist. The boy will be lucky if he gets you for a model."

"Mrs Anstey suggested I should go and stay at Roehampton later on, and I could be painted then. Of course it's impossible just now with so many engagements."

"I wonder how you would get on with Haroun. He is very different to your friend Mostyn."

"So much younger."

"But not only different in years. He is such a nervy kind of chap, who was never strong, and Mostyn has always made a pet of him. The two brothers are devoted."

"I could see that. I thought it delightful—the undisguised affection of the bronzed traveller for the pale young artist; they seemed so much to each other. Have you noticed how Haroun's eyes express his moods? Sometimes I think them terrible; and a moment later a change comes—they look mild, beautiful, almost holy."

"He has been always a complex character ; his mother once told me that he seemed to have two selves. As a child she used to detect in him some queer Eastern element, and once, she declares, she heard him talking in his sleep in an unknown tongue. She holds some wonderful theory that he recalls a past life, and will give you chapter and verse for the reason of her belief, only I fancy Arnold Anstey objects to it being mentioned."

"But how exciting and uncanny!" gasped Candida. "Did you always think him peculiar—I mean when he was quite little?"

"I remember him as a small boy drawing the interior of Persian shrines entirely from imagination, and he would tell us wonderful stories connected with the pictures. He wrote poetry, too, with the greatest ease ; I have a little piece by me still, which I kept because the diction was so extraordinary for a child. I fancy it was about some fountains, which he called 'the eyes of the earth,' and below he had painted a picture entitled 'The Fishpools in Heshbon.' He always sat on the floor Eastern fashion, and was silent for hours at a time, absorbed in meditation. Very different to Mostyn, who frequently stayed with me as a youngster, and was never still a minute."



"They almost seem like your own children, you have known them so long," said Candida.

She was wishing that Mostyn, with his bright manner and cheery smile, would appear suddenly among this crowd of men and women who no longer interested her.

"Will they be here to-day?" she asked, a little more eagerly than she intended.

"Very likely. I told Mostyn I should expect him to lunch if he were in town, and he knows my special corner in the park."

Candida grew brighter again. Once more the crowd became enthralling. She watched the moving figures anxiously, and her conversation was just a little disjointed.

Some one stepped softly behind them on the grass, pausing a moment before he spoke—a tall, slim, boyish-looking figure, with a sinuous grace of movement unusual in a Britisher. Often he came upon his friends without their observing his presence, for his light footfall had in it something of the scout—who sees, and is not seen.

He watched Candida critically. The light just caught her hair, and showed up the glints of gold which threaded their way through the hazel of her curls. Wonderful hair to paint, he thought, but distinctly difficult. Complicated tasks appealed to

Haroun's nature. He caught the expectant attitude of her quite unconscious pose.

"She is awaiting her own development," he told himself. "Perhaps she feels it has begun already; possibly she knows it will prove interesting."

Then he touched Major Marchmont lightly on the shoulder, and the spell was broken.

After a word of greeting the old man asked if Mostyn were in town.

"He is coming up this afternoon; I left a note at your flat as I passed. He wants to see you particularly, as he is off again next week."

"Next week!"

Candida echoed the words tremulously. She had dreaded to hear that Mostyn was leaving England, not merely because she would miss his friendship, but for other reasons. Gradually she had drawn from Major Marchmont the alarming intelligence that Mostyn delighted in risk and danger, that he courted, rather than avoided, the hurtful things in life. If there was an adventure to be faced, he would fling himself in the way of it with a recklessness the older man censured, while he possibly admired. Foolhardy was the term the time-worn traveller used more than once in reference to his godson's most treasured records;

and though he would not for the world have watered down the high, courageous spirit, he could not disguise from Candida that Mostyn held his life very lightly.

"For the sake of a novel experience Mostyn Anstey will some day throw away the precious gift of existence," Major Jim prophesied. "He has vowed to do certain things before he dies which I have told him are impossible."

These words flashed across Candida's memory now, as she murmured "Next week!" in a startled undertone.

"He is going to Persia," said his godfather, well prepared for the news. "If only I could join him!"

The longing in the voice spoke volumes, and made the simple wish eloquent.

"Why not?" persisted Candida, knowing that the companionship of Major Jim would be invaluable as a safeguard to Mostyn's wild schemes. "Surely you are strong enough; travelling never tired you."

"It is only the journey of years which plays havoc with people," he replied. "You may take that journey at home or abroad, but it's all the same in the long-run, and you can't cheat the ticket collector. I should be a drag now. I couldn't rough it; Mostyn must go alone. I've handed in my papers

to the old man with the scythe. If Time spares me a little longer, I must toady to him by behaving myself properly, till it pleases him to banish me altogether from his court."

Haroun was quick to notice the girl's concern. It amused him slightly, and yet he liked her for not disguising her interest in his brother.

"Trust Mostyn to come back safely," he said, with a smile that somewhat reassured her. "He is quite an old stager by this time; and, besides, he's only going sight-seeing, not like that awful Arctic expedition."

"There may be very great dangers—even in sightseeing," she answered mysteriously.

Major Jim looked up sharply; he caught the significance of her words, and guessed she knew more of Mostyn's plans than he had suspected. His expression warned her to be silent. She recalled the great devotion of the brothers, and the fact that Haroun was not strong. Why then suggest to one so highly strung and acutely sensitive that Mostyn's journey held any special purpose, beyond the desire to know more of a country in which they were both interested? Undoubtedly it was Haroun who first inspired Mostyn to make a special study of that wonderfully poetical land, with its Ferdusi, the Homer of Persia, its store of brilliant

art, its deep historical interest, its mysticism and romance.

As she curbed herself, she was conscious that Haroun's eyes pierced her. Did he suspect she was holding anything back? Possibly the brothers shared all their confidences, and her sudden marked reticence appeared absurd to the younger man. His look was one of quick analytical study. It conveyed to Candida a germ of disdain; it seemed to judge and yet interrogate. Instinctively she feared and mistrusted those eyes.

"You must miss your brother when he is away," she said, conventionally.

"Not so much as you might imagine. You see, I follow him in thought. We haven't quite the same ideas about space as other people. I shall not miss him any more when he is in Persia than if he were in London and I at Roehampton. I try to feel that he may come in at any moment. I never dwell on time, except when I look back."

"You can't look back so very far," laughed Candida, aware that he was as youthful as herself.

A smile stole slowly over his face, reminding her of Major Jim's hint about Diana Anstey's strange belief. Of course Haroun might imagine he recalled a previous

existence, but it could only be a flight of fancy, a stretch of vivid and encouraged imagination.

"I have lived a long while," he said, "the life of poets—love and tears."

He laughed as he spoke; how low and musical it sounded! Not only was he an artist with his brush; he could write a picture, he could almost convey it with a smile and a few jesting words. He had no wish to appear enigmatical, or to adopt a pose; he was always himself, the himself of the moment. Candida wondered whether he really changed, or if the two personalities were a foolish invention to advertise the coming artist and his work through the medium of cheap sensationalism. It had been written "almost the whole world are players," and Candida felt convinced Diana Anstey was playing upon her own vain imaginings.

"Love for your art," she queried, "and tears for your shortcomings?"

"My shortcomings," he replied, "are my only cause for laughter. Without them life would be intolerably dull."

"Somehow," she said, reflectively, "I cannot picture you ever having a plain or ugly moment. You clothe yourself and your surroundings with ideas that are so fanciful

and pretty, you help people to forget they live in a workaday world. I dare say it's very wrong, because it makes for content, and of course we were never meant to be contented."

"Heaven forbid! That would be the last stage of hopeless self-satisfaction, and consequent stagnation. We were made to fight always, like the microbes. The moment we are still—we are lost."

"Yet you can sit for hours without speaking or moving, or wanting to do anything."

"How did you know that?"

"Major Marchmont told me."

"But who said I was doing nothing? That, I gather, was your own supposition."

"A natural one," added Candida, in defence of her hastily-formed conclusion.

"I suppose," sighed Haroun, "that the twentieth-century young lady cannot be expected to grasp the inner meaning of meditation and absorption. She never steals the keys of heaven; she is too busy playing in the recreation-ground of her little earth."

"Are you two quarrelling?" asked Major Jim, mildly.

"Not exactly. We always go on like this when we meet," Candida assured him, sweetly; "it is part of the charm of our

friendship. We decided it wasn't the least necessary to be polite, and of course it's very easy to live up to that idea."

"Better to quarrel to-day than to-morrow," Haroun added, in tones of marked affability. "Miss Whitechurch has drawn swords with me, and I live in the delicious anticipation of some day becoming reconciled. When the happy hour arrives, Major Jim shall join our hands."

"I want to see your brother before he goes," said Candida, well concealing the effort it cost her to boldly announce this wish.

"Mostyn isn't likely to leave England without saying *au revoir* to you. Don't you know that you can count him among your most ardent admirers? It is only because I am a little jealous of him that I try to impress myself on your memory by being disagreeable. I would rather leave an unpleasant impression than not be remembered at all."

It struck Major Jim as he listened that Haroun had something of his father in him—the light wit that at times confused, the satiric vein that makes for unrest.

"I have promised Mostyn that your portrait shall be finished when he returns, if you are willing to do your share. He is



convinced it will be the picture of my life ; he has faith in your powers of endurance."

Candida rose. Her mother was threading a slow way through the maze of chairs and parasols. In her wake were several of Candida's admirers, stalking Mrs Whitechurch in the hope of a word with her daughter.

The world had come back in that brief moment to surround the girl ; she was shaking hands, talking vaguely, and wondering which day next week would be Mostyn's last in England. So few days, so few hours ! She knew her tears were near the surface, and for very fear of them she laughed the more.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ROOM OF MYSTERY

MOSTYN ANSTEY called to see Candida before leaving England, but he did not find her alone. There were others before him in the Mayfair drawing-room who had equal claims upon her attention. He might have read in her eyes a certain rebellion, as she smiled mechanically upon the visitors, made unwelcome by his presence, had not Candida been drilled too strictly in the school of society to betray her feelings. Only when he rose to go, instead of touching the bell, she followed him to the door.

"I suppose," she said in an undertone, "there is no drawing back. You are determined to carry out your resolve. The risk does not frighten you?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"The ordinary round of sightseeing no longer interests me," he told her, "but forbidden fruit holds a terrible fascination. I

have bought and packed my disguise. We shall have a great laugh over it when I return."

"If you ever do!" gasped Candida.

"Such worthless lives as mine are always spared," he answered lightly, and the tone jarred on her.

She wondered whether he would go if he could read all that was in her heart? She saw that he evidently believed she held him in the same scale of friendship as the crowd of men who flocked around her, and an inborn sense of dignity constrained Candida to hide her suffering at the thought.

She remembered only too vividly the few treasured hours when opportunity allowed them to talk undisturbed and alone. Then she caught glimpses of his true self; she guessed his restless nature needed some deeper tie than friendship; she even fancied he had found the woman who could satisfy his needs. But the dream passed, and the world, with its multitude of business and so-called pleasure, forced its way between them once more.

"May I write to you?" he asked.

Her eyes brightened, and she held out a rather tremulous hand.

"Oh yes," she murmured; "I shall be delighted to hear how you are getting on."

From nervousness she spoke in the little social way which chills the deeper passions and puts doubt into the soul of man. If Candida had been an older woman, she might have sealed her fate at that moment. Instead, Mostyn Anstey wished her hurriedly good-bye, telling himself, as he passed into the street, it was a mercy for his peace of mind that he would so soon be out of England.

The letters came. He wrote of his doings rather than his feelings, of the amusing incidents inseparable from travel, always conveying, as far as possible, an atmosphere of happiness, which formed his creed.

To the Anstey family Candida was essentially 'Mostyn's friend.' They associated her with him in a way that secretly flattered her vanity, and soothed the sorrow she tried so hard to hide. Nobody knew that Candida pined. Young as she was, she had learnt the art of acting a joyousness she was far from feeling. It was the fashion to be sparkling and bright; dull faces and unsmiling lips were not well received in her world, and even her own kith and kin never suspected that night and day she followed Mostyn in thought and prayer.

Diana delighted in the girl's beauty and charm of manner. She told her husband she

could wish no better wife for Mostyn, if the friendship should develop into a romance. Arnold was quite of her opinion, only he thought Mostyn was not cut out for domesticity, and would possibly follow old Jim Marchmont's example.

Haroun remembered his promise to his brother, and already the picture of Candida had been commenced. She was a difficult sitter, with many demands on her time, giving him an occasional hour, and always obliged to tear herself away for some previous engagement when the artist most desired her presence.

At last he wrote her a letter in his quick, demonstrative manner, which gave her a glimpse of the real man.

"My dear Butterfly,—You are wearing me to a shadow, you are glorying in my pain. I cannot help feeling you have some special grudge against my nervous system, which hails you as an enemy to be reckoned with in the battle for artistic life. May I paint you in words? Then you shall tell me candidly if I am ever to paint you on canvas. Look here: you rush like a whirlwind (for I have found an affinity between butterflies and whirlwinds) into my studio, bursting with life, to lead me on to destruction and an early grave. You pose yourself—the

pagan gods of grace and beauty taught you that pose ; and I, in the seventh heaven, thank my lucky star for such a model. The fever of work comes upon me with its own peculiar mastery and thrall, the lust of finishing consumes me ; for to the worker at least there is no such thing as time. It is then, Butterfly, that evil stirs within you. Thoughts of the near future throng your poor brain, converted by a hideous civilisation into a modern engagement book. You do not merely count the hours, you count the very moments, and mete them out to me grudgingly, until the obligation under which I am placed becomes too heavy for me to bear. I stop to plead with you : lo ! and behold, you are up and gone—I hear only the snort of your motor car in the distance. Butterfly, there must be a change. I ask this favour. One week, one only, given over to me. My mother is writing by this same post the conventional invitation, but it does not mean a visit of pleasure. I want my prey. At the end of the week, if you take your fair share of the bargain, we will have a picture worth showing to Mostyn on his return. You and he shall toss for it ; once finished, the canvas is no longer mine.—Yours in all sincerity, HAROUN ANSTEY."

Candida answered the letter by return.

“My dear Haroun (he insisted she should call him that),—I hardly realised I was treating you so badly; it all looks very shocking in black and white. Anyway, I mean to reform. I have accepted your mother’s kind invitation, and shall come with pleasure to the Priory. It does certainly mean a sacrifice of many engagements, but between ourselves I’m tired out, and the respite will be welcome.—Yours utterly for one week’s work,

“CANDIDA WHITECHURCH.”

The thought of Mostyn’s home held enchantment for the girl who loved him. To be with his people meant more to her than she dared own even to herself. The hurried sittings had been equally trying to Candida, schooled by an impatient parent to return punctually for a series of afternoon engagements.

The Priory garden was in its glory; such a blaze of blossom and flowering trees were seldom given to English eyes in their native land. Each year had increased the charm of the grounds; there were innovations, too, around the temple. The dome and part of the structure still stood, but, built on to the old walls, a magnificent studio made it a place of importance, a home of art, as

thoroughly Eastern as Haroun's original birthplace.

'Billy,' the idol, reigned in possession of this revised temple, his hideous form dear to the artist from early association.

"Those eyes were the first to see my entry into the world," he would say, touching the glass orbs. "He came to us the day I was born; he is my oldest friend."

Candida liked Haroun, for he never failed to surprise her, and the element of the unexpected was one she especially appreciated.

She still harboured an unspoken fear of his flashing eyes, and this very terror added an element of excitement to their intercourse.

"The picture promises well," he said, standing before his work, and reviewing it dispassionately. "At first I could not make it live; I felt as if I were painting a dead woman. You remember the day I almost gave you up? That was the turning-point. You encouraged me by calling it an animated smudge. You saw animation, and that was sufficient; I knew what to do with the smudge. After that the lips began to smile and the eyes to laugh. I realised the chrysalis stage was over, and the butterfly's wings were beginning to spread."

"I am really a good sitter," Candida



assured him, "though you are difficult to satisfy. I often long to distract your mind with a hundred questions which I suppress. This room holds so many mysteries for me. It always gives me the idea of some sacred chamber in a shrine."

"Yes," he replied, "the whole design was intended to convey that impression."

"I have often wanted to know the meaning of the Arabic inscriptions on the walls, and why they are there."

"Just a fancy of mine."

He spoke lightly, yet she felt as if all unwittingly she had trodden upon delicate ground.

"This mosaic work, too, is exquisite," she said. "Your mother told me you had workmen from Persia to decorate your studio. I suppose all these curios inspire you."

"They carry me back," he murmured, vaguely.

He was standing in the arched doorway, by a heavy curtain of deep rich purple. His shadow fell across a fretwork screen, the pattern of which was reflected on a floor of different-coloured tiles. Rugs of various hues and several small prayer-carpetts made patches of warmth and vivid colour upon the pale tints of the tiled ground,

Candida had always noticed how extraordinarily this place reflected shadows; she fancied, too, there was a rather uncanny echo. At times she caught the sound of voices in the alcoves, but Haroun told her they carried from a public thoroughfare which lay on the left of the studio, behind the shrubbery trees.

She fell into the now familiar position for the picture, and Haroun moved slowly to his easel. The small gold lamp in which a light had burnt when he was born beneath the dome, still hung in its original place. Now it contained scented oil peculiar to the East; Haroun made a habit of burning it both in his studio and at the Priory.

For a while he worked in silence. He made no secret of his difficulty in catching Candida's expression.

"You are so elusive," he said. "I see you in a new light every other minute. Yesterday it was a laughing, dimpled picture; to-day the butterfly seems sad, as if nearing the end of her summer. I often think you perplex yourself. You don't know whether to accept life as a tragedy or a comedy. In that we are alike; I am uncertain too."

"But surely we need not make up our minds; it will be decided for us."

She was gazing at the narrow rows of

Arabic, on a light blue enamelled ground, round the base of the domed roof, on each side of which the skylights were shaded by half-drawn blinds. She thought she would ask Haroun the meaning of the lettering. Instead she said :

"I suppose you first inspired your brother Mostyn with a desire to go to Mashad, where the interior of the great shrine has never been viewed by any eyes but those of a Mohammedan."

"We have often talked of the works of art in Persia. I used to dream sometimes that I was a pilgrim, passing through the courtyard of some vast shrine, and into those great chambers of gold and mosaic. I know it all by heart : my vision-house I call it ; and the place is so familiar, I could find my way blindfold to the tomb. I sometimes repeat the Zieratnama prayers, which I have never learnt."

He spoke as if relating a most ordinary fact. Candida felt a little shiver creep down her spine, yet his words threw light upon a mystery.

"I see now," she murmured, "why your brother has gone on this journey of investigation to Persia ; he wants to find if your dream-shrine really exists."

"The exterior, drawn by me from ima-

gination or memory, coincides with the great shrine at Mashad," replied Haroun, continuing his work with a feverish haste unusual to him. "We have photographs from a reliable source; still, Mostyn is a curious chap, and likes to satisfy himself."

"Too curious," she answered. "I am not so sure your dreams won't lead him to disaster."

Haroun looked up quickly.

"What do you mean?" he queried, then fell to mixing his paints with increased energy.

"I know," continued the girl, "that what he has vowed to do is not safe, or wise, or right. There is danger at every turn—the fear of detection, possibly the risk of his life. He may be betrayed by a false friend or untrustworthy servant, and delivered into the hands of the Mohammedans."

Haroun was absolutely at a loss to comprehend her words, but wisdom kept him from betraying his surprise. He guessed at once that she knew of some plan Mostyn had kept secret from him, which might come to light with a little diplomacy.

"What ground have you for your fears?" he asked, quite calmly. "Mostyn is such an old hand now at foreign travel, he knows the ropes, and how to guard his own skin. He won't walk into any trap blindly; he

looks all round a matter, and forms a decision slowly. He is about as well able to take care of himself as any man living."

"I'm glad you are not frightened; it is such a relief to talk to somebody who takes the matter calmly. I know Major Marchmont doesn't approve, and he has been daring enough in his day. I have never mentioned it to your mother; I thought possibly she had not been told."

"You are quite right."

"I felt very flattered your brother made me his confidante," Candida added, with lowered eyes.

"Tell me exactly what he said to you, then I shall know how freely we can talk together."

Haroun felt rather proud of this ruse.

"Until you mentioned your dreams," she answered, "I was not quite sure you were in the secret, but now I see, of course, that the responsibility lies at your door. He will not be content with a view of the outer wall: he means to enter the shrine disguised as a Mohammedan, to see if your idea of the interior is a correct one. He is convinced he can pass himself off as a genuine pilgrim, not actuated by curiosity, but fired by religious enthusiasm. He is a good actor, and may succeed in viewing the tomb, but surely

you must agree with me the risk is very great."

She spoke anxiously, forgetting her pose, and the business of the moment. She noticed that Haroun's arm seemed to stiffen, then fall nerveless to his side, and the palette clattered to the floor. He made no effort to reclaim it, but stood like one stunned, his face blanching to the very lips.

"Perhaps," she said, breathlessly, "I ought not to have spoken. Is it possible you didn't know?"

He turned a pair of accusing eyes upon her. His voice had entirely altered as he replied:

"Your fault lies in remaining silent so long. Why, in the name of Imam Reza, did you not speak sooner?"

The question was put so fiercely that Candida's heart sank. She wondered who Imam Reza could be. She did not guess he was the martyr and saint of the Mashad shrine.

"Then—you—didn't—know," she gasped, reading the fear and horror in his eyes. "You think there is danger; you are trembling——"

She watched his shaking hands, and saw that some awful inward struggle was distorting his usually handsome features. Drops

sprang to his forehead ; they gleamed on the flesh, and dripped to the eyebrow, as he ruffled his thick dark hair with nervous, trembling fingers. Knowing his love for Mostyn, she guessed what his agony of mind might be at hearing that harm threatened his brother. Her heart stood still, and just for a moment she pictured the bright vivacious face of the man she loved, stiff—cold—still. She shrank back, trying to blot out the mental picture.

"It isn't true," she added, under her breath, "that if he were discovered, they would kill him. It can't be true ; I won't believe it."

"Discovery," said Haroun, in slow, calculating accents, "means certain death. I suppose you know how they will kill him?"

He spoke almost gloatingly, but still she mistook the horror in his face for anxiety on behalf of a loved brother. She shook her head ; she could not answer.

"They will cut his throat slowly—always slowly, mind you—the same with animals, the same with men, and it will be done there in the shrine, his blood for the offence, to cleanse the sacred building from the dastardly outrage of an Englishman's idle curiosity."

He raised both hands to heaven as he spoke, and Candida fancied his frame grew taller, gaunter, more transparent. Expres-

sion had so altered his face, that before her stood a stranger, in the thrall of some vital, awe-inspiring passion.

"Also," he continued, speaking with renewed emphasis, "they will possibly carry their vengeance further afield. His life cannot suffice; a massacre of every European in the vicinity could alone wipe out such a deed."

A little cry escaped Candida; the coloured walls, the brilliant dome, the Arabic inscriptions, all seemed whirling round. She clutched a chair for support; the odour of the scented oil came near to stifling her.

"It is impossible to stop him now; you know yourself it is too late," she gasped. "Then why say these wicked, hateful things? I won't believe they could ever come true."

She was putting away the petrifying thought; she felt angry with Haroun. His highly-strung, imaginative temperament must not be allowed to shatter her own nervous system. There was a God above, and Mostyn's fate was in His hands.

"Shall I make you believe?" said Haroun, drawing a step nearer. "However complete his disguise, he is bound to be discovered. There is a test; I could have warned him."

Haroun's eyes grew glassy; they appeared



to look right through Candida, at some visionary object beyond. He spoke with the inspiration of a fanatic.

"Yes, tell me," she urged. "What test could betray him into the hands of these devils?"

She remembered the story of Haroun's two selves, the dual natures warring in him, the alleged recollections of a past existence. Was it possible that in some previous state he, himself, had been one of these blood-thirsty guardians of the shrine, who would not hesitate to murder an intruder in the hideous way described?

"Mostyn will be taken to the sacred chamber under the dome," whispered the low, vibrating voice. "The floor is about six feet below the level of the graveyard; he will reach it by a flight of zigzag steps."

Haroun indicated the winding stair with a quick, foreign movement of the hands.

"Yes—yes——"

The echo of Candida's breathless words died away in the alcoves of the mysterious chamber. She could almost believe that other voices, weaker than her own, urged him on.

Haroun bent his tall body, and crouched before her, acting the part of the man he described.

"Stooping under a low doorway," he continued prophetically, "Mostyn will enter the Gumbaz. I can see the room, just as he will see it for the last time on earth. It is carpeted with fine matting, circular in shape, and surmounted by a dome. The only light comes from three small wax candles and an oil lamp or *chiragh*."

He knelt on the ground as he spoke, and drew patterns on a blank sheet of paper, beckoning Candida to draw nearer. She watched his quick design, every pulse in her body throbbing, and a maddening pain raging at her temples. She did not believe, but she was afraid. She would like to have laughed off the whole matter, and assured herself that Haroun was either a great romancer, or of unsound mind; but his convincing manner overruled her better judgment; she felt riveted beneath his spell.

"This is a plan of the room," he said, "where Mostyn will be guided to a white stone let into the wall, on which is the print of a human foot, called the *Nishan-i-pa-i-Hazrat Ali Alai-us-Salem*."

The words were written quickly; even as he pronounced them, in an accent so utterly un-English, Candida could hardly reconcile him with the Haroun of an hour ago.

"Mostyn, the blasphemer, will kiss this

footprint, and touch it reverently with forehead and eyes, little dreaming he is in his chamber of death. Then I see him seated at a table where some prayers are read. You know, before this, he must have passed through many rooms, a Syud reading the Ziaratnama prayers; the lips of the unbeliever will even have kissed the Koran! These prayers are the last, however, the very last, before he dies."

"Why? What makes you say that?"

"Because of the test. It is in this chamber he will be asked to lift the sacred stone, a smooth, oblong, dark grey stone about two and a half feet in length. Kneeling on both knees, Eastern fashion, the weight of the body resting on the heels, both arms are placed beneath the stone as far as the elbow joint. Then Mostyn will be told that any true believer can, even though quite weak, lift the stone without effort; but if an infidel attempts the task, he cannot move it, however powerful he be. The stone will bear witness against him; he will die, as he deserves, with the knife at his throat."

Candida sprang away, and looked quickly towards the door. Without a doubt Haroun must be mad. His words were full of gleeful satisfaction; every shred of affection for his brother appeared to have vanished.

"I thought you cared for Mostyn," she said, looking steadily at him, with accusing but pathetic eyes. "How can you speak of him in that brutal tone? I shall never like you again, now I know you are his enemy. I only hope and pray this may be some fiendish and ill-timed joke of yours, for how could you know these things?"

He passed his hand over his forehead. Slowly he was coming back to the self of the man she knew of old—the artist with the great talent, the sparkling wit and charm of manner. Suddenly she felt as if her words had been cruel, that he was like a child, needing some one to guide him gently to the realm of reason.

"I seem to remember," he said, and a sob choked his voice, though the blazing eyes were tearless. "I told you in my dreams I wander—oh, so often—through the chambers of the shrine. I know that stone quite well. I see the pilgrims lift it. Only last night I passed down the stair, and kissed the white footprint on the wall. When I woke, there was a veil of crimson light across my eyes; perhaps it was the red of my brother's blood."

All the womanly pity in Candida came to her aid. She took his thin hands, and held them firmly.

"Haroun," she said, "you must put this all away—out of your mind."

He shook his head sadly ; he was still weak from his past rage.

"I ought never to have told you," she continued, "but I thought you knew. Mostyn was wiser than I ; he guessed it would excite you to know the true object of his expedition. Possibly he may change his mind, remembering Major Marchmont's advice. Other interests will fall in his way, to divert his thoughts from Mashad. Forget that such a wild scheme ever entered his head. You must not do any more work this morning ; you are unwell, unnerved. I am going to leave you here alone quietly ; you might rest on that divan. I have a headache ; I can't sit any more this morning."

