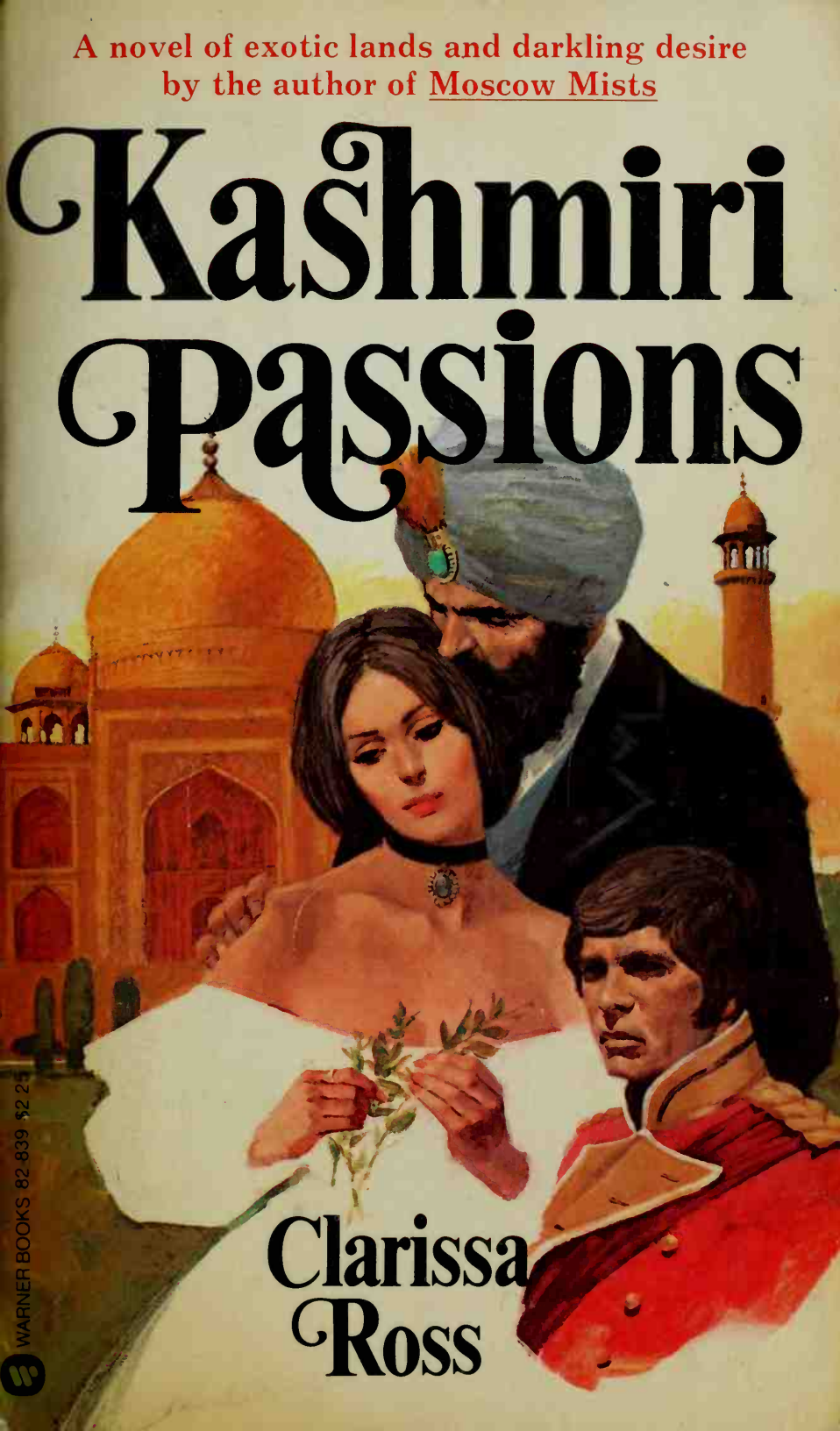


A novel of exotic lands and darkling desire
by the author of Moscow Mists

Kashmiri Passions



Clarissa
Ross



"Before I bed him, I'll slit my wrists!"
Priscilla cried.

Her uncle laughed mockingly. "You can't do that with your hands tied," he pointed out, and shoved her into the bedroom where old Sir Alfred waited.

"Would you like something to drink, dear wife?" Sir Alfred invited, and added with a lecherous leer, "It warms the blood and makes you ready for love!"

Although Priscilla refused, she managed to coax and dare the old man into drinking more.

After he had had several glasses, he looked up at her with a knowing glance. "It won't work, you know. You fancy to make me drink until I pass out so that you'll be able to run off again. You're not tricking me that way."

"You're a fraud," she countered desperately, "as a drunkard and as a lover."

Suddenly and with surprising strength, he seized her, ripping the top of her dress and exposing her breasts. "A little loving will improve your temperament," he said harshly. "We could have a good thing between us."

"All right," she answered tautly, "but not until you untie my hands . . ."

"You promise to behave?"

"I do."

He was now drunk enough to want to believe her. He flicked his knife down between the cords, and her hands were free. She wrenched the knife from his grasp and plunged it into his chest!

"Vixen!" He gasped and fell to the floor.

Priscilla backed away in horror. She had killed him!

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Kashmiri Passions

Clarissa Ross



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While completing this story I had the honor of receiving *Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee Medal* in appreciation of my contribution to popular writing. I feel I owe thanks to others in receiving this tribute. I thank Marilyn, Bob Mills and the long line of editors who have helped me publish more than 275 novels, including Kathy Malley, who is my editor for this novel.

East Riverside, 1978

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

BOOK ONE

London, 1856

CHAPTER ONE

It was late afternoon of a sunny day in May, 1856, as Timothy Rourke, a well-known New York artist, stood before his easel with brush and palette in his hands. The sun streamed down through the skylight above him in his attic studio overlooking Washington Square. The brilliant shaft of light cut through the shadows of the big room, highlighting the huge, red-bearded man, the canvas on which he was working, and his nude model crouched on a cloth of red velvet on the plank floor a short distance away from him.

The girl on the red velvet cloth was Priscilla Brentwood, nineteen, with long auburn hair which flowed gracefully over her slim shoulders. The expression of fear on her beautiful, heart-shaped face, the terror in her liquid green eyes, and the slight parting of her delicate,

ruby lips had all been carefully assumed for this painting, which was yet another Roman orgy.

Aging Timothy Rourke had suddenly become an international art favorite among the wealthy collectors who wanted sexually exciting paintings which they could present as studies in ancient history. Word of mouth had made him modestly famous and at last able to pay his bills.

Priscilla and Rourke's motherless daughter, Katie, had long been close friends. And that was how Priscilla had come to consent to reveal her lovely, lithe young body to the artist. Katie was always present in the studio when Priscilla posed naked before her father, and Priscilla often kept Katie company when it was her turn to pose. Just now Katie sat in a dark corner of the studio on a stool with Priscilla's robe in her hands.

Katie was the same age as Priscilla but much less outgoing in manner. She was completely unlike her boisterous, artist father who had brought her up since the age of seven when her mother had died of fever. Katie had the dark hair and large black eyes and white skin of her Irish mother. She had grown into a quiet young woman dedicated to her father and with few friends aside from Priscilla.

This afternoon in May was a difficult day for all of them. For within a few days Priscilla would be sailing for England to make her home there with her titled uncle. Timothy Rourke was upset at the idea of losing a talented and lovely model, Katie was saddened at the thought of losing a friend, and Priscilla was perhaps most unhappy of all at leaving America and all those dear to her.

The decision to leave had been thrust upon her almost a year earlier. Both her parents had been suddenly taken from her and but for a twist of fate she might also have lost her life. Her father and mother had been active in a

charity for the poor children of the rapidly growing New York. With the population now nearly a million and the city advancing upward to Twentieth Street it had become a bustling, formidable metropolis—the largest city in the United States. And with the hordes of immigrants, the latest from Ireland and Germany, there came problems of adaptation and poverty.

Earlier residents like Priscilla's parents tried to do what they could for the newcomers. One of the projects had been an annual riverboat excursion up the Hudson for several hundred of the poor children. On the day of the excursion Priscilla had been kept home with a bothersome head cold. But her parents went along with others of the more privileged class to escort the children and see that they had a truly wonderful day.

As it turned out, it had become one of the darkest days in the history of New York. The side-wheel riverboat had been overloaded with too many youngsters, and it had not been kept up properly. When the vessel was only a few miles up the Hudson a boiler blew up, killing and injuring many in the moment of the great explosion!

Frantically the captain headed the crippled excursion boat for shore. But as it moved slowly to land the flames increased and there were other explosions. In the raging inferno of the decks those in charge tried to herd the children into lifeboats and urge the older ones who could swim to jump into the river and make for the shore.

By the time the side-wheeler grounded on the nearest beach everyone still on it was dead. Among those who had perished in the blazing wreck were Priscilla's parents.

The shock had been a terrible one. And only the kindness of her father's lawyer and his wife had made the tragedy endurable for her. James and Edna Swift lived in a fine brick house on Greene Street only a half-block from her own home. Both houses were on a street within

walking distance of Washington Square. And when Timothy Rourke and Katie had heard the tragic news they had also been quick to come and offer her companionship and aid.

For a while she divided her time between the two families. She had kept her own home open and retained two of the older servants to keep it in good order. But she could not bring herself to remain there for more than an hour or so at a time. The ghosts of her father and mother were too much present in the fine old house.

Then James Swift took her into his study one day to talk of her future. He was a slender man with thinning ginger hair and sidewhiskers, one of the city's most popular lawyers. His wife, Edna, was attractive, kindly and inclined to stoutness. They had two children, both girls, and still in the nursery stage at three and four.

With a kindly expression on his thin, sensitive face, Swift had said, "Priscilla, you must know there is nothing my wife and I would like better than to adopt you as our own."

She smiled at him warmly and said, "You have as much as done that, already."

He sat back with a sigh. "I mean in a truly legal way. But it seems that is not to be accomplished as simply as I had hoped."

"Oh?"

James Swift gave her a searching look with his shrewd gray eyes. "How much do you know of your parents' people?"

Priscilla was a trifle surprised by the question. "Very little, actually."

"Tell me what you do know."

She considered. "My mother came from the South. Her home was in Charleston. Her father deserted my grandmother shortly after she was born. I believe he was an

actor or musician. My mother was brought up by my grandmother and her maiden sister. They all came to New York eventually. My grandmother died before my mother met my father. And my great-aunt died only two years ago."

"Did your mother ever speak of your grandfather? As to whether he might still be alive?"

"No. She had resigned herself to the idea he had died young. She hardly ever spoke of him."

"So you have no close relatives on your mother's side?"

"No. There probably are cousins in Charleston. But I have no idea who they might be. My grandmother and my great-aunt cut themselves from their relatives in the South when they came here."

James Swift nodded understandingly. "That is often the case."

She said, "My father, of course, came here from England. He came here as an agent for a tea company and continued with the firm until his death."

"Yes," the lawyer said, watching her more intently. "Now what did he tell you about his family?"

Priscilla smiled ruefully. "Mostly that he didn't get along with them. He said his father was a tyrant and he had an older brother with whom he did not get along. His family life had been so unhappy it was never discussed."

"So you know almost nothing at all about the Brentwoods?"

"No."

James Swift said, "Your father took me more into his confidence as his lawyer. In view of what has happened it is a fortunate thing. I have the full information concerning his remaining family in England. His father is long dead but the older brother he mentioned, Jasper Brentwood, has come back from India where he saw

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service with the British East India Company, and has taken up residence at the ancestral home Brent Hall in Surrey."

"I see," she said.

"I have had some correspondence with Sir Jasper," he said. "And he wishes you to come and live with him and his wife."

"*Sir Jasper!*" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes," James Swift said. "Your father was the second son of a titled family. So you are of the English gentry and it would only seem right that you agree to your uncle's wishes and take your rightful place with the family."

She was astonished. "Leave New York?"

"Yes."

"But this is my home! I love America! All my friends are here!"

James Swift showed sympathy. "I'm aware all that is true. It is a difficult decision for you. But I feel that it is one you must make."

"Please go on," she urged him.

He sighed. "Edna and I would like to take you in our family. But we have neither the title nor position of your father's people. Since Sir Jasper wishes you to live with him it appears the best thing for you. No doubt you can return to America in due time if that is your wish."

Priscilla was near tears. "Must I go?"

"I think you should try it," James Swift said firmly but with sympathy. "If it turns out badly, come back and live with us."

"What about my own home?"

"It must be sold."

"Must be?"

He nodded. "Yes. Your father's tragic death came at an unhappy time in his business affairs. With the winding up of his estate the house must go. You will not be left

penniless but neither will you have a large sum of money."

"I see," she said bleakly. "I'm sure I could get work here. I already pose for an artist, Timothy Rourke, as a model. I could get other modeling assignments."

He looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid I cannot recommend that."

"Why not?"

"Edna tells me you have been posing for this Rourke in the nude. That your likeness can be seen in many of the fine homes here in New York. Probably in London as well!"

She stared at the lawyer. "But what is the harm? Katie has always been present when I've posed. She poses for him as well."

His thin face had taken on a ruddy shade. "It is rather . . . indiscreet. Did your parents know of this?"

"No. I began it after," she said. "But I'm sure they would have understood."

"Perhaps," James Swift said doubtfully. "And perhaps not. Timothy Rourke is a bohemian. A talented fellow, without question, but his standards are not the same as ours. People are bound to find out about this nude posing and take the wrong view of it. It might well ruin your reputation."

"I cannot think people are so small-minded," she said.

"You will find many are," the lawyer told her sadly.

"Rourke says the body is a temple of beauty, not anything to be ashamed of," she went on. "He thinks Katie and I should be grateful because the Lord blessed us with good bodies."

The lawyer's eyebrows lifted. "He said all that?"

"And much more. He thinks it a tragedy that some bodies should be as bent and misshapen as some souls. He thinks the two are most divine when united. Beauty in mind and body!"

"I had no idea he was so well equipped with words," the lawyer said, clearly taken back. "I can agree with a good deal of all that. But let me warn you there is another side to it. Most people feel the body should not be so openly revealed except to those with whom we are united in marriage. And, of course, to the medical profession, when it is required."

Priscilla said, "If that had always been the case we should have none of the ancient great works of art, so many of them are shown naked. How do you account for that, sir?"

The lawyer coughed awkwardly. "I can see argument in this direction will get us nowhere. I shall not try to be judge as well as lawyer. I can only warn you others may not be so broad-minded. And I suggest you visit your father's folk in England for a while to see if you like it."

She hesitated, then asked, "How does this Sir Jasper strike you in his letters? My father did not like him."

"Perhaps he has changed," James Swift suggested. "His letters seem reasonable enough."

"Reasonable," she repeated with doubt. "But are they warm?"

"I cannot say that," he admitted. "But from all I gather he and his wife have had no issue. If you go live with them you will in time inherit everything. Many girls would be thrilled at this prospect of becoming a great lady."

"I only remember that my father labeled him mean and tricky," she said.

The lawyer smiled. "A youth's opinion. No doubt Sir Jasper has changed over the years. He appears to want to do well by you. I think it is what you best do."

She sighed. "I'm sure my father would wish me to take your advice."

"I think he would," James Swift agreed. "But you have my word that I shall send you passage money to

return here if this does not work out. You are always welcome in this house."

"I know that," she said.

"Visit England and the Brentwood family and then make your decisions for the future," he continued. "You may find much of your father in this uncle and so be happier there than you ever could be here."

"Perhaps," she said sadly. "I much doubt it. But if this is your advice I will take it. You can arrange my passage."

"Very well," the lawyer said. "Sir Jasper appears to want you to join the family as soon as possible."

"Give me at least a week or two before I go. I have not spent any time at home since I lost my parents," she said. "I must remedy that now if the house is to be sold. I must select the things I wish to keep and find storage for them."

"There is plenty of storage room here in the basement and attic," James Swift told her.

"You are so kind," she said. "It will take a few days and nights to go over things. It will be hard for me. But I believe my friend Katie Rourke will come and stay with me. And there are the two old servants."

"If you cannot arrange for Katie to be with you let me know," the lawyer said. "I will try and find some other suitable companion for you."

"When the house is sold with the things in it I don't want," she said, "what about the servants?"

"I can use them both," James Swift told her. "It so happens that our elderly house servant and his wife wish to retire in a few months. They plan to return to the country. So I'll be glad to have your Francis and Jennie."

She said, "That is a great worry from my mind. When it is all settled there will be a little money, won't there?"

"Only a little," the lawyer said with a sigh. "I'm sure

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your father could have reclaimed his fortune if he'd lived out without him the business has had no leadership. Whatever is left shall be duly deposited in a sound bank here in your name."

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for everything."

"Damnation!" Timothy Rourke cried out angrily. And he put his brush and palette down and stood with his hands on his hips, a giant figure of a man with a flaming red beard and bristling red hair. His outburst ended her reverie.

From her stool in the corner Katie stood up and asked, "What is it, father? Are you weary of working for the day?"

"I am and I've tried to finish this daub before losing my model!" her father said indignantly. To Priscilla he said, "I cannot afford to lose a beauty like you! Who shall I have to be my model when you're gone? Kate is too meek in her bearing and I cannot take in some bawd from the streets! If I were half my age I'd ask you to wed me and keep you here forever!"

Priscilla smiled up at him. "Please, Mr. Rourke. If you are finished for the day I will go dress."

He held up his hand to halt her. "Nay! Stay as you are! I wish to get in a few more strokes and then one more day's sitting will finish it!" And he picked up the brush and palette.

Priscilla promised him, "I'll be able to return later in the week. My ship doesn't sail until Monday."

"Too soon!" Timothy Rourke said, glaring at her. Assume the position and the expression of fear. Recall you are a maiden about to be ravished by ruthless soldiers!" And as she again took the crouching position and frightened look he began to add small touches to the painting on the easel.

From her distant corner, Katie said, "You mustn't keep her too long, father! Being a model is a weary business as I can vouch!"

"What about being a painter?" her father demanded, halting in his work. "You think that is easy? I'm the most unfortunate Irishman who ever landed in America with a career painting trash and a meek-mouthed Katie of a daughter who doesn't appreciate me!"

"I do!" Katie insisted. "I think you're a great artist! I truly do!"

Timothy Rourke grunted. "You'd better!" he said. "I know more of art than painting bare-assed maidens in a Roman setting! But if I'm to eat as I like and drink as I like, I have no choice!"

"You drink too much, father," Katie said quietly.

"There never was an Irishman who drank too much!" her father shouted. "And I'll ask you to mind your manners and show me some respect!"

"Yes, father!" Katie said meekly as her father went on with his painting.

Suddenly, as Priscilla crouched on the scarlet cloth, trying to maintain her look of terror, the door to the studio was thrown open. A handsome young man in a neatly tailored gray suit and gray top hat entered with a silver-topped walking stick in his hand. Priscilla cried out and Katie came racing across to cover her with her robe.

"Double damnation!" Timothy Rourke roared angrily at the young man. "What sort of a sod are you to burst into a man's house without knocking?"

"I'm sorry," the young man said, clearly flustered. "I shall wait in the hall. The name is Manley, we met at the Irish Pub. You invited me here!" And he went out hastily closing the door after him.

Timothy Rourke threw down his paint brush and

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palette. "That ends it!" he cried with disgust. "There'll be no more work done this day!"

Katie gave him an accusing look. "You kept her far past the usual time and you forgot about inviting that young man here!"

"Don't try to blame me!" the artist said angrily. And he went to Priscilla, who was by then safely wrapped in her robe. "I'm sorry for that shameful business, my dear," he apologized. "The idiot must have less than half his proper wits to burst into an artist's studio in that fashion."

She managed a wan smile. "It doesn't matter! It was only for a moment! Katie came quickly to my rescue!"

"And a damn good thing she did," Timothy Rourke said with indignation. "I shall give that young man a talking to. And you think no more about it."

Priscilla said, "I'd prefer to go out by the other door when I'm dressed. I'd rather not meet him again."

"Nor need you," the artist said. "Take the rear door by all means. I'll be serving him a whiskey in here and he's half the gentleman I think him to be he'll have put the whole matter out of his mind."

Katie told her father, "I'll be staying at Priscilla's again this night."

He said, "Mind the doors are locked well. I do not like the idea of two young girls alone in that big house with all its fine things."

Priscilla said, "The servants, Francis and Jennie, live in."

Timothy Rourke snorted with disgust. "That poor old pair! They're too weak and ancient to raise a proper cry if all your throats were being slit!"

Katie's pleasant face showed annoyance as she said over her shoulder, "Thank you for your comforting words, father!"

"Ahhh!" he growled with disgust.

In the dressing room the two girls at once relaxed. And as Priscilla began donning her many layers of clothing Katie stood by.

"He didn't get a proper look at you," Katie assured her.

Priscilla blushed as she put on a second petticoat. "He seemed to be frozen there staring!"

"Can you blame him? It's probably been a long while since he's seen so dainty a sight!"

Both girls laughed, and as Priscilla put on her rose-colored grenadine dress, she said, "I'm afraid I stared at him as well!"

"Could you be blamed, the way he burst in!"

"I saw that he was young, good looking and had blond hair and dark blue eyes," Priscilla smiled. "Not bad for a brief glimpse!"

"I didn't even look his way I was in so much hurry to get to you." Katie said. "Well, it's over. No harm done. It will teach him not to go bursting into an artist's studio again."

Priscilla put on her rose bonnet. "And as your father said, I'll never see him again!"

Katie crossed the dressing room to the door leading to the studio and placed her ear close to the crack between the door and frame. After a moment, she whispered to Priscilla, "I can hear their voices."

"Can you tell what they're saying?"

"No," Katie said with a grimace. "And I'm not sure I'd want to."

Priscilla smiled at her. "I suppose it is rather silly of us to be so shy when you consider that every day there must be hundreds of people staring at our naked bodies in your father's paintings."

Katie protested, "But they are not our naked bodies, they're the bodies of Roman maidens!"

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"I'd forgotten!" Priscilla chuckled as they quietly let themselves out by a rear stairway.

It was a warm, pleasant day and they strolled along slowly. Katie and her father had recently been to visit P. T. Barnum's new museum and she was filled with the wonders she'd seen there.

She also had other exciting news for Priscilla. "Next year Mr. Macy is to open a new store at Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street."

"So far uptown!" Priscilla received the news with some amazement.

"People are living up on Twentieth Street now," Katie pointed out. "New York is getting larger every year. They say that in time it will reach the new Central Park that has been set aside."

"Father took part in that project," Priscilla recalled with a tinge of sadness in her voice. "He predicted it would one day be in the central part of the city."

"New York may grow but never that large," Katie said, unconvinced. "And surely not with the crooked politicians we have in Tammany Hall. Father says the worst of the Irish have taken the city over."

"I think the city will manage," Priscilla said wistfully. "I hate to think of leaving it."

Katie gave her a warm glance as they waited at a crossing for a horse and wagon to rumble by. "And I'll be the one who misses you!"

"I'll be back," Priscilla assured her as they continued on. "I don't want to go to England at all!"

"But you'll be a great lady there! With an uncle who is a Sir and has a fine estate!"

"I'll never be as happy as I was here when my parents were alive," she said sadly.

Katie sighed. "Why did it have to happen?"

"I've asked myself that too many times," she admitted,

her eyes on the cobblestoned street, her thoughts wandering off to what now seemed distant and lovely days.

They finally reached the ancient brick house in which she had been brought up. Old Francis answered the door and greeted them warmly. Priscilla was shocked to see the way the thin little man had aged since their last meeting. Jennie came and served them tea and cakes.

She was pleased to be able to tell the frail old couple that their future was assured. "You will go directly to serve with James Swift and his wife when this house is closed," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Priscilla," Jennie said with tears brimming from her eyes. "I told my husband that you would see us well taken care of and I wasn't wrong." The two withdrew happily.

Priscilla and Katie spent long hours after dinner selecting silver, china and other valuables which she wanted to keep. It was a tiring, painful task since it meant the winding up of her home as she'd known it.

Among the things she put aside were two oval portraits of her father and mother. The sight of their beloved faces brought her both pleasure and sadness. She found it difficult to believe that she would never see them again.

The evening's work done, she and Katie retired to her bedroom. They talked a long while, mostly of the future and what it might mean to them.

Katie fell asleep first and she listened to her friend's steady breathing for a while before she at last sank into a restless sleep. She dreamed her parents were back in the house, exactly as they'd been in the old days. When she wept they had not been able to understand her tears.

Her sleep was rudely interrupted by the sound of something falling downstairs. She sat up quickly, staring into the darkness with frightened eyes. At the same instant

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Katie awoke and seized her by the arm with fingers strong from fear.

Katie whispered, "What was that?"

"Something below," she replied. "I think I hear voices down there."

"Could something be wrong with the old people?" her friend worried.

"Maybe," she said.

Katie held onto her arm more fiercely. "You don't think it's robbers?"

"Perhaps," she said. "We'll have to quietly go down and see."

"But if there *are* robbers down there?"

"We'll have to keep out of sight and somehow try and get help." Priscilla said grimly.

The girls put on robes and slippers and made their way out of the room and down the dark stairway. They were more than halfway down the stairs when there was another sound, something dropped again, from the dining room. They both stood frozen on the stairway. There could be no question now that the house had been broken into by thieves!

Then they saw a strange apparition in the form of old Francis in his nightshirt and nightcap. He carried a candle in one hand and a large copper kettle in the other. He ran past them and into the dining room.

What followed was what they least expected. From the dining room came veritable howls of pain mixed with cursing. The angry voice of old Francis continued for quite a few seconds. The girls ran down the rest of the stairs to meet him coming out of the dining room with the candle and kettle still in his hands. His eyes were listening with triumph.

"They're gone!" he announced in his feeble voice. They were making their way out of the dining room

windows when I poured the scalding water over them!"

"You shouldn't have taken the risk!" Priscilla worried.

The old man looked disgusted. "Takes more than the likes of those cheap crooks to scare me, Miss Priscilla. Only trouble was I didn't get there earlier. I'm afraid they got away with some good silver, unless they dropped it outside!"

"Don't worry about it," Priscilla said. "They have gone and we're all safe. What about your wife?"

Old Francis smiled. "Jennie is a deep sleeper. She hadn't stirred when I left her and I doubt if she has even now."

"Good, then she won't be upset," Priscilla said.

Katie sank into a nearby chair. "I'm upset! I can promise you that! Properly topsy-turvy!"

Francis nodded. "I'll just check all the doors and find a way to block the dining room windows until tomorrow. Then I'll have a carpenter come and fix them." And he went hastily off.

Priscilla gave Katie a bleak look. "Well, at least this proves your father was right. This house is no place for us alone."

They finished selecting and moving the things she wanted the following day. James Swift sent a wagon to pick up the many items and take them to his place. Francis had the dining room windows repaired and all was back to normal, though the thieves had taken a lot of valuable silver pieces.

On Friday afternoon Priscilla returned to the studio to pose for Timothy Rourke again. The big, red-bearded man was in a good humor.

He told her, "I gave that young fellow-me-lad the devil of a calling-down for breaking in on us as he did."

"I hope he took it to heart," she said, as she stood

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waiting to remove her robe and stretch out naked on the red velvet again.

"He did, no question about that," the artist said. And then with a wink, he added, "But he had the nerve to want your name and address. I think he was smitten with you!"

She blushed. "I'm sure you knew better than to tell him."

"No worry about that," Timothy Rourke replied. "I said you lived in Philadelphia and were going there directly."

Katie gave her father an admiring look. "Sure, it's a fine liar you can be when you like."

"Liar, is it?" he said indignantly. "I wasn't telling a lie, I was protecting a young woman's honor. The Rourkes have been famous for it for years."

"And for a lot of other less worthy things," Katie said with an eye to tormenting her parent.

"Be off with you to your corner," her father said.

The robe still about her, Priscilla asked, "Who is he?"

"Someone of no account," the red-bearded man said. "Thomas Manley is his name. He comes from a good enough family I've been told. In the horse-car business. He's been educated beyond his station if you ask me."

"You say that of almost everybody!" Katie said.

"And I'm generally right," the big man said defiantly. "Instead of putting his education to good purpose, this young man lives by gambling. He has rare luck most of the time, I'm told. But it's not a healthy existence!"

She said, "You mean most gamblers meet violent deaths?"

"By the sword or the pistol," Timothy Rourke said. "There's generally an argument, or an accusation of cheating and it ends in a duel. Or even worse, someone comes

up behind you in the dark and puts a bullet through your back or maybe slits a knife between your ribs."

"Father! Must you!" Katie admonished him.

"You've asked about young Manley and I'm telling you," the artist said. "He's a fine-looking man and I wouldn't want that to carry too much weight with you. The other side of him is dark and so is his future if he keeps on frequenting gambling parlors and saloons."

Priscilla smiled at the artist. "You spend a fair amount of time in saloons, Mr. Rourke."

"Aye! But I'm an old man with no future at all but painting Roman orgies," he said with disgust. "This young fellow should be making his name. Now, if you two will stop thinking about men for a while maybe we can get down to some work!"

Katie and Priscilla exchanged smiles as Katie helped her remove her robe and went over to the corner to sit with it. Priscilla assumed her usual position on the red velvet and after some fresh instructions from the artist, the business of finishing the painting began.

When the session ended and she stood before the big artist in her robe, he looked at her sadly and told her, "I'll not get another model your equal!"

"I'm sure you will," she said.

"No," he sighed. "My paintings will not be the same. Unless I'm able to paint you from memory." He brightened at this. "Maybe I can manage that!"

"All right," she smiled. "Anyway I don't propose to remain in England. I'll be back. I promise you!"

"We'll be waiting for you, lass," Timothy Rourke said with feeling. "Me and my Katie." And he kissed her tenderly on the cheek as he would a daughter.

It was a sad leave-taking. She and Katie decided it would be best if Katie didn't come to the dock to see her on shipboard. Better to say good-by earlier and

let it go at that. So they did. Katie ran back up to the studio sobbing as Priscilla left to go to the Swifts.

Only the Swifts were at the dock to see her on board the steamship taking her to England. The lawyer told her, "Your uncle sent only sufficient money for the cheapest sort of passage, so I added an amount to give you first-class accommodation. You are to share a cabin with a widow, a Mrs. Barbara Bodley."

"Thank you," she said. "It would seem my father's view of my uncle was correct. He still must be stingy. Please take the money from the sale of the estate."

"We'll not worry about that," James Swift said. "Have a safe passage and write as soon as you reach England. And let me hear from you regularly."

"You shall," she promised and kissed Edna Swift goodbye. Then she was turned over to a grumbling porter who carried her bags aboard ahead of her and guided her down below to an outside cabin.

"Other party hasn't arrived yet," the porter said with a scowl and waited with his hand out for his tip.

She found some coins and gave them to him. From his expression they didn't satisfy him but she didn't much care. She was feeling too full of despair. She was filled with a dread premonition that this journey to England was not destined to be a happy one.

What her reaction would have been had she known that at almost that identical moment the young man known as Thomas Manley was making his way aboard the ship as a passenger, would have been difficult to predict.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs. Barbara Bodley sat across from her in the tiny cabin and regarded her with a jovial air. She was a woman in her late thirties or early forties with hair that was either white or light blonde. She carried a bit of weight and her friendly face showed no wrinkles. She was dressed in a green suit trimmed with black brocade and she had the air of one who knew her way in the world.

"Well, my dear," the woman said with a friendly smile, "it seems we are to be cabinmates. I could ask for no better and I hope you may come to feel the same way!"

"I'm happy to meet you, Mrs. Bodley," Priscilla said. "This is my first ocean voyage and so it is all new to me."

"Always has to be a first time," Mrs. Bodley said. "And the *Saxony* is a sound ship. I'm always particular to find

out something about the ship on which I travel. This one has a good reputation. With any kind of weather we should be on the other side in twelve days."

"It's good to be in the company of an experienced traveler like yourself," she said.

"And how do you happen to be traveling to England alone?"

She told her as quickly as possible, ending with, "I'm not happy with the trip but I felt I must make it."

"You have pluck, my girl," Mrs. Bodley congratulated her. "It's a quality I admire. Since I've been a widow I've had to learn how to protect myself. And you can take my word it's a world in which you need protection!"

"Have you been a widow long?" Priscilla asked.

The woman rolled her eyes heavenwards. "It was just about seven years ago that dear old Herbert went to his just reward. Made a jugful of money in his day, he did! I was working the music halls doing a very elegant singing turn when dear old Herb met me. Took a fancy to me right away. He told me of all this money he'd made from whale oil and no one to share it with. I saw the point and agreed to be his wife. For six good years we journeyed far and wide. And I'm still traveling. Though I make my home in New York."

"I think it must be interesting," she said. "Where are you going this time?"

Mrs. Bodley winked at her. "London and Paris, my dear! They're the lively sort of cities I prefer. And I still have a few friends there."

"It was in London you met Mr. Bodley?"

"It was," the woman said. "I was singing in a superior sort of pub and he came in off the street. He stayed there the whole evening and saw me back to my rooms. That was the start!"

"That sounds romantic," Priscilla responded.

The older woman shrugged. "As romantic as most love stories, I'd say. Not that old Herb was in his prime, a bit gone to fat and baldness, if you know what I mean. But he had a handsome mustache and a way of making a woman feel like a queen. I've never been a beauty, though I'm a lot better looking than many, but old Herb made me think I was a raving beauty! So I'd say it was a true romance and no mistake!"

"I hope I won't be seasick," Priscilla worried.

Mrs. Bodley gave her another knowing wink. "A tot of whiskey straight now and then will work wonders in that direction!"

"Really?"

"Take my word for it," the jolly woman said. "And I keep a good supply right along with me!"

Priscilla was properly impressed by the worldliness of her cabinmate. They unpacked and made the best of sharing their small quarters as the ship moved out of the harbor. Thanks to her friendly companion Priscilla lost much of her loneliness. The stout woman carried her along with her enthusiasm. And before they left the cabin for the dining salon Mrs. Bodley insisted that she take a good stiff drink of whiskey.

"Medicinal, my dear," the stout woman said, as she downed a couple of the same.

The *Saxony* carried about a hundred passengers as well as a good amount of cargo. The main dining salon was elegant with ornate woodwork on its walls and white-clothed tables with fine place settings. By the time they reached their table the overhead lamps were swaying slightly and Priscilla was glad to have the burning whiskey in her stomach to settle it.

There were eight at the table assigned them. Two elderly married couples, one very deaf bachelor of about sixty, and a sour-faced woman of about the same age

who invariably dressed in black and whose name was Miss Louise Adams. The table conversation was not lively. Miss Adams seemed to take an almost instant dislike to Mrs. Bodley.

As they were returning to their cabin the jolly woman confided to her, "I'd say that Miss Adams was a trouble-maker and gossip. It's our bad luck we have her at our table."

"She doesn't go out of her way to be pleasant," Priscilla agreed.

"She'd better not test her tongue on me," Mrs. Bodley said darkly. "I didn't play the pubs for nothing. I know how to shut that sort up fast."

She laughed. "We'll have to depend on you. I think the others at our table are too old and deaf to know or care what is being said."

"Always the same," Mrs. Bodley sighed. "The number of presentable males on one of these ships is almost zero. Enough to break a woman's spirit!"

Back in the cabin the motion of the ship became much more noticeable. When Mrs. Bodley suggested they go up for the first-night concert, Priscilla refused. She simply didn't feel up to it. Rather quickly she became seasick and remained that way for nearly three days.

All during this time Barbara Bodley ministered to her like a devoted mother. She brought down broth and hot tea and tried to cheer her up with small talk. None of these things helped for a while but gradually Priscilla improved.

On the fourth day out Mrs. Bodley came down to her after lunch with the news that it was lovely on deck. She said, "Don't you think a stroll outside in the air is what you need?"

Priscilla smiled. "I do feel much improved."

"You've found your sea-legs, if you'll pardon the

expression," the jolly woman said with a laugh. "Unless we get some really bad weather you ought to enjoy the rest of the voyage."

"I hope so," she said. "I should hate to think I'd be trapped here in my cabin for eight or nine more days!"

"You won't be!" Mrs. Bodley said, tapping her with her parasol. "Come along with me!"

Priscilla took some extra care with her hair so it wouldn't be blown too much by the sea breeze and pinned on a small yellow bonnet to match her yellow dress. Then they went up on deck.

The ocean was calm and the air wonderful. She found herself truly enjoying shipboard for the first time. She and Mrs. Bodley found a spot by the railing to watch from.

She said, "If only it always was like this!"

"It is a good part of the time," the older woman said. And then she added, "By the way, our table partner, the sour Miss Adams, has been inquiring for you. I think she suspects I've stolen your money and tossed you over the side."

Priscilla laughed. "It would hardly be worth the effort since I have so little money."

Mrs. Bodley's face lost some of its good humor. She said, "It's a matter of our Miss Adams needing something to complain about."

"I can imagine."

The older woman brightened again. "But there is some good news. We do have at least one desirable young man on board."

Priscilla said teasingly, "And I can be sure that you lost no time in finding him."

"No time at all," Barbara Bodley laughed. "We met after the concert the other night. He is fond of Beethoven and so am I."

"What a soulful meeting!"

"It was," the older woman agreed. "He is a man of means and so does not have any business or profession. He plans to set himself up in a flat somewhere in London."

"You can give him advice on that score."

"I've promised to help him," Mrs. Bodley admitted. "And I tell you if I were your age I'd set my cap for him and no mistake!"

Priscilla smiled. "You're attractive. Why let age enter into it?"

The older woman smiled wearily. "I'll be truthful, my dear. I enjoy my widowhood. I'm not up to running about trying to keep up with some younger man and attempting to please him. Only to know that in the end I'd lose him to some younger and prettier face."

"You're very cynical," Priscilla said. "But probably also very wise."

The older woman nodded. "I've not lived this long without learning a great deal."

"I must meet this young man," she said.

"You will. He's going to be at the captain's party to-night. The captain is entertaining in his own cabin. Only about a dozen of us are invited. It's considered an honor."

Priscilla raised her eyebrows. "And I'm invited?"

The older woman winked. "I managed that. The captain has an eye for youth and beauty in a female despite a wife and four children in Liverpool. Quite a masher he is!"

She laughed. "I'm glad you've warned me."

"Another warning," Mrs. Bodley said with a sigh. "That sour Miss Adams is to be there. I can't imagine why the captain invited her unless she owns shares in the shipping company."

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They resumed their stroll around the deck. Priscilla noticed a good many people she had never seen before. She found a deck chair empty and decided to sit in it for a while. Mrs. Bodley had a whist game scheduled with some others she'd met and so left her for a while.

Priscilla proceeded to close her eyes and enjoy some restful moments in the open air. She thought about all her experiences since starting on the voyage and wondered what awaited her in England. As she let her thoughts ramble on she suddenly had the odd feeling that she was no longer alone. She opened her eyes. There standing staring down at her was a young man in a gray tweed suit and cap. And as she gazed up at him she had the alarming thought that she had seen him before.

It appeared that he was struck by the same idea for he removed his cap and said, "Excuse me, miss, but I think I know you!"

As he spoke she recognized him with horror. The last time she'd seen him he'd been standing in the doorway of Timothy Rourke's studio wearing a gray suit and top-hat and carrying a cane!

She said hastily, "I'm sure we've never met!"

"But we have!" he insisted. "You were the girl in the studio! The girl on the red velvet! And old Timothy told me you had returned to Philadelphia! What a liar!"

Priscilla was on her feet, blushing furiously. "You are making some stupid sort of mistake."

He blocked her way. "No. I'm not. I'm Thomas Manley and you are the girl who was posing for him in the nude!"

"Please!" She tried to get by him.

He gently took her by the arm. "Listen to me! You mustn't be embarrassed. I made an error blundering in there but I only saw your face!"

"Then how did you know I was nude?"

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It was his turn to blush. "A good question! The fact is I did get that general impression but I had no time to concentrate on details. I turned around at once and went out. Remember?"

"At least you were gentleman enough for that," she said stiffly. "Now please let me go to my cabin."

The handsome blond man eyed her appealingly. "If you do I promise I shall follow you."

"Then I shall complain to one of the staff that you are bothering me!"

"Be reasonable," the young man implored. "I have recognized you and you have recognized me. We both have a good friend in Timothy Rourke. Why can't we also be friends?"

"Because our first meeting was too scandalous!"

"Never," he argued. "I'd forgotten all about it until just now. I'll wipe it from my mind again. What could be fairer than that?"

She looked up at him with the trace of a smile playing about her lovely lips. "You are most persistent!"

"The secret of my success."

"Then you are a success? I gathered you lived by your wits."

"Isn't that being successful?" he wanted to know.

"You are different," she said.

"And you are most attractive," he replied and then added hastily, "And I mean with your clothes on. The other is gone from my mind."

"I'm glad," she said dryly. "It hasn't from mine."

"I know you're not one of those prudish young women or you wouldn't have been posing for Timothy," he said. "So why not let us be friends?"

She said, "I posed for Timothy because his daughter is my closest girl friend."

"Katie?"

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"Yes. And she was always in the room when I posed."

"Proper," the young man said. "I thoroughly approve. I've told you my name is Thomas Manley. What is yours?"

She sighed. "I suppose you'll find it out anyway."

"I will."

"So I may as well tell you, I'm Priscilla Brentwood."

"A nice name," the young man said. "I like it. Now let's stand over by the railing for a bit and talk for a little."

She surprised herself by obeying him. And she was further startled to discover herself revealing her own background and purpose in the voyage to him. He had a friendly, clever way of extracting facts from strangers which she was sure he had cultivated carefully.

She finally gazed at him in mild consternation and said, "You've drawn every bit of information from me!"

"Because I'm interested in you," he said.

"And I know little or nothing about you!" she chided him.

He gave her one of his disarming smiles. "There is so little to tell."

"I find that impossible to accept," she said. "What is your reason for being here? Timothy told me you were a gambler and you drank too much."

"And he told me you were from Philadelphia! You can't trust the man!"

She smiled at Thomas Manley. "You're telling me you are not a gambler?"

"I cannot truthfully say that. I do gamble."

"So it is all true."

"Not all," he said. "I gamble to give my life meaning. I need the thrill of the game."

"You gamble to give your life excitement?"

"Yes."

"Not to pay your way?"

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He laughed. "It so happens that gambling does pay most of my bills."

Priscilla eyed him shrewdly. "I gather you are what my late father termed a card shark. Your trade is gambling."

"No. It is more an acquired habit," he said.

"I fear I must doubt you," she said. "You seem to have no other means."

"Did Timothy tell you that?"

"More or less."

"Drat Timothy!" the young man said. "Surely you can be friendly with a card shark, if that is what I am."

"I don't think it wise," she said. "According to Timothy men of your type invariably end badly. You meet a violent death or are simply disgraced."

"That's all the worst side of it."

"And the best?"

He gave her a knowing smile. "Being here with you."

She shook her head. "You are a renegade! And to make it worse, a likable one!"

"At least we have come to some sort of terms."

"You must be the one my cabinmate Mrs. Bodley was telling me about. The romantic young man with such a way with women and cards."

"I know Mrs. Bodley," he agreed.

She laughed. "And I never guessed that it was you. That I had met you."

"So now we will be comrades for the voyage," Thomas Manley said.

Priscilla considered. "If I'm agreeable with you while we are on shipboard you must not take it as a license to pursue me further."

"Oh?"

"When the *Saxony* docks we must say good-by. Is that understood?"

He nodded. "It is. You are to be taken under the wing

of a family of title. A rogue such as myself has no place in the future of such a young woman."

She blushed again. "I did not mean that precisely. I do not expect to remain in England. I simply don't wish you to have any wrong ideas."

"Have no fear," Thomas Manley said with a mocking smile. "When I wish I can be the soul of discretion."

"I hope that is true," she said. "Now I really must go and rest and change my gown for the captain's party."

"I shall see you there," Thomas Manley promised. "I am also to be a guest."

She was in her cabin donning a dress and jacket of pale lavender silk when Mrs. Bodley came into the cabin and said, "You look a different girl! You have some color in your cheeks now! The stroll on deck did you good."

"It did," she agreed, smiling. "And by the way, I met that attractive young man you were discussing."

"Thomas Manley?"

"Yes," she said. "By a strange coincidence we had met before in New York. We are both friends of a well-known artist there."

Mrs. Bodley was at once excited. "And so you've met and talked with him? Isn't he charming!"

"Without question," Priscilla said. "But perhaps also dangerous."

"In what way?"

"My artist friend described him as a professional gambler. I believe this is true."

"A gambler!" Mrs. Bodley said, upset. "What a shame! And such a nice young man. But you are right. It would not do to become too friendly with him."

"We have agreed to be friendly while on board but to let it end when the voyage is over," she said.

The jolly woman considered this. "A good plan if you can hold to it. Are you sure you can?"

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"I think so," Priscilla said. "If you feel I'm failing do give me support."

"You shall have all the benefit of my experience," Mrs. Bodley promised. "Now I must hurry and change or we'll be late for the party."

Mrs. Bodley's rhinestone-studded crimson gown was the sensation of the captain's party. Priscilla felt quite dowdy beside her, and the sour Miss Adams, in her usual black gown, looked outraged.

The sour spinster murmured something that sounded like, "Has the taste of a barmaid!"

To which Mrs. Bodley smiled and said sweetly, "When I last attended a garden party given by Victoria and Albert I wore this dress. And the dear Queen used your very words, telling me, 'Even a barmaid would look like a lady in that delightful gown!' I remember it so well!" And the jolly woman turned her back on a crushed Miss Adams.

Captain Graves was middle-aged with a trim beard and a ready smile. He lingered over all the acceptable ladies and not only kissed their hands in greeting them but lingered to stroke them. He was especially attentive to Mrs. Bodley and she to him.

This suited Priscilla well since she was left to entertain Thomas Manley. In white tie and tails he looked even more handsome than when they'd met in the afternoon.

"A small but exalted company," he said, handing her a glass of champagne.

"Miss Adams is not in a happy mood," she told him.

Thomas glanced at her briefly. "She seldom smiles. A most vindictive female."

Priscilla said, "Mrs. Bodley thinks she must be one of the ship's owners or she wouldn't be here."

"It's possible," the young man agreed.

Miss Adams had been making a minute inspection of

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the captain's quarters rather than mixing with the others in a friendly manner. Now she suddenly came to a halt and in a shrill voice, cried, "Captain!"

Captain Graves, sensing something much awry, left Mrs. Bodley to hurry to the spinster's side. "Is something wrong, Miss Adams?"

Miss Adams drew herself to her full height and pointed an accusing finger at the painting on the wall before her. It was "Huns Ravage Rome," one of Timothy Rourke's most vivid epics. She said, "You have one of those vulgar Rourkes in your cabin!"

The captain mopped his brow. "A historical painting, Miss Adams. The dealer who sold it to me vouched its worth!"

"It's depraved!" Miss Adams said severely.

Thomas Manley winked at Priscilla, then moved forward to stand between the captain and the spinster. In his most charming manner, he said, "I say Timothy Rourke is a fine artist! Look at the beauty in the painting! The young woman about to be attacked for example! A lovely innocent!"

"I see her as a brazen hussy without clothing," Miss Adams snapped.

"Your eyes are prejudiced," Thomas Manley said. "I see the girl as pure and lovely. As a matter of fact, she looks a great deal like one of our number here. A young woman wholly beyond censure, I know you will agree! She bears a resemblance to our Miss Brentwood!"

By this time Priscilla was blushing furiously, outraged at Thomas Manley's prank.

The captain turned to gaze at her and then at the painting. Amazement showed on his bearded face. "You are right, young man. The girl in the painting does have a look of Miss Brentwood. Which proves your point that the study is innocent!"

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Mrs. Barbara Bodley bustled forward and took the captain by the arm. "Pay no more attention to it, Captain. I agree with you the painting's value is historical. Let those with filthy minds see what they like in it!"

Miss Adams gasped aloud and went white. Without a word she vanished from the cabin. No one seemed less happy for her leaving.

When Priscilla and Thomas were left alone for a moment she told him fiercely, "You did that deliberately! You knew I had posed for that painting."

"Not until I went up close to it," he said. "And in any case I saved the day for the captain. You must admit it was a good idea."

"You didn't do it to embarrass me?"

"Never," he said. "I used the likeness for my own purpose. Never did I hint it actually was you. Now did I?"

"No," she said. "But you did give me an awful moment."

"Not a soul realized," he told her. "Your secret is safe with me."

They were parted in the dining salon, and after dinner she saw him for only a few moments. With an awkward apology he left her to join a table at which sat three older men with bald heads and pot stomachs. It was evident they were rich men whose nightly custom was to gamble for high stakes. These were the logical prey for a gambler such as Thomas Manley. She went down to her cabin feeling depressed. He had told her the truth when he'd said that gambling was the thing he needed most in life. Gambling was truly his mistress!

She did not meet him again until the following afternoon. He greeted her with his usual warmth. "I looked for you later last night but you'd vanished," he said.

She said dryly, "It must have been very much later.

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You were still deeply involved with your card game when I left."

He looked uncomfortable. "Those gentlemen expected me to play. I'd won a considerable amount from them the night before."

"As no doubt you did last night," she said.

"I cannot help being lucky."

"If you continue being lucky for all the voyage you may be challenged as a card shark," was her warning.

"I doubt if anyone would dare unless they could back up such a challenge," he said. "And I know they can't."

"You are so skillful?"

He smiled. "I have such fantastic luck."

She turned away from him to stare out at the ocean. She said, "I hope that luck doesn't fail you."

"I'd be much more concerned if you failed me," Thomas said. "You sound angry with me."

"Perhaps I am."

"Why?"

"Because you have so much to offer and you choose to use it wrongly."

"Suppose I don't agree?"

She gave him a wry smile. "I know you well enough now not to expect that of you."

He said gravely, "You must put me down as a cheat."

"I take no pleasure in it."

"At least that is something."

"I wish you could see the wrong of it and mend your ways."

"Not likely."

"I know," she said bitterly. "I don't know why I care enough to worry about you. It's foolish of me!"

He reached and took her hand. "Not foolish! Gentle and kindly."

"You're satisfied as long as you can talk your way around me."

He shrugged. "If that is the only way we can maintain our friendship I'll try it."

She gave him a pained look. "Thomas, do me a kindness. Let me be."

"You mean that?"

"Yes," she said solemnly. "I have gone through enough pain this last year losing my parents and my home. I don't want any more pain."

"I have no wish to cause you pain," he argued.

"That is how it will turn out," she said. "For the rest of the voyage let us be strangers."

He stared at her for a long moment. Then he said, "Very well, if that is the way you must have it."

"Good-by, Thomas," she said, a slight tremor in her voice.

"Good-by, Priscilla," was his quiet reply. He turned and walked down the deck away from her.

She remained by herself for a long while until she was certain she had control of her feelings. Then she resumed her shipboard activity in the same manner as before, though carefully avoiding Thomas. She was aided in this when the captain decided to have a slight flirtation with her and gave her a great deal of attention.

It was Mrs. Bodley who first sensed something had gone wrong between her and Thomas. When they were in their cabin she asked bluntly, "Am I right in thinking you and Thomas are deliberately avoiding each other?"

Tensely, she said, "Yes."

"Why?"

"The reasons we discussed earlier," she said. "I was becoming too involved with him."

"You're probably sensible," the older woman said with a deep sigh.

She gave her a surprised glance. "Surely you agree?" Mrs. Bodley's pleasant face showed concern. "I must be honest with you, my dear. I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

"No," the older woman said. "I have watched you two more closely than you've realized."

"And?"

"And I think that young man truly cares for you. I mean that."

She glanced down. "It appears he doesn't love me enough to change his gambling habits."

"Have you thought that this may not be easy for him at this time?" the older woman suggested. "He has been playing with those men regularly. If he suddenly stops they'll surely think he swindled them."

"What if he continues playing and they come to the same conclusion?"

"I suppose that's a gambler's odds," Mrs. Bodley said in a worried voice. "I guess there is no real answer. You're probably doing right in avoiding him."

Despite her brave show of certainty she was inwardly not at all that sure. All during the rest of the voyage she felt a keen pain.

The last night before the Saxony was due to dock in England there was a gala concert which she attended with Mrs. Bodley and the captain. After it was over she left them together and went to the smoking salon where she discovered Thomas at the usual corner table with the three older men. She hesitated in her passage through the salon just long enough for him to catch a glimpse of her.

Then she went out on deck and even though it was a trifle chilly stood by the railing to gaze up at the star-studded sky. She was standing there with her troubled thoughts when she heard a light footstep behind her and

she turned to see that it was a taut and white-faced Thomas Manley who had come out to join her.

He said nothing but took her in his arms and pressed his lips hard on hers. The kiss was an ardent and lasting one and she found herself responding to it with a fervor she had never expected. Then the moment of bliss ended as quickly as it had begun. He let her go, gazed at her with distress on his handsome face and then turned and strode back into the smoking salon and his game.

She stood there limp and lost, not knowing what to make of his strange, almost harsh gesture of love. After a little she went down to her cabin convinced that this had been their final good-by. It was now truly over between them. She hastily prepared for bed and when Mrs. Bodley came in she pretended to be asleep.

The next morning the Saxony docked. Thomas left the ship almost immediately while she took a while longer.

Mrs. Bodley was the next to leave, offering her a tearful farewell. She said, "If you visit London come see me at the Westmore Hotel. I'm always there when I'm in England."

Priscilla promised, knowing that they were not likely to meet again.

Soon after the older woman left, Priscilla had the steward take her baggage up on deck. She was standing there with it watching the bustle of traffic and freight being moved on the docks when a servant in livery came over to greet her.

The servant bowed and removed his hat. He said, "I'm Swanton, coachman to Sir Jasper. He sent me here to pick you up, miss, and take you to Brent Hall."

She managed a smile. "I'd been hoping someone would soon come. My uncle was not able to meet me?"

Swanton had a hard, hatchet face and iron gray hair. He

said, "Sir Jasper and Lady Helen are preparing for company. They did not choose to meet you."

"Of course," she said, awkwardly. "Well, here are my things. I'm ready to leave at once."

The coachman and another younger man sat together on the high front seat of the ornamented carriage. Two brisk gray mares bore the vehicle over the cobblestoned streets and the rutted roads. This was her first taste of England and it so far only served to make her homesick for New York.

The day was foggy and there was not much to be seen in the dense yellow clouds which seemed to continually surround their progress. The voices of the people were strange and their accents hard to understand. And she felt her arrival had not been auspicious.

It seemed to her that after her long journey and considering her orphaned state, either her uncle or his wife might have made the effort to come to the dock and greet her personally. She recalled how loath her father had been to speak of his family and remembered his description of his brother as mean and miserable beyond belief!

The drive took fully three-quarters of an hour and she was somewhat chilled in the open carriage. At last they turned in a private roadway flanked at its entrance by stone columns. The roadway curved through brush and then they came out in the open before the entrance door of an imposing graystone building.

Swanton helped her down from the carriage and led her up the steps to the front door. It was almost immediately opened by a bewigged old servant with a long, lined face.

"Welcome, Miss Brentwood," the old servant intoned. "I'm Mason. I'll take you directly to your aunt and uncle."

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"Thank you," she said in a small voice, feeling there was an overwhelming air of depression in the atmosphere of this grand house.

The old servant walked down a long hall ahead of her until they came to a sort of sitting room. There she saw a tall, leather-faced old man seated at a writing desk, while in an easy chair not far from him sat a plump, irritable-looking woman working at embroidery.

The old servant announced her, "Miss Brentwood."

Her Uncle Jasper rose from his desk and came around to greet her. He was incredibly thin and his hollow-cheeked face had an unhealthy color to it. His gray hair was thin and his eyes had a watery look.

He offered her a caricature of a smile and said, "My dear Priscilla! After all this time!" And he kissed her on the forehead with dry lips.

She said, "Sir Jasper!"

He looked pleased but waved her words aside with a thin hand. "Always call me Uncle Jasper," he said. "For that is what I am. Your father's brother! May his soul rest in peace!"

The woman had put aside her embroidery and risen. She was dressed very plainly in gray and now she advanced to Priscilla, with a look of amazement. "I thought you would be much younger," she said almost in reproach.

Sir Jasper said, "We knew from the lawyer's letter she was nineteen!"

"Did we?" Lady Helen's heavy eyelids fluttered. "I seem to have forgotten. Well, I bid you welcome whatever your age."

Sir Jasper smiled, revealing yellowed teeth, and said, "My dear wife tends to be somewhat vague at times. An aftermath of our many years in India. But that is not of importance at the moment. This is to be your home and we are to be your parents!"

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"You are too kind," Priscilla said weakly, feeling anything but at home and wishing most fervently never to have parents such as these two!

CHAPTER THREE

As she learned more of the place, Priscilla found that her immediate reaction to Brent Hall and its people was correct. Sir Jasper Brentwood was a cold, calculating man who seemed to have few friends and who was even a recluse in his own home. Lady Helen remained a kind of enigma who was given to wandering about the great mansion in a sort of perpetual haze. She seemed to have difficulty remembering Priscilla's name and why she was there.

The servants were much in the mold of their master and mistress, going about their duties in tight-lipped silence. Indeed, the great house seemed a place of funereal silence. Priscilla wandered from high-ceilinged room to high-ceilinged room and though the furnishings and paintings were of great value there was much dust,

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dampness and a general air of neglect about everything.

Her own room overlooking the gardens and the circular summer house in the center of them was typical of most of the other rooms. It was perpetually cold and damp with no wood supplied for its fireplace and only two half-burned candles to provide light.

She saw all this as symptomatic of her uncle's meanness. And the food offered was not only scant but of poor quality. It was incredible that two people of undoubted wealth would live in this mean fashion. Even the tea was weak and watery. All in all it was a thoroughly depressing atmosphere. And the first thing she did was write both James Swift and Katie Rourke and announce her intention of returning home as soon as possible.

One morning a few days after her arrival at Brent Hall, Sir Jasper summoned her to his study. Lady Helen, as usual, had vanished somewhere in the dark recesses of the mansion as soon as breakfast was over. Now the thin old man sat very straight-backed in the armchair by his desk and observed her with his watery eyes.

"Are you happy here, my dear?" he asked in his rasping, harsh voice.

She hesitated. "It takes some getting used to. It is much different from New York."

Sir Jasper scowled. "I could never understand how my brother could abide that Yankee city! I made only one visit to the United States and I was not impressed."

"Our customs are rather different," she said, with an attempt at politeness.

"I spent most of my life in India, of course," her uncle went on in his thin, grating fashion. "I still have an interest in the British East India Company. That is why I shall be entertaining Prince Hali of Kashmir next week."

"Oh?" she said, interested at the idea of meeting a real

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prince and wondering how the royal visitor would respond to the cold and frugal life at Brent House.

"A wealthy neighbor and friend, Sir Alfred Coombs, is helping me entertain Prince Hali. He has been kind enough to agree to share the expense, which shall be no small amount, and so shall be staying here during the festivities."

"It sounds most exciting," she said.

"Yes." Sir Jasper cleared his throat. "Even though you are new to this house I shall depend on you to a certain extent to act as hostess. You have no doubt noticed that Lady Helen suffers a certain indisposition . . . a laxity of the mind which makes it impossible to depend on her."

"I have had evidence of her faulty memory," Priscilla said carefully.

"Exactly," her uncle said. "So I shall call on you to take over many of the duties of making our guests feel at home. I assume you have had some social experience of galas, dinners and the like?"

"Some," she said. "My mother and father did a good deal of formal entertaining."

Sir Jasper looked relieved. "I'm happy to hear that. You may later confer with the housekeeper Mrs. Crouch about foods and wines to be ordered. I shall, naturally, have final say of the list."

"How soon will these preparations begin?"

"Shortly, since the prince will arrive one day next week. About mid-week I should say."

Priscilla said, "Then plans ought to be in the making now."

The old man's thin face showed displeasure. "No need to rush. Invitations to the gala ball can be delivered by the coachman within a few hours. Sir Alfred will be arriving tomorrow. Time enough to begin then."

"I see," she said quietly.

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Sir Jasper gave her a shrewd look. "About Sir Alfred Coombs. As I have told you he is an old and valued friend."

"So you said."

"Generous to a fault," her uncle went on. "And at present a widower. Lost his third wife to a violent inflammation of the lungs last winter."

"That is sad," she said. "Is he an elderly man?"

"In his late sixties," Sir Jasper said, "but of a lively disposition. None would suspect his age. It has been his tragic fate to have lost three wives to one sickness or another."

"Has he any children?"

Sir Jasper frowned. "A no-good son who does nothing but waste his father's money in London and a spinster daughter who spends most of her time in church. Not at all a comfort to Sir Alfred." He paused, then continued, "Because of his unhappy frame of mind I would appreciate any kindness you can show him while he is here. He likes youth and a pretty face and I am hopeful this week of entertaining may do much to lift him from the slough of despair into which he has lately lapsed."

Priscilla said, "I shall surely do all I can to make his stay here agreeable."

"Spoken like a smart young woman," Sir Jasper said. "You will meet Sir Alfred tomorrow."

All that day the old mansion was in a state of commotion. Mrs. Crouch, a large, gaunt-faced woman with a formidable air, had suddenly begun directing a last-minute cleaning of the place. She strode from one great room to another instructing the servants as to the window-washing, dusting and general cleaning which had to be done.

Priscilla was amazed at the burst of activity and clamor which resulted. So was her aunt, Lady Helen. The stout

woman came upon several servants carrying a rug outdoors for beating and cleaning and stood gazing at them with amazement.

She turned to Priscilla who was standing close by and in a surprised tone, asked, "Has Sir Jasper decided to move us all back to India?"

"No," she said patiently. "It is in preparation for the visit of Prince Hali."

Lady Helen eyed her blankly. "Prince Hali?"

"Your royal visitor of next week!"

The heavy eyelids fluttered and Lady Helen said, "Yes, of course. I fear the whole thing slipped my mind."

"The time is getting near," Priscilla said.

"I must discuss the visit with Sir Jasper," her aunt said and went off down the hall.

It seemed to Priscilla the stout woman was always going off somewhere. Lady Helen seemed unable or unwilling to face any problem. Her favorite ploy was to vanish and let someone else take over.

Because of the hubbub throughout the old mansion Priscilla decided to retire to her room for a little. She sat by the window staring down at the gardens and the yellow and white circular summer house. The sun had finally come out and the gardens looked the most inviting spot of the entire estate.

Her mind went back to those final days in New York and her later adventures on shipboard. And much of her thoughts had to do with Thomas Manley and her meeting with him. Even now she knew that she had come to care for the charming adventurer more than was wise. She tried to dismiss him from her memories but his handsome face persisted in haunting her.

She wondered where he had gone and what would happen to him? No doubt he would find a flat in London and then move among the gaming houses plying his trade.

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And all too soon, Timothy Rourke's prediction would come true: he would be mixed up in some violent escapade and lose his life. The thought of it filled her with despair.

She was sitting lost in thought when a knock on her door intruded on her reveries. She went to the door and found one of the maids standing outside.

"You have a visitor, miss," the maid said. "He is waiting by his carriage at the front door. He didn't give me his name."

When she went out into the sunlight she discovered someone she had never seen before standing by an ancient carriage. He was in his fifties with a florid, pleasant face and bushy gray eyebrows and sidewhiskers. He wore a rather shabby gray suit and a battered hat which he at once removed, and bowed to her, revealing a fine mane of gray hair, parted on the side.

"Squire Hedley Finch," he said in a deep, bass voice. "I have come to pay you a call, Miss Brentwood. My wife and I just learned of your arrival. My dear wife, Elizabeth, was a childhood friend of your late father's."