She led him to the couch, and he sank upon it gratefully. She pushed a cushion towards him, and as he buried his forehead in the folds she fancied his tears were falling. He looked crushed, weak, helpless. Without another word, Candida stole away. As she passed under the arched door, a brilliant ray of sunlight almost blinded her. The birds were calling from the trees, the enchanted garden seemed miraculously alive with the hum of insects, the flutter of butterfly wings, and the

nodding of flowers in a faint refreshing breeze.

She glanced back at the studio; the startling scene, the fear within its walls, were now like an ugly dream of the night, already fading in the glare of the merry morning, the light, the warmth, the brightness of a God-sent day.

## CHAPTER VII

### HANDICAPPED BY MEMORY

As Candida hurried back to the house, she met Diana in the garden.

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs Anstey, seeing the girl looked pale and troubled. "I thought you were going to spend your morning in the studio."

She glanced critically at her guest. The older woman was a quick reader of character, and had altered little in the last twenty years. She still kept her young figure; her smile was scarcely less radiant than when Major Marchmont first knew her as the lively and perplexing Miss Hastings. Here and there a streak of silver marked a time-signal in her bright hair; the smile, perhaps, came less frequently, though her enthusiasms were even keener, while her interest in life and society had by no means slackened with the march of years.

Diana treasured each experience of the

past as a valuable possession. She knew that through joy and suffering combined her character had been formed. She was a better woman for the life lived in the world and of the world, feeling grateful to God for this love of living that she possessed, and knowing it was the highest compliment she could pay her Creator.

"Nothing is the matter," replied Candida, hastily, in a tone which scarcely convinced her listener; "only your son was rather tired, and I had a little headache too, so we thought a rest would do us good."

The girl had suffered so acutely within the past hour that she was anxious to save Haroun's mother from a similar scene. If the artist were left alone, he might grow calm and reasonable. She thought the outburst was caused by a fit of mental aberration, one which must be overlooked and excused in a nature so excitable and physically weak. His vivid imagination doubtless accounted for the terrible prophecy so heartlessly uttered. Mad people, she knew, occasionally turned against their nearest and dearest. He loved his brother, yet he had spoken as if he hated him. For the time being this strange genius was undoubtedly insane.

One moment Diana stood hesitating, as if



expecting Candida to speak again. She was carrying a large bunch of clove carnations, freshly gathered. It struck the visitor how young and pretty she looked in her simple morning gown, this woman who had brought such a bewildering and complex son into the world.

"I shall go to the studio and see if I can do anything for him," said Diana, after a pause. "Haroun isn't strong, and yet it is not like him to give up a morning's work. He is so interested in your picture, he must be feeling very ill to own fatigue."

She turned away, but Candida caught her by the arm.

"Perhaps," she gasped, "I ought to tell you he is a little upset. I happened to mention that I knew his brother was very anxious to enter one of the sacred shrines in Persia. I had no idea my words would have such an effect. He has really terrible thoughts and ideas on the subject; his whole mind seemed outraged by the sacrilege—in fact, he might have been the most strict Mohammedan, in sympathy with their religious instincts."

Diana felt her blood run cold. Candida was standing on the very spot where Ella had been killed the day after Haroun's birth. Was this the work of Ella's teaching, reach-

ing on even to to-day? She remembered the awful truth that repentance cannot save the penitent person from the effects of errors already committed. Haroun was the victim of those months in which she had learnt to believe, with her friend, in the great and relentless law of Karma.

"Did I ever tell you," said Diana, in a low, agitated voice, "I once became a convert to an ancient philosophy, that of reincarnation or spirit-evolution?"

"No, you have never spoken of it; but Major Marchmont says your son remembers, or at least bears impressions, of a previous life."

"Only because I willed it to be so. I never abated my strenuous mind-work before his birth, nor was I shown my error and folly until too late. He came into the world handicapped by that memory I had striven so hard to retain in his soul. He was never like other children. It was to Eastern customs and Eastern life his inclination turned. Though he was reared in the Christian faith, I knew from the first that the seeds of some other religion troubled his thoughts perpetually. I had surrounded myself with symbols of the East. Undoubtedly I attracted those influences in an elemental form, when the ego that passes

from one incarnation to another was preparing to be born again."

Diana spoke so seriously that Candida felt half inclined to believe her.

"I saw another man to-day," she said. "I did not know him for your son. There was nothing European in the passion and the attitude of his wrath against his brother. At first I thought his excitement arose from a fear that Mostyn might endanger his life through curiosity, but to my amazement I discovered the agony of mind was caused solely by the secret insult offered to the Mohammedans, if the visit to the shrine were carried out."

Diana placed her carnations in Candida's hands.

"Take these in for me, dear," she said, and the girl noticed her voice trembled. "Don't follow me to the studio; I want to be alone with Haroun."

She tried to smile, but the effort was a failure. Candida watched the agile form pass quickly across the lawn towards the dome-shaped building. She wished she could have seen into Diana's heart, for her eyes had held a mystery impossible to fathom. They conveyed so many conflicting emotions. Something of shame and humiliation, something of pride and the glow of success,

blended so strangely, that it was impossible to guess whether she were going to laugh or cry. As she neared the studio, she could have declared that Ella walked by her side. Those silent footfalls had tracked her down the years. At times they were lost in the whirl of life, but in quiet moments the presence reappeared, the sense of the unseen companion sitting or standing at her side. Now and again she felt it in a crowd. She almost said aloud, "You here, Ella?"

The door of the studio stood ajar, just as Candida had left it on her flight to the house. Diana peeped in unobserved. On one of the small prayer-carpets, close to the carved marble fretwork screen, knelt Haroun, but not, as she so often saw him, kneeling in motionless contemplation. The first sound which caught her ears, even as she crossed the threshold, was a low, bitter crying, broken disjointed words, uttered in a foreign tongue. She stood transfixed, knowing no more of what he said than Arnold Anstey when the 'Words of Power,' the Eastern mantras in which Ella instructed her pupil, first opened his eyes to the practices performed in that very place. Upon the face of Haroun a deathly pallor reigned, accentuated by the light from the stained-glass windows in the dome. He was beating his

breast, and shedding bitter tears ; impossible to doubt his mental agony, as he stretched out his palms in supplication. Diana noticed he wore no shoes ; they had been removed, and were lying in a far corner of the room. She went breathlessly towards him. Even then he did not appear to see her.

"Leave him ; see what he will do," she fancied the shadowy form of Ella whispered, with the old command. "We worked for this. You have given a proof to the world, yet you are cowardly, and forget."

Diana shook off the influence. She had no real fear but that Ella's spirit slept peacefully enough ; it was only some brain cell of her own retained the voice, and the magnetism, of a constant companion in the impressionable past. Bending down, she touched her son—her victim. He shivered slightly, and looked up. She wanted to ask him to forgive her, but she knew he would not understand there was anything to forgive.

"Why are you in such trouble?" she asked.

He could not answer ; he only shook his head, and motioned her to be gone. Seeing she paid no heed to the sign, he dashed away his tears, rose languidly, and, crossing the room, began putting on his shoes.

"Where is Candida?" he said at last. "I want to go on working."

"She told me you were tired, unwell," replied his mother.

"Tired? Good heavens, I should think I am tired, weary with the fatigues of a million years."

He stretched his arms, and sighed deeply.

"It is my fault," Diana said. "Haroun, I wish you would tell me what you remember."

"I have told you again and again—the Holy City and the shrine. Haven't I drawn both the exterior and interior a hundred times? It's those drawings which are to bring a curse on my head. Don't you know what they have done?"

Diana answered gently she was sure no harm could come of such an innocent pastime.

"No harm," he muttered, with a short laugh. Then laying his hand on her shoulder, his blazing eyes looked deeply into her soul. "They have raised the devil of curiosity in Mostyn. They have given him this sinful craze to penetrate into the holiest chambers, merely to prove if my memory serves me well. He would outrage the last resting-place of the saint; he means to visit in disguise the mosque of Imam Reza."

"I think not. People often talk of deeds they have no intention of performing."

"That wouldn't be Mostyn's way."

"Do you only remember the shrine?" she queried again.

In the past she had never put such a direct question. Generally she drew her information from him without betraying the smallest anxiety.

"The bazaar, the crowds of people," he murmured, "and the strange noises. I know the city gate, surrounded by miserable beggars who cling to the skirts of the pilgrims—one old man in particular, with a long white beard and an eye missing. I can't remember his name, but I feel he was my enemy, a snake in the grass. I know I suffered horribly; others have suffered, but they are not shadowed by the memory of the pain. I suppose you said it was your fault, because you are responsible for bringing me into the world."

"Yes," she faltered.

She half meant to tell him of Ella, and the scheme they hatched together before his birth, but prudently refrained. He was too unnerved for any such confidence at present.

"It seems to me," he said, pensively, "that all students of theosophy must recognise the continuing consciousness of the individuality in each successive birth, in spite of the personal memory being absent. I am un-

fortunate, for the old spirit has haunted me from my cradle. I didn't have a fair start like you other people."

Diana, watching him closely, noticed he was coming back to his usual self; her presence had dispelled the frenzy to which he gave vent in solitude. The colour crept to his face again; he spoke quite calmly now.

"Don't you think it would be better if you tried to put the whole idea out of your mind?"

She remembered, as she spoke, the earliest indication he had given her of uncanny intelligence as an infant. Before he could speak, he could look at her with apparently steadfast attention; and when she talked to him, as mothers will, he nodded with slow but repeated movements of the head, as though understanding every word.

He made the same solemn motion now which signified assent. Then, as if to act up to her suggestion, the strange, bright smile irradiated his face; he put his arm through hers, and drew her to the door.

"Come," he said, "let us find the poor little butterfly. I frightened her away, and perhaps she will never flutter back. Candida loves Mostyn. Why, didn't you know it? My dear mother, the fact is as clear as daylight; and, now that I have alarmed her about



his safety and cursed him into the bargain, I doubt if she will deign to be friends with me again."

He closed the door of the studio, and drew in a deep breath of fresh air.

"It's odd," he continued. "I don't seem to mind now what Mostyn does, yet less than an hour ago I felt he deserved to die. I wanted the scent of this newly-cut grass and the warm, damp earth in my nostrils. It's better than the oil I burn. Do you know, mother, I am half afraid some day one of my evil fits will fasten on me—and remain. I am not a rational being when those racial instincts rise in me, yet I can laugh at them afterwards. When over, they appear so utterly apart from my real self that I can even see a certain amount of humour in them; I become amused at my own fanaticism. If ever I lose my sense of humour, I shall be one of the poorest devils walking this earth."

Candida watched the return to the house from her window.

The artist waved and flung up a flower, which she leant out and caught. Could that bright debonair face, with the splendid eyes flashing a smile in her direction, be the same as the contorted, vicious, maniacal creature who pictured to her the possible form of

death that might be meted out to Mostyn in the mosque at Mashad?

She felt so completely bewildered, she almost doubted her own senses.

Diana came to her room with reassuring words.

"Haroun is quite himself again," she told Candida. "I want your promise never to refer to what happened this morning. It is better ignored. He told me to tell you he was sorry for what he had said. He is going to try and stamp out those recollections of the East, to live down the haunting knowledge of what has been before. I have promised to help him—I, who was his evil genius, who am responsible."

She spoke sadly; perhaps she knew she had set herself an impossible task. She dared not tell Candida how greatly she feared the future, how—even with her love for life—she dreaded lest she should live to see the end of her experiment.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CITY OF DEATH

Two riders were nearing Kuchan, on their way to Mashad—one an Englishman, blue-eyed, fresh of face, easy in his saddle, and upright as a soldier; the other his foreign servant and faithful attendant, Shamsuddin. The dust of travel was upon them both; Shamsuddin, riding behind his master, showed signs of fatigue.

Mostyn Anstey reined in his horse, and put his handkerchief quickly to his mouth, to stifle a waft of air heavy with the odour of rotting corpses.

Shamsuddin sniffed audibly.

"It's true, sir," he said; "I can smell it from here. Twelve thousand men and eighteen thousand animals all destroyed, in one night—by the hand of God."

Shamsuddin muttered the words with an emphasis peculiar to his diction. He had extraordinary expression of voice and face,

and a wonderful way of picking up accurate information, of sifting unfounded gossip from established fact.

Mostyn needed no assurance to confirm the rumour of the recent earthquake reported from Kuchan by its few survivors. The line of route gave pitiful evidence of a widespread devastation. Miles away from the ill-fated city, prostrate walls and tumbledown villages showed only too clearly that further on something serious had occurred.

"See, sir—riders, horsemen," whispered the quick-eyed Shamsuddin.

Mostyn glanced in the direction indicated. Coming towards him through a cloud of dust, he perceived a couple of Europeans riding across country to a village on their right, followed by a few mounted Persians. Only the day before he learnt that a party of Russian officers had come across the frontier to Kuchan, so, guessing their identity, he rode up and addressed them. They gave him plentiful information. The city of Kuchan was completely destroyed, every building had been laid in ruins, save one mosque, which stood uninjured, except for a long crack down the centre wall supporting the tiled dome.

"It stands to the north-west and is named Ziarat-i-Imam-Zida-Sahib," they told him,

"a marvel to all who see it towering above the mass of hopeless ruin."

"It is the tomb," said Mostyn, "of one of the descendants of the Imam Reza of Mashad."

This remark held little significance for the Russians, who were bent on no such mission of investigation as this secret pilgrim to the great shrine. There was a certain innocence and expression of youth about Mostyn which disarmed suspicion. He had the ready knack of making friends, the talent of popularity. They parted with words of good comradeship, and drifted away in their different directions, the Russians riding loosely, and appearing less at home in their saddles than the Englishman.

Mostyn, undeterred by the fetid atmosphere, made straight for what had once been the prosperous trading city of Kuchan.

Now there was not a brick left standing; the walls lay flat from the very base, almost level with the ground, a silent testimony to the sharp, sudden quaking.

"Why should such things be?" he wondered, surveying Mother Nature's terrific punishment. "One day a city of life and movement, the next a wild, desolate waste of foul horror, a few wooden posts alone marking the past existence of roofs

and verandas rising from clay-coloured ruins of annihilated houses."

To Mostyn the strange miracle of the unshattered tomb seemed like a good omen for the success of his journey. He fancied those unscathed walls breathed a message to him as a pilgrim of research (a word he preferred to curiosity).

"There is work to be done here," he said to Shamsuddin, espying some small search parties, vainly endeavouring to extricate their dead from the débris. "These poor crushed bodies might have been our friends and relations; at least we must offer to help, though the task looks hopeless enough."

He dismounted as he spoke, and climbed over the ruins of the outer wall, disregarding the nauseating atmosphere which came from the town, and ignoring the occasional sharp shocks of earthquake, which had not been noticeable while in the saddle.

Shamsuddin watched his master with increasing admiration. Never had he seen a trace of fear on the Englishman's face. Whatever the journey brought he met each circumstance with zest and fearlessness, involuntarily revealing to his humble companion the strength and beauty of an undaunted, adventurous and sympathetic

nature. To the servant the master was a source of inspiration, a being so perfect that affection amounted almost to worship. For Mostyn, Shamsuddin would have given his life, and felt honoured in the giving.

Here and there weeping women chanted heartrending dirges, or encouraged the workers with words and gestures. Their agonised faces appealed to all that was tender and emotional in Mostyn. He thought of his mother, of pretty Candida, surrounded by every luxury, and compared these hopeless mourners with the women of his memory.

In the city ditch many dead animals, dragged from the ruins, were decomposing in the sun; the place was a scene of horror which the light of day mocked with its Eastern brightness. Those who moved in this place of death appeared too absorbed with their melancholy work to notice that a stranger lent a hand, their brains paralysed by the past catastrophe and the knowledge of present danger. It was not for gratitude the traveller laboured; he gave freely his meed of pity and aid, a small tribute to the victims and their few remaining kinsfolk.

When at last he remounted, sick and weary from the ghastly work, he pressed on to the east side of the town, where some Armenian merchants were camping outside the city

walls, on the banks of the Karez, surrounded by bales of merchandise.

On hearing he was an Englishman they received him hospitably, quickly producing tea and kalians for the travellers' refreshment.

Their story of the earthquake was short and simple, the chief Armenian relating privately the details of the awful night.

"It happened," he said, "about ten at night, when most of the townspeople were asleep. Such a shock, you might well have believed the Day of Judgment was at hand. Ah! and it was a judgment," he added, mysteriously, glancing round to make sure his words reached Mostyn's ear alone.

"What had the people done to deserve such retribution?" asked the Englishman, drinking his tea with relish, as only a thirsty Britisher can.

The Armenian raised a quivering finger to heaven.

"I am persuaded," he answered, solemnly, "that God punished the people of Kuchan for their wickedness, and saved us because we are Christians. Excepting one man with a fractured leg, whom we have with us here, all the Armenians escaped scatheless, out of eighteen thousand souls crushed beneath the ruins."

About the sins of the town he would say



little, but Mostyn determined to learn more in the near future. His plans were deeply laid, and much that was withheld from him as an Englishman would doubtless reach his ears when he adopted his disguise.

Shamsuddin had commenced unloading his mules, and the Armenians were preparing a place for his bivouac, when catching sight of European-looking tents by a grove of trees, he remembered the Russian officers telling him that some of their party were camped near the scene of the disaster. He had promised to call if he sighted their camp, and strolled across to make himself known.

With all the courtesy of their race, they welcomed him to their tent. They spoke French fluently, and were surprised to find that Mostyn was equally familiar with their own tongue. His powers as a linguist had always made travelling easy and cosmopolitan friendships possible.

Seated on the ground, Mostyn was soon chatting freely with his new acquaintances, and sampling the coffee they brought him, though he had but recently enjoyed the Armenians' tea. The little company consisted of an army surgeon, an officer of engineers, and a mining engineer, with a few of the army hospital corps, and some orderlies. The mining engineer, apparently

a very sharp and intelligent officer, explained their presence.

"We hastened from Ashkhabad immediately on hearing of the disaster," he said, "to afford what assistance we could to the wounded. I, personally, am investigating the earthquake in the interests of science, and keeping a record of the exact time, duration, and intensity of the various shocks as they continue to occur."

Even as he spoke, Mostyn felt a slight vibration of the earth. He rose quickly; they all exchanged glances. Immediately a sound like a salvo of big guns being fired in a huge underground cavern, rumbled and re-echoed with a deafening roar. The engineer whipped out his watch and pocket-book, and holding up a warning finger, whispered, "It is not yet finished."

Each man held his breath. The faces of the dead were still vividly clear in Mostyn's mind, but his iron nerves were adamant. Even in such a moment of alarm he had no fear of death. Inwardly he felt sure little harm could come to him until he had fulfilled his mission. If he were to be wiped from the face of the earth it would be by the knife of the Mohammedan guardians of Imam Reza's shrine, not at the quaking of the earth's vengeance upon the Kuchan

inhabitants. He could have given no reason for his conviction, only that his desire had become so strong and definite, that it seemed impossible to be prevented viewing those dream-rooms of Haroun's mystifying recollections.

For fifteen seconds the little group stood motionless, watching the scientist; then the earth began to tremble. Mostyn was conscious of a most unpleasant sensation, as if some one unseen grasped him by the shoulders and shook him violently. This lasted about eight or ten seconds, when once again all was still.

The engineer replaced his watch, and made a note in his book.

"These shocks," he said, "vary in intensity, and were more violent during the night. They have been going on ever since the original disturbance, but are now diminishing in severity."

Mostyn replied that they were apparently local, as he had noticed nothing of the kind the night before at Shirwan, some thirty-five miles away to the north-west.

The Russians were anxious that he should stay the night in their camp, but Mostyn excused himself, returning instead to the Armenians, as he had instructions for Shamsuddin, who proved a willing party to

a plot the development of which must commence before daybreak.

That the Englishman had any secret adventure of an exciting and dangerous character upon his mind seemed utterly unlikely, as he shared, in his cheery manner, the al-fresco meal of the friendly Armenians. The thought of what was before him gave a flavour to every incident of travel, and he did good justice to the mutton kababs, chuppaties, and excellent Indian tea, before lying down to sleep. The thought of the quaking earth had no power to drive away slumber, and for a while Mostyn might have been in his comfortable bed at the Priory, so soundly did he rest.

At 3 a.m. another violent explosion below and the usual shaking forced him back from the peaceful land of dreams. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. The Armenians had kindly placed huge bales of cotton round his sleeping place, the proximity of which became unpleasant as the quaking of the earth increased. He had only just time to clear them at one bound, before they rolled on his improvised couch. He found Shamsuddin standing beside him, trembling from head to foot.

Mostyn smiled at the sight of his palpable terror.

"This isn't good enough, eh, Shamsuddin?" he said. "I told you to call me early, but the powers that be were before you for once—your task was assisted by some mighty underground artillery!"

Shamsuddin drew comfort from the light tone, though he could not smile himself. He replied that he was awaiting his master's orders, and his teeth rattled as he spoke.

"Tell my servants to load the mules as fast as possible, and start at once along the high road to Mashad, making for the British Consulate. I am expected there. They must deliver this letter, which states I am going on a shooting excursion southwards. Meanwhile, I shall profit by the darkness to dress myself in the travelling costume of a respectable Afghan—you know the rest."

Shamsuddin bowed, and vanished in the gloom. Mostyn often thought how like he was to some mysterious satellite, appearing at unexpected moments, without sound, as if springing from the earth.

As dawn broke over the doomed city, Mostyn and Shamsuddin, shaking the dust of Kuchan from off their feet, were also on their way to Mashad, unaccompanied, armed with carbines and riding on mules, with only

a few belongings in their saddle-bags, as pilgrims bound for the shrine of Imam Reza. But the rider whom Shamsuddin followed was no longer Mostyn Anstey, the dare-devil Englishman who had won such deep respect from his confidential servant; he saw beside him a new master, one who took great care to impress his identity upon his companion.

"Shamsuddin," said the familiar voice, "tell me once again who I am, that there be no mistake. Mind you, I have taken to myself an honoured name. I mean to receive respect at Mashad."

"You are a Hyderabad Sardar on pilgrimage," came the quick reply, "a cousin of Naib Nur Mohamad Khan of Kandahar."

"Good. Do I look the part?"

"To the life, sir."

"Shamsuddin, if you are questioned, I trust to your mighty powers of humbug; I rely on your tact and cleverness to assist me in escaping recognition."

"Sir," he replied, solemnly, "there is much risk, but you do not care for that. If you have no fear of the quaking earth, you will have no fear of the fools of men."

The remark amused Mostyn; the spice of danger sprinkled so largely over the enterprise made it peculiarly acceptable and entertaining.

"I mean to learn in my new character," he said, "much that would never be related to an unbeliever. I must make the most of my opportunities in the next few days. I want to find out why that disastrous earthquake is regarded as a direct visitation from heaven to punish the people of Kuchan. The Armenians would say little, but they showed a marked want of sympathy with the victims."

To Shamsuddin his master's desire for information was quite incomprehensible. Of what interest could such things be to the Englishman? Why should he appear so eager to study these worthless people, as he moved from place to place? It was a puzzle beyond solution.

"The English are wonderful," Shamsuddin thought. "They must know everything, and there is no gainsaying that 'must.'"

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SARDAR'S SERVANT

THE next few days were the most pleasant and interesting of Mostyn's journey. He learnt much of the people and their superstitions, while the mystery of Kuchan was explained in full to the supposed Mohammedan pilgrim.

Amir Hussan Khan, Ilkaneh of Kuchan, the evil chief of a wicked people, was known throughout the land as a notorious scoundrel, sunk deeply in every possible vice, and drunk with wine at the very moment of his death. For some years he had been frequently attended by Russian doctors for a painful disease, but failed to repent, until a few days before the earthquake, when, at the point of death, he developed a sudden religious fit. He sent with all speed for the Muttawalli, or chief guardian of the shrine of Imam Zada Sahib, receiving him with great honour, and presenting him with very costly gifts.



Then he informed him that after his death he desired to be buried in the same tomb with Imam Zada. The guardian, on hearing the request, grew white with rage, exclaiming:

"When did I get authority to do this thing? To dig up the tomb of a saint for anyone, and, merciful heavens! for a man who is a blasphemer!"

Protesting that such a proposition was not to be considered for a moment, he left the house of the Ilkaneh in a rage.

The following day he was again summoned, and the subject renewed, fabulous sums of money being offered him as a bribe; but still he refused to consent, and departed in displeasure.

The Ilkaneh, determined not to be baulked of his hope, assembled his heirs and most trusted followers, and commanded, as a dying order, that he must, at all hazards, be buried in the Imam Zada's tomb.

"If not by force of money, then let it be by force of arms," shouted the dying man, foaming at the mouth with drunken and blasphemous wrath, while the bystanders swore to carry out the sacrilegious wish.

A few days after the death of the sinful chief, his heirs so threatened and tempted

the Muttawalli that finally he relented, saying :

"I cannot do it thus, that I should open the tomb itself, and put him in, but there is a way in which it might be accomplished. Do ye dig an ordinary grave close to the foot of the Imam Zada's tomb, and from this excavation make a hole leading into the saint's grave, then put the body of the Ilkaneh through the hole. But if ye do this thing, do not let it become known abroad."

Both parties being satisfied by this expedient, the plan was adopted, and the body of the sinner deposited by the side of the saint. That same night, just as they completed the dastardly act, the earthquake occurred which levelled the whole city to the ground.

The man who related the story to Mostyn fully believed in the judgment. His voice trembled as he gave the details, adding in a whisper :

"Some declare, and I hold it is true, that the saint appeared to the Muttawalli that night in a dream, and said to him :

"How now, O traitor! Hast thou eaten my salt for these many long years, and thus betray thy trust? Thou shalt instantly be punished, and all the people of this wicked city shall share thy doom.'"

Having given utterance to these words, the saint vanished, and immediately every building, save the sacred tomb, was laid low.

Mostyn feigned to credit the whole story, replying that he knew such appearances frequently occurred in the large shrines or ziarats, such as Kerbela, Mashad, etc., where saints constantly communicate with the Muttawallis.

Shamsuddin watched his master's success as an actor—the reception accorded him in his guise of an Afghan—with mute wonder and occasional fear, warning him that at any moment some unforeseen event might cause him to be recognised.

The words appeared prophetic, for shortly after they were uttered, Mostyn met with an embarrassing adventure. Halting for the night after a long day's ride, still some distance from Mashad, they found the caravanserai occupied by some Afghans, and not wishing for their society, Mostyn, at Shamsuddin's suggestion, turned into a village enclosure close by, where they managed to secure a room. The place was very dirty, and at first the surly owner refused them shelter, but on hearing they were pilgrims bound for the shrine at Mashad, he grudgingly prepared a filthy stable,

which he had partially swept out for their use.

"The serai," he informed them, "was occupied by two Afghan Sardars, refugees from Kabul or Herat—Abdul Majid Khan and his brother Abdul Hamid, with several followers."

Mostyn, curious to know more of these men, told Shamsuddin to stroll round, and spy out the travellers, without, if possible, getting into conversation with them.

"But you will know what to say if they should question you," he added, with perfect faith in his confidant.

Shamsuddin bowed assent. His master's assumed name and tribe came as familiarly to his tongue now as if he had never known him by any other.

As he passed the serai, Abdul Hamid met him face to face, and stopping, asked him who he was, and whence he came.

"I am the Sardar's servant," replied Shamsuddin, humbly. "I have come with him from Hyderabad."

"And what is the Sardar's name?" replied the interrogator, not satisfied with such meagre information.

"My master is Sardar Mozaffar Khan."

Shamsuddin relished his part of deceiver,

and was laughing in his sleeve to think that an Englishman could so perfectly adapt the dress, the personality, and the speech of an Afghan.

"To what tribe does the Sardar belong?"

The question was quite a natural one, and Shamsuddin repeated readily enough the words in which he had been so well schooled by Mostyn.

"He is a cousin of Naib Nur Mohamad Khan of Kandahar."