"How kind of you to come see me," she said, liking him on sight and grateful for the sound of a friendly voice. "I wish I could invite you inside but the house is undergoing an intensive cleaning in preparation for the arrival of Prince Hali next week."

Squire Finch smiled. "Yes. I have heard about the prince coming to our poor part of the country. An honor! I think I have a suggestion."

"Yes?"

"My wife is a semi-invalid because of a rheumatic condition," the gray-haired man said. "And she would very much like to meet you. So why don't you join me and I'll take you to our place for the afternoon."

"You're most thoughtful," she said, glancing inside

where the vigorous housecleaning continued. "I do not think I shall be missed."

A twinkle showed in the squire's eyes. "Judging by the clamor in there I much doubt it."

She made her decision. "Then I shall accept your offer."

"Excellent!" Squire Finch said and helped her up into the carriage and drove off. She sat beside him thoroughly enjoying herself.

"This is the first day I've had any pleasure since coming to England," she confessed.

The squire chuckled. "Well, it's not such a bad place. Though much different from New York I'm sure."

"Yes," she said. "Much different."

"My wife and I live very simply," Squire Finch told her. "A bad investment lost me most of my fortune some years back. But we have enough to maintain our house with a servant or two. I act as my own coachman and in a country way we enjoy life."

"I'm sure you must enjoy yourselves better than Sir Jasper and Lady Helen. They are extremely odd people living in an odd atmosphere."

"I know," the Squire said. "There's a deal of talk about them in the county."

"I'm sure there must be," she said.

He chuckled. "You'll hear more about it from my wife. Elizabeth has a frank tongue and little patience with the likes of Sir Jasper and his wife."

"You say your wife knew my father?"

"They were sweethearts long ago," Squire Finch said.

"And then they parted?"

"Aye! Your father was sick of his family and went off to the New World. I came along and Elizabeth settled for me."

She said, "I'm sure she's happy."

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"We're happier than most, no doubt of that," the man said proudly.

They left the main road and took a smaller country lane which eventually led to a sprawling building with a thatched roof. It had a friendly air about it with barns in the back and livestock in sight.

"This is our place," the squire said, bringing the carriage to a halt outside the neat entrance door. A young man appeared and helped her down. Then he took the carriage over from the squire and drove it around back.

The squire escorted Priscilla inside. She found it most pleasant and smelling of spice and violets. Seated in an arm chair with a blanket covering the lower part of her body was a middle-aged woman with a worn, wistful face. She greeted Priscilla with a sad smile.

"My dear I can see your father's features in you! Come to me!" she exclaimed.

Priscilla went to her and the woman embraced her and bade her sit close by on a covered stool. The squire stood by the fireplace near them smiling with satisfaction as he went about filling his straight-stemmed pipe from a large tobacco pouch.

Elizabeth Finch gazed at her fondly and said, "Your being here brings back so many memories. As soon as I heard about your coming to Brent Hall I sent my husband to see you."

"I've been in sore need of friendly company," she said.

The invalid's eyes flashed angrily. "I have no doubt of that. You must have had more than your fill of those two!"

Priscilla confessed, "I don't understand them."

"Nor does anyone else," Elizabeth Finch said with disgust. "They are the scandal of the county. It is well

known that Sir Jasper buys only the poorest provisions for the house, then stands in the kitchen and weighs out tiny portions for both the family and the servants! He is a notorious skinflint!"

"Is he so poor?"

"He is rich!" the invalid exclaimed. "But he won't admit it. And that Lady Helen!"

"She is so vague and forgetful."

Elizabeth Finch leaned close to her. "Gin!"

Priscilla gasped. "I never dreamed of such a thing."

The other woman nodded. "It's best you should know. She drinks from sunrise to sunset. A habit she picked up in India, poor soul. And Sir Jasper does nothing to help her. I vow he likes her in her state of stupor. In that way he has full say of all that goes on in the house."

"Sir Jasper told me her mind had been unhinged by the strain of living in India so long."

"Her mind may be gone now," Elizabeth Finch said. "But her deterioration began with gin and not the sun. I have it on good authority she goes through with a full quart every day."

Squire Finch puffed on his pipe. "The servants talk back and forth. And they know what is going on."

"I'm sure they do," Priscilla said. "She has acted strangely from the moment of my meeting her. But she is kinder than Sir Jasper."

The invalid sat back in her chair. "To think that your father is dead and that wicked Jasper still lives! He was hateful as a lad and he has grown more so with the years."

Her husband took his pipe from his mouth. "When Sir Jasper and Lady Helen returned from India to take over the place on his mother's death, we all hoped that there might have been some change in him. But there

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wasn't. If anything he'd grown more cold and mean."

"So we have little to do with him," Elizabeth said. "He knows how close to your father I once was and he hates me for that."

Priscilla said, "I wonder that he wished me to come here if there was such bitterness between him and my father."

"I don't know his reason," Elizabeth admitted. "But you can be certain it is to his advantage."

Her husband nodded. "Sir Jasper never does anything with kindness as a motive."

Priscilla said, "I hope to leave as soon as possible. I have written my lawyer in New York and also a friend I have there."

"We would like to see you stay," Elizabeth replied, "but not if you're going to be unhappy."

"I'm sure I shall be," Priscilla said.

The squire moved from the fireplace and sat down near his wife. "Elizabeth and I would be glad to take you in and share what we have with you. We have never been blessed with children and a daughter would be most welcome."

Elizabeth gave her husband a warning glance. "You know there is nothing I would like better. But I'm afraid it would only mean trouble. Trouble for us and for this poor girl!"

"In what way?" her husband asked.

"You know how vengeful Sir Jasper can be," she reminded him. "Remember last year when our gardener accidentally shot one of his deer. The high price he extracted from us!"

The squire sighed. "I remember! But surely this would be a different case."

"No," Elizabeth Finch said. "If we took Priscilla from

him, he'd never rest until he did her some harm or caused us some trouble."

"Please!" Priscilla said. "I don't want to be the reason for any strife. I have some money of my own and am quite prepared to return to New York. You mustn't be concerned about me."

"As long as you're under his roof I shall worry," the invalid said. And turning to her husband, she continued, "It is a nice warm day. I think we might enjoy tea out in the rose garden. You can help me out and have Mrs. Hale bring our refreshments out there."

Priscilla stood up. "Are you sure it is wise for you to go outside?"

The older woman showed a smile on her wan face. "It is the best thing for me as long as it is not damp. I need air and sunshine."

So they all moved out to the sheltered rose garden at the side of the house away from the barns. An elderly woman servant brought out a tray with tea and cakes and set them on a wicker table by Elizabeth

Elizabeth poured the tea and passed it with a smile, telling Priscilla, "In the old days I entertained a good deal and visited a lot."

Squire Finch in an opposite chair laughed agreement. "Liveliest lass in the village! First up at all the dances! It was at a dance we met!"

"No," his wife objected. "It was at the parson's, after morning service. They held a light lunch to welcome me and you were there."

"I don't count that!" her husband protested. "It was at the dance I first held you in my arms!"

"And what a bold one you were!" Elizabeth said, giving him his tea.

"My father loved to dance," Priscilla said, her eyes bright with the memory of those long-ago days.

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"Well, you'll be having a great party at Brent Hall soon for Prince Hali," Elizabeth said. "Though I can't for the life of me believe that Sir Jasper is willing to part with the money it will take."

"Bound to be painful for him," Squire Finch agreed.

Priscilla put down her cup with a smile. "I can tell you about that. He is having some old friend, Sir Alfred Coombs, as a house guest. And in return this Sir Alfred is footing nearly all the bills."

Squire Finch and his wife exchanged stunned looks. It was Elizabeth who spoke up first. "Sir Alfred Coombs, did you say?"

"Yes," she said. "Do you know him?"

"Know him?" Squire Finch said and he burst into laughter.

His wife gave him a reproving look. "It is not a matter for fun, my dear," she reproved him. And to Priscilla she explained, "Sir Alfred Coombs is notorious around here. I daresay the only person who will have anything to do with him is your Uncle Jasper."

"That's the truth," Squire Finch agreed.

She stared at him in surprise. "Why? Do tell me about him."

Elizabeth looked grim. "He is known in the county as the lecherous lord! He's driven three wives to their graves by his most disgraceful conduct."

"No one invites him to their homes anymore," Squire Finch said seriously. "There's not a house he's visited he hasn't ended up with some female servant in his bed. And not a few of them had to complain to their employers about him!"

"But isn't he an old man?" Priscilla said, shocked by what she was hearing.

Elizabeth said grimly, "Wait until you see him! He's

old, his back is deformed, he wears his wig to one side because it doesn't fit him, and has the most repulsive set of wooden false teeth you're likely to encounter in your lifetime!"

"Not to mention that he can't keep his hands off any female near him," the Squire added. "It's downright disgusting!"

Priscilla listened in dismay. "Uncle Jasper asked me to be especially nice to him. And he's apparently told him all about my coming to Brent Hall for a visit."

"Ah!" Elizabeth said wisely, her head to one side. "Maybe that explains a lot! It could be he's thinking of arranging a match between you and that old lecher!"

"Oh, no!" Priscilla said, horrified.

"He's not beyond trying," Squire Finch said. "I vow he'd like to get the Coombs fortune into the family."

"Now that you've warned me I'll have nothing to do with the awful old man," Priscilla assured them. "I know how to handle his sort. I did not grow up in a large city like New York without gaining some experience in taking care of myself."

"Excellent!" Squire Finch said approvingly. "A girl with spirit! You'll be a match to any tricks Sir Jasper tries to play on you."

"I hope so," Elizabeth Finch said forlornly. "I say it plainly, I shall worry about you, Priscilla."

"You mustn't," she said, rising. She went over and kissed the older woman on the cheek. "It has been wonderful getting to know you and the squire. But now I'll have to return or they'll miss me and complain about my leaving."

"Especially when they hear you visited us," Elizabeth said. "They know we do not hold pleasant views of them."

"They don't deserve to be well thought of," Priscilla said.

It was late afternoon by the time the ancient carriage drew up in front of Brent Hall. There was no one in sight as she said good-by to the old man and promised to visit again as soon as she could. Then she waited until the squire drove on his way before entering the house.

The moment she went inside her Uncle Jasper appeared. It was obvious that he had been standing, hiding just out of sight. Now he stood blocking her way with an angry look on his thin face.

Sir Jasper rasped, "You have been absent all afternoon!"

"You did not say you needed me."

"I told you that you were to discuss the purchases of provisions with Mrs. Crouch!"

Priscilla could tell he was having difficulty controlling his anger. Rather meekly, she said, "I'm sorry. I fear I did not understand you."

He snapped, "I made myself plain enough!"

"I venture to disagree," she said in the same polite way. "You mentioned there would be no purchases made until after Sir Alfred Coombs's arrival tomorrow."

Her uncle's unhealthy face showed purple patches on the cheeks. "I don't recall saying that."

"I'm sorry," she said. "At least I'm back now and I shall gladly talk with Mrs. Crouch."

"She is busy with other things now," he said nastily. "It can wait until tomorrow."

"All right," she said, expecting him to end the discussion and allow her to move on.

But he didn't. Instead he continued to confront her and asked, "Why did you visit our neighbors without first discussing it with me?"

Priscilla's pretty face now began to show some anger of its own. Defiantly, she said, "It is not my understanding that I'm a prisoner here, sir."

"Nor are you," he said, slightly abashed. "But Squire Finch and his wife are not people with whom you should associate!"

"Why not?"

He showed signs of becoming enraged again. "I do not think I need go into that."

"I say you should," she said. "Squire Finch and his wife were friends of my father. I expect to be friendly with them and visit them, whatever trouble there may be between you and them."

Her uncle gasped. "That is your attitude?"

"I'm afraid so," she said.

"I shall discuss this with your aunt. I must confess I'm more than a little shocked by your behavior in this."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Perhaps it is just my brazen American way!" And with a slightly mocking smile she neatly made her way around him and up the stairs to her room.

Alone in her room she thought about the impossibility of her remaining at Brent Hall. However, she would have to stay until she heard from Lawyer Swift. In the meantime she would somehow have to endure life in the old mansion and assist in the coming entertainment of the Indian prince.

Perhaps with additional company in the old mansion her uncle would become less demanding and unpleasant. But she could not forget that Sir Alfred Coombs was coming to visit and the Finches' description of him was anything but comforting. She could only hope that Prince Hali and his entourage would make things more bearable.

Dinner proved a quiet affair and she tactfully made no mention of her visit to the Finches. If Sir Jasper had

discussed it with the lethargic Lady Helen, the stout woman certainly gave no indication of it. Actually, she fell asleep before dinner was over and was so dazed when she wakened that Sir Jasper had to order one of the maids to take her up to bed.

As soon as the maid left with her, Sir Jasper took a grim puff of his cigar and glared at Priscilla. "Your Aunt Helen drinks!" he snapped.

She pretended innocence. "I thought her indispositions were due to the Indian sun."

"She drinks gin!" Sir Jasper said in his harsh voice. "And she drinks it incessantly! She is a fool!"

"That is too bad," she said, quietly.

"I can protect her no longer," he went on. "You would be bound to find out."

"What about next week when the prince comes?"

"I hope his presence may have a good effect on her," Sir Jasper said studying the end of his cigar.

"You have not prepared me for the prince," she said. "I would appreciate knowing something about him before he comes. And before I order provisions. How many will there be in his party?"

Sir Jasper frowned slightly. "The prince will have a minor princeling with him, also a half-dozen servants. They'll be installed in the west wing."

"Will they require special foods?" she asked.

"The items which their special diet requires they will bring with them," Sir Jasper said. "The prince will eat as a Westerner while he is our guest. He was educated at Cambridge and so is familiar with English customs."

"I see," she said.

"A Colonel Saunders, a liaison officer from the British East India Company, will be along," her uncle continued. "It is imperative that there should be such an officer."

Protocol and other problems demand the presence of someone to advise both the prince and his hosts."

She asked, "Do you know the prince well?"

The thin man nodded. "I have known Prince Hali since he was a boy. It was I who suggested that he be sent to Cambridge, my own old school, and your father's as well."

Priscilla said, "Yes. I knew father had attended Cambridge."

"Prince Hali's uncle, who reigns over their kingdom in the Kashmir mountain country, is an old, decrepit man. It may only be a matter of months before Prince Hali is the supreme ruler of one of the richest of all Indian provinces."

"How old is he?"

"He is now twenty-eight," Sir Jasper said. "A huge young man with a fine black beard. In his turban he is taller than many a Sikh. I believe his exact height to be six feet five."

Priscilla could not help being impressed by her uncle's description of the young man. She said, "He sounds most interesting."

Sir Jasper nodded. "He can be of great value to the British East India Company in the future."

"I would suppose as a ruler he would have a good deal of power and an army?" she ventured.

"An army of sorts," Sir Jasper said. "Nothing to match our troops and the sepoys we have enlisted. We have the most able force."

"Is he married?" she asked. "I suppose it is the question you'd expect from a woman. But I wondered if he might be bringing his wife with him?"

Sir Jasper eyed her bleakly. "He is married. Has a few children. He also has a number of concubines. It is his privilege and his religion does not frown on it."

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"Married and with concubines," she said. "But he travels alone?"

"Yes, except for the minor prince I spoke of and his servants," her uncle said. "Wives in India are not given the privileges we Westerners bestow on our women."

"But you claimed him to be westernized?"

"Not to that extent," her uncle said with a knowing look at her.

She let the matter go at that. She found herself a little timorous at having to help entertain this impressive Indian prince. She had not expected him to have so many qualities of charm. Unlike her uncle and his wife she knew nothing of Indian customs and so would have to rely on the liaison officer, Colonel Saunders.

The next day the servants continued their cleaning. She wished that she could desert the old mansion and take refuge with the good squire and his wife, but she knew she did not dare. Sir Jasper was already angry with her for her other visit and had warned her that she was to have a discussion with Mrs. Crouch about the provisions.

With this in mind she sought the gaunt woman out in the kitchen and asked her, "Do you have any idea what and how much quantity my uncle intends to order?"

She said contemptuously, "Whatever he orders will be the cheapest and he'll buy as little as possible!"

In dismay, she said, "But he's planning to invite a number of people here!"

"I only know of what he's done before," the house-keeper said grimly. "And he's never done things right!"

"We can hope he will this time," she said, "I suggest you make a list of the amount of food and spirits you will need to entertain upwards of a hundred people for several parties."

Mrs. Crouch sniffed with disdain. "I'll make the list but I know he won't bother with it."

"I think we should begin that way," Priscilla said.

"As to spirits," Mrs. Crouch said with sarcasm, "I can tell you one thing. Lady Helen is almost out of gin. Her stock is down to the last few bottles."

"Better let the gin remain unreplenished until after our visitors of next week leave," Priscilla said.

Mrs. Crouch looked surprised. "Will you tell her then? Otherwise she'll plague me!"

Priscilla said, "I'll ask my uncle to speak with her."

"That won't help much," was the gaunt woman's gloomy prediction as Priscilla left her.

Priscilla went out to the front of the house in search of her uncle and arrived just in time to find him greeting a visitor. She did not have to look twice to guess that it was Sir Alfred Coombs.

Handsomely dressed in the bright blue suitable to a young gallant, but with the hump, clumsy wig and wooden false teeth mentioned by Elizabeth Finch, stood the old lecher. His face was wrinkled and yellow and he walked with a distinct limp. She was about to turn and flee when the two men came in arm in arm and caught her.

Sir Alfred peered at her with sunken green eyes which lit up with greedy interest, and demanded, "Now where did this lovely wench appear from?"

Sir Jasper saw her distress and seemed to take a malicious enjoyment from it. He said, "This is my niece from America. Sir Alfred. Her name is Priscilla and she has been eagerly asking me questions about you!"

The bent Sir Alfred almost jumped into the air with delight. "Has she now?" he asked, smiling and exposing his hideous wooden teeth. "Well, I shall be more than glad to take care of all your curiosity, my little pet!" Catching her by the arm, he planted a repulsive kiss

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full on her lips. She drew away, trying to conceal her aversion.

"Come now, missy, we're going to be very good friends!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The preparation for the visit of Prince Hali and his entourage now went on with more haste. Priscilla found she had little to say about the actual purchasing of materials or the arrangements. But she did notice that with the arrival of Sir Alfred Coombs money was spent much more freely. The old roué made his presence felt in the big house with his leering advances to any female within his range and his loud laughter and drinking. Priscilla was kept busy avoiding him, and one of her devices was to stay close to Lady Helen.

Lady Helen favored the garden in the mornings and the sanctuary of her room in the afternoons. She and Sir Jasper had separate bedrooms. Priscilla often went with her on the pretext of reading to her from the latest novel of Charles Dickens. By afternoon the stout woman was so

far in her cups that she merely sat dozing and unlistening. But Priscilla did not mind as long as she was safe from Sir Alfred.

Sir Jasper did not help matters by seating the old lecher next to her at the dinner table. At least several times during every meal his hand would slyly seek out some portion of Priscilla's lower body. She pinched him hard on each and every occasion, thus fending him off.

On the second night after Sir Alfred's arrival there was the celebrated episode of his sleepwalking. Priscilla was suddenly wakened by the sound of the door to her room being slowly creaked open. She sat up in bed startled and realized she had made the supreme error of neglecting to lock her door.

Now through the shadows of the room there appeared a remarkable apparition! Wearing a tasseled nightcap and a scanty nightgown which revealed his withered shanks came Sir Alfred! His wrinkled face was bereft of expression and his eyes were wide and staring; his thin hands were outstretched as if groping his way. Oddly, he seemed to be having no difficulty finding the path directly to her bedside!

With a cry of anger she hopped out of bed on the other side and rushing to the commode picked up a large jug of dirty, cold water and dashed it into his face.

"Damme!" Sir Alfred said, flinching and sputtering under the impact of the unexpected cold shower. Then he glared at her and demanded, "Why did you do that?"

She faced him defiantly. "Why did you come in here?"

At this he put on a show of confusion worthy of a Garrick! He glanced around him and plaintively asked, "Where am I?"

"In my bedroom," Priscilla said. "And if you don't wish more cold water you'd best remove yourself."

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He looked at her plaintively. "Am I so repulsive, dear girl?"

"You are more ugly than in daytime which is saying a good deal," she retorted sternly. "Now leave or I shall raise an outcry!"

The old man hesitated. "You are a cruel wench! Only my admiration for you caused my sleeping steps to head this way!"

"You will leave now or I shall scream!" she said.

Sir Alfred sighed and turned with hunched shoulders to leave. "So little romance in her soul!" he muttered in complaint as he went on out.

As soon as he'd left she securely bolted the door and returned to bed, still shaken. Then she started to laugh, remembering how funny he'd looked in his dripping nightclothes, sputtering under the cold water.

She did not know that the episode was to give her a certain fame in the old mansion. Somehow the servants got hold of the story and repeated it gleefully among them. At length Mrs. Crouch revealed to Priscilla how the rumors had originated.

"I was in the hallway and heard all that went on between you and the old man," Mrs. Crouch said. "He had wakened me by stumbling against my door as he went by. I suspect he was more than a little drunk."

Priscilla told the housekeeper, "I think the cold water did a good deal to sober him."

"It was a fair treat to see him get it," Mrs. Crouch said with relish. And then in a grim tone, she added, "You know he has been sleeping regularly with one of the dairymaids. She goes up to his room almost nightly."

She was shocked. "Does my uncle know?"

Mrs. Crouch nodded. "He knows! In fact it was he who asked me who was most loose among the wenches employed here. And when I told him he bade me have her

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sent to be interviewed by Sir Alfred. And you can guess what the interview led to."

"What a disgusting old man Sir Alfred is," Priscilla lamented. "And to think my uncle would conspire with him."

"Sir Jasper is thinking about the money he is getting from that old fool. I hope he behaves better here than he did at one of his own dinner parties."

"Oh?"

Mrs. Crouch leaned toward her confidentially. "It was the last dinner which any of the county people attended. He so misbehaved that they left vowing never to return again. It is said that when a truly pretty maid came in with the soup tureen Sir Alfred seized her after she'd placed it by him on the table. And while his amazed guests waited to be served that old goat dragged the girl under the table with him and had his way with her while they all sat waiting."

"Unbelievable!" Priscilla gasped.

"The butler swears it is so," Mrs. Crouch declared. "And by the time Sir Alfred came out from under the table, most of his guests and their wives had departed never to accept an invitation from him again."

"So that is why my uncle is his only friend?"

"That is the truth, miss," Mrs. Crouch said. "And I'd be dismissed from service here if it was known that I told you."

Later, Sir Jasper sought her out while she was sitting in Lady Helen's bedroom reading to the sleeping woman. His thin face showed annoyance as he stood taking in the scene.

"What sort of nonsense is this?" he demanded. "You know she is drunk and cannot hear you."

Priscilla calmly closed the book. "I enjoy reading aloud if only to myself."

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"Better than you enjoy the company of Sir Alfred, perhaps?"

"If it must be said, yes!"

Sir Jasper said, "I do not appreciate your throwing cold water in the face of my guest."

"And I do not appreciate his appearing in my bedroom after sharing his own bed with one of the dairymaids," she replied.

Sir Jasper crimsoned. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Strange," she said. "I thought you would."

Her uncle said, "Sir Alfred is important to my plans for the entertainment of the prince. I shall request that in future you be at least polite to him."

"I shall try," she said. "But that silly old man does not seem to go by any of the regular rules of manners. So I cannot be sure."

Her uncle's face showed his rage. "Your father and I did not part friends. I hope it will be different between us." And he went out leaving her alone again with the sleeping Lady Helen.

The day before Prince Hali and his entourage were due to arrive at Brent Hall, excitement reached a high point. The house looked much fresher and had an almost festive air, a compliment to the cleaning efforts of Mrs. Crouch and her staff. The kitchen was a hive of activity with special dishes being cooked ahead and a whole section set apart for the prince's own cook.

Lady Helen came out of her stupor enough to show concern about what she would wear for the arrival of the prince. After much debate she and Priscilla chose a dinner dress of pearl-colored silk.

"I like its ruffles on the sides and sleeves," Lady Helen decided, her thick-lidded eyes blinking with small excitement.

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"And I shall wear my violet silk," Priscilla told her.

The stout woman said, "No matter what you wear you will be a delight to the eye. I'm sure the prince will be pleased by your presence here."

"I shall do my best," she said. "I know the visit is important to Uncle Jasper."

Lady Helen nodded. "Jasper still owns shares in the British East India Company. What happens in India is important to us and to all England. The Queen will be given a report on how we manage by Colonel Saunders. You may be sure of that."

"I had no idea," Priscilla said.

Lady Helen gave her a plaintive look. "And, my dear, if I should on any occasion fall asleep do please quietly go about waking me."

That afternoon on the pretext of needing to go to the village for some silk thread, she managed to get the use of the carriage and coachman. And after she went to the small shop and purchased the thread she had the coachman take her to the house of Squire Finch and his invalid wife.

Elizabeth greeted her warmly. "Do come and sit with me a while," she said. "My husband is out but he will be back shortly. We have been worried about you."

She undid the ties of her bonnet and removed it. "I can't stay long. I was only able to get the carriage by saying I had to shop in the village. I'd never been given it to come here."

"I know," the sad-faced Elizabeth said. "How have you managed in that grim old house?"

She smiled. "It hasn't been all that pleasant. Especially since Sir Alfred has come to stay there."

"That old scoundrel!" Elizabeth said with disgust.

At this point the squire came in wearing his work clothes and greeted her. "You'll forgive me if there's a

whiff of the barns about me. I've been helping groom the mare."

Priscilla smiled and told him, "I simply wanted to see you both before the prince arrives tomorrow. I know that Sir Jasper does not have your names on his list of guests."

Elizabeth said grimly, "Even if I were well enough I would refuse to attend."

Priscilla said, "I think Sir Alfred should keep some of the county away."

The squire chuckled. "Curiosity will mostly overcome their feelings about him. Not often we have an Indian prince in this quiet part of the world."

Priscilla went on to tell them about her experiences with the lecherous old Sir Alfred, ending with, "He behaves so wildly, I think he is demented."

"No decent person should associate with him," Elizabeth declared. "And I am shocked that Sir Jasper has gone so far in forcing the wretched old fop on you."

"I only hope by the time the prince has left I shall hear from New York and be able to make plans for returning there."

Squire Finch looked troubled. "I only wish we could do more for you."

"No," she said. "You two must not get involved. I do not wish to have my uncle holding anything against you on my account. He is a vengeful, mean man as you know too well. Better to have no traffic with him."

"I agree fully," Elizabeth said, "yet we would like to offer you some protection."

She rose and began putting on her bonnet again. "It is time I learned how to protect myself," she said. "I discovered that need as soon as I lost my dear parents."

"Still," Squire Finch said, "send us word if you have any urgent need of help. I shall be over there in a flash."

"Thank you," she said. And she kissed them both good-by and went back to the carriage.

She expected that she or the coachman would be questioned when she arrived back at Brent Hall, but Sir Alfred had inadvertently done her a good turn, she found.

He had managed to get himself roaring drunk early in the day and had gone to the barns in search of his dairy-maid. He'd arrived at the dairy to find her in the company of a handsome youth. The two had exchanged words. Then the youth and the old man had quarreled and the youth had lifted Sir Alfred up and dumped him into a huge vat of buttermilk!

When she returned, Sir Alfred was being helped into the house, screaming with rage and dripping with buttermilk. His wig was gone, revealing his shining bald head, and he required a servant on either side of him to support him. All in all a ludicrous spectacle.

Priscilla's uncle was glaring after the drunken old man as Priscilla arrived. His only comment had nothing to do with her but with the situation he was facing, as he muttered. "Better it happened today than tomorrow!"

Priscilla did not lose the opportunity to escape any questioning and hurry upstairs to her bedroom. Once safely there, she was able to indulge in the hearty laughter inspired by the mad charade. And she was careful to keep aloof from the rest of the house until things had calmed down.

She spent the time mending her violet dress, and as she worked she again thought of New York. She hoped that replies to her letters to Lawyer Swift and Katie Rourke would come soon. When the excitement of the prince's visit was over she wanted to escape the old mansion as quickly as she could.

Inevitably she thought of her days on shipboard and

of her meeting with Thomas Manley. She wondered where he was and whether or not he was prospering. He was in London without doubt, but she had no idea what his address might be. Perhaps it was best that way. Had it been easy to reach him she might have succumbed to temptation and gone off to London in search of him.

She must put him out of her mind, must try to forget him completely and return to New York to find a new life and someone else to share it. In the meanwhile the prince would be arriving tomorrow to provide excitement for her.

Prince Hali and his party arrived in mid-morning. They occupied a half-dozen carriages and there was an almost equal number of carriages carrying baggage and servants. The whole atmosphere at the musty old mansion changed with the coming of this group. Even Lady Helen seemed wide awake and alert.

Sir Jasper presented Priscilla to the tall, black-bearded and swarthy-faced Prince Hali, telling him, "This is my niece from New York, Priscilla Brentwood. His Royal Highness Prince Hali!"

She smiled at the big man who loomed over her in his pale brown suit and matching turban. She said, "I have heard many flattering things about you, Prince Hali."

The prince took her hand and held it a moment. In a sonorous voice and with perfect English upper-class accent, he said, "Priscilla, a most interesting name. I hope that we may become friends. May I introduce my cousin, Prince Nan Gal."

Prince Nan Gal, a short, stout man in light suit and turban and with no hint of a beard on his round, owlsh face, bowed without a word.

Prince Hali continued, "And my good friend, Colonel Maitland, who has replaced an ailing Colonel Saunders who was to be my liaison officer."

Colonel Maitland bowed and said, "Honored, Miss Brentwood." He also was a good deal shorter than the unusually tall Prince Hali, an ordinary-looking man with a neat waxed gray mustache.

The party moved into the west wing as had been arranged and Priscilla was secretly amused to note that her uncle had kept old Sir Alfred Coombs as much in the background as possible during all the introductions.

There were to be no large formal functions until dinner time that evening. In the meanwhile the prince and his cousin and Colonel Maitland had a quiet luncheon with the members of the household. Lady Helen presided at one end of the table with the prince on her right and Colonel Maitland on her left. And miraculously she kept awake.

Priscilla found herself seated next to Prince Nan Gal, with Sir Alfred on the other side of her. It was natural that she give most of her attention to Prince Nan Gal and allow her Uncle Jasper to entertain Sir Alfred.

Prince Nan Gal spoke with an accent and was slow in forming his sentences. "Have you lived in India?"

"No," she said. "Never."

The stout, brown-faced man seemed surprised. "Most of those entertaining us have spent some years in our country."

"My uncle was there. So was my aunt."

"Ah, yes, the British East India Company."

"Yes," she said. "Were you educated in England as Prince Hali was?"

"No," the stout man said.

She tried again. "Do you believe that the English are doing a good work in bringing India forward?"

His brown face showed no expression. "That is often a matter of debate," he said. "I do not believe there has been any satisfactory answer as yet."

She was not sure, but felt she sensed some resentment in his manner. Deciding to be on the safe side, she turned to talk of her own country and especially of New York.

Prince Nan Gal at once became more animated. He said, "I have heard of New York, though I have never been there."

"I think it a great city," she said. "But then I do not know London."

"You have freed yourself of the British," Prince Nan Gal said.

"Yes," she said with a small, startled smile. "But we no longer think of it like that. I suppose we now think of the two countries as friendly allies."

"Before one can be friendly one must be free," Prince Nan Gal observed.

She was sure of his feelings towards the British now. So she went on talking about New York and the things she had enjoyed there. And he listened with grave interest. Once Sir Alfred caught her attention by pawing her leg. She routinely reached down and raked the back of his hand with her long fingernails.

He swept the injured hand up to comfort it with his lips and wooden teeth and snapped, "Vixen!" If Prince Nan Gal noticed he gave no hint of it, but asked some questions about the extent of farming in the county.

She confessed, "I'm afraid I'm unable to tell you since I've been here so short a time."

Prince Hali had donned an officer's uniform of white silk with golden epaulets and trim. He also wore a brown leather belt and a row of medals on his right chest, a gift of Queen Victoria for his service to the Empire. After lunch the handsome, black-bearded giant came directly to Priscilla and said, "Would you care to show me the gardens?"

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"I would be pleased to," she said. "Though they are not all that extensive."

She gave him a tour of the gravel walks and flower-beds and finally they wound up in the circular summer house directly in the middle of the gardens. A bench ran around the interior of the open-sided house. Priscilla sat down, with the prince standing by her.

"You are from the United States," he said.

"Yes."

"I have been there," he told her. "I have visited both Boston and New York. And I was entertained in Washington by your government."

She said, "Did you like my country?"

"I did," Prince Hali said. "I prefer it to England."

"Really?"

He smiled. "You are not a child. You must know that while we tolerate our conquerors we are not happy with them. India has been exploited by your British East India Company in the name of expanding the Empire."

She stared at him. "If you feel that way, why are you here accepting my uncle's hospitality?"

He offered one of his arrogant smiles. "I have long ago learned to take what is offered! The conquered learn that quickly."

"You are bitter!"

"Yes, you might say so," he agreed. "All this means nothing. I'm being entertained lavishly so I will not stand in the way of my people being robbed, my country plundered."

Her eyes widened. "Have you told Sir Jasper that?"

"Hardly."

"Aren't you afraid that I might tell him?"

"No," the prince said. "I believe you are my friend. I do not think you will betray any confidence between us."

She stared at him amazed at his manner of thinking. "I will not repeat what we have discussed," she admitted. "But I will wonder about you as the entertainments go on."

He smiled. "I shall appear most grateful."

"While at the same time you'll be laughing at us."

"Your uncle is amusing, a wizened old pinchpenny, and his good friend, Sir Alfred, is a caricature of an English country gentleman! We get many weird Englishmen in the army and in the service of the East India Company. Types like these two come as no surprise to me."

"I am not at home here either," she said. "I wish to return to New York."

"I saw you did not suit this strange old house and its people the moment we met," Prince Hali said.

"How perceptive of you."

The turbaned Prince Hali eyed her with amusement. "Am I turning you against me?"

"You are not too flattering of our small efforts to please you."

He said, "I'm sorry. My way of life at home is so lavish this pales in significance. I consider myself superior to my hosts. I am descended from Tamburlaine the Great. You have heard of him?"

"Yes. He was a famous warriour and plunderer."

Prince Hali's eyes showed a twinkle. "You see how far I have fallen. I am now the plundered."

"You do not like the role."

"Who could?" he asked. "Until ten years ago we Moslems ruled Kashmir. Now the English have ordained that an ancient Hindu of small talents and background be ruler. But one day soon it will be changed."

She stared at him with some concern. "Are things so unsettled in India?"

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"Yes," was his reply. "Today all India is a powder keg. It will take only the right spark to set it off."

"I understood your uncle is ill and you are soon expected to become ruler."

"Of only a small territory," Prince Hali said with some annoyance. "The larger area will remain under Hindu government."

"And, as you said, you do not approve?"

"I do not approve," he said firmly and glanced across the gardens to the great house. "This visit to England is meant to soften my opposition. It will not do so."

"Why don't you tell Queen Victoria frankly how you and your people feel?"

"I speak only for myself and my own kingdom."

"Then speak for yourself!" she urged him.

He smiled. "I like your American style. I fear we must wait, until one day we have our own tea party. That is what you called the Boston event of independence, is it not?"

Priscilla nodded. "Yes. That was the start of the revolution."

There was a grimness in his tone as he added, "Ours will not be a tea party, I fear. It will be a party bathed in blood!"

She was shocked. "How horrible!"

"Sorry," he said lightly. "Do not take me seriously as a prophet. I do not have a gift for it."

She eyed him with concern. "I don't know. I'm sure you were serious just now."

"Never expect a man to be serious, especially where a lovely woman is concerned," he said mockingly. "Instead of airing my views I should have been using my time with you to tell you how beautiful I think you are."

Priscilla blushed. "You are very direct."

"More so than an Englishman would be?"

"Perhaps," she said. "I have not had the experience with men that you surely must have had with women. I have been told you are married."

His smile was knowing. "Then you must know I have several wives."

"Several?"

"Yes. It is our custom."

"And concubines?"

"You have heard much about me," Prince Hali said. "A prince is entitled to any number of concubines. It depends on his appetite for female companionship."

Priscilla stood up and pressed her fan to her. "Along with his wives! I think that I would call that lust rather than love!"

The bearded man's eyebrows rose. "I do not recall my having spoke of love."

"Forgive me," she said. "It was lack of understanding on my part. In America we link marriage, love and parenthood. It is all of one package."

"I call that foolish," the prince said.

"We feel it very sacred. Very important to the woman," she said. "We believe that our men marry us for love alone."

"Impractical!" Prince Hali argued. "One should marry a healthy female for children with health! Marry a suitable woman of a rank of his own for companionship! Marry another for true love! And to avoid becoming jaded, concubines."

She said, "You've given me an interesting picture of your viewpoint of love and marriage. I shall never be so confused on the subject again."

The bearded man said, "Have I offended you? You think less of me?"

"No," she said with a smile. "I begin to admire you for the deception with which you beguile your con-

querors. And I worry that they are not aware of your complexity."

Prince Hali stared down at her. "That is a compliment?"

"In a sense."

"Let me also compliment you," he said. "I would make another marriage, a marriage for the enjoyment of the minds! That is what I find in you, though you are physically most lovely!"

She laughed. "Am I to consider that a proposal?"

"I would be pleased if you would," the prince said quite seriously. "We could announce the nuptials at one of the galas. It would be the talk of all England. Even Victoria would be amazed!"

"Do you think she'd approve?"

"No," Prince Hali said with a disarming smile. "But because she needs my support she would not show her annoyance. The marriage would be accepted."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I think your palace life would be too confusing for my innocent Western mind."

"My palaces are many," he said. "And truly they are lavish. Gold and marble have not been spared. You would share a special place in one of them. A place apart that would be solely yours."

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's an exciting offer but not for me."

"You prefer to marry some pale, clammy-handed Englishman?" he asked with distaste.

She shook her head. "Color has nothing to do with it!"

"I have known English women who thought me handsome!"

"I'm sure you have."

"But you do not like me?" Prince Hali kept his eyes fixed on her.

Priscilla smiled. "I like you, yes. I enjoy your frankness. Your confiding in me."

"Then?"

"But I do not understand you at all," she told him. "No more than you understand me. Yet I'm sure we are going to be the best of friends!"

"The best of friends," he repeated. "I find that an interesting statement. I will remember it."

Glancing towards the house she saw that Colonel Maitland, her Uncle Jasper and Prince Nan Gal were all gathered on the front steps watching them rather nervously. She had an idea none of them approved of their rendezvous, yet none of them dared to interrupt.

Turning to the man in white silk and turban, she said, "I think we should return to the house. I have an idea we are causing some concern by being here together alone for so long a time."

The bearded man shrugged. "I do as I wish. Does it bother you that they are concerned?"

"In a way," she said. "We shall have plenty of time together later on."

He looked pleased. "Very well," he said, taking her by the arm. "I will escort you back."

When they returned to the front steps and the others, Sir Jasper led the prince away to his study to discuss some British East India Company matters with him. Colonel Maitland and Prince Nan Gal accompanied them. She went on down the hall to the kitchen to inquire from Mrs. Crouch how the arrangements were going ahead for the evening dinner, to which about fifty had been invited.

The first thing she became aware of on entering the kitchen was the strange aromas there. Spicy, different smells which were not at all familiar to her. And she saw that the Indian cook and his two helpers were busy in the section of the kitchen set apart for them. Also, that all

three of the brown-skinned men were bare to the waist though they still wore their turbans.

Mrs. Crouch came up to her with a look of scorn on her gaunt face. "See yon heathens," she said sourly. "Their heads all bandaged and them stripped shamelessly! If I had my way I'd not let any of the maids in here."

"It is their custom," she said. "You mustn't mind."

"Not bad enough to lose half my space," the woman raged.

Priscilla asked, "How are you making out for tonight?"

"The venison is ready for the oven," Mrs. Crouch said. "And so are the woodcock! The salmon is already cooked and being prepared for the table. There'll be food enough! Don't worry about that!"

"This is only the first evening meal," she reminded her. "There are to be three!"

"Don't think I'm not mindful of it!" Mrs. Crouch said grimly. "Old tightfist has barely given me enough to get though the last night. And we're short of buttermilk what with that old fool falling into it!"

Priscilla laughed. "I think it may have taught him a lesson."

"Boiling oil wouldn't do that," Mrs. Crouch said gloomily. "At least we got his purse strings loose enough to give up most of what we need. Sir Jasper would never have done it."

Priscilla went back to another part of the house and took the stairs to the bedroom area. She stopped by Lady Helen's room and found her asleep in her chair after the unusual exertion of keeping alert and sober through luncheon. She did not disturb her, thinking it would be better to allow her to rest for dinner and the long evening ahead.

She was continuing on to her own room when a shadowy figure came out of the side corridor. It was Sir

Alfred Coombs, wearing his young fop's suit of pearl satin.

He bowed to her and showed his wooden teeth in a smile meant to charm her but which she found ridiculous. He said, "I saw you down in the summer house with the prince."

"Yes," she said. "I showed him the garden."

"You like men of his color?" Sir Alfred said, leering. "Some do! I have known fine ladies who would bed with nothing but Chinesel"

She said, "Did you find the buttermilk to have a beautifying effect on your skin?"

Sir Alfred's face darkened. "Don't be insolent to *me*, my girl!" And with that he limped on past her in an ugly mood.

She was delighted to escape him and hurried on to her own room to wash and dress for the busy evening ahead. Sir Jasper had asked her to help receive the guests and assist with the introductions as well. Thus far it had been an exciting day.

Her long, intimate conversation with Prince Hali had left her in a strange mood. His personality was strong and she knew there was a sharp mind behind that handsome bearded face. He had given her a fright when he had talked about the day of reckoning in India. She could not believe this was mere talk; she sensed his strong feelings behind the words.

His suggestion that she would make another good wife for him had also stunned her. But when she recovered she had realized this was a compliment. She could not deny his charm but she knew she would never be content to be merely another wife.

Evening came and the guests began to arrive. Somehow Sir Jasper had forced himself to hire a string trio. These three ancient gentlemen in white wigs and the costume

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of Regency days played rather gloomily in the large drawing room. The carriages came and deposited the guests at the reception hall where the family and the prince and his entourage were assembled to receive them.

Priscilla found herself installed near Prince Hali and was nervous at first, but as the guests, men in white tie and tails and females in elaborate, low-bosomed evening gowns, began pouring in, she had no time to think of herself. The evening went on well.

Dinner was a success though she noticed a number of the guests turned their backs on old Sir Alfred Coombs when he attempted to speak to them. Finally, the old man sat apart, his wig awry, his satin suit crumpled, trying to catch the tails of the maid's aprons as they passed! Whenever he managed and they halted to retrieve their aprons he hooted with laughter and tried to be even more familiar with them.

Prince Hali was surrounded by the guests and so she found herself standing a distance away by herself. She had not been there long when the liaison officer, Colonel Maitland, came up and bowed to her. He was a colorful figure in his red regimental jacket, dark trousers, orange epaulets and medals. He fingered his slim, waxed, gray mustache and eyed her cautiously.

She said, "The prince is most popular, isn't he?"

"Yes," the colonel said. "He enjoys attention."

She said, "I discovered that this afternoon. I spent a long while with him."

"Almost too long," the colonel said with meaning.

She stared at him. "You think so?"

Colonel Maitland said, "I think it part of my duty to inform you that Prince Hali is a headstrong man. And dangerous."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Why are you telling me this?"

"The talk continued longer than is usual with him," the colonel said. "I can only think that he is more interested in you than you realize. This is no ordinary man we are discussing, nor is he one of us."

"I see," she said bitterly. "We come back to the British viewpoint. These people must be considered less than us because they were conquered."

The colonel showed no emotion. In the same dry tone he went on, "Not exactly. But it is easy to see that you do not understand India or Indians."

"Nor do I pretend to."

"I have served in India in the militia," Colonel Maitland said dryly. "Out there our women are extremely

careful to be discreet. Not only among our own group but more especially when dealing with the natives."

She stared at him in wonder. "How can you refer to a Cambridge-educated man like Prince Hali as a native?"

"I made no such reference," Colonel Maitland said urbanely. "I'm simply suggesting that you do not court trouble."

"Thank you," she said, with a hint of sarcasm.

"Protecting the prince and also protecting his hosts is my job," the man said. "I try to do it as I see best."

"You need have no worries about me, Colonel," she said in a biting tone.

"Well, at least we have discussed it," he said. "If you should have any reason to complain don't forget that I had this talk with you."

"I'm hardly likely to," she said, her pretty face flaming. And she turned and walked away.

The three weary old musicians were still scraping away. She moved closer to them and pretended to be listening though her thoughts were actually far away.

Her uncle came up to her and growled, "I have never known such a thirsty lot. They are drinking us out of everything! I vow I'll have to buy another stock of spirits for tomorrow night."

She smiled at him. "At least they are enjoying themselves."

"I care not a whit about their enjoyment," the thin old man said testily. "It is the prince I'm concerned about. And in any event about half those here have insulted Sir Alfred by ignoring him."

"Can you blame them?"

"I can! They accepted the invitation knowing he would be here," her uncle said with exasperation. "And as if all that wasn't enough, your aunt has vanished."

Priscilla said, "That is nothing to worry about. You can be sure she has gone up to her bedroom to sleep."

"To drink gin!" Sir Jasper snapped. "Was ever anyone so plagued!" And he walked away.

She was about to go up and see if Lady Helen was all right when she saw Prince Hali coming directly to her. He had a wry smile on his bearded face.

As he joined her, he said, "What is wrong? You have been avoiding me all evening."

"Not at all," she protested. "I have duties to the other guests. You must realize that."

The tall man said, "I sensed evasion in you."

"Then you were wrong," she told him. "But you well might have if I were the sensitive type. I've been taken to task by Colonel Maitland for talking too much to you this afternoon."

Prince Hali scowled. "That meddling fool!"

"Please don't make anything of it," she begged him. "I only wanted you to know. Perhaps we'd better not be seen so much together."

"If that is your decision I will order my servants to pack and we will leave here at once," he said.

She looked up into his intense face and knew this was no idle threat. He was angry and he meant what he said. So she at once began to placate him. "There is no need for that. We shall go on being friendly as we wish."

"That is better," Prince Hali said, relaxing. "Do you like to ride?"

"I used to when I lived in America. Quite a while ago."

"Riding is my favorite sport," he said with enthusiasm. "At home I have a stable of fine horses. And I sometimes play polo as well."

"I'd like to see you ride," she said, thinking that it would be an impressive sight to watch this huge, romantic-looking man astride a fine horse.

"You shall," he told her. "Tomorrow morning."

"I'd enjoy that," she said.

"You shall come along with me!"

She laughed. "I wish I could but it's impossible. I have no riding clothes here, nor a sidesaddle, and I'm almost sure my uncle keeps no proper riding stock. His horses are work or carriage horses."

"No matter," Prince Hali told her. "We shall go riding together tomorrow morning at ten."

Priscilla stared at him. "You sound serious! But you can't be! I've told you it is impossible."

"There is nothing impossible." He waved aside her argument. "I will look after everything." And he smiled and then went to join his cousin, Prince Nan Gal.

She did not have time to think about this any further as guests were beginning to leave and she had to station herself at the door with Sir Jasper to bid them goodnight. She knew there was no hope of Lady Helen returning to take over what was properly her task.

As the last two guests left, she and her uncle were able to leave the reception hall. The prince and his party had already vanished for the night. So they were alone.

Sir Jasper gave her a grateful glance. "I would not have managed without you," he said.

She smiled. "I'm not sure I remembered all the names properly but I did my best."

"You were first-rate," the thin old man said. "And the prince has a fine opinion of you as well."

She halted at the foot of the stairway to turn and ask the old man, "Did he tell you that?"

"In so many words."

"He is intelligent," she said. "So much so he almost frightens me."

Sir Jasper looked grim. "Almost too smart for his own good. But the company needs his support so we must cater

to him. In his own country he is a person of great power. He is used to this. It makes it difficult for him here."

She said thoughtfully, "He is an enigma. One moment he is completely a Westerner and then in the next he reverts to being Indian. It is strange."

"I doubt if even he realizes the limits of his nature," her uncle said.

Priscilla said, "I think he has lost almost as much as he gained from his Cambridge education. In a way he is a tragic figure."

Sir Jasper shrugged. "It is on such tragic figures that we must depend for our power in India." And he started up the stairs.

Early the following morning she had her first true revelation of Prince Hali's sort of power. There was a knock on her door and when she went and opened it she found a maid standing out there with clothing over her arm.

The maid said, "Riding clothes for you, miss."

She was astonished. "For me?"

The maid held them out to her. "Just arrived from London. Sent special for you."

Taking them, she said, "But I didn't order any riding things."

The maid said knowingly, "It was one of the prince's men made the ride to London and back. He brought them."

"I see," she said. "Thank you." And she went inside with the clothes and examined them. The riding habit and hat were of navy blue and she could tell they would be the right size. A little later the maid came by with riding boots freshly polished.

It was obvious the prince had one of his entourage make the return trip to London and back to get these things and whatever else was required for their riding

excursion. It was like some fantasy taken from a story-book. The prince commanded and everything fell into place.

At ten minutes to ten she stood before the mirror on her dresser and surveyed herself. Prince Hali had forgotten nothing. She studied herself with a rueful smile and hoped he would at least find her as attractive as some of his concubines.

When she went downstairs he was waiting for her in a riding uniform of army style. He wore a dark brown turban to match the outfit and looked lean and powerful as he loomed above her.

She said, "You are a worker of miracles."

He smiled. "Only of the most modest sort, I fear. The garments fit?"

"As if they were tailored for me," she said, swinging about for him to see.

"You look most stylish," he said. "And I have a special treat for you. Horses which we were able to get from one of the other estates. Fine riding animals!"

"More miracles!"

"Just going about things in the proper fashion," he said. "It is time to go."

They went out into the pleasant morning sunshine to find Prince Nan Gal and the colonel there, along with two grooms holding a pair of fine chestnut horses by their bridles. Colonel Maitland's eyes met hers coldly for just a moment and then he turned to Prince Hali and made some complimentary remark about the horses.

Then Prince Hali helped Priscilla up into the sidesaddle and mounted his own horse. He told her, "Follow me along the path!" And in the next moment he'd galloped off.

She knew her horsemanship was in no way a match for his, but she urged her own steed on and it proved a docile,

good mount. She followed along the path more slowly enjoying the sunshine and air.

Reaching a hilly place she found Prince Hali waiting for her. He laughed. "I did not mean to leave you behind."

"Enjoy your own pace," she said. "Don't let me hold you back."

"I'm told there is a pleasant ride among these hills," Prince Hali said. "And there is a plateau when you finally reach the top from which you have a wonderful view."

"It sounds worth going up there for," she agreed.

"I'll lead the way," he told her. And he went ahead once again but this time he kept the horse to a canter and did not get out of sight.

She was enjoying every moment of it, the more so because it was all so unexpected. So this was one of the advantages of being a prince—you made the things you wished for happen.

When they finally arrived at the plateau at the top they tied their horses to some shade trees where grass was available for them to nibble. Then they went forward to the open space and stood on the giant, flat white rocks to study the view. Far below she could see the gray walls of Brent Hall and also many of the other estates.

"Magnificent!" Prince Hali said with a smile.

She stood beside him feeling tiny. "Yes. I'd never have seen it like this but for you."

He glanced at her. "I only planned the excursion so we could be together."

Priscilla blushed. "You mustn't say that. I know you are an ardent rider and you badly wanted to go riding today."

"Not alone."

"I'm happy you included me," she said.

Prince Hali studied her seriously. "We have only known

each other a few hours, for a day is only a scant number of hours. In the two days we've been together we seem to have a complete understanding of each other."

"I feel the same way," she agreed. "I think it a good thing."

The big man gazed at her with amazement on his bearded face. "You say a good thing! Surely you can do better than that! I call it unique! Perhaps even ordained!"

"Ordained?"

He nodded. "We of the East have a strong belief in fate. The will of Allah often is too shrouded in mystery for us to understand."

She gazed at him with fascinated interest. "You believe that! That I journeyed here from America and you came here from India. Because we were destined to meet in this place? This small English village?"

"Why not?" he asked, and then he said, "Sit down!" And he sat on the warm, white rocks and drew her down beside him. "You say that women of the West are satisfied only when men say they love them alone. What would you think if I told you I have come to love only you?"

She smiled ruefully. "I would say you were not being truthful. You have your wives not to mention your concubines."

"When I look into your eyes none of them count. I want *you*!" He took her in his arms and kissed her. He held her to him for a long moment until she resisted and pushed him away.

She said, "You know that was wrong! Colonel Maitland would never approve of any of this!"

The prince sighed. "So it is Colonel Maitland I must win! I suppose he is watching us now through some telescope. And if he is, do you think I care?"

"I do," she said, rising. "I'm fond of you, Hali. I won't deny that. But we must be sensible."

He got to his feet wearily. "It is obvious I do not have a proper understanding of Western ways. Of Western women particularly."

"Why do you say that?"

He gave her a resigned look. "Because I'm always wrong with you. You say you are fond of me and yet you repulse me."

She said, "I am fond of you, Hali. And I'm doing this as much for your sake as for mine. This thing we've discovered between us is good, but not good enough. I could never be your wife in your world."

He held out his hands resignedly. "And I cannot leave my world!"

"So let us ride back," she said.

He touched her arm. "There is still something. You will not turn from me."

"Of course not," she said. "Let us enjoy the rest of our ride. I have some friends I'd like you to meet. They live not far from here. I'd appreciate your stopping to pay them a visit. The woman is an invalid."

The prince seemed to have recovered his normal good humor. He said, "Whatever you wish! I'll be happy to see your friends."

So on the way back they took a side road and went to the squire's place. Both Elizabeth and her husband were surprised and delighted. And the prince was at his most charming.

He roamed about the big room in which the invalid woman sat by an open window and said, "This is a friendly house."

"It's an old one," Squire Finch said with a pleased smile. "Built by my grandfather."

"We came here as bride and groom," Elizabeth told the prince with a look of happiness on her wan face.

"Ah!" The prince turned to Priscilla who was seated

by the squire. "You see why it is such a friendly place. It is a house that has known love."

"I'm sure of that," Priscilla said.

"That is not true of your uncle's place," the prince went on. "I become gloomy from just being under its roof."

Elizabeth nodded. "I know! Sir Jasper is such a cold man. No wonder his wife turned from him to drink."

Prince Hali agreed. "True! Even within the British East India Company where loyalty is strong and a sense of humor is rare, Sir Jasper is a laughingstock. He is considered the meanest of men!"

"Everyone in the county knows that," Squire Finch chuckled. "If it weren't for old Sir Alfred I doubt he'd ever have put on this entertainment for you."

"The Company officials were aware of that," Prince Hali said. "I came expecting the worst!" He gave Priscilla a knowing glance. "But it has been much better than I expected. I have met this delightful young woman! And now I have been a visitor in this blessed house and met you two!"

"We didn't expect any such honor!" Elizabeth said. "And Sir Jasper would never invite us to meet you at his place."

"I could command him to," the prince said, the spoiled boy coming to the fore again.

"No," the squire said. "This has been much more pleasant for us."

They remained with the two old people for a short time longer with Prince Hali telling them stories about the Indian hill country in which he lived. Then they rode on.

Keeping his horse abreast of hers so they could talk, he said, "I genuinely liked those people."

She smiled at him. "That is rare with you."

"Rare enough."

She said, "They were thrilled. It will be an experience they will always remember."

He glanced at her. "What about you?"

She returned his glance. "I don't understand."

"Will you always remember me? Our time is growing short. There is only tonight and tomorrow. I leave early the following morning."

Priscilla stared ahead, her hands loosely holding her horse's reins. "Of course I'll remember you. Just as I hope you will remember me."

"You know my feelings towards you. If this were my own country I would make you my prisoner and take you with me!"

"Against my will?"

"Sometimes we do not know what is best for us."

"Then I'm grateful it is not your country we're in. I prefer to make my own decisions."

"Yes," he said. "And it seems they must always be against me."

When they reached the stables and turned the horses over to the grooms, he walked to the entrance of Brent Hall with her. He said, "We will ride again tomorrow."

She hesitated. "I don't know."

"You must," he said. "It will be our last chance. I have gone to all this trouble."

Priscilla smiled. "You are like a child. A spoiled child. Do you know that?"

"You mean that as an endearment?"

"Partly," she said. "And partly as a criticism."

He smiled at her. "I will accept your criticism as long as you agree to ride with me again tomorrow morning."

So it was arranged. That day was much a replica of the previous one. And the dinner that evening was the same as that on the first night with just fewer guests. The big event was to be the dinner and gala ball on the

third and last night of the prince's visit. Almost a hundred had accepted the invitation to attend and there was to be an enlarged musical group for the dancing.

Priscilla noted that Colonel Maitland avoided her and she wondered if the prince had spoken to him. She could not be certain. Perhaps the colonel had decided it was useless to give her his warnings and decided not to waste any more time on her. In any event, she was glad. She did not particularly like him.

Prince Nan Gal, on the other hand, followed her about with a smile on his round, brown face. He told her, "Is fine party."

She said, "You are enjoying your stay here?"

"Very good, indeed," the fat prince said. "And my cousin, His Highness Prince Hali, has not been so high in spirits for a long time."

"I'm glad," she said. "He does not seem to find it easy to relax."

"Has many worries," Prince Nan Gal told her. "He will soon be ruler. Troublesome times at hand."

"You think so?"

The fat man nodded soberly. "Unrest in my country! Soon an uprising! It will surely come!"

"Is there nothing to be done?" she asked. "Can't it be stopped in any way?"

"All know but no one ready to do anything," the prince said. "When my cousin become ruler he will have to oppose the British East India Company."

"But we are entertaining him now in the hope he'll remain our friend," she said.

The fat prince shook his head sadly. "Prince Hali likes you! He despises your uncle and the company he represents! It is too bad but it is so."

"I agree it is too bad," she said. "We can only trust the trouble you're so worried about will not take place."

"It will," Prince Nan Gal said emphatically.

She wandered about seeing that the guests were enjoying themselves for the rest of the evening and thinking that it was all a mad charade. Her uncle had gone to this trouble for nothing. Prince Hali's feelings towards the British East India Company would not be changed in any way.

Lecherous old Sir Alfred Coombs distinguished himself for the evening by becoming drunken and disorderly. He attacked one of the guests who had ignored him and Sir Jasper had to personally escort the belligerent and still struggling old man upstairs. This was the sensation of the party for a short while and then was forgotten as the prince had two of his servants offer a series of conjuring feats. These proved popular and saved the occasion.

Before Prince Hali left for his quarters in the west wing, he paused to say goodnight to Priscilla and tell her, "Be ready at ten the same as yesterday."

"If I'm not too tired," she said.

She went to her room worried about what she ought to do. His overtures to her on the previous riding excursion had made her aware of the dangers involved. She knew that she had responded warmly to his kiss for at least a part of the time and only when good sense replaced emotion had she made him release her. Another day she might not be able to call so coolly on her head to rule her heart.

Yet he would be hurt if she refused to go with him. She tried to think of some way to make the morning ride pleasant and safe. But there seemed no guaranteed solution to her problem. She went to sleep thinking about it. And it caused her some wonder to find that her dreams were filled with Thomas Manley.

When she wakened the next morning she discovered that fate had solved her predicament for her. It was

raining! They would not be able to go riding. She was so relieved that she was almost happy. Yet she had some regrets as well, for the ride through the woods and along the country roads the previous day had been a pleasant experience.

Prince Hali met her in the drawing room and glancing out at the falling rain, said, "Must you always win?"

She smiled. "In a way I'm truly sorry."

"And in another you are glad."

"You see," she said. "You understand me so well I don't have to offer explanations."

He went to the window. "It has been raining most of the night. It must end soon."

At his elbow she said, "I hope so."

Glancing at her, he said, "If the sun comes out by noon we might be able to go out later in the day."

"We'll see," she said. "Tonight is the big party. I must be at my best."

"You will be," he said. "I have told Colonel Maitland to send you my address in India. You can write to me."

"Thank you," she said.

"Where can I reach you?"

"I'll be here for a short while," she said. "After that I hope to return to New York. I'm sure that Uncle Jasper will forward any letters to me."

"I do not wish to lose touch with you," he said, his eyes fixed on her in that intense fashion. "I cannot have that happen."

"It won't," she said, though she was by no means sure she was speaking truthfully. She didn't even know whether she wished to keep in touch with him. Their moment together had been good; why not let it end without regrets?

The sun appeared early in the afternoon but not in time for their ride. Prince Hali had some callers from London

representing the East India Company and she was occupied with preparing for the gala ball and dinner.

Mrs. Crouch was in one of her gloomiest moods. She told Priscilla, "I make no promises about tonight. Those heathens have taken over most of my kitchen. I can't properly prepare for such a crowd."

She smiled at the gaunt woman and said, "You'll manage. You always do."

The woman sighed. "At least there's one good thing. They'll all be leaving in the early morning. How long it will take to put things in order after, I don't know!"

"Yes," Priscilla said with a hint of sadness. "They are leaving tomorrow. It hardly seems possible."

"I'm grateful, that's what," Mrs. Crouch said. "I couldn't last any longer! Not with those brown-skinned devils running all around my kitchen!"

By seven that evening the line of carriages filled the driveway. It was a warm, pleasant night after the rain and the house was already filled with guests. All that had gone before had been on a minor scale. This was the big event. Both Lady Helen and Priscilla had donned new evening gowns.

Sir Jasper continued to wear his shabby blue frock coat but old Sir Alfred was attired in another new outfit more suited to a younger man, this one in pale green. The prince wore a splendid yellow uniform and a silk turban to match. Priscilla's gown was of yellow silk—another prank played on them by fate. Without planning it, they had both chosen to wear yellow on their last night together. She took her place with Sir Jasper and Lady Helen in the receiving line.

After dinner the dancing began in the large, ornate ballroom. Prince Hali asked Lady Helen for the first dance and Priscilla danced with Sir Jasper.

Sir Jasper muttered, "If only my wife manages to keep

awake and Sir Alfred keeps out of trouble this should be a pleasant night."

"It's off to a good start," she pointed out.

"A long way to go yet," was her uncle's grim reply.

The prince came to her for the next dance. It was a lively one and gave them little chance to talk. In a way she was grateful for this. She felt that any deep conversation at this point would make their parting more difficult for them.

She was breathless when the dance came to an end and the prince escorted her across to an open window to get some cooling, fresh air. He said, "I must ask you for a waltz soon. It will give me a chance to hold you in my arms without having to apologize."

She said, "Shouldn't we save it for our farewell dance?"

He frowned. "I do not like farewells."

"I know."

He glanced towards the orchestra at the other end of the big room. "I will ask them soon. I do not want to wait."

She smiled ruefully. "Your impatience is one of your worst faults."

He shrugged. "I do not wish to put this off. I wish to waltz endlessly with you in my arms."

She laughed, "You have seen how easily I become breathless!"

"With the waltz it is different," he said. "I shall guide you and you will not feel tired at all."

He was forced to leave her when Sir Jasper reminded him he was scheduled to dance with one of the gentry who had come to the party. She was an elderly woman married to an officer in the East India Company, so he was unable to refuse.

Priscilla stood fanning herself and watching the floor filled with dancing couples. Even Prince Nan Gal was

out there with Lady Helen as a partner. The fat prince was blithely out of step and leading his partner against the others dancers rather than with them, but Lady Helen was so far gone with her nightly gin that she did not appear to notice. She had a beatific smile on her face, her heavy-lidded eyes were almost closed and she seemed to be enjoying herself.