The thick bushy eyebrows were raised in quick surprise; a smile broke over Abdul Hamid's face.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, with evident satisfaction; "he is of my own tribe; we are both Mohamadzais. How long has he been in Hyderabad? Why did he go there?"

The questions were put eagerly; evidently Abdul Hamid's interest was thoroughly aroused.

Shamsuddin considered a moment. They were in a corner; he knew it now. The stranger had no idea of letting the matter pass. He must parry the awkward remarks with the best wit possible.

"I have only been a short time in the Sardar's service," he murmured, "therefore I am unable to say how many years he has

resided in Hyderabad, or why he chose it for his home."

"All right," said Abdul Hamid, dismissing Shamsuddin with a lordly wave of the hand. "I shall come and see him. Tell the Sardar to expect a visit from a fellow-tribesman, who is anxious to greet him."

Shamsuddin hurried away, conscious his heart was beating uncomfortably quickly.

Mostyn guessed at once from his face he was the bearer of unpleasant news.

In gasping accents he warned his master of the unfortunate occurrence. His only idea was departure. They must pack up and leave at once. Five minutes' conversation with a supposed relation would surely be the undoing of Sardar Mozaffar Khan.

Mostyn seldom took refuge in flight.

"If we are not clever enough to bamboozle this old Kalian," he said, lightly, "we may as well give up our mission and go home."

He concealed from Shamsuddin that the thought of the interview roused in him a sensation of genuine alarm. It would be a difficult situation, and at any moment exposure might lay his future plans low; but to run away would be the surest road to suspicion and possible detection.

"The master will face it out?" gasped

Shamsuddin, his eyes half starting from his head. "He will receive the visitor?"

"Certainly; there's nothing else to be done. Must we not show civility to our own kinsfolk? You are a bit of a romancer, Shamsuddin; if our curious friend meets you again, and troubles you with questions, just draw on that splendid imagination of yours. I don't mind betting it won't fail you. Prepare tea, and spread out a few carpets for the reception of my guest; and above all, try not to look as if it were a funeral feast."

Cheered by Mostyn's light raillery, Shamsuddin went about his work with increased respect for his master's sang-froid. He had only just made the tea, and put the place in something like order, when the Kalian appeared. The trembling servant ushered him in to the presence of Sardar Mozaffar Khan, hovering on the threshold to hear the usual greetings, and withdrawing as Abdul Hamid commenced overwhelming Mostyn with questions.

For fully an hour the two men remained together, talking animatedly. Every now and again the anxious Shamsuddin drew near the door, and sighed with relief that his master had not yet betrayed himself. An almost superstitious awe of Mostyn

entered his servant's mind. His coolness and plausibility were things to be wondered at, and revered. Who else could have met such a contingency without flinching?

The listener caught scraps of the conversation from time to time. His master was talking volubly in Persian and Pushtoo, while his guest consumed a quantity of tea and tobacco. No suspicion entered the mind of Abdul Hamid, who attributed the Sardar's imperfect accent to his prolonged residence in Hyderabad, of which Mostyn gave a glowing, and entirely fictitious, description.

On his kinsman's departure, Mozaffar Khan bade Shamsuddin escort the honoured guest to the gate of the caravanserai.

On the way, Shamsuddin had cause to remember his master's words, "Draw on that splendid imagination of yours." The instruction conveyed a compliment, and faith in the powers of a trusted servant.

For a few seconds Abdul Hamid walked in silence. He seemed to be thinking deeply, pondering some problem in his mind. Suddenly he looked up, and remarked abruptly :

"I say! all Mohamadzais are Sunnis. How comes it that your master is a Shaih?"

Shamsuddin knew the moment had come



to prove his ready wit. But for the confidence placed in his inventive genius, he might have found himself tongue-tied, but taking example by Mostyn's fluency, he braced himself to the appetising task of deception.

"I am eating his salt," he replied; "how can I relate this thing to you?" Then pausing dramatically, he looked up from under his eyelids. "But since you have asked me, I can only say that it seems to me in these days men have become women, and women men."

Abdul Hamid's curiosity was arrested by the words. He asked their meaning in a tone which encouraged Shamsuddin to give him some fresh food for thought.

"Listen!" murmured the servant, in a low voice, preparing to let his tongue run riot with a quickly invented tale. "When the Sardar came to Hyderabad on account of some annoyance in Kandahar, the Nizam took a great fancy to him. Nothing was too good for the newcomer. He was made a court favourite, and granted the title of Sardar Bahadur, with 500 rupees a month, and a jagir of twenty-four villages. In fact, he was getting on very well, until he married a pretty Shaih woman of eighteen summers. He has been married six months, but the

woman has been out of temper ever since the first day, and cries every moment to the Sardar :

“ ‘May God burn my father and my mother by fire for marrying me to a Sunni! You must either divorce me or become a Shaih, otherwise we shall never get on together.’

“One day, in desperation, the Sardar answered: ‘Very well, I will accept the Shaih rite; but tell me about the rules of the sect.’ She did so, and the Sardar accepted everything as laid down by her. She has completely enchanted him, and if at mid-day she says it is night, he has not sufficient determination to say it is a lie, but instantly replies, ‘Yes, it is night.’ By these means that woman has gradually forced the Sardar to come where we are at present, saying to him that so long as he has not made pilgrimage to all the Shaih ziarats, she will not believe that he has become a true Shaih. So here is the Sardar obediently making pilgrimages, and, for aught I know to the contrary, he will visit every ziarat in Asia before returning to Hyderabad.”

Shamsuddin paused. He had recited the well-conceived libel on his beloved master with secret pride at the thought of the vast

amusement it would cause Mostyn, when the danger of the moment had been successfully averted.

Abdul hung his head, and was silent for a moment. Then he answered dolefully :

"Without doubt you say well when you declare that your master is no man ; for were it otherwise, he would never have acted so contrary to Afghan custom."

Shamsuddin bade the visitor a respectful good-bye, and hastened back to their stable to repeat the conversation exactly word for word, intensely pleased with himself for having fooled Abdul Hamid. But though Mostyn laughed heartily over the ridiculous story, Shamsuddin never once smiled. He was too conscious of the risk his master had run to indulge in merriment just then, warning Mostyn that even now the danger of discovery was by no means over, since Abdul Hamid's brother, Abdul Majid Khan, might at any moment take it into his head likewise to pay a visit to the cousin of Naib Nur Mohamad Khan of Kandahar.

"I shall never know how I got through that hour," declared Mostyn. "I've been told I have Irish blood in my veins, and now I believe it. I can't think how I kept the conversation going without arousing his suspicions! If the brother arrives, that

will be the last straw. You must tell him I am asleep—or dead.”

Their fears, however, proved groundless, for Abdul Majid Khan, probably hearing Shamsuddin's story from Abdul Hamid, had no wish to visit such a contemptible creature as a fellow-tribesman who had forsaken the faith of his fathers.

At an early hour the following morning, Mostyn had the satisfaction of seeing the whole of the Afghan party filing out of the caravanserai, and shortly afterwards he and Shamsuddin hurried away in the opposite direction. As they travelled along the road to Mashad, incessant salutations greeted them, and shouts of ‘God-speed’ from hundreds of miserable beggars, who crowded round the pilgrims as they neared the Holy City, clinging to their legs, or dragging at their skirts. Mostyn, for all his high courage, was strangely susceptible to the sight of suffering. The deformed and ill-clad wretches filled him with a sense of nausea, while they tore at his heart-strings with their cries for pity. As he threw them money, Shamsuddin could barely refrain from an attitude of disgust.

“They are robbers!” he exclaimed, hotly. “They prey on the bird of passage; they are not worthy to receive.”

He warned Mostyn that he was likely to be stopped at the city gates by the guards, assuring him it was merely a question of blackmail, levied in a most systematic and open manner by all Mashad people, who considered the pilgrims their legitimate spoil, to be cheated in every conceivable way.

Mostyn was quite prepared for the infliction; and satisfying the officer in command, found himself free to enter the fateful city of Mashad.

A strange, dream-like sensation stole over him as he passed up the street leading to the shrine. How often he had pictured this hour, when Haroun explained to him the fancies which filled his mind! Here and there in the crowd he saw eyes startlingly similar to those of his brother—the long, narrow, slumbrous eyes, which could flash and scintillate with true Eastern fire when emotions were aroused. He caught the familiar look in the face of a man playing a guitar outside a house. He saw it again in a warlike individual with black beard and large head-dress of sugar-loaf shape, talking animatedly to some horse-dealers, just starting on their way to India with a fine lot of Turkoman horses in excellent condition, well fed and well groomed.

They had just vacated a nice clean serai in the Khiaban-i-pain, where Mostyn decided to stop.

Would this be his last halting-place? he wondered, as he looked towards the domed roof of the great shrine. It stood out with mystical beauty, in form and shape exactly similar to many a drawing and brightly - coloured picture in the Priory studio.

No thought of faltering, no idea of drawing back, crossed Mostyn Anstey's mind as he surveyed the beauteous building, entrance through the doors of which meant certain death to an unbeliever. The fever of exploration was upon him; the awful joy of adventure sent his blood coursing quicker through his veins; the thrill which heralded danger, making him careless of life, had never held him more firmly in the grip of its deadly fascination.

The routine of English life and the quiet safety of his British home seemed very far away from the traveller. At that moment, he almost felt as if the Priory belonged to another existence. At least, those dear ones in the distant land were in blissful ignorance that this was the eventful evening of his masquerade. With all his heart he wished Major Marchmont could be with him—the

man who never flinched, the old warrior with nerves of steel.

That Shamsuddin feared was palpable from a sudden trembling which possessed him when Mostyn bade him prepare for the expedition and unpack the clothes to be worn on this momentous occasion.

Shamsuddin had certainly his good points, which lay in a fidelity not to be bought with money. Mostyn knew, at least, he could rely implicitly upon the honour and love of his devoted servant.

With thoughts of England, the sweet face of Candida came instinctively to his mind. She floated goddess-like upon the plane of his filmy imagination, a fair, soft, smiling image of exquisite femininity. The touch of her small hand, the little rippling laugh, the grace and lightness of her dancing, as he guided her through a crowded ballroom, were good to dwell upon. Would she care if some racial instinct warned the guardians of the shrine that one unworthy to kiss their sacred book had passed the holy portals with a lie upon his lips?

Mostyn knew well the penalty and mode of death; this very knowledge added a fearful excitement to the enterprise.

He and Shamsuddin were the sole occupants of the serai in the Bala Khana; and

presently the welcome news that all was prepared for the making of an interesting toilet banished the somewhat sentimental thoughts which had temporarily filled Mostyn's mind.

Under Shamsuddin's directions he clipped his beard grown on the journey, shaving off the upper portion above a line drawn from the top of his ears to the corners of his mouth, and cutting the lower part to form a semicircle round his throat. This done, Shamsuddin proceeded to blacken the edges of his master's eyelids with surma.

"I should hardly know myself," Mostyn declared, with an approving nod at the transformed face in the glass. "It's capital; my own father would not recognise me."

He drew on, as he spoke, a pair of Afghan baggy trousers of white linen, the complicated folds of which took some time to adjust with the smartness expected from a Sardar.

"It seems I am to wear clothes enough to compliment the remains of a dozen saints," he continued, winding a red and yellow woollen muffler round his throat, and finally putting over his flannel shirt a Chesterfield coat of rough dark serge, lined and faced with black silk—a garment built in Piccadilly.



Shamsuddin stood by, holding a neatly embroidered kullah, or sugar-loaf cap, with a gold fringed turban attached, to complete the Sardar's costume. On his feet Mostyn wore black English socks and a new pair of Afghan shoes with turned-up toes.

"Am I ready?" he asked, surveying himself in a very small glass, with all the anxiety of a *débutante* about to proceed to her first Court. "Surely I have forgotten something."

Shamsuddin drew from a bag on the floor three articles: a rosary to be carried in the hand, a grey silk handkerchief, and a small cone-shaped piece of hard clay, from the shrine at Kerbela, to be placed in the pocket.

"These," said Mostyn, "I put on my prayer-carpet, to lay my head upon while at my devotions."

Shamsuddin nodded; he was painfully conscious of increasing nervousness. He feared some curse might fall upon his master; he even hinted it was not yet too late to draw back.

"Do you think I would travel all these miles and dress myself up in a fancy costume, merely to turn coward at the eleventh hour?" laughed Mostyn. "My good fellow, I assure you I would not give up this evening's ex-

perience for a king's ransom. By the way, I must wear the signet ring which bears my name; that is the crowning feature of this splendid humbug."

He looked with admiration upon a silver band which he placed on the fourth finger of his right hand. Upon the stone the name 'Mozaffar' was engraved.

"Was ever Sardar more perfectly equipped?" cried Mostyn, still in the same light tone, a marvel to Shamsuddin, when danger lurked in the air. "Nothing has been overlooked, and I must say my get-up does us credit. I am really rather proud of my kit. It makes you a bit particular about your clothes, when your life hangs upon them."

With a due sense of the risk the visit involved, Mostyn, followed by Shamsuddin dressed as a respectable Afghan, left the serai, and proceeded solemnly towards the ziarat.

From the bottom of his heart Mostyn wished at that moment he could have communicated with his brother, fully believing no one in England would be more interested and enthusiastic over this pilgrimage.

Because of Haroun's highly-strung nature, Mostyn had refrained from a burning desire to make a confidant of the artist, but already he looked forward to the day when he could

give a full account to the dreamer of dreams.

The hour of fulfilment was at hand, and who could tell the far-reaching consequences which this reckless act might sow? Mostyn saw no prospect of a harvest ripe with wrath—or red with blood. He walked like a man treading on air; he had absolute confidence in his own power of deception.

Dusk crept over the earth. In the distance the lights from the bazaar were beginning to twinkle.

Nearer he drew to the outer chain placed across the gateway of the bast or sanctuary, the chain he knew he must salute by taking it in his right hand and placing it over his face. Not only was he a traveller, but a student; in every detail he had schooled himself.

Shamsuddin glanced neither to left nor right; he walked mechanically, his mind paralysed with dread for his master. His own life appeared as nothing in comparison with the safety of that splendid specimen of a man who laughed in the face of fear. He remembered Mostyn's smile when the earth shook beneath them. A man who could make a jest at such a moment deserved to live, yet these dogs would kill him—if they knew.

The chain was reached and passed. They were now in the crowded bazaar, and the lights from the shops on either side seemed to Shamsuddin like hundreds of eyes spying into their very souls. He scented an enemy in every form. The vast throng of purchasers, the story-tellers and gossips, were all so many ghastly phantoms peopling a nightmare. The very sound of their voices seemed a storm of accusation; at every step he fancied they would shriek aloud:

“Death to the infidel!”

Mostyn passed quickly through the busy scene, hastening to the sahn or courtyard by the south gate, across which another heavy chain was stretched. They saluted as before, and moved on to the sahn-i-kuhna, or chief courtyard of the shrine. To their left front stood the huge aiwan or gilded porch, near the sacred tomb chamber, on which the longing eyes of pilgrims yearn to rest. The gilded porch glistened in the reflected light from the glaring, noisy bazaar. Mostyn paused to view it with a sense of keen appreciation. He remembered Haroun had drawn this porch when quite a boy, and cried, because he declared to colour it was quite impossible—the gold was not to be bought.

Was this the first evidence of a great discovery? Mostyn's pulses quickened. He

almost fancied, as he asked himself the question, that Shamsuddin must hear the beating of his heart. But Shamsuddin could only catch that awful mind-cry which re-echoed in his brain :

“Death to the infidel!”

## CHAPTER X

### IN THE PRECINCTS OF THE SHRINE

OUTSIDE the gilded porch Mostyn looked round critically, registering in his mind every detail of the scene. He had a marvellous memory, one which served him in good stead on all his previous wanderings, and he was anxious now to remember the route exactly, making a mental note of each fresh stage.

The courtyard appeared in the dusk to be about a hundred yards long from east to west by about seventy broad from north to south. Through the centre there flowed a stream of water in a deep channel, composed of large blocks of dark-coloured stone. The yard itself was flagged with gravestones, each covering two or three bodies of the faithful, whose privilege it was to be left undisturbed for thirty-two years, at the end of which time another departed Mohammedan might be deposited in the same grave. The

enormous fees paid for such a holy resting-place proved the chief source of revenue to the shrine.

From the north, south, and east respectively, three large aiwans or gateways gave access to this courtyard, each standing sixty feet high. Mostyn noticed their beautiful scheme of decoration, remembering with the same uncanny thrill Haroun's description of these gates, and his assurance that the fourth aiwan on the west, or tomb side, was not used for ordinary traffic. These details, given so confidently by his brother, were startlingly accurate. Mostyn noted that the walls between the gateways were about forty feet in height, and consisted of a double row of balconies, with large single archways, and richly decorated recesses at intervals, the one to the left of the west aiwan being completely closed by a beautifully carved marble fretwork screen, in much the same style as that of the Taj at Agra. Though Haroun had never described these walls, the fretwork screen in the studio at the Priory was a miniature imitation of the one upon which Mostyn now rested his astonished eyes.

It was a relief to observe that so far their presence attracted no attention. Hundreds of pilgrims were wandering about the courtyard, while many knelt outside the fretwork

screen, close to the walls which hid the tomb chamber, beating their breasts and wailing pitifully, their eyes streaming with tears, and their palms outstretched in the exact attitude Haroun adopted in his hour of agony, when Diana found him weeping bitterly in the temple at Roehampton.

Inside the sahn several vendors still did a good business even at so late an hour, with turquoises, rubies, crystals, jade, etc. Passing them by, Mostyn and Shamsuddin walked solemnly to a tall recess on the right of the southern aiwan, where they took off their shoes, placing them in charge of the Kofshbardar, who guards the footgear of pilgrims and visitors. Already some sixty or eighty pairs of slippers were neatly arranged in rows. Mostyn noticed that the guardian eyed him narrowly, as he raked in the shoes of the newcomers with a long rod armed with crooked iron prongs. He seemed to pass over Shamsuddin, and rivet his penetrating gaze especially upon the English impostor in the immaculate guise of a Mohammedan pilgrim.

Mostyn turned away as quickly as possible without betraying any undue desire for haste. Those eyes had seemed to look into his very soul, to read his secret. To Shamsuddin, who had also noted the expression, it ap-



peared as the first signal of his master's doom. The old saying that conscience makes cowards of us all returned to Mostyn at that moment, and he started unnecessarily as a small Syud boy with a black turban darted up to offer himself as a guide. Seeing they were strangers, he asked eagerly if he should read the Ziaratnama prayers, and show them the sights.

Mostyn gave a signal of dissent; he was on his dignity, and must live up to the importance of his assumed rank.

Shamsuddin spoke for him, in lofty and contemptuous tones.

"No; you are too young," he told the boy, with a wave of his hand. "We want some full-grown man to guide us and read the prayers for the Sardar."

On hearing the words, another Syud of some forty years advanced respectfully, and bowing low, muttered:

"Your slave is present; my name is Akhoond Syud Reza."

Mostyn accepted his services, still retaining an air of calm superiority, while Shamsuddin at once directed their guide to read the Ziaratnama for them. He wondered what his master's feelings could be under his outward coolness. Surely some lurking fear of possible disaster must obtrude itself in

such an hour of crisis. One false step, one breath of suspicion, and his life would not be worth a moment's purchase.

Mostyn knew only too well the danger threatening him at every turn. He was human enough to be acutely alive to the horror of his doom were he captured within the sacred precincts. He knew the Moham-medan's methods of killing, just as Haroun had known them in that distant England of safety and peace. The knife, with its slow but deadly mission, would have been no surprise to the bogus pilgrim. He came reckoning the cost, willing to risk the hideous consequences of this fervently desired adventure.

Akhoond Syud Reza led them into a small chamber behind the archway; then turning sharply to the left, entered a long, narrow room, the Tanhid Khana-i-Mubarak, paved with slabs of white marble, and illuminated by candelabra fixed to the walls, which, catching the reflected light, revealed bunches of flowers in mosaic, a decoration that somehow seemed familiar to Mostyn. Possibly in Haroun's numerous drawings this very design may have appeared.

The Syud halted. Opening his book, and raising the forefinger of his right hand, he commenced reading part of the Ziaratnama

in Arabic, Mostyn and Shamsuddin standing on either side of him, with their fingers also raised. The mockery of their attitude struck Mostyn with strange compelling force. For the first time he felt a certain horror of what he was doing. To these people, the hallowed spot, the beautifully-worded prayer, were dearer than the creed of many a lax and sickly Christian in the throes of an only too common spiritual paralysis. What would even such a one think of a professing infidel who, from curiosity, mingled his presence with the worshippers at Christ's altar, and, with blasphemy in his heart, violated the Holy Sacrament? Perhaps it was the absolute stillness, the magic of the place, which first implanted the thought in Mostyn's mind. He felt under a spell, controlled by unseen influences, condemned by voices which spoke only to his soul. A sense of relief came over him when the Syud moved on, leading them down the room to an exit near its southern end, which formed the entry to a larger chamber, with floor of exquisite mosaic work and walls covered with Arabic inscriptions, such as Haroun introduced to make his studio like the famous shrine of his tormenting memory.

The gold lettering in parts was identical with that at Roehampton.

This room adjoined the tomb chamber, and here the Syud completed his reading of the prayers, before guiding them into yet another apartment to the north of the sepulchre.

The beauty of the place for a moment took Mostyn's breath away. He forgot his horror, forgot his danger, in the pure delight of the ornamentation surrounding him. The floor resembled the most beautiful carpet, though in reality only a few rich pieces were spread, on which some dozens of the Koran lay, the rest of the dazzling pattern being mosaic work, of a fineness Mostyn had never yet seen, or contemplated could exist. The copies of the Koran were all in manuscript, and the Syud, taking one, kissed the book, and placed it to his eyes and forehead, bidding them follow his example. Then all three knelt, the Syud holding Mostyn by the wrist while he read a couple of pages. The touch of his hand was peculiarly disagreeable to the Englishman, but the slightest sign of drawing away would have been fatal. It seemed quite long, though in reality it was only a few seconds, before the guide released him. Laying his Koran aside, he produced a pocket-book, and demanded Mostyn's name, tribe, residence, etc. Sham-suddin, as the Sardar's confidential follower,

stepped forward to give the required information.

His master listened, well pleased by Shamsuddin's excellent acting. The servant's voice had not the ghost of a tremor, though in reality his knees were knocking together with fear. He would have given his whole life's savings to find himself safely outside the shrine at that moment.

"Name?" queried the Syud.

"Sardar Mozaffar Hussain Khan," replied Shamsuddin stolidly, watching the letters as they were written down, and knowing that for all time this witness to a gigantic lie would be kept in the records of the shrine, should they escape without detection.

"Tribe?"

"Afghan. Mohamadzai."

As he uttered the last word his lips grew dry. Mostyn could see that he swallowed with difficulty, and his eyes were starting forward, as if their owner were about to choke. He quickly recovered himself, however, and as the Syud was writing at the time, he had no chance of seeing the change of expression.

"Father?"

The question had been expected, and prepared for in advance, each answer being due to Mostyn's forethought and knowledge.

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"Mohamad Hosain," said Shamsuddin, and his unhesitating retort brought to his master's mind a mental vision of Arnold Anstey, the good British parent, with little love for travelling, and less for books and learning. A trip made easy on the Continent was sufficient to appease in the easy-going Arnold that 'great law of change' which every nature must satisfy at some period of its career.

"Mother?"

"Mariam."

A wondering sensation stole over Mostyn, as he realised he might be near to reunion with the mother he had lost so many years ago.

"Rank?"

Were these questions never going to end?

Shamsuddin continued patiently to satisfy the thirst for information.

"Sardar Bahadur of the Hyderabad Army."

"Dwelling?"

"At present in Mashad."

The Akhoond, closing the book, turned to Mostyn.

"The Sardar's name," he said, "and the names of his parents, are duly entered in the register of the Ziarat of Imam Reza—on whom be peace. You must now pay me

sixty krans in order that for thirty years two 'siparas' of the Koran Sharif may be read each year on your behalf, and I will also see that your parents are benefited in the same way."

Shamsuddin, knowing the usual course of action on an occasion of this kind, commenced haggling over the sum, in a manner which brought the first touch of humour into proceedings fraught with fear, and possibly bearing the fruit of death.

Mostyn listened in silent amusement, while his loyal attendant beat down the guide to forty krans, which were counted over on the Koran. Having finally settled the account, they were free at last to enter the sepulchre of Gumbaz-i-Hagrat.

Following the example of other pilgrims who had already entered, Shamsuddin and his master held handkerchiefs to their eyes, and sobbed loudly, as they passed into the sacred chamber by its golden door on the north, towards which the head of the Imam is said to lie.

The scene within was indeed strange, weird, unearthly. Round the tomb, walking slowly, or clinging to the railings in fanatical fits of violent struggling and hideous contortion, were sixty to seventy persons, some openly violating the rules by fighting each

other in their frantic efforts to reach the corner rails, and handle or kiss the silver padlock, the chief attraction to devout pilgrims. Loud were the howls of grief or excitement, the only unconcerned faces being those of the guards, who stood sullenly in different parts of the room, a strong contingent especially grouped round the east door, which was closed. Evidently they were employed to watch every movement of each pilgrim. It seemed to Mostyn, as he entered, that he must be the special object of their scrutiny, so closely did they follow him with their piercing and terrible eyes. The traveller had experienced many a bad moment in all four continents, but he could remember no such feelings of dread since the early days of childhood, when thoughtless nurses told him 'bogey stories,' seeking to repress his high spirits with fearsome tales of spooks.

To avoid the unpleasant gaze of these warlike-looking men, he turned quickly, and contemplated the silver door on the west side, which, like the north, was unguarded.

This must be the chamber Haroun knew so well in his dreams, for it coincided strikingly with his description. He had always termed it "a chamber of fear."

"The pilgrims cry something aloud," he



had often told Mostyn, "but I can never hear the words. I only see their lips moving, and sometimes I feel they are cursing me."

A well-known scent pervaded the air, which made the amazing chamber seem almost home-like to Mostyn. He glanced upwards at the cupola, some thirty-six feet high, lined with gold, from the centre of which hung a massive chandelier, furnished with small lamps, in which burned the scented oil his brother loved. The mosaic work covering the walls was richer in gold and inlaid jewels than the previous designs, which until now had seemed to the Englishman the finest in the world. Here the floor of black and white marble was inlaid with the same delicate work in dull colours.

Moments seemed like hours, under the marked scrutiny of those silent watchers, the guards who dogged Mostyn's steps with unconcealed attention. He wondered if the Kofshbardar, who had looked at him so strangely when raking in his shoes, had sent some word of suspicion that the Sardar was not all he appeared to be.

Anxious to pass on in as short a time as possible, Mostyn moved to the centre of the chamber, and surveyed the tomb, enclosed by perpendicular railings seven feet in height, with silver filagree and scroll work

between. He knew he must store in his mind each detail for Haroun's benefit—the bars at the corners, square and very massive, the curtains screening the tomb inside the railings, the gold and silver tablets, the large old-fashioned padlock, which the pilgrims were still striving to touch. As they jostled against him, he thought more than once that an arresting hand touched his shoulder, to claim him as the legitimate prey of this palace of the dead. Mostyn's nerves, strong as they were, began to feel the strain. He knew there was much still to be seen and done, and the awful howling of the pilgrims depressed him. He had once at Gashmiran, a lonely village of Bashakerd in south-east Persia, seen strong men weeping bitter tears on beholding the Shibih or Passion Play, but these pilgrims from far-off lands impressed him more deeply with their excitable display of grief, as they viewed the tomb of the saint and martyr, bewailing his cruel death, and loudly cursing his murderer.

As Mostyn stood by the railing known as the 'Zirreh,' he listened to catch the phrasing of the curse. Surely there was some familiar word ringing in his ears, wafted to him from varying voices in different corners of the shrine. With an effort he collected

his scattered thoughts, and followed the lament, syllable for syllable.

The cries were distinct enough, echoing round the room with an uncanny significance for the disguised Englishman.

"Lanat bar Haroun," shrieked a shrill voice behind him. "Bar Mamoun lanat," growled a gruff bass. "Lanat bar Harouna-al-Rashid," cursed another.

"Haroun!" The name his brother had himself adopted in infancy was the man these voices cursed, in this, the dream-chamber of fear.

The sound seemed to stagger Mostyn, and he forgot that a certain formula was required of him, until he caught the sound of Sham-suddin's prompting whisper. Quickly he recalled to mind that the devout pilgrim must walk three times round the railing of the tomb, each round being called a 'zawaf.' The Syud accompanying them recited 'Sarawat' in Arabic from the Koran each time they stopped to touch the railings or the padlock, joining them in the curses upon Mamoun and Haroun, which they were bound to utter at an appointed spot. To fail in any of these details would have instantly betrayed a lack of fervour, and brought upon them the immediate suspicion of spying guards.

To Mostyn the cry of "Lanat bar Haroun" always seemed uppermost, bursting from the throats of all sorts and conditions of men and women, from well-to-do merchants in small round turbans and long black cloaks to miserable, palsy-stricken beggars in dirty rags. There none appeared greater or less than another, for the Persian saying goes: "Kings and donkeys are all equal in ziarat."

During their third and last round, on reaching the centre of the railings, Mostyn, according to custom, threw over the enclosure into the tomb five silver krans, wrapped in white paper, previously prepared. This he knew was done by almost all respectable pilgrims, the amount deposited on the grave being optional. He could not make out the exact place where Haroun was buried, but the pilgrims cursed him on nearly reaching the east side of the tomb.

Having completed their third 'zawaf,' they walked out of the room backwards by the silver door, and entered a small but exquisitely decorated chamber adorned with marvellous inscriptions, and hung with jewels, amulets, and tablets encrusted with precious stones.

Mostyn drew his breath more freely; the change of atmosphere was welcome. The

startling words still rang in his brain, though he no longer heard the cursings round the tomb; he fancied it would be long before he could forget those cries of "Lanat bar Haroun." It was a relief to escape the close, uncomfortable scrutiny of the guards and enjoy the impressive magnificence of the Persian art without feeling those watching eyes burning into his soul. There, as throughout the shrine, all was on a scale of grand magnificence, giving a sense of vast and solid riches, no attempt at tawdry display, but the beauty which wealth and talent could alone supply. From this room they passed to a fine hall, through a large recess, or shah nishin. At first it was too dark to distinguish the surroundings clearly, the faint lighting giving a mysterious air to the dar-es-sayida, as the hall is called. Here again pilgrims and others were praying aloud, or kneeling in deep thought on small prayer-carpets, reading and swaying their bodies backwards and forwards as they told their beads. To Mostyn they looked like so many ghosts. He felt that he and Sham-suddin might well have been disembodied spirits, but for the attendance of their guide, anxious to show them every sight for which they had previously paid.

Leading them sharply to the left, at a few

paces from the door he stopped in front of a large, round, embossed silver tray or patnus, cemented into the wall some four feet from the ground.

This, he explained, was the tray in which Mamoun-al-Rashid (brother of Haroun) placed the poisoned grapes, on eating which Imam Reza died in great agony.

With the utmost veneration Mostyn and his servant saluted the relic, kissing it and touching it with eyes and forehead.

The Syud looked on approvingly ; he at least was well satisfied with the behaviour of the pilgrims, and guided their steps reverently to an alcove in the same wall a few paces beyond. It contained a smooth but somewhat uneven stone, about two feet six inches long, raised a couple of feet from the ground.

"It is said," he murmured, "that when Hadrat Imam Reza was enduring intolerable agony from the poison, he leaned against this stone in the cell in which Mamoun-al-Rashid confined him."

The Syud pointed as he spoke to an indentation in the side of the stone.

"That," he continued, "was mercifully caused by a miraculous softening of the stone, in order that the aching flesh of the martyr should not be bruised or cut by its

sharp edges and corners, now made smooth by the constant rubbing and kissing of pilgrims."

Mostyn also saluted this stone, making a note of the hall in his memory while the guide was speaking.

"About a hundred feet long," he calculated, "by forty feet broad, paved with slabs of dark marble, and ornamented with mosaics composed of different-hued tiles."

He wanted to give Haroun an absolutely accurate description, should he escape alive to return to England, though he knew well that even there his life would not be safe if he spoke too freely of his adventure. He must tell the details only to those he could trust, since the Mohammedans would travel the world over to avenge such a deed, should this masquerade come to their knowledge.

At the south and north ends of the hall were two large doors, the former leading into the mosque of Gauhar Shah, the latter into the south side of the sahn-i-kuhda, or principal courtyard of the tomb, where they had left their shoes on entering.

The route now led to a huge entrance porch or shah nishin, looking into the yard of Gauhar Shah's mosque.

The Akhoond led them with great reverence to a side recess of the shah nishin,

and pointed to a flat, oblong black stone, twelve feet long, six broad, and three feet six inches thick, lying on the ground.

"This stone," he said, in an awed voice, "is the very same upon which the body of the martyr was laid out and washed."

Mostyn and Shamsuddin both feigned to be deeply impressed by the sight, and following the example of others, walked three times round the stone, with both hands pressed against the upper edge, worn by the palms of generations of pilgrims.

This done, their guide appeared anxious to hurry them back through the large hall towards the sahn-i-kuhna; but Mostyn lingered a moment under the porch, to view the magnificently decorated façade of the Masjid-i-Gauhar-Shah, on the opposite side of the courtyard.

In the centre a big stone tank, some forty feet square, appeared to be used indiscriminately for drinking and washing by the poorer pilgrims, who flocked to it either before or after their gratuitous meal at the kitchens hard by.

Mostyn pointed to a space near the tank, enclosed by a wooden railing six feet high.

"What is that enclosure?" he asked.

His eye had missed no detail of the many bewildering scenes through which they had



passed, and this mysterious piece of ground puzzled him.

"It is called," replied their guide, "the Masjid-i-Piraka, or Masjid-i-Pir-Zan. On this spot, at the time Gauhar Shah's mosque was being built, there stood the house of an old woman, who refused, in spite of all offers of compensation, to remove from the place. 'I also,' she said, 'shall build a masjid here.' When Gauhar Shah's mosque was completed this piece of ground was railed in to show that the old woman's wishes had been respected."

Mostyn liked the little story ; determination always appealed to him. He thought how few Englishwomen—or men either—would, for the sake of sentiment, fancy, or religion, be proof against the test of gold, the fierce power of the all-conquering bribe. As he grew more accustomed to his surroundings, his sense of uneasiness lessened. Shamsuddin divined his master's state of mind, and regretted that it should be so. He knew too well that when peace appeared at hand it was often the time to make ready for battle. The strain on his mustered courage grew greater every minute. He wanted the affair over ; he pined secretly for a safe refuge, far from these forbidden walls. More than once a horrible fear seized him that

his reason might give way, and his voice cry out the history of their intrigue.

"An Englishman in disguise—a Christian within your walls!" He could picture but too well the awful consequences of such an act of madness. The whole yelling multitude of fanatical men and women, mustering from every corner, with the sentence of death writ boldly on their savage faces, with murder blazing from their eyes, and an insatiable thirst for blood. Not Mostyn alone, but other victims beyond the walls of the sacred building, would likewise be hurled into eternity, and massacred by the flashing blades of butchering knives. Yet this man, committing the ghastly outrage against the time-worn faith of an ancient land, could linger to listen while his guide told of a persistent squatter having gained for herself a victory within these hallowed precincts which might prove his death-place.

Once more Shamsuddin wondered what this Englishman could be made of, to conceive and carry out such an idea, with an audacity as amazing as it was foolhardy.

Mercifully they were moving on again. Mostyn had no further questions to ask. Now they came to the less important part of their visit, which necessitated a return to the place where they had left their shoes.

The thought that he must once more meet the eyes of the Kofshbardar was by no means agreeable to Mostyn. Those were the eyes which first appeared to condemn him, to read his true character. Now as they viewed him afresh approaching with Shamsuddin and the guide, Mostyn fancied their pupils dilated, changing from ebony to coals of living fire—probably a mere stretch of nervous imagination, but none the less terrifying to the guilty party.

As quickly as possible he handed the Kofshbardar two krans, the man marking his every movement as he shod himself, much as a cat watches a mouse.

Perhaps he was sharp to detect the undue haste of the Sardar, who dared not return the penetrating stare, which fixed itself upon him with mesmeric force.

Mostyn felt his throat grow hot and parched; he longed for a drop of water to cool his tongue.

“No chance of a drink, I suppose?” he whispered to Shamsuddin.

The words had scarcely passed his lips when they saw before them a huge pillar of granite, roughly hewn into the shape of a font or drinking-place. Here the sweet water was offered to thirsty pilgrims in exchange for a few small coins received by the man in

charge, who ladled out the cool liquid into a brass cup. It certainly appeared a miraculous pillar to Mostyn ; and he wondered involuntarily if Haroun could have described it, noting its proportions for future reference when talking with his brother. Six feet in height, the supporting pillar resting on a broad sloping base, while the desire for a cooling draught had been granted by the presence of a basin, filled with water from a skin.

Certainly this welcome refreshment did much to fortify Mostyn against the haunting memory of the Kofshbardar's eyes.

"There must be a story about that stone," he thought, and tactfully drew his guide on to the subject, without betraying his ignorance.

The stone, he learned, was said to have fallen in a shapeless mass from heaven, and notwithstanding tremendous efforts, could not be removed from the sahn. One night the Mutawalli, or chief guardian, received orders from the Hazrat, in a dream, to leave the stone on the spot where it had fallen from the skies.

"Have it cut out properly for holding water," said the martyr ; "but do not attempt to remove it from its place."

This was accordingly done, the story being passed down, in perfect sincerity and belief, to generations of grateful pilgrims.

The Syud Reza, leading the way to the left of the western central gateway, showed the cells of Kaid Khana, places of imprisonment for those offenders punished inside the bast by the Mutawalli Bashi, who holds supreme authority within the sacred precincts.

Mostyn, always averse to the sight of suffering, felt his heart sink as he viewed in silence two long cells or rooms, barred with iron, and occupied only by four miserable-looking men. They shouted loudly to him for alms, with imploring gestures and tear-drenched eyes, proclaiming their innocence the while.

He wondered for what offences they were thus confined, while he, if his crime were known, would not have been considered worthy even to stand by such wretched specimens of humanity. Yet he breathed the free, fresh air, unfettered and respected, while their haggard faces, tattered clothes, and scarred bodies, testified to the treatment received at the hands of their persecutors.

Mostyn, anxious to alleviate their sorrows, told Shamsuddin to fling them some coins, but the action was stopped by the Syud, who said that to give alms to prisoners was strictly forbidden.

"What are their crimes?" asked Mostyn,

turning away that he might not read the disappointment in their faces.

"They are inhabitants of Mashad, who were caught in the act of stealing the shoes of pilgrims left outside the various entrances to the shrine."

Once more Mostyn thought of the Kofsh-bardar's accusing eyes.

"They were soundly beaten," the Syud continued, "and sentenced to fourteen days' imprisonment by the Mutawalli Bashi. They receive a beating every morning, and are fed twice a day from the kitchen of the shrine."

Their haggard features gave testimony to the physical suffering daily inflicted.

Even as the Syud spoke, Mostyn felt Shamsuddin touch him with a finger of warning. He turned sharply, and following the direction of his servant's eyes, read the cause of his alarm. Certainly the sight was enough to shake stronger nerves than Shamsuddin's, and for the first time he realised that Mostyn also (fully aware of his peril, and in no way underrating the risk they ran) shared his sense of overwhelming fear.

The worst was upon them, for marching from the south-west door, with drawn swords, came a party of fifty men, under the command of an officer. They were dressed in dark uniforms, with Astrakan hats, in which a

special badge marked them out as guards of the shrine. They were making straight for the sham Sardar and his trembling follower.

Mostyn guessed at once that the Kofsh-bardar with the piercing analytical eyes was at the bottom of all this. If some visionary powers, the occult magic of the seer, had made the man suspicious, a hue and cry would be the result, and the guard turned out to witness the speedy destruction of the infidel.

The soldiers hastened their steps as they approached Mostyn, the light falling on their drawn swords being the one touch of brightness among this marching body of fierce-visaged men, swooping down upon the victim of a nation's wrath.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MYSTIC STONE

SHAMSUDDIN was in danger of entirely losing his presence of mind, and betraying both himself and his master before the expected arrest. Mostyn saw, not only the blanching of his face, the nervous twitching of lips, and glassy expression of fear-strained eyes, but the inward desire for flight, the awful temptation to run—anywhere—anywhere—away from this habitation of dread.

Alcoves and corners in the dark made inviting places for refuge, and Shamsuddin was so quick of movement, he might possibly, while attention was centred on Mostyn, have mixed himself up with the crowds in the bazaars, and vanished away with the cunning and wit of his race.

The soldiers were almost upon them now, but Mostyn spoke no word ; he just looked at Shamsuddin, and that eloquent look conveyed volumes. It braced his servant to fresh



loyalty—it drove completely from his mind the craven thought of deserting his post. To die at the side of such a master, would not this be an honour? The unhappy man assured himself he was glad of a chance to display the heroism in his heart; he was even curious to see how Mostyn would meet death.

“Who are these men?”

The Sardar put the question to his guide without a trace of emotion. He was crushing, under an outward calm, the regret that forced him to acknowledge life—dear life—was better far than the accomplishing of a mission such as this. The bitterness of failure already turned his pilgrimage to an aimless, foolhardy, abominable proceeding, productive only of Dead Sea fruit.

The Syud made answer calmly, in a tone which suddenly changed the whole colour of the scene.

“They form,” he replied, “part of the guards of the shrine, who number seven hundred men in all, and of whom about fifty are told off daily for guard duty in and around the Ziarat.”

Shamsuddin almost fell to the ground, so great was his relief, while at the same time he cursed himself for a dastardly coward, recalling his craven fear, his half-resolve to

flee. He could just see that Mostyn caught his breath and flushed slightly : it was the only sign of an intense inward gratitude to God, to whom he had lifted his heart in earnest prayer for deliverance from peril. The soldiers were passing close by now, marching round the 'candlestick' to the western gateway. As they drifted out of sight, in blissful ignorance of an intruder deserving to die, by their strict Mohammedan laws, Mostyn and Shamsuddin returned to the 'candlestick' with their guide, and paid five krans as a nazrara or offering, to be expended in lighting them part of the way to heaven.

This done, they turned eastwards, following the central water channel, on their way to an enclosure called the Sahn-i-Nau or old courtyard.

To move freely, without the paralysing fear of the past few moments, produced in them both a sense of relief almost amounting to elation. Though still in the lion's den, they were happily aware that, for the time at least, the lions slept.

God was on their side. Mostyn knew it now ; in this folly and possible sin, a forgiving, all-merciful Providence watched over the Christian pilgrim and his servant.

As they hurried through a number of

small bazaars, Mostyn wasted no time in adding to his store of information, by questioning the Akhoond on the subject of various buildings.

The shops and caravanserais, within the chained limits of the bast or sanctuary, were, he learned, the exclusive property of the shrine, all profits accruing to the treasury of the mosque.

"And what does the property include?" asked the Sardar.

Akhoond considered a moment, then made answer in calculating tones :

"Seven hundred camels"—he spoke the words proudly—"four thousand mules, all out on hire or at work, five hundred gardens, and about one hundred karezes (canals) in and around Mashad and its outlying districts."

"The yearly revenue must be very large," declared the Sardar, quite willing to appear impressed by this record of wealth.

His informant was not slow to mention the amount, an equivalent of three hundred thousand rupees, or twenty thousand pounds.

"In addition to this," he continued, "the burying fees must be taken into account, and the offerings of the pilgrims, which are very large. The whole is spent under the orders of the Mutawalli Bashi, in the repair and ornamentation of the shrine, in the distribu-

tion of food and clothing to the poor, and in keeping up the large staff of officials, such as guards, ferrashes, lamplighters, etc., attached to the sacred precincts."

He spoke with utter confidence in the absolute honesty of their chief, into whose hands the handsome revenue came. A great personage, this man of power, a little god to his faithful followers, and revered highly by the many doubtful characters seeking refuge under his sway.

Once within the bast or sanctuary, all debtors, and criminals of every kind, became free from pursuit. No one could arrest them without their own consent, or the order of the Mutawalli Bashi, who, supported by his regiment of guards, was well able to maintain the strictest discipline, both among the refugees from crime and the crowds of pilgrims thronging daily the courts, bazaars, and caravanserais of the holy enclosure.

The picturesque faith of these thousands of pilgrims, travelling from far-off lands to visit the martyr's grave, and so obtain remission of all their sins committed up to the time they touched the silver screen, appeared to Mostyn like some fairy fable in this twentieth century of scepticism. He felt transplanted back thousands of years, to another age.

"Many return again and again during

their lifetime," said the Akhoond, solemnly. "The number of their visits are only limited by the distance of their homes, or their inability to undergo the great privations and sufferings which meet the poorer pilgrims on their journey, often causing death to the aged and infirm. Many have turned their dying eyes to Mashad, with a last despairing cry for strength. Imaz Reza, all honour to his name, has many willing victims, who perish yearly in their efforts to reach his blessed tomb. Doubtless the sacrifice is appreciated; his glorious soul rejoices at the loyalty and devotion of all true Mohamadzai."

"I understand," said Mostyn, "that Sunnis as well as Shaihs are welcome to visit the tomb."

The Akhoond nodded assent, remarking: "The associations connected with the death of the Imam make the pilgrimage especially attractive to those of the Imami Mazhab. There are but few Shaihs who do not desire to visit all the imams' tombs, before they meet the imams in heaven."

The conversation ceased abruptly, as they reached the door of the Ziarat-i-Ustad-Imam shrine, a visit to which came second only in importance to that of the resting-place of Imam Reza.

Here again the same prayers were read as at the bigger shrine, twenty krans being paid for very little satisfaction, the darkness concealing all objects of interest from the pilgrims' view.

One solitary oil lamp gave the faintest possible glimmer in the intense, overwhelming gloom, revealing faintly a large square-domed chamber, with an oblong tomb in the centre under the dome. The shadows made the scene so ghostly that Shamsuddin hesitated upon the threshold, as if, indeed, he feared the darkness even more than he had previously feared the light.

It was the last of the principal sights, and their guide seemed to expect they would now be satisfied with their first day's work, and return on the morrow to complete the visit.

For a moment Mostyn consulted apart with Shamsuddin.

"If you value your life," whispered his servant, "you will not return. Once we are free, no power would bring me back, unless it were to save the Sardar's throat from the knife of an assassin."

"You are right," answered Mostyn, in a low undertone. "It is a case of now or never. I particularly want to complete the pilgrimage this evening."

The cool remark staggered Shamsuddin.

Could it be possible his master was not going to seize this opportunity of escape? The words "complete the pilgrimage," suggested the misery was to be prolonged.

"You see," Mostyn added, noting that Shamsuddin's face had fallen considerably, "I shall never have another opportunity. We've risked so much, it seems a pity to miss anything now. I don't think there is any great fear of detection at present."

Shamsuddin was ashamed to own he disagreed with his master. Mostyn's courage had gained such control over him, he felt he must live up to it at any cost. He made a gesture of humble resignation, preparing to face the mental torture of this prolonged suspense, this dread and anxiety, which still remained ripe in his soul.

Mostyn, turning to the Syud, expressed an eager desire to see the Ziarat of the Kadam Mobarak, the wonders of which their guide had hinted at earlier in the evening.

"It is now late, and past the hour," he replied. "But if the Sardar does not mind the trouble and fatigue, there is no harm in visiting the Ziarat at night-time."

Mostyn showed the indefatigable energy, inseparable from the born explorer, which Shamsuddin had grown to expect from him. After this evening, his faithful follower felt

that nothing his master could do would ever surprise him again.

With a faint heart, the still nervous servant followed Mostyn and his guide as they retraced their steps through the bazaars to the Sahn-i-Kuhna, and, leaving it by the northern gate, passed through a mass of poor-looking houses and caravanserais. Presently they reached a large burying-ground, a place made uncanny by the lack of light. Shamsuddin would have given much for a lantern to guide his steps, but the darkness appeared to Mostyn as a welcome protection from spying eyes.

The Syud, evidently eager to have done his work, hurried them at a rapid pace in a north-easterly direction, walking so fast that his followers stumbled in the dense blackness over the low tombstones.

"May the spirits of these saintly dead rest in peace," muttered Shamsuddin, "and leave us unmolested."

He fancied he espied gaunt, transparent, shrouded forms peopling the darkness. As he grazed his shins and ankles, he hardly noticed the physical pain, for a cold sweat of ghostly fear had broken out upon his forehead.

Mostyn possessed cat-like eyes in the dark. He could always find his way on the



loneliest road, without assistance from stars or moon. He avoided the tombs after the first few minutes with magic skill; even when the Syud half fell and regained his balance, Mostyn seemed able to pick his path easily enough. This difficult route led to the back wall of a brick building with a dome. Passing round to the front, which faced eastwards, their guide informed them dolefully that all the attendants had left the shrine, which stood deserted in utter darkness.

Again Shamsuddin scented an opportunity of escape. He urged it was too late for sightseeing, that the hour of rest was at hand, when all good citizens should sleep. But Mostyn hated to be baulked. He had set his mind on seeing all he could in this one night, and with characteristic determination stuck to his point.

"Where do the attendants live?" he asked.

"In quarters adjoining the Gumbad," replied Syud Reza, promptly.

"Then can you not go and call them?"

"If the Sardar will wait a few minutes, his slave is ready to obey the request."

Mostyn declared himself quite willing to wait, and dismissed the Syud on his errand.

Alone in the darkness, Shamsuddin turned

to his master, and falling on his knees at his feet, clutched the folds of the baggy Afghan trousers convulsively.

"Master," he pleaded, "for the love of those you love, let there be an end to this useless risk of life. Hold your servant presumptuous, punish him if you will, but at least listen to his entreaty, before you banish him for ever from your side."

"Get up, get up," said Mostyn, in a low, authoritative tone. "Whatever you have to say, let it be said standing, and for goodness' sake, Shamsuddin, keep your head. I thought you were a cool, reliable sort of man. I am not often mistaken in people. I expect you to keep calm, and not betray your feelings. Any sign of emotion now, any fear on your part, may rouse the suspicions of these fellows the Syud is bringing back."

Standing thus bidden, Shamsuddin returned to the subject uppermost in his mind.

"Is it such a little thing—this life," he asked, "that you would treat it as a toy? Ah! master, I read in your face that it was dear to you, when those fifty men with drawn swords were marching upon us—as we believed—to take us prisoners. You understood then all it meant to face the end, to know that soul and body must part company

—not by natural means, but at the hand of violence. I am unworthy to argue; I know that I presume. I am as a dog before you, yet I cannot help but plead. Your God gave you, a moment since, a free passage into safety. You had simply to walk straight out of the jaws of death, while those who would murder you, slept. The road lay clear, the darkness had fallen—we were delivered! Even now you have the opportunity lying open before you. Go quickly, and leave me here to dismiss the men. I will blame the Syud for tarrying so long, saying the Sardar grew weary of waiting. I will pay the guards for their trouble, telling them to expect my master on the morrow. Then I, too, will follow with speed, and overtake your steps.”

Shamsuddin's tone of entreaty touched Mostyn, though it failed to disturb his set resolve.

“Had I known,” he said, “that you would suffer like this, I would willingly have spared you, Shamsuddin, but since you agreed to come, there is no drawing back. We have sent for the guard, and I mean to see the matter through. This shall be the last move. I give you my word—when we leave this shrine I will dismiss the Syud, and return with all speed to our caravanserai.”

Shamsuddin thanked him, with something of tears in his voice.

To do him justice it was not of his own life he was thinking.

A tramp of feet near by heralded the return of their guide, accompanied by attendants, who lost no time in lighting the lamps.

The sacred chamber under the dome was a small room, the floor being about six feet below the level of the graveyard, reached by zigzag steps, down which the pilgrims were invited to descend.

The steps, though Mostyn knew it not, were exactly similar to those Haroun had described to Candida Whitechurch, while the room below, carpeted with fine matting and circular in shape, resembled the plan he had drawn on the studio floor, when speaking of the test which must betray Mostyn.

Apparently only four persons at a time could go into the chamber, so their guide and one of the guards remained outside, while the Sardar, Shamsuddin, and two of the attendants groped their way down the winding stairs. They had to stoop under the low doorway to enter the Gumbaz, known as the Ziarat-i-Kadam-Mobarak, the Kadam-i-Hazrat, or the Kadam Sharif.

Three small wax candles and an oil lamp, placed on a table at the west side, illuminated the room. Behind this table, let into the wall at about three feet six inches from the ground, was the white stone, eighteen inches square, with the indented print of the human foot Haroun knew so well, the very name of which he could say by heart, the Nishan-ipa-i-Hazrat Ali Alai-us-Salem.

It seemed to Mostyn that his brother must be near him through all this long pilgrimage ; never for a moment had the young artist been absent from the supposed Sardar's mind. Now the thought of that strange individuality at home forced itself even more strongly upon the older brother, as he kissed the footprint, touching it reverently with forehead and eyes, in strict accordance with Mohammedan ideas. He had seen Haroun salute relics of art in this same quaint way, jokingly perhaps, but with a half-hidden expression of deference in his intense mystical eyes. Surely his spirit drew near ! Perhaps now in his dreams he entered this very room, hovering over the little group seated in front of the table, while prayers were read.

Mostyn, though he feigned to follow the sacred words, was really speculating in his mind the purpose of a smooth, oblong dark

grey stone, some twenty inches in circumference. He had formed no definite conclusion, when the reading ceased, and the attendant bade him and Shamsuddin kneel before the stone. This they did in true Eastern fashion, the weight of their bodies resting on their heels, ready and willing to follow further instructions, and both rather puzzled by the impressive, mysterious manner of the men in charge.

"Behold now," said the full, ringing voice of the tall guard beside them, "I will expound to you a truth, one known to all who pass our way as infallible. Rejoice if ye be true men, that your faith is to be put to the test; tremble if you come here with treason in your hearts against the holy faith of the Mohamadzai."

Shamsuddin, much as he trembled inwardly, never moved a muscle—he was too petrified. Only his jaw dropped slightly, and he stared at the speaker as if indeed his face were carved in stone, and his eyes the glassy orbs of a stuffed animal.

In a flash the warning he had spoken to his master passed through his mind word for word: "You were given the chance to walk straight out of the jaws of death—even now the opportunity lies open before you." But alas! alas! the Sardar had not listened,

preferring to treat his life as a toy. Surely the moment was at hand when his spirit must be broken, when the cruel knife would do its work—in the stillness of this evening hour.

Instead of choosing safety, this reckless masquerader had walked unheedingly into the very jaws of a waiting death, whose presence dogged his footsteps from the first. Did he now realise the useless sacrifice, and bow to the superior wisdom of a humble but devoted servant? Shamsuddin's thoughts grew confused; he ceased to ask himself these burning questions.

The speaker had paused, looking fixedly at Mostyn, who showed a deep respectful interest in the words.

"If thou art a true believer," continued the voice, "place both arms under the stone. Though weak or ailing, with little effort you will raise it, thus proving your faith. Should an infidel attempt this task (however powerful he be), no strength on earth could move the stone, no power raise it heavenwards."

The man spoke with an assurance which almost persuaded his listeners this miracle might come to pass.

Mostyn made a sign of assent, and with comparative ease raised the stone, Shamsuddin joyfully following his example, though

he was so weak from nervousness, he wondered his arms had not become paralysed before the test. As they passed up the steps again, he fumbled for the money to be paid in offerings from the Sardar's purse—thirty krans for the most trying few minutes ever spent in the service of a master with lion-like courage.