A hand touched her elbow and she turned to see the grotesque smiling face of old Sir Alfred. He bowed and almost lost his ill-fitting wig. "May I have the pleasure of this dance?" he asked.

She was going to refuse him and then decided she would do better to accept his offer. Otherwise he might start his drinking again and make another scene. So she coolly smiled her agreement and he whirled her out onto the floor.

He was a better dancer than she had expected. As a result she was able to get through the experience without too much pain. She avoided looking directly at his yellow, wrinkled face and those wooden false teeth. When the dance ended she was relieved to have one of the county gentry ask her for the next dance. He also escorted her to the punchbowl and saw that she had a drink.

Colonel Maitland came by as she was standing there and bowed to her. He said, "The prince has asked that I leave his address for you. I will enclose it in an envelope and leave it in care of your uncle for you."

"Thank you," she said. "Then I won't be seeing you in the morning?"

"No. We will be rising very early and leaving. Probably before you are awake."

"In that case," she said, "I wish you a pleasant journey."

"Thank you," he said politely. "We have had a most interesting time here."

"You will accompany the prince back to India?"

"Yes. I have been appointed his liaison by the company," he said. "I have been relieved of my military duties for a period."

"From Prince Nan Gal I have learned that India is not in a good state," she said. "He predicts an uprising."

The colonel frowned. "Prince Nan Gal told you that?"

"Yes."

"I would not expect him to be uttering such statements," the colonel said with annoyance. "Especially to a young woman like yourself."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you not think me equal to understanding political unrest?"

"I consider his remark indiscreet, and I would ask that you not repeat it. For one thing it is a wild story, wholly unlikely, and for another it could cause your uncle some embarrassment."

"I will not speak of it to anyone else, Colonel," she said.

"Thank you," he said and bowed before he continued on his way.

She had her dance with the stout gentleman from the next estate and then heard the orchestra leader announce a waltz by the request of His Royal Highness Prince Hali. There was general applause.

The prince crossed under the brilliantly lighted candles of the huge glass chandelier and came directly to her. The orchestra began the lilting waltz and he took her in his arms and very gravely began to lead her around the room. He danced very well. She saw many of the crowd standing watching them and felt they must make an interesting picture, she in her yellow gown and he in his yellow silk uniform and turban.

Now other couples joined in with them and soon the floor was filled with waltzing couples. The handsome,

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bearded prince glanced down at her and she saw a light in his eyes that she didn't quite understand, that almost frightened her. It was a look of bright coldness different from any expression she had seen in them before.

The dance went on for a very long while. She was lost in the dream of music in his embrace. Then it ended and there was the usual applause. She was breathless and even the prince was breathing heavily.

"I am warm," he said tensely. "Let us get away from all these staring eyes."

"Outside?"

"Where else can we cool off?" he asked. And he led her across the ballroom to a side door which gave access to the garden. The moment they stepped out into the night air she felt better.

She smiled up at him in the dark. "It was a good idea after all."

"I need to escape the crowd for a little," the prince said. "Let us stroll across the lawn."

She said, "We shouldn't stay away from the party long. They will miss us."

"Let them! It is our last night!"

She said, "Who can tell about that? We may very well meet again. You mustn't be so melodramatic about it."

He glanced down at her. "And you mustn't be so casual!"

"I'm not casual," she admitted. "I simply don't want to make this more painful for us than it need be."

His hand held hers tightly so she could not escape him as they made their way across the lawn. In a slightly sarcastic tone, he said, "So sensible!"

"Please, Hali!" she said plaintively.

They had reached the summer house. Now he led her into it and the moment they were inside its shelter he took her in his arms and kissed away any protests

she might have been ready to make. She felt a stirring surge through her and she did not attempt to break the embrace. Rather she responded with the deepest emotion!

In the distance she vaguely heard the orchestra playing again and the faint chattering of the guests. For the moment it was a world lost to her. She did not care for anything but this moment with the handsome, bearded man.

And then they were on the floor of the summer house and he was moving a practiced hand beneath her dress. Vaguely she knew what was about to happen and could think of no way to prevent it—was not even sure she wished to!

She moaned slightly as he entered her. Then she gave herself wholly to the act between them. She knew a soaring sweetness shaded by a sense of sorrow. It seemed to go on for an eternity and yet end with shocking suddenness. He said nothing as he rose and stood over her. Nor did he attempt to help her up from the summer house floor. After a moment he turned and started back to the house.

Priscilla raised herself up to watch after his tall, retreating figure. Then she began to sob brokenly as she went about restoring her disheveled clothing to some kind of presentable state.

CHAPTER SIX

Fortunately he had not torn her dress. By the time she stepped back into the house the party was in its final moments. Most of the guests were too far gone in alcohol to notice that her dress was slightly wrinkled or that there were tear stains about her eyes. As Lady Helen had long ago disappeared, she gamely took her place beside her uncle to bid the departing guests good-night.

To her blurred eyes and stunned mind it seemed there was an endless parade of faces and figures. But eventually all had gone. She saw Prince Hali come and shake hands with her uncle but pay no attention to her.

Colonel Maitland stood by and she thought she saw a slight sneer on his thin, wax-mustached face. But perhaps it was her imagination.

Prince Nan Gal came to her and bowed awkwardly. "A great pleasure," he mumbled.

"A safe journey," she said, managing a wan smile for him.

She waited for Prince Hali to stop talking to her uncle and come to her. She did not know what would be said between them. But she waited for the moment when he would come to her, feeling that she might tell by the expression on his face whether he felt remorse or whatever for his treatment of her.

But when he finished with her uncle, he gave his attention to a thoroughly drunk and befuddled Sir Alfred Coombs. After he'd thanked the old man he joined the colonel and they went upstairs without any further words. She stared after him again and her eyes once more filled with tears.

"What is all this?" It was her uncle staring at her and noting her tears.

"Nothing!" she managed, touching a hankie to her eyes. "I'm weary."

"Yes, weary. Well, it is over. You mustn't let your nerves get the better of you," Sir Jasper said. "Time for bed. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Yes," she said tautly. "Good night!" And she ran from him and up the stairs before she broke into a loud sobbing once again.

She cried herself to sleep that night. And in the morning she felt so ill and ashamed that she could not bring herself to leave her room. A maid sent up by Mrs. Crouch brought her a tray of food which she barely touched.

When the maid came to take the tray away, she asked her, "Has the prince's party left?"

"Yes, miss," the maid said. "They all left early this morning. And Sir Jasper has gone to London to see them aboard ship."

"Oh," she said.

"It's a quiet house today, miss," the maid said. "But Mrs. Crouch wants it that way so she can get things put back as they were."

"Yes," she said. "I understand. And thank her for the tray."

"I will, miss," the maid said and went out.

It was a dull, cloudy day and suited her mood. She cried some more and when she went to the window she found herself staring down at the top of the summer house. A tiny shudder went through her. How long would the memory of last night haunt her?

How could Prince Hali have coldly turned his back on her without a word? Perhaps because he did not properly know what to say. She had believed he truly loved her. In those first moments in the summer house she had given herself to him! She could never deny that to herself. She had known it could only end in misery but she had not let that stop her. And he had greedily taken her as he might have any one of his concubines. She had been an object of desire, and he was someone not used to being denied what he desired! So he had taken her!

They had both been attracted to each other, both played with the fire of a passion which had suddenly overtaken them. And they had each reacted in the way that might have been expected. She had let her fondness for him blind her good judgment. And he had refused to be denied her.

She remained in her room for the rest of the day, spending much of the time in bed. She longed to have some friend like Katie to confide in. But Katie was an ocean away. Then compassion came from an most unexpected source. In the late afternoon there was a gentle tap at her door and Lady Helen entered.

The older woman gazed at her with her heavy-lidded

eyes and in a tone of deep sympathy, said, "I have just learned that you are not feeling well."

She said, "I'll be all right. I'm over tired."

"Of course you are," Lady Helen agreed and came over and sat in the chair by her bed. There was a faint odor of gin about her but she seemed wide enough awake.

Priscilla said, "Too much excitement!"

"I know," Lady Helen agreed. "Thank goodness Sir Alfred Coombs has returned to his own house. I had about enough of him as well."

"And Sir Jasper went to London to see the prince and his party off."

"Yes. He also had business at the East India Company offices," Lady Helen said. She glanced at her with those heavy-lidded eyes. "You were a great help with our guests."

Priscilla said somewhat bitterly, "I'm sure you'd have managed without me."

"Not as well," Lady Helen told her. "And I must say you made a strong impression on the prince and his party. When he was dancing with me he told me how much he admired you."

"Did he?" she said with some irony.

The heavy-lidded eyes fixed on her with sympathy. "You spent a good deal of time together."

"Yes."

"I'm sure you must have come to enjoy his company even though he was here such a short while," the older woman said.

Priscilla looked at her and guessed that despite her drinking and her spells of drowsiness, Lady Helen was aware of a good deal more than most people realized.

She said, "Yes. I did. But I think I never did truly get to know him."

"I understand what you're saying," the older woman

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said. "I spent many years in India as you know. And after all that time I was never sure about the educated Indians. I often had the impression they were merely tolerating us. Thinking us pompous fools."

"It could well be," Priscilla said.

"Prince Hali is probably no exception," the other woman went on. "I don't think you should worry too much about whether you reached an understanding or not."

"Perhaps you are right," she said.

Lady Helen offered her a comforting smile. "And when you have recovered from your indisposition none of this will seem of such importance."

"That is likely so," she said with a sigh.

Lady Helen rose, the aura of gin still around her. "I will go now. When one is weary it is better to be alone." And she made her exit as quietly as she had entered.

The older woman had not said much that was new or of great importance. But there had been an air of understanding about her which made Priscilla believe she knew far more than she had let on. And her general attitude of sympathy had been comforting.

She slept better that night and in the morning tried to put the whole affair out of her mind. She had a strong desire to go and visit Squire Finch and his wife, but she did not dare see them for a while. She was certain they would notice that she was grieving for Prince Hali and she did not want that. Nor did she ever want anyone to know what had happened between her and the handsome Indian prince.

Sir Jasper returned and reported at dinner the next night on the departure of the group. He said, "Prince Hali thanked me most effusively at the last minute before I returned to the docks. He asked to be remembered to everyone and especially to you, Priscilla."

She kept her eyes on her plate. "That was most thoughtful of him."

"I gathered that he really enjoyed himself while he was here," her uncle here. "So much of this entertaining is a bore to those people. But he seemed to relax here."

Lady Helen said, "Well, now that it is over I say we should forget about it. Just be thankful things went as well as they did."

"I still have to present the final bills to Sir Alfred," her uncle worried. "And he was not in the best frame of mind when he returned home. Seemed to have the idea he'd been slighted by many of the guests."

Lady Helen gave her husband a glance from under her heavy eyelids and said, "I shouldn't be surprised if he were right. But he was snubbed because of his own bad behavior in the past. Not to mention the scandalous way he carried on here with that dairymaid."

Sir Jasper's thin face showed annoyance. "Madam, that matter is best not spoken of."

"Yet it happened," she reminded him.

Sir Jasper directed himself to Priscilla, saying, "Colonel Maitland left an envelope with me. I believe it contains some information about reaching Prince Hali. His mailing address. He asked that I give it to you."

"Thank you," she said.

Sir Jasper cleared his throat. "Well, I must say the house is quiet again after all that commotion. And I confess I prefer it this way."

No one made a comment. Later in the evening Priscilla's uncle brought her the envelope. She felt a slight excitement as she studied it, thinking that perhaps it might contain some message. But when she opened it she found it was simply the mailing address which had been mentioned.

A week passed and she began to feel much her old self.

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She was restless to get away from Brent Hall and when a letter arrived from Lawyer Swift in New York she quickly opened it to read its contents.

Then she sank down into the easy chair in her bedroom and went over it a second time, a look of dismay clouding her lovely face. In part, he wrote: "I regret that the sales of your parent's home and personal effects did little more than pay his business debts. I find it my unhappy duty to tell you there is nothing left of the estate to place to your credit. I think this most unfortunate. I shall be happy to offer you a personal loan if you require money at any time, but no doubt your uncle and aunt are taking excellent care of you."

She gave a deep sigh at this. And then she read on, "You will be surprised to learn that Timothy Rourke unexpectedly pulled up stakes and left New York, taking Katie with him. I do not know where he has gone but there have been rumors that he decided to move to London. So perhaps you may see them. Let me know if I can be of any further help to you. In the meantime my wife and I send you our love."

Coming after everything else, the letter was a crushing blow. It changed her plans about returning to New York. She did not wish to place herself in debt to the Swifts for her passage and her living expenses when she arrived there. And the news that Katie and her father were no longer in the city made the move back less attractive to her.

This explained why she had received no reply from Katie. Her friend had not received the one sent her. Timothy Rourke was quite capable of moving without leaving any forwarding address.

She sought out her uncle in his study and told him the bad news. She said, "There is nothing left for me of the estate."

Sir Jasper compressed his thin lips. Then he said, "I'm not surprised. Your father was never that good a businessman."

Angered, she replied at once, "My father had built up an excellent business."

"Then how do you explain this?"

"It happened after his sudden death. There was no one to properly look after the orders and accounts," she said. "I will not have my father blamed."

"As you like," Sir Jasper said with a near sneer. "I have my own opinion. At least it seems clear that you must look to me for your future security."

"I have no wish to be a burden to you."

The thin man said, "You are not. Because of Lady Helen's unhappy problem I need a woman to run the household affairs. One can never completely leave such matters to the staff."

"Mrs. Crouch is most capable."

"With supervision," was his firm reply. "And you should be able to supply that supervision."

"I will try to be useful while I'm here," she said. "But I would like to try and work out some other plans for my future. Find a means to make my own way."

Sir Jasper did not appear impressed. "What is there for a gentlewoman to do? Become a companion or a governess?"

"I may even seek work in that direction," she said.

"Why?" he asked. "You have it here. I need a companion for Lady Helen, as I have explained. Is that not a good enough position for you?"

She hesitated. "Perhaps it might be easier to work for strangers than for relatives."

Her uncle shook his head. "You have a lot of wrong ideas, my girl. And you will soon find that out. This world is not an easy place."

"I'm aware of that," she said.

"Well, let us leave it there," Sir Jasper said. "You are my niece. I do feel some responsibility for your welfare."

She left the conversation filled with a conviction that anything would be better than settling down to a life at Brent Hall. It was not that she didn't like Lady Helen, but she knew the cool, gloomy atmosphere of the house would soon grind her down.

That afternoon she walked the rather long distance to visit Squire Finch and his wife, Elizabeth. She found the two seated outside in the garden. They greeted her warmly and commented on her tired appearance.

Squire Finch settled her in a wicker chair with a cold glass of lemonade and told her, "You ought not to have walked all the way here. I would have willingly come for you if you'd sent me a message."

She shook her head. "No. Better that I walk. I do not wish any arguments with my uncle at the present and he would certainly cause one over my visiting you. This way they need only think I have gone for a long walk."

"I dare say he'd be in a proper fit if he knew you had brought that pleasant Prince Hali to see us," Elizabeth said with indignation showing on her pale face.

"I was able to keep that from him," Priscilla agreed. "I find Lady Helen not at all bad to deal with when she has not had too much to drink. But since the company has left she has gradually gone back to having too much gin."

"I'm afraid it is too late to expect her to change her ways much," Squire Finch said, his pipe in his mouth. "Yet if I had the choice between Jasper Brentwood and gin I'd make the same choice she has."

Priscilla then went on to tell them the bad news she'd received from New York. She ended with, "So now I must try and think of some way to escape Brent Hall. I do not

wish to act as companion to Lady Helen. I cannot abide the prospect of being dependent on Sir Jasper."

"I should hope not," Elizabeth Finch said with some anger. "I can imagine accounting to that old skinflint for every bonnet or petticoat one might need."

Squire Finch frowned. "It is a pity you ever left New York. At least you had more friends there."

"I can see that now," she agreed. "Even without money I could have managed better there."

"You are still welcome to come and live with us," Elizabeth told her.

"Devil take what Sir Jasper may say!" Squire Finch agreed.

She smiled at them. So concerned about her. "No. I feel I should leave this village. My best prospects may be in London."

"It is a great city," Elizabeth said. "But a perilous place for a young woman on her own."

"Have you any definite plans?" Squire Finch asked.

"Not yet," she admitted.

He puffed on his pipe. "I have a cousin living in London, a good-natured, middle-aged man. James Baker of Murray Street," the squire said slowly so she would take it in well. "Keep that name and address in your mind. You need only mention our name and he would be delighted to help you in any way possible."

"Thank you," she said. "I shall be sure and remember. James Baker of Murray Street."

Elizabeth nodded. "James might know of some vacancy open which you could fill."

Priscilla smiled. "I knew I should come over and see you. I was certain you'd find some way to help me. And you have."

Squire Finch said, "It is very little. What about your prince friend? Have you heard from him?"

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Anxious not to betray her feelings, she said carefully, "He left his address for me. But I have not written him."

"Perhaps you should," Elizabeth suggested. "He seemed a kind, educated young man. And both of us felt that he was much taken with you."

"Aye!" the squire said. "It was in his every look at you."

She managed a wan smile. "We did become rather good friends, I'll admit."

"I knew it!" the invalid woman exclaimed. "I could tell."

Priscilla hastened to add, "But there can be nothing of a romantic nature to emerge from the relationship. The prince already has a wife. In fact, in accordance with his position in life and religion, he has several wives."

The invalid woman was astounded. "I had no idea! He seemed so much like us!"

Squire Finch removed his pipe from his mouth to say, "He is a Moslem prince, my dear. Nothing can change that."

Priscilla left soon after this. The squire insisted on driving her back most of the way.

She got down from his carriage in a lane about a mile from Brent Hall. She told him, "I do not know when I shall get a chance to get over again. But if I decide to leave here in a hurry I will write you later."

"Do that," he said, his hands on the reins. "And if you go to London do not forget James Baker of Murray Street."

"I have already memorized it," she assured him. Then she saw him on his way. He waved before he turned the corner of the road in his carriage and she waved a final farewell in return.

She walked the rest of the way in a rather forlorn state of mind. And once again her thoughts turned to Thomas

Manley. She wondered if she might find him if she went to London. Perhaps this James Baker might find him for her even though London was a large city.

But by this time Thomas Manley could have moved on to some other city. Or even to the Continent. He was a wanderer and his profession of gambling made him more prone to keep on the move. Her prospects of ever seeing him again seemed small. And even if they did meet, would the situation be any different between them?

Sir Jasper did not question her as to where she'd been all afternoon; apparently her visit to the squire and his wife had gone unnoticed. Things continued evenly for a few more days. Her only pleasant interludes in the grim old house were when she talked briefly with Lady Helen or with Mrs. Crouch, who had come to be her admirer and friend.

One afternoon when she'd gone to see Lady Helen and found her lost in a gin-sodden coma she went downstairs to talk with the housekeeper.

She told Mrs. Crouch, "I'm worried about my Aunt Helen. She seems to be drinking more than ever."

The housekeeper looked grim. "It's Sir Jasper. They had a great quarrel this morning! I had it straight from the maid who looks after their rooms."

"What about?"

"I didn't find that out," Mrs. Crouch said grimly. "But it was a bad quarrel. And whenever he bullies her in that fashion she turns to the gin again."

"It is tragic," she said.

"Sir Jasper is a hard, mean man," Mrs. Crouch warned her. "You must never expect anything of him. He will only return loyalty with cold cruelty. Remember that!"

"I will."

Mrs. Crouch gave her a concerned look. "You should

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not stay here too long. He will trap you in some way. Make no mistake about that."

She was filled with uneasy fear. "You think so?"

The confrontation with Sir Jasper which she worried about happened on an appropriately menacing night. Thunder and lightning had been playing about the area from late afternoon. And by the time dinner was over the storm broke upon Brent Hall with full fury!

Part of her uncle's meanness was apparent in the tiny candles provided for lighting in all parts of the great mansion. The large living room was lit by only two or three inadequate candles and as Priscilla stood by the window gazing out at the storm the huge room was every so often lit up by a blue blaze while the walls seemed to vibrate from the roar of thunder.

The storm was just beginning to wane when she turned to see the stern-faced figure of her uncle standing close by her. He must have been standing there watching her for several minutes before she'd realized it.

He said, "Will you kindly join me in my study. I have something which I wish to discuss with you."

She was almost certain the interview was going to be a painful one. But she hid her fears and said, "Yes, if you like."

When they reached the study he pulled the drapes at its windows to shut out the lightning. The thunder was moving off in the distance and it seemed the worst of the storm might be over.

She sat facing the old man across his broad desk with the only light in the room, a solitary candle, casting a faint glow on Sir Jasper's lean, cruel face.

He folded his hands before him on the desk and cleared his throat. "I find this a most disagreeable matter to bring up."

She sat placidly, thinking that he was referring to her

secret visit to the Finches. "Have I annoyed you in some way without realizing it?"

Sir Jasper's gaze was grim. "As you know, Sir Alfred Coombs and I had an unfortunate misunderstanding regarding the bills for the entertainment of the prince. He went so far as to accuse me of asking him to pay more than his fair share."

"I did not know," she said. Nor had she heard any of this previously.

"It has been a most awkward situation," Sir Jasper said. "I have tried to make the best of it but now he has capped all his bad behavior by threatening to blackmail me."

"Blackmail you?"

Sir Jasper nodded. "He is threatening to make certain revelations available to the press and public. And what he is ready and all too willing to reveal could cost me my position with the British East India Company and also my position in society."

She could not imagine what he was getting at. "That is most unfortunate. But Sir Alfred's own position in society is so precarious I doubt any words he could say against you would carry much weight."

Her uncle continued to stare at her oddly. He said, "In a normal situation, I would agree. But I'm afraid in this case he has me in a rather unhappy plight." He frowned. "On the final night of the prince's entertainment Sir Alfred and his dairymaid decided to keep a tryst in the summer house. Something which one could readily believe of the two."

"Yes," she said, faintly. Now she knew what was coming.

"When they arrived at the summer house they were not able to make use of it for their immoral acts because someone else had taken possession of it for the same

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purpose, before they arrived. It is shocking for me to know that they discovered Prince Hali and you there in a most flagrant sort of behavior."

"I have heard enough," she said in a weak voice, her eyes cast down.

"Sir Alfred is ready to tell all," Sir Jasper said grimly. "And the girl will back him in his words. This could bring great disgrace on both myself and the prince. Not to mention you."

"It does not matter about me," she said brokenly. "I do not care what he says."

"You have the least to lose in this," Sir Jasper said, leaning forward so that his cruel face was more clearly in the glow of the candle. "I can lose my position with the British East India Company for allowing such a thing to happen on my estate and Prince Hali's reputation can be blackened and it could cost him a great deal. Perhaps even the throne which he is shortly expected to inherit."

She said, "What do you want of me? A denial?"

"A denial would be worthless."

"Well, what?" she asked desperately.

"There is a way to keep Sir Alfred silent."

"What is it?"

"He can be dealt with. His silence bought."

"But isn't he already a very wealthy man?"

"The wealthiest in the county," Sir Jasper said. "None of us can match his worth. And he is old and alone."

She said, "Then why does he want blackmail money?"

"He doesn't," her uncle said. "He wishes another sort of payment. He will keep silent if you will become his bride."

At first she couldn't believe she had heard right. "His bride?"

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"Yes. He will spare all our reputations if you will consent to marry him."

"It's unbelievable!" she said.

"Exactly my own reaction!" was his blunt reply. "I am shamed and humiliated that you would so disgrace me!"

"There must be some way of settling with that wretched old man," she sobbed.

"I have told you the way!"

She stared up at him in disbelief. Then she also got to her feet. "You cannot mean you expect me to marry him?"

"Think!" her uncle said. "He is old and rich! He cannot live long and you will stand to inherit a fortune!"

She lifted her hands to her ears. "Do not say such things to me!"

"Come now!" Sir Jasper said grimly. "You are not all that easily upset! Not above a tumble on the floor of the summer house with that hot-blooded Indian! I think you can face the marriage bed with Sir Alfred!"

She turned to run from the room, crying out, "No!"

He was after her and seized her by the arm and roughly yanked her around facing him. He stared down at her tear-stained face and said, "I will not be ruined! You will pay for your fancy little games. You will marry Sir Alfred!"

"It is you!" she accused him. "You wish to gain more control over his fortune through me! The prince would not wish me to so sacrifice myself!"

His grip on her arm became so painful that she could hardly bear it. He gritted through his teeth, "If this comes out in the press the prince will never gain his kingdom. Victoria will not tolerate such immorality to go unpunished. And he will end up cursing your very name!"

"Please, you are hurting me!" she said, trying to get him to release her arm.

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He eased his grip a trifle. "It is all arranged. Sir Alfred is to come here tomorrow night. There will be a quiet ceremony presided over by the vicar. Your aunt and I will be the witnesses. And you may spend your honeymoon night here in the west wing!"

"You can't be serious!" she protested.

"You must go through with the ceremony!" Sir Jasper said harshly. "After that you may handle it as you like. Sir Alfred would not dare to come out with such accusations against his wife!"

"So I am to be the sacrifice!"

"If you wish to call it that," her uncle said. "You have brought disgrace on me and I have found a way to save us all. And do not try to escape this house before tomorrow night or you will rue it. I will find you wherever you go and I'll make you pay in my own way for scandalizing us and the prince!"

With that he released her. She ran sobbing from the room and along the long, dark corridor. The lightning came more weakly now and the thunder was almost lost in the sound of a heavy rain. She groped for the stair railing and still crying as if her heart were broken stumbled up the winding stairway.

She reached her room and threw open the door just as the lightning came and she saw what at first struck her as an apparition in the almost dark room. But then she realized it was Lady Helen in nightgown and robe.

Lady Helen came to take her in her arms and murmur, "You poor, dear girl!"

She sobbed bitterly. "You know?"

Her aunt held her close. "I know! I guessed from the start. And when my husband came to me with his nefarious plan we had our most bitter quarrel! You must believe I have no part of this."

"I believe you."

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"Sir Jasper is an evil man," her aunt said. "You dare not defy him. He has threatened me with the madhouse if I oppose this business."

She stopped her sobbing to stare at the pale face of the stout woman in dazed alarm. "He has actually threatened that?"

"Yes. Either I attend your wedding as a witness or he sends me to Bedlam."

"He wouldn't," she said, not able to make herself believe this.

"He would," the stout woman said quietly. "Unfortunately, I have given him the excuse through my drinking!"

She listened, stunned. "I have no course but to run away!"

Lady Helen said, "Run away if you must. I do not blame you! But to protect yourself and Prince Hali from that wretched old man you should first marry him."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"I do not think you should honor the marriage vows, but you must silence him," Lady Helen said. "So you should go through with the marriage service."

"Then if I flee I shall be his wife! He will have a right to send after me to have me brought back!"

Lady Helen said, "Not if you are smart enough to vanish. And I believe you are a clever girl. I must return to my room now. If Sir Jasper finds me here he might send me to the madhouse at once!"

"Go!" she said tautly. "Don't let me put you in such danger!"

Lady Helen left her and she went over to the window and stared out at the downpour. There was no hope but to do as Lady Helen had suggested.

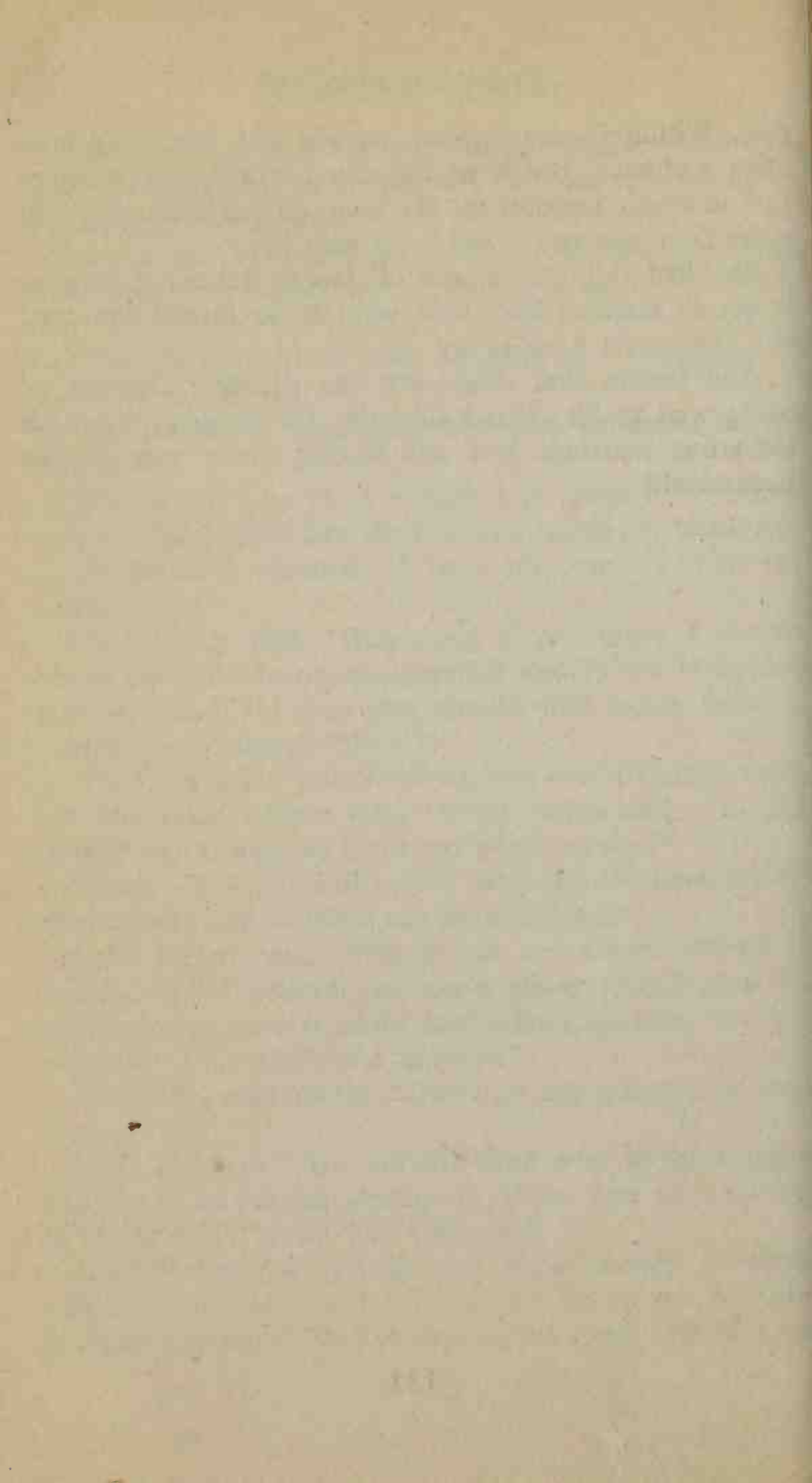
Lady Helen had said she was clever enough to vanish and not be found. But she was by no means so sure. Such escape might be possible in the great city of Lon-

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don. Within its anonymous crowds she would at least have a chance. But it would take her a day or perhaps two to reach London on her own. In the meanwhile Sir Alfred's agents might catch up with her.

She had only the name of James Baker of Murray Street to comfort her. And what if he turned her out? But she would have to try.

And before that there was the dreadful charade of being wed to Sir Alfred Coombs. Of escaping from his lecherous marriage bed and finding some way to flee Brent Hall!



CHAPTER SEVEN

"May the Good Lord forgive him, for no one else will ever be able to," Mrs. Crouch said gravely when she heard the story of Sir Jasper's perfidy from Priscilla's lips.

"I'm to wed the foul old man tonight!" Priscilla said pitifully, as she and the housekeeper had this secret meeting in a storeroom off the kitchen.

"You mustn't!"

"I have no choice!"

"You cannot do such a thing!" Mrs. Crouch said. "You must not!"

"Listen," she said. "To silence that evil old man I must become his wife! Then before he can bed me I must escape."

"How?"

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"I'm not sure," she said. "But I will hit on a way. I may need your help."

"Anything I can do!"

"I will need a disguise."

"A disguise?"

"Yes," she said. "In case they send agents after me to bring me back. And to make my travel easier."

Mrs. Crouch thought a moment. "You would be safer as a lad!"

"You are right!"

"If you poked your hair up under a cap!"

"No need. I can cut it!"

"But such a shame." The housekeeper eyed her shining hair sadly.

"Not if it will save me!" she said.

The housekeeper said, "I can get you some lad's clothing and bring it here along with a candle for you to dress by."

"Do that!" she said.

"You'll not be able to use the railway," the housekeeper warned her.

"No. What about a stagecoach?"

"If it is very late you might not find a stage," the housekeeper warned.

"Then I shall have to hide in the bushes for the night."

"What after you get to London?"

"I have a name. I will find friends," she said. "I'm sure of it!"

Mrs. Crouch said, "If only Prince Hali were here he would help you!"

"I wonder," she said, grimly. "We'll never know. But you will not fail me? You will bring me the lad's clothes?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll be here waiting with them. Ready to help you!"

"I cannot say what time I will arrive."

"It does not matter. I will be here."

She donned a white silk gown before going downstairs at the appointed hour of seven. When she reached the drawing room she saw Lady Helen, lost in gin, asleep in her high-backed chair; Sir Jasper, dressed in his shabby black and looking impatient, and her bridegroom, the lecherous old Sir Alfred Coombs, wearing a pale pink velvet suit and looking more monstrous than ever.

He ran to greet her with a lascivious smile. "My! What a lovely bride!"

Sir Jasper said, "Properly you should not see the bride in her gown until the ceremony."

The old man whirled around on his game leg and with his wig askew said, "We stand on no ceremony here! We are old friends!"

Priscilla saw that her bridegroom-to-be was already very drunk. She asked Sir Jasper, "Has the vicar arrived?"

"Not yet," Sir Jasper said irritably as he consulted his pocket watch. "He is always late!"

"No matter. We can have the wedding dinner and the bedding afterwards! Then tomorrow he can wed us properly!" And the old lecher roared with laughter at his own joke.

Lady Helen lifted her heavy eyelids to glare at him and murmur in protest, "Cannot that clown be silenced?"

"He is in high spirits, madam, because he is about to wed," Sir Jasper snapped at her. "He has every right with such a lovely bride waiting on him."

Sir Alfred clapped his thin hands together. Swaying just a little he said, "I congratulate you! You have said it exactly! I could not have done better! My fourth and most lovely bride! And with a passionate nature, as I well know!" And he guffawed again.

She moved to Sir Jasper. "This man is offensive."

Her uncle sneered. "Come now, your feelings are not all that tender. You will get used to him! And he has the reputation of being a lover of much prowess!"

"Fathered more bastards than any other title in the county," Sir Alfred Coombs agreed with drunken pride. "And capable of fathering a good many more!"

It was at this rather peculiar moment that the vicar arrived. He was an old, bald, near-sighted man, with a long, gloomy face. He came trotting into the room with a Bible under his arm and his spindly legs encased in leggings.

"I'm sorry to be late," he apologized. "My carriage was temporarily stopped by a mud hole."

"As long as you're here!" Sir Jasper remarked acidly.

"Marrying me for the fourth time!" Sir Alfred Coombs said, shaking the hand of the gloomy vicar heartily.

The vicar showed discomfort. "I believe I officiated only on the occasions of your last two weddings," he said in a doleful tone.

"I have lost track!" Sir Alfred said. "No matter! We are ready and you shall be paid for coming this long way through the mud."

Sir Jasper had wakened Lady Helen who was standing sleepily at his side. He said, "We will proceed to the chapel. I consider it more seemly to hold the ceremony there."

"Anything to properly dignify the moment," the vicar said, studying the drunken bridegroom.

The chapel room was cold and bleak. They all assembled there and the vicar stood before her and the swaying Sir Alfred. The vicar opened his prayer book and gave them both an anxious glance.

"You are ready to begin?" It was almost as if he were hoping that she would announce a change of mind at the last minute.

"Proceed!" her uncle snapped.

"Very well," the vicar said with a sigh. "Dearly beloved!"

The service proceeded with only one awkward moment when Sir Alfred couldn't find the wedding ring. "I have it!" he said in drunken perplexity as he searched the pockets of his velvet suit. "I took it off the body of my third wife before her flesh was cold."

A look of horror crossed the vicar's face at this and did not leave it as the ceremony went on with the finding of the ring. When it was all over Sir Alfred gave Priscilla a resounding smack on the lips and held onto her as if he were afraid he might fall.

Sir Jasper addressed himself to the vicar. "Will you be good enough to remain and feast and drink with Sir Alfred and the new Lady Coombs?"

The vicar was looking as if he might be ill. Shuddering, he said, "No. I must leave at once. I have still some eventide prayers to attend to!"

Sir Alfred Coombs hooted with laughter at this. "And have your prayers ever brought you such a lovely bride as I've won for myself this night?"

"I fear not, Sir Alfred," the vicar said. "I happen to be a celibate. If you will excuse me, I must be on my way!" And he hurried out of the room.

Sir Jasper frowned. "Silly old fool!" he said of the vicar. "We shall celebrate in any event."

"Not I," Lady Helen said sleepily. "Take me up to bed, Jasper."

"Disgraceful!" her husband said, glaring at her. And he told the old man and Priscilla, "I shall join you at the wedding table as soon as I have delivered my wife upstairs to bed!"

Mrs. Crouch presided grimly over the dinner. She did all the serving, even pouring the wine. There were just the

three of them at the big table with its white cloth, fine setting and elaborate display of food.

Sir Alfred was beyond eating much. The first disaster came when he bent too far over his soup plate and his loose wig fell off to be well-splashed with soup. The old lecher replaced it without trying to dry it off, first backwards, and then properly, if slightly to one side.

Sir Jasper rose and said, "A toast to the bride and groom!"

"I'll drink to that!" Sir Alfred said, struggling to his feet and lifting his golden goblet of wine. "To the fourth Lady Coombs!" And he laughed boisterously.

He then proceeded to struggle with a turkey leg in one hand while he held onto her with the other, pausing only to bestow a greasy kiss upon her. And as the meal proceeded he indulged in many such frivolities. By the time it was over he was barely able to rise from his chair.

"To bed!" he said, his eyes glazed, his hands limp on the chair arms.

She gave her uncle a pleading look. "What now?"

"All is prepared in the west wing," her uncle said with disgust in his voice. "I fear your bridegroom is not in the best of condition for your wedding night. But I'm sure you'll not be too much disappointed. I will have a servant help him upstairs."

"Fourth and best!" Sir Alfred said drunkenly from his chair.

It took two youths to carry the old man up to the big bedroom prepared for the first night of their marriage. The lads left him stretched out on his back on the bed snoring and snickering hurried out of the room and closed the door.

Priscilla gave her new husband a look of disgust and then began removing her bridal dress. She substituted a

robe for it. Then she sat before the dresser and cut off her lovely hair with more haste than precision. She left it as short-cropped as any lad's.

Now she was ready to proceed downstairs, get the boy's clothing from Mrs. Crouch and make her escape. But she must be wary. Sir Jasper might be watching the door of the bedroom. She tried a door at the side of the room and found it led to a sort of parlor. She had an idea the door from this room opened on another hallway. She tried it and her guess proved correct.

Carefully opening the door she looked out and saw no one. Then she emerged and hurried down the dark hall to the rear stairway used by the servants. She made her way down these mean, winding stairs until she reached the lower floor and finally the storage room.

Mrs. Crouch was waiting for her there with the clothes and a lighted candle. The older woman saw her hair and said, "You look like a lad!"

"I must if I'm to get out of this fix!" she said, taking off her robe and preparing to get into the boy's trousers.

Mrs. Crouch said, "What about him? Did you have any trouble getting away from him?"

"No, thank heavens. He was quite unconscious," she said, busy with her dressing.

"Heaven be praised!" Mrs. Crouch said. "Let me help you with that shirt."

"I'm dressed!" Priscilla said, tying a red handkerchief about her neck. "How do I look?"

"Like a lad! But your face is too clean."

"Some lampblack," she said. "Get some lampblack and smudge my face a little."

"I'm fair sick with worry about you going off into the dark night alone," the older woman said unhappily.

"Just hope I do get away," Priscilla said more cheer-

fully than she'd expected. The excitement of escaping was keeping up her spirits.

A few minutes later, her face properly smudged, she slipped out of the rear door with Mrs. Crouch watching after her. As she fled into the shadows a dog in the barn barked, almost stopping her heart. But nothing else happened. She hurried on until she was well away from Brent Hall.

Then, exhausted, she slackened her pace. The lad's clothing was thick, coarse cloth and warmer than a dress. She was grateful that the night was no colder, and that there was no moon.

When she reached the post road to London there was no sign of any vehicle on the road. Most of the stages had gone by early or would be starting later. She decided to find a spot in the bushes and try and sleep.

After locating a suitable spot she found sleep impossible. So she sat there staring into the night and praying that a stage would come along before the dawn. By then she might be missed and either Sir Alfred or her uncle would send out searchers for her.

She had some gold sovereigns and other coins in a small linen bag on a string given her by Mrs. Crouch which she had hung around her neck. This was all the money left from her passage money to England. It would at least get her to London.

The main thing was that she found transportation before they came after her.

She felt herself grow slightly drowsy and then a sound aroused her. It came from a distance and was a kind of clattering which gradually grew louder. As it came closer she recognized the sound: wagon wheels. Her spirits rose and she got up eagerly and went out into the road and waved her hands and shouted.

The wagon drew up by her. It was a big wagon covered

by a tarpaulin and drawn by two gray horses. The driver, an old man with a long white beard, sat on the seat at the front of the wagon staring down at her.

"What are you doing here at this hour, lad?" he wanted to know.

"Looking for a ride to London!"

"A ride to London, is it!" the old man said with disdain. "You gave me a bad start! For a moment I thought as how you were a highwayman come to rob me!"

"I'm not that! I'm only fifteen, a boy!" she said.

"Are you a runaway?" the old man asked suspiciously.

"No!"

"Then what are you doing out here at this hour?"

"I broke a valuable clock belonging to my mistress! It slipped from my grasp as I carried it," she complained. "And she made the master turn me out even though it was after dark!"

"Miserable wench!" the old man on the wagon said. "Did they give you any pay?"

"Nary a penny."

"The bastards!" the old man said and spat with disgust. "All right, boy, if it's London you're going to I can take you part of the way."

"Thank you, sir!" Priscilla said with delight and climbed up on the seat beside him.

The old man urged the horses on and glanced at her. "You're a skinny lad!" he observed. "Do you have any objections to traveling with the dead?"

She stared at the white beard. "In truth, sir, you are not dead, are you? If you be a ghost I'll take my leave and no offense!"

The old man laughed heartily. "I be no ghost! But I do have a dead one behind under the tarpaulin. All safe in an oaken casket."

"Oh!" she said with relief. "Now that is a different

matter. You squared our accounts. If I frightened you, old man, I can vow that you sent chills down my back just now."

He chuckled. "That's the reason I'm out at this hour. I'm taking the body of Lord Stanley to the family cemetery near London for burial in the morning."

"Lord Stanley, is it!" she exclaimed. "Now, he sounds important!"

"One of the first lords of the nation," the old man told her. "The Queen and Prince Albert often entertained him. He had a deal to say about factories and the like. They wanted him to raise the standards of his factory hands—he had about eleven hundred of them—and he would have none of it. Didn't mean to spoil the working class!"

"He sounds as if he'd been a stern master!"

"He was that," the old man agreed cheerfully. "Never a kind word to any of his help. Passed me dozens of times without even glancing at me. And tonight I'm all the company he has. Except until you came along."

"I'm just a ragamuffin on the road."

"So we're his last companions," the white beard chuckled. "For all his pomp and glory he winds up spending his last night above the ground with Old Harrity and a poor boy thrown out by a mean master."

"Do you think he'd approve of us?"

Harrity said, "If he doesn't he has only to get out of his casket and say so. If we're willing to abide him in his state he should be able to get along with us two!"

"That is very true. He is contributing the least to our talk to break the loneliness of the night."

"Well said," old Harrity agreed. "I'm glad I came upon you, boy. By dawn we'll have reached the crossroads to where I'm going. I'll have to drop you off there. But it's close by an inn where you can get a good breakfast."

She was careful to keep in the character of the forlorn

lad. "I expect if I offer to help in the stables I can get a few crusts in exchange."

"You can do better than that," the old man said jovially. "Go out by the stages and offer to read the hands of the ladies embarking for London. Tell them you're the seventh son of a seventh son and can read their futures in their palms. They'll make fun of you but they'll wind up giving you a few pennies."

"That's a capital idea if I can carry it through!"

"I've seen it done many a time," the white beard told her. "You can manage it. You're a bright lad."

"Thank you," she said.

"You'd best close your eyes and see if you can nod a little," the old man said. "You don't want to be too weary in the morning."

"I've never tried sleeping like this before on a moving wagon."

The old man laughed. "The fellow in the rear is doing well enough and he's a lot older than you!"

"You have a lively wit, old man!"

"It's my sole stock in trade. I live by it," Harrity said. "I'm old and rheumatic and would have been let go years back if it wasn't that I amuse the chief groom. He's told me, 'Harrity, I keep you here because you have a lively humor!' And it's the truth."

It was a chilly ride but she did manage to sleep in snatches. The old man drove on without showing any signs of weariness at all. Then dawn came and with it a thin, eerie mist. She woke up and slapped her arms around herself.

The old man grinned at her and said, "The only one who has enjoyed this ride is Lord Stanley. Leastwise, he hasn't complained."

"I'm grateful for the ride. When do we reach the crossroads?"

"In another ten minutes or so," the old man said. "And remember what I told you about the palm reading."

"I'll try."

"If I had a penny in my own pockets I'd give it to you," Harrity said bitterly. "But Lord Stanley was not a generous man. And I'm not to be given any pay for the trip, only my board and room at the other end of the journey."

"Will you be there soon?"

"Another hour or two," the old man said. "And then it's good-bye to Lord Stanley. I'll have to start keeping company with lesser folk again."

The mist began to thin and the sun to shine and then they came to the crossroads with its signs. Old Harrity pointed out a large distant building and said, "Lad, yon's the inn! Good luck to you!"

"And I thank you, Harrity," she said with a smile. She jumped down and bowed after the wagon as it rolled along. "And good-bye to you, Lord Stanley!"

So now she was on her own again. She was sufficiently far from Brent Hall to feel much safer but she would not consider herself completely safe until she reached London. She took a few pence from the bag hidden around her neck to pay for her breakfast. Then she marched from the road into the bustling inn yard. There were several stagecoaches there waiting for passengers, who were undoubtedly inside having a hearty breakfast. Some private carriages were also waiting there. Stewards were hurrying to pack parcels on some of the stages, while dogs, cats and poultry moved at random among the confusion.

She went to the rear door of the inn, jostled several times by impatient stewards on their way out with small trunks or wicker baskets. She smelled the delicious aroma of food as she stepped through the door and found her-

self in a kitchen with huge fireplaces where men and women worked as busily as the ones outside.

A big, burly man with an apron confronted her. "What do you want, lad?"

"To buy my breakfast!" she said. "I have the money to pay!"

"Have you, now?" the big man said with suspicion. "Then let me see it!"

"How much?" she asked.

He squinted at her and decided, "For one the size of you, fivence! And that's a rare bargain!"

"Yes, sir," she said meekly. She drew out the coins and passed them over to him.

He took the money and asked, "Are you leaving on the London stage?"

"I'd like to!"

"Then you'd best hurry," the big man warned. "It will be taking off in about a half-hour."

"Thank you," she said.

The burly man stared at her. "You're an odd sort of lad! You speak a good bit differently from most of the boys about here."

"I came here from America," she said. "I'm joining my parents in London to return!"

"America!" The burly man said. "I should have known. Well, on to the dining room with you. You've paid, so no need to eat here in the kitchen. You may take your fill in the dining room with the gentry!" And he laughed.

She decided that she liked large men with a ready laugh. It was the thin, rasping type like her Uncle Jasper one must fear. She made her way into the wood-paneled dining room which was filled with noisy customers shouting out their needs to harried maidens running about trying to wait on them.

She took a table close by the door to the kitchen and

in a moment a short, ugly girl came and said, "Do you want the porridge and kippers?"

"Yes, that will do," she said. "And some hot tea to wash it down with!"

The girl nodded and rushed off without replying. Now Priscilla gave her attention to the others in the dining room. Well-dressed men and women sat at the long wooden tables, complaining about the food and service, and worrying about their various journeys and the conditions of the road. She was pleased that none of them paid any attention to her. A ragged lad was below their interest.

The ugly waitress came back with porridge, milk and a plate with kippers and fried potatoes. Only then did Priscilla realize how hungry she was. She pounced on the food like a starving person and soon had it all gone. Then she sat drinking the hot tea which the girl had brought a little later.

She was speculating whether she should dare take the regular stage to London or if it would be better to wait and try and get a free ride or a cheaper one than the stage by managing to get one of the wagons to take her. She was so lost in thought she missed seeing a well-dressed young man come across the room to stare at her.

All at once she was taken out of her reverie by the handsome young man coming up to her and saying sharply, "Lad, where have I met you before?"

She recognized the voice at once and felt her cheeks go crimson. For the newcomer was none other than Thomas Manley, with whom she had become so friendly aboard ship.

Trembling, she said, "You've never seen me before, mister. I've never been more than two miles from the farm in all my life."

Thomas Manley was studying her with shrewd eyes. He

said, "For one brought up on a farm your skin is very white!"

"I've been living in the city of late!"

"But you said you'd never been more than two miles from your farm home!"

"Except for being in the city," she hastily amended.

"You're a fine-looking lad, and that voice!" Thomas Manley said, staring at her. Then his expression changed to one of awe and he slapped his thigh with the palm of his hand. "What a dolt I am! I know who you are!"

"Please!" she begged and jumped up to run out the back way.

He seized her so she couldn't escape and said, "You are Priscilla Brentwood! We met on shipboard!"

"Don't tell on me!" she pleaded.

"Why should I?" he asked. "And what are you doing in that lad's get-up?"

"I'm fleeing from great trouble. I must get to London," she said.

He frowned. "What has gone wrong?"

"Nearly everything!"

"You told me on shipboard you were going to live with your uncle, a man of title! Did it not work out?"

"It was a disaster!" she said miserably. "Please," she said. "Let me go!"

The young dandy said, "I want to help you. You're not going to fool many people in that lad's garb. Especially when you have such a pretty face and every time you open your mouth one gets that pleasant New York accent!"

"I managed up until now! You just happened to recognize me!"

"Look," he said, glancing furtively over his shoulder. "I may have to leave here in a hurry. But I can help you. So why not come along with me? I have a carriage ready and waiting outside and I have a house between here and

London. Come and be my guest for a day or two and if you still wish to go on to London I'll arrange it for you."

She gave him a forlorn look. "I must tell you. I'm a married woman now!"

He gave a low whistle. "Well, after turning me down so neatly you managed it quickly enough. Whom did you marry?"

"Lord Alfred Coombs," she said. "A lecherous old man with a fortune. I'm sure he'll send searchers to bring me back!"

Thomas Manley's handsome face showed amusement. "A pretty fix you've managed to get yourself in, Lady Coombs!"

"Don't call me that!"

"It's your true name now!"

"I hate it as I hate him! I ran off on our wedding night! My awful uncle pushed me into the marriage with a blackmail threat!"

The young man said, "He sounds a dandy. It's good to hear an American voice again, even from someone on the run as yourself."

"I only want you to know that if you help me you can't expect anything from me. I'm a married woman!"

Thomas Manley laughed. "I know you well enough to expect nothing but trouble. You've got a gift for it!" And then he gazed over his shoulder again in that furtive way.

Just as he did an old man with a younger one at his side came into the dining room and gazed around the place. Then the skinny old man pointed a thin forefinger in the direction of Thomas Manley and herself and shrilled out, "That's the one! That's the villain who cheated me at cards last night!"

"'Ods bodkins!" Thomas Manley said with a grim dismay. He moved swiftly, dragging her with him. "Out the

back way! These are the two gents I've been worried about!"

She said nothing as she was breathlessly dragged through the kitchen, out across the busy courtyard, in between two of the larger stages until they came upon a carriage with its horse harnessed and ready and a boy standing holding it by the halter.

"There, lad!" Thomas said, tossing the boy a coin. He shoved Priscilla up on the seat and got up beside her. They were on the road in a matter of seconds.

The old man and the younger one came into sight just too late to halt them. They shouted imprecations after the fleeing carriage and the old man lifted his arm in the air and shook his fist after them. Thomas Manley urged the horse on at full gallop until they were out of sight of the inn.

Then he slowed the pace of the animal and smiled at her. "I had a premonition there was going to be a slight unpleasantness this morning."

"No doubt because you'd so blatantly cheated that poor old man last night!"

He looked amused. "That poor old man is probably wealthier than your husband, Lady Coombs. I did not invite him to gamble. He invited me."

Priscilla said bleakly, "Another close call! Timothy Rourke was right. You'll never come to a good end!"

"Well, you're not the one to boast," he told her. "Winding up married to some horrible old man and wandering about in boy's clothing!"

"I'm a victim of circumstances," she said bitterly. "You make your own problems."

"I have a weakness for gambling. Otherwise I have no vices at all."

"You'll never repent," she said unhappily. She was realizing how much she liked him and how fortunate she

was to have his help in this dire time. Yet she was always disappointed by his reckless attitude towards life.

"Come now," he said with warmth. "We mustn't waste all this time quarreling. Tell me about yourself and how you managed to get in this predicament."

Priscilla was glad to be able to pour out her story to someone. She told him everything but the fact that Prince Hali had raped her in the summer house. She merely said that they'd been discovered in a warm embrace.

Thomas heard her out and said, "Your Uncle Jasper is a true villain! It is obvious he forced you to marry that old lecher so you'd get his fortune. No doubt Sir Jasper had high hopes of managing your estate and cheating you of most of it."

"I'm sure that is true," she said. "And they will leave no stone unturned to find me. No doubt agents are scouring the road and area around Brent Hall for me at this very moment."

"And you are safely here with me," he said.

"How safe is that?" she worried.

"I have a fine little house some miles from London," he said. "It makes an excellent headquarters for my work."

"Your gambling!"

"Whatever," he said, shrugging this off. "I can move into the city or into one of the various towns surrounding it as I did last night."

"If you have the same bad luck as last night it won't be too long before you're recognized."

"That is the point in moving about."

"Do you have servants?"

He smiled. "It's a perfectly proper atmosphere for you, Lady Coombs. I have a housekeeper and I have a young partner who sometimes joins me in my forays. His name

is Wilfred and he'd rather you didn't ask him the last one."

"Another card shark?"

"He has great dexterity with cards," Thomas said agreeably. "But I would not call him a cheat. Unhappily his father was hanged as a highwayman and since then Wilfred has been shy about his family name."

"He sounds like a scoundrel."

"Couldn't match your uncle at any game," Thomas Manley said. "So you will not be alone there with me. I propose you rest for a few days, let my housekeeper fit you with some proper clothing, and then we'll see about London."

Priscilla said ruefully, "I've cut off all my hair!"

He said, "Doff your cap and show me!"

"I don't like to," she said, shyly.

"Do as I say," he urged her.

She slowly took off the cap. "I've ruined it!" she said of her hair.

"It will grow back in a while," he said. "My housekeeper will make you a bonnet to cover the worst of it. She's very clever."

"Where did you find her?"

"In a London gaming house!"

She stared at him. "Isn't that a strange place to find a housekeeper?"

Thomas Manley eyed her with a twinkle. "Not like Meg! She's a very special sort of housekeeper. She's my mistress as well!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

She gasped. "At least you're frank!"

"I didn't want you to enter the house with any false ideas," he said. "It wouldn't be fair to you or to Meg."

"I'd expect fairness to Meg is the last thing which would bother you."

"On the contrary," he said. "I think a great deal of Meg and I'm sure I have made her life better. Before she met me she had drifted from one man to another."

She stared ahead of her primly. "It sounds completely immoral to me!"

He slyly asked, "What about marrying some silly old man? And let's not forget your little romance with Prince Hali!"

"That was different," she said, blushing again. "I don't think I ought to go to your house at all!"

"Jealous?"

She looked at his smiling face and wanted to slap it until she realized that he was right. And it wasn't very fair of her when she considered her own plight. She said, "You can get yourself in enough trouble. I don't wish to cause you more."

A stagecoach came rushing by in the other direction. The two drivers waved and one of them blew a jaunty note on the long horn which he carried. Someone inside the stagecoach leaned close to its windows and also waved as they went by.

When the dust from the other vehicle had settled, he said to her, "Let us realize one thing. We like each other despite the fact that we rarely agree. I want only to help you. Please believe that."

"I do," she said in a somewhat subdued manner. "If only I can get to London I have the promised help of one James Baker of Murray Street."

"Who is he?"

"A friend of some friends of mine. And it so happens he knows my uncle and hates him."

"Sounds like the right sort to help you. But why not think of returning to New York? You'd be safe there. And you'd have plenty of friends, including Timothy and Katie Rourke."

"The Rourkes have left New York. Mr. Swift believed that they might have come over here. He suggested I might meet them in London."

"I have been in London a good deal and I have not met them," Thomas Manley said. "But then it is a large city."

"That is why I'm so sure I can lose myself there," she said.

It was late afternoon when they pulled up in front of a modest green house on the outskirts of a village. A young man with a shock of yellow hair, a lanky body and a very

long nose appeared and took over the care of the horse and carriage.

"Welcome back, guvnor," the youth said.

"Thank you, Wilfred," Thomas said getting down from the carriage seat and swinging her down. "This lad is an old friend of mine, Wilfred."

"What do you know!" Wilfred said with a grin and he took the horse and carriage out back.

Thomas smiled at her. "Well, may as well face the music now as later. Meg has to meet you!"

"I can still go on my own way," she suggested, holding back.

"I'll not hear of it," he said. And he led her inside.

A pretty dark-haired girl in a white frilled bonnet and a dress cut low enough to show her best points came running out of a back room to greet them. She threw her arms around Thomas and kissed him warmly.

"You're back and safe!" the girl exclaimed.

"I always get back safely," he said.

"And I always worry," the girl said. Now she turned to look at Priscilla curiously. "And why have you dragged this lad here?"

"It is not a lad but a lass!" Thomas said, deftly taking off the cap.

"A lass!" The dark girl exclaimed with a look of sudden indignation on her oval-shape face. "Well, that is nerve, I must say! And me worrying about you!"

Thomas lifted a restraining hand. "No false ideas, my girl. This is Priscilla Brentwood, an old friend of mine from shipboard. She does not fancy gamblers. But she made a bad marriage and now she's on the run. I've offered to look after her here until she can safely move on to London."

The black-haired girl gave Priscilla an impudent stare. "I'm Meg, I am! And this is my man!"

"I know," she said in a small voice.

"No hanky-panky," Thomas assured Meg and kissed her on the cheek. "This is simply a friend in need and I wish you to help her."

"Help her?" Meg said.

"Yes. She needs some decent woman's clothing and a bonnet which will cover her hair. Then after she's had a rest maybe she'll dare seek out her friends in London."

Meg said, "I'll do anything I can to see her on her way. And let her remember who is who, here! I'm always ready to fight for my rights."

Priscilla said, "I have no wish to interfere here. I did not wish to come. Anything you can do to assist me will be much appreciated. And I am anxious to reach London."

Meg said doubtfully, "Well, as long as you understand. We have been doing well here and I don't want to have it all upset. Come along and I'll see what I have to dress you."

Meg took her to what was presumably the bedroom she shared with Thomas. The dark girl rummaged in the dresser and came up with some rather drab things, including a blue skirt and a worn white blouse.

She tossed them on the bed. "These ought to fit you. We're about the same size."

"You're very kind," she said.

Meg was instantly on the alert. "But not stupid!" she said, pointing a finger at her. "Keep that in your head! I won't be robbed of the best man I've ever known in all my life!"

Priscilla was busying herself changing into the offered clothing. "I like Thomas, but as he has already told you, I want nothing to do with gamblers."

Meg's eyebrows raised. "You think a lot of yourself!"

"It's not that," she said. "It's only that I realize gam-

blers' sweethearts are due to suffer a lot of pain. I heard you say you had been worrying when we arrived."

The dark girl showed surprise. "So that's it! You like Thomas well enough but you're not willing to risk anything for him? I'm willing to go through *any* pain for a man like him," Meg said. "That's the difference between us."

"I would prefer him to turn from gambling. There are many other things he might do."

"Not as well!" Meg said with pride. "Maybe you've never seen him working the tables. But I have! Even in London, where the best of them go, he can hold his own."

Priscilla had finished dressing. She said, "I'll keep the lad's outfit in case I need it again."

"Whatever you like," Meg said, studying her with cool eyes. "You don't look half-bad now. With your hair you'd be fetching enough!"

"Could you spare me a bonnet to cover my hair?" she pleaded.

"Why not?" Meg said. And she found one and passed it to her. "With that on no one can tell whether you have hair or are as bald as my old aunt!"

"I feel better," she said.

Meg nodded. "Mind! No tricks with Thomas! He can say what he likes, but he wouldn't have brought you here if there weren't some kind of feelings between you!"

Priscilla knew the hard school from which the dark girl had emerged and so could not blame her for her distrust. At the same time she found Meg attractive and warm-hearted. Thomas was lucky to have such a young woman to care for him.

The lanky Wilfred fairly danced with amazement when he saw the transformation in her. He said, "Blimey, she's a proper beauty!"

"Not for the likes of us," Thomas Manley warned him with a smile. "This is Lady Priscilla Coombs!"

"Always a bloke to joke!" Wilfred laughed. And he bowed to her, "Happy to meet your ladyship. The name is Wilfred!"

"I've been told about you," she said. "I'm glad to know you."

Meg stood by glumly. "If you can all get over trading compliments maybe you'd like to sit down to the fine mutton dinner I've prepared!"

Thomas fondly put an arm around her. "I'm famished, Meg! On to dinner!"

So her stay at the cottage began with a festive meal along with wine and a good deal of jolly conversation. After a while Meg appeared to be less jealous of her and Priscilla felt that under other conditions they might be close friends.

The routine at the cottage was carefully planned. Thomas and Wilfred remained at home most of the days but in the evenings they set out for some gaming place. Usually they did not return until the following morning. They would have a hearty breakfast and sleep for a little. Then it would all begin again.

Thomas insisted that she remain at the cottage for at least a week. He told her, "By that time they're very likely to have stopped the most energetic part of their search for you."

"You honestly think that?" she asked.

"I do," he said.

If Meg suspected he was keeping Priscilla there because he cared for her deeply, the dark girl had become careful to hide her feelings. She now accepted her as an equal and a person to confide in.

One day when the two were alone Meg asked her, "What is it like to live a proper life?"

She smiled at the girl seated across the table from her. "A proper life? I'm not sure I know what you mean."

The dark girl said, "I mean to live like the toffs do. Thomas says you were a toff back in New York."

"A very minor toff," she said. "But I had good parents who sheltered me perhaps too much."

"Go on," Meg urged. "Tell me about how you lived. I have always been a guttersnipe. I learned what little manners I have from a madam in a brothel who'd seen better days. Wouldn't let me be one of her regular girls, she wouldn't! Save yourself for some good man, was what she said. Well, I met a few and they didn't turn out all that good, not until Thomas!"

"He thinks a great deal of you."

Meg smiled sadly. "He'd leave me in a minute if you would have him!"

"I'm not so sure of that," she said, blushing.

Meg said, "Go on! Tell me more about New York."