"May I die without a kran to my name," thought Shamsuddin, "if I ever serve any but a coward in the future."

With a prudent consideration for the necessities of their homeward walk, Mostyn asked one of the obliging attendants to fetch him some small change for ten krans, a request willingly performed.

"We have still to run the gauntlet of the begging crowds on our way back," he said in an undertone to Shamsuddin, whose joy knew no bounds that the moment had come to quit the shrine. "They will expect generosity from a returning Sardar. We are supposed to leave with hearts too full to refuse requests, for have we not been blessed by sights the most sacred and enlightening in all Persia?"

He had good reason for his forethought. As they entered the courtyard once more, they had literally to fight their way through the dense throng of beggars swarming round,



assured that the now satisfied pilgrims would scatter some money in their wake, as a thankoffering for privileges received.

Syud Akhoond Reza, politely anxious to see the Sardar safely off the premises, tried hard to clear the way by raining curses and blows on the jostling multitude, with little effect.

He even offered to accompany the visitors to their caravanserai, but Mostyn replied he he could not think of putting him to this trouble. So, after many affectionate and flattering speeches on both sides, the Syud committed the Sardar and his companion to the care of Providence, watching them as they plunged into the crowded Bazaar of the Bast, making their way as fast as possible to the chained gate.

There a fresh crowd of importunate beggars impeded progress, but at this juncture Mostyn's store of small coins stood him in good stead. With hand upraised, he flung the money broadcast over the heads of the greedy mendicants, escaping as they bounded into the air with frantic leaps to catch a share of the largess.

Glancing back, while hurrying along by the dirty channel which bisects the Khiabani-Pain, he saw them grovelling in the mud, a mass of struggling human forms, writhing,

swearing, rolling over each other, in search of scattered treasure.

"The only thing to do was to make a bolt for it," he said, addressing Shamsuddin in his own cheery tones, which differed entirely from the voice he had adopted before the Syud in his capacity of Sardar.

The sound of the familiar accents fell pleasantly on his servant's ear, though he was still fearful lest they should be followed.

"It is possible," he hinted, "that even now our movements are watched."

"In which case undue hurry will not be particularly conducive to safety. The spies might wonder why we were so anxious to be gone," replied Mostyn, cautiously. "I think it would be a good plan to halt at a kabab shop and get some food."

It suddenly struck Shamsuddin that half his fear arose from hunger. He was weary and faint; at least he liked to imagine so, as an excuse to self, for the nervous dread he had endured.

He agreed willingly enough to his master's suggestion, and did good justice to the freshly roasted meat, and large, flat, damp Persian cakes, which they ate as they strolled leisurely through the smaller bazaars. Then casting a final glance up and down the Khiaban, assured no one observed their movements,

they made with all speed for their caravan-serai, darting into the gateway in a state of intense anxiety, prepared instantly to close the postern behind them, if any sign of disturbance threatened their retreat.

All was still. Mostyn and Shamsuddin faced each other in the blissful solitude, and smiled.

"Feeling better?" queried Mostyn.

Shamsuddin grinned from ear to ear, with great tears shining in his eyes. He had no idea what a humorous object he looked to the less emotional Englishman.

"The master has only to command," he said, "and I would go again through a thousand greater dangers—I would suffer a thousand times as much."

The words came easily enough now, with the shrine out of sight, the mission fulfilled. Shamsuddin had no idea of being a humbug; for the moment he was quite genuine, entirely forgetting his resolve to serve cowards for ever in the future.

"Let us hope," replied the Englishman, "you will never have to risk that precious life of yours again, for anybody's curiosity or folly. I shall try and reward you for those bad hours; but now fetch me a razor and a pair of scissors out of my saddle-bag. I am going to make short work of my beard."

In a few minutes Mostyn was clean-shaven. Then throwing off his Afghan trousers and dust coat, he rapidly tumbled into his English travelling suit, and flinging round him a thick choga, he completely concealed the lower part of his face.

"Are you ready to start?" he called to Shamsuddin. "You've got to shave too. You won't be safe to follow me in that beard."

"Yes, sir. The bags are packed, the mules are ready, and my face is as hairless as the day I was born."

He appeared as he spoke, transformed into quite a different-looking man.

"Our lucky star was in the ascendant this evening," added Mostyn, with a grateful sigh. "It made our plan plain sailing, the keeper of the caravanserai having to go away on business, and wanting his fees in advance. Don't forget to give the key back to the shop-keeper next door, and pay him for looking after our property during our absence, but muffle up your face, and be quick about it."

Shamsuddin, after speedily concluding this small matter of business, sprang on his mule, and followed his master across the Ghiaban, plunging into the labyrinth of bazaars, and going roughly in the direction of the British Consulate, not daring to ask the way.

Soon, however, having made certain they were not being followed, Mostyn turned into a dark lane, and taking off his cap and loongi, threw them to Shamsuddin, who placed them in his saddle-bag. Putting on a small English deer-stalking cap, he rode boldly into the bright light of a large bazaar, and began shouting out inquiries in true British style, asking for the whereabouts of the Consulate.

The men with the beardless faces looked very different to the Afghan Sardar and his attendant, who not an hour since trod the sacred paths of pilgrimage.

Many voices were ready to direct him, for money was scarce among those loafers of the street. They had not the good fortune every day to meet an Englishman requiring guidance.

At the Consulate he found a warm welcome, an old friend of Major Marchmont's being in residence there.

"We feared," said his host, "that you had missed your way. Your head muleteer, who arrived safely with your caravan, told us you had gone shooting, but I gathered from your letter I was to expect you to-night."

Mostyn replied they had been unavoidably delayed, and apologised for disturbing the household at so late an hour.

He did not realise how completely the removal of his beard altered his appearance until, when sending for his muleteer, he discovered the honest fellow failed to recognise him.

"I hoped," said the crestfallen servant, "that my master had arrived. Do you bring a message from him?"

The question was put eagerly.

"He will be here very shortly," Mostyn replied, concealing his amusement, "but where's the hurry? You are treated well; you have comfortable quarters."

The man acknowledged this, yet still remained downcast.

Mostyn, puzzled by his attitude, questioned him tactfully, to discover the reason.

"My master," he said, "one of your countrymen, is as far above all other masters as the heaven is high from the earth. When he parted company from his caravan, to go with the faithful Shamsuddin on a shooting tour, we were just outside the ill-fated city of Kuchan. The earth was still restless and revengeful; it seemed to thunder out a mighty warning, as if dissatisfied with the number of its slain. Ever since that morning I have felt uneasy for my beloved master, hearing the cannon roar of the hungry earth, and picturing some ill to the good man I serve."

"Cheer up," laughed Mostyn. "If you look at me again, you may recognise the features of one who certainly does not recognise himself—as a master above all other masters."

The startled muleteer stared at the speaker in doubtful surprise. He was afraid to believe his ears, yet the voice resembled strangely the man he had served and loved. While he was yet hesitating how to act, Shamsuddin, also beardless, appeared, to vouch for Mostyn's identity.

The worthy servant gazed with widely-opened eyes at their smooth and smiling faces. Evidently he thought they were both mad, though his joy at seeing his master was flattering in the extreme. Drawing close he salaamed and touched the Englishman's feet, remarking respectfully, that in his humble opinion it was a great pity to have shaved off so fine a beard.

Late into the night Mostyn sat talking to Major Marchmont's friend, relating many tales of distant lands, not breathing a word of his recent adventure in the shrine. He knew well enough that no hint of what he had done must reach a living soul in Persia. He doubted if this Englishman would have dared to give him shelter, were he to suspect that such a proceeding had even entered the traveller's mind!

Once alone in his own room, Mostyn referred to some notes he had made of Haroun's fanciful descriptions. In no single point did they fail to agree with the sights that night had revealed to Sardar Mozaffar Khan.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE CALL OF THE PEN

WHEN Mostyn found himself in strange countries, the love of adventure, and the extraordinary attraction of wandering far afield, made it difficult to return. Perhaps, had he guessed how deeply one fond heart yearned for his homecoming, he would have lost interest in his tour, but somehow he never suspected that the long English winter would appear interminable to Candida. In her desire to conceal how much she missed him, she spread across her letters a guarding chill, which effectively hid the burning fires beneath. She knew he had visited Persia; but since he made no mention of Mashad, she gradually came to the conclusion he had taken Major Marchmont's advice, and avoided the dangerous errand of curiosity. Diana Anstey, and even Haroun, were inclined to share this theory; only Major Marchmont guessed that Mostyn's very

silence was a proof he had carried out his intention.

"He will return in the spring," said the old traveller, who knew that England called when the first flowers of the early year burst through the earth, and the rejuvenating influence of Nature's budding made even a stale old world into a nursery of freshly-born delights.

To the spring Candida looked with hopeful eyes, a tremulous longing, and even a half-belief in a possible future of fulfilment. She was quite sure, as the months dragged on, that one man alone held her fate in his hands. The autumn shooting parties, the hunt balls, the coming and going of society life, daily taught her the lesson which may early be discovered or take long years to learn. There was still the old host of admirers and friends, in whose society pleasant hours might be passed, hours which left little or no impression upon the deeper feelings of her heart. She could not escape the ghost of a face, the shadow of a presence, behind the fleeting amusements of the hour. It even made her a little heartless. She found it difficult to smother the hidden impatience, which grew sometimes into an agony of hope deferred.

She fancied she was less popular; her

acquaintances dimly discerned the lack of that *joie de vivre* which society demands. Girls complained that Candida was growing uninteresting; married women feared she was being spoilt; her mother preached upon the sin of discontent.

"Really, Candida," she said, "you seem very hard to satisfy. I suppose you get too much attention! I can't understand why you don't fall in love with some of the really delightful people who are only longing to fall down and worship the ground you tread on."

Candida considered a moment. She was in a highly critical mood, and not inclined to spare herself.

"It's my own fault," she confessed, looking her mother full in the face, and blushing furiously at her tumultuous thoughts. "I just steel myself against it all, as if my heart were in armour. I often think I don't deserve to win any love or affection at all."

Mrs Whitechurch studied the girl curiously. Her reply came as a surprise to the older woman. Though personally her nature inclined towards frivolity, she was keenly aware there was nothing shallow in her daughter, who inherited from a deep-thinking father a forcible and keenly sensitive temperament. No one of any discernment could look into Candida's face and think her

cold. She was made for love, for the best and highest sentiments that romance could give. The mobile mouth had unconsciously betrayed a world of suffering, as the quivering lips passed sentence on their owner. The eyes were deep and glowing ; her colour came and went.

Mrs Whitechurch put a question boldly which, until this moment, she had not dared to ask.

"Are you still thinking of Mostyn Anstey?" she said, with uncompromising candour.

She knew she could trust her daughter to speak the truth, even though it pained her to own that her affections were wasted upon an unworthy object.

"Yes. I think of him often, as a very dear friend who perhaps needs my prayers."

Candida spoke with a quiet dignity. She returned her mother's scrutinising glance without flinching.

"I guessed as much," murmured Mrs Whitechurch, with ill-concealed disgust. "I saw you were wrapt up in him before he left England, and it surprised me that a girl with your pride could care for a man who made it so clear that the caring was quite a one-sided affair. I hoped when he went away, without a word, you would come to your senses, and see your mistake. If he had any feeling for

you, is it likely he would absent himself for the whole winter? I know men too well, and I am certain he can have no serious intentions, or he would make sure of his happiness, and not leave you to be snapped up by anybody else."

Mrs Whitechurch only put into words a suspicion which had long haunted Candida's mind.

"Because he has forgotten me," she replied, slowly, "I see no reason why I should forget him."

"Imbecile!" muttered Mrs Whitechurch, half below her breath.

"It's like this, mother," continued the girl, hurriedly, anxious to justify herself, though she knew she could never be entirely in harmony with her worldly and ambitious parent. "I have rather fixed ideas on some subjects, and I know that everything is sent for a purpose—even suffering. I cannot help caring for Mostyn Anstey, because in some mysterious way, which I don't pretend to understand, he appeals to me—he makes me look on other men in a different light. He puts them in the shade; they seem a little narrow compared with him. He is such a traveller, his views of life are so broad; one sees courage in his face. I know if I were persuaded that I could be happy

married to another, I should be afraid to meet Mostyn—afraid for myself, afraid for my husband. While I feel like that, I intend to remain single."

The absolute resolve in Candida's tone silenced Mrs Whitechurch. She shrugged her shoulders, indulged in a short sarcastic laugh, and resigned herself to the inevitable. She had little fear that in the end Candida would marry, and marry well, but she did not like to see the girl wasting her best days of youth in a dream which made for disappointment.

"I met Major Marchmont this morning," she said. "He had just heard that your friend Mostyn returns early in April."

Candida caught her breath.

"The Ansteys will be very pleased," said the girl.

"And you will be pleased too."

"Of course."

"He will just be back in time to spoil your season. What will be the use of entertaining in town for your benefit, if you are still in this foolish frame of mind?"

"None at all. Why entertain? I should be quite as happy in the country."

A mischievous twinkle crept into Candida's eyes. She knew her mother dearly loved society, and that it was no sacrifice to her

to rush through the crowded months of spring and summer with social obligations making strenuous demands on every moment of her time. Candida served as a good excuse to slave perpetually at the round of pleasure.

"I shall persevere, in the hope of distracting your thoughts and making you more reasonable," sighed Mrs Whitechurch, with such an admirably assumed air of virtue, that Candida could not refrain from laughing aloud.

"Dear mother," she said, "I really believe you are the youngest of us two! Sometimes I envy your untiring spirit. How does it feel never to grow sick and sorry in a crowd, always to say, 'I am happy because I am doing what is fashionable; I am satisfied with myself because the world is satisfied with me'? I really think you might have passed on your enviable disposition. I should have been very grateful."

"At your age, certainly, I never found anything a trouble. I was the life and soul of my own little circle. I should have scorned to fritter a thought on a man like Mostyn Anstey. It seems to me that modern girls lack pride, or else they are too self-willed to accept fortune when it comes."

Candida had a shrewd suspicion that it

was just her pride and reserve which stood in the way of her happiness. She was beginning to wonder if in the end she would let pride go to the wall, and show something of her feelings. Haroun had told her that Mostyn was very sensitive, and often, despite his strong character, appeared inclined to depreciate himself.

He might be a great explorer, and yet a nervous and reticent lover. If so, her every action seemed, on looking back, to have sealed her doom.

"After all," she said aloud, "pride is a sin. The Bible condemns it!"

She moved to a writing-table, and sat contemplating a blank sheet of notepaper. She owed Mostyn a letter. He had written over a week ago and asked her for news of herself. Day by day, for some unknown reason, she had postponed replying. Possibly Fate stayed her hand till this melting moment, when, goaded on by her mother's sarcasm, she felt she would justify the suspicion of lowered pride.

"Dear Mostyn," she wrote, while Mrs Whitechurch, oblivious of the scratching of Candida's pen, related small histories of current scandal.

"So you are coming back in April? I have just heard, and you can't think how



glad I am. Of course you will have crowds of friends to visit, but none will be waiting to give you a warmer welcome than myself. So please come and see me as soon as possible, because I have really been anxious about you, and the long winter has made me old, terribly old, in heart and brain. I want some travellers' tales, real rousing ones, to shake me out of myself. You are so good-natured, you will spare an hour, I know, even in the first rush of homecoming. I ask it as a favour, and especially wonder if a certain adventure was attempted and achieved. I dare say you will think me altered. I have such a tired mind, it's like a home-sick feeling—only I am at home, which is rather odd. How I envy you your wonderful months! You must picture them to me in words, if it won't bother you to distraction. Forgive me for inflicting my thoughts and feelings, but I know what a good friend you are.—Yours as ever, CANDIDA WHITECHURCH."

She knew if she read the letter over, she would never post it, so she quickly hid it from sight beneath the fold of an envelope. It was so different to the usual chatty epistle in which she lightly related her doings with a sense of humour which was all her own. She had betrayed for the first time a touch of bitterness and longing. She meant the

words to convey more than she dared pen, to carry a message of warm friendship, which he could take or leave as he pleased. Should he fail her, no one would be any the wiser, but perhaps he would come—first of all—to the heart which ached for a sight of him. The mere idea set her picturing possibilities. If other men found her desirable, why not Mostyn? After all, they were such good friends, and what better basis for love? Her mind travelled rapidly with the delirious joy of day-dreaming. She saw him at her side, with a new light in his eyes, a softer note in his voice; she could almost feel the rapture of his arm stealing round her. She thought of him quickly as lover and then as husband, that close, mysterious union. She was even away on her honeymoon, in the realm of make-believe. What if it should ever come to pass that their lives were blended into one, and the calm bliss of a union which death alone may shatter, should fold its overshadowing power over Mostyn and herself? She found it impossible to imagine any flaw in such a future. The small disappointments, the contemptible disagreements which attacked the average married couple, would be as far removed from their sphere as heaven from earth. It was just the dream of a happy girlish

hour, with perhaps little hope of future realisation, yet conducive to peace.

She posted the letter to Mostyn herself, without Mrs Whitechurch knowing that any communication was passing between them.

It reached him on landing, and among a vast pile of correspondence Candida's familiar hand instantly caught his eye. All through the long, self-inflicted exile he always looked for her letters, with a slumbering hope that in some small way, however guarded, she would betray a slight show of feeling, of deeper emotion than the unsatisfying friendship, so tantalising to the warm heart of a lover.

He left his other letters, and opened Candida's first. His eyes raced rapidly over the page; he hardly knew whether the words gave him joy or pain.

She wanted to see him, that was plain enough, but why? She was sad and tired of life, an unnatural state of mind for a girl of her years, and he knew there must be a reason for this ageing of heart and brain. He could not flatter himself that his absence was the reason; he feared some recent love affair had upset her, leaving her weary of the pleasure-world in which she dwelt.

Never mind! She needed him; that was enough. The call of home and parents,

the desire to tell Haroun all his adventures in the shrine, the thousand demands upon his time, were as nothing to Candida's voice.

He sent a telegram naming the first possible hour he could reach her house, and dismissed all other claims as secondary and unimportant.

The ready coming of the traveller, in answer to her request, was the first triumph to Candida's new scheme of unbending. She had shut herself long enough within the ice-house of pride; she was ready now to burst out into the sunshine of sympathy and undisguised pleasure at his return.

Mrs Whitechurch noticed the change in Candida's appearance, after the receipt of Mostyn's telegram.

All her recent languor vanished. She blossomed again with that soft budding of youth which makes grief impossible for long.

The winter had passed, as a grey cloud blotting out the blue of her life's sky. Once more spring glowed in her veins, as it ran rampant over the earth. The strange excitement of love thrilled through her heart, singing an echo to Nature's awakening.

"I am expecting Mr Anstey this afternoon," Candida told her mother. "He has

only just arrived, and he telegraphs he is coming straight to me. I can't help feeling a little flattered, because he has so many friends."

"A good sign," murmured Mrs Whitechurch, mollified.

Personally she admired and liked Mostyn ; he was a man of means, intellectual, well-born, and high-principled. She could wish no better partner for her daughter ; but she still mistrusted his attentions, and in no way regarded him as a marrying man.

"He has been away so long," continued Candida, "that I shall not be at home to anyone else. I want a quiet talk, to hear all his news."

Mrs Whitechurch showed continued satisfaction. She was relieved to see the change in Candida's appearance : the beautifying sparkle of pleasure had touched, with its tender magic, her whole personality.

"You had better take tea in the boudoir, and give orders you do not wish to be disturbed."

Her mother spoke magnanimously ; inwardly she said to herself :

"No harm to give the man his chance. If he is ever likely to fall in love it will be now, when Candida is full of enthusiasm. She happens to be looking her best, too.

It is quite a relief to see her wake up again."

As Mostyn drove through the streets of London, he could hardly believe he was on his way to Candida. He had little dreamed he would see her so soon, or that she would want him. Whatever her sorrow, he was prepared to share it, if unselfishly; the pain would be all his own, and she should never know. Could he soothe and comfort her, could he win the affection he hardly dared hope for, then the strange attraction of a wandering life would be buried in an early grave, and lost beneath the tender influence of home.

## CHAPTER XIII

### IN THE SUMMER OF HER YEARS

CANDIDA awaited the coming of the traveller with mixed feelings of nervousness and pleasure. She was a little frightened at the thought of her own boldness, and wondered if her letter had conveyed too much.

The moment Mostyn arrived every mis-giving vanished. He came into the room with a smile which seemed to envelop her, with a hand outstretched to grasp the girl's trembling fingers, that wanted never to let them go again. Candida made no effort to hide her emotion; she looked up unflinchingly into his face, and her eyes sparkled with a joy so unmistakable, that every pulse in his body beat quicker for the sight.

"I can hardly believe you are really back, I have been so anxious about you," she gasped, a vision of the shrine rising before her like a mental mirage. "You went away with a fixed idea—a foolhardy one, Major

Marchmont called it—but I hoped against hope you would change your mind.”

Mostyn shook his head.

“The idea was too firmly rooted for that,” he replied; “but what does it matter, since I am home again to tell the tale? I dared not write my experiences, but some day I will give you a detailed account of my masquerade. It was a risk, certainly, and more than once I felt sure I had betrayed myself. I thought the last moment had come for ‘Sardar Mozaffar Khan.’ It was then I realised the truth of Major Marchmont’s words, that the game was not worth the candle.”

Candida caught her breath. She thought of that far-distant day in the studio with Haroun, and his gruesome description of the Moham-medan mode of murder. She could not feel thankful enough that Mostyn had been spared. He read a certain confusion in her face, as she drew a chair near the table, and begged him to be seated.

“You told no one of my proposed adventure?” he queried, vaguely conscious that Candida had something on her mind. He had never seen her in such a transparent mood; he found it peculiarly refreshing and delightful.

“I thought,” she faltered, lowering her



eyes, "that of course Haroun knew. He led me to speak of it, and I, believing he was in the secret, betrayed your confidence unwittingly."

"Oh! that doesn't matter," said Mostyn, in reassuring tones. "I only wanted to guard against giving him any anxiety on my behalf. He is so nervous and imaginative, that one really cannot treat him quite like other people. I suppose he was intensely interested, because, you know, it was chiefly on his account I went to explore the Mashad shrine."

"He was more than interested; he was frightfully excited."

"So I can well believe. I am trying to fathom some mysterious form of psychic phenomenon, and I own I have not the clue yet. Haroun, who has never seen the shrine, knows the precincts at this moment almost as well as I do, who have penetrated into the holiest of holies. Doubtless he could tell you many of the rites and practices; certainly he would describe the chambers and their magnificent scheme of decoration as accurately as an eyewitness. I must confess I am at a loss to account for his dreams — and his knowledge, which gives plenty of food for thought to believers in a previous existence. It

almost seems that in a former state Haroun frequented that wonderful building. The very name which he adopted for himself in childhood is to be found there. The brother of Haroun, Mamoun al - Rashid, poisoned Imam Reza, the saint of the shrine."

Candida's eyes opened wider; her lips parted slightly, showing a glimmering of white teeth. She pressed both hands to her heart.

"He was more than excited," she answered, almost in a whisper; "he was horrified—maddened; he considered your action worthy of death. The mood soon passed, and he became his own reasonable self again, but for a few moments it was terrible. He was so transformed I hardly recognised him as the same man; he changed before my very eyes into another personality. I cannot forget that awful scene. I thought he was possessed by devils. It really half-convinces me that in another incarnation he was a Mohammedan, with fierce racial instincts, thirsting for the blood of an unbeliever, should such a one venture to desecrate their sacred place by his forbidden presence."

Mostyn listened in surprise. This was something new and startling, a hitherto undiscovered trait in his brother's extraordinary character.

"Perhaps," he said, "I had better not talk of my adventure. For months I have been looking forward to reading him the exact description of every room, which I wrote down that same night. I have drawn plans, too. I had intended telling him everything."

Candida saw that Mostyn was disappointed and troubled.

"Perhaps he may be different now. I think you should feel your way gently, and judge at the moment. If he has got over his agony of spirit, and forgotten his prejudice, he will naturally question you. Mrs Anstey says he has never mentioned his outburst, or alluded to the shrine again, though he speaks perpetually of you, and longs for your return. It is very good of you to come first to me, when your nearest and dearest are waiting for you."

"Sometimes," said Mostyn, with a softening of his voice, "there is a friend who is closer to one's heart than the 'old folks at home,' or the most beloved brother or sister—a friend whose face haunts the dreams of the wanderer, and whose word of command is law, simply because that law is rooted and grounded in love."

He spoke quickly, and with a strength of feeling which took her breath away. He

bent suddenly forward, capturing her hand. She felt her fingers crushed almost fiercely in his palm ; she could find no words, though her lips moved faintly. In the past she had grown accustomed to his guarded phrases and a reticence for which she was alone responsible.

She knew now she must blame herself for the barrier between them. Her fear of betraying her secret had held him back ; she realised at last he loved her all the time.

Oh ! the wasted months, the winter of yearning and suspense ! How had she borne it with such a fair show of outward fortitude ?

"When your letter came," he said, "a thousand fears made a coward of me. I hardly dared hope to read such a warm welcome in your eyes. I imagined you were going to confide some sorrow to me—a love affair, perhaps, in which I should play the part of adviser and friend, occupying that unenviable position of 'the one who looked on.' Will you relieve my mind ? Tell me you are heart-whole, that I may speak. If I could win you, Candida, I would be the happiest man in the world, which I believe is a hackneyed expression, but a very genuine one, in my case, for all that."

"It seems impossible," whispered the girl,

"we could be so happy. Others I know have had this happiness from the beginning of the world, yet I had grown to think it was not for me. I had schooled myself to suppose the affection which would come my way would be the love I could not return. Have you only just begun to care for me, that you stayed away so long?"

He shook his head. His arms were stealing round her now, with the strength of passion in their clasp, making her feel she was already his own.

"I cared from the first moment I saw you," he replied; "but I stood back, vaguely conscious of being out in the cold. I knew if I spoke, and you refused me, that our friendship must cease. I could not afford to lose you as a friend, so I decided to wait, until you showed some signs of unbending. If you had hinted in one of your letters that you wished me to return, I would have hurried back, but you wrote in the casual terms of an acquaintance—you told me always of your gaieties, and I pictured you supremely happy with your lot. It was not until I traced the strong note of sadness in your last letter I suspected that the butterfly had known a winter. Is it true I was in your thoughts all the time, that you missed me—as I missed you?"

"It has seemed like a lifetime since you went away," she confided to him, shyly. "I can hardly realise yet that I am to find my youth again; I had grown to feel so terribly old."

He laughed to see the blushing cheek, with its rosebud bloom, the bright young eyes, and the supple, girlish figure. Age was so far removed from her whole personality, it was difficult to credit that her soul had felt an autumn blight in the very summer of her years.

"We have muddled our lives," he whispered, "but in the future we must have no misunderstandings. You are the one being in the world who can make life perfect for me. It all lies in your hands, to give or to withhold. God knows you are far dearer to me than my own body or soul. If I were to make you unhappy, I would not allow myself to live."

She listened with wonder to the words, which were spoken in slow, steady accents; no mere lover's rhapsody this, but sentiments straight from the heart of a deep-thinking, serious man. Here was a harbour into which Candida felt she could sail her barque without fear or misgivings of ills to come.

She told him very simply just how that troublesome reticence, born of pride, had

made her appear cold and distant, for fear her love for him should be one-sided. It was rather a pitiful little tale, and one which made him realise his own folly in not storming the citadel before. He recalled the many dangers which he had faced without fear in foreign lands, and it seemed the height of irony that a faithful woman's heart should have ached for him through the moral cowardice of a timid lover.

The present hour of reunion burst upon them both with the glory of revelation, throwing the past into the shadowland of quick forgetfulness. They talked already of that great day when their final vows would be exchanged before the altar, when side by side—as bride and bridegroom—their hands should join for better, for worse.