And she did. The days went by quickly and she began to forget some of the worst of the nightmare at Brant Hall. But Priscilla knew she could not remain there indefinitely.

One afternoon when she was strolling with Thomas along a nearby country lane, he halted and said, "You know I'm in love with you, Priscilla!"

She said, "I wish you wouldn't say that. You make me feel disloyal to Meg and I'm not."

"I care for Meg," he admitted. "But she can never take your place with me."

It was then she made her decision, saying, "Tomorrow afternoon I want you to drive me to London. I want to find James Baker."

His handsome face clouded. "So that is your answer?"

"It must be," she said, as they strolled on.

She little knew then what the next hours would bring.

But within a short time she was faced with a drama she had not anticipated.

The following morning Thomas and Wilfred did not return at their usual time. As the hour for their return passed, Meg became terribly nervous. She paced up and down by the window which looked out on the yard, waiting vainly for some sign of the two men.

"What can have happened?" she asked Priscilla in despair.

She said, "Perhaps they became involved in some morning game."

"No," Meg said. "They never do that. Something is wrong. I'm sure of it. You have always said that the gambling will lead to his death!"

"I said it only to discourage him from making gaming a career," she said.

"They would have been here an hour ago if all had gone well," Meg said, pacing again.

"Do you know where they went?"

"No," Meg said. "They never tell me."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Wait," the dark-haired girl said bitterly. "Wait and pray they've had better luck than they deserve."

The morning went on and still the two men did not return. Priscilla had visions of Thomas in a jail somewhere. Or perhaps the lanky Wilfred had become mixed up in some sort of trouble.

Suddenly Meg cried with relief. "Here they come!" But her relief was short-lived. She added in a wail, "There is only one of them on the driver's seat!"

Priscilla joined the other girl as they went out to welcome the carriage. A grim-faced Wilfred had the reins and he jumped down and looked at them with eyes filled with shock and sadness.

"They shot him!" he said. "He's been near death since the early morning!"

"Dear God!" Meg said, going to the carriage where Thomas, white and still, his chest bandaged, lay stretched out on the carriage floor.

"You must help me carry him out gently," Wilfred said. "The doctor said he was only to be moved with care!"

The two women gave tender assistance to the thin youth and the stricken Thomas was carried inside the house and placed on his bed. Blood was seeping through the chest bandage and his face had a waxen look.

Meg said, "What about the doctor?"

Wilfred said, "We had to seek one out. He has promised to come here this afternoon. But there is a danger he might lead the police here."

"It is a danger we'll have to face," Meg said. "What happened?"

The young man moved away from the bed and kept his voice low. "An argument after a game. Thomas was accused of cheating though I swear he never did. Fellow drew his gun and shot him. I managed to get him out to the carriage and on the road."

Meg shook her head. "I've waited for this day after day, knowing it was bound to happen!"

"Just bad luck," Wilfred said, looking despondent.

Priscilla glanced at the unconscious man on the bed. "What did the doctor say?"

Wilfred shrugged. "He wouldn't tell me much. But I think he feels he has an even chance."

"If only he gets better," Meg said, tears in her eyes.

Wilfred said, "I had to tell the doctor where we lived so he could find us. If he tells others there could be trouble."

"Let there be," Meg said. "He needs the doctor."

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Suddenly there was a stirring on the bed and Thomas Manley called out weakly, "Meg!"

Meg stood transfixed for a moment. Then she ran to his bedside and kissed him and knelt by him. "God be praised!" she said.

Thomas was clearly having difficulty speaking; after a slight hesitation he managed, "Priscilla! Must get her out of here! Police may come!"

"Don't worry about me!" she protested. "I'm not going to leave."

His glazed eyes fixed on her. "Must," he said. "Wilfred will take you part of the way."

Meg said, "Don't you worry! We'll see to it!"

"Promise me!" he begged, his breath coming in gasps.

"We will see her safely on the road," Wilfred said. And at that Thomas Manley closed his eyes and dropped into a coma again.

Meg took her into the next room. She said, "You heard him. He wants you to leave."

"I can't desert him," she protested.

"You must," the other girl said. "It's what he wants. If he wakes again I'll wish to tell him that we've done his bidding. It will give him peace and maybe help in his recovery."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

Wilfred joined them and told Priscilla, "I'll take you most of the way to London if you get ready quickly. I want to be back here when the doctor comes."

"No," she said. "I'll manage on my own. It's only a short walk to the village. I can get a stagecoach there. He needs both of you here."

Meg said, "It would be a blessing if you would do that,"

"You're sure you don't want me to take you?" Wilfred worried.

"No," she said. "I can do well on my own. You must take care of him. I'm going to change into my boy's clothing. I'll feel safer in them even if I don't much fool anyone."

"Whatever you like," Meg said.

When she was dressed and ready to leave Priscilla went to Meg. "May I kiss him before I go?"

The other girl nodded. "Yes. He would want it."

She went to the bedside of Thomas Manley and the sight of his bloody chest and the white pallor of his face with its closed eyes made her regret that her dire predictions had at last come true. She bent forward and kissed him gently on the forehead. Its cold clamminess terrified her.

Leaving him she went to Meg and kissed her. "Take care of him," she said in a whisper.

Meg sighed. "Good luck to you!"

Her eyes brimming with tears, she started walking towards the village. She felt like a traitor, even knowing she was doing what Thomas wanted.

She marched along, a sad-looking little urchin in ragged clothes. She wondered why love needed to always be so complicated. Why were there always so many difficulties? She hated herself for the biting comments she had made to Thomas about his gambling, and what it would lead to. And yet she knew, faced with it again, that she would likely say the same things.

So troubled was she in mind that she was barely aware of arriving at the inn where the stagecoaches stopped on their way to London. There was no stage in sight.

But the courtyard was not empty. A covered wagon with an ancient horse stood near the door of the inn. She was about to go inside and ask about the next stage when a remarkable figure of a man came striding out. He was tall and very thin and had a long, friendly face. He wore

a black cloak and a shabby black suit as well as a rather battered black hat.

He glanced at her with a friendly smile. "Looking for the stage, boy?"

"Yes, sir," she told him.

"Won't be by for two hours or more," he said. "That is, the one to London."

"That is the one I want."

The tall man was standing studying him with great interest. "You are a remarkable looking boy. Good features! Good enough for a girl! And you look honest as well!"

"Thank you, sir," she said nervously.

"My name is Burt Mills," the tall man said. "Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"Can't say that I have."

"A great oversight in your education, lad," the tall man said seriously. "In my day I was a celebrated tragedian. Now I am the owner and operator of the Mills Punch and Judy Show! You surely have heard of Punch and Judy?"

"Yes, sir. I have that."

"Ah," the tall man said. "So you are not hopeless. I hate these country lads who say nothing, know nothing and gawk and grunt."

"I'm not one of them," she told him.

He laughed and eyed her in even a more friendly fashion. "I can tell that, lad. You are a sensitive boy! A boy who one day might grow up to be an illustrious actor like myself!"

"Too much to hope for, sir," she said humbly, wondering how on earth she could rid herself of him.

"One needs a start to climb the summit," Burt Mills said in his full-blown fashion. "The first step is the most important. And I am about to offer you the first step. I shall give you passage to London if in return you will help

at our open air performances. We need an honest lad to collect coins from the audience and turn them over to us."

She said, "I'm not sure I could manage it, sir." She was thinking it was an interesting offer but might delay her in reaching the city.

"Nonsense! Of course you could! And I shall give you board and a place to sleep in the back of the wagon with the Punch and Judy box. And as a special benefit I shall give you free acting lessons on the side!"

"You're very generous!" she said. "How long do you expect it will be before you reach London?"

"We stop for performances at every village," the tall man said, considering. "I should say two or three days. Now what do you say?"

She rather liked the friendly man and decided this short delay wouldn't matter too much, so she said, "Very well, sir. I accept your offer."

"I promise you will not regret it," Burt Mills said. "I shall teach you to play Hamlet as performed by me. Charles Dickens himself assured me he had never seen such a melancholy Dane. He marveled at my tears as I recited at Ophelia's grave!"

"I shall look forward to it!"

"So you shall!" Burt Mills said. "And as soon as my wife and co-star Nancy joins us, we will drive on to the next village for another performance."

"Yes, sir."

Burt Mills bent close to her and said, "I may as well tell you my Nancy is a trifle addicted to gin. Not in a large way, but it sometimes interferes with her performance. She lacks spirit, and of course, my classical training. But then we must not complain. One cannot have everything!"

As he finished speaking a short, fat woman with a shawl over her head came out. Her round, wrinkled face

bore a sour expression. In a sharp voice, she asked her husband, "Well, what are you idling here for?"

He doffed his hat. "Waiting for you, dear Nancy," he said with gallantry. "You were still at the bar when I left."

She tightened her shawl about her and said, "I did not know you were ready." She glanced at Priscilla. "Who is the boy?"

"Our new helper and my latest student of the Burt Mills approach to Shakespeare," her husband said. "This lad is going to join us and take up the coins. It is too tiring for me to do it after the show. And most of the people vanish before I can get to them."

"Because you are slow like a slug," Nancy said with venom. "And how do I know this lad will be any better?"

"See him!" the tall man said. "Look at the brightness of his eyes! The sweetness of his expression!"

"How you babble on!" his wife said with disgust. She gave Priscilla a grim scrutiny. "What is your name, lad?"

She thought quickly. "Sam!"

"Sam!" That seemed to please her. "My first husband's name was Sam. And he was a winner, I'll tell you. No puttering about with a silly Punch and Judy show for him. He was an undertaker and a most successful one!"

"Until he was in turn undertaken," Burt Mills said in a lofty manner. "My dear, I took you away from the dreary world of business and have brought you to the magical realm of the theater!"

"Some theater!" Nancy snapped peevishly. "A Punch and Judy show which doesn't even allow us to pay our bills."

"Things will improve with Sam collecting," her husband said.

"They had better," she grumbled. "If they don't, I'm leaving."

"Say not such things," Burt Mills implored her. "You are probably one of the best Judys in the business!"

Nancy looked sourer than ever. She told Priscilla, "Don't let him turn your head with his fancy talk, Sam. And watch the coins and bring them back to us quickly and you may be a great success one day. Perhaps even an undertaker!"

"Yes, ma'am," she said, somewhat alarmed.

"Heaven forbid it!" Burt Mills muttered under his breath. And aloud, he said, "All aboard! On with the Mills Punch and Judy Circus!"

The tall man and his wife sat on the seat in front; Priscilla squeezed in beside the Punch and Judy stand in the back. It was about eight feet tall and four feet wide and deep. And part way up one side was an opening where the Punch and Judy performance took place.

She was to see a sample of the show before the afternoon was over. They set up in the courtyard of the inn at the next sleepy little village. Mr. and Mrs. Mills took the hand figures of Punch and Judy inside the box and knelt out of sight to manipulate them.

A group of dull-eyed villagers slowly gathered. Priscilla stood by nervously with a cloth hat which Burt Mills had given her to collect coins from the audience. By the time two dozen or so were gathered the show began.

Burt Mills was a silly, good-natured Punch while his sour wife fretted away as Judy and kept striking him on the head with a tiny broom. The audience loved it; she did not have too much trouble collecting coins from a few of them when the show had ended.

When she took the proceeds back to Burt Mills his joy was a delight to see. "You've done well! Better takings than for days!"

"Because you were too slow getting out to them before," the woman snapped.

"Do not forget *I* discovered Sam."

"Pure luck," Nancy Mills said. And she told Priscilla, "Keep after them lively and pay no attention to him and you'll do well!"

So this was her introduction to the world of Punch and Judy shows. That night they gave an evening performance by torchlight. Mrs. Mills became quite drunk and hit her husband's Punch figure more on the head than normally. This went over well with the audience, who howled at her complaints and punishments.

Again she took in a good collection. That night Burt and Nancy Mills shared an attic room in the inn while she was allowed to sleep in the wagon. She lay awake a long while worrying about Thomas Manley and fearing that he might be dead. She had dreadful nightmares when she finally slept with the monstrous old Sir Alfred pursuing her in them.

For the next two days she played the lad and toured with the Punch and Judy show. Her employers were more pleased with her every day and she began to worry that they might not want to let her go. But it appeared that when they reached London they were going to join a sideshow museum where an admission would be charged so her services would not be required.

However, Burt Mills offered to keep her on as a drama student, saying, "Let me teach you the Bard and you will be made for life!"

"More likely ruined for life!" his wife said sourly. "Go off on your own, boy, and find some honest work. This is only fit for vagabonds like Burt and gin drinkers like me!"

It was a remarkable confession; Priscilla admired her for it.

When they reached the outskirts of London traffic began to get heavier. And by the time they were in the middle of the great city she was reminded of New York,

because of the crowds and many vehicles. Only this city was a lot older.

She bade the Millses a warm farewell and sought out a coachman who looked at her in her ragged clothing and said, "Get away, lad! No free rides!"

"I can pay," she said, showing him some coins. "I wish to be driven to Murray Street to the home of James Baker."

The coachman lifted his hat from his bald head and chuckled. "What manners you have, young sir! I wonder you don't have a title!"

"I do," Priscilla said with mischief. "It's Lady Coombs!" And she quickly got inside the coach and enjoyed the puzzled expression on the bald man's face.

The coach gradually left the poor section where she had found it and took her to the prosperous section of the great city. They drove along many streets filled with fine-looking houses. At last they came to Murray Street, which proved to have only six houses on either side. She paid the coachman and began to search out the house of James Baker.

The butler who answered the door gave her a cold look and informed her, "You ought to have come to the rear door, lad."

"I wish to see Mr. James Baker," she said.

"Do you? And may I ask the nature of your business?"

"It is personal and private!"

The butler showed annoyance. "You guttersnipes grow more fancy-tongued every day!"

"I speak the truth," she said. "I was sent to see him by Squire Finch and his wife."

Mention of the squire's name made the butler look less severe. He said, "If you will go to the rear door, lad, I shall tell Mr. Baker you are there."

She saw that she must either go to the rear door or

miss seeing James Baker altogether. So she said, "All right. The rear door it shall be."

The butler's response was to slam the door in her face. She made her way through an alley to the much meaner rear door and again rang the bell. After a slight delay the same butler answered it.

The butler said, "Mr. Baker is about to have his evening meal but he has consented to give you a brief audience first."

"You make him seem as important as the Queen!" she said, annoyed.

"No smart talk, lad, or I'll not take you in at all. So be quiet and come along," the butler said firmly.

She was shown into a big drawing room where an enormously stout man whose vast, pale moon-face was crowned with black hair sat in an easy chair with a drink in his hand.

The butler said, "This is the lad, Mr. Baker."

"All right," the fat man said, breathing heavily. As the butler vanished and she found herself alone facing the stout man she almost lost her courage. "You have a tongue, boy. Use it!"

"Squire Finch sent me," she said.

"Did he? And how is the old squire and his poor sickly wife?"

"As well as could be expected, sir," she said.

"Well, that is how all of us are, is it not, lad?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't suppose," the fat man said with his lip curling in derision. "Do not be a sniveler. Have opinions and out with them. Squire Finch is a silly old fool, isn't he?"

"No!" she said, angry at this injustice. "He is a fine man!"

James Baker laughed loudly, his stomach joggling and

rumbling. "That is better! That is how I like a lad to talk!"

"I am not a lad!"

The fat man stared at her as if he had not heard right. He said "What did you say?"

"I'm a young woman," she said. "My name was Priscilla Brentwood. I'm the niece of Sir Jasper Brentwood!"

"That old villain!" the fat man said angrily. "I trust you are nothing like him in nature."

"I promise you I am not," she said. "I agree with your sentiments. He is a villain."

The fat man studied her. "And so you are a young woman?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "I have the misfortune of being Lady Coombs!"

Now James Baker was seized with laughter once again. He said, "You have the most amusing sense of humor, I vow! Lord Alfred Coombs must be eighty if he is still alive!"

"He is alive," she said sadly. "Or at least was when I fled from him on my wedding night. My dreadful uncle forced me to marry the old lecher!"

The fat man put down his glass and gave all his attention to her. "I vow your performance is as good as any I've seen in the playhouse," he said. "Are all these things you've been telling me true?"

"I swear it," she said.

The fat man rose with a sigh. "My dinner is waiting for me. Come share it with me and tell me all about this while we are eating."

It was too good an offer for her to refuse. So she began back in Timothy Rourke's studio in New York and went on until she left the Punch and Judy show.

"A most fascinating account!" the fat man complimented her.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"I do not wish to be a burden on you," she said. "But if you can help me find some sort of position I will be most grateful to you."

"You shall remain here as my guest," the fat man said. "I will see you have some proper clothes so we can tell what sort of young beauty you are. It will give me great pleasure to do all this merely knowing it is against the will of your miserable uncle, Sir Jasper!"

CHAPTER NINE

So she was secure for the moment. Mr. James Baker of Murray Street turned out to be not only outrageously fat but also outrageously wealthy. In addition, he had the true bachelor's liking for attractive, young girls. Priscilla knew he was enjoying her as he would any new toy which caught his interest.

He first had some dresses brought in to her. Then he escorted her to a number of tailoring and millinery establishments and picked out fashionable clothing for her. They made a strange sight, the ponderous, fat man and the slight young girl with her close-cropped hair.

Each evening they feasted royally in the dining room of his mansion and the first night she wore her new blue gown he gave her a warm compliment.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"You are as fair a lady as I have ever had grace my table," he told her.

She smiled at him. "I'm truly grateful for all your kindness, but I must soon begin to earn my own way."

"Why?"

"It is not right I should live on your bounty."

"Why not?"

"I need to work for my living," she said.

He stared at her with a baffled expression on his fat face. "You must have Scottish blood. Only Scotsmen think it a great virtue to work. I would as soon be idle as not."

"But you do work," she said. "I have seen you late at night going over papers pertaining to the British East India company."

"I need some work."

"And so do I," she insisted. "I want to pay you back for all the things you've given me."

He touched a napkin to his mouth. "I cannot allow that. Like your parents, I wish to do my share for charity. Let us say that at the moment you are my charity."

She said, "You are too generous!"

"I wrote the squire a long letter telling him you were here with me and in good health," he said.

"Thank you," she said, anxiously. "Has he responded?"

"I do not wish to disturb you," the fat man said, "but they are still looking for you."

"My uncle and Sir Alfred?"

"Yes. You might be sure they would not give up quickly," he said. "They have hired agents in London hoping to seek you out."

"Oh, dear!"

The fat man said, "So you see ordinary employment is not open to you. It would make you too easy for them to trace."

"I'd rather kill myself than go back to that awful old man!"

"I think it need not come to that," James Baker said.

"What can I do?" she worried.

"Stay on here."

"I cannot do that forever."

"Don't be impatient," the fat man said. "I have several ideas in mind."

"Really?"

"Yes. Be sure of it," he said. "Once I take hold of a thing I see it through. I have the reputation for it."

"I'm sure you have," she said admiringly.

"So you will stay with me until you are safe."

She said, "About the other matter."

His eyebrows lifted. "Ah, yes! The gambler!"

"Yes. Have you learned anything at all about him? Do you know whether he is alive or dead?"

James Baker said, "I can help you only a little. He is not in that cottage any longer. They all moved out a few days after you left them."

"Is he still alive?"

"I don't know," the fat man said. "His death was not reported at the time they left the house."

"So he still may be alive?"

"That is entirely possible," James Baker said. "But the group have dropped out of sight."

"To avoid any police questioning," she said.

"Ah, yes, that is probably the story," the fat man said. "This young American must be an interesting fellow."

"He is."

The fat man smiled at her coyly. "Are you in love with him?"

"If I were I wouldn't admit it."

He showed astonishment. "That is strange!"

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

She smiled wearily. "We would only bring each other unhappiness. That is, if he is still alive."

"I think you might count that he is," James Baker said. "But let me advise patience. I have certain contacts who bring me information from time to time. I shall try to locate this Thomas Manley."

"Thank you," she said.

"One thing."

"What?"

"If I do? What then?"

Priscilla considered. "I don't know. I guess I'll simply be glad to know he is alive and not do anything more."

"Not try to see him?"

"I think not," she said. "Every parting we have is filled with pain. I might send him a message."

The fat man stared at her. "I must say I find this all oddly fascinating," he said.

A few days later James Baker joined her in the parlor of the mansion where she was reading the *Times*. He said, "Some unsettling news from India."

"Oh?" She put the paper aside. "There is nothing in the *Times*."

The fat man said. "Wouldn't be. This is strictly confidential."

"Tell me, if you feel you may," she said. "I do not expect you to divulge the secrets of the British East India Company to me."

He stood there like a large Buddha. "I'm sure I can trust you to be discreet."

She smiled. "To whom do I talk these days except the servants and you?"

"That is so," the fat man said. "So I think I may tell you there is unrest in all India."

"A rebellion?"

"It hasn't come to that yet," James Baker said grimly. "But it might."

"I see," she said.

"Prince Hali's uncle died a month ago and he is now sole ruler of his province in Kashmir."

It was the first news she'd heard of the prince in a long while. She said, "Does the Company feel he will make a good ruler?"

"We have wooed him enough," the fat man said bitterly. "But with these Indians you can never be sure."

"I know," she agreed.

"You met him," he remembered. "What is your opinion of him?"

"He is hard to understand."

"Ah!" The fat man exclaimed. "You are echoing my own thoughts. You do not think he can be depended upon."

"He is so complex," she said in a troubled voice. "I'm not sure he even understands himself."

"That is probably true," Baker told her. "I shall remember what you said. By the way, I had a letter from Squire Finch this morning."

She was all interest. "How are they?"

"Well," he said. "But worried about you."

"They hardly need to be when I have you as my protector," she said.

He sat down heavily in an easy chair opposite her. He said, "The fact is that your Uncle Jasper paid them a visit."

She was amazed. "They weren't on speaking terms! What was the purpose of his visit, or need I ask?"

The fat man smiled grimly. "You needn't ask. He wanted to find out if they had any idea of where you might be."

"My secret is safe with them."

"Absolutely. They told him nothing. But just as he was leaving he inquired about me. And that is also odd since we are not friendly."

"I don't like it," she said.

"You mustn't worry," the fat man said. "Thus far we have had no hint of any trouble."

"It may come soon enough."

"We shall deal with it when it does," he said confidently. "I propose to take you to the theater tonight." He smiled. "You know I like to show you off when I can."

"You have been far too kind!"

"Not at all," he said. "Tonight we shall see a stage play adapted from Charles Dickens' *Cricket on the Hearth*. The word is that the play isn't bad but that Mr. Dickens doesn't like it at all. I think we ought to find out for ourselves."

"I'll enjoy going," she said.

"Fine," the fat man said, rising with his usual difficulty. "And after the theater we shall drop by some good eating place for a supper."

She was amused by him. Not only did he consume prodigal amounts of food at the table, he also included extra snacks and meals in his daily routine. It was no wonder that he had become mammoth in size.

She wore a gown of plum-colored silk and at her throat a string of fine pearls which James Baker said had belonged to his mother and which he insisted she wear. She was able to camouflage her hair with a special bonnet which the fat man had ordered made for her. All in all she felt she would be presentable.

James Baker, in his opera cape and black top hat, made a striking figure. When they descended from their carriage at the brightly lighted theater entrance she was aware of many eyes upon them. Her companion paid no

attention to the curious stares but marched along proudly with his arm linked in hers.

The theater was filled as the red velvet curtain rose on the first scene of the play. She tended to agree with Dickens that the adaptation was not as good as the original. Still, it was good entertainment.

Between the acts she became aware of a dark man with piercing black eyes standing at the rear of a box opposite them. He went to great effort to remain standing in the shadows; even when the other occupants of the box took their seats, he kept discreetly in the back.

A worried look on her pretty face, she tugged at the fat man's arm, saying, "Look directly across from us. In that box there's a man standing."

The fat man obeyed her and said "Yes. I see him. Away back against the wall."

"He's been there all evening," she said. "Watching us and taking pains not to be seen himself."

The fat man rubbed his chin and considered. "He could be a private detective sent to spy on us by your uncle or your husband."

"What shall we do?"

"Enjoy the play," the fat man said firmly. "If that chap wishes to weary himself standing in the shadows watching us, let him. Later we'll see if he follows us."

So they remained for the balance of the play. When it was over, she noted that the dark man had vanished and began to think it had all been imagination on her part.

She said to her protector, "It could be I was too ready to see harm in that fellow."

"Time will tell," was Baker's calm reply. And he hailed a cab and asked that they be taken to the Strand Dining Hall.

When they settled back in the cab, the fat man asked her, "Did you enjoy the play?"

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"Very much," she said. "But I think if Mr. Dickens had done the stage adaptation himself it would have been better."

"I understand he is planning to do just that," James Baker said. He turned and glanced out the rear window. "There's a cab following us. It will be interesting to see who gets out."

"If it's the dark chap who watched us at the theater?" she ventured nervously.

"Then we may assume he is a private detective," the fat man said.

They reached the popular restaurant and James Baker paid the driver. Then he stood close by the door with her at his side, just enough away from the bright entrance lighting so they could see without being too easily observed. As the other carriage came to a halt the dark man got out and paid the driver.

"It's him! The same one!" she said in a frightened voice. "I'd recognize him anywhere."

"Softly!" he said, patting her hand with his white-gloved one.

The man was dressed shabbily in black. He stood by the restaurant entrance gazing around, obviously searching for someone. Then James Baker marched straight up to the man and demanded, "Fellow, are you following me?"

The dark man looked startled. "No, sir!"

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for a friend!" the man gasped.

James Baker glared at him and said, "Unless you have some business here I suggest you be on your way!"

"Yes, sir!" The man slunk off and was lost in the street crowd.

The fat man returned to her and said grimly, "He's a

private detective, without question. That is why he backed off so readily when I challenged him."

"I knew it!"

James Baker looked his usual calm self. "No need to be frightened. He'll not bother us any more tonight. And by the time he makes his report to Sir Alfred we will have made other plans for you." He patted her hand. "Now let us go inside and enjoy ourselves. Our suppers are waiting."

She could not help but admire his calm. And she only hoped that it was well-founded. The evening had proven at least one thing: She must leave Murray Street as soon as possible!

James Baker went out somewhere the following morning. And when he returned he seemed in good humor. Over lunch he told her he had been visiting a friend of his who was willing to help her.

"Tell me about it!" she said eagerly.

"Have you ever heard of Harry Layton?"

"No."

"Well, nothing strange about that. Not too many are familiar with his name. But he is popular and well-known to a small important group in this city. He runs a kind of club."

"A club?"

"Yes," James Baker said. "And, as it happens, he needs a live-in hostess at the moment. The quarters offered are simple but good, and the food at his club is excellent. In addition to room and board your pay would be ten pounds a month!"

"Ten pounds and keep!" she said. It was a princely sum.

"The club is a private one, so he has strict control of those entering. This makes negligible the chances of any of your husband's detectives finding you there."

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"You are wonderful," she told the fat man. "You handle everything right. I will take the job."

"Wait," he said. "Before you decide I must tell you one thing."

"What?"

"It is a private gaming club," James Baker said, studying her carefully. "However, it is perfectly above board in its operations. You need have no fear that anyone is being cheated out of their money."

She hesitated. "Would I be required to encourage the customers to gamble?"

"Not at all!" the fat man said emphatically. "You would greet the guests, see that they are provided with plenty of food and drink, and in all respects see that the atmosphere of a private home is kept. No rowdyism, no arguments or drunken members tolerated."

She said, "It sounds fair enough. What about girls? Does this Harry Layton supply girls for his customers?"

"No," James Baker said. "Most of them are old and jaded like me. They may appreciate a trim ankle or a pretty face, but that is as far as it goes. I should be able to see you regularly since I'm a member of the club."

She weighed all her misgivings about gambling against the risk of discovery. Surely at a private club she would be better protected than anywhere else. And so her decision was made.

"I'll take the position," she said.

"Wise girl!"

"I'd rather it had been something else, but I haven't any choice, do I?"

"That is the truth of it," the fat man said. "As I came back in my carriage a while ago I spotted that dark man lurking across the street watching this house."

Her eyes widened with fear. "Perhaps they plan to take me by force!"

"I don't think they'll try that yet," he said. "But I do believe we should wait to make the move until after dark. And we should depart by the rear entrance rather than the front. I'll send a carriage ahead with your things. Then we can slip out the back door and pick up a coach in some other street."

As she packed that afternoon she could not help wondering what Thomas Manley would have to say if he found her working at a gambling house. He'd laugh . . . And this brought to mind the question of whether Thomas was still alive or not. Thus far she'd had no word.

After her things had been dispatched by carriage she asked, "Have you heard anything of Thomas Manley?"

"Nary a word," James Baker said. "But if you keep your ears open at Harry Layton's it is possible you may learn something."

"I suppose the gambling circle is really a small one."

"Not all that large," the fat man said. "You would like to see him again, wouldn't you?"

"I would like to know that he is safe and well."

James Baker sighed. "Well, this job may help you find out about him."

That evening, according to plan, they left by the back door and found a cab on the next street. She sat back nervously as the carriage wheels rolled over the cobblestoned streets.

When they left the cab she found herself standing at the entrance of what seemed a perfectly ordinary private residence. James Baker rang the bell and waited. Then a slide in the door was opened and someone peered out at them.

The slide was abruptly closed and the door opened. A big man with a battered face greeted her companion. "Evening, Mr. Baker. Welcome to the club!"

"Thanks." He gave the man his opera cape and hat.

"Many members here tonight? Mostly they come later."

"That's right, Mr. Baker," the big man said. "They'll be here later!"

The fat man led her to a door marked "Private" and said, "The sooner you meet Harry Layton the better."

"Come in!" a hearty voice invited them.

Inside, a man in white tie and tails sat working at account books. The office was pleasant and softly lighted.

James Baker said, "Miss Brentwood, this is Harry Layton!"

Harry Layton stood up and came around to greet her with a smile on his ruddy, pleasant face and a handshake. He looked in his late forties and he had kept his figure trim.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. "I need someone like you to keep things running smoothly. When Mr. Baker told me of your problems and abilities, I decided you were the one."

"I hope so. I shall try hard."

"That's what counts," Harry Layton said. "And you'll be safe here. We keep a close eye on who we allow in."

"I cannot afford to be found," she said.

"This is safer for you than most places in London would be," Harry Layton said. "Now my general man will show you your living quarters while Mr. Baker and I enjoy a fine brandy together."

The man's name was Fenwick. He was a little man with a shifty eye and nervous sniff. He led her up to the top floor and down a hall to a large, paneled door which he opened with a key. Then he went inside and lighted a lamp. "This is your place," he said, a hint of Cockney in his careful voice.

She investigated the pleasant parlor, dining room and bedroom. "I'm sure this will do nicely."

"Best rooms in the place!" the little man said.

"Then I'm most fortunate."

"Boss wants you to be happy," Fenwick said with a sniff. "You have rooms with a view of the street."

"How nice," she said.

"Your things were all brought up here," Fenwick said. "You can put them away."

"I will," she said. "I'll start this minute."

It took her almost a half-hour to get all her things properly installed in the dresser and closets. Then she went down to seek out James Baker and Harry Layton. The club was much more crowded than when she'd arrived and she saw that most of the members were of middle-age and looked like a sober lot. She could not imagine them giving her any trouble.

Baker and Layton were standing at a long mahogany bar in one of the downstairs rooms.

James Baker had a brandy snifter in one hand and a lighted cigar in the other. He was clearly enjoying himself. He said, "Well, what do you think?"

She returned his smile. "I'll stay, of course. I think it a rare opportunity."

"Good," Harry Layton said pleasantly. "You can move about and meet some of the members. Main thing is that they have their fill of food and drink."

Fine draperies decorated most of the walls; it would be dark in there even in the daylight. She supposed this was to fend off curiosity seekers. There were no windows for outsiders to gape in.

There were many tables, each presided over by a sober-faced man in white tie and tails. There was the click of balls, the sound of odds being called out and the reek of cigar smoke. She had an idea Harry Layton was as generous with his cigars as he was with his free food and drink. By the wall across from the bar a table of foods was set out for those who wished to help themselves. A

wispy little man in a chef's hat and apron stood by ready to assist any newcomers.

He eyed her and said, "You the new hostess?"

"Yes," she said. "How did you guess?"

The little man with sunken cheeks said, "Not hard to do! You're the only lady in here!"

She glanced around. "I am. I didn't realize."

"Place is strictly stag," the little man said. "Better that way. You want some food?"

"Not just now," she said. "My name is Priscilla, since we will be working together. What is yours?"

"Ginger!"

"Ginger?"

He nodded glumly. "You can't see for my cap but what is left of my hair is red. So I'm Ginger!"

She laughed. "Good to know you, Ginger."

He nodded again in his solemn way. "Be careful of Fenwick."

"Fenwick?"

"He works under the boss," Ginger told her. "He showed you upstairs, didn't he?"

"Yes," she said, "he did. Quiet little man."

"Ah!" Ginger said knowingly.

"What does that mean?"

"Ever heard of the Piccadilly Poisoner?"

"No."

"Was taken in for murdering his wife and a lady living with them. Very mixed-up case. The jury couldn't make up its mind and so the Piccadilly Poisoner went free."

"And?"

"And Fenwick was the Piccadilly Poisoner. He doesn't like women much."

"That seems fairly well established," she said with a tiny shudder.

"He didn't like the idea of the boss hiring a woman,

but when Mr. Layton makes up his mind no one can change it," Ginger observed mournfully.

"I hope you're not a woman-hater also?" Priscilla asked the little man.

"No," he said. "I'm a widower with three boys and a girl. I'd like to find someone to take care of them. I'd be willing to marry them, of course!"

"Very generous of you," she said. "I hope you are successful."

She went back and found James Baker watching the roulette game in progress. He turned away from it to admit, "I sometimes try the wheel."

She smiled. "I'll soon get to know all your bad habits."

He chuckled. "You satisfied with it here?"

"Yes," she said. "Though I've just learned that Fenwick, Mr. Layton's right hand man, is the famous Piccadilly Poisoner!"

"It's all right," the fat man assured her. "He's never been in any trouble since."

"I expect he had his share of it," she said wryly. "So this is to be my domain. You think I'm safe from Sir Alfred here?"

"He's not a member and I can't imagine him coming here. His weakness is women, not gambling," James Baker reminded her.

It was a new style of living for her. It meant staying up late at nights until almost the last guest had left, though Fenwick did the actual locking up. She was expected to see that the food was varied and fresh, and she had to learn the names of the guests in order to greet them.

"Great many horse-racing gentlemen," the florid-faced man said with a wise wink. "They have the money. Takes a heap of it to operate a good stable."

"I'm sure it must," she agreed.

"Sport of kings," Harry Layton said expansively. "I've had a horse of my own from time to time. But I don't have the patience for it. And I can't be out at the tracks and here."

She smiled at him. "I'm sure you do well enough here."

He said, "Fair! There's the pay-offs to be made and the like. A gaming club can be raided if the right people aren't paid regularly. Even a private club."

"I didn't know."

"They can always find an excuse if they wish. And since many folk hate gambling, the law always gets approval. I take no chances, I pay well and often. But it cuts down the profits."

She said, "At least you are spared the nuisance of a raid and costly fines."

Harry Layton nodded. "You've a smart head on you, Miss Brentwood."

"Thank you!"

"Not to mention that one big raid would send all my gentlemen running off. They're not the sort to want their names in the police news."

"I'm sure of that."

"Quiet, well-to-do gentlemen," Harry Layton enthused. "I have great respect for them all."

She said, "I knew a gambler."

"Did you?" The ruddy-faced man showed interest.

"Yes. His name was Thomas Manley."

The owner of the gaming house smiled, "Young Tom Manley! You met him? Where, may I ask?"

"On shipboard coming from America," she said. "We became good friends. I know he was wounded lately and I wonder if he has recovered."

Harry Layton nodded, then glanced about to be sure that no one in the big room was close enough to overhear them. He said, "He is back at the game again."

"Is he well known in London?"

Harry nodded. "He plays in the best spots. I wouldn't be surprised if he might come in here one night."

"I'm not sure I want to see him," she said, at once nervous.

He looked at her strangely. "I thought you said you were friends."

"We were."

"But you aren't now?"

"It isn't that so much," she said. "It's strictly a personal thing. It doesn't matter."

"As you say," Harry Layton told her. "By the way, you getting along with Fenwick all right?"

She smiled. "Yes. He doesn't seek out my company, but he's civil enough."

"Let me know if he isn't," Harry Layton said. "A word from me will keep Mr. Fenwick in line."

"I'll remember," she said.

Around ten o'clock James Baker came waddling in. As soon as she saw the fat man she knew he was bothered. His usually placid face showed a taut look of concern.

She went at once to greet him. She said, "Mr. Baker of Murray Street."

"I'm glad you remember me." He smiled for a moment. "Let us go some place more quiet. I have a few things to tell you."

"I thought you looked bothered," she said. "Come into the rear parlor."

As soon as they were alone, he said, "I have had some callers—the dark detective, Sir Jasper and Sir Alfred. Sir Alfred danced a merry dance and said I had stolen his wife!"

Priscilla sighed. "I'm sorry I brought that on you!"

"No matter," he said, waving it aside. "I told them

their private investigator had made a grievous mistake and I threatened to call in the law unless they left at once."

"Did it work?"

"Partially," he said. "Sir Jasper was the worst. He said he was certain I knew your whereabouts and that he would eventually make me tell him."

"What then?"

"I ordered them out again," the fat man said with disgust. "And they left, old Sir Alfred trailing in the rear. Marriage to you hasn't done him much good, I fear. The old lecher looks as if he had one foot in his grave!"

"I can't say I'm sorry!"

"Nor should you," the fat man agreed. "But they think they are on to something and they'll worry at it as a terrier does with a rat."

She said worriedly, "I know you're right."

"That is why I was late coming here," James Baker said. "And why I dare come here only occasionally. I do not want to lead them to you!"

CHAPTER TEN

From that time on she became gradually more uneasy. Each night as the club filled with members she would search their faces to see if there might be anyone new, some guest, perhaps, who would recognize her and give away her hiding place. Her nerves suffered.

She rarely went out in the daytime, but there were some shopping needs which she could not ignore. Whenever she left the club she first made sure there were no suspicious characters lurking about.

She went to her dressmaker in Clyde Street for a fitting. It was important to dress well in her new work and she was expected to change her dresses with some frequency. It took almost an hour to take care of the fitting and then she went to the chemist in the same street for some throat lozenges. While she was in there she happened to glance

out at the street and saw the dark man staring at her through the window.

It gave her a terrifying start. She finished paying the chemist for her purchase and then bewildered the old man by asking if she might leave by the rear entrance to his shop rather than go back out onto the street.

The old man stared at her. "Why do you not wish to use the street door?"

She indicated the window. "There's a man out there who has been bothering me."

The old man adjusted his spectacles and peered out. He said, "Do you want me to speak to him?"

"No," she said anxiously. "That would do no good. It would be best if I could get out some other way."

The chemist sighed. "There is no door out back. We have to bring everything in here."

"Really?" she said, clutching her package and trying to decide what she should do.

"Perhaps I could send my lad for the police?"

"No," she said. "He would deny everything and I couldn't prove him in the wrong."

The old chemist showed concern. "You can wait here for a little if that will help."

She said, "Perhaps if I went into the back shop and stayed there for a little he'd get the idea I'd left by some other door. Then he'd move on."

The old man nodded. "All right. Go out to the back."

The rear of the chemist's shop was a kind of laboratory in miniature. A thin youth worked there mixing white powders. He gave her an interested glance.

She said, "I'm waiting in here for a little. I want to avoid someone out on the street."

The youth smiled conspiratorially. "I'm mixing up packets of health salts."

"Do you sell many?"

"They go as fast as we put them up," the youth said as he went on working.

"What is in them?" she asked, sitting on a packing box near the youth.

"Epsom salts mostly," he said with a grin. "But the mister wouldn't want me to tell you that."

"Your secret is safe with me," she assured him and gave a worried glance in the direction of the outer shop.

The youth said, "Who are you hiding from?"

"A hateful man!"

"You should put the bobbies on him," the youth said.

"I've thought about it," she said with a sigh.

"We had a robbery here last month and the bobbies came and went all over everything but they didn't catch the thief."

"That was annoying," she said.

The old chemist thrust his head in the doorway of the rear shop, "It's all right now. The dark chap has moved on."

She stood up, reluctant to leave this hiding place. She asked, "How far?"

"He's not in sight. My guess is he's made it to the back street, thinking you went out there."

Priscilla nodded. "Then I'd best leave before he finds out his mistake and returns." She thanked him and hurried out into the street. There was no sign of the dark man and she hastily made her way back to the club.

When she went inside she was met by Fenwick. The dour little man said, "Someone came by here today asking if we employed a lady."

Fear caught in her throat again. "What did you tell them?"

"I said no lady would work in a place like this," the

little man said. "Mr. Layton told me not to give out any kind of information."

"Mr. Layton advised you correctly," she said. "This man. Was he dark haired, thin, and hollow-cheeked?"

Fenwick nodded. "That describes him, miss."

"I know who it is," she said. "And you mustn't ever tell him I work here!"

"Don't worry about it, miss," Fenwick said. "I know a bit about life."

"I'm sure you do."

He gave her a strange look. "Did they tell you I was the Piccadilly Poisoner?"

Embarrassed, she said, "I do think somebody mentioned it."

"Ginger, probably," he said with annoyance.

"I'm not sure."

"It don't matter," Fenwick told her. "The charge was never proven. Just think of that. They never proved anything."

"It must have been an ordeal," she said.

"For a bit I thought they might stretch my neck," Fenwick told her. "But it turned out all right."

"That's the main thing," she said.

"And I don't hate women!" With that he walked away to the back of the house.

She gave a sigh of relief and went on upstairs. There was no question that Fenwick was a sour little man, but she felt that she had somehow won him over. And he could be as good a friend as he might be an enemy.

That evening the club was well-filled. She moved from one member to another, checking on their food and drink, wishing them luck.

One bearded, portly man said, "There is a dice game going on in the main parlor that is staggering. One of the players has won an enormous amount."

She said, "Does Mr. Layton know?"

"Yes," the elderly man said. "He's in there watching at this very minute. I'm going back. You should come along. You may not see anything like it again."

Despite her dislike of gambling her interest was aroused. She wanted to see this player who could risk huge amounts on a throw of the dice. There was a crowd gathered around one of the tables in the main parlor. She moved over to the fringe of the crowd just as a roar of laughter and a round of applause signaled that the gambler had won another turn of the dice.

The player gathered up his winnings and left the table. She almost fainted. It was Thomas Manley!

"Priscilla! I do not believe it!"

She had recovered enough to smile wryly. "Yes. I'm working here in this gambling house."

He stared at her. "You are the beauty everyone is raving about!"

"I don't know about that," she said. "But I've been here for a while. You did well tonight!"

His eyes twinkled. "Thank you for congratulating me. I always thought you disapproved of gambling."

"I do," she said. "But you are here to gamble so you might as well win rather than lose."

He said, "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Just then Harry Layton came by and gave them both a friendly smile. He told her, "I said if you waited long enough he'd turn up."

"That's true," she said, blushing.

"Was she asking for me?" Thomas asked.

"She was worried about that wound you received," Layton said.

Thomas smiled. "I was on my feet in a week. The wicked are hard to kill."

Layton said, "If you two want to talk go into my office."

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

I'm going to be busy out here for a while. Gotta get back some of that money we lost to you, Manley."

Thomas laughed. "I'll be back to play again."

"I know that," Layton said and waved them on.

She let Thomas lead her into the office feeling that all eyes were upon them. Inside, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Thank you for worrying about me," he said.

"You seem very fit again."

"I am," he told her. "We moved shortly after I sent you on to London."

"I know. I couldn't reach you."

"We couldn't stay there any longer," he said. "Even though I have no police record, Wilfred does. I didn't want to see him thrown into prison."

She said, "Where are you now?"

"Here in London," he said. "It seemed the best plan after all."

"And you're still gambling!"

"Don't lecture me," he said. "Just tell me how you reached a place like this?"

"Simple," she said with a smile. And she told him her story.

He frowned. "They're still after you. I thought they would have given up long ago."

"So did I," she said. "But I wasn't to have such luck."

"If they're looking for you here you're no longer safe in this place," he worried.

"I am as long as I remain inside," she said.

"I don't like any of it!"

She said, "What about Meg?"

He looked a little guilty. "She's still with us."

"With you," she said softly. "She's your girl, not poor Wilfred's."

"All right," he said. "She's still with me."

"Why don't you marry her?"

"I'm not as easily given to marriage as you seem to have been, Lady Coombs!"

"Don't try to put me off by saying cruel things," she told him. "You owe Meg a good deal. She nursed you back to health."

"True."

"Then make her your wife."

"I don't think she's interested," he said. "She's a girl who grew up in the streets."

"And the streets didn't harm her," Priscilla told him. "I know her story. I heard it from her own lips."

"So you two became friends?"

"Why not?" she said. "We had something in common. We both care for you."

"Neatly said," the young gambler told her with a smile. He sat down in Harry Layton's swivel chair and gazed up at her. "Fear seems to agree with you. You look prettier than ever."

"I have no choice," she said.

"Your only hope is to get out of England."

"You think so?"

"Yes," he said. "In New York you could have your friend, Lawyer Swift, work on the marriage. He should be able to have it annulled since it was never consummated."

"That's my main hope," she agreed.

"So you should plan to return to New York as soon as possible," the young man said. "If you need money I have plenty to give you."

"Thank you, no," she said. "I've saved enough working here to pay my expenses back to America."

"Then don't delay it too long," he warned her.

"I must give Mr. Layton time to find someone to take my place here," she worried.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"Go on thinking about other people and the first thing you know you'll find yourself caught," he warned her.

"You're very free with your advice but you're not willing to take any of mine."

"Such as?"

"Marry Meg," she repeated. "There is nothing which would make her happier."

He stood up, his eyes meeting hers soberly. "And what about us?"

"Too late for us," she said bitterly. "It was from the start."

"Only because you say so!"

"No, I mean it," she said, feeling pain with every word. Wishing fervently that he had not come before her again in this way.

He said, "Let me take you in my arms and have you say that again!"

She drew back. "No!"

"You don't trust yourself," he said in a bitter voice. "You're in love with me and you won't admit it."

The door to the office opened and Harry Layton came in. "Sorry," he said with a smile. "I thought you two had gone."

"We stayed here too long," she said. "I must go out and see about the buffet."

Harry Layton asked Thomas, "Are you playing any more tonight?"

He shook his head. "No. I think my luck might change. Things suddenly appear to be going against me."

Layton shrugged. "Another night, then?"

"Definitely," Thomas said. And he followed her out into the hall. "When can I see you again?"

"I don't think we should plan meetings," she told him.

"You're wrong in this, Priscilla," he said, calling after her.

She did not turn but continued on to the bar. Tears blurred her eyes but she would not admit to them. Holding herself very prim and straight she went to the buffet table and checked the offerings with Ginger.

The little man stared at her. "You look as if you had some bad news."

"Do I?" she said. "Don't worry about it. I'll be all right."

She went on to join the men gathered around the gaming tables in the next room, speaking pleasantly to them. She kept herself busy for the balance of the evening. But when she went to bed that night she sobbed herself to sleep.

She did not trust herself to meet Thomas again. And she felt it was time she left the club and returned to New York. Then, one morning, Fenwick came to her with an envelope.

He said, "A boy just brought this."

"Did he wait?"

"No."

She opened the envelope and read, "Come at once. I am very ill." It was signed James Baker!

She told Fenwick to get her a coach while she was up putting on her bonnet and wrap. When she hurried downstairs again the little man had a coach waiting for her. She gave the driver the address in Murray Street and sat back, filled with apprehension for her friend. His extreme weight had always worried her; she felt it could lead to apoplexy. She found her tension growing as the ride went on. At last she was in Murray Street and in front of the familiar house. She paid the driver and ran up the stairs and rang the bell.

After a moment the butler opened the door and there was such a frightened look on his face that she was

afraid James Baker might have died while she was on the way there.

She said, "How is he?"

"Just fair, miss," the butler said miserably and stepped aside to let her in.

It was like a frightened animal stepping into a trap. In the next seconds someone came up behind her and seized her by the arms. And from a side door appeared Sir Jasper with a pistol in his hand and old Sir Alfred limping after him.

Sir Jasper smiled coldly. "We caught you nicely!"

"What have you done to James Baker?" she demanded, struggling futilely to free herself.

Sir Jasper kept the butler covered with the pistol. He said, "Baker will not be harmed as long as you obey us. His butler can free his bonds as soon as we've gone!"

Sir Alfred Coombs came up to her, his withered face showing anger. "You have sent me on a pretty chase, wench! But I'll make you pay for it!"

"We have no time for domestic arguments," Sir Jasper said with a cold smile. "Will you leave with us quietly or do you want harm to come to James Baker?"

She said, "You're an expert at threats and blackmail, aren't you, Uncle Jasper?"

"Hear that!" Sir Alfred lamented. "Such a way for a girl to talk to her flesh and blood!"

"Tell me," Sir Jasper went on coldly. "Can I depend on you to behave or are you going to cause trouble?"

"If I must I'll come along quietly," she said.

"Very well," Sir Jasper said. He told the henchman holding her, "Bind her hands together before her. We'll cover the bond with a scarf so it won't be noticeable."

"Yes, sir," the man said and maneuvered her about roughly so that she saw it was the detective. He tied her

hands together with some strong cord he took from his pocket.

Sir Jasper said, "Now you're to walk with me. I'll have the pistol pointed at you under my coat all the time. If you cry out or try to escape I'll kill you."

"Thank you for making it so plain," she said grimly.

They left the house and the dark man had brought around a coach. Sir Jasper kept his word and the pistol was always pointed at her. When they were all in the carriage it rode off.

Sir Alfred leaned forward, his wooden teeth showing. "How much more sensible if you hadn't deserted me on our wedding night!"

"I would have killed myself if I hadn't," she told him.

The old lecher shook his head. "You've not changed at all!"

"She will come around," Sir Jasper told him. "The best mares are the hardest to break!"

Sir Alfred looked more hopeful. "That is true," he said.

They arrived at a handsome building and Sir Jasper led her out. They mounted the steps of the building and he unlocked the door with a heavy key. "This house has been placed at our disposal for a few days by a business associate of mine. You and Sir Alfred will be very happy here!"

She protested. "You can't leave me at the mercy of that old monster!"

"You are his wife!" Sir Jasper said harshly and literally shoved her through the doorway and inside.

Following her, he said, "We are the only ones in the house. There are no servants so you have no hope of rescue."

Sir Alfred came limping into ask, "What are you going to do now?"

Sir Jasper gave him another of his cold smiles. "I'm

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taking her up to the bridal chamber. After that it is purely up to you!"

The old man looked anxious. "I'm not sure I'm equal to her!"

"We'll keep her hands tied," Sir Jasper said, his words freezing her blood. "She won't be able to give you all that much opposition!"

She said, "Before I bed with him I'll slit my wrists!"

Her uncle laughed mockingly. "To do that, my dear, you need to have free hands. And you will notice that you haven't!"

He shoved her roughly up the stairs of the cold, damp house. On the third floor he opened the door of an elaborate bedroom.

"Fit for the new Lady Coombs," her uncle taunted her. Then he turned and told the dark detective, "Give Sir Alfred the knife. He can cut her bonds when she shows she is willing to do his bidding."

The dark man placed an ugly-looking knife in the hands of the worried Sir Alfred. The old man said, "She is a nasty piece! Maybe I should let her be here alone for a little."

Sir Jasper pushed him into the room along with her. He said, "It is time you two met on the marriage bed. There should be no more dawdling."

Sir Jasper gave her a look of triumph. Then both he and the dark man went out, closing the door after them. She went over to stand staring out a window, her back to the old lecher to whom she was wife. They had trapped her neatly, she thought bitterly.

From behind her old Sir Alfred quavered, "Would you like something to drink, dear wife?"

"No," she said angrily, keeping her back to him.

"Then I shall take one," he said. "It warms the blood and makes a man ready for love!"

She had memories of him drinking himself into a stupor that other night and it came to her that she might trick him into doing the same thing again. Then she would somehow make her escape.

She turned to him with a forced smile and said, "So you consider yourself a drinker?"

The old man stood staring at her lecherously. "I can manage as much as the next man, whether it be with a bottle or a lass!"

"I much doubt it," she said.

He downed a large glass of liquor, coughed and choked a little. Then wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he told her, "I've only just started. Let me show you some true drinking!" And he filled another glass and within a short time had downed it.

She taunted him, "I have seen men drink twice that much and be able to still dance a lively jig."

Sir Alfred did a silly little jig with the refilled glass in his hand and lost part of the liquor. He said, "I'm as game as any!"

"You're probably not any better in bed than you are with the bottle," she said.

Tipsily, he poured out another drink. "I can drink any man under the table. And take any woman there as well!" He hooted at his own joke.

She said, "Go on! You've not proven anything yet. Let me see you really drink!"

He gave her a knowing glance. "So that's your game?" "What?"

"I know," he said. "You fancy to make me drink until I pass out and then you'll be able to run off again!"

"No!" she said, angered that he should so easily see through her ploy which had been shallow enough.

He put the glass aside and came over to her. "You're not tricking me that way."

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She was thinking desperately. She said, "You're a fraud as a drunkard and as a lover!"

"Don't say that!" he protested and he came up to her and pulled down the top of her dress in a quick motion so that her breasts were suddenly exposed. Then he greedily placed his lips on them, kissing them lasciviously as he held onto her.

"No!" she cried and lifted her bound hands to push him away. Then she tried to rearrange her dress without much success.

The old man was delighted with his surprise move. He leered at her. "You're ruining a good thing between us," he said. "We could have a lively time together!"

"You think so?" she asked sharply.

"I do," he said removing his frock coat and then his cravat and vest. He came towards her in his shirt and pants. "A little loving will improve your temperament!"

"Wait!" she said. "You will truly try to be a good husband to me?"

"I give you my word," Sir Alfred said. "Show me half as much passion as you showed that Indian and I'll return it!"

"All right," she said tautly. "Bring over the knife and untie my wrists."

Sir Alfred gave her a toothy smile. "We can make love as well with them tied and there'll be that much less risk."

"And that much less loving on my part," she announced. "I will be free before we bed!"

He stared at her for a suspicious moment, then went over and got the knife. "You promise to behave?"

"I do," she told him.

He was now drunk enough to want to believe her. He flicked the knife down between the cords and her hands were free. At once she began to struggle to escape him. He fought to hold her with the knife still in his right hand.

She reached up and twisted the knife from his grasp. He howled with rage!

"Let me go!" she warned him. "I'll kill you!"

"No!" he shouted, still holding on to her, pawing at her, tearing at her dress. She couldn't fend him off one-handed but she dared not drop the knife. Terrified of his somehow stunning and raping her, she fought on furiously and then with an almost automatic movement plunged the knife into his chest!

"Vixen!" the old man snarled and staggered.

She dropped the knife. "I warned you!"

He reached out for her. "You—you—" And then he fell down on his face.

Priscilla backed away from him in horror. She had killed him!

Pulling her clothes together, she made her way out of the room and into the cold hall. Far below she could hear Sir Jasper and the dark man talking. She suspected by their voices they were also taking the opportunity to get drunk.

She went down to the second floor and hesitated at the lower stairway. The voices of the two men were louder for a moment and then they faded as if they might be walking towards the rear of the house. It was her chance! She darted down the stairway like a wraith, made it to the door, and in a moment was outside.

She ran into the street, bent on putting as much distance between her and the old mansion as possible.

After a few minutes she reached a wider street and there were cabs moving up and down it. She lifted her hand and frantically hailed the first empty one on her side of the street.

She told the driver, "Murray Street!"

She stepped inside and tried to collect herself. She began to sob, remembering the startled look on the wrin-

kled old face and Sir Alfred's cry. She was a murderess. She closed her eyes and sat there very still.

The driver opened the door, "Murray Street, miss."

She said, "Yes. I must go in that house over there to get your fare!" And without waiting for his protest she ran to the house of James Baker and tried the door. It opened when she turned the knob. She rushed inside to find James Baker and his butler in a frantic exchange. The fat old man was in his shirt and pants, without a cravat or vest. He looked at her and his big face lit up. "Bless my soul, it's you!" he said.

Gasping, she told, "Need cab fare! He's waiting!"

James Baker ordered his butler to go pay the fare. Then he poured her some brandy and sat her down. "How did you manage to elude those villains?" he asked.

"I stabbed Sir Alfred!" she said in despair. "He's dead!"

The fat man's face took on a look of concern. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! Then I escaped from the house they'd taken me to! I don't know exactly where it was!"

James Baker said, "I was about to notify the police . . . I dare not do that now!"

"It doesn't matter," she said miserably. "I shall have to go to prison!"

"Tell me the circumstances," he ordered her.

She did, concluding, "I had to get the knife and use it. And that is what I did!"

The fat man sighed. "You were driven to the point of madness!"

"People might believe that if I were merely some girl made captive by Sir Alfred. But I am his wife!"

"Yes, that does change the face of things!"

She gave him a pleading look. "As soon as my uncle finds out Sir Alfred was stabbed he'll be here looking for me!"

"Let him!" James Baker said. "He'll not find you here or anywhere else if I can help it."

"What shall I do?" she worried.

He said, "First, I'll take you to the club to pack your things. Not too much luggage. In the meanwhile I shall decide on the best way for you to get out of London and where you should go."

She said, "I don't want to mix you in this!"

"I insist," he said. "Just let me finish dressing."

It seemed to her that her life had reached its lowest moment. She sat mutely by him in the carriage and he made no attempt at conversation either. He sat there with a stern face and his mind apparently far away in thought.

At the club he took the owner, Harry Layton aside and quietly told him what had happened. He said, "Because of this unhappy business I must smuggle Priscilla out of the city."

The club owner turned to her. "I shall be sorry to lose you," he said. "Perhaps you should remain here and battle it out. You might be as lucky with a jury as Fenwick was."

She said, "I'm afraid I'm too obviously guilty."

"She was his wife," James Baker said. "I fear it would be difficult to build a defense on her behalf."

Harry Layton asked, "Where will she go?"

"I'm not sure," the fat man said. "I have one or two possibilities I shall pursue while she is here packing."

The club owner said, "Let me help in any way possible."

"Thank you," she told him.

"Just see that no one gets to her until I return," James Baker said. "Sir Jasper may come here looking for her."

Harry Layton looked grim. "I can handle him."

The fat man said, "I must be on my way now. But I

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shall return within an hour or two. And I hope I may have your future brilliantly arranged by then."

Watching him leave, she felt her terror returning to her. But Harry Layton was very understanding and even walked up to her room with her.

He said, "When your bags are ready let me know and I'll have Ginger bring them down."

It took her a few minutes to get enough control of her nerves to do any proper packing. Finally she began and soon had two large traveling bags filled. She was amazed to find how many new dresses she'd acquired.

When she finished she went downstairs to the office and told the club manager. He sent Ginger to bring the bags down and gave her some extra money.

"You may need this," he said, giving her some bank notes.

"I don't feel like taking money from you," she objected. "I'm paid up to date. I shouldn't get anything extra!"

"You've been a credit to the club," he said, closing her hand on the money. "I'll not be able to replace you."

She said, "I was planning to return to America. But I enjoyed my work here so much that I remained longer than I intended."

He nodded. "What shall I tell Thomas Manley if he asks for you?"

A sadness swept through her. She said, "Tell him I wish him well!"

"He will want to know where you've gone?"

"Don't give him any other information," she said. "It was over for us before all this happened. Now that I am a murderess I can only hope to bury myself somewhere and begin another life."

"Very well," the club owner said quietly.

Then James Baker returned in a breathless state. He

sat down for a moment and protested, "I have never rushed about so in my life!"

Harry Layton said, "Have a drink?"

"No time!" James Baker said. "Have your man take her luggage out. The coach is waiting by the door. Then we must be on our way."

As the club owner left, the fat man told her, "I have booked passage for you on a ship sailing within a few hours. You are booked under your maiden name of Priscilla Brentwood."

"I knew you would help me," she said gratefully. "Is the ship bound for New York?"

"No," he said, rising. "That would be risky. Communication is too rapid between London and New York. You might find the police on the docks waiting for you when you arrived there. I have chosen a better place for you to drop out of sight. I have managed to get you one of the few civilian reservations available on a troop ship bound for Calcutta, India!"

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"India!" she gasped.

"It was the easiest for me to arrange," he told her. "I'm an officer of the British East India Company."

"So is my Uncle Jasper!"

"I know," the fat man said patiently. "But he will not suspect your being on this ship. It is a troop sailing. There will be only about a dozen civilians on board, aside from the members of the Nineteenth Infantry."

"You're sure it will be safe?"

"Yes."

"And after I get to Calcutta?" she asked.

"I have a letter for you to give over to a Captain Marsen, who is with our government there. He can be trusted and he will help you, I'm sure."

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She gave a small shudder. "I'm frightened! It's so far away and I don't know the country."

"I promise you that you will manage," he said. "I will keep in touch with you and let you know when you may safely return."

"Never if Uncle Jasper has anything to do with it. He'll never forgive me for costing him the fortune Sir Alfred would have brought to the family."

"Not even Sir Jasper is immortal and he is not a young man," James Baker pointed out. "Now we must get along or you'll miss the boat."

She said good-by to Harry Layton and Ginger and then she and James Baker got in the coach and were driven off. She sat there speculating on what surprises life held for one. In a short few hours she had been kidnapped, committed a murder, and was now about to take passage to India. This brought thoughts about Prince Hali and whether she would meet him.

She asked James Baker, "Is Prince Hali's kingdom near Calcutta?"

"No, my child, it is far distant from it. His land is in the Kashmir hills."

"So it is unlikely I shall see him."

"Most unlikely."

She was both relieved and disappointed. And she wondered how they would both act if they met once more, this time in his native land. The carriage rolled on and she saw that a heavy fog had crept over the city.

She said, "It is a truly foggy night."

"Dreary," he agreed. "Suits the occasion. It breaks my heart to have you leave London."

"I can never thank you, dear friend," she said. "It's not likely I'll ever dare to return."

"Not in your present identity," he said. "But suppose

you marry. Later you could surely return as the wife of some man unaware of your past."

"That seems highly unlikely," she said.

"Highly unlikely things have been happening," he reminded her.

She said, "I hope they won't suspect you helped in my getting away."

"I'm willing to risk that," the fat man said.

They reached the docks and the fog was thicker here than it had been in the streets. Vaguely she could make out the outline of the big vessel. As they left the coach a smart body of troops were being marched aboard to the accompaniment of pipes and drums.

She turned to her friend, James Baker. "So there will be mostly soldiers on board."

"Officers and men," he said. "You shall no doubt have a good opportunity to meet some of the officers."

"I'm frightened!" she said, looking up into his fat, friendly face.

"You must not be," he said. "Wipe the past from your mind! Forget about this evening! It will pass. Build yourself a new life in the future."

"It will not be easy," she said. "Not any of it! But it is for the best! Thank you, James Baker. I hope you are not blamed in any way for what I did."

"You mustn't worry about that," he told her. "Now I'll see you aboard."

He took her up a gangway which was free at the moment and sought out the purser. He turned out to be an elderly man named Green. He bowed to her and smiled his welcome.

"Mr. Baker has explained about your poor health and your desire to escape another winter in London," the purser said.

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She said. "Yes. My health has been frail, though I am feeling better now."

"Nothing like a long sea voyage and the warm sun of India to heal weak lungs," the purser said warmly. "You'll be sharing a cabin with a Mrs. Copley, Mrs. Estelle Copley. She is the wife of a lawyer attached to the Governor-General's staff in Calcutta. A fine woman. You will like her."