“You won't keep me waiting long?” he pleaded. “If two people love, why should they delay? When there is nothing to wait for, an engagement is like a sojourn on the outskirts of heaven—the joy and the music lie beyond. I would not try to rush you if I doubted making you happy, but oh! Candida, I know, I know!”

She felt the burning passion of his kiss, the thrill of the twin soul sighing for its union. She wished this blissful moment could last for ever, without a sully touch

from the world, knowing that later on mundane matters would be discussed. The conventionalities of engagement and marriage must be entered into with the usual unavoidable commonplace arrangements. She longed to be wafted away to some sphere where giving in marriage could be established without any preliminary form. The quiet boudoir seemed like a sanctuary, in which great hopes and glorious emotions had been born within the last hour.

When eventually Candida emerged from that sacred shrine of plighted faith and solemn promise, Mrs Whitechurch had no reason to ask if the meeting between the friends had been a happy one. Their radiant faces told the story which the ages tell and re-tell with undying freshness.

Mostyn had no wish to withhold his news. He went straight to the older woman, clasped both her hands in his, and asked her if she would accept him as a son.

All her misgivings for Candida's future faded in a moment. The disappointments of the winter were forgotten ; the spring had come, with rich fulfilment, to thaw the snows, to raise fair flowers, to gladden their hearts.

" I have never had a son, to my sorrow," she informed him. " If I am really to give you my daughter, I think I can part with her



to you better than to anyone else. If you are all that our old friend Major Marchmont says, Candida is indeed a fortunate girl. I had a short but very happy married life, and a suitable union is the highest good, in my opinion, which a man or woman can hope for in this world."

"The near approach to Paradise!" added Mostyn, with conviction, as his eyes shone with the new gladness of a perfect trust.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE CARVED OAK CHEST

THE Anstey household was in a state of rejoicing, for Mostyn's engagement to Candida caused genuine pleasure. Certainly all looked bright for the future, though at times the girl felt nervous lest the Moham-medans should ever hear of Mostyn's pilgrimage and deception at Mashad.

He said little at first about his Persian adventure, for Haroun avoided the subject, and Diana declared he had been certainly brooding over it in silence, ever since his strange outburst in the studio. Mostyn noticed the absence of all the old drawings of the shrine, which first prompted his journey of discovery. Haroun would talk freely enough of other places Mostyn had visited, avoiding the delicate ground which aroused in him such inexplicable emotions. He feared his own passions, that second self, with its racial instincts, that flood of

recollection which set his brain on fire, when he considered the enormity of Mostyn's crime against the Mohammedan faith.

He wanted to know desperately, whether the deed, so iniquitous in his eyes, had been attempted, but dared not trust himself to ask. He guessed the affair was discussed during his absence, for once or twice he noticed, with his almost painfully quick perception, a sudden changing of the subject as he entered the room. He found himself perpetually on the watch, as one who guards his soul from an ever-present danger. Aware of this troubled state of mind, his powers as an actor were brought strongly into play. He was always assuming a part; his lively conversation, his bright smile, were often masks to hide the true state of his turbulent thoughts. Occasionally Diana suspected Haroun deceived those around him; Diana—upon whose conscience lay the weight of her son's burden. The years had taught her to read with a keen eye even such a complicated character as Haroun's. She alone held the key to his strange nature. Those months of 'concentration' before his birth were never to leave her mind clear, bright, and unclouded, for the shadow spread its presence down the long vista of years with unrelenting darkness.

Candida was at the Priory, already treated as a daughter of the house, her charm and beauty winning the hearts of all her future relatives. Major Marchmont was also a guest at the old Roehampton house, and, chiefly for his benefit, Mostyn decided to read, within locked doors, the chronicle he had written of his visit with Shamsuddin to the great shrine at Mashad. His only audience, besides the Major, consisted of Candida and Mr and Mrs Anstey.

Haroun, on this particular afternoon, would be engaged, they knew, with a model in his studio. A timeworn warrior from Chelsea, dressed in the picturesque garb of a pensioner, had been brought from town on the Ansteys' motor car, to sit to the young artist, so it seemed a favourable opportunity for Mostyn's improvised 'lecture.' He was prepared to give his listeners every detail, to show how alike were the portraits of the exterior of the shrine to the well-known sketches Haroun originally exhibited on his walls. The description the younger brother gave before Mostyn left England would be compared with the traveller's authenticated notes, while they knew already from Candida the amazing fact of Haroun's familiarity with the test believed to betray the unfaithful. Had not this home-bird, who never set foot on Persian

soil, described accurately the lifting of the sacred stone, which, it is supposed, no infidel can raise, describing even the winding stairs and the low doorway leading to the Gumbaz?

The afternoon had grown suddenly dark. A steady downpour made a rhythmical sound, sweeping the shrubs and stirring the trees in the Priory garden. To Candida it was rather soothing music, the patter of silver drops like heart-beats against the long, old-fashioned windows of the library. Here the little group assembled, in order to shut themselves off from the rest of the house, apart from casual callers, to enjoy an hour of quiet enlightenment upon a subject of interest to all. It seemed a pity that Haroun, the central figure in this little drama of an innocent adventure, should be, by necessity, shut out from the confidence of brother, parents, and friends. The room, lined with books, and furnished with old oak, looked sombre, even on the brightest day. Several large carved chests and high-backed throne-like chairs held legends of their own. They had been brought to their present abode from historical castles, with stories attached of illustrious personages who enjoyed restful hours on their tapestried cushions, or kept treasures in the vault-like depths of the age-worn receptacles.

Candida sat next Mostyn, who faced the little company with more eagerness in his manner than he habitually revealed, even when indulging the luxury of re-living his travels in the presence of sympathetic companions. By aid of his notes he was able to read, and partially to tell, every detail of that thrilling time, from his journey to Mashad, the humours and tragedies of the road, to his actual entry into the most sacred places of Mohamadzai.

The whole narrative was one of thrilling interest to Major Marchmont, who knew, more than any present, the awful peril in which Mostyn had willingly placed himself. At the conclusion of the history he spoke without reserve.

"That you are alive here to tell us of your adventure is a matter for great congratulation," he declared ; "but let me warn you, my dear fellow, to keep the whole matter to yourself, at least for some years. It might be safe, eventually, to publish the account of the shrine, if you are quite sure you will never return to Persia, and at the same time keep your identity secret. From what I know of those people, they would track you to the end of the world, if they got so much as an inkling of the trick played upon them. Such an outrage to

their religious principles could only be washed out in blood. They would murder you here in England, had they any idea of the real identity of the bogus Hyderabad Sardar."

Candida cast an anxious glance in Diana's direction; she traced an uncomfortable look in the eyes of Mostyn's father and step-mother. Her own heart-beats quickened with a sickening fear. She seemed to know that her peace and happiness were too perfect for endurance. Was this to be the cup of bitterness, this deadly terror of a secret foe?

She laid a trembling hand on Mostyn's arm; her voice shook as she addressed him.

"Promise me, dear one," she pleaded, "that this episode shall never be named, or noised abroad. Think what a wanton risk you ran, and may still be running, unless you can utterly bury the past, that it may never be known, or brought up against you. Your life is my life now, and I am sure Major Marchmont will join his request to my prayer. How could I ever have an easy moment if I thought those murderers were seeking to destroy you?"

"Candida," he said, "I am eager to live (I have at last so much to live for!); don't

let this worry you for a moment. I have every confidence in Major Marchmont, for I know he isn't an alarmist; he would not say anything to frighten us without reason. I should always go by his advice."

"But you would not follow it before. He tried to dissuade you from visiting the shrine; he did his best to save you from running into danger," Candida replied.

"You see, I laid less value upon life in those days when I belonged only to myself. I can trust you all to keep my prying a secret, and you may be sure I have no wish to boast of a most risky and foolhardy action. I shall always be glad I explored the shrine, as things turned out, for I am exceedingly curious, and once I get an idea in my mind I can't rest until I have worked it off. My wandering days are over now; the Mashad adventure was a good wind-up."

Major Marchmont secretly prayed it might prove so. He had shown, perhaps, little consideration for Mostyn's parents and future wife in speaking so plainly, not because he was callous of their feelings, but with a desire they should treat the matter seriously, and guard Mostyn from future folly.

The interest of the afternoon was transformed for Candida into an hour of dread.



The gloomy room, and the fast-falling rain without, lost attraction—she longed for sunlight and change of scene. Diana noted the girl's sudden restlessness.

"It must be time for tea," she said, cheerfully. "Let us come into the boudoir, and forget our fears. If Mostyn's safety is in our hands, we have little to trouble about, since I understand no outsider, except Sham-suddin, who has his own life at stake, knows anything of the pilgrimage."

Mostyn nodded assent, as he gathered up his papers and photographs.

The boudoir was essentially a feminine room, and full of a natural brightness, which even a dull day could not counteract. The change seemed to lift a weight from Candida's mind. With the spirits of youth, she determined not to dwell on possible disaster. Since Mostyn had been saved from deadly peril in the shrine, it was hardly likely that now, in his own country, he would have to suffer for the deed.

As the door of the library closed, an intense stillness reigned in the room. The only sound was furnished by even a fiercer falling of the rain upon the windows. Not until some moments after the retreating footsteps had died away did a faint movement indicate the presence of a living person.

Slowly the lid of one of the carved oak chests rose an inch, and a hand appeared—a nervous, white, trembling hand, with a strange foreign ring on the third finger.

The lid remained stationary for several seconds, while the occupant of the hiding-place listened intently. Then, hearing nothing, the covering was flung open widely with a jerk, and a cramped form emerged in kneeling posture. It was Haroun, in his shirt-sleeves, the silent witness of Mostyn's words, the unknown fifth in the select audience to whom the story had been confided with unreserved candour. His face had much the appearance of a dead man's; he might well have posed for a waking soul rising with its ghastly weight of decomposing flesh. His cheeks looked shrunken and thin, his eyes were fixed and glassy, his jaw had dropped; he shivered with such violence that his teeth rattled. He clasped both hands across his forehead, damp from exhaustion and heat. Every pulse in his body beat with maddening force, like sledge-hammers against their prison doors. For a time a paralysing weakness made it impossible for him to stand upright. Though cramped in every muscle, physical discomfort was almost forgotten, in the mental anguish which held him as in a vice. A streak of

blood flowed from his lower lip, where his teeth had pressed upon it with a mighty effort to restrain a cry. He fancied he could hear malign whispers from invisible tongues ringing in his ears, telling him terrible truths, in a foreign language, with which his brain seemed quite familiar. His body sank till it rested on his heels, and in this posture, so natural to him from childhood, he pondered upon the iniquity of Mostyn Anstey.

"Death," said the voices, "death by the knife—that must be the vengeance for this outrage to the faith. Write, for your hand alone can do it. Give information against the infidel to the guardians of the shrine."

He leapt from the chest, his whole frame suddenly alive with energy, while his aching limbs lost their stiffness, and his hands no longer trembled. Every nerve in his body grew taut. He was iron from head to foot: he could not suffer, he could not feel; a frenzy possessed him like the madness of drink; he had no power of himself; a new being controlled his actions, a fresh motive power compelled his thoughts. With noiseless tread he slipped across the room, reaching a writing-desk by the window. A sheet of paper lay ready to hand, in the folds

of a silver blotter, on which Mostyn's initials were engraved.

Haroun hardly seemed to follow the words which flowed from his pen. He knew that he wrote in the language which came to him untaught from his cradle, the language in which as a child he spoke aloud in his sleep. He laid before the true believers at the great shrine of Mashad every word which had reached his ears in that silent, agonising watch. He told the name of his brother, and as he wrote upon stamped 'Priory' paper, he laughed spasmodically—short diabolical snatches of laughter with a strange mixture of gloating triumph, of misery, of storm-tossed turbulent mind-waves, like the motion of restless seas at the call of strong winds. The hands which could have saved him from his ghâstly deed of betrayal were so near, yet none knew of the threatened danger. In that fateful hour the lovers were side by side in the pretty boudoir, chatting over afternoon tea, with Diana and her husband.

"No good to expect Haroun," said his mother, glancing through the window in the direction of the studio; "he never comes in for any meal if he gets interested in his work. I fear he has had a bad light for painting to-day, but such things affect him very little."

Haroun seldom followed in the footsteps of others; he despised the usual stumbling-blocks, and made the best of disadvantages.

Through overhearing a chance word, he first suspected that Mostyn intended reading some paper while the model from London would occupy the studio, and from that moment he set himself to discover the place and hour. He had a peculiarly noiseless tread and very sharp ears; his faculty for catching distant sounds or murmured words often struck Diana as uncanny. To a detective his talents would have proved invaluable, for he was born with strange instincts and keen perception. As he wrote in the library, he still listened intently for approaching footsteps, fully aware he was in no fit state to be seen by any member of his family.

Through all his apparent madness a cautious cunning and calculation ran. He hurriedly sealed the letter, directly the fatal words were penned, addressing it to Mashad, without a thought of faltering. His lips were set in one hard, unrelenting line; he seemed to see everything through a scarlet haze, a red sheet of blood.

He seized his coat, which lay crumpled in the oak chest, and stole out into the misty dampness of the afternoon. The old Chelsea

pensioner had been paid and sent back some hours since, the studio blinds were drawn. Haroun made his way to the post-office with speed, running under cover of the trees, and welcoming the occasional drops of moisture which fell from the boughs on his heated forehead. He could trust no other messenger to commit the condemning epistle to the post. Every now and again he drew it from his pocket, to read the direction with elated eyes. He muttered to himself snatches of foreign words, which sounded like curses. He saw nothing but the path ahead, like a crimson thread in the gloom of overshadowing trees. As he entered the post-office he became dimly aware that his appearance attracted attention. The post-mistress, who knew him well, cast puzzled glances at his ashen face and quick, nervous gestures. She thought some great calamity must have occurred at the Priory, but dared not make any remark, for the expression in his eyes frightened her. He handed the letter to be weighed, and asked for the required stamp; she noted it was addressed to a place in Persia, and heavily sealed. With his own hand he dropped it in the letter-box, breathing a sigh of satisfaction.

Slowly now he retraced his steps, feeling some great deed had been accomplished.

His blood no longer boiled ; he felt cool and satisfied ; he was vaguely conscious of having done the right thing. Those same mysterious voices were whispering in his ears, but with a very different note. They flattered and sang sweet praises ; they rejoiced that the sharp arrow had left the bow, to wing its way straight to the very seat of vengeance. He could see the shrine miraged in the evening shadows : the gold of the gates was reflected in a sudden shaft of yellow light, which made a streak across the grey skies. In imagination he was walking with the pilgrims through the noisy bazaars, pushing onward, onward, to those sacred portals. Surely he must pass soon into the chambers of splendour, to kneel in the old accustomed way, to bend his forehead low to the earth, to kiss the relics with eager lips. Such dream-kisses were more fraught with emotion than the earthly kissing of a woman's lips. Haroun had admired feminine beauty from his youth, but chiefly as an artist. The ruling passion of his life turned to a faith of which he had been taught nothing. His guides and tutors were voices and memories of the past, and reaching back to a previous existence when he had known all, and understood fully the religion of a people far removed from the influence

of his present surroundings. Often this strange persistent memory made the past a true reality, while the Priory and its occupants were but a dream, to be suffered patiently until the hour of glad awakening. On the other hand, there were days and weeks when his British birth held pre-eminence. He also escaped from his heritage of recollection, happy for the time being in his English surroundings. So the tide flowed and ebbed, returned and retreated, with restless uncertainty, keeping him weak of frame, thin, pale, brain-weary, a soul within a soul, driven by powers which the mind of man could never fathom or understand.

He entered the Priory by a side-door, and went straight to his room. Reaction was setting in; he felt tired and desirous of sleep.

Flinging himself down on the bed, he closed his eyes, and almost immediately lost consciousness.

For more than an hour he lay wrapt in deep slumber, from which the dressing-bell awoke him with a start. He sprang up, and sat on the corner of his bed,—wondering. He liked the touch of the cold iron post upon his hand; he felt as if he had passed through some crisis in his sleep.



"Extraordinary!" he said to himself. "I must have slept all the afternoon. Of course I remember I sent that model away, because I felt too exhausted to paint—the old mental excitement again. By gad! when I feel like that, I ought to ask somebody to lock me up, only I haven't the nerve to own I am not myself. Lucky this time I came straight to my room, and spent the afternoon in bed. I have had the most diabolical dreams, and fancied—but no; it's too ghastly to contemplate! Can't think what put such hideous notions into my head. I shouldn't be the least surprised to hear I had been seen wandering about in my sleep. I imagined I caught Mostyn congratulating himself on having entered the shrine at Mashad (though it matters little to me whether he went there or not), but I seemed frenzied. I gave him away to the authorities, wrote and posted a letter. Bah! those vivid dreams are desperately tiring; I ache from head to foot."

He dressed wearily, and at dinner Diana remarked he did not look well.

"I expect you overworked yourself," she said. "I don't suppose you left the studio all the afternoon."

"As a matter of fact," he replied, "I sent the old pensioner back, and never touched a brush."

Diana exchanged a quick glance with Candida.

"What did you do with yourself?" asked the girl. "You never came in to tea."

"To tell you the truth I was despicably lazy. I went upstairs, and just tumbled off to sleep, thereby avoiding one of my really bad headaches. Sleep is a wonderful doctor, and one I can generally summon at a moment's notice."

A little sigh of relief escaped Candida. Then Haroun had suspected nothing! She felt grateful to the heavy day, which was accountable probably for his lassitude.

As the evening wore on he became more cheerful; the presence of Mostyn had usually an exhilarating effect upon his brother.

"I sometimes think I have quite a rival in Haroun," Candida said, jokingly, to Diana; "he and Mostyn are so devoted. I must say it is very delightful to see such a united family. Haroun tells me he is already rack-ing his brains to think of a really original wedding present for us."

"Do you believe in luck?" asked Haroun, joining the ladies at that moment.

Candida confessed to certain mild superstitions.

"I had an old coin, which came out of a very celebrated collection, and was given to

me as a mascot by a friend who has since died. I've always carried it in my pocket ; when I change my clothes I mechanically replace it from one coat to another. I have never mislaid it for a moment until to-day. Oddly enough it must have slipped from my pocket, though there is no hole in the lining, as I have looked carefully. I've a vague suspicion nothing will go right with me unless I find it again. I have searched my room, and told the servants, that the house may be swept and garnished. The gardeners, too, have promised to look along the path from the studio to the side entrance early to-morrow morning, as I only missed my precious coin just before dinner."

"It is sure to turn up," said his father, "as you have not gone out of the grounds all the afternoon. I should be sorry if it were lost for good."

"Say for bad," laughed Haroun ; but though he passed the matter off with a jest, Diana knew the occurrence troubled him.

"I shall make a note of the date," he added ; "and if nothing unfortunate occurs, I will never believe in mascots again. I know it is very foolish, for all superstitions make one unnecessarily uncomfortable. I think I shall divorce them from my scheme

of life ; it's ridiculous to believe in anything of the kind."

"Yet he does believe, for all that!" Diana told Candida afterwards. "I wish the coin could be found ; he is so imaginative, he will see evil in everything now."

## CHAPTER XV

### THE PLAYACTOR

CANDIDA'S engagement to Mostyn was only to be of a few months' duration. Their April love would see its fulfilment towards the end of July, and the wedding prove a late event of the season.

Mrs Whitechurch was in her element over the business of trousseauing. She made up her mind that her daughter's equipment should be one of almost sensational beauty in the world of dress, an ambition which Candida regarded as of little or no importance, though she humoured her mother, trying to show a keener interest than she really felt.

Her time was passed alternately between London and Roehampton, and as she grew to know Haroun better, she found herself liking him more and more. He was so interested in the forthcoming ceremony, that if he himself had been the bride-

groom he could hardly have shown keener enthusiasm.

"Candida will make a really beautiful bride," he said to his mother; "she is quite a picture-woman, and so graceful. It gives me pleasure to see her move. I know just how she will glide up the aisle with her stately tread, which is so unusual in England. Grace, to my mind, is a greater fascination than beauty of feature; luckily she has both."

"And also, which is more, beauty of mind," said Diana.

"You call that more?" declared Haroun, satirically, with a shake of his head.

"Don't you?" asked Diana in surprise.

"Certainly not. I could forgive her any devilment for the sake of her colouring and figure. I would not change it for the whitest soul on earth."

He laughed at seeing how deeply his words shocked Mrs Anstey. She never quite knew if he were serious or not, but hoped in this case he had spoken jokingly.

"I must say," she replied, "that I think your brother has every chance of happiness with such a thoroughly good woman. Ever since their engagement he tells me he has never heard her say an unkind word of a living soul. She is amiable, gentle, and true. I wish, Haroun, you could get such a wife.

I should like to see you married to a woman like Candida."

"In face and form, yes ; but I shall neither look for nor expect a saint. I am not sure a too perfect character wouldn't pall on me a little. I like a spice of the devil ; it's diverting at times. I wouldn't mind a battle occasionally, for the pleasure of making peace afterwards."

"That isn't my idea of a successful marriage," sighed Diana, feeling herself out of touch with Haroun's theories.

As she spoke, her husband came hurriedly into the room. He held a familiar object between his finger and thumb. Haroun, with a gasp of joy, seized upon it excitedly.

"My coin, my mascot!" he told his mother, hurrying to her side, and dropping it joyfully on her lap. "I have always had a feeling that some misfortune would prevent me being at Mostyn's wedding ; perhaps now I shall have a chance. Where was it found?" turning to Mr Anstey with eager inquiry.

"One of the maids picked it up in a corner of an old oak chest in the library. She was looking for a piece of Eastern drapery which had been placed there some months ago, and the coin fell out of one of the folds."

"How strange!" said Haroun, thoughtfully. "Perhaps it had been in my studio, —the drapery I mean."

He became suddenly silent, almost depressed. His pleasure at having the coin again seemed swamped in some gloomy reflection. Diana made a casual remark, but he failed to answer, and left the room apparently without having heard her speak.

He could remember clearly the afternoon of his loss. On that day the terribly vivid dream of crouching in the oaken box had tormented his mind during the afternoon. Now he began to wonder if it really were a dream, or if indeed he had hidden himself in that dark recess, to listen while Mostyn related a thrilling adventure at Mashad. How could the coin have been found there otherwise? He seemed to recall the discomfort of that cramped position, even to the removing of his coat, from the pocket of which the coin had been lost. If that were the case, might not the rest of the dream be also true? What if he had really written a letter to endanger his brother's life? The thought turned him sick and cold; he shivered from head to foot. So long ago it would hardly be likely that the post-mistress could remember him purchasing foreign stamps, yet a desire to go



to the post-office on the chance came suddenly to Haroun's mind. No sooner thought of than done. He hurried to the place, where it was just possible he might find a clue.

"I suppose," he said, addressing the post-mistress, "that neither you nor your attendants could remember if I brought a Persian letter here in April to be weighed and stamped? It seems a stupid thing to ask, but I am not sure if I sent it, at this distance of time."

He fixed his eyes upon the woman with such a penetrating look of inquiry that she fully realised her answer must mean a great deal to him.

"I remember," she said; "because, you will excuse my saying so, sir, but you came in looking very upset and pale, I feared something must have happened. I weighed the letter myself, and sold you the stamps. I particularly noticed the direction. The name of the place was Mashad in Persia."

The faint colour which had given Haroun's cheeks an almost girlish flush faded, leaving him white to the very lips.

"Thank you," he muttered, faintly. "You say I looked upset? How strange! I remember so little of that afternoon."

He wished her good-morning, walking

away unsteadily. There was no longer any doubt in his mind as to what had happened. The vision had been reality, the dream a truth. This paralysing discovery made his head reel ; he felt like a drunken man groping along the road.

"My God! What have I done?" he asked himself feverishly, knowing not if the letter to Mashad had been intelligible, or merely some wild rubbish written by a hand possessed. He still hoped it might not imperil Mostyn, but the uncertainty was fraught with horrible dread.

At first he decided to hasten back to his brother, and tell him all, but on second thoughts he resolved to keep his terrible secret strictly to himself. This was no time, just before the wedding, to alarm the bridegroom. Besides, he valued his brother's affection too highly to risk losing it for perhaps a groundless fear. His great love for Mostyn was almost as strong, in his rational moods, as his hatred for the infidel who dared to penetrate the sacred shrine when Mohammedan instincts were uppermost. He feared that already the human bloodhounds might have started upon Mostyn's track. On the very day of the wedding he might mysteriously disappear, or be openly assassinated.

Often Haroun had thought that he was born to be a detective. In another sphere his art-work would have been sacrificed to the absorbing profession of paid spy to the British police force. Now he saw a chance of exercising his natural talent, of proving his ability in this particular line. Solemnly he resolved to shadow his brother night and day, to keep such a vigilant watch over his movements, that never for a moment should he be in ignorance of Mostyn's whereabouts, and all if possible without betraying any unusual desire for his company, or showing anxiety which might excite suspicion.

Haroun's English instincts were uppermost at present. Ever since that fearful outburst, when he had given Mostyn's deed away to the authorities at Mashad, the racial traits of a second self slumbered contentedly. It was as if that other being within him knew that justice and vengeance would be done, and, gratified by the knowledge, sank subservient to the true nature inherited from British parents.

Mostyn was glad to see the sudden change which came over Haroun. The younger man, instead of shutting himself up for hours in the studio, laid his work aside, and frequently accompanied his brother to town.

He showed a marked preference for Candida's home, though he never obtruded himself upon the privacy of the engaged couple. He would pay long visits to Mrs Whitechurch, always while Mostyn was under her roof, leaving with his brother, and amusing Mostyn on the way to Barnes with stories of Candida's mother.

"She is quite a good companion," Haroun declared. "We have struck up a friendship which amuses me, and seems to please her. I rather like worldly people. I get on with women older than myself. Of course she is a terrible gossip, but I like drawing her out ; it's diverting to see how far she will go. You may be amused to hear I know a good deal more than you do about Candida's trousseau. I have even designed some of her dresses. An artist's eye for colour is helpful in the scheme of a picture frock or tea-gown. I can't help laughing sometimes at the mother's undisguised vanity, while dear Candida cares as little for appearance as if she were hopelessly plain. That may be perhaps because she knows she looks lovely in everything. By the way, Mostyn, you will tell me directly if I am giving you too much of my society ; I am always ready to clear."

Mostyn warmly assured his brother he

was delighted to be favoured with his company, little guessing there was any hidden motive in Haroun's presence.

The scheme of watching and guarding Mostyn grew upon the younger man; his vigilance increased as the days drew nearer the wedding; he had a thousand secret ways of keeping the unsuspecting bridegroom in sight.

Mrs Whitechurch arranged a garden party in the country, to take place before the wedding, at Athlone Park, her place in Sussex.

"The people down there are very disappointed that Candida is not to be married in the little rural church, which is only a few yards from the park gates," Mrs Whitechurch told Haroun, "so I am opening out the house, and giving this party to console them. I want to introduce Mostyn before he is actually my son-in-law. A number of the county people will come up for the wedding, but it is nice for them to know Candida's fiancé first. A few days' rest out of town will do us all good, and then there are the village folk to entertain. Candida insists on a parish tea and a school treat in honour of the event."

"I don't think you will get much rest," remarked Haroun.

"Early hours, and breathing the pure air, are quite sufficient to brace me up," remarked the energetic widow, cheerfully. "I don't mind what I do in the daytime, if I am allowed the luxury of retiring at ten o'clock. In London we are late every night. Of course Mostyn will be staying with us, and I was wondering if you would come down and help to make things go? You see, Haroun, I look upon you as one of the family now."

She patted his hand playfully as she spoke. Inwardly he heaved a sigh of relief, congratulating himself on his diplomacy in making Mrs Whitechurch his friend.

The thought of Mostyn spending even a few days out of his sight at this critical time was agony to Haroun. He knew that after the ceremony his brother must vanish on that journey of journeys, the honeymoon, and then it would be time to warn him of possible danger. Before the strain of that momentous day, no hint should be given to disturb the lover's peace of mind.