James Baker said, "Miss Brentwood's things are on board. You can take them down whenever you like. And show her to her cabin."

Mr. Green nodded. "I'll be happy to do that at once. We sail within the half-hour."

She turned to the fat man and impulsively kissed him on both cheeks and pressed against him, sobbing. He muttered some consoling words, then turned her over to the purser.

Drying her tears, she followed Mr. Green down below, and several times military men in their colorful red jackets and blue pants stepped aside to give them clear passage.

Mr. Green knocked on a cabin door amidships and when it was opened by an elderly, withered woman, he said, "This is Miss Brentwood who will be your cabin companion!"

The faded woman showed a small smile. "How nice! I wondered who it would be. I hoped it wouldn't be some old hand. I hate to hear them complain."

Purser Green smiled. "You'll not hear Miss Brentwood complaining. She is leaving England because of frail lungs."

"Poor thing!" the older woman said with warmth. "Do come in and rest yourself."

The purser saluted Priscilla, saying, "I shall see your luggage is properly taken care of, miss." She thanked him and he left.

The cabin was small and had two narrow bunks. Mrs. Copley had already taken the lower one so she would automatically be relegated to the one above. She assured the older woman that she did not mind.

Mrs. Copley said, "I'm quite willing to change if you are not feeling well."

She said, "I was ill. I'm better now. I'm making the trip because I don't think my lungs would survive another cold winter."

Little Mrs. Copley had iron-gray hair and a mournful face. She said, "I had a cousin who suffered the same weakness. Married a good man up in Scotland and she didn't last two years. There's not a doubt but that her death was brought on by those northern winters."

"Do you like India?" Priscilla asked.

"I'm perfectly happy," the older woman said. "My husband and I have a villa in Calcutta not far from the government offices where he works. I have a garden and a half-dozen brown-skinned servants. I live a pampered life!"

"And you don't become lonesome for England?"

"At times," the woman said. "But then the mail arrives with letters, newspapers and magazines and I feel I'm not so far from home."

She sighed. "I hope I'll feel the same way."

"If you meet the right people, you will," Mrs. Copley said. "My husband has a fine voice and is accomplished as an elocutionist. We have a Shakespeare Group and he reads to us from the various plays. He meet once each fortnight and do at least an act of one of the plays."

"That sounds very pleasant," she said.

Mrs. Copley smiled happily. "Then there is church every Wednesday and Sunday. It is the thing to do in a heathen land, to attend one's Christian church. And we

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have a sewing society and there are bazaars, teas and often dances at the military barracks."

"It sounds like a full life."

"Many of the old hands complain," Mrs. Copley said. "But my husband and I are satisfied. Our only daughter is married and living in London, so there is no worry about her. I have just come from visiting her."

Priscilla ventured, "I would suspect it is more difficult for single women than for those who are married."

Mrs. Copley said, "As soon as a girl is of marriageable age she either marries out there or in England. I dare say you won't be single long, Miss Brentwood. You'll be able to have your pick of husbands. This ship alone is full of officers, many of them single."

"I'm in no hurry to marry," she said, though it was not all that true. Married, she could vanish much more easily. She recalled James Baker's advice to try and marry and then make her way back to England.

The older woman smiled knowingly. "When you meet the right man you'll lose all your reluctance."

"Perhaps that is it," she said. "I have not yet met the proper man."

Mrs. Copley sighed in sentimental fashion. "As soon as I met Mr. Copley I knew he was my fate. When he proposed to me, I accepted. And I have never regretted it!"

Priscilla's luggage was brought down and they busied themselves arranging their things in the cabin, each taking a share of the storage space. Then Mrs. Copley took her up to the salon which had been set aside for the civilian passengers, and a few of the military officers. It was not large, with only four medium-sized tables in it. She and Mrs. Copley sat at a table with an elderly missionary couple. Priscilla couldn't help wondering what the saintly pair would think if they knew they were sharing their table with a murderess.

The missionary, a little man with birdlike head and shoulders, hunched forward in his chair to ask her, "Did you not find it difficult living alone in London, Miss Brentwood? So much crime these days!"

She forced a smile as she paused over her bouillon. "I did not live alone," she said. "I shared the home of my guardian."

Mrs. Bishop, the missionary's wife, was stout and pink-faced, with a delicate air which never seemed to desert her. She said, "You are an American, aren't you? The accent seems to indicate that."

"I am," she said. "I came to England only a little while ago."

"Her lungs," Mrs. Copley spoke up. "She has been ill with weak lungs. That is why she is going to India."

The Reverend Bishop considered this and said, "I would think the dry, hot climate of India would be excellent for you."

His wife smiled sweetly. "My husband and I are going to a spot rather cooler, though it can even be hot there at times. We are going to the hills! The Himalayas, you know! Kashmir country."

"Really," she said. "I once met someone from there." She thought of Prince Hali again.

The Reverend Bishop said, "May I inquire the name of this person? It is possible we might meet them."

Priscilla said, "His name was Hali. Prince Hali."

"A prince!" The good Mrs. Bishop was impressed.

"Actually I believe he is ruler of his state now," she said. "I met him at a social given by the British East India Company." It was close enough to the truth. She was starting to debate with herself whether she had been wise in admitting she knew the prince.

Little Reverend Bishop looked delighted. "I shall be sure to remember that name. I'll write it down. Perhaps

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this Prince Hali may be able to help us with our work."

"Yes," his wife said in her sweet manner. "Often these heathen chieftains espouse Christianity in a most devout and touching way!"

"I've seen little of that!" Mrs. Estelle Copley told the missionary couple.

Priscilla hastily explained, "Prince Hali is a most civilized type. He received his finishing education at Cambridge."

"Cambridge!" The Reverend Bishop said with awe.

"Yes," she said. "And he is something of a philosopher about the various religions. Actually he is a devout Moslem."

"But I understood the hill country people were generally Buddhist," the missionary said.

"I do not know," she said. "I can only pass on to you what he told me."

The missionary couple finished their meal first and left the table. Mrs. Copley showed relief. "I m glad to be rid of those two! They are so naive as to be pitiful!"

She said, "I think they may have some very wrong ideas about this country they're going to."

"You are right," Mrs. Copley said. "My husband is in government as you know. And he thinks we should not interfere too much with the Indian people."

"Oh?"

"Yes," the woman said. "He thinks a rule without too firm regulations will work best in India. And one of the causes of unrest is the fear among the natives that we may try to rob them of their religion."

Priscilla said, "And yet they still send out such missionary couples as Reverend Bishop and his wife, who are ill-prepared to deal with life even in their own country."

"Precisely," the older woman said, over her tea. "I

think the Church of England should be informed that they are creating more danger for everyone here by their persistent sending out of missionaries."

"Perhaps they'll quickly become discouraged and return home," she said.

"We can hope so," Mrs. Copley told her. Then she leaned close to her and in a low voice said, "There's a nice-looking young officer at the next table who seems unable to take his eyes from you."

Priscilla, not yet recovered from the unhappy incidents of the preceding hours, began to tremble. What if this young man was a member or guest of the club? If so, the fact she had been hostess there would soon spread all over the ship.

She whispered to the other woman, "Are you sure he's staring at me?"

"Certain," Mrs. Copley said. "When you can do so and make it look natural, glance over there."

She nodded. And after a little she reached for the salt at the other side of the table and at the same time glanced in the direction of the young officer.

As he was staring at her at that exact moment, their eyes met. And he was good-looking, blond with a small mustache. He smiled at her quite openly. She ignored the smile and blushing, gave her attention to her plate again. His face was not familiar to her. If he had been to the club it could only have been for a single visit.

If he challenged her on the matter she decided to tell him he'd made a mistake.

Mrs. Copley whispered, "Do you know him?"

"No. He's a stranger!"

"Well, he won't be for long," the older woman said. "He's coming over here."

The young man came and stood by her. He was a handsome figure in his crimson, gold and blue uniform. He

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said to her, "You must forgive me. But I believe you are someone I know."

She looked up at him coolly. "I think not."

"Please, wait a minute," he said. "Think about it. My name is Edward Peel, Captain Peel. Does that name not suggest a Christmas party at a country house in Kent?"

"I have never been in Kent," she said evenly, delighted that her worst fears had been unfounded. That he only thought he knew her from some party, not from the club.

"You're not Kathleen Stokes?" he said, disappointed.

"I am not," she said.

The young man crimsoned. "Forgive me! I could have sworn you were. Terribly sorry! And he bowed stiffly and rejoined his fellow officers at the other table.

When they left the salon to walk along the foggy deck to the companionway to their cabin, the older woman said, "I must say he had good manners. He seemed quite upset at his mistake."

"I know," she said. "I felt a little sorry for him."

"Edward Peel," Mrs. Copley said. "I must make some inquiries about him."

She said, "Pray don't on my part!"

"No," the older woman said. "I'm simply curious. I'd like to find out something about his background."

No sooner did the big vessel leave the fog of England behind them than they hit a period of stormy weather. Once again Priscilla was to discover that she was not a sea-going type. Mrs. Copley survived the storm and the heaving of the ship cheerfully. She left Priscilla in the cabin each day and went up to the salon to dine.

When she returned she admitted that only a few made an appearance there. The two old missionaries were also confined to their cabin. And it was among the military on board that the storm took its worst toll.

"Those military chaps have no stomach for rough

weather like this," Mrs. Copley said as the ship rolled nastily.

In her bunk, Priscilla moaned, "Neither have I."

"You'll be fine in a day or two," the older woman assured her. "The storm will end and you'll get your sea legs."

"I wonder!"

The little woman continued on with her news. "Oh, by the way, I found out something more about your Captain Peel."

"He's not my Captain Peel," she protested.

"You know whom I mean," Mrs. Copley went on. "The one who stared at you so much."

"I remember," she said in a small voice.

"He's not able to come to the table either if that is any consolation to you."

"It's no consolation," she groaned. "I only pray this ship will stop swaying and dipping or sink altogether!"

Mrs. Copley said, "Don't say such things. It could bring bad luck!"

"I'm sorry," she said.

The little woman said, "Captain Edward Peel is a second son. His brother, the first son, is a lord."

"I'm American," Priscilla said. "Such things mean little to me."

"Second sons are rather unhappy folk," Mrs. Copley went on. "They rarely have much money and they usually go into the church or the military. They live in the shadow of their titled brothers."

"It really doesn't interest me," Priscilla said, still very ill.

"I simply thought I'd tell you," Mrs. Copley said.

Priscilla kept to her bunk until the storm ended about forty-eight hours later. All at once the ocean was smooth and the sun warm. They were nearing Gibraltar and every-

one assured her that the voyage from there on in would be like a holiday—unless there was another bad storm or an attack by Chinese pirates. One had to take chances if one wished to travel.

The ordinary soldiers were confined to one area of the ship but the officers mingled freely with the few civilian passengers. On the morning of the second fine day Priscilla strolled around the deck alone, and later stood by the ship's railing staring out at the endless, vast sea.

"Forgive me," a voice said at her elbow.

She turned to find herself facing the young man known as Captain Edward Peel. He was smiling but he looked pale and ill.

She said, "What is it?"

"I want to apologize for bothering you at the table," he said.

"No need," she told him. "It was an honest mistake."

He smiled shyly. "It wasn't, you know."

She stared at him. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"I made that all up to get a chance to speak to you," he said. "I've never been to a weekend party in Kent either."

She studied his good-looking, friendly face and was mildly amused. "No doubt you've used that trick before."

"Yes."

"Has it worked?"

"Not right away," he said. "But sometimes later."

"You mean you return to the fray, like now," she said, annoyed.

"No, really," he said. "You are rather special. You're the first girl I've ever admitted to that I was playing a game. It was a fraud."

"So are you, I fear!" she said, holding onto her bonnet against the sudden wind which had come up.

He looked out at the sea with worried eyes, "I hope it

isn't going to storm again. I was terribly ill. Were you?"

"Yes," she said.

He brightened. "Then we at least have something in common. We're not good sailors!"

She was forced to smile at this. "So you ought to be satisfied. Now, will you please let it go at that and leave me alone."

Captain Peel looked hurt. "Am I bothering you?"

"What do you think?"

"It's very dull on shipboard. I should think any sort of diversion might be interesting."

"I'm doing very well on my own," she said. "If I need a diversion I will get in touch with you." And she turned her back on him.

He said nothing but went off down the length of the deck with his shoulders slumped, reminding her of a dispirited puppy. She rather liked him but she did not wish to strike up a friendship with anyone so soon after the business in London. When she was ill she had been tormented by dreams of the killing and had cried out aloud. She hoped that she had not also talked in her sleep.

She had no idea what the future held for her. She had a letter of introduction to a man in Calcutta—only that and the money she'd saved, along with what Harry Layton had given her. It wouldn't last long. She had to find some sort of employment.

She was thinking of all these things when little Mrs. Copley came up to her. The little woman said, "I hear you've been hateful to poor Captain Peel."

"Who told you that?"

"He did. I met him a moment ago and he looked so forlorn I asked him what was the matter. And he told me you had been very cold towards him."

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"I don't think I behaved differently from any other girl who might have found herself in my place."

Mrs. Copley reproved her. "You don't wish to forgive him for the hoax he played on you."

"It seemed silly!"

"But it wasn't, really," the other woman said. "He means well. He was desperate to meet you and it was the only thing he could think of."

"Then he isn't too brilliant."

"Perhaps not, but he *is* nice," Mrs. Copley said.

She made no reply to this. And every time she entered the dining salon when Captain Peel was there, he would smile at her. She pretended not to see him.

A few evenings later she and Mrs. Copley went up on deck to listen to a concert under the stars given by the band of the Nineteenth Regiment.

The first people they encountered were the missionaries, Reverend Bishop and his wife. The little man told them happily, "The music is lovely! What one would expect to hear in paradise!" And the two moved on.

Mrs. Copley sighed. "They are not going to find India a paradise, I can promise you that."

"I know," she said. They found chairs near the band and sat to enjoy the music. The next selection was a lively military march. After a short intermission, the red-jacketed musicians played a lilting waltz.

It was while the waltz was going on that someone came and sat next to her. When she glanced and saw it was Captain Edward Peel, she moaned, "You again!"

"You don't mind my enjoying the music, surely?"

"No," she said, preparing to rise. "You can enjoy it all by yourself!"

"Please!" he said, restraining her with his hand on her arm. "I thought we might sit and enjoy the concert together."

"I'm here with Mrs. Copley," she said. Then she turned to look and discovered that worthy lady had gone.

The young officer said, "See? You were alone until I came along."

She said accusingly, "You and she made this up!"

He nodded. "Yes."

She stared at him. "You're very persistent!"

"I am," he agreed. "And I would like us to be friends."

"Well," she said reluctantly, "I suppose anyone has a right to sit here for the concert."

"Thanks," he said happily as if she'd given him an invitation to join her.

The concert ended and there was polite applause from the upper decks and cheers from the lower deck where the ordinary soldiers had gathered.

Rising, he said, "That was pleasant!"

"Yes," she said, preparing to leave him. "I liked the music."

"Don't go in yet!" he pleaded. "It's too nice a night."

She stared at him. "Is there nothing I can do to make you give up?"

"No."

"Captain Peel," she said, "you're a pleasant young man. But at the moment I'm not in the mood for a romance." And having said this she went over to the railing and stood with her back to him.

He followed her. "You're suffering from a broken heart?"

She looked at him. "I'm suffering from a number of things. None of which you can do anything about."

"Why not give me a chance?"

"Look!" she appealed to him. "I'm trying to stop us becoming friends because I know a friendship with me would be destructive to you!"

"I'm willing to take the risk," he said with disarming frankness.

She laughed at this and the warm friendship with him began. From then on they saw a great deal of each other. And as they met day after day, she began to feel he was truly a rather special young man. Gossip on shipboard included them as the latest romance. Mrs. Copley and the missionary couple made sly, pleasant comments about the joys of young love when she sat at the table with them.

One afternoon as they strolled on the sunny deck arm in arm, he said, "I know hardly anything about you except that you are an American girl with weak lungs. Yet I like you better than any other girl I've known."

To put him off, she said, "Tell me more about yourself. You are a second son and your brother is Lord Albert Peel. What else?"

He sighed. "He and I don't get along well."

"Why?"

"I can't really say. He's inclined to be overbearing. And he thinks I'm a dolt."

She looked at the young man sympathetically. "You're far from it!"

"Thanks," he said. "My brother is married. For a second time. His first wife died leaving him with one little girl. Then he married an actress. They quarrel a lot. Live in Kent."

"Ah!" she said. "Where we spent that mythical weekend together?"

"You'll never forgive me that!" he said, depressed.

"You're forgiven," she told him.

"Anyway the part of Kent where our castle is wouldn't be anyone's choice for a pleasant weekend. It's a gloomy spot. I'm sorry for the little girl."

She hugged his arm in hers. "You're a kind man, you know."

"I hope so," he said. "Now my whole life is the army. I've served in India before and I've come back. I shall die in India in the Queen's service!"

"That's morbid!" she reproved him.

"Why?" he asked with a wry smile. "Give me a bit of glory! What else do I have? No family, little money, no one who cares for me."

It came out without her realizing. "I care for you," she said.

He stared at her. "You've never said that to me before."

Aware of her mistake, she looked away from him. "I shouldn't have said it to you now."

"But you did!"

"You must forget it!"

He took her by the arm and turned her around and said in a tone filled with wonder, "There are tears in your eyes! You're crying over me!"

"No!" she protested.

"You're supposed to be the one who hates lies," he said. "Be truthful! Give me some reason not to think I'm alone."

"All right, Edward," she said. "I do like you a great deal. But that is as far as it can go."

"No, it isn't," he said. "Marry me! You should anyway! You'll never make out in India on your own!"

She shook her head. "I can't marry you!"

"Give me a reason," he urged her.

She gave a deep sigh. "All right! I'll give you the best I know. I'm on my way to India because I'm a fugitive from the law! I murdered my husband!"

The young man's mouth dropped open. Then he said, "I don't believe it!"

"You'd better. It's the truth!" She did not care now. She had told him the worst.

He stared at her. "But I know you. And I know if you did commit a crime it was either an accident or forced upon you!"

"Does it matter?"

"It does! It matters a great deal to me," the young man said. "Now I want you to start at the beginning and tell me about yourself and how this happened."

She gazed out at the ocean and in a low voice went over her story for him. She gave him the main facts without lingering on too many details.

"I knew it!" Edward Peel said. "It was an accident."

She shook her head. "No one would believe it. My uncle would testify against me."

"I say you're wrong. I think you should have remained in England and fought any charges they might have made, but since you didn't, I say we should be married."

She stared at him in astonishment. "You are willing to marry a confessed murderess?"

"I'm anxious to marry the woman I love," he said. And he took her in his arms and kissed her with great gentleness.

Her eyes were glazed with happy tears. "You're a fool, Edward! You know that!"

He smiled. "Yes. My brother always said it was what I'm best at. I'm going to speak to our chaplain. We'll have a military wedding and spend the rest of the voyage enjoying our honeymoon!"

There was no stopping him. And in truth, she did not want to. He knew the worst about her and still loved her. Her other life was lost to her. Thomas Manley lost with it. She was lucky to have this good man want her for his wife. It was her chance to survive and to know a true love!

Mrs. Copley was filled with delight. "I shall be the matron of honor," she insisted.

Missionary Bishop was adamant. The little man said, "You will not be married by the chaplain. You will be married by me. We have been friends from the start."

So there was a compromise. They had a simple military wedding with both the chaplain and the old missionary presiding. She was moved to a cabin in the military section of the ship which had been specially chosen for their honeymoon.

Edward proved an understanding and gentle lover. And he never mentioned any of the things which she had told him of her past. She felt that she could not be happier. Now she began to look forward to India.

Her new husband said, "Now you must get to know some of the military couples. You will be living among them later and I'm sure they're going to like you."

She smiled at him. "Just so long as you like me!"

"I love you," he said, his lips caressing the nape of her neck.

She closed her eyes as they lay there together and hoped that it might never change. But she knew that despite Edward's optimism, one day the darkness from her past might reach out for her and she would lose everything.

BOOK TWO

India, 1857

CHAPTER TWELVE

Priscilla stood by the railing of Her Majesty's vessel, *Brittanic*, as it lay at anchor in the harbor of Calcutta. In a short time she, along with the rest of the wives and officers of the Nineteenth Regiment, would be disembarking. And she'd heard fresh rumors of trouble in India.

She stared across the harbor at the city of Calcutta. In the distance there were snow-white buildings, highlighted by a blinding yellow sun. It was hot, and around the ship were sights which almost nauseated her. In the yellow water bloated, rotting bodies of pigs floated by along with other debris—wooden boxes, the carcass of a dog. Then a bloated, ugly thing so misshapen that it took her a moment to realize it was a human body! She shuddered and turned away.

She was suddenly facing Captain Ralph Hudson, a tall,

dark man with a heavy black mustache. He was married to a middle-aged woman, many years older than himself, and reported to be wealthy. Edward had warned her that he was a womanizer and one to be wary of. He'd been involved in several scandals.

The dashing Captain Hudson said, "This is your first sight of India. I gather you find it disillusioning."

"Such filth frightens and disgusts me," she said. "Is this what I'm to expect of India?"

"Some of it," the lean, bronzed man said with a mocking smile. "But there is another side. India can be beautiful! A strange calm beauty when you find it. I don't think it exists anywhere else on earth. I think it is what made me return. My wife, Maude, did not want me to serve here again. The Indian climate is bad for her health."

"I have been told many of the women do not bear up well under the heat and living style of contained army posts."

His eyes twinkled. "There are ways to overcome the boredom. And a glass of cool gin and tonic helps with the heat."

Priscilla said, "I suppose there are games, parties and things of that sort. Edward says his regiment even has a cricket team."

The dashing captain looked amused. "Let me warn you, Priscilla, this land of India does strange things to some women. Girls who are known to have been shy, retiring creatures at home in England sometimes become brazen, amorous women under this blazing sun."

"Really?" she said, thinking of his evil reputation.

"Illicit romances are routine," he said.

"Not with people of self-respect, I'm sure," she said, in a way that would indicate she had heard about his ac-

tions. "And as a new bride with a husband whom I love dearly I have no fears."

Captain Hudson gazed at her with some resentment and his hand touched the end of his magnificent mustache as if to pat it in place. He said, "Of course, I know you are surely above all that sort of temptation, Mrs. Peel. But if you find strange longings tormenting you, don't think it unique or say that I didn't warn you!"

At that moment elderly Colonel Mason came along. Captain Hudson saluted him and moved away. The colonel watched after him with amusement. He said, "Doesn't take him long to find the prettiest girl in the group."

She smiled, "Thank you for the flattery, Colonel."

"Truth, not flattery," he said. He was resplendent in his red jacket with gold braid, dark blue trousers and military hat of black with a drooping white plume. His pot stomach betrayed his weakness for drink, a weakness which she had been told was fairly common among Indian army veterans. In contrast to his bloated stomach, his legs and arms were spindly. He was usually drunk by evening but this was fairly early in the day and he was at his best. And at his best he was an intelligent officer.

"Are you looking forward to seeing Calcutta?" he asked.

She glanced over the railing. "Some of it. But I can tell by the harbor waters there must be ugliness as well as beauty."

"That is the contrast of India, Mrs. Peel."

She said, "So I understand. Captain Hudson says he finds the calm beauty of some of its shrines fascinating."

The white-haired veteran chuckled. "Hudson also finds the calm beauty of other men's wives equally enjoyable. I'm sure you've been warned about him."

"A pity," she said. "He has a nice wife."

The colonel sighed. "A money match, I fear! You'd be blind not to see that. His Maude would be a more suitable wife for me than for that young man. But that is no reason for him to be unfaithful to her. He sought her hand in marriage and he should honor his vows."

"I agree," she said. "I'm learning swiftly that army life in a foreign country is a special existence. With everyone so much of a group and so contained that there is bound to be both friction and gossip."

"It is not too bad," the colonel told her. "The temporary quarters here are not as spacious as those we will be given at our regular post. And then there are plenty of native servants to do the work."

"Where is the regiment to be sent?"

"Our destination ultimately is Cranpore," he said. "But we shall be here in Calcutta for a little while preparing for the move. Our expedition will require elephants, camels and porters to move us and our equipment. Then it is up to the hill country of Kashmir!"

She was startled. "I had no idea we would be going there."

"We were assigned there before leaving England. It is a pleasant place, cooler in the hills."

"I'm sure it is," she agreed, wondering if Prince Hali was to come into her life again.

The old man said, "You and Captain Peel will have servants, and two camels for your luggage and transportation. You will find riding a camel difficult at first."

"I'm certain it will be for me," she said.

"You'll learn," he said. "The British East India Company and Her Majesty do well by us. We live like royalty with every luxury and servants to command. But the curse of it is that the loneliness and dreadful climate detract from the pleasures."

Priscilla said, "Even London has its bad side. I'm going to make up my mind to enjoy India."

"Good attitude," the colonel said. "It's the proper way to start. Don't be like that foolish Nell Henderson who has fretted all the voyage because she's afraid she'll lose her looks in this climate. She's made her husband miserable. Too bad! He's a capable young officer."

She said, "I've met her. She didn't make any secret of not wanting to come here."

"Then she shouldn't have married an army man. I'm a bachelor myself."

She said, "Do you not approve of officers bringing their wives along?"

"A hard question," he said. "I don't like to see families broken up. And while we close our eyes to it, we know the ordinary soldiers frequent the bazaar brothels and as a result we have thousands of good men infected with disease all the time. Women are needed here."

She smiled. "It's helpful to talk with someone of your experience."

"I'm an old hand, my dear," he said, looking pleased. "When we are quartered in the barracks in Calcutta I'll make it a point to introduce you to some other people who will be going to Cranpore with us."

Priscilla thanked him and went below to their cabin to see that she'd missed nothing. While she was there Nell Henderson came in.

"I can't get things in my trunk," she wailed. "They fitted in well enough when we sailed. But they won't go in now!"

She laughed. "Let me help you. I've done plenty of traveling and I know about packing."

"You're American, aren't you?" Nell said, clearly impressed.

"Yes," she said, "but that's not as important as getting

your trunk properly packed. We'll soon be disembarking."

Nell took her into her cabin and pointed mournfully at the open trunk. It sat in the middle of the cabin with an overflow of clothing. The girl sank down on the lower bunk, saying, "It's hopeless!"

Priscilla said, "Nothing's hopeless. You haven't had the patience to fold everything neatly before you packed."

"I tried. I thought my husband would help me. But John is never around when there's something to be done!"

"He's with Edward and the rest of the officers who are supervising the disembarking. It's an important task."

The girl stared at her soft, white hands and folded them. "I shouldn't have married John," she fretted. "I wasn't ready to marry."

Priscilla was busy unfolding dresses and folding them more neatly. "Nonsense!" she said. "John loves you a great deal."

"He's a silly boy," Nell said, pouting. "When I first saw him in uniform I thought he was so handsome! I don't see him that way now!"

Priscilla was glad she was being kept busy, otherwise she would have been inclined to give the girl a good lecture. She simply said, "You can have a good marriage if you work at it."

"You can say that," Nell told her. "Edward is a fine husband. I could fall in love with him myself. But John is so young! And bringing me to this hot country! I'll lose my looks!"

"I don't know about your looks but your trunk is all packed and locked," she said, rising from the task.

Nell said, "How clever you are!" She rose and kissed her. "We must become the best of friends! I'll need a friend like you to survive!"

"You'll have lots of friends," Priscilla told her.

"I really like Captain Hudson," Nell confided. "He's so charming! Why did he marry that dried-up old woman?"

Dismayed, she responded, "I hear he married her for her money. And that he seduces other men's wives."

Nell's face shadowed and her pretty lips formed in a pout. She said, "I'm sure that's only horrid gossip!"

"Perhaps so," Priscilla said wearily and left the girl to go on deck. The first person she met was Mrs. Estelle Copley.

The little woman said, "I wanted to say good-by. And if you have time look me up. We're near the Government House."

"I know," she said. "I will miss you."

The older woman said, "And I shall always remember the voyage and the part I was able to play in your romance and marriage."

"You probably brought it about," she said.

"I know you two will be happy," Mrs. Copley said. "I must go now. But do come to visit me when you can. And bring Edward with you!"

"I shall," she promised and kissed her former cabin companion good-by.

A short time later she saw Edward coming down the deck towards her. He bowed and said, "Madam, may I offer you Calcutta?"

"How generous you are!" she laughed. "And do I accept this generous gift now?"

"We are about to disembark," her husband said. "All the preparations have been made. There will be a band playing on the docks to greet us and we will journey through the streets to our temporary quarters in the Calcutta barracks."

"Wonderful!" she said. "Nell had trouble with her packing. I helped."

Edward looked gloomy. "That girl has John half out of

his mind. It's a bad marriage. I don't see it lasting long in India."

"What about us?"

"We'll celebrate our golden wedding anniversary," he said. "That is, unless you desert me and marry some maharajah and raise a lot of little princes."

"Sounds pleasant," she said.

"I'd never allow it." He kissed her warmly.

She said, "I've begun to think of this ship as my home and almost my world."

Edward laughed. "There's a larger world waiting for you. All of India! Come along!" And he led her across the deck towards the gangway.

The band on the dock were dressed in the usual red jackets, but they wore white turbans. A bearded band-leader led them in a cheerful British marching song. And in the background were brown-faced natives of every age and sex.

The colonel took the salute, looking less the bloated alcoholic and more the efficient leader of Her Majesty's troops. She and Edward shared a carriage with another couple. They rode through the streets of the great Indian city and found their route heavy with traffic, many of the vehicles carrying wealthy Europeans. In all the carriages a bearded coachman presided on the front seat while a small Indian boy rode the rear axle underneath.

Edward told her, "The boy is a *chokra*. His duty is to be ready to open the carriage door for the passengers."

Further along she saw her first camel, his head raised augustly above the crowds, padding along like a disdainful aristocrat. She was conscious of the teeming humanity of the streets. The color and noise confused her. And over it all there hung a rather fearful odor!

The procession finally reached the barracks and Priscilla found herself standing before a modest thatched

bungalow. Edward was already dealing with several natives and telling them what to do with their luggage.

Edward told her, "Not a palace, mind you. But it will do for the short time we'll be here."

The servants were an industrious lot. They kept darting about arranging things. She found it hard to adjust to them bustling around her. At last she begged them to leave and allow her to do the rest of the unpacking herself. They stared at her with a hurt look on their faces and, like silent, humiliated animals slunk off.

Edward came back inside and asked, "Where are the servants?"

She said, "They were smothering me. I dismissed them for a while."

"I hope you didn't get off to a bad start," he said. "They are sensitive and offend easily. They like to please." He put an arm around her. "Be extra nice to them when they return and they'll quickly regain their good humor."

She sighed. "So much to learn."

He said, "We have been invited to the Officers' Mess for drinks and dinner. I want you to look your loveliest. All the important officers and East India Company people will be there."

"A party so soon? We've hardly unpacked."

"That's how we managed to endure out here," he said. "Plenty of parties."

"Very well," she said. "I shall wear my pink gown, the one you like, and do my hair nicely so you'll be proud of me."

"I'm forever proud of you," he said. "Also I have an old friend you'll be meeting. Captain Everett Hickman. I served with him briefly in the Crimea. He's a bachelor. His downfall has been his gambling."

It made her remember Thomas for a moment. "Really?"

"Yes. We get many of them in the service. As you know

we play cards a lot. Hickman got in over his head in the Crimea. A money-lender bailed him out at an excessive rate of interest. Now I understand he's managed to get himself heavily in debt here."

"What happens if he can't pay?"

"He'll be posted in the mess and actually lose his rank," Edward said. "We had a major in the Crimea who wound up as a private."

"I think that's horrible!"

Edward shrugged. "Don't forget the army is composed of levels. Officers are at the top. We can't afford to set a bad example."

"I suppose not," she said.

"There are some other things about our army you should know," he said. "Rather disgraceful things. In fact, seniority depends more on the ability to pay the Crown than it does on military knowledge. And some officers take a cut in pay rather than serve in India."

"There is a choice?"

"Yes. I don't approve of any of what I've told you. I'm in the army because I like the life and I think we have a future in India. And now hurry and dress for the party. We mustn't keep the colonel waiting."

The Officers' Mess was like a big oblong box with a fairly high ceiling. Natives crouched along the side walls manipulating great fans linked to the ceiling. These rectangular flaps were called *punkahs* and they were continually pulled back and forth by the native in charge to provide a cooling of the air. The natives were called *punkahs* after the fans and kept at their work in a tireless way.

The place was crowded. Both the army and the British East India Company were well represented, the bright uniforms in colorful contrast with the civilians' black frock coats and white trousers.

Colonel Mason was receiving the guests and was already far along in his cups. He gave Priscilla and Edward a vague smile and murmured something she could not hear. They then moved on to join the others from ship-board and some of the army regulars.

Priscilla looked for Mrs. Copley but didn't see her. She finally asked one of the government officials about her and he told her, the good lady had been too weary from the voyage to attend a party so soon.

She said, "I think she was wise to stay home and rest."

She overheard a young officer complaining about the mail arriving late despite a new faster route from London to Marseilles by train, then by ship to Egypt, whence it was taken by camel caravans along the Suez, and then on by steamer to Bombay. This route supposedly saved weeks over the route around the Cape which the *Britannic* had taken.

Edward came to her and said, "I want you to meet someone." And he led her to another part of the big room. They halted before a man of her husband's age with a handsome face marred by a deep scar which ran the length of his right cheek.

Edward said, "This is my friend Captain Hickman. He saved my life in the Crimea! And for a remembrance of the incident he received that scar from a Russian saber!"

She smiled and said, "I thank you for saving Edward for me. The scar suits you. It gives your face an added distinction."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll believe you because I want to."

Edward told her, "Just a word of warning. Never gamble with him. He's a professional."

She asked, "Is that true?"

"No," he said. "I'm an amateur. That's why I keep on losing as I do. I went through the entire Crimean War

frightened to death about how I was going to pay my gaming debts."

"An unusual fear," she said with an amused smile. "But not a craven one."

The man stared at her. "I seem to remember meeting you somewhere."

She was instantly on the alert. "I can't think where. I was never in the Crimea. I'm American."

"I've been in London from time to time," the man said. "I think I've met you there."

"I can't say," she said. But she was remembering him and the scar. He had been at Harry Layton's gaming house several times as a guest. She prayed he would not recall the occasions when he had seen her before.

She managed a smile. "Don't spoil the party trying to rack your brain. It will come to you later."

He nodded. "You're right. It usually does."

She and Edward moved on. Edward asked in a low voice, "Would it have been at Layton's he saw you?"

"Yes. I recognized him."

"Don't worry about it," her husband said. "It's not likely he'll remember if he hasn't yet. And if he does I'll ask him to keep it a secret."

"Will he?" she worried.

"He is my friend," her husband said as if that solved the problem.

Edward left her for a moment and she went on to meet some others. She found a Dr. Mackin, his wife, and their daughter. They made a most interesting group. The doctor was a Scotsman, a shrewd-looking man with an amazingly wide knowledge of medicine. He kept up-to-date with papers from England.

His wife, Ethel, was pretty though she had eyes a trifle too small. She was in her early forties and was known to have a fine singing voice. Priscilla learned the

woman often gave concerts at the outposts. Her accompanist on these occasions was her daughter, Nina, a lovely dark-haired girl who also wrote poetry. She was twenty-one and bound to be a target for every eligible man at Cranpore.

Nina told her, "I have a cousin who lives in New York. He writes me it is becoming a great city. It will be fun to have an American at Cranpore."

She laughed. "You may find me very dull. Americans are no different from other people."

"I disagree," Nina said. "All I have met seem more lively, less reserved."

"That may be true," she said.

Edward came along with a second drink for her. Gin and tonic seemed to be the most popular drink of the affair. She noticed that the party was becoming more animated. She commented, "They do drink a lot, don't they?"

Edward smiled ruefully. "I read somewhere that more Europeans die of drinking spirits in India than from bad water. It may be true."

"They will serve food soon, won't they?"

"It's buffet style," he said. "We can line up. Give you a sampling of Indian curry and the rest."

"I'll be glad to try anything," she said. "My head is beginning to reel from the gin."

"The food will fix that," he said with a smile.

They joined the line by the long table laden with food. Native servants stood behind the tables to replenish and serve the various dishes. She and Edward took samplings of many of the dishes and went to a quiet corner to eat.

Edward asked, "Is the food all right?"

"I like it," she said. "It at least has plenty of flavor."

"What do you think of the gathering?"

"Everyone seems to know everyone else," she said. "But then it is a contained world."

"It's always a little cramped in barracks," her new husband said. "When we get to Cranpore it will be better."

"I'm overwhelmed by all the brown faces," she said. "There must be very few Europeans in India. The odds must be high against us in this vast country. What if they should rebel?"

"Why should they?"

"I can't say exactly, but even back in London I heard there was unrest out here."

Edward sighed. "I suppose there are always those who are dissatisfied in any colonial area. But the English have done much for India. We eliminated cruel old customs like suttee, when widows were expected to burn themselves on their husband's funeral pyres."

"But India is in truth a conquered nation."

He smiled. "We consider it expansion in the name of progress. The Queen is now the Empress of India. But the country still has its own rulers. There are princes and maharajahs with all manner of power and money."

"Yes," she said. "Prince Hali certainly did."

"He's a ruler now," Edward said. "I think he inherited the throne of his kingdom only a short while ago."

"Are we likely to meet him?" she asked.

"We may," Edward said. "In fact it is likely we will. I don't imagine his palace can be far from Cranpore."

She sighed. "I'm not sure I wish to meet him again."

Edward said, "That is up to you."

She smiled and leaned close and kissed his cheek. "I'm very happy with my British husband," she said.

"And I with my American wife!"

She sighed. "I'm just beginning to realize the heat here never ends. It does get oppressive."

"This room is too crowded," her husband said. "We'll leave as soon as we decently can."

She nodded. "I'd like that. I don't want anything more to drink."

"Nor I," he said. A dark boy came by and took their empty plates.

An intense-looking, bearded man came over and bowed. "I must meet this charming lady, Peel." He stood there swaying slightly.

Edward said, "Priscilla, may I present Dr. Ramsay. Dr. Ramsey, my wife. She has just been talking to Dr. Mackin and his family."

The drunken man shrugged. "She will not find him as interesting as me. Mackin is a dull fellow!"

She had taken an instant dislike to him. "Do you mean professionally or socially?"

"Doesn't matter!" the drunken doctor waved her question aside.

Edward intervened. "Dr. Ramsay was also in the Crimea."

"You enjoy being an army doctor?" she asked the drunken man.

He hiccuped and stared at her. "I will tell you all, beautiful lady. Army doctors are not in much demand in England. But I say we are among the best! Florence Nightingale knows that! She saw us at work. I've been in tent hospitals at the front operating with blood to my elbows!"

Edward said, "I'm sure Priscilla will accept your word on the grim conditions in the Crimea." His voice was controlled but she knew he was angry with the doctor for his gory description.

"My name is Horatio," the drunken doctor said, "I was named after Nelson!"

"You ought to have been a navy man," she suggested.

"The navy is nothing!" Dr. Horatio Ramsay said, weaving again. "You're damned pretty! I'm a bachelor! Like pretty women!" And he moved on.

Edward said, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize he was so drunk."

She watched the retreating doctor. "I'm not sure I'd like him even if he were sober."

"That's very likely."

"Is he a good doctor?"

"No! He had a bad reputation in the Crimea."

"I guessed something like that," she said. "Let us be thankful we have Dr. Mackin going to Cranpore as well."

"I only hope Ramsay doesn't cause trouble for Mackin. He is not easy to get along with."

"That would be unfortunate," she agreed. "Perhaps we can leave now?"

"I think so," he said. They moved on to the door and met Captain Henderson standing there. His boyish face bore a worried look, and he at once came to them and asked, "Have you seen my wife?"

"No," Edward said.

The young man said, "She and Ralph Hudson went over to get a drink. Then they vanished."

"They can't be far away," she said soothingly.

Captain Henderson continued to look forlorn. "I've gone over every inch of the place and I can't find them!"

Priscilla said, "So many people here!"

The young man sighed. "Nell doesn't drink well. And she is worst with gin. I hope she doesn't drink too much." He was clearly very upset.

"Do you want me to try and find her?" Priscilla asked.

"If you would," he said.

"Leave it to Priscilla," Edward said. "While she's gone you and I will enjoy a cigar."

She left them aware that there was a good chance of an

unpleasant incident at this party before they even started to Cranpore. She was pretty certain of what Captain Hudson might be up to. Especially if Nell was drunk.

Then she saw Maude Hudson, standing by the colonel. She greeted them pleasantly. "It's a lovely party, Colonel Mason."

"Thank you, my dear," he said, glass in hand and slurring his words a little.

Maude Hudson said, "I'm looking for my husband. Have you seen him anywhere, Mrs. Peel?"

"I don't think so," she said.

"I can't think what has happened to him," his wife worried.

Priscilla smiled. "You know what a gallant he is. He's probably been caught getting second drinks for some of the ladies whose husbands have deserted them."

Maude Hudson smiled pitifully. "It would seem that I am one of them."

Priscilla suggested, "Why not try the bar?"

"I will," the older woman said. "I looked before. But he may have returned there after I left."

"I wish you luck," she said. Then, trying to sound very casual, she asked, "By the way, I should like to call on you tomorrow. Which is your bungalow?"

"In the same row as yours," Maude said. "We're exactly three buildings away from you. I'll be looking forward to your visit." And she went towards the bar.

Priscilla waited until the older woman vanished in the crowded room and then she hurried out the exit door. She had a dreadful feeling that Hudson might have taken Nell to his own bungalow.

It was hot outside though not as stifling as it had been in the Officers' Mess. She was beginning to understand why some women could not live in this climate. She walked swiftly through the darkness.

She reached the Hudson's bungalow and halted. She hesitated outside for a full minute. There was no light inside. Perhaps she had been wrong. She hoped so. She might have been wiser to have kept out of it completely. But she'd felt sorry for Henderson and she did not want to see any harm come to Nell.

She was on the point of turning and going back to the party when she heard a sharp cry from within the bungalow. She went to the door and knocked on it.

From the inside came a frantic, "Help me! Please help me!"

She recognized Nell's voice and pushed open the door and went inside. She stumbled over the legs of an overturned chair and headed through the darkness to the bedroom from which the sounds of a scuffle emerged.

She entered the bedroom, and in the faint light coming through the window from the lights of an adjoining house saw the figures of Nell and Hudson. Nell rushed to her, throwing her arms about her. The girl was in a disheveled, hysterical state.

"He tried to rape me!" Nell sobbed.

She held the girl in her arms. "Why did you ever come here?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "We were walking and he was talking so nice to me. Then we were in here and he attacked me!"

Hudson, standing sullenly in the background, said, "She's a liar! She encouraged me!"

Priscilla said, "You'd better go find your wife. She's looking for you!" Then she told the weeping Nell, "You go outside and fix your hair and dress. Get back into the mess and join your husband. He's by the door with Edward."

"He'll guess!" Nell quavered.

"Not unless you're a complete fool," she said. "Go on. The sooner you get back to him the better."

The girl left and Priscilla faced the angry Hudson. "You're a disgrace to all of us!"

He sneered. "You're only angry because it wasn't you I brought here."

"You know better than that," she said. "I warn you to leave that girl alone."

"You'll be sorry for interfering," Hudson told her.

"I doubt it," she said. Then she turned and quickly followed Nell out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Later that night as she lay awake in the tropical heat, with Edward asleep beside her, she reviewed the night's events.

Nell had behaved better than Priscilla had expected. Though looking warm and somewhat disheveled she pretended to have just been out for a short stroll. Her husband charitably put her condition down to the heat and drink. Many of the people at the party were somewhat drunk, so Nell had not drawn the notice she might have otherwise.

When a grim-faced Ralph Hudson later appeared, he had gone straight to his worried, elderly wife. Priscilla knew she had made an enemy of him. His threats had not been idle ones. She would have to be careful. The worst feature of it was they were all to be part of a small,

contained world for a long while. It was not a pleasant prospect.

It was near morning before she slept. And the heat soon woke her. But this time Edward had risen and gone out to report for duty. Her servant, whose name was Kara Singh, was waiting to assist her. He wore a pure white *dhoti* and was quietly putting her breakfast on the table when she appeared.

"All is ready, madam," he said, bowing.

"Thank you," she smiled, and sat down. She was finding out why the wives of Indian officers were soon spoiled for any sort of chores.

A second servant, whose name she did not know, kept himself busy with outside duties. He brought fresh water to the bungalow and puttered around outside keeping the immediate area clean. Kara talked to her in accented English and spoke with the other servant in their own language.

She was finishing breakfast when someone appeared in the doorway of the room. It was Captain Everett Hickman.

He smiled and asked, "Has Edward left?"

"Yes," she said, getting up from the table and going to him. "He was gone when I awoke. I imagine he has a good deal to do."

"Preparation for the journey to Cranpore," Hickman said. "I'm fortunate in not being a supplies officer so I have little to do."

"What is your exact position in the company?"

"I'm presently an engineer specializing in explosives. In the Crimea I was a cavalry officer."

"Would you care for any breakfast?"

"A cup of tea would be most welcome."

So she had Kara Singh bring them the tea along with a tray of biscuits. The two sat in the living room and

relaxed as much as the heat allowed. She saw that the captain had traded his heavy tunic for a shirt.

"It's so terribly hot here," she said. "Edward says it is cooler in the hills."

"All India is hot."

"When will we be moving on?"

"Soon," he said.

"I'm glad of that."

"They need us at Cranpore," he said. "It is my understanding that the garrison there is rather weak and because of the recent troubles they wish to strengthen it."

"Then there are troubles?"

"Yes," Captain Hickman said, putting down his tea cup. "It has come about through unrest among the sepoys."

She was not familiar with the term. "The sepoys?"

"Yes. That is what we call the Indian soldiers. It was mainly with the aid of sepoys of the Bengal army that India was conquered. Sepoys are almost as able as British soldiers, they seem equally loyal and they are much cheaper. The British East India Company is chiefly interested in profits!"

"I'm not surprised," she said.

"They let those of us on the spot do the worrying." He smiled grimly. "In all of India there may be thirty-five thousand British troops. We are backed up by a force of about three hundred thousand sepoys. So they outnumber us by ten to one. You can understand their value. We have this combined force of four hundred thousand, mostly native, to keep the two hundred million people of India under our control."

"That's fantastic!" she exclaimed. "You can't well stand any large rebellion."

"We surely cannot," Hickman said. "The story I've heard is that a few months ago there was an argument

between a sepoy and a lascar at the great arsenal of Dum Dum near here. The sepoy, like so many Indian soldiers, was a high caste Brahmin. The laborer begged for a little water from the sepoy's *lotah*, a little brass pot used to contain water for ritual cleaning."

"And this offended the sepoy?"

"Yes. It would be the same as if a dirty tramp asked you for the loan of your washcloth. The sepoy refused and the laborer angrily told him, 'Your caste ideas will soon be a thing of the past! There is a new order from England which will destroy all castes. Cartridges for the new Enfield rifle, greased with the fat of pigs and cows! You will have to bite these cartridges as part of your drill!'"

"What did that mean?"

"Pig fat is unclean to Mohammedans and cow fat is not to be touched by Hindus. An order like this would mean that both religious groups would be infringed on and both lose caste."

Priscilla said, "People fight more readily for their religious beliefs than anything else. It is stupid not to face that!"

"I agree," he said. "There were two small mutinies a while ago. Now things are quiet again. But you never can tell when the trouble may resume. The rumor about the cartridge still circulates though the authorities insist the fat used to grease the cartridges is butter, which has been clarified."

"Will the natives believe that?"

"I don't know. I think the damage has been done. We still face mistrust and possible mutiny. Many of the sepoys fear we wish to convert them to Christianity by making them lose their caste."

She sighed. "It doesn't sound good."

Hickman sat back in his chair. "The sepoys face a

dilemma. If they remain loyal to us they run the risk of being thought apostates and becoming social outcasts, rejected by their families, relatives and fellow Hindus. If they remain faithful to their religious beliefs it means insubordination and breach of faith with us. Then they face punishment, dismissal and poverty."

"So?"

"I have heard one shameful story," he said. "That to make an example of one of the leaders of the uprising they shot him live from a cannon."

"Horrible!"

"I suppose the officer must have deemed it necessary," he said. "These people do not learn easily. They are of a different culture."

"My husband is a gentle man," she said. "He would never do anything like that."

"Edward is almost too sensitive for the army," Hickman agreed.

"These people are so poor and live under such terrible conditions," she said. "Need they be punished more?"

"Their plight is desperate," the young officer agreed. "And it cannot be all blamed on the British East India Company. I fear India will always be in trouble."

She said, "I've enjoyed our talk. You've told me so many things I didn't know."

"I hope they didn't frighten you."

"Better to be prepared."

Captain Hickman stood up. "I wonder if Edward would have brought you here if you hadn't already been on shipboard. If I had a wife I do not think I would bring her along."

"I was on my way here in any case."

"Why?"

"I have a desire to see all the world. I journeyed from

America to Britain. Then I decided to see what it was like out here."

"No one warned you that India was a powder keg ready to explode?"

"One person," she said. "But I have a strong will. No one could dissuade me from making the trip."

"Interesting," he said staring at her. "I really must go." At the door he turned and said, "By the way, I now remember where I saw you in London. But it shall remain my secret!" And he went on out.

His words stunned her for a moment and then she was a little relieved. She felt sure that he would keep the information to himself. But she was certain he was wondering why she'd left London so suddenly and been so quick to marry Edward!

A warm and weary Edward returned for lunch with her. She told him about his friend's visit. "He stayed a while and filled me in with a lot of information about India."

Edward nodded, as they sat across the table from each other. "I'm glad. I want you to be friends. He is a fine fellow."

"I agree," she said. "He's recalled that I was the hostess at Layton's club."

Edward frowned. "Oh?"

"Yes. But there's no reason to worry. He said he would make no mention of it."

"Then that is settled," her husband said, reaching out and touching her hand.

She smiled. "I've every confidence in him. But he did tell me some worrisome things about what is happening here."

He smiled wearily. "Just getting ready to move to Cranpore gives me enough to worry about. We are short of transport."

"How does that happen?"

"East India Company economy," he said grimly. "We run into it a good deal."

"But we will be moving on soon?"

"Very soon," he said. And standing up, he asked, "By the way, what did you say to Hudson when you found him with Nell last night?"

"Nothing pleasant!"

"I met him this morning. When I spoke to him he was surly."

She got up to go to the door with him. "I'm afraid of that man. I think he'll do anything he can to harm us. I don't think he's mentally stable."

"You're probably right," Edward said. "But I'm not afraid of the bounder. I simply haven't time for his nonsense. We have plenty of problems without quarrels among ourselves."

"I'm sure of that," she said. He kissed her and left.

After lunch she slept a little. A slight breeze had come up and the heat was a little less grinding. She wakened and put on a white linen dress. She was completing her toilet when another visitor arrived. The elderly wife of Captain Hudson!

Maude Hudson was wearing a pale blue dress and had a parasol of the same shade. She said apologetically, "I've been waiting for you to visit me. Then I decided I had better come here."

Priscilla said, "I'm sorry, I fell asleep. I was just on my way to call on you." The truth was that after the tense moments of the previous night she had forgotten all about her promise.

Maude looked pleased. "Then I haven't interfered with your plans? Shall we go to my place now for tea?"

"Since you're here, why not have tea with me?"

"Very well, this time we shall remain here," the older

woman said. "I'm very restless today. I would like to move about a little. Suppose we postpone tea and get a carriage. I could perhaps show you something more of Calcutta."

"That would be fine," Priscilla said.

"There's a faint breeze," Maude Hudson said. "Be sure and bring a parasol whenever you go out in the sun. You can become ill without realizing what is happening."

A little later Priscilla sat beside the older woman in a carriage moving slowly through the Calcutta streets. She was shocked by the filth, poverty and famine.

Maude, her parasol carefully over her head, told her, "Thousands of these unfortunate souls have no homes and sleep in the streets and alleys. Often the best shelter is taken over by cows!"

"Because they believe the cow is sacred?" she suggested.

"Yes. Cholera is also a constant threat."

"I do not wonder! Things are so unsanitary!" Priscilla said. "The city seems to be poisoning everything around it, including the river and harbor with its waste."

The older woman said, "Now I shall show you some things which will show that India also has beauty."

They went by fabulous white buildings which brightly reflected the rays of the sun. They saw members of the rich European colony, their women veiled and wearing Muslim dresses, and like themselves holding parasols over their heads. She wondered, "How can they ignore the poverty and misery around them?"

"You will come to accept it," Maude said. "We all do." They went by the palace of the governor-general, Lord Canning. Priscilla remembered prim Mrs. Copley, whose husband was a legal member of the governor-general's staff. They arrived at a time when Lord Canning was actually entering the palace's gold-topped gates. His carriage wheels struck sparks from the courtyard's cobble-

stones. Footmen in fine livery attended him as he stepped out of the carriage with its crest of gold.

Priscilla said, "First the poverty and now the pageantry!"

Maude smiled. "Well said, my dear."

The carriage took them back to the barracks. She bade Maude good-by at her door. "Thank you for a memorable afternoon," she said.

The older woman offered her a pathetic smile in return. "I hope you were not bored. I enjoyed it. I often find myself terribly lonely."

"Remember we are to have tea together soon," Priscilla said.

"Tomorrow?"

"Why not?" Priscilla said. "At three."

They parted and she went inside to find that Edward was there, already in his full dress uniform. He said, "Where have you been?"

"Out sightseeing with Maude Hudson. What is going on?"

He smiled. "The colonel has invited us to his bungalow for drinks. It's just for drinks. We'll return here for dinner. Kara Singh will have it ready."

She gave a tiny groan. "Is Calcutta to be a continuous round of parties? I'll feel I'm back at the club again!"

"Cheer up," he said. "This won't be a long affair."

"I have to change!" she said in a panic. "I don't want to be late."

"We have a little time yet," he said. "I don't expect there will be too many people there. It's rather an honor to be invited."

"I'm sure of it," she called from the other room as she hastily went about changing and freshening up.

She was sitting at her dressing table making up her face before the mirror when Edward rather shyly came

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into the room. He said, "Mind if I sit here and admire you?"

"Not at all!" she laughed. And patted some powder over the rouge she'd applied. Then she turned and saw him staring at her oddly. "What is it?" she asked.

He said, "I'm wondering if I treated you fairly in making you marry me."

"You didn't make me! I wanted to!"

"You must miss London."

"What has that to do with it?" she said. "I enjoy being here as your wife even if I do find the country difficult and uncivilized."

"Had you come here on your own you would not have stayed," he said.

"I could not return to England," she said. "You know that."

"You'd probably have gone to Australia or even back to America," he suggested.

She got up and came over and kissed him. "Whatever happens I'm glad we met and married. You have put some hope in my life."

He held onto her hand. "I'm beginning to be afraid for you. The rumors you heard do have some foundation. I made some inquiries today. Things are worse than I thought!"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "We're together. Let us hurry so we're not late for the colonel's party."

Colonel Thomas Mason was receiving with a genial gleam in his watery eyes. His bloated stomach strained at his red tunic so richly embellished with gold braid. His purplish face contrasted with his white hair and whiskers. He had undoubtedly been imbibing since he rose that morning which was generally the custom with most old India veterans. He greeted them warmly and they moved on to join the other guests.

Priscilla was delighted to see the Mackin family present. And Nina Mackin, the poet and pianist, came to her with a pleasant-looking sandy-haired young officer in tow.

"Dear Mrs. Peel," the doctor's lovely daughter said, "may I introduce you to my new friend, Captain Ronald Tredale."

"I'm happy to meet you, Captain Tredale," she said. "Am I right in thinking I have heard that name before? Is there not a Sir Alan Tredale on the London stage?"

The young man looked pleased. He said, "Yes. Sir Alan is my uncle. We are very proud of him."

"Well you might be," she said. "I have seen him act." She could also have told them that she had seen him gamble at the club, had she dared.

The young man said, "There are several brothers. Sir Alan is the oldest and my father the youngest."

She asked, "What is his profession?"

"He is a lawyer in Leeds," Captain Tredale said. "But the family always have a reunion in London annually."

Nina's eyes were sparkling and her pretty face colored prettily as she said, "I wanted you two to meet."

"I'm happy to know Captain Tredale," Priscilla said. "You two must come and visit with Captain Peel and me very soon."

"Thank you," the young man said. "Good of you. A touch of back home in a foreign land."

"It's Captain Tredale's first time in India," Nina Mackin said.

"And mine," Priscilla said. "We also have that in common."

Edward came with the usual gin and tonic, which, she was forced to admit, seemed a suitable drink for the hot climate. Then he told her, "I want you to meet our padre, Major Smith."

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Priscilla found herself being guided by her husband to greet a thin man with a grim visage and heavy glasses, who had the look of a fanatic.

"May I present my wife, Priscilla, Major Smith," Edward said.

The padre was a small man. He eyed her with some arrogance and said, "My pleasure, Mrs. Peel. I understand you were married on board ship."

"Yes, we were," she said.

The little man looked grim. "Rather a hasty romance, I would assume."

Edward said quickly, "We did not need a long courtship. We found much we liked in each other."

The padre raised an eyebrow. "Really? In my experience I have found that long courtships produce the happiest marriages."

She said, "How does one weigh the value of love, Major Smith?"

His fanatical eyes fixed on her. "Are you thinking of Christian love or of lust, madam?"

Edward came to her rescue. "Should one put a religious tag on love, padre? I think that rather unsound."

The padre was a little taken back by this reproof. He said, "I am a theologian. My thinking is bound to be at odds with those outside the church."

Edward said, "I understand. I'm sure you meant nothing personal in your comments."

"I rarely do, I try to speak in a general way," the little man said pompously. And to Priscilla, he asked, "Do you have any talents?"

Somewhat bewildered, she said, "Talents?"

He showed irritability. "Is that such a strange question? I mean do you do anything especially well such as sew, cook, sing or recite."

She said, "I enjoy reading aloud."

"Excellent!" Major Smith said. "I shall have you read some suitable poetry to my Young Ladies' Guild some evening. We have a very active group at Cranpore."

She said, "I'm not sure I do it well enough. I have never read in public."

"Now is the time to begin," he told her. He turned to Edward. "How are the preparations for our transfer to Cranpore coming along?"

"Fairly well," Edward said. "Your copies of the Bible in the native language of the province have arrived—several large wooden boxes of them."

"I wondered about my Bibles," the major said, smiling for the first time. "The missionary society in London promised they would be generous with me as soon as the edition was ready."

"They must have sent at least a thousand copies."

"Seed for the field," Major Ian Smith said piously. "I shall not be idle in Cranpore."

Priscilla, who had been quietly listening, now asked him, "Do you think it wise to push religious conversion when it has become such a volatile subject lately? I'm speaking of the recent uprisings."

"Do you not think I should spread the good word?" the major asked severely.

"I think this may be a time to approach the subject with discretion," she said.

"I do not," he snapped at her. "My purpose in India is to spread the Gospel and win converts for the Lord."

She said, "I would expect your first duty would be to the men of the regiment. To give them comfort and protection. You're endangering them with your proposed missionary activity."

"Are you trying to tell me things about India?" the padre asked angrily.

"I'm reminding you of the sepoy troubles. You seem to have forgotten them," she said quietly.

"I do not care to continue this discussion," the major said and strode off in a rage.

Edward laughed. "I've never seen you handle anyone better!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should have kept my tongue between my teeth."

"You did right," he said. "He started it by criticizing our marriage."

Just then the colonel came by with a flushed face and in a genial mood. "Am I to understand you have been discussing the sepoys?"

"Yes," she said. "With the padre. Our viewpoints are somewhat different."

The colonel chuckled. "I should hope so. Nasty little fellah! About the sepoys, first-rate soldiers, but they've been causing a bit of trouble! Settled down now! Shot one of them from a cannon mouth and they all quieted down."

"I heard about that before. I hoped it wasn't true."

"Absolutely true!" the colonel said.

"I'm sorry to hear it," she said. "I think in the end such cruel behavior will bring on more tragedy."

The colonel had been gazing around and not listening to her. He said, "Jolly good party, don't you think?"

"First rate," Edward was quick to reply.

"I have often served in the hills," the old colonel said. "Once I was at Amritsar. Ever hear of it?"

Priscilla said, "No."

He beamed at her. "My first station years ago! The Holy City of the Sikhs and the site of their Golden Temple. Sikhism is a religious outgrowth of Hinduism! Same thing, except the Sikhs believe in one God and don't worship idols."

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"Like Christianity," she suggested.

"Not all that different," he said. "As symbols of his religion the Sikh wears a turban and beard. They also have a bracelet on one wrist and carry a dagger. The Sikh doesn't cut his hair but coils it into a knot, so, held in place by a wooden comb on the top of his head."

Priscilla said, "Strange," She was actually enjoying hearing more of Indian lore.

The colonel nodded. "The Sikh carefully trims and curls his beard. Now this fussing with beards might make you think they are effeminate fellahs! Not at all! They rank with the Pathans and the Gurkhas as the best fighting men among the natives of India."

Edward commented "I agree with that."

The colonel said, "I was a young man when I first saw the Golden Temple. A gilded building set in a body of water called the Pool of Immortality. Sikhs bathe and party around that pool. I had an Irish officer with me who knew the place. He had me take off my shoes and cover my head with a kerchief. I had to leave my pipe and tobacco behind before I followed him in and kissed the doorstep. He warned me not to touch it with my feet."

Priscilla was all interest. "And what then?"

"We entered the temple," the colonel said. "Inside the richly decorated building musicians played and chanted. We stood there listening to it all. A white-bearded ancient read aloud from the Sikh scriptures. The Irishman told me the music and chanting would go on for hours. It began at four in the morning and continued until midnight." The colonel ended his account abruptly and stood staring at his empty glass. He clapped his hands and a servant in white *dhota* came quickly to take it and refill it.

"Thank you for an interesting story," she told the old man.

"All in the past," the colonel said. "Live in another day now. No more adventure."

Edward said, "It is a fine party but I think we should leave now, sir."

The colonel looked sad. "So soon? Well, if you must! Come again, both of you. Delighted to have you any time."

They left the colonel's bungalow with guards stationed at its door. She said, "The colonel believes in tight security."

"I think he's wise," Edward said.

As they strolled along in the warm darkness, she said, "The colonel is an old dear but I don't like your padre."

"We'll have little to do with him," Edward said grimly.

"Are there any other clergy at Cranpore?"

"I expect you will meet the Presbyterian padre. He's a dour chap but his heart is in the right place. Not at all like Smith."

"Will the colonel be in full charge at Cranpore?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

She said, "I don't know. He does drink a great deal."

"Not anything like the man up there now," Edward warned her. "The word from Cranpore is that Colonel Simpson, the man in charge at this moment, is so far gone with drink and fat he has to be carried about on a litter!"

"You're joking!" she said, halting and staring up at him.

"No, it's the truth," he said. "They claim it has been years since he's been able to mount a horse. I guess he rarely leaves his house."

"Scandalous!" she said as they resumed walking.

Edward said, "Can you expect anything better in an army in which commissions and promotions are bought

and sold like in a retail store? That practice has to be ended or the army will collapse."

"It should never have existed," she said. "Will you tell me how it came about?"

"In the old days royalty wanted officers only from the privileged, loyal nobles. So they put a price on being an army leader."