"I shall be delighted to come to Athlone Park, and am ready to throw myself body and soul into all the arrangements for the consolation of the disappointed ones,"

Haroun replied, with a boyish enthusiasm which he forced himself to assume in the presence of Mrs Whitechurch.

He read her character shrewdly, seeing she appreciated high spirits, and a certain gaiety of manner which fitted her own. Had he betrayed the real state of his mind, the horrible tension, which kept him night and day on the watch, he realised he would lose her inevitably. She shunned sadness or melancholy, avoiding all doleful subjects or distressing truths as she would the plague.

"We will have quite a good time," she declared, her eyes sparkling. "I never like Athlone Park so well as when I rush down there from London. The charm of contrast makes one forget the country can be the dullest place on earth. I want you to advise me about the garden party. I mean to have heaps of entertainments, otherwise the whole affair will be as flat as ditch-water. We must have music and singing, fortune-tellers in tents, and perhaps some dancers performing in the open air. I have engaged a few artistes already, but waited to consult you about the final arrangements."

She paused with an air of flattering expectation for Haroun to speak. He con-

sidered a moment, determined not to disappoint her.

"I should have liked a pastoral play, some poetic little drama of the East, done by professionals. I have a piece in my mind which I think would suit exactly. I could arrange the correct costumes, and lend the actors some of my Persian garments."

Mrs Whitechurch was charmed with the suggestion; they talked long and fully on the subject.

"Anything for a novelty," she said. "I hope, too, that a number of London friends may motor down. If you will settle about the play, I shall be deeply grateful."

Haroun felt glad of this outside interest to divert his mind a little from the painful strain upon it, caused by his daily anxiety.

He entered into all Mrs Whitechurch's schemes with an enthusiasm which delighted her; she could not speak highly enough of Haroun.

"Sometimes I think you prefer him to Mostyn," said Candida, with perhaps the faintest touch of jealousy, which she would not have acknowledged even to herself.

"Oh, no! they are so utterly different. Haroun would make an impossible husband. I don't think any woman could live with him



for long ; he is too exacting—too jumpy, shall I say? One never knows what he is going to do next. As a friend and companion he is most interesting. He worships the very ground Mostyn treads on ; never seems really happy when his brother is out of his sight. The older man is a kind of hero to him, for Haroun still seems a boy, though he is becoming quite celebrated as an artist."

The move to Athlone Park was a welcome change. Candida loved the old-world house, with its beautiful gardens and wealth of flowers. Here she was no longer the prey of dressmakers, though the daily incoming of wedding presents kept her busy with her pen.

"I spend my life thanking people," she declared. "I feel quite uncomfortably grateful at finding I have so many friends."

The day of the garden party dawned bright and fair. Athlone was en fête, and the grounds had never looked lovelier. Special carriages were to be reserved in an early afternoon train from town, both for guests and performers. Haroun felt convinced the Eastern play would prove a great attraction.

Everyone for miles around looked forward to meeting Candida's fiancé. They had heard of him as a singularly clever man

and a great traveller, while Candida, ever since her somewhat recent *début*, had been the belle of the county.

Mrs Whitechurch, looking singularly young for her years, was in her element. She loved nothing more than playing hostess to a large crowd. Her cheeks were blooming, and she accepted the congratulations on her daughter's forthcoming marriage with as much delight as if she herself were the bride-elect.

Haroun met many of his town acquaintances, and was introduced to a large number of country people.

Occupied with conversation, and interested in the well-arranged entertainments, he did not observe for some time a tall, dark, sinewy man, of fierce Eastern countenance, who moved silently among the chattering throng, speaking to no one. His narrow dark eyes, with their thick, black-haired brows, looked searchingly from left to right, as if on the track of some missing object. He moved with a grace suggestive of a panther hunting prey. The moment Haroun's glance fell upon the stranger, he was conscious of the sharp awakening of some slumbering instincts. He scented danger and treachery; he knew the hour of vengeance had thrown its first threatening shadow across the bride-

groom's sunny path. It needed no telling that this unknown personage was not one of the social crowd, or else why did he wander friendless and aloof among the well-dressed multitude?

Quickly Haroun sought his hostess.

"Mrs Whitechurch," he said, in such a low, breathless voice that it instantly arrested her attention, "can you tell me who the tall olive-coloured man is with the rather queerly-cut clothes?"

She followed the direction of Haroun's eyes.

"Oh, that coffee creature with the diabolical face!" she murmured, indulging a little rippling laugh. "He must be one of the actors in your Eastern drama. I am sure no friends brought him, for he has certainly not been introduced to me."

"But I know all the actors; you forget I attended the rehearsals," replied Haroun, trying to conceal his tone of alarm.

"Then perhaps he did come with somebody, and I overlooked him. He is certainly being neglected. Do make a point of finding out, for I can't bear to see anyone stranded. Introduce him to some strong-minded natives here who won't be frightened of his fearsome eyes. His appearance gives me the creeps. What can his nationality be?"

"Persian, I think."

"Really! Then you ought to be interested, for I am told you love that poetic nation."

Haroun turned away without replying, for temporarily a hatred of all things Persian predominated. The true self, rooted in his affection for Mostyn, remained uppermost, ever since he realised that his recent madness had sown the seeds of everlasting remorse.

He made a few inquiries, and finding that none of the local people were acquainted with this man, determined to introduce himself.

As he advanced, somebody addressed Haroun in a voice which palpably reached the tall, dark figure.

"Have you had your fortune told, Mr Anstey?"

The Persian, on catching the name Anstey, turned quickly, and riveted his eyes on Haroun. The glance held scrutiny as well as inquiry; Haroun seemed to read its meaning like an open book.

"He thinks I am Mostyn," said the younger brother to himself, and a sudden glow turned his blood to fire, a thrill which set every nerve tingling from head to foot.

The speaker who had asked him about his

fortune received no answer. He was standing quite still, staring into space, as if seeing a vision. On his face a sudden light, a radiance almost unearthly, spread its mystifying touch. He appeared transformed, but not as of old, for in his heart the beauty of sacrifice sprang to life; some pure vital resolve, some great courageous idea, took possession of his mind. He saw a way to save Mostyn. He looked along a winding path of circumstances, the relentless road with the signboards 'Cause' and 'Effect' pointing in one direction alone.

He advanced to the swarthy Persian, who appeared to draw him nearer with that cold yet magnetic gaze. He spoke, without a trace of emotion.

"You don't seem to know many people here, and Mrs Whitechurch has asked me to look after her friends. She has noticed that you are alone, and forgets with whom you came, as she has not the pleasure of your acquaintance."

The man hesitated before replying; just for a moment he appeared to find difficulty in speech.

Then he advanced with a smile which might have been genuine or might have been of Judas, and bowed with great respect, as he made his explanation.

"I am with the members of the cast for the Persian play."

"How is that?" asked Haroun. "I know the actors, and have spoken to them all."

"Quite so. I have merely come in the position of an understudy, since one member of the company is feeling indisposed. He suffered a touch of the sun only a few days ago, and feared, if the heat were very great in the garden, he might be ill at the last moment. I tried to keep apart from the guests, but I was told I might walk about the grounds. I fancy I have the honour of addressing the future husband of the beautiful young lady of the house?"

Haroun made quick reply, with all the enthusiasm of a lover.

"Yes," he said, "I am the happy man. My name is Mostyn Anstey. I only returned to England a few months ago. I know your country well, for I think I am right in guessing you come from Persia."

He spoke cheerfully, and drew a little nearer. The strong individuality of the Mohammedan attracted him like a magnet, with a strange mixture of fascination and horrified curiosity, making for keen excitement. The sportman's love of danger woke

with tenfold force in Haroun's soul; he was fearless, and even eager to suffer risk. The gods, he felt, had given him a glorious gift of victory. He had the whip hand over himself—at last he could repay!

## CHAPTER XVI

### I UNDERSTAND THESE PEOPLE

THE stranger acknowledged he was Persian, but appeared eager to pass over the fact and speak of other matters. He did not ask Haroun what part of the country he had visited, but mentioned in flowery language the forthcoming wedding.

"You have won a jewel," he said, "a lady fair as the day, and worthy to be the wife of a gentleman so highly esteemed as yourself. I must confess that I am deeply honoured at being allowed to exchange a few words with you."

Haroun tried to trace a note of mockery in the tone, but it was well concealed beneath the courteous veneer.

"I am always interested in meeting new people from far-away lands," Haroun replied. "Have you been long in England?"

"No, I arrived quite shortly; and acting is not my usual profession. I trade in precious



stones. I have in London now some of the most exquisite gems that the eye of man has ever seen. I would gladly show you my collection before disposing of them to the trade, if you should wish to secure some choice and original gift for the bride of your heart. They are stored in the house of a friend who shares with me the business of beautifying fair women with the decoration befitting their heaven-sent charms."

He flung up his hands and eyes as he spoke with a droll expression of ecstasy, hardly in keeping with his natural grave countenance. Haroun felt an involuntary shiver pass down his spine as he listened.

He guessed the story of the jewels was a mere fabrication, a lure to get Mostyn to some lonely house, where the knife might do its cruel work. This man was probably one of many, waiting to draw a net around their victim, whence there could be no escape. If one or two failed in the attempt, a hundred others could fill and refill the posts of those unsuccessful messengers of vengeance.

Suddenly in his own heart Haroun knew and realised what it meant to these men of faith, whose holy shrine the infidel had desecrated. He felt in his body the racial instincts which led them on, though his love for Mostyn was stronger than all else, now

that he had set himself to shield and protect the doer of this supposed evil. Blood alone must wipe out the offence ; Haroun was conscious of the fact in every tingling nerve. Were he to give up this stranger to the English police, have him arrested and searched as a suspicious character, it would merely be stemming a drop in the ocean.

"I am looking for something original in jewellery," he said. "I have a desire to give my future wife a set of ornaments quite different in design to anything she has seen before. A number of people are to bring me specimens, but I hardly think I shall find what I want in this country. If I fail, I will come to you ; only let me know where you are to be found."

The Persian took a card from his pocket, and presented it with a stately air, bowing again, this time lower than before.

"You can communicate with me at that address in London, but it is not my residence. You must tell me where to meet you, and your humble servant will then conduct you to the house of his friend, where the valuables are stored in a safe. The sight of them will make you dream that the stars of heaven have been given into your possession. We have scraps of the moon and portions of the sun. They are almost

unearthly in their beauty, those lustrous gems of light."

Haroun read the little piece of paste-board, which might be a death-warrant in disguise.

The name 'Mohamed-ed-Din' was printed in bold letters, while an address in Bloomsbury had been written below in purple ink.

"Thanks," said Haroun; "you shall hear from me if I am not suited."

The Persian gave vent to one more slow, expressive smile, which revealed the gleaming white of his teeth, making his skin appear even darker in contrast.

"All shall be preserved for your coming until the date of your marriage," he promised fervently. "We sell to the trade, as I told you before, and the trade can wait. To so celebrated a traveller as Mr Mostyn Anstey Persia should give her best. For such a glorious bride, no jewel could be fair enough, were it to rival the very sunbeams from above. May your love be as tender as the dews of morning, as lasting as the coming of night and day, an endless sweetener of your years."

The soft expressions were as honey and music to Haroun. Just for a moment he forgot his dread and horror in listening to

what seemed a familiar sound of long ago. This man, whom he recognised unmistakably as an enemy, had the power to lull his fears and awaken some echo of past days. Haroun felt an almost overwhelming desire to betray his true identity, to say, "I am not the man, but the hand which betrayed him. I am the defender of your faith ; I have given you your opportunity of vengeance."

He crushed the terrible idea. If such feelings were to rise uppermost, then Mostyn would be lost.

"I must apologise for detaining you from your friends, and from the lady of your life," said Mohamed-ed-Din. "For the favour of your presence I thank you, and must no longer keep you from basking in the smiles of beauty. Be sure, when we meet again, I will show you something worthy of the regent of your existence. Should you, however, be satisfied first with other ornaments, may I beg you will still inspect the treasures of our journey? We should display the glories of Persia for your pleasure and not our profit, in the hope that you will tell your honoured friends Mohamed-ed-Din can produce for them the most precious stones in all the world, set with a skill which raises his countrymen to a high pinnacle of perfection in art."

Haroun paused before he uttered the final words of leave-taking. Somehow he knew that after this conversation the man would vanish from Athlone Park. Not for a moment had he believed the story of the understudy. The part he had come to play was a drama of real life, which might develop into a tragedy for the bride and bridegroom, unless they were saved by the strategy of a brother who had brought the danger upon them, and was now prepared to pay the price of his madness and his shame.

"I will come," Haroun answered, firmly. "It is possible I may not require your wares, but still I shall not disappoint you by my absence."

"We should esteem it a favour of favours if your Excellence would come alone. We wish to keep our store of goods a secret for the first few weeks of our landing on these shores. Then we will crave your word of kindness to recommend us to the wealthy people in your midst. The reason for this request is not far to see. First we must satisfy ourselves as to their value with other traders, the men from your big diamond houses in London. After that, we shall know the price to name to the illustrious persons with whom you associate."

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"I understand perfectly," said Haroun, with deep meaning. "You have made it all so very clear to me. Be sure I appreciate the invitation; I know it will be one of benefit to the bride."

He moved away, afraid to trust himself to speak another word.

Mohamed-ed-Din turned also and was lost to view among the trees.

Haroun went straight to the actors' tent, where they waited in costume to commence their performance.

"Have you brought an understudy," he asked, "a Persian fellow, with very dark skin and eyes?"

"No," the answer came from several mouths.

"Oh! my mistake," added Haroun, quickly, anxious not to be questioned.

He left them as abruptly as he came, fearing his remark might rouse comment.

He was making his way back to Mrs Whitechurch, when Candida met him, wearing a less radiant expression than of yore.

"Mostyn asked me to find out from you who the unknown man was. Several people noticed him, and were remarking on his strange looks. I saw you deep in conversation with him, but the moment you turned away he hurried down the drive, evidently

desperately anxious to be gone. I can't tell you how the sight of him frightened me. I thought perhaps—oh! I hardly like to say it—that he—he might be a spy, come here for some evil purpose."

"What purpose?"

Candida dared not mention to Haroun her real suspicion, believing him to be still in ignorance of the adventure at Mashad.

Already she feared, in the excitement of the moment, that she had said too much.

"Well, burglary," she stammered, "or possibly some scheme of revenge on somebody he considered an enemy. His face was so evil, it made one imagine all sorts of terrible things."

"You were afraid," said Haroun, hardly above a whisper, "that he might have come from Mashad."

Candida started violently. She could never forget the scene in the studio, and knew well Haroun had maintained a severe silence on the subject ever since, even after his brother's return from Persia. To hear him calmly mention 'Mashad' took her breath away.

"I don't quite understand you," she faltered, and hesitated for him to proceed.

He had no wish to puzzle her, for he

felt that a deep power of control was strong within him; he was master of his true self.

"You see," he murmured, kindly, "I am well aware that Mostyn risked his life in the shrine. It came to my ears some time ago."

"Great heavens! Then his secret is known! He must be in deadly danger."

She stared at Haroun with agonised eyes.

"You have little cause to fear. If the man were a spy, he has gone away under the firm impression that I am Mostyn."

"What made him think that?"

"I told him so. He had no reason to doubt my word. He heard me addressed as Mr Anstey; he congratulated me on my engagement to you. I was proud to acknowledge so charming a fiancée. Surely, Candida, you would not have me disown you, if anybody, Christian or Mohammedan, paid me the compliment of supposing I was your choice?"

He spoke with his old raillery, and smiled in the boyish fashion which appealed to all lovers of youth.

"But don't you see," whispered the girl, fearfully, "you took the danger upon yourself?"

"Nonsense! What would be danger to



Mostyn is not to me. I understand these people so well, I am capable of dealing with them. Believe me, I am perfectly safe, and able to protect myself. I will see that Mostyn is preserved unscathed—you can trust me for that; only in return for the service I may be able to render, grant me one small request.”

“Anything in the world,” she answered, gratefully.

“Silence—that is all I ask. Not a word to Mostyn! Remember, if you tell him anything of this, you may imperil his future safety. I implore you to trust me implicitly, despite a painful hour long ago, when I might well have forfeited your respect or regard. My brother’s life is dearer to me than my own. I mean to guard Mostyn, to shield him if these men are on his track. I have methods which will place him absolutely beyond their reach. I swear by God, and on my own soul.”

Haroun’s manner was one of such quiet reverence and absolute assurance, that Candida could not disbelieve him. She knew the tears were welling in her eyes, and, while she longed to tell him just how thankful she felt for his brotherly love and encouraging words, she hardly dared trust herself to speak. He saw the struggle,

realising she was on the verge of breaking down.

"There, there!" he said, "don't say anything now; you must keep a firm hold on yourself, my dear child. I know my request is granted already."

He became unexpectedly paternal; his boyishness had vanished. He seemed to patronise her, in a soothing, elderly way, which made her feel he was years her senior.

"How good you are!" she faltered. "I shall be better in a moment. Of course I will do anything you ask after your great kindness. It's difficult to have a secret from Mostyn, but perhaps you are right. If he guessed my anxiety, it would make him wretched, and it's better for one to suffer than two."

"But you won't suffer after I have proved to you that there can be no longer any danger. Tell Mrs Whitechurch the Persian was an understudy for the Eastern play, and do not point out the fact that he has left the premises. Here comes Mostyn; try and look a little more cheerful, or he will think you are tired of him already, and regretting your bargain."

Haroun left her with this last word of advice, and went to assure himself that

Mohamed-ed-Din was no longer to be found. He inquired at the lodge gates if a tall, dark, foreign-looking man had been seen leaving the grounds a short time ago.

He learned that a person answering to the description recently passed out in hot haste. A motor had been waiting to drive him away ; the chauffeur was masked.

"It surprised me that a guest should leave so early," the lodge-keeper added, "especially in such an evident hurry. There are many strangers from London here to-day, sir, but I noticed the dark-skinned gentleman especially coming in. He was above the average height, you see, and his complexion caught my eye. He was walking, and didn't go up the drive with the rest. He branched off, crossing the park towards the kitchen garden. He must have gone in that way."

"To prevent being announced," thought Haroun, as he felt for a coin, and transferred it from his pocket to the lodge-keeper's hand.

"Just forget to repeat what you saw," he said, confidentially. "Don't mention to Mrs or Miss Whitechurch any details of that fellow's arrival or departure. I have satisfied myself he had no right to be at the party ; he came uninvited, possibly for a bet, or curiosity, one can never tell. After a few

questions from me he took a hurried departure. Ladies are apt to exaggerate these things, and get scared about burglars."

"Very good, and much obliged, sir, I'm sure."

The sound of distant music mingled with the poetry of the summer afternoon. Haroun walked slowly back, meditating.

"What is danger to Mostyn, is not to me. I told her that," he murmured, with rather a satirical smile at a woman's credulity. "She believed me, and I'm glad. I said I was perfectly safe, but safety is a word of more meanings than one. Safe to suffer, safe to die, or safe to live, what does it matter? The world was made for lovers, and I am not in love."

He paused, for this last assertion was perhaps untrue. He was in love with Nature, with the sunlight and the moonshine, with the everlasting picture above of floating cloud, of blue and rose, of amber, shining at the rise or fall of day. His art was his mistress, and the whole world held a thousand wild delights. Life was so wonderfully kind to youth, when pleasures were easy of attainment, when already the laurels of success crowned the brow.

Haroun knew his feet had commenced to climb the dizzy ladder of fame; now it

seemed to totter under the weight of heavy circumstance.

He drew near the gay scene.

“Why not enjoy?” he asked himself with a short, rather mirthless laugh. “To live is good—if only for a day.”

## CHAPTER XVII

### IN MOSTYN'S INTEREST

It was a week before the wedding, but Haroun still kept his promised present to the bride a secret.

"I am going to ask your acceptance of a simple gift, which I venture to think you will like better than anything else in the world," he said.

"How mysterious!" she replied, and her eyes looked at him thoughtfully, with a half-puzzled expression. "You make me very curious. I am sure it will be original, and I am equally certain I shall like whatever you choose; but I do wish you would not keep it a secret any longer, you rather tantalise me."

"I am sorry. Still I fear you must contain your soul in patience till the wedding-day, and possibly until after the ceremony."

"Then you are having something made specially?"

"It has yet to be made."

"Perhaps you will make it yourself?"

She was thinking of a picture, though he had already given Mostyn a life-sized portrait of the bride.

"Perhaps I shall."

"Then you are right, and of course I would rather have your own work than any other present. I am so proud to think I shall be sister to a celebrity. I am always being asked if the young artist who has made his mark is a future relation of mine. The name Anstey has become already familiar in the art world."

Her words, which were no flattery, appeared to give him pain. He shrank a little from the truth, and the realisation of his sudden fame.

The originality of his work made it popular. His pictures were hung, and found ready purchasers, directly they emerged from the studio at the Priory.

"You don't like talking about your success?"

"No."

"Why? You were never shy."

"It frightens me to realise the shortness of life; one has so little time to fulfil ambition."

"You have certainly made the most of

your years. I can't see you have anything to regret. Your laurels surely are coming rapidly enough. To be too impatient is to show weakness."

"I never boasted of being strong. My character moulds itself, and my only tutor is inclination. I told you from the first that if you accepted me as a friend you would find me a mass of weakness. Now, as a sister, you must be even more lenient, because, in knowing me better, you will discover more faults."

"Yet," she said, "you could do so much if you would. I often feel you want a firmer hold upon yourself, and then you might simply laugh at the world."

"But I always do. I look on it as a farce, which amuses me immensely."

"I meant a different kind of laughter—the laughter of triumph."

"You expect too much."

"Yet I have a shrewd suspicion I shall not be disappointed."

She studied his face as she spoke. There was a new expression in his eyes, one she had noticed for the first time as he spoke to her at the garden-party, when the fear of the dark stranger made her heart stand still.

"I have greater faith in you since that



afternoon at Athlone Park," she said. "You were very kind to me then. You made me believe that Mostyn was safe, and you have kept up your influence ever since; you put fresh life and hope into me. Sometimes I wonder if I shall ever have quite an easy mind again, or if the terror will last to the end of my life. I picture myself always followed by a certain dread. I dream of that dark face in the Athlone garden. My husband misses a train, is detained perhaps in quite an ordinary way, years after we have been married. Instantly the old horror awakes. At last they have seized him, he will never return—never! The alarm passes, the memory of the shrine fades; but, each time there is a suspicion of mystery or anxiety, the deed comes back—I see the flash of the knife, remember the vengeance. So I picture my future, which to the public eye appears all roses and honey. They say we ought not to regret that roses have thorns; we should rather be thankful the thorns have roses."

She spoke more passionately than was her wont. Haroun could see the traces of deep feeling in her face. He pitied her, knowing how keenly the mental eye may witness scenes of misery and despair.

"Candida," he said, "you told me just

now you had greater faith in me, yet it seems you do not altogether trust my powers of protecting Mostyn. I dare not lay my plans before you—a scheme which will make his deed as if it had never been committed. I told you before, I tell you again, I have undertaken to see this matter through. You must know how deeply I love my brother to forgive him for committing what at one time I considered a crime worthy of death. You have not forgotten one wild, mad day, when in an evil moment I told you the penalty the Mohammedans would inflict for such an outrage. I am only living now to wipe that scene from your mind, to show you I am no wild beast thirsting for blood.”

“Haroun, how was it you had those savage feelings—you, with your great, kind heart, your sympathetic nature?”

She was wondering fearfully if he might not be overcome again by such a mood, and just as he would save his brother, deliver him instead into the hands of the destroyers. She tried to conceal the terrible thought, realising how quickly he defined the working of her troubled brain.

“God knows, Candida—don’t ask me. The day may come when I shall stand upon a safe pinnacle, when you will see your

husband living in security at your side, when no doubt will be left in your heart of the brother whose nature made him vile—whose nature made him pure and true. Sometimes the weakest are the strongest in the end. It is love which gives them strength. Men are heroes for love, and cowards through hate. They are partly brute and partly angel; the duel must continue to the end.”

He was alone with her in the London drawing-room. Mostyn had gone to write a business letter in the study below. Every now and again they involuntarily lowered their voices, as if some listening ear might catch their words.

“I have something rather important to say,” he continued, after a pause; “it’s about the wedding day. Don’t think me faithless or unkind if I fail to appear at the church.”

Candida gave a little gasp; her eyes opened incredulously.

“Oh! surely you will be there—Mostyn’s only brother. Really we can’t spare you, Haroun.”

He smiled—a slow, strange smile which irradiated his features, and lacked the cynical expression that had so often made her feel uncomfortable in his presence.

“You will spare me when I tell you that

it will be in Mostyn's interest I stay away. For that reason I persuaded him to release me from my original promise of being his best man. I pretended to feel nervous of the post; and as I am always looked upon as something of a crank in the family, I got my way without arousing suspicion. There are certain men who must be watched that day, and I cannot trust hired detectives, for the less known of this matter the better. My work will be outside the church; but remember this, Candida, my spirit will be near you, blessing you as you kneel—a poor blessing, perhaps, from such as me, but at your service for what it is worth.”

The girl's eyes grew dim. She saw him suddenly through a mist of tears, which gave his face a shadowy appearance.

“You are very ready to let yourself be misunderstood; why not have the credit for what you are doing? Your absence will be misconstrued both by Mostyn, my mother, and your parents. Their feelings will be hurt; they will attribute your action to lack of interest, even unkindness. You must explain.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head.

“It matters so little to me; I have never made a bid for popularity. Is it not better

they should think my conduct somewhat strange and remiss, than suffer pangs of nervousness or apprehension? You are the only living soul in my confidence. I have paid your sex a high compliment in believing that you, a woman, in love, could keep her own counsel, and even guard a secret from her lover. You won't disappoint me—brave little girl?"

He took her hand in his quick impulsive way, and pressed it with a certain emotional courtesy to his lips. As he did so, the door opened, and Mohamed-ed-Din was ushered into the room. As the tall, brown-faced stranger stood before them, as the name was announced by the English servant, Candida felt her blood run cold. The colour fled from her cheeks; she retained her grip of Haroun's hand, as if she dared not let it go.

The man advanced with a graceful gliding step, and bowed with a show of reverence which momentarily reassured the girl. At least he was not about to assassinate them, though his dark, fierce eyes looked capable of murder.

"What do you want?" asked Haroun, with a slight show of annoyance. "Why have you come here?"

"Your humble servant craves pardon for

an act of presumption; he desired speech with you, and sought your presence far and near. First he journeyed to Roehampton, inquiring there for the house of Mr Mostyn Anstey. Having reached the portals of your fair domain, the retainers informed him that you had taken your excellent presence to this address, the home of your beloved. I fear I thrust myself upon some sweet moments of a hallowed courtship. I crave a thousand pardons; I beg the forgiveness of the lady who is queen of this mansion, and mistress of your heart."

Haroun gave an airy wave of the hand, as if to dismiss any question of forgiveness. He turned to Candida with such a bright, debonair manner, that it almost deceived her, despite her knowledge, and inward dread of the Mohammedan's presence.

"My darling," said Haroun, putting his arm round her, and drawing her to the door, "while I am talking to this gentleman, will you go down and tell my young brother that I cannot join him for a few minutes? Perhaps you would keep him company below, or else ask him not to wait for me. Also, kindly see we are left undisturbed."

"Certainly, Mostyn," she replied, playing into his hands by an instinct born of fear.

He had willed her to use the name. It seemed to come from her lips in answer to his thought.

She paused, and looked towards Mohamed-ed-Din.

"You will not keep my fiancé long, I trust. We are very busy, and have so many arrangements to make."

"Your ladyship's word is a law before which I bend," replied the Persian stranger, deferentially. "Have no fear that I shall detain Mr Mostyn Anstey from his pleasurable duties."