Priscilla found herself unable to adjust to the heat. The days which followed had a sameness to them. She became accustomed to the servants always hovering about. And she and Maude Hudson often had tea together and became good friends.

One afternoon, Maude confided sadly, "I was wrong to marry a younger man. Especially such a vain man! I'm sure he's ashamed of me!"

"He asked you to be his wife," Priscilla reminded her.

"It was because of my money. I knew that, of course, but I felt he might come to care for me despite our difference in age. I was wrong. Now, I only hope he doesn't hurt the lives of others with his many affairs."

"I see that as the real danger," she agreed, thinking of Nell.

"I dare not mention you to him," Maude confided. "Your name seems to send him into a rage. Have he and your husband had some quarrel?"

"I don't think so."

Maude stared at her. "Did he try to force himself on you?"

"No," she said. "But I did rescue a younger woman from his hands."

"I knew there had to be something. Thank you for telling me."

Priscilla said, "Perhaps he will behave better when we reach Cranpore. He will have more to do."

"No," Maude sighed. "He'll be worse up there. I know from the past."

Priscilla did not find this news cheering. And her meeting with Nell a few days later also bothered her.

Priscilla said warmly, "I haven't seen you since the night of the first party."

"No," Nell responded tersely.

"How are you and John getting along?"

Nell, in her many-frilled pale blue dress and straw hat with wide brim and blue ribbons trailing, shifted her blue parasol from one shoulder to the other. With a shrug, she said, "Well enough, I suppose."

"He was not angry?"

"No," Nell said, crimsoning. "What right did he have to be angry with me?"

"We both know that," she said.

Nell looked more unhappy. Then she blurted out, "All right, you helped me! And I'm grateful. But I think perhaps too much was made of it!"

"He was about to rape you!"

"No! He wouldn't have done that," Nell protested.

She said grimly, "He tore your dress and had you on the bed. What more proof do you need? When I arrived you were shouting for help!"

"I know, I got frightened," Nell said.

"Have you been seeing Captain Hudson since the other night? Don't lie to me."

Nell pouted. "He did take the trouble to come see me."

"I'm sure he came when he knew your husband wouldn't be around!"

Nell looked hurt. "John was away on duty. I didn't let him inside."

"Indeed," she said with sarcasm.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"He apologized."

"Did he?"

"I forgave him."

"Charming!"

"Yes. I agreed that males are on a lower level than females when it comes to love. But one can't condemn them for it. Male aggressiveness leads to all the great achievements of men."

"And some not so great," she said grimly.

Nell said, "You're making fun of me! He did truly say he was sorry."

Priscilla said sadly, "I thought you were smarter. I honestly did."

Nell said, "I may be stupid but I know we don't want the officers fighting among themselves."

She said, "Then you'd better not offer yourself around so freely."

"How dare you!" Nell gasped.

"I know what I'm talking about. You encouraged him and then lost your nerve," Priscilla said in disgust. "I should have let him take you!"

Nell turned away. "I won't listen to you!"

"I think you should for your husband's sake if not for your own," she said. "Things will be more difficult at Cranpore and Captain Hudson means to add you to his conquests."

"I bid you good afternoon, Mrs. Peel," the blonde said indignantly and stalked off.

Priscilla turned and started back to her bungalow to find that someone had been standing a short distance behind her taking in the little scene.

It was Captain Hudson, who now advanced to her with a sneer on his flashily handsome face. "You didn't get very far with Nell, did you?"

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"No," she said. "I didn't."

He said, "That's only the beginning. I'm really going to pay you back." And he saluted her and marched by.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She was stretched out on the bed resting when she heard Edward come into the living room. Getting up she pushed through the beaded curtain of the bedroom door and went out to him. He removed his sun helmet and took her in his arms and kissed her.

He said, "Have Kara Singh bring us something cold to drink."

She smiled wanly. "Gin and tonic?"

"Yes," he said. "I need one!"

She went to the kitchen and ordered the drinks and then returned to the living room. Edward was standing with his brow wrinkled by a frown.

She said, "I had an interesting meeting today."

He glanced at her. "Oh?"

"Yes. I was out strolling and I came face to face with

Nell Henderson. And you won't believe this! She accused me of intruding. Claimed that Captain Hudson really had no intention of harming her beyond a few kisses!"

Edward's eyes widened. "She said that?"

"I've always thought her something of a fool," Priscilla said bitterly. "But I never gave her credit for being this silly." She sank down in a wicker easy chair as Kara Singh came in with their drinks. When he had gone back to the kitchen she continued, "I couldn't help being angry! I gave her a lecture!"

He sat down across from her and sipped his drink. "Did it do any good?"

"None. She said Ralph Hudson had apologized and she had made up her mind to accept the apology."

Edward said, "You know what that means. He will go on keeping after her until he gets his way."

"I'm not sure I care any longer."

"I do," her husband said. "For John's sake. He is in such a state he's not able to do his work properly."

She said, "I do feel sorry for him. But what can one do?"

"Pray that Nell will come to her senses or that friend Hudson will tire of the chase. Surely his wife should be able to keep him better in line."

Priscilla shook her head. "She's resigned to his being a rotter."

"That's unfortunate," he said, sipping his drink again. "I think I see other trouble in the offing with Hudson."

"Oh, no!"

"Yes. I passed him today chatting with that nice girl, Nina Mackin. From the way the charm was oozing, I'd say he has her marked as his next victim."

"She must be warned," Priscilla said.

"Nina is an intelligent girl and young Tredale, the new

junior officer, is interested in her. Will you talk to her?"

"What if she reacts like Nell?"

"I'm certain she won't!" Edward stared at his glass glumly. "It would seem that Nell has a wish to destroy herself and her marriage."

"I didn't tell you everything!"

"There's more?" he said in surprise.

"Yes," she said. "When I finished talking with her and turned around I found Captain Hudson standing a short distance behind me. He could have overheard our conversation easily. He gave me a sneering smile."

Edward looked angry. "Did he say anything?"

"You won't fly in a rage and do something rash?"

"Is that the way I usually behave?"

"No."

"Well, then?"

She said, "He bragged about winning over Nell. He hinted that he had done it especially to get back at me."

Edward showed disgust. "He should spend more of his time soldiering than on silly revenge games."

"And he ended by telling me he wasn't finished. That he still considered the score with me wasn't settled."

Edward jumped up, his pleasant face livid with rage. "By heaven, that does it! I shall go to his bungalow and take him out and give him the drubbing of his life!"

"No," she said, rising. "That would be no solution."

He stared at her. "You think he shouldn't be punished for such behavior?"

"We must consider the morale of the regiment even if he doesn't. A scandal would do everyone harm. Disorganize things when you are all so busy. Let us get on to Cranpore. If he continues his miserable tricks there I think you should report him to the colonel."

"Colonel Mason?" he said. "What do you think he'd do?"

"Punish him."

"The colonel will do nothing. All he cares about is his gin and tonic. He's half-drunk most of the day and all of the night."

"I still say let the matter stand until we reach Cranpore. Then if you have to deal with it, act as you think best."

Still angry, he said, "I've told you what I think best."

"You're short on officers, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"If you and Hudson get in a brawl you might be kept here for a trial. Then the transport would leave with even less officers."

Edward sighed and continued to pace back and forth slowly. "That is the only good reason for not having a showdown with him now."

She said, "The heat is fearful here. How soon before we leave?"

"Before the end of the week," he told her. "But don't expect it to be cooler along the road. And don't think you're going to reach Cranpore overnight. It will take a week."

"With nightly stops along the road?"

"Yes. We're still short of transport. And Major Smith is insisting that ten heavy wooden cases of Bibles be carted along on the first expedition. Sheer madness!"

"I expect that from him."

"It will mean taking along that much less ammunition, guns and provisions. But you can't argue with him. He sees himself as God's appointed leader here."

"So?"

"We'll be short that much vital supplies," her husband said. Throwing himself into a chair, he gave her a troubled glance. "I hate to mention it. But that's not all."

She knelt by his chair and took his hand in hers. "I

knew you were upset when I first saw you. So I told you my bad news first."

"At least we have something to share! Bad news!" he said with a sour smile.

"Go on," she insisted.

"Everett is in serious trouble. Gambling."

"He's lost heavily?" she ventured.

He nodded. "Yes. He apparently was unable to find a money lender who would risk giving him the money to pay his debts. So he has been posted on the wall of the Officers' Mess."

She gazed up at her husband seriously. "And what does that mean?"

"He'll lose his rank. If he remains in the army it will be as a private soldier. I warned him!"

"Poor man!"

"Ruined by gambling fever," Edward said. "It is a pity."

Priscilla said, "Like many good men before him!" She was thinking about Thomas Manley.

"The regiment will lose an officer when it badly needs more and I will lose a friend," he mourned.

"All the more reason for not bringing the Hudson affair to a crisis point."

"I won't," he said. "At least not yet. But I'll depend on you to speak to Nina and warn her."

The following afternoon she sent Kara Singh with a message to the doctor's bungalow. And about an hour later the pretty dark girl appeared for tea. Sitting together on a divan facing the tea stand, they discussed the coming move to Cranpore.

Nina said, "I have never made the journey. But my parents have. My father says it is a slow business and may take a week with only a few hours rest and sleep each night."

"Still, we will be on our way to the hills of Kashmir. And it is supposed to be cooler there."

"That is a good point," Nina agreed as she took a cup of tea from Priscilla. "And father says it is the best time to make the trip. When it is rainy the wagons and heavy guns get bogged down in the mud."

Priscilla smiled over her own tea cup. "Which means when it is dry, as it is now, it will be terribly dusty."

Nina smiled. "The climate isn't good. Captain Tredale despises it. He's counting the months before he can leave the service and return to England."

"Perhaps you should marry him and return with him."

Nina said, "You really think that?"

"Yes. Things are not good here no matter what they tell you. There could be a violent uprising at any time."

The younger girl said, "I heard my father discussing that with mother. They stopped when I came near."

Priscilla said, "You like young Tredale. I think he'd make a good husband."

Nina looked down. "I'm not sure I'm ready to marry. You see so many unhappy marriages."

"Oh?"

The girl quickly smiled at her. "Not yours, I didn't mean that!"

"I'm glad," she said.

"But take Captain Hudson's case," Nina said with some awkwardness. "Even he admits he made a terrible mistake marrying that older woman."

She gave the girl a searching look. "Don't you find it strange that he should say this to you?"

Nina blushed. "I guess he needed someone to confide in."

"He's confided in a lot of women!" she said with disgust. "He'll tell the same sad tale to any woman who'll listen and who he hopes will go to bed with him."

Nina looked shocked. "Mrs. Peel!"

"I must speak frankly. I don't want you to misunderstand. That is what he wants!"

"He appears to be so charming!"

"A charming man does not speak ill of his wife behind her back. He married Maude Hudson so he could use her money to buy his commission and future promotions."

Nina's blush had faded and now she was pale. In a small voice, she said, "You are sure of this?"

"I know his wife. He's even made her think that she was the one wrong. But commonsense must make you see that he, arrogant and independent as he is, would not marry a woman unless it suited him."

"What a dreadful thing to do. And how awful for poor Mrs. Hudson!"

"She is far too ready to forgive him," Priscilla said unhappily. "What she ought to do right now is return to England and leave him here to his games."

"Why doesn't she?"

"Because she has always been a faithful wife in spite of his cruelty to her."

"I shall avoid him in the future," Nina promised.

"You would be wise to. And expect him to pursue you all the harder if you are cool to him. His nature demands that he conquer women. Then he discards them and moves on to someone else."

"He is an evil man!"

"And he doesn't even think about it or worry about it. Just now he is after Nell Henderson."

Nina's mouth gaped. "That silly blonde?"

"Yes. Her husband worships her despite her shortcomings. They could have a wonderful marriage. But Hudson has chosen to intrude."

"Will she pay attention to him?"

"I'm afraid so." And she told her what had happened

the night of the party, ending with, "And even after all that she is seeing him again. She is a very headstrong and silly young woman!"

"He has the charm of the very evil," Nina said.

"I know."

"But don't worry about me, Mrs. Peel," the doctor's daughter said. "A warning is sufficient. And I happen to be fond of Captain Tredale."

"I think you two would make a fine pair," Priscilla said. "And I'd hate to have Captain Hudson break it up."

"Don't worry, he won't!" Nina said as they went on with their tea.

Later, when she was having her afternoon rest before Edward returned from his labors, she thought about it all. She had at least been successful in spoiling one of Hudson's little games. The victory was not all his. And with some luck Nell Henderson might come to her senses.

That this was not likely to happen was shown that evening. She and Edward were sitting reading the London newspapers which had just arrived. She always ran through them thoroughly to see if there were any mention of the murder of Sir Alfred Coombs. So far she had found none. Since the press must have given the story sensational coverage, she decided that she had missed those issues. This was not surprising since she had been on shipboard for a long while after the incident when the story would be front page news.

There was a knock on the door and Edward answered. Young Captain John Henderson came in with a wan smile on his thin face. He said, "I came for Nell. Did I somehow miss her?"

Edward and Priscilla exchanged glances. Priscilla, who had also stood up, moved across the lamplit room to him. She said, "Did she tell you she was coming here?"

"Yes," John said. "I know you see her a lot. And I

appreciate your being company for her. She's most unhappy."

Priscilla gave Edward another look. "Yes," she said, "I realize she doesn't like India."

"On the other nights Edward had to bring her home," John said. "I intended to surprise her tonight by coming for her. Isn't she here?"

"I'm afraid not," Edward said. "Perhaps she decided to go somewhere else at the last minute."

The young officer looked upset. "But she said she was coming here!" He stood there uncertainly, his young face pale. "I'm sorry I intruded in this way."

"Not at all. Stay a while if you like," Edward told him.

"No," he said. "I must find Nell."

Priscilla said, "I'd go home and wait for her. She's bound to be back soon."

"I suppose so," he said doubtfully. "Thank you, both." And he left.

As soon as he'd gone Edward and Priscilla faced each other with troubled expressions on their faces. She said, "Well, it seems that Hudson has won out with Nell."

Edward nodded. "The hussy! Telling her husband that she was here and that I had escorted her home!"

"I feel so sorry for them both," Priscilla said. "Hudson has ruined what might have been a happy marriage."

"I wonder," Edward said. "I think if Hudson hadn't turned up it might have been someone else. Nell will never be happy with anyone. Least of all with herself!"

Another knock came on the door. Priscilla whispered, "Do you suppose he's back?"

"We'll see," Edward said. And he returned to the door and opened it. This time their visitor was the young captain Everett Hickman, dressed in his best uniform and looking very impressive.

"May I come in?" he asked, removing his white helmet.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"Glad to see you!" Edward said. "I'll order some drinks."

After the drinks were served and they sat around the table with the rose-bowl lamp on it, Everett smiled wryly.

"This is the last evening before I revert to the ranks."

Edward frowned. "You had no help from the colonel?"

"He can't do anything," his friend said. "I brought on my own disgrace."

Priscilla touched his hand. "It's a shame! And bad for the regiment when officers are needed."

"Not those who can't meet their gambling debts," the man with the scarred cheek said. "I'm not the first to find myself in this position."

"Was the gambling worth it?" she asked.

He looked grimly amused. "Would you be shocked if I told you I think it was worth it to me?"

"No," she said quietly. "You are aware I spent a long while as hostess of a gaming house."

Captain Hickman looked embarrassed.

Priscilla smiled sympathetically. "I have known other fine men ruined by gambling. It is like drinking. Some can handle it and some can't."

"What is going to happen to you?" Edward worried.

"You will not be seeing me, good friend. I shall be in the regiment but in the ranks, not among the officers. I shall live a different life but I shall be at Cranpore."

Edward said, "You could transfer? Would it not be easier for you than becoming a common soldier in the Nineteenth?"

Everett Hickman said, "I've been in several wars. And I find nothing common about the British soldier. I may learn a good deal in the ranks. I will also be able to gamble with lower stakes that will not get me in so much trouble."

Priscilla said, "As long as you remain with the regi-

ment we can go on being friends. We will see you the same as in the past."

"I fear not," he said. "Edward will explain the matter. Ordinary soldiers do not socialize with officers and their ladies. Not in this army. So the only time you'll see me will be on drill or parade. But I shall keep a sharp eye open for you and though I may not address you, you will know I'm glad to see you."

"I think it all monstrous," she declared.

Edward told her, "He is right. Those are the army rules and we must live by them."

"I find myself disliking your army rules," she said petulantly.

"Thank you for caring, both of you," the man with the scar said. "I shall treasure the memory of our friendship and of this evening."

Edward looked solemn. "Why don't you stay here at barracks?"

"I have a loyalty to the regiment," his friend said.

"You know we are heading into a dangerous situation," Edward pointed out.

Hickman shrugged. "You are taking your wife with you."

"I wish I weren't, if the truth be told," her husband said grimly.

She turned to him, "I insist on being at your side."

"You see?" Hickman said. "And I insist on remaining with the regiment."

Edward gave a deep sigh. "It seems to be calm enough now but I keep wondering if it isn't the sort of calm which heralds a storm."

That night Priscilla found her husband's lovemaking more urgent than ever before. He clung to her with a kind of desperation; he could not seem to have enough of her. She, too, lost herself in these moments of ecstasy, thank-

ful for the present and like Edward, fearful of what might await them in the hill country.

The next afternoon she had Maude Hudson over again for tea. The older woman told her, "I'm beginning to hope that Ralph may be on the way to being a better husband."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said.

"It's only a small thing." Maude Hudson smiled. "But he has worked many evenings lately."

"Has he?" She wondered how many of those evenings had been spent with Nell.

"I have the seating for the journey to Cranpore," Mrs. Hudson continued. "You and I, Mrs. Mackin and Nina will ride in one carriage."

She smiled. "They told me I'd have to ride a camel."

"You'd never manage it," the other woman said. "They roll terribly and are extremely stubborn."

"Then your news is good," she said.

"You must wear your lightest clothing," Maude warned her. "It will be a journey in the blazing sun and the dust from such a caravan is beyond belief."

She said, "I suppose the caravan will be a lone one." one."

"So long that it will stop in two sections along the way."

"Will the camps be guarded?"

"Always," the older woman said. "And especially in times such as these."

Two days later under the relentless, blazing sun the caravan assembled in the barracks. Old Colonel Mason, in plumed helmet and full dress uniform, led the Nineteenth Regiment out through the streets of the city and into the open country to begin the long journey to Cranpore.

The army band played a rousing march all through the city. But when they reached the countryside they broke ranks and joined the other groups of marching soldiers.

Priscilla, in an open carriage with Maude, Nina and her mother, kept an eye out for Everett Hickman but could not single him out from among the marching men. She did notice that Nell Henderson was in a carriage with some young officers' wives whom she had not met. And ever so often Captain Hudson rode by this carriage on his white horse, waving to the ladies with great gallantry.

Because of the great amount of luggage there were servants for every man of the regiment, which added up to a long column of Indians. Priscilla's carriage was somewhere in the middle of the seemingly never-ending line.

While every officer had two camels for his personal things, some asked for ten. And it was said that Colonel Mason had demanded twenty. All the mess equipment of dishes, silverware, tables and chairs were brought along—even a piano for musical nights.

Then there were the waterbearers, the camp cooks, and sweepers to dig latrines for sanitation. And the mess bar traveled along with all varieties of spirits and even ice to cool the drinks. The number of camp followers exceeded the strength of the regiment. And all these people had wives and children, not to mention cats and dogs, monkeys, parrots and every other sort of pet imaginable.

Priscilla said, "There's so many servants and their families."

Mrs. Mackin told her, "My husband says they outnumber us twenty to one in the caravan."

There were all sorts of beasts of burden, camels, great elephants, mules and many horses of every variety and size. Some were fine animals for riding, others pulled

ammunition wagons and food carts. It was left for the most powerful of the elephants to drag along cannon.

Priscilla said to Maude, "We would be a delightful target for attack, if anyone so wished."

"True," the older woman agreed. "An enemy force could strike and be gone before we became aware of what had taken place!"

The children in the caravan, when the novelty of being part of the long procession wore off, became bored and restless. No stirring band music now, just the weary shouts of commands, the sounds from the various work animals and the wailing of infants.

With the approach of darkness camp was made for the first night. A number of bonfires along the trail showed where groups had gathered to eat and sleep. Priscilla knew only that she would be relieved when they reached Cranpore, where she could establish some kind of permanent home.

Edward rode up shortly after the meal. He looked dusty and weary as he dismounted and came over to her. After their kiss of greeting, he said, "We've made fair progress today, but we've pushed the troops. I'm not sure we can do as well every day."

"How many days?"

"Six or seven," he said. "The thing becomes more of an ordeal as we move on and everyone gets more weary."

Mrs. Mackin came up to them and asked Edward, "Do you know where the doctor is?"

Edward said, "There's a question of a case of cholera among the camp followers. He's gone to check it out. Should the rumor be true, we'll have to send the victim to the nearest village to protect the caravan."

The doctor's wife took the news with the resignation of one used to such crises. She said, "Then I expect I won't see him tonight."

Edward said, "I'm afraid not. When he reports to the colonel I'll tell him I saw you and all was well."

Mrs. Mackin said, "Yes. Nina and I are quite comfortable. And we are enjoying the company of Mrs. Hudson and your wife."

Edward smiled. "Have her tell you some tales about New York."

So the next day to break the monotony she was enlisted in the role of story-teller. She found herself the focus of attention as she told about the great American city where she had lived. And she told how she had posed in the nude for Timothy Rourke and how respectable it had been.

"And then I met myself in one of his paintings on the ship coming to England," she said with a smile.

Nina laughed. "In the nude?"

"Naked as a jay bird," Priscilla said, joining in the laughter. "However, a friend helped smooth the situation over."

"Who?" Mrs. Mackin wanted to know.

She did not want to mention Thomas Manley's name, so she said, "It was a man I'd first met in New York."

Nina said, "Where is he now?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "I think he may still be in London. I've lost touch with him." She hastily began to tell them of the famous P. T. Barnum's "American Museum" in New York. Anything to get away from the awkward subject and memories of Thomas.

Edward had been right; the second day found everyone more weary than before. That night they ate little and slept as much as the makeshift sleeping arrangements allowed them. Priscilla did not see Edward again until the evening of the fourth day.

When he rode up she saw that his tunic was open and

his shirt open at the neck. Before he had appeared dust-ridden; now he looked outright shabby. And his face was haggard.

She smiled at him as he joined her. "Do I look as exhausted as you?"

"You always look cool and lovely," he said, taking her in his arms. "How do you manage it?"

"I'm actually sweaty and miserable," she said. "We all are and we will be until we reach Cranpore."

"We're better than halfway there," he said.

"What about the cholera case?" she asked.

"Turned out to be something else, thank heaven!"

As they talked another officer rode up. As he approached the bonfire she saw that it was Captain Hudson. He paid no attention to her or Edward but marched over to the other three ladies.

Edward said grimly, "He manages to be out of sight whenever there is a nasty job to be done."

"I'm sure of that," she said.

They watched Hudson greet his wife rather casually and then turn his attention to Nina Mackin and her mother. He kept his back to his wife as he talked animatedly to the other two women.

After a little of this Priscilla was delighted to see Nina detach herself from the group and come over to join her and Edward.

Nina said in a low voice, "I hope you don't mind. Captain Hudson was paying far too much attention to me and ignoring his wife."

"I'm glad you came over," Priscilla said. She saw that Hudson had turned and was now scowling in their direction. "I think you've let him know how you feel about him."

"I hope so," the pretty dark girl said.

Edward told her, "Your friend Captain Tredale is

acting as the colonel's personal officer and so he can't get back here this far."

Nina said, "Tell him I was asking for him."

"You may depend on it," Edward said.

Captain Hudson returned to his horse without looking their way and rode off. Priscilla knew she would be blamed for informing Nina about him.

Edward said, "I really must get back to my post now."

And he kissed her and left.

The four women slumped in the carriage, their throats parched with heat and dust. They always seemed to have a layer of dust on their faces and clothing. And there was little water to wash their faces. Life had to be lived under the most primitive conditions in such a caravan.

The ordeal of the travel each day was only matched by the uncomfortable camp at night. By the sixth day, the long column moved so slowly it was frustrating. It must have been the same for the animals as for the humans. An elephant went wild and turned on its keeper; it had to be shot. The cannon it had drawn was left to be hooked onto a team of horses. They could not manage it and the great cannon sank down into the sandy spot. In due course it was abandoned.

The sixth night arrived and all the weary members of the long caravan fervently wished that the morrow would see them to the fortress known as Cranpore. The nights, at least, were cooler because of their having reached the mountainous area.

In the morning she was awake to see the sunrise and Nina came to stand at her side. "Isn't it a majestic sight! Such mountains! They must be part of the Himalayas!"

"Yes, at last!" she said with a tired smile for the eager young girl. So this was the kingdom of the handsome

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Prince Hali who had once begged her to be his wife!
Would she finally see the great marble palace of which
he'd told her?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Priscilla found nothing majestic about Cranpore itself. This outpost of the British Empire high in the Kashmir hills was a rather miserable square of buildings of various sizes, surrounded on three sides by a stone wall about six feet high for protection and on the remaining side facing a fairly broad river which was presumed to offer many things, including the defense feature of a broad moat, a source of water and a pleasant view in contrast to the parched land around it.

The river wound down to another larger outpost and so it became the main avenue between the two places. But at many places it would not carry more than small boats and so could not be used for any heavy commerce. This fact was largely cursed by every commander arriving at Cranpore.

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Colonel Mason, weary and drawn-looking, was no exception. He took one look around him and at once asked the officer in charge, "How in damnation did this post become so run down?"

The young man flinched under the scorn of the veteran soldier's watery eyes and replied, "Our colonel had been a sick man for years, sir."

Colonel Mason snapped back, "And had the bad taste to die before I arrived."

"His timing was not the best, sir. That is true."

Priscilla had overheard the exchange at the party given for their arrival at the Officers' Mess.

In another group, Major Smith, the padre, was orating to some ladies who had gathered about him. "We shall have regular weekly services on Sundays, and a mid-week service on Wednesday. The concert hall will be used as a Sunday school. And the church will be occupied with different activities every night of the week."

Mrs. Mackin asked him, "Did you get your Bibles all safely here?"

The little man glared at the doctor's wife. "It is interesting that you brought that up, madam. We did get fifty wooden boxes of the Holy Word here. But this morning when we opened them I discovered to my chagrin they are not in any recognizable Indian language. By a process of deduction I have come to the conclusion they were printed for use in Africa!"

"How upsetting!" a little old woman with a weak voice said, putting her frail hands in the air to indicate her dismay.

"It is more than that, dear lady," the major said. "It is downright disgusting. The officials of the missionary society in London must be congenital idiots!"

"Padre!" the doctor's wife rebuked him mildly.

"I do not say this lightly, ma'am. I promise you."

"What do you propose to do?" the little woman asked.

"On next Guy Fawkes' day I shall have a blazing Holy fire which all will see for miles," the padre said angrily. "And I shall send an account of it to the offices of the missionary society in London and congratulate them on their efficiency in providing me logs for my fire!"

Priscilla moved on in the hot, crowded room and thought how much it resembled the Officers' Mess in Calcutta, only this one was much smaller. Suddenly a familiar voice at her elbow said, "Are you not speaking to me?"

She turned to see a rather dejected Nell. The slim blonde had not managed the trip well. She said, "I didn't know that you wished my company."

Nell's pale cheeks showed flushes of color. "I did not mean to offend you."

"You did," Priscilla said.

"I hope all that is forgotten," Nell said. "We shall be trapped up here in this dreadful place for two years. We cannot afford not to patch up our quarrels."

She gave the girl a keen look. "Could it be you wish to use me as an alibi again?"

"I do not understand," Nell said, looking frightened.

"I'm thinking of those many visits your husband claimed you made to my bungalow in Calcutta. When, in fact, you never came there at all."

"John must have made some mistake!" the girl protested.

"Yes, I can agree with you in that," she said with some sarcasm. And then looking across the room, she added, "I won't bore you with my mistaken comments any longer. I see Captain Hudson coming this way and I wouldn't wish to come between you two!"

The girl looked crestfallen as Priscilla moved quickly

away to the other end of the Officers' Mess, where the colonel was the main figure.

"How do you do, Mrs. Peel," a familiar voice said.

She looked around and found herself looking into the face of Captain Tredale. She said, "Have you seen Nina?"

"Yes," he said. "And thank you for your kindness to her on the trip here."

"It was a time when we all had to help one another," she said. "I was fortunate in having three good people with me."

The young officer nodded. "I also want to thank you for opening her eyes to the sort of fellow Captain Hudson is."

"I felt I had to speak."

"You were right. And Nina now knows how to handle him." He sighed. "It's too bad the wives of some of the other junior officers don't."

"I know," she agreed, sure he was referring to Nell Henderson.

He looked around him. "As soon as my time is up I'm finished with the service. It's back to England and a life in commerce for me."

She smiled. "Perhaps you might join your famous uncle on the stage."

He shook his head. "Never. That's not my idea of a good life either. I think I will article for the law with my father."

"It sounds like an excellent choice."

Shyly, he said. "Nina has nothing against the law and she fancies the idea of starting a music and voice school in Leeds."

"I'm sure you could both be happy there."

"We're not happy here," he said grimly. "If we can last through this next twenty-four months it will be all

right. The fort is in a poor state. Some of the defense buildings are falling down."

She smiled. "The houses **aren't** actually in ruins but they're not equal to the bungalows at Calcutta barracks. And I looked forward to coming here!"

"So did I," Captain Tredale said.

"We simply must make the best of it," she said. "I've asked for some paint and rugs for my floors. Everything has been promised me but then nothing happens."

"That's the pattern," her companion agreed. "It's the way the army and the British East India Company handle problems. And you can tell the results!"

"We're so far away from the other posts," she worried.

"We are that," he said. "And with only a single telegraph line for communication. Break the line once and there would be silence!"

Edward, resplendent in a new red tunic, joined them now. "Come, Captain Tredale, I cannot let you monopolize my wife! Go find your own girl!"

The young man laughed. "Good idea, sir. I will!" And he began making his way back into the crowded area of the room.

Edward smiled at her. "I know! You want to leave!"

"Do I look that miserable?"

"These affairs are not your sort of thing," he told her. "And I'm beginning to tire of them. So let's leave quietly. No one will know we've left."

Outside the air was pleasant if not as cool as she'd expected. They strolled along under the stars and made their way past several sentries to their new home. She had an elderly male servant named Ram something or other, but who seemed happy just to be called Ram. He had a grizzly, gray beard and a round face with a merry smile.

Ram had helpers whom she hadn't met. Gradually she was bringing to the simple one-story house assigned to

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them some semblance of home. When she was able to paint the living room and put down additional rugs it would be better. But the main thing was that they would not have to think of moving for several years. She and Edward could build their marriage and enjoy more of one another than in the past.

Oil lamps were lighted on the living room table and on the dresser in the bedroom. They went inside and he took her in his arms again.

Looking at her earnestly, he said, "Has this been too much of a disappointment for you?"

She smiled up at him. "No."

"It's not good enough," he said angrily. "Not what I want for you!"

"Just the same, this is better than a London prison," she teased, pulling his hair.

He smiled sadly. "And I suppose I rate above a prison guard?"

She covered his mouth with her hand. "Don't ever say that again. If I had not fallen in love with you I would not have married you!"

Edward said, "As a second son my life has been largely accepting what was left. You are my triumph! All the other humiliations vanish. You've made me a singularly happy man!"

She touched her lips to his. "I hope I never fail you," she said in a tense whisper.

In the week which followed she managed to finish the decoration of the house. After that she began taking a look about the compound.

The relentless sun was high in the sky; the day would be tormentingly hot. She moved to the edge of the parade ground and saw the great cannons lined up there. She had heard that sometimes the smaller of these were mounted on the backs of elephants, so they could be

fired with mobility. And that when the recoil from the blast came the poor beasts trumpeted with terror and trembled.

A drill was in progress. Artillerymen stood there in brass helmets, leather breeches and tiger skins. Behind the gunners on two sides of the square were two rows of soldiers in red coats. And almost at once she recognized the one on the end of the row nearest her as Everett Hickman. So he had maintained his loyalty to the regiment and made the long march to Cranpore. Like the others he carried his gun at a slope. On the third side of the square a full Indian regiment stood.

She watched for a little the intricate drill which followed and found herself thinking the whole business absurd. This was not the preparation for the sort of war they might face in India one day. Also, the cannon looked old and not very frightening. What would happen to this small group if hordes of angry brown men came swarming over the inadequate walls of the compound and across the river? It was not hard to imagine.

One wireless line to the outside world. That in itself was terrifying. She was afraid, constantly, but she didn't want Edward to find out. He was having his first real happiness with her and she didn't want to spoil it.

As she left the drill ground she met Maude Hudson with a shopping basket in her hand. The older woman smiled and told her, "I've just come from the stores. They get some fresh fruit and other things brought in almost every day."

"I must remember that," she said.

Maude sighed. "Well, Cranpore has deteriorated since I've been here."

"You would know."

The older woman gave her a worried look. "Have you found anything different about the servants here? Mine

are sullen fellows. There's hatred in the air."

"I'm not surprised."

"Well, we must make the best of it," Maude sighed. "I'm conducting a sewing class once a week at the chapel. Come if you find the time."

Priscilla smiled. I'll find the time."

Maude hesitated, and then said, "He's still seeing her."

"Nell?"

"Yes. They're both becoming bold about it," the older woman said. "I'm almost ashamed to show my face anywhere."

She touched her arm sympathetically. "You must not think that. You have many friends."

"I hoped Ralph would be better here though I knew he wouldn't," the older woman lamented. "I hope it doesn't end in tragedy for those young people."

"I find it hard to be concerned about Nell," she said. "But I am sorry for young John Henderson."

"So am I," Maude sighed.

Later, Priscilla told Edward about the conversation, saying, "I think Maude's health may break under the strain of it all."

"Hudson wouldn't care. He'd then be rid of her and have her fortune."

"You think him that callous?"

"Yes," Edward said sternly. "And if anyone breaks my guess is that it will be young Henderson. He goes about like someone in a daze and he walks out of any room Hudson enters."

"I imagine Hudson enjoys that. He likes to inflict cruelty."

"Without a question," Edward agreed.

"I watched the drills," she said. "I think this is a toy fortress with toy soldiers. If there's real trouble it may be difficult."

"We can hope there won't be," her husband said. "By the way, the palace of your friend Prince Hali is only about a ten-minute ride from here."

She smiled. "I cannot say he is my friend."

"You've said that before. But you did meet him. The story is that since he's become ruler he's been difficult to deal with. He is almost a recluse in his palace and any offer the British East India Company makes to him, he seems to think too little."

"That sounds like him," she said.

The next morning Nina Mackin appeared at her door smiling. She asked Priscilla, "Would you like to go riding?"

"I'd love it," she said, "but I have no outfit."

"Take one of mine. Ronald is having the horses saddled and brought around by ten. Later than that it would be too hot."

She said, "Can we be back by noon?"

"Yes," Nina said. "After that it will be boiling. And we don't want to go far. Ronald says there is good flat land outside the compound."

So she went to Nina's house and donned one of her riding outfits. Captain Ronald Tredale and two native soldiers arrived with three riding horses. They were fine animals and he'd had sidesaddles placed on two of them.

"Ready, ladies?" he asked. And he helped Priscilla up on the back of a bay mare. For Nina he had a spirited black horse. His own mount was a dappled gray. He led the way out of the compound past the guards on duty at the gates. She realized that she and Nina probably would not have been let by if they had attempted this alone.

Outside the compound they found that the young captain's promise was fulfilled. There was a good long stretch of flat fields suitable for riding. They rode abreast, raced for a little, and then galloped off on their own.

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Before she was aware of it Priscilla found herself out of sight of the others. She reined her mare and tried to decide which direction they had taken.

She was not alarmed but she was afraid the others might be concerned about her. She was about to turn the horse around and gallop back in the direction from which she had come when she was aware of another rider on her right, coming toward her at a rapid pace.

As the rider drew near she saw he was a native on a fine white horse and wearing a white silk uniform and turban. It was the black beard which she identified first and made her guess who it was. She urged the mare in his direction and rode to meet him.

In a moment they were face to face for the first time since they'd known each other at her uncle's house in England. It had not been all that long but yet it seemed an age. She reined in the mare.

Prince Hali looked astonished. "You!"

She smiled. "Yes. I decided to find your palace."

"It is not far away," he said. "You have grown more beautiful."

"And you have become more powerful!"

"That is nothing," he said with derision, keeping the white horse tautly reined. "I am a serf of your Queen."

"A very well-kept serf," she said.

He stared at her, not able to take his eyes off her. "I have thought of you often."

She said, "And I'm hardly likely to ever forget you."

His handsome face shadowed. "We could have had a beautiful life together. You spoiled it. How did you get here? Why have you come?"

"I came here with my husband," she said. "He is an officer at Cranpore."

"You married an Englishman!" he said, his tone derisive.

"Perhaps not as complex or volatile as you, Hali," she said. "But he is a good man. For the first time in my life I am happy."

"Is he that gambler you spoke of?"

"No."

He said, "So you enjoy leaving a trail of broken hearts behind you."

She laughed. "Come, Hali! I'm not that sort of *femme fatale*!"

"You are no ordinary woman."

"Nor are you an average man," she said. "Will you invite me to your palace one day?"

Prince Hali looked sullen. "Perhaps."

"Not exactly a warm invitation."

"English are no longer welcome in my house!"

She raised her eyebrows. "Not even a friendly English-woman?"

"It is possible. One day I may invite you," he said.

"I will be at Cranpore," she said. "My husband's name is Edward Peel. Captain Edward Peel."

"And you are Priscilla," he said, his eyes searching her face.

"Yes. I'm sorry you're at odds with the authorities. I hope it works out."

"Perhaps I will do something about it one day," he said.

Priscilla gave him an earnest look. "I wouldn't do anything rash, Hali. The British Empire is strong and supports the East India Company."

"But the British are weak in India," he said with a grim smile.

"Perhaps," she said. "You have a habit of seizing what you want, and by doing that you lose it." She turned her mare quickly and galloped off in the direction in which she'd come. She did not look back for quite

a few minutes and when she did he was still there, man and horse motionless against the horizon.

Within a few minutes she caught a glimpse of Nina and Ronald and shouted to them. They swung around, looking relieved. She rode down to join them.

Nina said, "We were terrified. We thought we'd lost you!"

Ronald said, "I was already trying to think of what I'd say to your husband."

She laughed. "I'm sorry I was so long. I met an old friend, Prince Hali."

Nina, lovely in her brown riding habit and hat, showed delight. "What is he like?"

"Much like he was when I met him in England."

Ronald said, "It's fortunate he knew you. He is strong against the British right now. And we are probably riding on his land."

"He said his palace was only a short way off," she said. "I asked him to invite me there. He wouldn't give me a definite answer."

"I hear he used to visit Cranpore and entertain the officers at his palace. They had fabulous times. But not any more."

Priscilla said, "It's too bad."

Nina nodded. "We'd better go back. We've had enough excitement for one day."

But the excitement was only beginning. At the compound they were halted by the guards. Then no less a personage than the dashing Captain Hudson came striding out to them, a scowl on his face.

Hudson, in his most military fashion, glared at them and said, "You will all three dismount and follow me to the quarters of Colonel Mason."

Ronald Tredale dismounted and in a friendly way, asked, "Is this some sort of joke, Hudson?"

"You will find out," he said shortly. "I will ask you and the ladies to follow me!"

Nina and Priscilla exchanged puzzled looks and got down from their horses. They left them with the stable-boys who had appeared and followed a ramrod-stiff Captain Hudson to the colonel's office.

Colonel Mason looked sober and in a bad mood. He gazed at them with his watery blue eyes as Captain Hudson brought them in.

He waved Hudson out, saying, "Thank you. I will not need you any longer."

Hudson saluted and said, "Yes, sir," and left.

The colonel did not ask any of them to be seated though he was known for his old-world courtesy, especially where women were concerned. He sat back in his chair, his purple face showing anger.

"What permission did you have to take these ladies riding, Captain Tredale?" he demanded.

The young man looked stunned. "I didn't ask anyone's permission."

"Ah! You didn't ask anyone's permission. That sounds odd from an officer with army training and experience."

"It was not a military exercise, sir," Ronald blurted.

"I shall decide what it was," the colonel said, thumping his fist down on his desk. "It was damn tomfoolery."

Priscilla said, "I'm sorry. I'm sure the captain meant no harm. He was merely trying to entertain us."

"Yes," Nina spoke up. "You must not blame him."

"Ladies!" the colonel said. "You will speak when I speak to you!" This was a new side of him.

Tredale hung his head and said abjectly, "I take the full blame, sir."

"You placed these two young women in grave danger. Do you realize that?"

"I'm sorry, sir!"

"Let me state now that there will be *no* riding outside this compound. Do all of you understand that?" He glared at them for a moment. Then he went on, "I have received information on the wireless today that indicates India may soon be in a state of rebellion."

"Rebellion, sir?" The young officer looked pale.

"We at Cranpore will be living in a kind of state of siege from now on even though hostilities have not been declared. We must behave as if we were about to fight a war. I have sent to Calcutta for additional troops. Pray that they get here. We have a badly outdated fort, too small a regiment and too many sepoys attached to the forces here."

Priscilla asked, "May I speak, Colonel?"

"Very well," he said. "I have told you the facts. Anyone going out there alone is in danger of being cut down."

She said, "Of course we'll not go out there again until all this is settled. But I met and talked with Prince Hali and I think there may be hope of his remaining loyal to us."

The colonel stood up in disbelief. "You made contact with the enemy and talked with him?"

"I did not regard Prince Hali as an enemy," she said. "I met him in England."

"What did you talk about?" the colonel demanded.

Surprised, she said, "Of personal things."

"Did you tell him anything about Cranpore?"

"I said my husband was a captain in the army. That was how I happened to be here."

The colonel persisted, "Did he ask you how many troops we had?"

"No. And I didn't discuss anything of that sort. I did warn him not to do anything impulsive!"

He came over to her. "I could have you charged with consorting with the enemy. Spying!"

"But that's nonsense!" she protested.

"It had better be," he said, taking a deep breath. "In my view you have all three committed a serious offense. Another error of this sort will cost you your commission, Tredale."

"Yes, sir," the young man said. "I will accept being dismissed from the service if it is your wish."

"You sound too anxious," the colonel said. "I need men."

At last he let them leave. When they were outside Nina said indignantly, "It had to be that awful Captain Hudson who reported us."

"No doubt of it," Ronald said. "He almost did us a favor. If I'd been thrown out of the army I'd have left at once and taken you with me."

Nina shook her head. "I couldn't leave my parents if things are as bad as he said."

Priscilla gave them a wise look. "I don't think the colonel is one to exaggerate a situation. So it would seem there'll be no more riding."

"It was so much fun," Nina mourned. "And you'll miss seeing your prince again."

Captain Tredale said, "I hope Edward isn't too angry with me. Nor your parents, Nina. I was trying to make it more pleasant for you here."

She smiled, "Don't worry! It will be all right."

And so it was, though their escapade became the juiciest gossip of the stockade. It was wildly exaggerated with stories of their being shot at by natives and of Prince Hali attempting to kidnap Priscilla.

She denied all the nonsensical stories but she had the feeling most of the people didn't want to believe her.

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They preferred the more exciting version of the story.

At home that evening she told Edward everything about the incident in detail. "It was all very harmless. Hudson and the colonel made the worst of it."

Edward warned her, "It is dangerous out there. Don't risk it again."

"Hardly," she said. "Colonel Mason claims things are at a fever pitch. We could have a rebellion anytime."

"He's right."

"But there seems to be no trouble here in the compound," she pointed out.

"Things have been happening. We've been getting a number of deserters, which up until now has been unknown. These men earn more in the army than they could anywhere else. Either they are being paid by Prince Hali or their devotion to their religion has brought them to the point of madness."

She said, "How many men have deserted?"

"Almost fifty sepoy," he said, "and more of the servants than I'd care to state. Besides that, we've got other sore spots."

"Such as?"

"The hospital."

"I expected trouble there," she said.

"And you were right," Edward said. "Dr. Ramsay and Dr. Mackin can not get along. Each has staked out a section of the hospital and are keeping their patients carefully divided, each taking full charge of his own section."

"Isn't that a good way to practice medicine?" she asked.

"Not when they are always at each other's throats," her husband said.

"Could they work together in a real crisis?"

He gave her a sad smile. "I think it would take a war to settle the trouble between them. It is a pity. But everyone expected Ramsay to make trouble."

"He's so crude," she agreed. "He and that awful little chaplain."

"There's another problem," Edward worried. "He still is filled with plans for converting the natives."

"He's a fanatic! Quite mad as I see it."

Her husband sighed. "So we have tensions outside the compound and even worse ones inside among ourselves."

"I think the colonel is worried."

"So would you be in his place," Edward said. "And when you told him you'd talked with Prince Hali, who won't even reply to his messages, it must have been the last straw."

"I discovered that too late," she said.

"What was Hali like?" Edward asked, giving her a sharp glance.

"Much as he was when I met him in England," she said. "I didn't understand him then and I don't think I understand him now."

At that moment their door burst open and Nina came rushing in. "Something awful has happened!"

Edward went to her. "What?"

"I don't know," the girl said white-faced. "I haven't been able to find out. They sent for my father."

"Who sent for the doctor?" Priscilla said, on her feet.

"Someone in the back row of officer's bungalows," she said. "I came here to see if Captain Peel might find out."

Edward said, "I'll go see if I can learn anything." And he left them.

Nina sat down in a nearby chair and sobbed. "This is a terrible place! I wish I were back home in England!"

She went to the girl and patted her on the shoulder.

"Most of us wish that. Who was it came for your father?"

"Major Smith." Nina halted her crying to tell the story. "He said that Dr. Ramsay was drunk and he needed a doctor right away. Someone was dying."

"Oh?"

"But he didn't say where or who. My father went with him, of course. I followed and an officer stopped me. I was told to go back home and stay inside. Do you suppose the trouble has started? That someone in Cranpore has been killed by the natives?"

"Let's hope not." Priscilla responded soothingly. "Maybe Edward will find out."

"I have a terrible feeling about it," Nina said. "I don't know why!"

Priscilla said, "This heat doesn't help. And it has been a difficult day for all of us."

The door opened and Edward entered without a word. He went over to the sideboard and poured himself a shot of whiskey and drank it down straight.

She went to him. "Did you find out?"

He turned to her, his face gray beneath his tan. He nodded slowly. "Yes."

Nina got up and went to him. "Has anything happened to Ronald?"

"No," he said wearily. "Captain Tredale is all right."

"What is it, then?" Nina insisted.

"Don't act so strangely," Priscilla said. "We have a right to know."

"Yes," he agreed. "I suppose you have. Nell and Hudson were properly caught tonight. John Henderson found them in bed together in a room in the hospital."

"It was bound to happen!" Priscilla said. "Did he attack Hudson? Was he hurt?"

Edward looked ill. "John went back to his own bunga-

low and took his service revolver and put a bullet through his head. There was nothing your father could do, Nina. John died instantly."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The suicide cast a pall of gloom over John Henderson's friends and associates. But the majority of those in the regiment did not know the circumstances which led up to the suicide. Colonel Mason decided that discretion should be the rule.

It was known that his wife, Nell, had suffered a mental breakdown on learning of the tragedy. Dr. Mackin had kept her sedated for several days and she was unable to attend the burial held in the compound cemetery. Later on, she progressed into a kind of dazed state, in which she simply sat staring at nothingness and paid no attention to anyone. She was kept in the hospital.

Captain Ralph Hudson went about his duties as usual. He was cool, calm and collected, And for the first time he and Maude showed up at a church service one Sunday morning.

Edward and Priscilla were revolted by the whole sordid business. And Priscilla no longer spoke to the dashing captain. When he came by her she turned her head and pretended interest in something in the other direction.

One afternoon Nina told Priscilla, "Captain Hudson has been bothering me again. He seems to show up wherever I go."

"You know what's in his mind," she told the girl. "He's looking for someone to replace Nell."

"I know," Nina agreed. "But I promise you he will get nowhere with me!"

"The colonel could have punished him. But things are so bad he needs to hold on to every officer he can."

"Every one says so." Nina nodded. "Did you hear about the new line patrol?"

"No."

"Ronald is to be in charge of it," the girl said, her eyes bright with pride. "He's going to be responsible for patrolling the telegraph wire from this end. The other garrison will police it in the same way there. The two groups will meet midway along the telegraph line. It's a great responsibility . . . I shall miss Ronald. He'll be away so much."

Priscilla warned her, "Captain Hudson will try to take advantage of your loneliness."

"Let him. That *beast!*" the girl said. "I went to see Nell at the hospital and she didn't show any sign of knowing me."

"Yes. I had the same experience."

There was horror on Nina's lovely face as she asked, "Do you suppose she will always be mad?"

"Your father is not hopeful. When things have eased and there is not so much tension he wants to send her back to Calcutta, he told me. And likely from there to

England. There's a chance she might come around in a different climate."

That evening she spoke to Edward about the telegraph line patrol. He listened gravely and said, "It's true! We have to take precautions against its being cut."

"Then things are not getting any better?"

Edward said, "Don't repeat this, but the situation is deteriorating. The colonel is getting reports of serious uprisings almost every day."

"Do you think the rebellion will spread?"

"It could," her husband said. "Odd things are taking place. We're continually losing servants and some of the sepoys. And for the last several days the merchant in the village who sent us daily supplies of fresh fruits and vegetables has shipped nothing."

"So?"

"The colonel has asked me to visit the village tomorrow and speak with this merchant," her husband said. "It is about five miles away. Would you enjoy coming along?"

"Won't the colonel object?"

Edward smiled. "Ask his permission tonight. He will be at the dance he is giving in honor of the regiment."

"I didn't plan to attend."

"Why not?"

She looked down. "It's very soon after John Henderson's suicide."

Edward came and took her in his arms. "I know how you feel. But the colonel knows what he is doing. In this dangerous position morale must be kept up. That is why he is holding the dance and why we should attend."

Music poured forth from the open windows of the Officer's Mess. The women wore the best of their finery and the men their full dress uniforms. Priscilla turned

away when Captain Hudson came by her with Maude on his arm. The older woman was wearing a forced smile but her eyes showed the pain she was feeling.

Mazurkas, waltzes and other dances were the order of the evening. The regimental band had never played better. Priscilla found herself in demand for nearly every dance as was Nina Mackin.

When she had an opportunity she went up to the colonel, who was standing with several other senior officers, and with a smile, asked him, "May I break the rules again, sir?"

The old man smiled. "Well, at least you know what you are proposing to do. What rule do you wish to break?"

"The one against us leaving the compound. I would like to accompany my husband to the village tomorrow," she said.

The colonel's watery old blue eyes twinkled. "If Edward is willing to take you, then you may go. It's up to him."

The following morning she found herself seated beside her husband in a carriage on its way to Marut. There were two turbaned drivers on the front seat of the open vehicle and two other rode on a seat at the back. She noticed that all were armed.

Holding her parasol above her for protection, she said, "We have plenty of guards today."

Edward glanced at her gravely. "The way things are you never know when you'll need them."

"Aren't the people of Marut friendly to the garrison?"

"They were once. No telling about it now."

As they reached the village she soon was conscious of hate-filled eyes staring at them as they drove by. Grim faces were everywhere and occasionally a clenched fist was raised.

The bazaar itself was sickeningly hot. The shops were

mostly wooden huts with open fronts and colorful signs in the native language. Hard earthen alleys ran between them. Flies buzzed everywhere over the displayed food. Blind and maimed beggars cried out for alms.

Edward told her, "Their parents mutilate them when they are babies in many cases. It gives them a career as professional beggars!"

"How horrible!" she exclaimed, the stench of a rotting dog carcass rising up as they passed its worm-eaten body in the street.

"Each alley has its own trade," her husband said. "There are the streets of barbers, moneylenders, candies and so on. I have to stop here at the fruit shop. You remain in the carriage. Don't try to leave it!"

"I won't," she promised, already afraid of the place and its people.

Edward had difficulty getting past the beggars. He tossed a few coins in the air and they scrambled for them as he hurried into the shop. Sacred cows loped about everywhere. No one bothered them.

She watched the women in bright saris with golden ornaments in the sides of their noses. Little children ran along beside them naked or played among the horse, camel and cow manure.

She was delighted a few minutes later to see Edward coming back. He had the same difficulty getting through the crowds and when he was in the carriage beside her he told the impassive-faced guards, "Take us back by way of the Street of Harlots."

She asked him, "How did you make out?"

"I received a lot of excuses and promises," he said grimly, "none of them, I think, genuine."

The carriage had moved on and they were now in a narrow street where the huts had wooden doors dividing them into stables, with the bottom of each one closed

and the top open so the girl inside could display herself. The girls sat in their stables on stools. Their faces were painted.

Edward told her, "This is strictly out of bounds to the regiment. But the soldiers slip away anyway and come here. In other times the garrisons had their own brothels supervised against disease. But the Queen would not let this go on. So now soldiers all over India patronize the native brothels and most wind up with venereal disease. At this very moment we have about twenty men in our own hospital now with one form or another of venereal disease."

"Horrible!" she said. "It's all so ugly!"

During the drive home Edward was uneasy. She could see it in him. At last he turned to her and said, "The colonel is thinking about sending a party of women and children back to Calcutta. The problem is to spare enough troops to guard the party."

"It's that bad?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "You saw the attitude of the village people today. They hate us and they know trouble is in the offing."

"Prince Hali said it could be," she recalled. "Do you think you might go to him and reason with him?"

"The colonel has tried to reach him. The word is that he is not presently in his palace. Of course it may be a lie. These people are masters of lying!"

It was that very night the first thunderbolt hit Cranpore. She and Edward were visiting the Mackins when a junior officer came for Edward. The young man saluted briskly and told him, "The colonel requires your presence at once!"

Edward smiled wearily and told the others, "Sorry to break up the party. I'll try to get back promptly."

After he left she asked Dr. Mackin about Nell. "Is she showing any improvement?"

"A little. She is responding to others better."

Nina spoke up, "She smiled at me when I saw her yesterday. But she did not know my name."

Mrs. Mackin sighed. "The poor girl was always balanced on the edge of madness. That is why she was such easy prey for Ralph Hudson."

Priscilla said, "I wonder if he ever goes to see her."

Dr. Mackin looked bleak. "He came to the hospital to see me recently for treatment of a personal nature. I told him Nell was in a room just across the hall and he coldly replied that he didn't wish to see her!"

"He has no heart!" Nina said indignantly.

Priscilla was wondering what Hudson's medical problem was. Could it have been for some disease picked up in the Street of Harlots?

Dr. Mackin said gravely, "Be wary of that man! In his own fashion he is as mad as poor Nell. The colonel would have dismissed him were we not short of officers. When this crisis is over I have the colonel's word that Hudson will be asked to resign his commission."

"I shall believe in the army system if and when it happens," Priscilla said.

Their conversation ended abruptly when Edward rejoined them. He said, "I've got to go out with an exploring party at once."

Priscilla stood up and went to him where he stood just inside the door. "What is it?"

"The telegraph wire has been cut."

"No!" Nina jumped up. "Ronald and his men are guarding the wire!"

Edward grimly told her, "Captain Tredale and his men can't be every place at once!"

"Do you think he's been attacked? Killed?" The pretty girl was near panic.

"Nina!" her mother said and put an arm around her.

Her father said, "Edward has answered your question. No doubt while Ronald and his party were at the far end of the line someone attacked it at this end."

Nina stared anxiously at Edward. "Is that so?"

"Your father explained the situation exactly," he told the girl. "We will ride with torches and materials to repair the wireless. It could take all night!"

Priscilla and Edward left. She was full of misgivings. As they walked back to their bungalow in the darkness, she asked him, "Do you really think Captain Tredale is safe?"

"We don't know," he said. "He may well have been ambushed, and he and his men killed!"

"And now they're sending you out?"

"We'll have a larger party and be able to protect ourselves," he said. "I want you to go to bed and rest. There is nothing to worry about."

"The wireless has been cut! We're completely isolated!"

Edward sighed. "All the more reason to sleep and conserve your strength for whatever lies ahead."

She watched the torch-lit procession ride through the gates. She decided to follow her husband's advice and go to bed. But she was not at all sure she would sleep.

She tossed in her bed for hours in the hot night. When dawn was approaching, she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. It was still not daylight when she was awakened by someone entering the cottage.

Sitting up in bed with a great feeling of relief she called, "Edward! You're back! Thank God!" And she was about to get out of bed and greet him when she saw the figure push through the beaded curtain of the bedroom doorway.

It was Captain Ralph Hudson, clad only in shirt and trousers. He came quickly to her bedside and stood over her smiling in a manner which sent a hideous stream of fear coursing through her!

"You!" she gasped. Then she screamed.

He sprang at her and grasped her throat, cutting off her cry. "There's no one to hear anyway!" Then he tore her nightgown from her and threw himself cruelly upon her. It was rape of the most brutal sort! Sobbing hoarsely, she tried to fight back, scratching at his face, trying to get at his eyes. He hit her mouth sharply, cutting her lip. Dimly she was aware that it was bleeding.

Suddenly it ended. Someone entered the room and pulled Hudson from her. It was Edward. Hudson was standing now, backed against the wall, pleading!

"No! Don't!" Hudson whimpered.

The reply was the blast of a gun shot and Hudson slumped down to the floor with a moan. Edward dropped the gun and ran to her. "My darling!" he said, cradling her in his arms.

"You killed him!" she said in despair.

"I'd do it again!" he told her.

"But they—they—" She could not finish it.

"As soon as I can get Dr. Mackin to you I'll give myself up to the colonel," he said.

And that is what he did. By the time the doctor arrived there was no question that Hudson was dead. Mackin had the body removed and then attended to her.

"One of the most brutal rapes I've ever encountered," he said when he'd done all he could to put her at rest.

She stared up at him teary-eyed. "What about Edward?"

The doctor shrugged. "He'll surely have to face a court-martial. But I can't see anything but an acquittal. I'm sending Nina to stay with you."

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That day and night would always live in her memory as the beginning of the nightmare! She stayed in bed aching and torn, with Nina attending her. Dr. Mackin arrived at noon to change some dressings for her and tell her the turn of events.

"Where is Edward?" she asked. "Why hasn't he come back here?"

Dr. Mackin sat by her bedside studying her with troubled eyes. "I will not lie to you, Priscilla. Edward is in the compound prison. He will remain there until his trial."

"His trial!" she echoed in despair.

"The colonel felt he had no choice. Discipline must be maintained. So Edward must be imprisoned and tried in due time. It is unfortunate. With Hudson dead and Edward out of action, it means the colonel has two less officers at his disposal."

Nina was also there and she asked, "What about Ronald?"

"No one knows," her father said. "There has been no word of him. Edward's party was attacked last night. Many were killed. That is why they retreated back to the compound. Of course, Hudson, who'd been left in charge, wasn't expecting them until morning or later."

"What now?" Priscilla asked.

"The wireless line is still dead," he said. "Another matter. Mrs. Hudson wishes to come and talk with you. I told her it was entirely up to you."

Priscilla closed her eyes. "I'll see her."

"Very well," Dr. Mackin said, rising.

That afternoon a frail figure in black and with a heavy black veil came into Priscilla's room. As she approached the bed she turned back the veil so that Priscilla might see her pale, worn face. There were tears in Maude Hudson's eyes as she took Priscilla's hand in hers.

"You poor, poor dear," the older woman said.

Priscilla looked up at her. "I'm sorry. My husband acted on impulse. I don't blame him. But I'm sorry."

Maude raised her chin. "My husband had become a very evil man! No one could help him. He is better dead."

"I hope so," Priscilla said. "I trust you can repair your life."

"I'm a free woman after years of torture," Maude said. "I will plead with the colonel and with the court-martial if necessary to free your husband."

"I'm sure that will help a good deal," Priscilla said.

"That is why I came here," she said. "To tell you that he would have my support. And I'm sure if that poor, mad Nell were able to, she would also take the stand in Edward's defense."

"Thank you," Priscilla said, and then under strong sedation found herself drifting into a deep sleep.

It was growing dark when she awakened. A lamp had been lit and was on the dresser. Nina and her mother came into the room. They both seemed tense.

She sat up on her elbow to ask them, "What is it?"

"Mutiny," Mrs. Mackin said, a tremor in her voice. "The natives are lining up on the other bank of the river to attack us."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Why else would they gather there with every sort of weapon? There are cannons pointed at the compound more modern than those we have to defend it," Nina told her.

"I must get up and dress," she said.

"No," Mrs. Mackin protested. "The doctor said you were not to leave your bed for a few days."

"He did not know about this at that time," she said. "Please help me!"

They did. It was dark by the time she was able to

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go outside. But she could see torches at various intervals on the opposite bank of the river and she could hear a great mixture of voices, animal sounds and creaking wheels, all indicating that a great army was gathering across there.

She said tensely, "If they're going to attack us why don't they begin?"

"They're in no hurry," Mrs. Mackin said. "We're helpless."

Nina stayed with her through the night. She could tell the lovely dark-haired girl was terrified that her fiancé, Captain Tredale, had been ambushed and killed. But the girl attempted to hide her fear and proved a good nurse and companion.

The shelling began at dawn. The first one fell so near the bungalow that it trembled as if there had been an earthquake. Nina and Priscilla exchanged frightened glances. Then they ran to the window and looked out to see the smoke rising from a great, gaping hole in the courtyard near them!

"We shall all be blown to bits!" Nina lamented.

"It's going to be bad," Priscilla said. "Let us go to your father's house. I want to find out about Edward."

As they dressed and prepared to leave the bungalow the pace of the shelling increased. They moved quickly along the street, staying close to the various buildings. If a shell hit close to them they would certainly be killed.

The smell of gunpowder filled the air as did the shouts of officers trying to keep some semblance of order in their battle to save the garrison. But it seemed to her more shells were landing in the compound than they were placing in the camp on the other side of the river.

They reached the Mackins' bungalow and Nina's mother frantically embraced her daughter and took them inside.

"I was sure that first shell had hit your house," she told Priscilla.

"It was close," she said.

Nina asked, "Where is father?"

"At the hospital," her mother said. "There are many casualties coming in already."

Priscilla knew the prison was the building next to the hospital, so she suggested to Nina, "Let us go to the hospital. Nurses are bound to be needed. I imagine most of the native servants have deserted."

"Ours have," Mrs. Mackin said.

"Ram didn't show himself at the house yesterday," she told the older woman. "I can't think there are any natives left here."

Mrs. Mackin said, "Have you looked across the river? It's a crawling mass of humans, and equipment stretching for as far as the eye can see. They must have been planning this attack for months."

"I'm sure they must have," she agreed. And to Nina, "Are you going to the hospital with me?"

"Yes," Nina decided. "I'm sure they can use us."

"I will stay here," Mrs. Mackin said. "Tell your father."

Nina kissed her. "Keep inside, mother!"

Then Priscilla and she went out in the street again.

The sun was high in the sky and the air was thick with smoke and flame. The noise of the artillery on both sides was shattering. The compound had become a bedlam. Riders and wagons dashed back and forth, the frightened horses whinnying and trembling. The roar of battle went on.

Stretcher-bearers, some of them wounded themselves, were carrying the badly wounded into the hospital on litters. The voices of these victims of battle were lifted

in cursing and groans as they lay stretched in the reception room waiting to be treated.

The girls waited, shocked by the number of casualties. Then Dr. Mackin came out, his apron bloodstained, his arms bare to the elbows. He saw them and asked Nina, "Is your mother safe?"

"Yes," Nina said. "We've come to help!"

He looked at Priscilla and said, "You should still be in bed!"

"No. I'm well enough!" she said.

He seemed hesitant and then said, "Very well! Go into the main ward and report to Ramsay. He's happy at last! He's had two amputations!"

Dr. Ramsay put them to work at once, carrying medications to and from the pharmacy. Patients had been waiting for prescribed medicines for hours without anyone available to bring them the drugs. This became their job.

Priscilla worked until she fainted. When she came to she was stretched out on a bed in the ward of the wounded. As she sat up Dr. Ramsay came briskly towards her.

The bearded man said, "You've done enough for to-day."

"I'm sorry I fainted," she said. "Where is Nina?"

"You didn't just faint, you collapsed," he said sternly. "Nina has gone home to rest. And that's what you'd better do." At that moment one of the few orderlies left came running to get him and he left her.

She was still feeling dizzy. She stood up and swayed a little. The ward was almost in darkness except for a few lanterns set out at long intervals. The sounds of battle had slowed down. Moving slowly she made her way out into the darkness.

A shell fell flaming on the thatched roof of a house.

It went up in flames and she heard screams. She found it hard to believe she wasn't dreaming it all. Stumbling through the darkness, she reached the entrance to the jail and went in.

Colonel Mason was there. He at once showed concern. "Mrs. Peel, I understood you were too ill to be a walking patient."

"I'm on my feet against doctor's orders," she said wanly. "May I see my husband?"

"In a moment," the colonel said. "I've sent another officer in to the cell block to bring him out. I'm ready to take his oath to present himself in court when required and in the meanwhile he will resume his duties as an officer!"

"Thank you, Colonel," she said with emotion.

The old man said, "Thank those devils across the river! They've forced me to use every man available! I cannot have officers in prison when I need them."

Edward came out accompanied by another man. He halted before the colonel and saluted. He said, "I have heard your terms and I'm ready to accept them. Let me take the oath!"

The oath administered, the colonel allowed Edward to take her in his arms. She whispered, "I knew it would be all right. They're bound to free you eventually."

"Prison isn't worrying me now," he said. "It's that horde across the river. There must be thousands of them!"

"Take care," she said.

The colonel told him, "Report to Captain Hickman!"

"Hickman?" Edward gasped. "Has he also been given back his rank?"

"This morning," the colonel said. "Bring all the women and children up here to the prison. It seems the safest place for them."

She said, "I can help with that."

Edward eyed her worriedly. "You're not well enough."

"I can manage," she said.

"Good girl," Colonel Mason said. "Lieutenant Craig will be in charge of the operation. He's at my office in the headquarters building. See him there!"

Even with darkness the battle continued. The shell blasts kept the sky lit up. It was a tremendous task gathering all the women and children together. But before midnight they were all sitting about the prison looking thoroughly miserable. There was far too little space for them and hardly any sanitary conveniences. There was water and a little food. The colonel had promised more supplies would be sent.

Priscilla and Nina returned to the hospital as soon as they'd finished helping round up the women and children in the prison. The hospital was so overcrowded that the latest injuries, no matter how severe, had to be treated on their stretchers.

People came and left in the pandemonium of battle. Then there came a direct blow on the hospital. The night was lit up and the girls threw themselves on the trembling ground. When the eternity of the awful moment ended and they were getting to their feet Nina's father came groping his way through the smoke and plaster clouds.

The little doctor seemed dazed. He said, "The pharmacy!"

"Oh, not that!" Nina said.

"Ramsay was in there when it happened," her father said in a tone of disbelief. "All the medical instruments and supplies in there have been destroyed. And Ramsay and all the others in there lost! I'm alone now to look after all this!"

"Where can we begin to help?" Priscilla asked.

Dr. Mackin drew a hand wearily across his eyes. He

said, "Come to the operating room and make a list of all the drug supplies there. I want to know what is left and how much of everything. There isn't any more. Just what is in there!"

So they worked for hours making an inventory of the remaining drugs. In the middle of the room Dr. Mackin worked incessantly at the operating table. An orderly was assisting him now. When Priscilla and Nina had finished they dragged themselves out to the ward, took some blankets to a corner and slept for a little.

In the morning there was the problem of feeding those able to eat. And all needed fresh water for their parched lips. She and Nina joined a half-dozen wounded soldiers who were still ambulatory to help with this task. There was a job for all to do.

Priscilla scarcely had time to think of Edward or his safety. She simply took it for granted that he was all right. Then Captain Everett Hickman was brought in with a dreadful chest wound. He looked up at her as she came to see if she could help him in any way. She thought there was a flicker of recognition in his eyes, then he closed them and before he could be put on the operating table he was dead.

Tears flowed from her eyes as she covered him with a sheet. Then she moved on to the next of the wounded, a young boy with a badly mangled right arm. He was deathly white and staring straight up at the ceiling. In a low voice, he said, "I can't move my hand!"

"It will be all right," she said. And as the orderlies lifted him to move him nearer where Dr. Mackin was operating she saw the arm was only a bloodied stump with a tight thong around it to stanch the blood.

She was in the reception hall waiting for the next lot of injured when a disheveled and bloodied Edward came in. He still wore his helmet, though his tunic was open

and his left arm had a bandage on it. His face was soot-blackened and blood-smeared. Never had she seen him so weary and his eyes were those of a tortured animal.

Seeing her, he came quickly and held her in his arms for the shortest of moments. His dry lips caressed hers, then he looked at her in despair. "Those demons are coming across the river and we can't stop them!"

"Shouldn't we surrender?" she cried.

He shook his head. "They don't know the word! If we're not lucky they'll murder every man, woman and child in Cranpore!"

Dr. Mackin came out of the operating room, staggering from fatigue. "What is the word?"

"They're moving across the river," Edward said hoarsely. "We're done for!"

"What does the colonel advise?" Dr. Mackin asked.

"Killed long ago," Edward said, his eyes tortured. "And the rest of his staff with him. I'm the senior officer left. I'm going back to the cannons! But we'll never keep them at bay!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Priscilla stared after her husband in dismay. Turning to Dr. Mackin and Nina, she cried, "I'll never see him alive again!"

Nina put an arm around her. "Help may come!" she said.

"The colonel sent an urgent plea to Delhi before the wireless was cut," Dr. Mackin reminded them. "That was more than a week ago."

Priscilla said, "How can you go on with no drugs?"

"I'll simply do my best," the little man said as the building rocked again from shelling nearby. "We are now in the hands of God!"

Nina asked her father, "How can we best help?"

"Organize the women and children," her father said. "Help them as much as you can. They'll need leadership."

There's nothing to be done here in the hospital. It grows more hopeless each moment."

As if to underline this some bedraggled stretcher bearers appeared with new wounded. The doctor wearily waved them to the floor until he could get to them. Nina kissed her father good-bye; then she and Priscilla left the hospital and made the short dash over to the prison.

Nina's father had been right. The women and children were bewildered and there was no organization. In all there were close to fifty of them.

Priscilla called on Maude Hudson and Mrs. Mackin to check on the food supplies in the hospital building and be prepared to ration them. The well was out behind the building and though they needed water, none of the women had thus far been willing to risk going out to get it.

She and Nina took on this task, carrying huge buckets. All the while the battle went on. But it seemed to Priscilla that the cannon of the compound were gradually being silenced. She strained to see Edward out on the firing line but could not, with the continual clouds of powder smoke and the great confusion.

Back in the prison she quickly made her way through the building. There was the warden's office out front and a large room for holding prisoners temporarily just off it. In the rear there was a giant ward for minor offenders and at least five cells along the opposite wall for those charged with major offenses. She supposed that Edward had been in one of these cells.

The sole hygienic facility in the place was a latrine dug in the earthen floor at the rear of the ward room, about six feet long and perhaps half that deep. The stench from it was sickening and made her worry about cholera and all the other possible results from such filth.

She came back to the outer room next to the warden's

office where the frightened women and children had chosen to hide. It was impossible to address them all at one time because of the clamor of battle outside. But she went from one to another and tried to comfort them as best she could. As she made these rounds she came upon Nell who had been transferred over there from the hospital.

The transformation in the once striking blonde was ghastly. Nell's face and body were emaciated, her eyes were sunken and dead. Her skin had taken on a sallow cast.

Priscilla knelt beside her. "Nell!"

Nell was sitting on an old stool which someone had found for her. She was a little apart from the others and when Priscilla spoke to her she neither looked at her nor replied.

With a feeling of heartbreak Priscilla left her. She had to help those who could be helped. She was about to confer with Nina in the warden's office which they had made their headquarters, when the worst shelling of all hit the area.

The two girls held each other as the prison shook and plaster and dust fell from the ceiling and walls. She cried, "It has to be the end!"

Then the shuddering ceased but there was the smell of smoke and the sound of crackling flames. They ran to the window, which no longer had frame or glass in it, and looked out. The hospital was gone! Where it had stood there were only flaming ruins!

"My father!" Nina sobbed.

"Perhaps he managed to escape," Priscilla said as she stared at the blazing inferno. But she knew that this would have been next to impossible.

"What now?" Nina asked.

"We must remain here and help," Priscilla said. "It is what your father said we should do."

"Yes," Nina agreed brokenly.

"We must bar the door and wait," she said grimly. "If we are lucky the enemy won't be able to cross the river."

But even as they went back to secure the doors a macabre silence fell. Outside they could hear only an occasional rifle shot or a voice raised in command or frightened cry! She and Nina went back into the warden's office.

Maude Hudson came in looking surprisingly self-contained. She told Nina, "Your mother is resting for a moment. She knows about the hospital."

"I'll go to her," Nina said and at once left the office.

Maude turned to Priscilla and said, "We have enough food for about three days and water for one day. Of course water can be brought in from the well as we need it. But I don't know where we can get food. The supplies building was one of the first to burn."

Priscilla nodded. Then she went to the window and listened. She turned to Maude with fear shadowing her lovely face. "Do you hear a chanting sound?"

The older woman went to the window and listened. "Yes," she said grimly. "Many voices! And they're getting nearer!"

"They've crossed the river," she said. "That means only one thing. We've been defeated. If any of our men are alive they'll be taken prisoners."

"And us?"

"I daren't speculate," Priscilla said, listening at the open window. "We must try to keep the others calm. Panic will only make things worse."

"We can only wait until they get here," Maude sighed. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

She said, "I wish you'd stay with Nell Henderson. The

poor creature can't fend for herself and the others are too obsessed with their own plight to bother about her."

"I'll stay with her," Maude promised.

Priscilla afterwards wondered if she had done right. There was grim irony in her sending the widow of the man who had caused Nell's madness to take care of her. Yet she knew of no one more able for the task than the older woman.

Nina returned, teary-eyed and pale. "They're coming here! They're swarming up the river bank destroying everything in their path!"

"I know," she said quietly.

"What can we do?"

"Wait," Priscilla said. "Wait and pray!"

The women and children huddled forlornly in the waiting room next to the office. She and Nina joined them and went to stand by the bolted door waiting for the attack which would surely come upon it. They heard the swelling sound of fierce shouts from outside. The sound became magnified and then there was the assault of rifle butts on the door. It trembled but did not break down. The children whimpered and the women sobbed their fear.

Then some heavy timber was apparently used against it. For with a great splitting sound the door burst from its bolts. It flew open and a dozen or more turbaned men rushed in, their rifles held in readiness. They gave the women a disdainful glance and then a scarred-faced one who seemed to be the leader snapped out an order. At once three of the men went out back to make a search of the building.

Outside the fierce natives could be seen and heard. Priscilla guessed they were calling for their blood. The scarred one and his aides kept the women covered with their rifles.

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Then the three men came back from their exploration and reported to the leader. It was at this point that the crowd around the door gave way and a huge figure in white turban and khaki uniform came striding in. It was Prince Hali. He gazed impassively at the unhappy group of women and children.

Since Priscilla was standing in the forefront with Nina he could not miss her. He stared at her for a long moment before he turned to the scarred one and rasped out some orders in the native language. Then he turned and went on out.

Priscilla watched him go with a sinking heart. He could have spoken to them all in his perfect English and calmed the worst of their fears but he had chosen not to do this. What did he propose to do?

The underlings with the rifles began herding them all back into the filthy ward with its open latrine. The women pleaded and the children clung to their mothers.

To urge the frightened group on several of the sepoys produced menacing swords and threatened to hack at anyone who took too long to move. Within a short while they had all been shoved into the big ward room with its two small windows high in the wall and its iron gate which was padlocked.

Nina gave her a look of despair. "We can't last in here! It's unbearably hot already and it will get worse."

"I doubt if they want us to last," she said. "They have killed our men and now they will deal with us."

"Better that they should kill us and get it done with," Nina said unhappily.

So the unthinkable ordeal began. Five days passed. The condition of the imprisoned had shifted from panic and protest to apathy. The food rations consisted of a small bowl of rice and a mug of water twice a day. The heat and stench grew more unbearable with every passing

hour. Already some of the children lay on dirty straw in one corner of the room, groaning with dysentery. There were several women in the same awful state, including the unfortunate Nell.

Priscilla did what little she could, sponging their brows with muslin torn from the bottom of her dress. Nina worked among those who still held onto a slim strand of health. She saw the food given them was fairly divided and the water used to the best advantage. In this, Maude Hudson and her mother assisted her.

One of the more disgusting things was the open latrine with large flies buzzing about it. They had been reduced below the level of animals.

Priscilla was standing by the barred door looking out at the guards on duty there. She wondered what they had in mind. How long would their suffering continue? Was their plan to let them all die?

As she stood there the scarred man came and sneered at her through the bars. Then he gave a sharp order. A guard came and unlocked the prison door and the scarred man beckoned for her to come out. With a sinking feeling she obeyed him, wishing that Nina had been close by so she would know what had happened. But Nina was somewhere in the back of the crowded ward.

She took a deep breath of the fresher air as she moved down the corridor to the front of the jail. The door to the warden's office was thrown open and she saw Prince Hali standing in there.

He said, "Come in!"

She obeyed him, coming to stand before him, aware of her matted hair, dirtied face and hands, soiled and bloodied dress. Her feet were bare and also covered with filthy slime.

The handsome bearded man showed disgust. "You stink!"

"Yes, I do," she said evenly. "So do all the other poor creatures in there. But that is your doing!"

Prince Hali was staring at her. "Even as you stand there you are still beautiful."

"I did not come here for compliments."

"Your husband is dead," Prince Hali said. "All are dead except the women and children here!"

Priscilla said, "I guessed that."

He raised an eyebrow. "You do not care? Did you not love your husband?"

"I care greatly," she said. "But this is not a time for tears."

Prince Hali said, "Even now I admire you. I can have you on my own terms. Take you to the harem you scorned."

"Yes," she said. "You are the conqueror."

He nodded. "Exactly. The tables are turned."

"For how long?"

He looked at her angrily. "For all time. India will rule herself from now on. All over the country there are uprisings!"

"I wonder," she said. "You are treating us like pigs or worse. What do you propose to do with us?"

Prince Hali said, "You can leave here with me."

"Thank you," she said. "It's too late for that."

Prince Hali's stern black eyes met hers. "I have only to give the order to see the children cut down and the women ravished and put to death."

"You are indeed powerful," she said. "And this is what you will do with your Cambridge training! It is true that education is wasted on savages!"

His hand touched his sword sheath. "Be careful! There is a limit to my patience!"

"And none to mine," she retorted. "I shall wait in that pigsty for death."

He stared at her. "You are brave."

"I'm terrified," she said. "But I must stand by those other women and their children."

Prince Hali stepped away for a moment and then turned and said, "What would you have me do?"

"Are you serious?" she asked.

He sneered. "Of course! Tell me what a good Englishman would do if these were my people and he'd captured them?"

She said, "You know as well as I do. He would at least make the lives of the unfortunates bearable so they did not die of filth and disease. And he would hold them as hostages to make the best bargain he could with the enemy."

Prince Hali listened intently. "You think I should do that?"

"Yes. Let them move back into the outer room, Have the ward room cleaned up and the latrine filled in with earth and another one established in the most distant of the smaller cells and curtained off. Some lime will also be needed to keep it reasonably clean."

"You expect all that?"

"No," she said. "But you asked me what you should do."

"And for yourself?"

"Give us some extra water and pails to keep ourselves and our clothes clean. Then I shan't repel you the next time you visit me."

Prince Hali said, "I'm not sure there will be another time." He spoke to the scarred man in their native tongue and she was roughly taken by the arm and led back to the ward. As soon as she was thrust inside and the door locked behind her, she was besieged with questions.

"I can tell you nothing," she said. "I have asked for mercy. Whether it will be granted or not I cannot say."

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That night Nell died. Priscilla recited the Twenty-third Psalm over her poor, frail body. Maude Hudson stood by with tears running down her wrinkled cheeks. Priscilla called for a guard for nearly fifteen minutes before one came. Then she had trouble making him understand that someone had died and must be taken from the room.

Only when the scarred man, who understood some English, arrived, did they enter the ward and carry out Nell's body. It was a grim moment for them all as they silently watched not knowing whose turn it might be next.

But the following morning there was a change for the better. They were herded back in the cleaner and more airy outer room while a horde of native workmen went into the filthy ward to clean it out. Pails of water and soap were supplied and the unfortunates began to bathe and clean their torn and soiled dresses as best they could.

Priscilla felt much better after a bath and getting the worst of the soiled matter from her clothes. She could tell by Nina's appearance that the access to the most simple hygiene had done wonders for her. The old latrine was filled as she had requested and a new one established with a keg of lime and a trowel set by it. It was still primitive, but not as bestial as before.

With the extra space the heat was not so intense. But Priscilla knew the chance of the cholera among them spreading was great. Besides Nell, two children had died and been removed.

Three days later she was again taken to the office of the prison where Prince Hali awaited her, clad in a golden turban and white robes. He smiled at her.

"You look and smell better," he said.

"I thank you for myself and the others."

"So, I'm not all that more savage than an Englishman?" he suggested.

"You are many things," she said carefully. "But you have shown mercy at this time and your Allah should look down on you with pride."

He seemed impressed. "I like that," he said.

"I mean it," she told him. "But I warn you. We have cholera. It could spread. It might also strike your people."

He frowned. "I have given you all you asked. I can do no more."

"You can do as you wish," she reminded him. "You are the conquerer."

"Would you have me turn you loose into the desert?" he asked. "Do you want the vultures to feast on you? Or should I have you all driven back to Calcutta in splendid carriages?"

She said, "You are right. Your position is not an easy one."

"I have done what I can."

"How long do you expect to keep us here?"

He paced up and down before her. "I do not know. I do not know which way this rebellion is turning. We have had news that some of the uprisings have ended quickly."

Priscilla said, "I think I told you they would."

He glared at her. "How could you know?"

"India was only conquered because she was a divided, miserable collection of states. The British were able to provide a sort of ruling power."

Prince Hali stared at her. "You are saying I was foolish to turn against the English? That in the end they will be victorious!"

"You were one of their appointed princes," she said. "You have risked a great deal."

He eyed her impatiently. "I still have faith in my fellow princes," he said. And he ordered her taken back to the cell.

She did not see him again for several days. In the meantime a strange state of affairs came about. They were given more and better food, and allowed to go out in the fresh air in groups, though under guard. A latrine was established outside a door which was unlocked and they were able to go outside to this facility enclosed with barbed wire and covered with canvas. There were guards on the other side of the canvas but this was better than the inside latrines.

Nina said, "We'll have much less chance of the cholera spreading."

"I agree," she said. "I think I worried him when I told him of the danger."

She was not too surprised when she was summoned to the warden's office for a third time. Prince Hali was waiting for her as before, less regal this time, wearing his battle uniform of khaki and a khaki turban. He held a riding crop in his hand.

"You are more comfortable?" he asked casually.

"Yes," she said. "Much more comfortable. We thank you."

Prince Hali said, "I have been generous."

She felt he had something to tell her. "And now?"

"Now I have news which will interest you," he said quietly. "The rebellion is over. You were right. The British have won. India will continue under their rule."

"How do you know this?" she exclaimed.

He tapped his riding crop against his knee. "Because I have just come from the camp of General Craig. He is on his way here from Delhi with a strong army. They should be here by this time tomorrow."

"I don't believe it!"

"It is true," he said. "I have talked with him. I am to be punished by the loss of most of my kingdom. I shall retain my palace, a little ground around it and a pension sufficient to look after my needs. My brother's eldest son, presently in Delhi, will become the new ruler."

She almost told him she was sorry but quickly realized how wrong that would be in the face of what he and his cohorts had cost them all. She had lost a beloved husband and many friends. So had all the women with their orphaned children. So she said, "It would seem that your gamble did not turn out well."

He shrugged and stared down at the floor. "War is war! I played its rules! I lost! I will be humbled!"

"That is what hurts most, isn't it?" she said bitterly. "Your pride."

"Yes," he said. "I shall never have the respect of my people again. But you did well for me with your advice. General Craig was thankful that I had not only spared the women and children but tried to make them more comfortable."

"You have done all that."

The striking black eyes in the brown, handsome face met hers soberly. "Because of you. You asked me and I wanted your respect."

"You have it," she said. "At least in that."

The prince hesitated. "I shall not be ruler. Nor shall I ever be as wealthy as I was. But there is still a room in my palace waiting for you!"

"I'm sorry," she said.

He stared at her again. "We will be withdrawing at nightfall. I will see the prison door is unlocked when we leave. You will have your freedom to welcome the arriving troops. Cranpore will be rebuilt and all will be the same again."

She shook her head. "No, Hali, you are wrong. Nothing will ever be the same for any of us. Not ever!"

Prince Hali bowed to her. "I shall not see you again. I still love you. But perhaps it is better this way. If you had agreed to be my wife I would have probably have tired of you eventually." He gave the scarred one a sharp order and again she was returned to the other room and the door locked after her.

Nina was waiting for her. She stared at her and said, "You're crying! What did he do to you?"

"Nothing," she said, and smiled through her tears. "Rescue! An army is on its way! We'll be free by this time tomorrow."

The news of their upcoming rescue brought about a strange reaction. The women who had borne up so stoically under capture and loss broke down now and wept for their loved ones. And she wept along with them.

The army of Prince Hali retired under darkness. Nina was the first to discover the prison door had been left unlocked. They streamed out under the stars and gave their grateful prayers to a God who had not forgotten them.

The next morning they stood in the courtyard by the overturned cannon and the wreckage, shading their eyes to watch the road leading to the gates of the compound. On the other bank of the river which had once teamed with native soldiers there was no hint of anyone. The area was completely deserted.

Then, from far in the distance, there came the faint stirring sound of a military band. A surge of emotion went through these army women and their children. And as the sound of the band drew nearer their pulses pounded more wildly. When they at last saw the dust and the forefront of the column of marching soldiers they burst into cheers and sobs.

After the main body of the army had marched in, an officer detached himself from the group and ran across the courtyard and took Nina in his arms! It was Captain Tredale, saved by being absent on duty when the rebellion began.

Later, Priscilla was matron of honor at their quiet wedding in Calcutta. Captain Tredale had been assigned to the government staff in the great Indian city so they would neither of them face life in another outpost. As soon as his term of service was over the young man planned to take himself and his wife back to England.

Most of the bereaved women had elected to return to England on the next available ship. But Priscilla moved into Mrs. Copley's large, elegant home near Government House.

Mr. Copley carefully explained her position in his best legal manner. He said, "To gain the most from the government, dear lady, you should accept their offer of free passage back to England and the small pension they offer you."

They were sitting in the study of the palatial home, he across the desk from her. She said, "And if I do not choose to return to England?"

"You will lose the passage money but not the pension," he said. "I personally can't think why you would wish to remain in India after your sad experience. I fear it may have left a worse mark on you than you realize."

She smiled wanly. "A scar that will not heal? I already have several."

The gray-bearded lawyer said, "My wife and I are pleased to have you as our guest. Stay as long as you like. But think what is best for you in the long run."

"That is hard to say," she mused. "I would like to return to England." But she did not dare reveal, even

to this friend, that she had left London as a murderess.

"Then why don't you?"

She smiled wanly. I have no one to go back to. I'm an American, you know." This was only partly truthful since James Baker would no doubt welcome her and Harry Layton would try to offer her protection. But she didn't wish to involve them in her crime.

"What about your husband's family?"

She said, "They live in Kent. Albert, his older brother, has the title. Edward and he didn't get along."

"Still, under the circumstances I think you should write and explain all that has happened and see what their reaction might be."

She said, "You mean I might go to live with the family."

"In view of the fact your husband died for his country, I would expect them to welcome you with open arms."

"I'd hardly expect that," she said. "But if they had some sort of employment I could do at the castle. That might make it more interesting."

"With your pension and some other small income you ought to be able to manage nicely," he said. "Would you like me to write a letter to Lord Albert Peel?"

"Perhaps you could," she said. "I do not wish charity. Just some sort of employment and a place to live."

"I shall look after the matter at once," Mr. Copley told her. "With some luck we should have a reply in a month or two. Meanwhile, we are delighted to have you here."

The next evening she dined with Nina and her new husband in the bungalow which had been assigned to them. Nina was bubbling over. "There is talk of the governor general returning to England to confer with Queen Victoria about the rebellion. And if so, he is taking his immediate staff with him!"

Ronald Tredale said, "Which means that I'll be included!"

"When will you know?" she asked.

He said, "It's practically settled. I think we'll be sailing in a few weeks."

Priscilla smiled sadly. "You'll be leaving me behind. I'm getting in touch with Edward's family but I won't have word back for a long while."

Nina said, "You should return to England anyway. You could stay with my mother for a while."

"I'd prefer to hear from Edward's people first," she said.

Ronald said, "It would be jolly if we all found ourselves returning on the same ship."

"It's hardly likely," she said. "Though I would enjoy it."

Nina turned to her husband and said, "You forgot the most important thing, Ronald. You didn't tell her the news from Cranpore."

"Sorry," Ronald said. "So much to talk about, you know."

"What is the news from Cranpore?" she said, suddenly alert.

The young officer said, "Rather nasty business, really. General Craig went to pay an official visit on your friend, Prince Hali, to see about the transfer of the throne and all that."

"Yes," she said impatiently. "Go on."

Young Tredale looked embarrassed. "Well, it was most unfortunate. He was informed he couldn't talk with the prince because the fellow had taken a pistol and put a bullet through his head!"

"Hali dead!" she exclaimed, tautly.

"Sorry to offer that sort of news," the young man said.

"It's all right," she told him. "I had to hear it from

someone. Better from you." And she knew now that she wanted to leave India.

The weeks passed without word from Lord Albert Peel.

Often she and Mrs. Copley sat on a patio at the back of the great mansion in which the Copleys lived. The older woman said, "You mope a great deal these days. When we first met on the ship coming over, you never had a really depressed mood."

She smiled wanly. "I'm sure I did. You just didn't notice."

"You were surely happy after you met Edward Peel. Your romance and marriage made the voyage!" Mrs. Copley said with a happy beam of remembrance on her wrinkled face.

"We were very happy," she agreed.

"Such a tragedy," the older woman said. "But you mustn't let it overwhelm you. Edward would not wish that. And it will not bring him back."

"I know," she said. "Grieving does not change anything. My friends the Tredales are on their way to England with the governor-general," she said. "I shall miss them."

When Mr. Copley returned from the office, he informed her, "We had a mail from England today and a letter from Lord Albert Peel."

"What does he say?" she asked.

He took the letter from his pocket and opened it, saying, "Actually it is not directly from Lord Albert but written by his cousin, Hugh. I gather that Lord Albert is presently ill."

"Oh?"

"Yes," the lawyer said. "The letter is rather long but

I shall give you the gist of it. Lord Albert wishes you to come to his castle in Kent and be governess to his twelve-year-old daughter."

"Excellent!" Mrs. Copley said. "Don't you agree, Priscilla?"

"Yes, I think it is what I've been hoping for," she said, "Did the letter express any sorrow for the death of my husband?"

"Most certainly," the lawyer said. "Lord Albert sent his regrets. Well, you know they are awaiting you. There's a ship sailing day after tomorrow."

"I'll take it," Priscilla said.

BOOK THREE

England, 1858

BOOK THREE

THE END

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

England seemed cold to Priscilla, even on this late midsummer afternoon, when she stepped off the stage at the Leather Bottle Inn. She asked one of the porters if the carriage from Peel Castle had come for her and was told that it had not yet arrived.

She had the porter put her luggage to one side while she entered the sitting room of the ancient inn to wait for the carriage which she'd expected to pick her up. It was an inauspicious beginning to an undertaking about which she was still much in doubt.

The voyage from Calcutta had been uneventful, but she's been saddened by her memories of the honeymoon voyage she'd made with Edward. She missed him a great deal.

As the ship neared England she had debated with

herself whether to get in touch with James Baker or any of her other friends. She decided against it. She could still be in trouble for the murder of Sir Albert Coombs and they could be charged for aiding her. She had a new identity in Mrs. Edward Peel, better to remain with it. So she remained in London only long enough to arrange the thirty-mile journey to Cobham, where the carriage from Peel Castle was to pick her up.

A stout, red-faced man wearing an apron came to her, a tray in his hand.

"Would you care for a little something, ma'am?" he asked.

"Thank you, no," she said. "I expected to be met here by the carriage from Peel Castle."

"Ah," the big man said. "That would be Giles Parton, he is the estate manager for Lord Albert. You going to live at the castle?"

"I hope to. My late husband was Edward Peel."

The red-faced man's face showed surprise. "Little Eddie! You mean to say you're little Eddie's wife! He's been here many a time as a lad! Used to like my wife's fudge!"

She said, "Unhappily, he is dead. He was killed in the rebellion in India."

"Aye!" the man said. "I heard about the rebellion! A bad thing it was! And poor Eddie was killed away out there?"

"Yes."

"How did it happen?"

"I can't tell you," she said. "His body was not found. There was a great deal of shelling. Many people simply vanished, blown to bits."

"A sad business, ma'am," the innkeeper said. "I'm sorry I brought it up."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm used to talking about it now. I find England so cold after India."

"Cold, ma'am? This be a right warm day!"

"So everyone says, but it doesn't feel that way to me."

The big man sympathized, "I would expect the blood gets thin in India and the like. It could take a while to come back to standing normal climes."

"That's true. How far away is Peel Castle?"

"Three, maybe four miles," the man said. "Built in the time of Elizabeth with gardens the like you're not apt to find in any part of England. It's a fine building perched on a hill overlooking a beautiful countryside."

"And Edward came here?"

The man nodded. "The last time I saw him was afore he joined the army. I was sorry to see him go. All around here liked him better than Lord Albert."

"So I've been told."

"No disrespect, ma'am," the innkeeper said. "But Lord Albert has always been a cruel man and a hard landlord. And he and Eddie could scarce stay in the same room together."

"Edward told me that but he didn't say why."

"There could be many reasons."

"I'm sure," she said. "Lord Albert has a twelve-year-old daughter, Emily, hasn't he?"

"Yes. By his first wife. She died. The wife, I mean."

"Oh?"

"He married again. Not much luck there either," the big man said. "But you'd best hear all that from the family."

She smiled ruefully. "If they choose to confide in me. Sometimes that doesn't happen."

The big man smiled. "Well, you'll like the castle. Built in Elizabeth's time, as I said. And it has a secret stairway."

"Does it?"

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"Yes. Story is the Queen used to visit some titled gent who caught her fancy. Or he would go to her, whatever way they decided it. No one else in the house had any way of telling they were seeing each other on the sly."

She said, "Interesting! An old castle with a hidden stairway."

"I've heard the Peels deny it exists," the innkeeper told her. "But I've known those who were servants in the house and say they walked those very stairs."

"Why would the Peels deny the story?"

"They're an odd lot," he said. "At least, exceptin' Mr. Edward. He was my favorite. There's never a sign of Lord Albert these days; he never neaves the castle. But his cousin Hugh and his wife live at the castle."

"Yes," she said. "I have heard of Hugh."

"He's about the same age as your husband would have been. Comes from the Surrey branch of the family. I hear he lives on his family money and whatever his wife had before she married him. He gambles a good deal. Story is that he has to live with Lord Albert now because he can't afford a place of his own."

"I see," she said, her thoughts turning to another gambler. Was Thomas Manley still in England? She didn't know.

"Hugh has been over here and played cards many a time with some other gentlemen. And I can tell you the stakes was high! Too high!" He shook his head grimly. "You'll excuse me, ma'am. I best go back and check business in the bar."

"Of course," she said.

A giant of a man appeared in the doorway of the inn parlor. He had a bronzed, stern face and gray piercing eyes. A mop of black hair fell about his forehead.

He asked in a deep voice, "Are you Mrs. Peel?"

She stood up. "Yes, I am. Are you from the castle?"

"Giles Parton, estate manager, at your service, ma'am," the giant said. "If you'll come out to the carriage we shall have you at Peel Castle in no time at all."

She followed him out and he lifted her up onto the one-seater to sit beside him as he drove. Then he loaded her luggage in the back.

As he got onto the seat beside her he jiggled the reins and urged the trim brown horse on its way. "I'm sorry I was late. We had a birthin' and I could not get away."

"A what?"

"A birthin'," he repeated. "One of the prize cattle gave us a fine little bullock. I could not leave until it was over."

"Of course not," she said. "It didn't matter. I had a nice talk with the innkeeper."

"He enjoys a bit of gossip," Giles Parton said dourly.

She glanced around at the trees with their green leaves, the bright green fields and the many flower beds. The winding road seemed to be leading them through an enchanted garden.

"This is much different from India," she said.

The man at the reins grunted. "Never interested in those heathen places. And so poor Mr. Edward was killed there."

"Yes. But he rather enjoyed India."

Giles Parton nodded bleakly. "He was always one to enjoy new things and taking chances."

"I liked that about him," she said.

"But see what it led him to?"

"Perhaps that was his destiny," she said.

"Lord Albert isn't likely to be killed in any foreign place. For the last two years he's remained in his room with none of us ever setting eyes on him."

"How odd of him!"

The big man gave her a grim look. "They're an odd

family, ma'am. Every one of them. Excepting the girl Emily."

"She is the child of his first wife?"

Giles Parton looked a little less angry. "Mrs. Bertha," he said. "She was a good woman. Not like the second hussy he met and married."

"Is the second wife at the castle now?"

"Ran off! Just at the same time Lord Albert decided to play the hermit. His food and drink has to be left outside his door for him. When he finishes with the dishes he puts them out. And that's as much as anyone ever sees of him."

"Do you think it is because his second wife ran off?" she wondered. "Could it have unhinged his mind?"

"A lot of people say so," the estate manager admitted. "I have my own ideas but I'm not saying them."

"What is the little girl like?" she asked. "It could be that I'll be her governess."

"You couldn't find yourself a better post."

"You think not?"

"No, Miss Emily is a fine child. In truth, she doesn't act or talk like a child. She's been among grown-ups too much. But she's still just a youngster."

The carriage rolled on through a shaded lane and she found herself feeling chilly again. The estate manager gave her another odd look. "You cold?"

"Don't mind me," she protested. "I'm just not used to English weather yet. I'll be all right."

"We don't have many days warmer than this. Of course it gets cool in the shade."

"That's it," she said.

"Speaking of Miss Emily, Mrs. Delia has been taking care of her lately and she doesn't do too well. She's not a good teacher and she draws accidents like honey draws flies. Only yesterday she and Miss Emily were

coming in from the gardens and a section of drain pipe broke away from its place and came tumbling down. It almost hit them on the head."

"An unusual accident," she said.

"Not when the drainpipes are as old and in as bad repair as they are at Peel Castle," the estate manager grumbled. "I've been trying to get Lord Albert to repair them but he never gives me an answer. How are you going to deal with someone you can only talk to by passing a slip under his door! He was always the same, wanted everything from his tenants and won't give them anything. Most of the tenants' bungalows are in a shocking state of repair."

"Lord Albert is mean?"

"And without any need," the big man said. "To go back to Mrs. Delia, that's Hugh Peel's wife, another time she and Miss Emily were walking on the shore when a lunatic who lives on the next estate and dabbles in archery almost shot an arrow into Miss Emily's back. Mrs. Delia saw it coming in time and they threw themselves down on the river bank."

"Did the man apologize?"

"Apologize?" the outraged Parton exclaimed. "He won't even admit he was to blame. Swears it wasn't him. And everyone knows he's the only archer around."

She said, "You're right, the woman does seem to have bad luck."

"Another time they were in the field, taking the short-cut back, and one of the prize bulls got loose. He saw them and came after them and it was just a miracle that woman and little girl got out of the field safe."

"Perhaps that is why the family felt they should have a new governess for the girl," she said.

"Probably," he agreed.

"I'm not sure my own luck is better than Delia's. But if I find I'm not doing the job well, I'll leave."

The big man said, "I hope you don't. Someone with a level head is needed at the castle."

"What makes you think I have a level head?" she asked.

"Your talk. You sound sensible."

"Thank you."

He glanced at her. "And you were married to Mister Edward."

"I was."

"He was the pick of the family. I'd be willing to bet that he'd be pretty careful in finding himself a wife."

She smiled. "I'm just someone he happened to meet on board the ship."

"Edward used to climb the tallest apple trees to get the best apples as soon as they were ripe. And his brother always complained and told on him."

"My husband said his boyhood wasn't all that happy. The trouble is that Edward is gone and there's so little I know."

"You'll find out soon enough," the big man said gloomily. They had reached a small hill with open fields on the left and he halted the carriage and pointed across to a great stone turreted building set on an opposite hill-top and surrounded by gardens. "That's it," he said. "That's Peel Castle!"

She was breathless at its beauty. "It's lovely!" she exclaimed. "I always thought such castles were invariably on tall cliffs above the sea."

"Not Peel Castle," the big man said, driving on. "It's an ideal setting. In the old days it was a happy house."

When they reached the entrance of the castle, a jovial-looking young man with thinning auburn hair and mutton-chop whiskers was standing on the steps to greet them.

He came to her when she got down from the carriage and embraced her. "My dear Priscilla! So you are Edward's widow! I am his cousin, Hugh Peel!"

A little overwhelmed by the warmth of his greeting, she said, "Of course. It was you who wrote Mr. Copley and suggested I come here as governess."

"Exactly," he said. "Giles, have Mrs. Peel's things taken to the blue room, if you'll be so good."

"Yes, sir," Giles Parton said and got up on the seat of the wagon to drive around back.

Hugh Peel seemed to wear a perpetual smile on his rather flat face. He said, "Giles is driving to the rear and your things will be taken up the back stairs."

"Thank you," she said. "Such a lovely setting."

He glanced about him happily. "Yes. I think we do rather well for ourselves."

"Where is the child?"

"Off somewhere with my wife," he said. "But don't worry, they'll soon be back. Are you very tired?"

"Not at all," she said. "I rested for a while at the Leather Bottle Inn."

"Excellent place," Hugh said. "I go there myself. Come in and have a drink with me then. I have a few things to tell you before my wife and the child join us. One must use some discretion with children."

She entered the large, circular reception hall and almost the first thing that caught her eye was a large, colorful portrait of Edward. She went to it at once and felt she might cry.

"He was very good looking," she said.

"Your husband," he said, "had the true Peel looks. Now Albert doesn't have them, but he has the title and that is what counts, eh?"

She lingered studying the portrait. "I suppose so," she said. "The trip was worthwhile if only to see this."

Hugh said, "No doubt Albert will give it to you if you wish. It shouldn't be hanging out here with the hunting scenes. It ought to have a place of honor in the living room but Albert has reserved that for himself. And of course one can't dispose of the older paintings of one's ancestors! Not very well!"

She followed him into the great living room as he went on chattering. There was no question that he was easygoing, not too bright and enjoyed talking. She was impressed by the huge oblong room with its two cut-glass chandeliers dominating it from a decorated plaster ceiling. The furniture was old, shining mahogany. There were a great many fine oil portraits along the walls and over the fireplace a modern one of a man who slightly resembled Edward but who had a thinner, more gaunt cast of features.

Hugh stood below the painting and smiled at it. "That's the man! Lord Albert rules the roost! What will you have?"

"Sherry," she said.

Hugh poured out the drinks and brought hers to her. He said, "I hope you approve of the sherry. Bristol Cream! I prefer Scotch and straight." He dashed down his drink and looked more relaxed. "Do sit down."

She did and while she sipped her sherry he poured himself another drink. "I am the poor cousin," he said. "When Albert's second wife ran off and left him, he was alone here with his little girl. He needed company and someone to take care of Emily, so he made a bargain with us. Free house and living in exchange for our presence."

"I see," she said.

"Not bad, I'd say," Hugh said happily. "My wife, Delia, didn't want to come here but I insisted. So here we are. And now you are going to join our group. The hope is

that Emily will be better cared for and in less danger in your hands."

She said, "I heard something about their misadventures. I will try and live up to the responsibility."

Hugh stood before her, his glass in hand. "Emily is a fine little girl, easy to handle. My wife, Delia, you may not like."

"Why not?"

He made a gesture with his left hand. "It's hard to say. She's not a cheerful sort. Sees the worst in everything. Never satisfied with anything I do, including coming here."

"I see," she said carefully.

"Just don't allow her to bother you," he said.

"I won't," she promised. "I hear this old house has a secret stairway."

He laughed. "It's probably the first thing you heard."

"Just about."

"It has the stairway, I believe," Hugh said. "Though I have never been able to find it. Supposed to lead from down here somewhere to a chamber on the second floor once used by Queen Elizabeth the First."

"Exciting," she said. "Have you known anyone to discover it?"

He shook his head. "Not since I've been here," was his reply. "Though they swear it is here. It and Queen Elizabeth's ghost flitting through the corridors!"

"A ghost *and* a secret stairway," she said. "You are well provided for!"

"I should say." Hugh laughed. "Though I will tell you I think I've seen the ghost! Misty figure, ancient clothing, moves swiftly like a shadow!"

She smiled bitterly. "I've gone through a great deal in my lifetime. So you must forgive me if the story about

your ghosts doesn't bother me. Whether or not I see her, will I see Lord Albert?"

Hugh Peel spread his hands. "That is a large question and one which I'm not actually able to answer. That is why I wished to talk with you privately before Emily arrived."

"Please go on," she said.

"Yes. Well, Emily's mother Bertha was a fine woman. Much too fine for Albert. She died suddenly and Albert made a rather hasty second marriage. It proved a disaster!"

"In what way?"

"In almost every way," he said grimly. "Her name was Charity, Charity James. She was a minor actress. He courted her and married her and brought her here. She couldn't abide the quiet and the flowers, she wanted London and the theater! She drank a great deal, was unpleasant to poor little Emily, and fought regularly with Lord Albert."

Priscilla said, "Not exactly a love match."

"Albert had expected it would be. But it all went wrong. Then she went off to London several times and he found out she had been seeing another man there."

"And?"

"Their quarrels became worse. Albert sent for my wife and me."

She frowned, "I seem to recall your saying he had you come here after his second wife left."

"She left but later returned," Hugh Peel said. "Delia could not stand the woman. We stayed as long as we could, then I had to tell Lord Albert it was no use. We went back to our little cottage."

"And later returned?"

"Yes. Lord Albert and Charity had another truly, awful battle one stormy night a few months later. She

was drinking and left. The story is she picked up a ride on a passing stage and took passage on a coastal vessel. The ship sank in the storm and she was one of those lost."

"So it was after she was drowned that you returned?"

"Delia would never have set foot in here if she'd had any thought that awful Charity would return alive. With the news she had drowned, Delia agreed to return to care for Emily."

"And you've been here ever since?"

"Yes," he said. "And in all that time I've only been in contact with Albert through means of notes which we exchange. He lives in a locked apartment on the third floor. He does not come out. Food and other needs are left for him and he takes them in and puts out the dirty things to be washed. But no one has seen him since the night of that last quarrel with his second wife."

"That is surely puzzling," she said.

"Extremely," Hugh said. "And that is why I rather doubt that you'll see him."

"But surely he'd want to see his child," she said.

"Not Albert. He has no streak of sentiment. But he does write her notes and sees that she gets presents at suitable times."

"He must be slightly mad."

"That is possible. We have thought of that."

"Have you tried to get him to see the family doctor?" she asked.

"He refuses to see anyone. That includes doctors." Hugh gave her a knowing glance. "There is one other possibility."

"Oh?"

"It goes back to Charity, the second wife who was drowned. She once acted in some cheap melodrama in which she threw acid in a character's face. When she was

drinking she used to threaten Albert with the same treatment."

Her eyebrows raised. "Acid in his face?"

"An especially corrosive acid," Hugh said. "She claimed to have bought it in London and insisted that given enough taunting she would use it!"

"So?"

Hugh leaned his face close to hers and in a low tone said, "Suppose their battle that last night became that bad! And suppose she found the acid and waited for a chance and threw it into his face before leaving?"

"Horrible!" she said. "The pain and the scarring."

"Just so," he said. "It may have happened. That may be why my cousin doesn't want anyone to see him. He may be terribly disfigured."

"What an ugly story! It must have been dreadful for the child."

"No question," he said. "Delia has tried to help her but at night that poor little girl is haunted by nightmares."

"I only hope I can help her," she said. "And I am much disappointed that I won't be able to discuss it all with Lord Albert. I'd like to talk to him about Edward and the way in which he met his death."

Hugh warned her, "I'd forget that idea. Albert and Edward were not close. I think Albert hated your husband. In his present state of mind he doesn't want to hear about him."

"You will at least tell him I'm here!"

"Be sure of that. I will write him a note and pass it under the door to him," Hugh promised. "In due time he will send me out a reply."

She said, "Since your wife and Emily have not yet arrived I may as well go upstairs and freshen myself up before I come down to join you at dinner."

"Good idea," he said. "I'll show you up to your room."

It is only down the hall from Emily's. Thought you should be close by."

"Yes," she said rising to follow him. "That surely would be best."

The winding stairway took them up to her bedroom on the third floor. The room was attractively decorated in various shades of pale blue highlighted with white. Her luggage was already there and ready to be opened.

He said, "Did everything get here safely?"

She looked and counted, then said, "Yes. All here."

"Will I send a maid to help you unpack?"

"No," she said. "I'd much rather do it myself."

Hugh winked at her. "I admire that. I hate women who sit by and let servants do everything."

She smiled. "Then you would despise all Indian army wives. They are taught to be useless and let the servants do it all."

"Strange," he said. "We must talk about India one day. Do come downstairs when you're ready!"

"I will," she promised. And as soon as he left she went about unpacking. The room was pleasant enough and yet she felt it to be basically cheerless. The entire house was like that, almost an enjoyable place to live, but with something spoiling it. A feeling of the macabre about it, perhaps. Who could feel at ease in a house in which the master has become a faceless personality, ruling the place from a locked apartment!

Hugh Peel had been very genial in welcoming her to the family. She did not dare to think what they might do if they knew she were a murderess and a former hostess in a London gaming club. She worried that some of Hugh's friends might visit the castle and recognize her from the club.

She could always deny everything, claim that she had been in India at the time. She was weary from running.

She needed to rest here for a little. But was it going to work out? She didn't know.

After she'd unpacked she used the water on the commode to wash. The spotless room with its aroma of flowers and its huge bed made her recall the days and nights she had spent in that foul prison ward. She supposed the memory of that would always haunt her. Now Edward and Prince Hali were both dead. How futile it had all been!

She chose a green dress, deep enough in color to suggest mourning. In India she had worn only light-colored gowns and the intense heat and blazing sun had kept her miserable. Now, unused to the British climate, she was having chills. But she felt they would pass. She would once again be accustomed to the rigors of Britain!

She was about to leave the room when there was a faint knock on her door. She went and opened it and discovered a girl, only a little smaller than herself, standing there. The girl had carefully braided golden pigtailed and a freckled face that looked frightened.

The girl said soberly, "I'm Emily."

"Do come in, Emily," she greeted her warmly. "My name is Priscilla and I'm your aunt by marriage. You may call me Aunt Priscilla if you like!"

"No."

"Very well," she replied cheerfully. "You may choose your own name for me."

The little girl said soberly, "I shall call you Priscilla. And you call me Emily."

She laughed and placed a hand on the youngster's shoulder. "If that is what you wish."

"And you are more agreeable than Aunt Delia! I hate her!"

Priscilla's lonely heart was immediately attracted to the

appealing little girl. "It doesn't pay to waste hatred on anyone. It only hurts you."

"I hate her just the same," she insisted. "She says awful things about my daddy because he never comes out of his rooms. And I know he is a good man. Could you make him come out and talk with me?"

"Maybe later. I don't know," she admitted.

"Letters and presents are no good," Emily lamented. "I want my father!" She was near tears.

"I'm sure it will all work out," Priscilla said as brightly as she could. "Now we ought to go downstairs and join the others at dinner."

Emily nodded. "All right," she said.

They made their way down the winding stairway and found Hugh standing in the living room by the fireplace with a harried, worn-looking woman who looked much older than he.

Hugh said, "I see you and Emily have met!"

"Yes," she said. "I think we're going to be good friends."

He turned and introduced his wife. "My dear Delia, this is Edward's widow, Priscilla."

Delia's eyes darted nervously over her in appraisal. In a taut voice the other woman said, "You came all the way from India to be with us?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm ready to work at once."

Delia warned her, "You may come to think that you made the voyage for little."

Hugh spoke up, "You mustn't let Delia upset you, my dear Priscilla."

Delia gave him a sarcastic look. "So it is 'dear Priscilla,' is it?"

He looked embarrassed and murmured, "My dear!"

Delia ignored his plea. Her thin lips trembling, she said, "You've come to be with Emily in my place! You think

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you can do better than I! But let me warn you, it's not anything human you're going to be dealing with. It's the ghosts in this old house who wish to harm the poor child!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"No, no!" Emily said pitifully and pressed herself against Priscilla's side.

"Don't be upset!" she told the child. "It's just a silly quarrel. It doesn't mean anything."

Hugh had moved between her and his wife now and he no longer looked the affable man of the afternoon. "You are quite right, Priscilla." And turning to his wife, he warned her, "I will not tolerate another such outburst from you."

"I have said what I wanted to say," Delia said, her pointed chin held high.

Hugh forced a smile. "Well, now that this nonsense is over, I suggest we forget all about it and go in to dinner. We are going to be a happy family group no matter what!"

Emily appeared quite relaxed at the table and it seemed the unfortunate remark had not made too much impression on her. Or perhaps she had heard it before.

During the meal Emily asked her many general questions about India and its people. Priscilla gave her the best answers she could and was impressed by the child's lively mind. She felt she could do much with her.

Hugh smiled and said, "I can see you have the natural knack for imparting information which I fear my wife lacks."

Delia paused over her plate to glare at him. "I have never pretended to be a teacher!"

He said placatingly, "I did not mean to offend you, my dear. I simply wished to compliment Priscilla."

Delia's cheeks were flushed. "You are ready with compliments for everyone but me!"

Hugh glanced down the table at Priscilla with a resigned look and said, "I have invited guests for this evening, neighbors whom I want you to meet. A brother and sister, Stanley and Jane Baxter."

She said, "Would they have known my late husband?"

"Yes," Hugh said. "I believe that Jane once found herself caught between Edward and his brother, Lord Albert. She couldn't make up her mind which one she liked best and so she wound up not marrying at all."

Emily observed, "Mr. Baxter was wounded in the Crimean War."

"That is correct," Hugh said. "Stanley lost his left eye and had his left leg and arm badly damaged in a shell explosion. I think only the dedicated nursing of his sister got him on his feet again."

Priscilla said, "They sound an interesting couple. I will look forward to meeting them."

Delia made no comment so it was hard to say whether she approved of the visitors or not. Emily talked on of

her pony and of having been to see a circus in London. Eventually the dinner ended.

After dinner Hugh took Priscilla aside and informed her, "From now on you are responsible for the child. It is Lord Albert's wish."

"Very well," she said. "Will Delia object?"

"Perhaps," he said. "But you must be firm. The truth is I'm worried about Delia. You heard her talk. She is no longer a well-balanced person. Full of fantasies!"

"Is this a recent development?"

"Fairly. I've had the doctor talk to her but it does not help. And these accidents she's been having when the child is with her seem to be too coincidental. I begin to think she deliberately is looking for trouble."

"That's very strange," she said.

"Delia has always had a self-destructive streak," he worried.

"What does Lord Albert think?"

He shook his head. "It's very difficult to know. There are only the cryptic notes he sends out. And I don't think my messages to him always convey things as clearly as they should."

She sighed. "There is no question that most of the problems here center around his shutting himself off from everyone."

"I know," Hugh said in a baffled tone. "I simply do not understand it. Well, I think you'll like the Baxters. Delia doesn't get along with Jane Baxter, they had some silly argument and Delia took it personally. So she'll vanish when they arrive."

Priscilla smiled bleakly. "With things as they are I can guess you don't have many visitors."

"Hardly any," he said. "The Baxters are the exception. They are fine people. Rarely have I known a brother and sister to be so devoted."

They arrived at the stroke of eight. Stanley Baxter wore a black eye-patch and walked with the aid of a cane. He was tall and thin with an intelligent face. His hair was black and somewhat curly. His sister, Jane, had the same coloring and intelligent features but in her case the features were more refined to give her a glow of beauty.

After they'd been introduced and drinks had been passed, Hugh, in his favorite spot before the fireplace, told them, "Since both Delia and Emily have gone upstairs to bed I can frankly say I'm relieved to have Priscilla here to take over the responsibility of the child."

Jane Baxter gave her a smile of encouragement. "I agree. Delia has done her best but it is not enough."

Stanley Baxter turned to her and said, "How does it feel to be at Peel Castle without your husband?"

"I miss Edward a great deal," she said. "I always shall."

The young man frowned. "Many of my friends were killed in action. I've often wondered what their widows felt, how they reacted. I was too badly hurt and took too long recovering to be able to make visits of condolence among them."

"I understand," she said. "You were fortunate to escape with your life."

His smile was bitter. "Look at me! A shambles."

"Be grateful you're alive," was Priscilla's advice.

Jane Baxter said, "Did Edward continue to enjoy dancing? When I knew him as a young man he was an excellent dancer."

She smiled sadly as she remembered. "There were a great many parties. We did dance a good deal."

"I suppose there was an air of desperation in all that," Hugh ventured. "Many of the army people must have known a rebellion was in the offing."

Priscilla disagreed. "No, I don't think so. I'd say it was just the opposite. There was little understanding of the danger."

The man with the black eye-patch grumbled, "It's the army! We must do away with purchased commissions. Until we do we'll have rotten officers. They bungled things in the Crimea and now they've done equally badly in India!"

"I know Edward believed as you do," she said.

Jane told her, "I used to spend a lot of time here when I was younger. I think it's a wonderful old house, don't you?"

"I'm much impressed," she said.

Hugh sighed. "I've had trouble convincing Lord Albert that the grounds must be kept up as they always were. Since his self-incarceration he seems to have lost interest in the estate."

Jane looked upset. "How long must this madness persist? He's locked himself away from us for nearly two years now!"

Hugh frowned. "Who can tell? At the moment the one thing which concerns him is his daughter's safety. But since we don't know why he's locked himself in, we don't know that he won't come out just as suddenly."

"I wonder," Jane said gloomily. "I cannot see the care-free days we had growing up ever returning."

Stanley told his sister, "You expect too much!" And turning to Priscilla, he said, "Since you've only just arrived you have not yet seen the gardens under star-light?"

"No."

"An enchanted place," he assured her. "May I have the pleasure of showing them to you?"

She smiled. "That might be pleasant. But I shall have

to get a cloak. My blood is still thin from the warm Indian sun."

"I'll meet you by the front door," he said, leaning on his cane and rising with some effort.

She said, "You're sure you feel like walking?"

"Yes. It's just getting up and down that bothers me," he said. "Walking is supposed to be good for me."

"Very well," she said. "If your sister and Hugh will excuse us, I'd like to take a stroll through the gardens."

Jane smiled, "It will be worthwhile."

"We've seen it so many times before you'll forgive us for staying in here and chatting," Hugh said.

She found her cloak and put it on and then joined Stanley Baxter. He opened the door and they went outside. She gave a tiny shudder.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"I find the air biting," she said.

"In a few weeks it won't bother you," he assured her. "Let's walk to the south gardens."

It was a beautiful evening, bright with stars overhead and fragrant with the perfume of the gardens. Priscilla could not but think herself lucky to be safely returned from India and here in this pastoral part of England, despite the weird and baffling behavior of the people of Peel Castle.

Perhaps Stanley Baxter read her mind, for he halted and pointed his walking stick to a lighted window high in the nearest tower. "That light is in Sir Albert's apartment. I have seen it there many nights. That is why I'm sure he wasn't blinded by acid. A blind man needs neither candles nor lamps!"

She stared up at the window. "Very strange," she said.

"The whole business is bizarre," he said with annoyance. "I never liked Albert. And his second wife was a strange person. But I didn't expect this of him."

She said, "It's too bad. It could be such a paradise here!"

"I agree," he said. "My sister and I feel sorry for old Hugh. His wife is difficult. I'm glad you're here. The little girl needs you."

"You think so?"

"Yes. Delia is gradually making her as neurotic as she herself is. I've noticed it happening. You must get fresh air into that child's mind."

"I'll try," she said. "I've no special training as a teacher."

"You are fond of Emily. That is the most important thing."

They had reached the end of the gravel walk and come to the tall brick wall which guarded the estate on all sides. Now they retraced their steps and walked slowly back towards the old castle.

She said, "You walk very well."

"With the cane to take my weight," he said. "At one time the doctors told me I would have to lose the leg. Saving it was miraculous and gradually getting to be able to use it again was an extra. I owe it to my sister's nursing that I have made this good a recovery."

"She's very nice," she said.

"A fine girl," Stanley Baxter said. "And still not too old to marry."

"Of course not!" Priscilla said.

"The unfortunate thing is since there are only the two of us she has become greatly devoted to me. She's given so much of herself to my recovery she hasn't had time to think of her own life."

"Perhaps if she had a season in London and met people of her own age," Priscilla suggested.

"Yes," he said. "That would be ideal! I hope we can soon arrange it. In the meantime, and this is confidential,

I think she has become unduly fond of Hugh Peel."

She halted and stared at him. "Really?"

"Yes. Don't ever repeat this."

"Of course not."

He glanced toward the castle grimly. "She escaped getting involved with Albert and now I worry that she may become infatuated with his cousin."

"But Hugh is married."

"He and his wife do not get along," Stanley said. "And let me warn you, he has a fondness for the ladies."

"I sensed that," she said. "He was extremely flattering in the comments he offered me."

"I've warned Jane about him," he said with a sigh. "But she is so starved for affection and male company that even a shabby Hugh looks good."

"I'd say getting her to London is the best solution. It will also do you good."

"I don't matter."

"But of course you do," she insisted. "You must build your future also. You should find a wife."

"How many young women would want to marry a one-eyed cripple?" he asked.

"Many of them," she said. "You have good looks and a charming manner. Think of the qualities you still possess, not your losses."

He smiled wryly. "Good advice. I'll try to take it."

"You must!"

They were on the steps at the main entrance and before they went inside, he said, "I hope we can become friends."

"I feel that we will," she said. "You are a lot like Edward in many ways."

"We grew up together. We were much closer than most of the others."

"I'm sure he must have mentioned you but I do not

remember," she said. "Your name would not have meant that much to me."

"I hope it will from now on."

"Be sure of that," she told him sincerely.

They went inside and discovered Hugh and Jane seated together on a divan in the living room studying the latest edition of the *Illustrated London News*. They both seemed upset at being discovered in such close proximity. Jane let the magazine fall to the carpet and Hugh jumped to his feet. Smiling at them awkwardly, he retrieved the magazine and gave it to Jane.

"We were just going through the news," he said.

"So much violence in the world," Jane said, blushing. "And the Queen has gone into such deep mourning for Prince Albert that she is paying no attention to politics."

Stanley Baxter said, "That may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. I think Parliament should make the important decisions."

"Oh, quite!" Hugh said with an air of knowledge which did not suit him.

Jane rose with a smile. "Well, it is time for us to go. We had a most delightful visit. You must come and call on me soon, Priscilla."

"Thank you," she said. And she and Hugh saw the two on their way.

After they had gone Hugh escorted her to the stairs, acting just a trifle embarrassed. He said, "Fine pair, those two!"

"Yes, I agree," she said.

"Stanley's illness has been hard on Jane," he said uneasily. "I try to cheer her up."

"I noticed," she said, with meaning.

His face crimsoned. "Yes! Well, I'll say goodnight and do sleep well!"

"Thank you," she said. And she went upstairs to the

blue room to find a candle lit on the dresser and her bed turned down. The housekeeping at the castle had apparently not suffered.

In bed she stared up into the shadows and thought of the stories she'd heard about the old castle. Delia had said that evil ghosts were trying to harm little Emily. Was she referring to the ghost of the stepmother, Charity, who had left on that stormy night and been drowned? But the castle ghosts and the mysterious, secret stairway dated far before that!

She fell asleep speculating about these things. Then she was awakened by a floorboard creaking somewhere in her room. She sat up in bed, frightened, and stared into the darkness. "Is there someone there?"

No reply. Now everything was deathly silent. Yet she had the impression that someone was in there with her, waiting in the darkness. Her experiences in India had taken a toll of her nerves from which she was not yet recovered. She found herself trembling and beads of perspiration formed at her temples.

"Please!" she begged.

Many thoughts ran through her mind. Could it be the ghost? Or possibly a mad and disfigured Lord Albert roaming through the castle at night! Was it he who crouched in the shelter of the darkness waiting to spring out at her if she moved?

She sat there transfixed, not knowing what to do. Then there was a scream from down the hall! A frantic, childish scream and she knew it must be from Emily's room! Forgetting her own fears, she threw back the bedclothes, picked up a robe and ran toward the door leading to the hall.

In a moment she was opening the door of Emily's room. The little girl was standing up in her bed sobbing. She rushed to her and took her in her arms.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"A ghost!" the child sobbed.

"No," she said. "There are no such things!"

"There are!" Emily insisted. "I saw her. She came to me through the shadows and touched my arm. Her hand was cold as death!"

Trying to calm the child, she said, "You know what I think? I think you had a bad dream!"

Emily shook her head. "No. I was awake."

"I wonder!"

"Yes," the child insisted as she clung to her. "It's not the first time! She's come here before! She has a face like a skull so I know she's dead! And tonight she touched me with a finger that was a bone!"

Priscilla said, "You're allowing your imagination to run away with you!"

"I'm frightened! Delia says she has seen the ghost. And it came to my mother before she died. Does such a ghost always visit those about to die?"

"Only in Delia's mind," she said, grimly. "You mustn't pay any attention to her."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you later," she said. "Now I want you to go to sleep again so we can have a good day tomorrow. I'll leave this candle on the side table. Then no ghosts will come near you. They prefer the darkness!"

"All right, if you leave the candle," the child said with little enthusiasm.

She kissed Emily goodnight and tucked her in. "You'll be safe enough now."

"And your room is just down the hall," the little girl said, staring up at her.

"Yes. You can always call me if you need me."

"All the others have their bedrooms on the floor below," she said. "They'd never hear me!"

"I can hear you plainly," she said. "But don't call me unless there's really a good reason."

"I won't," the girl said.

She left the child's room and walked back down the pitch-black hall. How dark the old house got! She was as puzzled by Emily's story as she was by her own experience. Certainly she had heard someone in her room.

Her own door was open and she went back inside. As she did her nerves went taut once again. For she was sure someone stood watching her from across the room. For a moment she did not dare move nor speak.

Then she said sternly, "I see you. Reveal yourself to me. I know you are no ghost."

"I mean no harm," a voice quavered in reply.

She gasped. "Delia!"

"Yes," the answer came weakly.