Candida passed out, her cheeks burning now. She felt guilty as well as frightened. Was it fair, after all, to help Haroun in a deception which might work him harm? He had said there was no danger to himself; could she believe that? It seemed unlikely. She was torn between her love for Mostyn and her fear for his brother. At least Mohamed-ed-Din would meet an equal in wit and cunning, if he sought to entrap Haroun. Candida had been often surprised of late by the young artist's powers. Knowing that he watched Mostyn, it bewildered her to observe his stealthy actions, and the easy way in which he avoided arousing suspicion. She felt herself instinctively taking a lesson from him, and it was the

example now of his calm manner which gave her the courage to join her lover with an air of unconcern.

Meanwhile Haroun held an animated conversation with the unwelcome guest, whose manner changed visibly to one of excitement as the door closed upon Candida.

"We have a big yellow diamond," he whispered, "the finest specimen ever seen in London; it only arrived this morning. If you will come with me now, I can give it to you for a ridiculous price. The reason is simple enough. It was brought to London by my cousin. He has just heard that his father is dying, and he must return to Persia immediately. He has spent much money on his travels, and has not sufficient to take him again across the seas until this magnificent jewel is disposed of. He gives me this one day to seek you, and we must join him at his residence, if you are inclined to view the treasure for your bride. To-morrow the great stone will pass to a common man of trade, thus enabling my cousin to quit the country. Surely you could never let so grand an opportunity escape."

The man's voice trembled with anxiety. He found it difficult to conceal his state of tension; his eyes glittered, his fingers twitched.



"Why should not your cousin bring the diamond to me?" said Haroun, drawing himself up, and looking taller as he spoke. "My time is very full, and I told you I cannot waste a moment until the day and hour appointed. On the morning of my wedding all work will be over; I can spare a short time then. If this special stone should be unsold, I will be glad to inspect it and make you an offer, but I shall probably have to content myself with less ambitious gifts. Already I have presented my bride with the ornaments she will wear at the ceremony."

A look of intense disappointment crossed Mohamed-ed-Din's face. He seemed quite dazed for the moment, and muttered to himself inaudible words of confusion. At last he spoke distinctly.

"My cousin, poor fellow, he weeps for his father. He lies on his couch with his face to the pillows, and asks me to go and do his work for him, yet he will not entrust the jewel to my care. It is all very foolish; but he is young, and fears to lose his prize."

Mohamed-ed-Din's eyes grew moist; he moved to the door like one who suffers bereavement, and is broken in spirit.

"If you had but seen," he sighed; "a

diamond to make the fair ones of the world crazy with envy towards your wife, and sold at a sacrifice! But you are young, and though you have travelled far, you still let the good things slip by you. It takes age to realise that the golden opportunity may come but once in a lifetime."

Haroun laughed lightly.

"My pocket is the gainer for my prudence," he answered. "We have a fixed time, my friend, and it is no good rushing people. I shall not be surprised if the diamond is still in your cousin's keeping when I call. We never know our luck in this world, and certainly on one's wedding day good fortune should hover near."

The Mohammedan shook his head.

"A last chance lightly dismissed never comes again. You have yet time to follow me; but I do not ask, I have spoken—that is enough. Your own opinion will, I am sure, be the most excellent, which is all I may say in respect to your gracious person."

"Though you think the more," replied Haroun, in a chaffing tone. "Till our next meeting, when I hope I may be in a mood better suited to your liking. I trust your cousin's tears will be dried by an excellent sale of the yellow diamond."

Thus he parted with the intruder, a smile

on his lips and a strange knocking at his heart.

"I am not afraid," he told himself, staunchly, as he watched at the window to see Mohamed-ed-Din depart, "yet I wonder that devil dared to call! He had some reason for entering the house. Perhaps he is suspicious, and doubts my identity. If so, to-day will re-assure him. Candida was splendid. She rose to the occasion with astonishing promptitude; she paved the way well. Providence brought Mohamed-ed-Din upon the scene at a propitious moment. It is not often I kiss Candida's hand."

The tall figure of the Persian strode away from the house, without looking back. His teeth were set, he kept his eyes fixed rigidly before him. Turning a corner sharply, he joined two men of his own build and colouring. They muttered a curse at seeing him alone.

"The dog prefers to live a few days longer," he muttered. "Each hour he cumberes the earth is a disgrace and abomination; but we must have patience, my brothers—the day will come."

They walked on in silence, their features wearing a mask-like stillness. Mohamed-ed-Din breathed hard, as if he had run a race. There were signs of exhaustion in the man,

which could only be accounted for by mental suffering. All three were as mourners, waiting for some future hour when the resurrection of hope should be given through the blotting out of a deep and feverish grievance —by prayer and blood.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE BEST THAT PERSIA CAN GIVE

AN old house in Chelsea had been rented for a short period by a foreigner, who informed the owners he might be recalled to his native land at any moment. Arrangements were made that a caretaker could be summoned to look after the place whenever the temporary household removed their presence. The newcomers consisted of three men much alike in appearance and age, with a retinue of Persian servants, who talked in their own language, and seldom left the premises. The strangers brought with them a quantity of heavy rugs in brilliant hues, which they spread across the floors, entirely concealing the English carpets. Large double curtains of rich crimson were hung across the sitting-room doors, while divans replaced ordinary British chairs and sofas. No visitors came to the house, and every face in that silent abode wore a sphinx-like expression. Since their arrival, no smile

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had ever passed those set lips, or lightened the sombre eyes of Mohamed-ed-Din's retainers.

A substantial rent having been paid in advance, with a lavish margin for wear and tear, the proprietors of the Chelsea house cared little what manner of men their tenants might be, though they jokingly remarked that in all probability these men were Government spies, sent over on some diplomatic errand.

It was late in the day, and a red afterglow from the sun still lingered in the sky, though the rich crimson had faded from the silent waters of the Thames.

Mohamed-ed-Din and his two companions were seated on a low couch, each with a scroll of paper in their laps. For some moments they remained in silence meditating deeply, then Mohamed-ed-Din shook out his scroll, and read aloud its contents, his listeners hanging upon every word, comparing the text with the writing they also held. Now and again they interrupted, making some comment, or altering the letters on their own copies of the document.

"What think you of our detailed scheme, Ferdusi?" asked the reader, when he came to the conclusion of his written order.

Ferdusi, thus named after the Persian poet, nodded approval.

"It is good," he said, "and very complete. I find no weak point, no flaw in the splendid working of an elaborate revenge. The child of evil is wiped from the earth as easily, as quietly, as if one trampled on a wasp or exterminated any other worthless creature adding its detestable presence to the vermin of the earth."

The third figure in the little group rose and stretched the palms of his hands to heaven.

"So soon! so soon!" he gasped, feverishly, his limbs trembling, and his blazing eyes lighted with a fiery vengeance. "Rest in peace, Imam Reza; by your death agonies we swear that his last pang shall exceed tenfold the sufferings of your saintly end. The fate after death of this cursed Anstey will be equal to that of your murderer, the abhorred Mamoun-al-Rashid. You can sleep well, for your country wipes out this dog of an infidel's crime in blood. Your faithful servants fail in nothing; their glorious task is now upon the eve of success and fulfilment."

Ferdusi touched a bell, and whispered to his companions.

In answer to the summons, the door opened silently, the scarlet curtains were drawn, and the servants, each as tall and fierce-looking

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as their three masters, advanced to the centre of the room. They stood in line, as if upon parade, with soldierly smartness, awaiting the word of command.

"You are aware," said Ferdusi, "that this is the last night we sleep in our prison-house of thwarted desire. To-morrow will see the washing away of the slur upon our sacred tomb at Mashad ; to-morrow we go forth as conquerors, yet in secret, to take the good news home to our brothers in the holy faith."

The servants made obeisance.

"Let each recite his duties," muttered Mohamed-ed-Din, "since equal responsibility lies upon all. One false move, and we may be lost."

In low, impressive voices they stated one by one the allotted task which lay before them on the morrow. Shortly after noon, no trace would be left of the Chelsea household. The keys were ready to be returned ; all was in order for immediate departure.

"Perhaps you may like to see the jewels we are to display to-morrow morning for the bridegroom's benefit," said Ferdusi, showing his gleaming white teeth as he spoke.

He motioned them to a table, upon which lay a long gold-box, studded with precious



stones. Slowly he turned the key, raising the lid for the benefit of the onlookers.

As he opened it fully to their gaze, a sound between a sigh of satisfaction and a half-stifled growl broke from the little group. Within, spread upon quilted satin, lay two large, shining knives with ivory handles and sharp steel blades. It was significant that the rugs, completely covering the room, were of scarlet hue, and heavy enough to absorb the life-stream from a dying man.

The group of eager spectators surveyed the weapons reverently, with clasped hands, and an expression of intense excitement in their eyes.

"The best that Persia can give," said Mohamed-ed-Din, placing his fingers on the sharp edges of these deadly-looking weapons. "Let us kneel awhile in prayer, brethren, and supplicate with tears that to-morrow's work will be sure, that the unbeliever pay the price of his great unspeakable sin, here on his native soil, among his own most damnable countrymen."

Following the speaker's example, they one and all fell prone upon the ground, bowing their foreheads to the floor, and groaning out sob-strangled words, beating upon their breasts as they prayed.

The blinds of the Chelsea house were

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drawn; passers-by guessed nothing of the scene within. They saw only an old stone house, with figures of saints carved upon the roof, turning their sightless eyes towards the grey river, disturbed by a breathless, bustling tug bearing the picturesque brown-sailed barge of commerce to the sea.

## CHAPTER XIX

### NO SHADOW OF A DOUBT

"I CAN'T believe," said Diana Anstey, "that you would be so unkind as to absent yourself from your brother's wedding."

She looked reproachfully at Haroun as she spoke, but he avoided meeting her eyes. He was apparently quite unmoved by the little tremor in her voice, the tone of supplication, which gave force to her words.

"I fail to see what difference my presence would make," he answered lightly. "I am not the bridegroom. I have prepared Candida, and she quite understands. Mostyn will have no time to think of anything but his own happiness that day, and you are sure to be well looked after."

"But what is your reason for wishing to stay away?"

"Have I ever a reason for anything?"

Diana sighed. She felt very unhappy about her son, and half-suspected some

secret passion might be smouldering in his heart for his stepbrother's beautiful young bride.

"Would the ceremony be painful to you?" she asked.

He read her meaning, and laughed aloud.

"Yes; that's it, mother. I am in love with Candida. Only think what an embarrassing situation! In books and plays two brothers always fall in love with the same girl. Do you blame me for dramatising my life, and playing the rôle of disconsolate lover?"

She could tell from his manner he was not in earnest; his joking words puzzled her the more.

"If you do not attend the church, at least you will come to the reception, and wish them good luck. Mrs Whitechurch, for one, will never forgive you if you stay away."

"A terrible thought—to be in the black books of Mrs Whitechurch for life!"

"But really, Haroun——"

"You can be expecting me, but, to tell you the honest truth, I intend vanishing altogether on that day. I have a holy horror of a wedding. It means so much: the ruin, perhaps, of two lives, the possible source of other ruined souls. But for your marriage with my father I should never have been

planted on this earth to bring worry and trouble on your head. Heaven knows what miserable children Candida and Mostyn may be responsible for in future years!"

Diana covered her face with her hands; his thoughtless remark stung her. She knew her own shortcomings; every detail of Haroun's birth was as clear in her mind as when he was a baby. His quick sympathies were touched at the sight of her sudden distress; he went to her side, and put his arms round her tenderly. He had a wonderfully affectionate touch; his warm kiss, and the way he pressed her to his heart, soothed her instantly.

"You know I love you, mother," he said. "You must always remember that. I want you to know, too, that I love Mostyn, more perhaps than you could ever guess. I wronged him once, as you may remember, in my thoughts. Some day I shall atone for that wrong. We couldn't do much on this little planet without love, could we? It's the height and depth and length and breadth of desire, of greatness, of peace. It's so overpowering, yet so humble and lowly; it's wide enough to embrace the world, yet narrow enough to creep into our little human hearts."

Already he was charming away Diana's depression. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Haroun," she said, "I am feeling more resigned now. If you do not want to go to the wedding, I won't say another word, only I can't imagine what you will do with yourself to-morrow. At least I hope your thoughts will be with us."

He loosened his hold of the frail figure (Diana grew thinner as age advanced), and moved to the window, where he stood gazing out upon the Priory garden, towards the spot where he was born.

"I shall hear the bells ringing in my brain, the joy-bells for Mostyn and Candida," he said slowly. "Perhaps I shall rest, and dream of them in my sleep."

He opened the long French windows, and stood a moment in the sunlight, gazing up towards the sky. Then, without another word, he passed into the garden, and walked in the direction of the studio. He let himself in with a key, and drew up the blinds. A small inlaid table with writing materials stood by 'Billy,' the idol. Taking up a pen, he wrote quickly to Candida a letter to be posted early the following morning, a letter which would reach her on her wedding night. Without pausing, he reeled off the words. His hand was firm and steady, though a sudden dampness broke upon his brow.

Sealing the contents, he placed the envelope

in his pocket, and went quickly back to the house. For the first time he had purposely let Mostyn out of his sight, feeling sure his brother would be safe to-day, since he had taken care to send Mohamed-ed-Din a line the previous night, confirming the appointment for the wedding morning, and reminding him that punctuality meant everything on such a day.

Seeing the coast clear, he now hurried to Mostyn's room and closed the door.

"As Mostyn," he said, "my character must be complete. Those devils are so sharp, they would notice if my underlinen were marked with the wrong initials."

Quickly he ransacked the newly-packed luggage in the bridegroom's room, extracting one of each garment upon which an initial would be needed, even to a handkerchief, leaving the boxes as tidy as if no stealthy hand had purloined some of the contents. A card case with Mostyn's cards he also transferred to his pocket.

Later in the day he asked his mother for the key of the safe, saying he wanted to find a valuable scarf-pin he had put away amongst her jewellery, in case he should change his mind at the last moment, and go after all to the wedding.

He went alone to the safe, having care-

fully procured the key at a moment when he knew she was engaged. From a leather case he drew a large gold watch presented to Mostyn Anstey by some members of a geographical society, and inscribed fully with their names and his, and an allusion to a famous journey he had made for exploration purposes.

"This will complete my costume to-morrow," he said, as he read the writing on the watch. "I do not think there will be the shadow of a doubt as to the identity of my body when the Mohammedans have fulfilled their vengeance."

That evening Haroun put forth all his powers of fascination in order to try and charm his parents and those about him. Diana recognised the special effort, the forced spirits, the desire to please.

"Perhaps," she thought, "it is to make amends for his churlish resolve about the wedding."

She was also surprised that the mysterious present he kept promising the bride had not yet appeared.

"It isn't quite ready," he said. "Possibly she will receive news of it by post to-morrow."

He remembered Candida asking if it were to be made specially, and his reply that



perhaps he would make it himself, with his own hands.

What could he give her better than a sacrifice, a willing gift from the heart, a present of future peace, of safety for the man she loved?

When the household slept, Diana lay late into the night thinking of her son. As her eyes closed, she fell to dreaming of Haroun, and troubled visions of his face, distorted by some mysterious pain, haunted her. At daybreak she woke, feeling so uneasy that she rose and went noiselessly to his room.

He lay quite still, with an expression of perfect serenity on his unconscious features. Beside the bed she noticed a stamped letter addressed to Candida at the country-house a friend was to lend for the honeymoon.

A sudden temptation seized her to open the letter and read. She hardly knew why, but she could only restrain her hand with difficulty from grasping the missive penned to another. She seemed to know it held a secret, the explanation of his intended absence.

"I would never pry into my son's affairs," she said, turning away with a shudder at the very thought. "God grant I may be forgiven for the burden I brought into his life."

She stepped back and pressed a light kiss on the ruffled hair. Something of the old

tenderness which only a mother can feel to the helpless babe in her arms, came back to Diana now. She forgot that even in his infancy she had feared Haroun. Those baby eyes convicted her long ago, looking out upon a strange world, with that odd absence of youth, that knowledge of a past—vague, shadowy, lurid—a past perchance of violence and war, in the far-away childhood of civilisation. To-night he was her baby, her all, the little thing she crushed to her heart, a resurrected portion of her own soul.

She returned to her room comforted by the memory of his calm breathing, by the kiss she had left on the waving hair with a word of blessing and a tender smile.

## CHAPTER XX

### GOD BE WITH HIM

CANDIDA stood looking at herself in a long gilt-edged mirror. The sight was a pleasing one, and happiness sang loudly in her heart, with just a faint undertone of sorrow, mingling with dread. She saw reflected a white-robed figure, shrouded in a veil of Brussels lace, floating round her in lovely folds, and a stately train drifting from her shoulders across the floor, upon which a sheet had been spread.

Mrs Whitechurch rested her eyes with pride upon her daughter.

"Perfection!" she said. "I hope you are not nervous. I ought to be getting off to the church in a few minutes, and you had better wait upstairs until your uncle fetches you. The carriage will be here in about a quarter of an hour. Kiss me once again, dear child, and tell me you are quite contented, quite sure of yourself."

Candida lifted her veil, and raised a beaming face to her mother.

"Of course I am absolutely happy. I only wish the ceremony were over, because I have feared from the first that it was all too good to be true. Even now I feel as if some cruel stroke of fortune might keep Mostyn from my side."

"Oh! that is just a morbid fancy; you have no ground for thinking so," replied Mrs Whitechurch, who had heard nothing of Mohamed-ed-Din's visit to their London house, or Haroun's mission of watchful detective. "I must say I am rather disgusted with your future brother-in-law. After all his professions of friendship for me, he has failed us to-day—of all days. I wrote and asked him to look after me especially, escort me up the aisle and accompany me into the vestry. I received a short note from him of six words: 'I pray thee have me excused.'"

"How like Haroun—no explanation! He always has been, and always will be, mysterious."

Candida laughed lightly, but that ominous knocking at her heart continued. She wondered just how grateful she ought to feel to Haroun for watching the movements of Mostyn's enemies, and even taking the

risk upon his own shoulders by temporarily assuming his brother's name.

Mrs Whitechurch, with one more satisfied look at the bride, left her to meditate upon her speedy entrance to that holy estate from which the springs of joy and sorrow flow ever in floods of honey or gall.

Only a few moments of solitude, but they were precious to Candida. The uncle who was to give her away had not yet completed the finishing touches of a faultless toilet; her maid had gone to the church; and she stood alone, with hands clasped, and eyes looking out into the future, no longer seeing the white image which the mirrors flung back as the sunlight danced around the room.

Her lips moved in prayer, yet she was not breathing Mostyn's name. A sudden fear for Haroun took possession of her mind. What if he were running some risk, in that lighthearted way which was apt to deceive? Those enigmatical natures were often the most courageous when danger threatened. He had told her his own life was safe, but could she believe him? He understood the Mohammedans, he said; he knew how to deal with such people. How did he know? How did he understand?

She moved to and fro slowly, to work off the agitation which lay heavily on her mind.

"God be with him," she murmured, "and protect him in his rash youth!"

Something seemed to tell her Mostyn was safe, and free from pursuit. Their day of happiness had dawned, the hour of fulfilment was at hand.

An elderly, soldier-like man came bustling into the room.

"All well?" he queried. "Congratulations on a charming effect. Your mother is a woman of taste; she tells me the bridal gown was her own design."

"As a matter of fact, I think an artist suggested the idea. Mother wanted me to look like an old picture, not a fashion plate, and Haroun Anstey set his sharp brains to work out the scheme."

"Well, I'm proud to give you away. You are in for it now, Candida—no escape."

He laughed cheerily as the door opened and a young footman informed the bride that the carriage awaited her. He gathered up the train, with a certain reverence in his touch for the exquisite embroideries and delicate fabric. Below, the butler held a magnificent bouquet, which he placed in Candida's hand as she reached the hall. The fragrance from the flowers almost overpowered her for a moment.

Outside, a few curious pedestrians waited

to see the figure of romance pass from her maidenhood's home to the chariot of fate which should bear her to God's house, where, in the face of the congregation, she might make her vows, as she would answer at the dreadful day of judgment.

The drive was but a short one, and Candida spoke little. Her uncle understood her silence.

The chief figure in any pageant must always experience something of numbness and awe—a certain halting of vivid realisation, a sensation that actions viewed by so many eyes become mechanical.

As Candida entered the crowded church, and, headed by a full-voiced choir, moved slowly up the aisle with downcast eyes, she thought only of the one she would meet before the altar—the heart of her heart, the love of her life, the twin-soul to whom she had come to be joined by will and ordinance of holy rite.

Safe, and unscathed by his secret foes, stood Mostyn, the man of travel, still bronzed by foreign suns—a bridegroom worthy of the beautiful woman with her pure girl's heart and stainless life.

Many were the curious eyes watching the simple process of the familiar service. Words spoken unfalteringly, the binding gold

received as a token and pledge, the bursting forth of joyful song, and then the passing from sight of those two central figures, as they followed the clergy who had bound them fast.

“Be unto them a tower of strength,” the minister had said, in the words of ‘common prayer,’ and the answer rose with little thought, perchance, of its dire necessity—  
“From the face of their enemy.”

Candida fancied she saw the face. It was dark and sinister, rising with a cruel smile before the eye of imagination—the face of Mohamed-ed-Din, as he had bowed before her when she called Haroun Mostyn, when she put the brother in the lover’s place.



## CHAPTER XXI

### PERSIA IS TOO STRONG

THE crowded reception was over ; bride and bridegroom had left behind a throng of smiling faces and loving hearts.

Mostyn felt glad, after all his travels, that Candida had expressed a wish to spend at least the first part of the honeymoon in a country-house, where rest and privacy could be preserved. The fashionable hotel or the gay seaside resort held little charm for her at such a time.

Berrington Castle, the residence for centuries of the lords of Berrington, looked an ideal retreat for a newly-married pair, as they drove up the long avenue at the close of a tiring and exciting day.

All the surroundings breathed peace. The deer grazing in the park, with their slumbrous eyes, were already half hidden by the shadows of evening. The gardens,

rich in flowers, gave forth a scent of roses, jessamine, and honeysuckle.

In every window of the castle lights glowed. The great iron-clamped door stood open, and a flood of brightness illuminated the old oak hall.

As Candida entered beside her husband, the organ in the high carved gallery gave forth a volume of sound. Once more the strains of the 'Wedding March' burst upon their ears. The organist, though intent upon his playing, nevertheless glanced over his shoulder to try and snatch a glimpse of the happy pair below. He could not see the bride's face, as she paused to speak to the servants, but he caught the bend of her graceful figure and the tall outline of Mostyn Anstey, standing close to his young wife.

On all sides a profusion of white flowers gave the house an air of festivity. It almost seemed to Candida that the grave pictured ancestors smiled down from their massive frames, as if knowing that the dawn of love had entered through those open portals from the soft summer evening without.

While they lingered below, Candida's maid hurried upstairs to unpack a delicate lace teagown for her mistress to wear at the evening meal. The bride's windows looked out across a glorious stretch of country.

The eye could travel unretarded beyond stretches of green park to distant hills where little homesteads would soon light their twinkling lamps. The furniture had an old-world air, "almost funereal," the maid thought, as she surveyed the black carving on the wardrobe and the elaborate decorations of a huge four-posted bed. The canopy above of heavy velvet, the weird faces on the oak pillars, hardly pleased her fancy. She thought of all the histories the house held within its silent walls, feeling she would not be sorry when Mrs Anstey appeared, to bring a ray of living brightness to the solemn chamber. She had not long to wait.

"What a glorious room!" cried Candida, to whom the old historical homes of England were almost sacred in their beauty. She loved a house with the mysterious individuality of a past age, with legends clinging to every stone.

"I was thinking, miss (I beg your pardon—ma'am), that it was just a little gloomy with so much of this dark carving about. I would rather have seen you in a nice white room with cheerful wallpaper and lighter hangings."

The maid shook out the diaphanous tea-gown, as if to emphasise her words, putting a touch here and there to the ribbons

and laces which stamped it as essentially Parisian.

"Oh! don't worry about me, Severn. I am in such very good spirits that all the ghosts of the Berrington family could not depress or alarm me to-night. If they walk the corridors, I shall bid them welcome. Poor souls! Where they are gone, we're told, there is no marrying or giving in marriage."

Severn looked rather shocked at the levity of Candida's remark.

"At least I hope I shall not meet them," she said.

With deft fingers she rearranged the bride's hair, talking of the wedding, and repeating remarks she had overheard in the church.

Even so short a separation from her husband seemed wasted moments to Candida. She thought of the peaceful evening they would spend wandering in those wonderful old gardens among the moonbeams.

She could see a fountain playing on the lawn, and a sundial in shadow. She knew where the old mulberry trees grew near the disused fort, and confessed to herself that alone she would hardly have cared to explore them in the dark. But with Mostyn beside her, every fear vanished. She no

longer thought of Mohamed-ed-Din, for had not the wedding passed off smoothly? and now they were away unscathed—now she could feel more confident of the future.

"Haroun watched well," she told herself. "I must write to him to-morrow. He will probably send me a line to-night; he said I should hear about his present."

As if in answer to her thoughts, a letter was brought to the door. Severn took it in, and handed it to her mistress. Candida was already dressed in the easy white gown, with a simple row of pearls about her neck and a sprig of orange blossom from the Berrington trees fastened in her hair.

She knew Haroun's writing at once, and smiled as she took the envelope from the tray.

"How good of him," she said, seating herself at the corner of the bed, and resting her head against the dark oak pillar.

She was curious to see if he would tell her his movements of the day. It was as well, perhaps, the letter had been brought to her alone, though she intended explaining to Mostyn just how anxious his brother had felt on his behalf, and the pains taken by Haroun for their safety at the wedding.

She broke the seal, while Severn arranged the silver ornaments on the dressing-table.

The white figure of the bride looked strangely ethereal against the deep crimson coverlet, with its old-fashioned fringe of gold.

The writing was clear and plain. From between the sheets of paper a familiar coin fell into Candida's lap, the coin Haroun called his mascot, which had been lost and found at the Priory.

Candida read the words slowly at first, then with increasing haste, arrested only by a temporary cloud which dimmed her eyes, blurring the distinct letters, and shrouding the room in darkness.

"Sweet Bride."

(The opening was so like Haroun—he had something of the flowery Persian in him; he loved soft words.)

"By the time this reaches your hand, you will be my sister—a sister to one in a shadow-world, far beyond the reach of family love or earthly affection. My wedding gift is of little price to me, of great price to yourself. I have reason to hate this present life. Unknowingly I committed a deed which made it impossible for me to carry on the daily curse of my dual nature. Once you saw the ugly side, and this will help you to understand. In a dream, which became reality, I betrayed my brother. I brought

the Great Vengeance, the thirsty bloodhounds, upon his track, in hot haste from Mashad, with murder in their hearts, fixed as surely as there is a God in heaven. From that moment Mostyn Anstey's name was written in the fatal book, marked upon the list of the condemned ; nothing—absolutely nothing—but his death could wipe out the offence. For that reason I took his name, made myself known to them, and worked to complete the end they had in view. While you and Mostyn are made one, I shall be paving the way for your perfect peace and safety in the future. No fear need ever cross your mind again, no dreaded revenge darken your path, no still, small voice of warning knock at the door of your fond wife's heart. I imperilled my brother, how and why I cannot explain, but now I give him to you with the willing sacrifice of my own blood. Tell them at home to make no search for me. Persia is too strong ; she will bury me with the secrets of her past. I have taken Mostyn's place ; I am going in his stead to pay the price demanded by Mohamed-ed-Din and his countrymen. I go with my eyes open, I go with a blessing in my heart for you—I die for my own faith !

“YOUR BROTHER HAROUN.”

Candida sprang to her feet. With one hand

she supported herself against the pillar, with the other she pointed to the door.

"Fetch your master!" she gasped.

Severn ran to obey. The white face of the bride, the staring, terrified eyes, told her that something dreadful had occurred.

In a moment Mostyn was at Candida's side.

Severn closed the door as he caught the trembling figure in his arms. The letter fluttered to the ground between them.

THE END.