She went to the dresser and lit the candle there. "What do you mean by roaming about the house at this hour scaring everyone?"

The older woman, gray hair falling about her shoulders, looked anguished. "I haven't wandered around. I came here to see you!"

"You were in my room a while ago and wouldn't reveal yourself," she accused the woman.

"You're wrong! When I came upstairs to see you I found the door of your room open and you weren't here!"

Priscilla stared at her sternly. "Why don't you tell the truth? You were in here before that, and then you went on to Emily's room and terrified her by playing ghost!"

"No!"

"And after that you hid in the dark hall and made your way back here while I was with that poor child. Isn't that the way it went?"

"No," the woman insisted. "I only just came up here. And I've been waiting for you!"

"Why are you here then?"

"I came to talk with you when no one else would know," the woman said.

"What about?"

"The things going on here." Delia looked as if she might burst into tears. "Hugh has poisoned your mind against me already."

"Why do you say that?"

Delia reached out poignantly and said, "I know I seem odd to you, but I'm only sick and nervous because he has made me this way. He is constantly running after other women!"

"You came up here in the middle of the night to tell me that?" she said with disbelief.

"I came to tell you he's trying to drive me mad so he can marry that Jane Baxter!"

She said calmly, "I wouldn't worry. Even if your husband should be silly enough to try to have an affair with Jane, I'm certain she is much too nice a girl to be party to it."

"You can't be sure!" Delia protested. "Hugh can have a way with him. I know!"

Priscilla said, "Go back to bed and forget all this and try and sleep."

Delia's worn face showed concern. "Before I do there is something I must tell you."

"What?"

"Things do happen in this house!"

"What sort of things?"

"Ghostly things! Just as you experienced tonight! I have seen a phantom flitting through the corridors. And tonight it called on you and poor Emily."

"You've been telling Emily those stories and doing her great harm!"

"I have not made them up! They are true!"

Priscilla said, "They may seem true to you but I forbid you to repeat them to that little girl."

Delia began to whimper. "The ghosts are trying to kill both me and the child. I thought you would understand. But you're like the rest!"

She was momentarily touched by the woman's distress. "I do sympathize with you. Go back to bed and later we will have a serious talk about this."

She eased Delia to the door and closed it after her. Then she leaned against it with a feeling of relief. There was no question that Hugh's wife was in a bad mental state, poor thing.

In the sunshine of the next morning the eerie events of the night before seemed distant. She had breakfast with the others. Delia did not appear but Hugh was there and so was Emily.

Hugh said embarrassedly, "Delia is not feeling well this morning."

"That is too bad," she said.

"She doesn't sleep well. She has her own bedroom. And that doesn't seem to help. She once complained my snoring kept her awake all night, but now she wanders about like Lady Macbeth just the same."

Priscilla said, "I think her nerves are making her ill. Really ill. I'd have that doctor take a look at her again."

"I will," Hugh promised. "By the way, I had a note from Lord Albert this morning."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Hugh went on. "He said to tell you he welcomes you here and he wants you to give your best attention to Emily."

She smiled across the table at Emily. "You can be sure that I will."

"He again offers his regrets on Edward's death and

he promises that as soon as he can arrange it, you shall receive a proper share of the estate."

Priscilla said, "I did not come here for that."

Hugh shrugged. "You are entitled to it. You would be mad not to accept it."

"It is something we can go into later."

"I simply mentioned it because Lord Albert wrote it in his note," Hugh said. "No doubt he will be giving me additional details later on." He then turned to Emily and said, "And he says you can have another pony. Speak to Giles Parton about it!"

"Oh, good!" Emily clapped her hands. "Now I'll have two ponies."

"Your father wishes you to be happy," Hugh told the child.

Her little face shadowed. "Then why doesn't he let me visit him?"

He sighed. "I've told you, child. He is not well. When he is better you'll be together again."

"When will that be?"

He hesitated and gave Priscilla a troubled glance.

Priscilla told Emily, "Your father is trying hard to get well enough to see you. In the meanwhile we'll talk to Giles about the pony!"

The little girl brightened. "Yes. I want another one just like the one I have now!"

After breakfast she gathered some study books which Delia had been using and took the child out to the garden. She said, "It will be fun to pursue your studies out here in the shade."

Emily said, "Let us go to the stables and see Giles Parton first."

"All right," she smiled. "You won't put your mind on your lessons until that pony business is settled, so we may as well go now."

"It's this way," Emily said, a charming figure in her white pinafore as she hurried along the gravel path ahead of her.

Giles Parton stood in the doorway of the stable watching them approach. He had a troubled look on his bronzed face. As they came up to him, he tipped his cap. "Good morning, ladies!"

Priscilla smiled. "You have extensive stables here." "The barns are large," the big man agreed. "Lord Albert's one weakness is fine racing stock."

Emily took the big man by the hand. "I'm to have a new pony! My father said to tell you!"

The big man showed surprise. He asked Priscilla, "Is that so?"

Priscilla said, "Yes. Hugh passed the word on at the breakfast table."

"I want another just like Mickey," Emily said.

"Very well, I'll look into it," Giles Parton said slowly as if he weren't convinced.

"I'm going in to see Mickey now," Emily said and vanished inside the stable.

Priscilla said, "It seems she has inherited her father's love of horses."

The big man said, "She's mighty fond of that pony. But I can't see why Sir Albert is getting her another."

"I have no idea. Maybe he wants to see her happy."

"It beats me," the big man said. "The morning of the day he decided to make himself a prisoner in that tower, he came to me with a bag of golden sovereigns. And he instructed me to go to Cobham and buy a filly that had been marked as the best in the county. I went and bought her. Two years later she's here eating her head off and he's never said a word to me about her."

"It's very strange," Priscilla said.

The estate manager was staring up at the tower of gray stone where Lord Albert had chosen to imprison himself. He said, "It is that, ma'am!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

She glanced at him. "Have you spoken about this to Hugh?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He has no love for animals. He'd be telling me to sell her without consulting the master. And I will not do that!"

"But Lord Albert regularly writes out instructions for him."

Giles Parton curled his lip. "So he says! But what's to stop him making his own decisions and putting them down as coming from the master?"

It was a good question. "I hadn't even thought about that."

"I have and often," the big man said. He gave her a sharp look. "You won't go telling him, will you?"

"No," she said. "Of course not. I wouldn't make trouble for you."

"I put you down for a proper lady, ma'am. And one of spirit. And I'm glad you're going to watch over Miss Emily for there's much that's wrong here."

"I'm sure that there is."

Giles Parton sighed. "The only way I can explain it is the master's mad!"

"Everything would seem to point to that," she said with a sigh.

"And how long can it all go on with a madman at the helm?" Giles Parton wanted to know.

Emily returned and she and the little girl found a suitably shaded spot in the garden and did some work on her reading and arithmetic. After Priscilla felt they had worked long enough she put the books aside and smiling at the youngster, said, "Now we can sit here and chat until luncheon."

Emily smiled at her. "I like you. You're not old and cranky like Delia."

"I don't think Delia is well." To change the subject she asked, "Do you remember your stepmother?"

"She's the only one I remember. My real mother died when I was very young."

"That was sad."

"Yes. It was."

"What about your stepmother?"

"Charity?" Emily considered. "She had a pretty face and she wore nice clothes but she was hateful!"

"Oh?"

"She used to slap me whenever she could think of an excuse. She hated me!"

"You're sure of that?"

"I know," Emily said with certainty. "Because once my father and she were having a terrible fight

and he told her that she hated me without reason!"

"He said that?"

"Yes. And then she was always getting drunk!" Emily said with glee.

"That's a serious thing to say," she warned the child. "You should be sure of your facts."

"I am," Emily said. "When she got very drunk she couldn't talk at all and she walked like this!" The child gave a remarkable imitation of a drunken person staggering along.

"I think I've seen enough," she said.

Emily laughed. "Well, you asked about her."

"And then she and your father had a quarrel and she left here?"

"Yes. It was a stormy night. I went to bed early. I don't remember any of it."

"Better that you don't," she said.

"I only wish my father would come down from the tower and hold me in his arms like he used to," the child said wistfully.

"I'm sure he will one day," she smiled, feeling sad for the little one. "He's been so ill."

"Couldn't he be ill down here?"

"He needs quiet," she said.

Emily sighed. "Well, I hope he gets better soon. Or I'll be all grown up."

Priscilla smiled. "It won't be that long. By the way, I understand you and Delia had some near accidents."

"Yes," the little girl said scornfully. "She's not very careful!"

"I don't think you should go anywhere with her," she said. "You'll be safer here and with me."

"I'm going to ride my pony this afternoon," Emily said happily. "But Giles Parton always goes with me when I ride. He has his own mare."

"He's a good man. You'll be safe with him."

"I like him," she agreed. "And my father used to say he was his only sincere friend."

Priscilla was impressed. "You remember a lot of things your father said."

"And things Charity said too," Emily volunteered. "She used to curse me!"

"I don't need to hear that," she said hastily. "Time for lunch."

Because Emily was going out with her pony that afternoon Priscilla decided she would walk over to the Baxters. She felt an urge to get away from Peel Castle and talk to someone. Not that she could speak of her own position frankly. She wondered what their reaction would be if they knew that Priscilla Peel was wanted for murder in London under the name of Priscilla Brentwood!

She had not forgotten. It had been her sole reason for coming to the castle. And it might end up being her only reason for remaining there. Of course there was Emily, Edward's niece. No matter that Emily's father had not been fair to Edward, she wanted to help the child as much as she could.

The Baxter house was a modest thatched cottage with a miniature garden resembling the large ones surrounding the castle. When she walked up to the door she was greeted by Jane, who seemed pleased to see her.

"Do come in!" she said. "I hoped you might accept my invitation."

She entered the cool, pleasant living room with a smile. "I had the afternoon off. Emily has gone riding. It seemed a good time to pay a visit."

Jane Baxter, prim and pretty in a dark blue dress and white apron, said, "So little happens here that we welcome visitors at any time. My brother is resting in his room but he'll be out shortly."

"I'm sure he needs plenty of rest," she said.

Jane put on the kettle, then came back to sit with her. She said anxiously, "When he returned from the Crimea I despaired of him living. He is still in delicate health."

Priscilla said, "I know something of the ordeal he must have gone through from my own experiences in India."

"I'm sure you do," the other girl said. "One tends to forget about all that."

"I don't," she said grimly. "But I seem to have enough new problems without dwelling on the past."

The water started to boil, and Jane went to make the tea and prepare a tray of biscuits.

A little later as they sat facing each other over tea, Priscilla said, "One of the big problems I have is Delia. She is such a bad influence on Emily. She fills the child's head with stories of hauntings and the like!"

Jane said, "The castle has always had the reputation of being haunted."

"I cannot encourage such talk."

"Delia is a dreadful person," Jane said. "If only Hugh were free of her life would be much different for him."

Priscilla said, "I wonder about him."

Jane showed surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I remember a man something like him. His name was Hudson. He was in my husband's regiment. He blamed his wife for a great deal. But it was his selfishness that was at the root of all the evil."

Jane blushed. "Are you likening Hugh to him?"

"I suppose in a way I am. To be brutally frank, I find Hugh shallow. Much like that other man."

Jane was clearly confused. "That is odd. He has always been so pleasant and understanding with me."

"Men of that type are never without charm," she said with meaning.

Still upset, her cheeks crimson, Jane said, "I have

lived such a sheltered life here in this small village. I suppose I'm not a good judge of character."

"Exposure to the larger world is not always pleasant," she said. "But I think most of us need it."

"I shall keep that in mind," Jane said. "My brother has suggested we go to London for the social season. Perhaps we ought to go."

"I'd call it a first-rate idea," she said.

At this point Stanley appeared, limping a little as he came toward them on his cane. "What is this? Company? Why wasn't I told?"

Priscilla smiled. "I didn't want to interfere with your rest."

"I'd have been glad to come out and join you," the young man said, settling down in a chair near them.

Jane smiled at her brother. "Well, now you're here."

"Yes," he said. "Thank you for coming to see us so soon."

"I wanted to get away from the castle," she said.

He nodded. "Bit grim, isn't it?"

"Definitely," she said.

Jane frowned. "Things first went wrong when Lord Albert married that awful Charity and brought her here."

Priscilla asked, "Don't you think it odd that Lord Albert shut himself up on the very night that his wife left? You'd think he'd have been delighted."

"Yes," Stanley Baxter said. "I have often thought about it." He gave her a knowing glance. "Would you like to hear a rumor that has been quietly making the rounds?"

"I suppose so," Priscilla said.

"There are more than a few people who think Charity didn't run away and drown in that shipwreck."

"Oh?"

"There was no proper list of the passengers on that coastal ship. Really, the story came from Lord Albert.

Mad Lord Albert, imprisoned in the tower by his own wishes. So it has been suggested that Charity never did leave the castle."

"Then what happened to her?" Jane wanted to know.

"She was murdered!" her brother said. "By Lord Albert, who could no longer endure her. He buried her somewhere on the grounds or in the cellar or whatever. Then, shattered by the enormity of the crime, he sentenced himself to spend the rest of his life in the tower."

"What a dreadful thought!" Jane gasped.

Priscilla gave the brother and sister a knowing look. "It is not all that unlikely," she said. "And if it is true, do you suppose Hugh and Delia know?"

Stanley said, "It's possible. Hugh's acting as a sort of agent for Lord Albert, with full powers and control of moneys. He'll never be in that favorable a position again."

Jane looked pale. "And that may be why his wife is so obsessed with ghosts. Because she knows about the murder and it is preying on her mind."

Priscilla stared at them. They all sat there in startled silence for a little. Then she said, "It all fits so well it terrifies me."

"Yet we haven't a wisp of proof," Stanley pointed out.

"Lord Albert a murderer!" Jane said with awe.

"Why not?" her brother demanded. "She was a monster with a pretty face and figure! I know from what he said to me he had come to hate her. And he was no saint by any means."

Jane said, "But if nothing can be proven?"

"We are back where we started," her brother said with a harsh chuckle. "I vow it's a better game than whist."

Priscilla said, "I worry most for Emily."

"Of course," Jane agreed.

"I will have to try and quietly find out what I can,"

she said. "Perhaps, given time, I may be able to piece some of this puzzle together."

Stanley said, "You'd better use caution. If murder has been done there are more than one in that house who have a reason to conceal it."

"I realize that," she said.

Jane gave her an anxious look. "If it were not for Emily, I'd say you ought to leave that awful place and return to London."

"I can't do that," she said. Without explanation, they would take for granted she was referring only to Emily.

"If there is anything we can do, let us know," the invalid Stanley said.

"Yes. By all means," his sister chimed in.

Priscilla smiled ruefully. "Just now I'm so confused I'm not sure where to start." She rose. "Thank you for your hospitality. I really must go now."

"I'll walk you part of the way," Stanley said. "I need some air."

Jane gave him a worried look. "Don't go too far, Stanley. Don't overdo it!"

"You mustn't worry so much, little sister," he teased her as he put on his hat.

When they were well away from the cottage, she told him, "I tried to plant a warning about Hugh with your sister. I think it worked."

"Thank you," he said. "You've done what I couldn't do. She would think me prejudiced."

Priscilla shrugged. "Your theory of Charity being murdered sounds so logical I can't get it out of my mind. I think you must be right."

At the gate leading into the castle grounds, Stanley stopped. Staring up at the tower, he said, "I'd give quite a lot to spend fifteen minutes up there with Lord Albert."

She smiled grimly. "You think he might confess?"

"Stranger things have happened," he said. "It will have been on his conscience for two years now; if he did it, he'd want to talk with someone."

"Then Emily would have a murderer for a father."

"Murders sometimes can be condoned, at least understood," he said.

"You think so?"

"Yes. Such crimes must always be punished. But I do not think the same stigma attaches to a murder on impulse, or one done after continual abuse. The disgrace is not the same as in a premeditated murder."

She was thinking of her own case and wondering if people would be as considerate in judging her. She said, "If he is guilty it might be better that he made a clean breast of it."

"I think so," the man at her side agreed. "Keeping himself locked up there with a crime on his conscience could lead to madness. If it hasn't come to that now."

"I fear that," she said.

Stanley smiled at her. "Be careful! And forgive me for trying to play detective. It is a way for a cripple like myself to while away the time."

She went on to the castle and found that Emily had not yet returned. She made her way up the curving stairway, noting the fine chandelier which hung sparkling in the sunlight midway above the stairs. No expense had been spared in keeping the castle a showplace.

Instead of stopping at her own room she impulsively made her way to the next level. After a moment she found herself before the massive oaken door which led to the chambers Lord Albert never left.

She knocked on the door. After a moment she heard a shuffling sound inside. Someone was on the other side of the door listening.

She called out, "Lord Albert! I would like to speak

with you! It's Priscilla! I wish to discuss Emily with you!"

She waited, listening, hoping the door might open and that Emily's father would present himself to her. But the silence continued. Then suddenly she saw a yellow square of paper slipped out from under the door.

Picking it up, she saw that it was crudely lettered with the words, "I will only speak with you through my cousin." So there it was, her answer. She turned away frustrated.

She came down the stairs, the yellow paper crumpled in her hand.

As she reached her own landing she was suddenly confronted by Delia. The frail woman faced her nervously. Priscilla said, "You are feeling better?"

"Yes," the older woman said weakly. "You have been up there?"

Priscilla saw no need to lie about it. "Yes."

Delia shook her head. "It will do no good!"

"You seem very sure of that?"

"I know!"

She eyed her sharply. "Just what do you know?"

Delia was trembling. A hand sought her throat nervously and she said, "I know he has locked himself in there and won't see anyone."

"I don't think that was what you were about to say," Priscilla told her sternly.

"It was!" Delia said. "I swear it was!" And then she turned and hurriedly made her way down the stairs, almost stumbling.

Priscilla watched after her grimly. The woman knew something that was troubling her. But what? That was the question. And how to get her to talk was another problem. Still, of all those who might be involved, she was the weakest.

Dinner was a quiet affair that evening. Emily was weary from her pony riding and went up to bed almost as soon as she left the table. Delia, who still looked ill, also went up very early. Priscilla found herself alone with Hugh Peel.

He invited her into the living room and as he touched a match to a large, expensive-looking cigar, he said, "So you were over to visit the Baxters today?"

She was startled. "How did you know?"

He puffed at the cigar a moment and smiling expansively said, "I came by in my carriage and saw you and Baxter walking back here. Your conversation must have been interesting if it was as serious as it looked."

She found herself aware of a hidden sinister note in what he was saying as if, despite having introduced her to the Baxters, he resented her going to see them on her own.

She said, "Jane invited me over for tea."

"She's a charming girl."

"Yes, she is," Priscilla agreed, waiting to hear what he might say next.

"Her brother is something of a bore. He plays the role of war hero so thoroughly," Hugh said with a light sneer.

She found herself annoyed. "He is a war hero, isn't he?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," he said. "I trust you had a pleasant afternoon."

"I enjoyed it," she said.

"And when you came back you went directly upstairs and tried to contact Lord Albert," he said, his eyes fixed on her coldly. "I thought you understood that he was not to be bothered?"

"I wanted to discuss Emily with him."

"You can do that through me."

"It would be much more satisfactory if I could talk to Lord Albert directly," she argued.

"Please do not bother him again," Hugh said. "You have an excellent position here and a good home. Further, Lord Albert is at the point of settling Edward's share of the estate on you. I consider this the wrong time to upset him."

"I'm sorry." She gave him a searching look. "Will you answer me one question?"

"If it is possible," he replied cautiously.

"Do you expect Lord Albert to recover and resume his normal place in this house?"

He eyed her uneasily. "How would I know that?"

She said, "You should know better than the rest of us."

Hugh studied the tip of his cigar for a moment. "I do not know why Lord Albert chose to lock himself away. Therefore, speculation on his return is idle."

She escaped from his company as soon as she could and went up to her room. She was beginning to be certain of one thing, that whatever was going on, Hugh was part of it.

Sleep came with difficulty and when it did, she was plagued by nightmares. Part of the time she was back in India, but Sir Alfred Coombes was there too. Then she plunged into a new dream in which she was at the castle being pursued by a phantom with a skull face. When the phantom removed its mask it was Hugh!

She awoke with a start, thinking she had heard a scream. All was silence so she turned on her other side and sought sleep again. This time she slept through until morning.

When she went down for breakfast she found a furor in the reception hall. Hugh Peel was standing there questioning several frightened-looking maids and male ser-

vants. Seeing her, he came to the bottom of the stairway to greet her.

"Delia has vanished," he said, showing tension. "I can't understand it."

"When did you learn she was missing?"

"This morning. I stopped by her room to see how she was," Hugh said. "As you know we have long had separate rooms. And she wasn't there!"

"Had her bed been slept in?"

"No. She did not use it last night," he said.

She asked, "Where is Emily?"

"Safe enough," he said. "She's out at the stable seeing her pony. I sent her out there to give us a chance to settle this without disturbing her."

"Do you think she may have run off?"

"Delia!" he asked incredulously. "Why should she run away?"

"She hasn't seemed too happy and she was strangely quiet last night."

He said, "I'll check her room!" And he went upstairs.

She followed him, her heart pounding. She had an idea that something dreadful must have happened to Delia.

Hugh came out quickly, his face grim. "Her clothing, her pocketbook and all the money she had are still in there."

"Nothing missing?"

"Nothing!"

Priscilla said, "She may have had some sort of mental lapse and wandered off. You should send out a search party before anything happens to her."

He seemed to be debating. "It will cause more gossip but I seem to have no alternative."

"I cannot see any."

So he went downstairs and started organizing two

search parties. When this was done they began a period of nervous waiting. Emily returned and joined them, having heard from the servants that Delia was missing.

She asked Priscilla, "Where do you think she has gone?"

"I have no idea," she said.

Emily considered it soberly. "Maybe the ghosts came and took her!"

Hugh glared at the child. "Stop such talk!"

Priscilla was beginning to think the search would take all morning, when suddenly she heard running footsteps outside. The door burst open and the youth leading the first party went to Hugh breathlessly.

"Well?" Hugh asked crossly.

"We've found her!"

"Where?"

"Up behind the barns in the big pond," the youth said, still short of breath.

"The pond!" he echoed.

"Yes," the youth said. "Begging your pardon, sir, it looks as if she might have thrown herself in there."

"My wife committed suicide?" he said with loud disbelief.

The youth nodded. "She must have, sir."

Priscilla told the youth, "That's enough. Mr. Peel has had a bad shock. You go and bring back the body. Make a stretcher with blankets and poles and cover the body with a sheet."

"Yes, ma'am," the youth said and lost no time in getting out.

Hugh sank down into a chair, his hands over his eyes. Brokenly, he said, "Another tragedy! I should not have stayed in this cursed house! Delia lived constantly in fear!"

Priscilla asked, "Did she ever threaten to take her life?"

"Yes, many times," Hugh said, gazing forlornly at the carpet by his feet.

Emily said, "She always was warning me-not to play around the pond. She told me it was a lot deeper than it looked."

"So it is," Hugh said, turning to Priscilla. "Take the child to your room for a little. I don't want her here when the body is brought back."

"Very well." She took Emily's arm and they went upstairs together.

On the way up, Emily said, "I don't think Delia would throw herself in the pond like that. She was afraid of it. Afraid of going out in a boat."

Priscilla gave this a good deal of thought. And it seemed to her that out of the mouths of children there came much wisdom.

The funeral was a suitably small one. Hugh did not ask Lord Albert to break his imprisonment to attend the burial rites, but according to him he had received warm sympathy from his titled cousin.

Priscilla was in a state of shock from it all. She had felt that Delia was about ready to tell her some of the things she wanted to know. Now Delia's lips were sealed forever.

Hugh Peel did not seem too shaken by his wife's death. After the first shock following the bad news he made an excellent adjustment. But Delia's death made a strangely noticeable emptiness in the old mansion.

Priscilla took Emily out to stay with Giles Parton in the stables for a little and she quickly made her way to the neighboring cottage of the Baxters. They had both

been at the funeral but she hadn't had a chance to talk with them.

They were both at home and welcomed her into their parlor. She said, "Thanks for coming to the funeral."

Jane said wryly, "I wouldn't have missed it. Delia was one of my favorite people."

"I know," she said. "She was a strange woman."

Stanley gave her a wise look. "And she came to a strange end, don't you think?"

Jane said, "Can you picture her making her way to the pond in the dark and then having the nerve to throw herself into it?"

"Emily says she wouldn't," Priscilla told them. "She says Delia was afraid of water."

"Which," Stanley said, "suggests murder!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Murder!" Jane echoed weakly.

"Yes. Why not?" Stanley Baxter said. "Hugh decided that Delia was weakening and going to give away their guilty secret, so he had to dispose of her and make it seem like a suicide!" the young man said.

"It's a horrible thought!" Priscilla said. "But I know she was afraid of him. You could tell!"

Jane said, "To murder his own wife!"

Her brother informed her, "It has happened many times before. And don't forget the stakes are high for Hugh. He's going to have plenty of money from Lord Albert as long as the murder of Charity doesn't come out."

"And now we have another murder," Priscilla said in dismay.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

"That usually tends to be the case," Stanley said. "One murder leads to another. Which means your staying at the castle is a risky business!"

"I can't desert Emily," she said.

Jane suggested, "Couldn't you go to London and take her with you?"

"I'd never be allowed to," she said, knowing well enough it was out of the question for her own reasons. Stanley Baxter showed a smile on his thin face. "Now it may be we're all wrong in our guessing. Hugh and Lord Albert may both be innocent as the proverbial lambs."

Priscilla said, "Hugh insists that Charity threw the acid in Lord Albert's face and that is why he has become a recluse."

Stanley shrugged. "Maybe he's telling the truth."

"I'm not convinced," she said.

"Nor am I," chimed in Jane. "And to think I was nearly charmed into an infatuation by that smooth Hugh!"

Her brother smiled. "At least you were rescued in time."

Priscilla said, "What next?"

"Discreet inquiries," Stanley Baxter said. "By the way, there will be a fair at Cobham Village on Tuesday. I think it might be fun for us all to go. And you could bring along Emily."

"She would enjoy it," Priscilla agreed.

"And it has been a hard time for her," Jane pointed out.

Her brother went on, "So we will all attend the fair. While you are enjoying yourselves I shall have a talk with the proprietor of the inn. I want to find out if anyone knows whether she boarded the stage or not."

Priscilla said, "And if she didn't?"

"Then she didn't drown in a shipwreck. She was mur-

dered and her body hidden somewhere in or around the castle," Stanley Baxter said.

Before Priscilla could make a reply to this there was a knock at the door of the cottage. They stared at each other in surprise. Then Stanley lifted himself out of the chair and limped over to the door and opened it. Hugh Peel was standing there!

"May I join you?" he asked affably.

"You're most welcome! Anytime!" Stanley said, showing him in.

Hat in hand, Hugh advanced awkwardly into the room. He said, "Jane! Priscilla! I had an idea Priscilla might be over here and I'm rather tired of sitting alone in that great house."

"Have a chair!" Stanley said.

"Thank you," Hugh said, looking around and making Priscilla wonder if he had managed to overhear any of their conversation from outside.

Stanley brought him a drink and said, "It is whiskey straight, as I recall."

Hugh nodded gratefully. "More so than ever these days. I've needed stiff drinks to keep me going." And he downed some of the whiskey.

Stanley sat down again. "It has not been an easy time for you."

"No," Hugh said with a sad expression. "I thought I might save you the effort of escorting Priscilla home. I know your leg still bothers you."

"Thoughtful of you," Stanley Baxter said.

Hugh gazed at them all nervously. "It is a dreadful thing, losing a wife."

Jane said quietly, "Especially under such circumstances."

He glanced at her uneasily and sighed. "Yes. It never struck me she'd take her own life."

Priscilla reminded him, "But you said she had threatened it many times."

Hugh cleared his throat. "People who threaten suicide rarely go through with it. The ones who keep silent are the ones to worry about."

"True," Stanley Baxter said. "But it seems that poor Delia was not true to type."

"She never was," Hugh said gloomily. "I'm especially sorry that this tragic thing has happened so soon after Priscilla's arrival."

Priscilla said, "I worry more about the effect on Emily."

"That too," Hugh said piously. "My personal loss fades when I begin worrying about what that poor child has gone through."

Jane said, "Don't you think her father should give up his ridiculous charade and resume a normal life?"

"Lord Albert is an enigma. I cannot push him one way or the other. I'm simply trying to hold the place together, and it is not easy. I'm happy that Priscilla is with us, for Emily's sake, but I'm sorry she's had to face this tragedy so soon after her dreadful time in India."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness," she replied, thinking that they were all suddenly talking in platitudes and not meaning anything they said.

Hugh glanced at her and said, "If you don't mind I think I'd like to get along. I'm rather tired."

"All right," she said. "Emily and I are going to the fair in Cobham Tuesday with the Baxters. I didn't think you would mind."

He did not look pleased, but he said rather stiffly, "I expect it will be all right."

The Baxters had risen to see them out. Stanley said, "You may be sure we'll take good care of them."

Priscilla gave the Baxters a wise smile. "Until Tuesday then!"

"I'll come by for you and Emily in our carriage," Stanley called after them.

She nodded and then she and Hugh began walking back to Peel Castle. All at once his meek, friendly mood changed and he glared at her.

"I know you were all talking about me!" he said.

She felt her cheeks burn. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"Suppose I were to say I overheard some of what you said?"

"I'd say you were wrong. Listeners generally hear things wrong."

"I doubt it in my case."

She said, "I do not understand your resentment of my occasional visit with the Baxters. You introduced me to them."

Once again his mood changed and he contritely told her, "You mustn't mind me! Delia's suicide has so upset me I don't know what I'm doing or saying!"

She had to pretend to accept his explanation. She said, "I forget. I'm sorry. We must try to be more tolerant of each other."

"Thank you, my dear," he said as they neared the castle. "You don't know how lonely I am or what a strain I'm under trying to cater to Lord Albert."

She said, "My fear is that he is mad."

"It could happen," Hugh agreed.

"Should you not discuss it with the authorities?" she suggested.

"Perhaps in due time," he said worriedly. "Up until now he has only been aloof and difficult. But if any signs of true insanity appear, then I shall act!"

"Delia believed there was a ghost in the house. She even described it."

"Her mind was sick. You know that!" Hugh said unhappily as they stood by the castle entrance.

"I wonder if it might be Lord Albert wandering about the house when no one will see him," she said. "If his face is so horribly mutilated he might do that."

Hugh listened with what seemed interest. "I'm glad you mentioned that. It had never struck me."

She said, "Think about it."

"I shall," he promised.

"I'm going to the stables to get Emily," she said. "She should be back from her pony ride by now."

"Very well," Hugh said. "I shall see you at dinner."

She went on to the stables uncertain in her mind about Hugh. He was either the most accomplished scoundrel she had ever encountered, and she'd met a good few, or he was innocent.

Giles Parton was seated on a stool by the entrance to the stable. He rose and told her, "Emily is inside learning how to properly groom her pony."

She smiled, "Well, I mustn't interfere with that."

"It's something she should know," he agreed. "Gives her more feeling for the animal."

"And more sense of responsibility."

"Exactly," the big man said. "Sad business about Mrs. Hugh."

"Yes. I still can't believe it happened."

"Nor can the rest of us," the estate manager said. "She wasn't a cheerful woman by nature but to do a thing like that."

"Especially since she was basically afraid of water."

He showed interest. "I didn't know that."

"Many strange things have been happening here," she said.

"There is a lot of talk about us in the village," he said. "The feeling is that the curse has come back."

She looked up at the big bronzed face. "You have been here a long while, Parton?"

"I have. And my father before me."

"Have you ever seen the ghost?"

The big man rubbed his chin. "I've seen things in the dark I can't explain. But I wouldn't want to say they were ghosts."

"Did you ever see the secret stairway? The one Queen Elizabeth is supposed to have used?"

"No, ma'am."

"Do you think it exists?"

He nodded earnestly. "Yes. I do. Old Dole told me about it."

"Who is he?"

"Dole worked here as a gardener, man and boy, until his joints became too stiff. Now he lives with his grandson in the village."

"In Cobham?"

"Yes," Giles Parton said with a smile. "Friendly old gaffer. Likes his bit of ale."

"Do you think he was telling the truth?"

The big man eyed her indignantly. "Now I tell you straight, ma'am. Old man Dole may like a drink but he's not a liar!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to speak against him. What did he tell you about the stairway?"

"That he found it by accident and it led to passages connecting all parts of the house."

"Did he tell you where it was located?"

"No."

"Did you ask him?"

"Yes. But he refused to tell me. Said if it got round some thief might make use of it. Better for the family not to have it known."

She said, "I think it important to Lord Albert at this

moment to know about that hidden stairway and the passages that lead from it. Do you suppose if I went to see old Dole, he'd tell me about it?"

Giles Parton shrugged. "Old Dole is a strange one. It's hard to know. You can try."

"I think I will," she said.

She waited for Emily and then she and the little girl went back to the house. Hugh was in a genial mood at dinner that evening. He was so pleasant and considerate that she began to feel ashamed of suspecting him of so much villainy. Surely she had to be wrong. After Emily went upstairs to bed Hugh invited her to have a good-night sherry with him.

After he'd filled their glasses, he touched his to hers and said, "To better days at Peel Castle."

"I heartily wish for them," she said sincerely.

He told her, "I have been in contact with Lord Albert again and he wishes to offer you terms of the estate agreement within the next week. He has spent a good deal of time working it all out."

She said, "I would gladly forfeit my share of the estate if Lord Albert would get well and rejoin his little daughter."

He said, "We can only pray that it will eventually happen."

That night she was awakened by a scream from Emily's room! She jumped out of bed, putting on her robe as she ran, not bothering about slippers. The door to Emily's room was open and the child was sitting up in bed crying.

"What is it?" she asked going to her and taking her in her arms.

"The ghost!" Emily sobbed.

"You dreamed it!"

"No! I saw it! And it touched me again with its cold

hand," Emily insisted through her tears. "The same one who came before."

"Where did it go?"

"Into the hall," the child sobbed. "Toward the landing."

She was determined to fight Emily's fear of the supernatural and at the same time try and catch up with anyone who might have cruelly been playing ghost to torment the child.

Priscilla told the little girl, "Put your hand in mine and we'll track this ghost!"

"It went toward the stairs," Emily sniffled.

"We'll see." Side by side she and Emily made their way to the stairs and then cautiously started down them. The old house was deathly quiet in this after-midnight hour. They went down to the first landing and then started down the stairs leading to the reception hall.

Emily whispered, "I don't see the ghost!"

"Nor do I," she said, as they halted partway down the stairs.

As she finished speaking she was aware of a strange rasping sound directly above them. In fearful response she drew the child up in her arms and dragged her backward up a few stairs. And just in time! In the next second the big chandelier over the stairway crashed down missing them by inches, splintering glass all about them, and wrecking several of the steps.

The house came alive as if by miracle! The servants came first and gasped at the damage. Then Hugh Peel appeared in his bathrobe. He surveyed the fallen chandelier and said, "We can only be thankful no one was hurt!"

Priscilla spoke up angrily. "Emily and I were almost killed!"

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"We were coming down the stairs when the chandelier fell," she said.

Hugh stared at her. "What were you doing down here in the middle of the night with that child?"

She said, "We were following a ghost!"

He frowned. "Following a ghost?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, near tears. "This chandelier fell just as we came to this spot on the stairway. Someone must have deliberately dropped it to kill us!"

"You're mad!" he said. "The chandelier is suspended by a length of rope up in the rafters above. The servants had it lowered for cleaning the other day. They could not have tied it securely enough. The knot kept slipping until the whole thing crashed down!"

"At the precise moment we were below it?" she said.

"A coincidence," Hugh insisted.

"No matter what you say, I'll consider this as an attempt on our lives!" And she took the child upstairs with her and remained with her for the rest of the night.

When she came down to breakfast the next day the wreckage of the chandelier had been removed but the broken steps had still to be fixed. She was informed that Mr. Peel had gone to London on business and might be gone for several days. The news had a cheering effect on her rather than otherwise.

After breakfast she took Emily out to the stables and while her pony was being harnessed, Priscilla asked Giles Parton what he thought of the night's misadventure. "Do you think it fell accidentally?"

He looked bewildered. "What else?"

"I wonder if someone watched from above after decoying us into using the steps. And when we reached that certain spot the someone let the rope slip!"

"It doesn't seem possible, ma'am," the big man said.

"How else could it happen?"

"I've always worried about those big chandeliers," he said. "Especially the one over the stairway. There's a long rope on that one and it's a great strain. The rope might have been wearing in some spot for a while and then suddenly it grew weak enough to break!"

She listened with skepticism. "I wish I could believe it," she said. "I'm going to visit the Baxters while Emily is riding. If she returns before I come for her be sure and take good care of her."

"Don't you worry about that, ma'am," the big man said earnestly.

The Baxters received her with delight and heard her story with excitement. Stanley Baxter tapped his cane on the hardwood floor. He exclaimed excitedly, "Not a doubt of it. It was a trap to eliminate both you and Emily!"

Priscilla grimaced. "Do we need to ask who would benefit most from our deaths?"

"Hugh Peel," Stanley said. "He'd be the next heir."

She said, "I was almost ready to think we'd wronged him. He was so nice to me last night."

Jane said, "Why not? He expected to turn you over to the village undertaker this morning."

"I don't know what to do," Priscilla admitted.

"Maybe it's time to call in the police," Stanley said.

His words terrified her. She said, "No. Not yet. I think we need more evidence."

"How much more?"

"Something to link Hugh to the crime," Priscilla said.

"An examination of that rope by an expert might do that," Stanley said. "And the local police can always call in an expert from London."

Panic rose in her again. She said, "It's no use. The rope is gone."

"Gone?" Stanley said.

"Yes. When I came down for breakfast this morning all the debris had been cleared away. You can be certain he has gotten rid of the rope."

He sat back in his chair gloomily. "He's a hard eel to trap."

Jane said, "Remember this isn't the first accident in which Emily was nearly killed."

"Right!" Stanley agreed. And to Priscilla, he explained, "These accidents happened before you arrived."

"You mean the accidents blamed on Delia's carelessness?"

"With Hugh away perhaps we could coax Lord Albert out of his room," Jane suggested. "It seems to me he is the key to all this. He should be protecting his daughter from that scoundrel."

"We could try," Priscilla told them, "but I believe that he no longer properly understands anything. I'm sure he has gone mad and Hugh knows it."

Stanley looked thoughtful. "Only a madman would lock himself up that way."

"Hugh knows it," Priscilla said. "And after he's rid himself of everyone else in his way he'll murder Lord Albert and somehow make it seem he killed himself. No one will question it."

"And we'll have a new Lord Peel," the young Crimea veteran said.

Jane said, "I still think it's a police matter. Surely they could make Lord Albert see them and try to reason with him."

Priscilla said tautly, "There are a few other things I'd like to try first."

"What?" Jane asked.

"I want to talk to an old man named Dole who lives in the village and is supposed to know about the secret stairway. I have an idea it will give another access to

that apartment where Lord Albert has locked himself in."

Stanley reminded her, "Tomorrow is fair day. We planned to go to the village. I was going to question the stagecoach driver about Charity."

"Fine," Priscilla said. "Jane can show Emily the wonders of the fair while we try and find a few things out."

"One other thing," Stanley Baxter said.

"What?"

"Hugh told the servants he was going to London. But we only have his word for it. He might circle around back and be up to some mischief tonight."

Priscilla was startled. "I didn't think of that!"

Jane said, "Why don't you and Emily come and spend the night here? Your excuse can be that it will save time in the morning when we all head for the fair."

"Do you mind?" she asked, feeling better.

Stanley smiled, "I'll be over in the carriage to pick you up in time for dinner here. Say about six-thirty."

"We'll be ready," she promised.

As she walked back to the castle she was filled with desperation. Things were closing in on her. If she were to save herself from one danger, she had to put herself in another. But in the end the safety of Emily would be the deciding factor. It had to be!

When she reached the castle she went straight up to the attic level and that strong oaken door. Angered and frustrated, she began to pound on it feverishly. The only response was that shuffling sound from inside. She pounded on the door again and cried out Lord Albert's name.

Nothing happened.

She went close to the door and said, "Lord Albert, I'm trying to save the life of your child! Listen to me!"

Then, with terrifying rapidity, the door swung back to reveal a hooded figure clad wholly in black! The

figure had a poker in its hand and brought it down on her head with deadly accuracy.

The heavy door was slammed shut and locked in her face. She felt the world spin around and go black and collapsed on the floor before the door.

An elderly servant bearing a food tray to leave by the door found her. He helped her to her feet.

"That's a nasty blow to your head, ma'am," the servant sympathized.

"Yes," she said, touching it gingerly. There was a lump under her hair.

"Was it Lord Albert did it?" the man wanted to know.

"I expect so," she said wearily. "He was all in black!"

"He always had a wicked temper," the old man said. "Mr. Hugh says not to bother him and I'm sure he's giving us good advice."

She was feeling somewhat better by the time Stanley Baxter drove up in his rig to get her and Emily for the night. Emily was delighted at this unexpected turn of events and Priscilla did not say anything in front of the child to spoil her enjoyment.

But after dinner, when Emily was safely in bed and asleep, she told the story to the Baxters, concluding, "Under my hair there's a lump as large as an egg."

"You could have been killed!" Jane said in alarm.

"That's getting to be a regular thing," Priscilla said with a thin smile.

Stanley told her, "It only backs up what Jane and I have told you. You're dealing with two madmen! It's an unequal contest. You need the police on your side."

"After we find out what we can tomorrow," she said.

"Just as you say," he said with a wry smile.

Tuesday was another warm, sunny day, and they started out early. The little village was already crowded with wagons and carriages from the surrounding area.

KASHMIRI PASSIONS

The fair was one of the big events of the year. They had some time locating a place with suitable shade to tether their horse and have a boy watch it and the carriage.

Across the village green the fair was set up. Music came from the sideshow stand where a fat man played an accordion. There were banners advertising acrobats, fire eaters, thin men and fat women.

"I've always wanted to visit a sideshow!" Emily said with delight.

Jane had her by the hand. "I'll take her with me and you can meet us by the big tent."

Stanley and Priscilla left the two and went straight to the Leather Bottle Inn. They were fortunate enough to find the stagecoach owner out back.

He was a hearty old man with a large stomach and a ready smile. He shook Stanley vigorously by the hand. "You're the Baxter lad that was hurt so bad in the Crimeal!"

Stanley smiled and said, "I am. And this is my neighbor, Mrs. Edward Peel."

The old man turned to her. "You're the one I heard about. Edward Peel's widow."

"Yes," she said.

Stanley told the man, "We've come to ask a few questions about the night when Lord Albert's wife vanished."

"Aye!" The big man nodded in assent. "As I recall Mr. Hugh were here a while back to ask me the same questions."

"I hope you won't mind repeating some of the answers," Stanley said.

"You give me the questions, Mr. Baxter, and I'll try hard to offer you an answer," the old man assured him.

"The story goes that she made her way here that night and boarded your stage. That you took her to the coast

where she booked passage on that unhappy ship which sank in the storm."

"Aye," the big man said. "I've heard it said."

"Is it true?"

"Only part of it," the big man told him. "There was a lady came and boarded the stage that night and I did drop her off later to book passage on that ship. But it weren't Lady Peel. It was an older lady that looked something like her."

"You're sure of that?" Stanley asked.

"I am," the old man said. "For when she boarded the stage, I addressed her as Lady Peel and she told me her real name and her village. She spoke common like myself, not genteel like Lady Peel."

"So you would swear Lady Peel did not ride in your stagecoach that night?" Stanley persisted.

"I would and all," the big man said. "And I told young Mr. Hugh that very thing."

Stanley said, "You're a good man. Thank you for being so patient as to tell us over again. Here's a half-crown for your trouble."

"Thankee, Mr. Baxter," the big man said. "Any time I can help. Are you going to fair?"

"Yes, later," Stanley said as they left him. They walked out into the roadway and stood looking at each other. "Well," he sighed. "I guess there's no doubt about that."

"Charity didn't leave Peel Castle!"

"She's buried somewhere there at this moment. What we need is a spade and some fresh mounds to suggest where to dig."

Priscilla said, "Maybe we can do better than that. I want to see this old man Dole who is supposed to know about the hidden stairway."

Stanley frowned. "Is that important?"

"I think it could be."

"All right," he said. "Where do we find him?"

"He lives with his grandson. And the house is supposed to be fairly near the inn."

Stanley said, "We'd better start making some inquiries."

And they did. Finally, they found the house and knocked on the door.

A pleasant-faced woman with a bonnet on her head came to the door. She said, "Yes? What is it? We're just about to leave for the fair."

Priscilla said, "I'm sorry to keep you. We'd like to talk with old Mr. Dole."

The woman looked sad. "Grandfather? I'm sorry. He died last week. Bless his soul!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

They thanked the woman and walked back to the road. Stanley halted and leaned on his cane. "What now?"

She smiled grimly. "I suppose we'd better return to the fair and find Jane and Emily."

"Must we?"

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He held up his black walking stick. "It is not all that easy for me to get about at the crowded fair grounds. I'd just as soon spend as little time there as possible."

"I'd forgotten," she apologized. "Let us find a place where we can sit for a half-hour and give Emily time to enjoy herself. Then we can pick them up and drive home."

There were several wooden benches at that end of the village green. On this busy Fair Day the benches and

the area generally was deserted. It was pleasant in the sun and they sat there.

Priscilla asked, "Do you and Jane still plan to go to London in the autumn?"

"I think we should," he said. "What about you?"

She gave him a rueful look. "I can't say. Not until this madness at Peel Castle is settled."

Stanley Baxter's face clouded. "You should let me call in the police," he said.

She sighed and stared down at the ground. "Give me just a day or two longer."

"Anything could happen in that time!"

"I have a reason."

"Very well," he said. "But I shall be worried every minute until the truth of what is going on in that old house is revealed."

She looked up at him with a troubled smile. "You and Jane have been so good to me. I don't think I could have managed without you two."

He was silent a moment, staring across the green at the spire of the white church directly opposite them. Then he said, "There is something I've been wanting to ask you."

"What?"

"Assuming all this business at the castle is settled, what do you propose to do with your life? You're still young."

The question caught her by surprise. "I've been so caught up by what has been going on lately I've not given much thought to the future."

He glanced at her. "Have you any thoughts of marrying again?"

She considered this. "I suppose so. I'm not one who enjoys living alone. It depends on meeting the right person."

"That shouldn't be hard for someone like you."

She gave him a wry smile. "You might be surprised. Every love I've had seems to have been doomed."

He made a pattern with the point of his cane in the grass by the bench as he said, "You sound as if there might still be someone. Someone whom you care for deeply."

She gazed at him in surprise. "You understand me very well."

He turned to her. "Then it is true?"

"Yes," she said in a small voice. "There is a man. I've never been able to forget him even though I've tried."

"And?"

She shook her head. "It has always been hopeless."

"You mean he doesn't love you?"

"Nothing like that," she said. "I'm sure we were both deeply in love. But there were other things. He is a reckless person, makes his living by gambling. I asked him to give it up and he refused."

"But you still went on loving him?" Stanley said.

"It was mad of me, I suppose," she said and bit her lip. "I suppose if I'm to be honest with myself I still love him."

"Is he here in England?"

"I don't know."

"Will you try to find him?"

"Too many things have happened," she said. "I have had problems which I can't tell you about now. He was living with a girl called Meg. I told him to marry her."

"Did he?"

"I don't know," she confessed.

Gently, the dark man said, "You will have to seek him out and discover what your feelings are for each

other now. I don't think you'll be able to plan your future properly unless you do."

She said, "I'm sure it would be futile. He'll never change. And I could not be partner to his kind of life."

"You ought to be more sure," Stanley said gravely.

Priscilla gave him a startled look. "Why are you so interested?"

His smile was sad. "I have been in love with you from the hour of our first meeting."

Bewildered, she said, "But you've never shown it! Never said anything!"

"I didn't feel I had the right. I'm a good deal less than a healthy man. Not too many women would ever think of me in a romantic way."

"That's not so!" she protested. "You are a good man, and one day you'll make some woman a fine husband."

"But not you?"

Priscilla said, "I'm too confused to answer that. You made me bare my heart to you."

"I understand," he said. "And I agree. I think you should seek out this other man."

"I'm confused about that, too."

Stanley went on, "But if you find there is still an impasse between you two, I would consider it an honor if you would think of my offer."

"Dear Stanley!" she said, her eyes blurred with tears. She placed her hand on his and leaned close and kissed him on the cheek.

His mood at once changed. He gave her a business-like smile. "Well, now we've finished with that sticky business we have other things to do!" He stood up, leaning on his cane.

She smiled at him, marveling at his kindness and courage. "What next?"

"To the fairgrounds to pick up Emily and Jane," he said.

They found them at a candy stall. Emily was filled with the wonders of the sideshow and of the magical feats of the acrobats. Jane wryly complained of the heat and crowds and being tired.

"You came just in time," Stanley's sister said.

In spite of her disappointment Priscilla felt a sort of content on the way home. She knew it must be because the kindly dark man had declared his love for her.

When they reached the entrance of Peel Castle he got down from the carriage and saw her to the door. He was still clearly worried. He said, "Unless I hear from you, Jane and I will pay you a call here tonight. Just to be sure all is well."

She said, "I think we'll be safe as long as Hugh is in London."

He indicted the tower. "You're forgetting about that madman up there!"

"That is true," she agreed. "Then I'll expect you later."

Stanley and Jane drove on to their own place and she and Emily went into the house. A workman was on the stairway repairing the damage done by the heavy chandelier.

The housekeeper came to greet them and informed her, "Mr. Hugh returned a while ago."

Priscilla realized this changed things. She said, "Where is he?"

"He went off to the village about something," the woman said. "But he'll be back for dinner."

Emily was eager to fit in the pony ride she'd missed in the morning and Priscilla wanted to speak with Giles Parton. So as soon as they had changed their clothes and freshened up they went out to the stables.

Giles Parton ordered Emily's pony harnessed and as

the child ran off to watch, he turned to Priscilla. "Did you manage to talk with old Mr. Dole?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "His granddaughter answered the door. Mr. Dole died last week."

Giles Parton looked surprised. "No one sent word of it. They usually do."

"I was disappointed," she said. "It would seem the stairway will have to remain a secret."

The big man frowned in thought. "There might be one other person!"

"Who?"

"A woman who was housekeeper in the castle in Dole's time. According to him they investigated the secret passage together. But she's not been too well. She lives in that white cottage up above the barns. Her son is a gardener here."

Priscilla said eagerly, "Do you think she'll talk to me?"

"She'll talk but she may not say much."

"What do you mean?"

The big man tapped the side of his head. "She has these flights of fancy. Wanders a lot. But every now and then she says something that makes sense."

"I see," she said, let down at the thought of a new kind of frustration. "Still, it ought to be worth a try."

Emily went on her pony ride with Giles Parton following her on his prized mare. This left Priscilla free to take the winding path up the hill to the pleasant white cottage. When she reached it she saw a merry-faced old woman bouncing a child on her lap.

Priscilla halted before her. "Are you Granny Burton?"

The woman held the child protectively and squinted up at her. "I am and who are you? The new maid?"

She laughed. "No. I'm Edward's wife."

The wrinkled old face creased and Granny Burton

hooted with laughter. "What sort of silly story is that? Edward is away at school with his brother, Albert!" She started crooning a song and jiggling the baby on her lap.

"The secret stairway," Priscilla said carefully. "How do you get to it?"

Granny Burton reacted to this. She said, "Why do you want to know?"

"It's important to the family," she said urgently. "Tell me where it is."

The old woman was singing again. She paused and said, "The nursery! It was a wonderful nursery! This wee one will never see the likes of it. All pinks, and blues and whites!"

Priscilla began to think it was hopeless. "The stairway," she said. "Do try to remember!"

The old woman chuckled and stared up at her craftily. "Through the looking glass!" she said.

"Looking glass?"

"King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table," the old woman said with delight. "You shall be a king, my lad!" And she joggled the baby up and down again happily. This time the youngster resented it and began to cry. The old woman stood up rheumatically and carried the baby inside.

Priscilla had no further hope. Another dead end. The old woman's mind was exactly as Giles Parton warned her. Granny Burton continually mixed the present with the past, and fact with fantasy. A troubled look on her face, she walked back the path to the castle.

It was becoming increasingly clear to her that Stanley Baxter was right. She would have to call on the police for aid. If she kept putting it off she might wind up losing Emily's life as well as her own.

But she knew that once she had contacted the police she would almost surely be recognized as the murderess

of Sir Alfred Coombs. They would dig into the past of all the principals as a matter of routine, and her secret would be out. She wished she'd had the courage to confess to Stanley.

Still, if she summoned the police it might remain in local hands. Surely there would be some magistrate or other local officer who could take charge. In that case she need not be concerned about her past in London being revealed.

She entered the house still thinking of old Granny Burton, who had been housekeeper at Peel Castle when a nursery had played an important role in the house. She had never heard a nursery spoken of since her arrival. Emily, of course, was well past the nursery stage.

The housekeeper passed her on the stairs and she asked her, "What about the nursery? Is there such a room here?"

The woman smiled. "Not for years, ma'am. The room that used to be the nursery is now an upstairs sitting room. It's on the second level."

"Thank you," she said and went on up. So that explained it.

Idly she made her way down to the room and went in to see how it had been changed. It was painted yellow now with white woodwork. It made a pleasant sitting room with its divan, easy chairs and table. Then her eyes fixed on something on its inner wall! A giant painting about eight feet tall and at least four feet wide of King Arthur and his knights. It dominated the room just as in other days it must have dominated the nursery. Had the old woman been answering her question without her realizing it?

"Through the looking glass," the old woman had chuckled. And then she'd mentioned this huge painting.

Priscilla's pulses stirred more quickly as she went

close to the painting. She placed a hand under the frame on one side and nothing happened. The painting did not move. It was likely nailed to the wall rather than hung on wires. But when she tried the other side, an amazing thing happened.

The giant painting silently swung out like a door to reveal a dark passage with steps leading to the floor above! She had found the hidden passage at last!

"What are you doing?" a familiar voice asked.

She whirled around to see Emily standing there watching with great interest. She said, "You've heard about the secret stairway. I've found it!"

"Behind King Arthur!" the girl said in awe.

"Yes," she said. "Where is Giles Parton?"

"At the barn," Emily said.

"Will you go ask him to come here? Tell him I've found the entrance to the secret passage!"

"All right," the child said, ready to go.

"Wait!"

"Yes?" Emily stood listening.

"If you meet Hugh or anyone else but Giles Parton don't tell them about this!"

"I won't!"

"It's very important! Remember that!"

"All right!" Emily said. And she ran out of the room and down the stairs.

Now Priscilla found herself facing a dilemma. She hoped that the stairway would take her up to the apartment in which Lord Albert had barricaded himself and give her a chance to spy on the madman without him or Hugh knowing. Then she could show the police how to reach him.

She stood there debating whether to close the secret entrance and wait for aid or whether to make a first exploratory expedition up the stairs by herself. She de-

cided to first go up alone and see what she found. Then to have others take over.

Cautiously she stepped into the dark passage behind the painting and looked up the stairway. A faint glimmer of light revealed that the stairs were both narrow and winding. And it was damp and cold in this hidden place. She was going to draw the painting closed but decided that might lock her in. It might only work from the outside.

She knew she was placing herself in some danger, but she hoped that if she were wary she might reach the apartment and see some of what was going on up there.

Scarcely daring to breathe she started up the winding stairway. A distance up she saw there was a small window about the size of a brick set in the stone wall. It was this which cleverly brought in light from the outside.

She went up what she estimated to be two flights and then the stairway became darker. And before she knew it she had come to a landing that was a dead end. She groped about the slimy stone walls, then located a door and tried the knob. It turned easily and she opened the door and found herself in what looked like a storage room. Advancing cautiously into it she had a feeling of triumph!

It was almost certain she was in a room of the secret apartment. Now she moved on to another door and placed her ear against it. She was rewarded by hearing voices arguing on the other side of the door. And one of the voices belonged to Hugh.

Hugh's voice was choked with rage. "You've been at it again."

"No!" a quavering voice pleaded. "No! I swear it!"

And Priscilla was shocked—this voice was a woman's. She was almost positive of this. She kept very quiet and listened again.

Hugh seemed to be pacing back and forth as his voice came to her at different levels. "Keep on with this and you'll ruin everything!"

"You haven't done so well!" the female voice accused him.

"I have done as well as possible," Hugh said. "I thought it would be all over the other night!"

"That was stupid! Too risky!" the woman said.

"Can you think of something better?"

"Fire!" the woman said. "Start a fire in the right place. The flames and smoke would finish them before anyone got to them."

"Destroy the castle?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know," Hugh said. "And what about you? Where would you go?"

"London," she said. "Then make my grand appearance later."

Hugh sounded reluctant as he said, "It might work."

"You can't wait much longer. She's suspicious and so are the Baxters!"

"Then they'd suspect a fire! The Baxters, I mean."

The woman said, "What good will it do them unless they have proof?"

"I'll see what can be managed," Hugh said.

The two then conferred in low tones which she could not make out. And without warning the door to which she'd pressed her ear was violently thrown open, sending her falling to the floor. Standing over her were an angry-looking Hugh and a rather ravaged-looking older woman clad in black.

The woman shrieked, "I knew there was someone out there; I sensed it!"

Priscilla stumbled to her feet and prepared to run to the other door but Hugh produced a pistol and pointed

it at her. He said, "One step further and you'll be dead!"

The woman said, "You fool! You must have left the secret door open!"

"No!" he said. "She's found it on her own some way. Who told you about it?"

"I found it by accident," she said in a taut voice. "Let me go!"

The woman laughed without humor. "You think that likely? Now that you know!"

She said, "Where is Lord Albert?"

The woman laughed again in the same wild fashion. "Buried in his own gardens for many a day!"

Hugh gave the woman an angry look. "You drunken fool! You're giving it all away!"

"What's the difference?" the woman said. "She's not going to leave here alive."

"Please!" Priscilla begged. "Let me go. I'll leave if you'll let me have Emily. I'll do you no harm. I'll not tell!"

Hugh sneered, the gun still pointed at her, "You think I believe that. The moment you got out of here you'd go for the police!"

"I can't," she pleaded with him. "I'm a murderess myself!"

"Listen to her!" the woman hooted. "She's a better liar than you'd expect!"

Hugh said, "You and Emily must die, Priscilla!"

"Why?"

"Because you stand between us and the estate," Hugh went on. "Once you two are dead, the door to the apartment will be found open one night. And I will spread the story that Albert, after locking himself up for years, has run off. He will not be found, of course. And I shall run the estate in the meanwhile. Then Charity appears and explains that she was living abroad and did

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not drown as everyone thought. Later, Albert will be declared missing and legally dead. And this good lady will marry the new Lord Peel. Myself!"

She listened with growing dismay.

"You're mad!" she told the two. "You'll never get away with it!"

"I say we will," Hugh said, his eyes bright with malice. "We'll keep you up here, then entice Emily up later. In the night you'll be locked in your rooms and the fire Charity spoke of will conveniently take place on your floor. Your burned bodies will be found without any suspicious marks."

Charity said delightedly, "What do you say to that?"

At that moment the door through which Priscilla had originally entered the storage room opened and Giles Parton burst into the room with a roar. He brushed her aside onto the floor as Hugh fired the pistol directly at him!

Charity shrieked in fear and cowered back against the wall. Giles Parton, a giant of a man, showed no effect of the shot but kept on advancing towards a craven Hugh.

"Stay back!" Hugh cocked the gun again but he did not fire.

With a loud curse Parton grabbed Hugh and shook him like a rat. The two men began a wild struggle with Hugh still managing to hold onto the gun. Suddenly there was another shot. And this time Hugh screamed hideously. The big man let him drop to the floor where the weapon with which he'd accidentally shot himself in the struggle had fallen.

Charity gave another shriek and ran to the fallen man and keened over him. Hugh was past mercy or caring, his wide eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Priscilla went to Giles Parton. "He shot you! Are you hurt badly?"

"I think not, ma'am," the big man said slowly, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "Send the stableboy for the doctor and the police."

"I will," she promised.

"I'll keep an eye on this one," he said, grimly indicating Charity.

Priscilla rushed down the spiral stairs and found Emily obediently waiting at the secret entrance, where Giles Parton had told her to stay.

She told the child, "There's been an accident! You mustn't go up there!"

"Is Giles all right?" The girl was ready to cry.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "You tell the house-keeper and stay down in the hall. I'm sending for the doctor and we'll need someone to meet him."

She ran to the stables and within minutes the stableboy was riding to the village for help. Then she sent a message to the Baxters with one of the other lads. And all this done, she hurried back to the entrance behind the painting and up the stairway to the locked apartment.

She found Giles Parton had retrieved the gun and had pulled forward a chair to sit in. His face was ashen now and the front of his vest was stained with his blood. Charity had gotten up from beside Hugh's body and was standing away a little, looking sullen.

Giles saw Priscilla and said, "It's good you're back! She's fixing to run off!"

She worried, "You're bleeding terribly!"

"Take the gun!" he said. "Keep it pointed at her!"

She accepted the weapon gingerly. As she did so, Giles toppled from the chair with a groan and stretched out on the floor near the body of Hugh!

"Fixed him!" Charity said with malice.

"We'll see," Priscilla said grimly, covering her with the gun.

She was still doing this when Stanley Baxter and Jane arrived. Stanley asked no questions but took over keeping Charity covered.

Meanwhile Priscilla examined the fallen Giles. She told Jane, "He's still alive! If only the doctor would come!"

Her prayer was shortly answered. Dr. Hastings arrived first and looked shocked at the scene of carnage. The village constable came next. Soon Giles was downstairs being treated for a bullet wound in the stomach and the bewildered constable was taking Charity in custody as a first step in clearing up the murders. Emily and Priscilla went to the Baxters'.

They kept as much of it as possible from Emily, not letting her know for the time being that her father was dead. She had not been greatly attached to Hugh, and now it was natural she should rely completely on Priscilla. The child was more upset about Giles Parton than anything else. Happily he seemed to be doing fairly well.

As soon as Emily was safely in bed Priscilla had a long talk with the Baxters. She pointed out, "Emily has now inherited the title."

"Lady Peel," Jane said with awe. "Such a little girl. So much responsibility."

Stanley Baxter said, "You may very well be named Emily's guardian until she comes of age."

"That will be up to the courts," she said quietly, aware of her own problem.

Jane said, "Emily's chief worry seems to be about Giles. If he lives I don't think this experience will be too shocking to her."

"She hated Charity," Stanley agreed. "And she doesn't know about her father yet."

"I told her he had gone away the night of the quarrel," Priscilla said. "And that Charity had remained up there pretending to be him. She seemed to believe it, though she wants her father back."

Stanley said, "Later on she will better be able to bear the news."

"Do you know where the body is buried?" Jane asked.

"According to the constable, Charity told them. By this time the body may have been dug up. It was somewhere in the back garden where the soil is soft and easy to move," Priscilla said.

Stanley smiled grimly. "Trust Hugh to pick a spot where he wouldn't have to shovel too hard."

"I think Emily should be taken away for a holiday until the worst of this is over," Jane said.

"I agree," Priscilla said. "The question is where?"

"We can think about it tomorrow," Stanley said. "In the meantime you and she are better here."

Priscilla slept little that night despite being in the Baxters' friendly house. She knew she could no longer lie to the friendly Baxters. She must tell them the truth about herself! And she must return to London and give herself up to the authorities.

In the morning the word on Giles Parton was still good. Stanley had gone over to the castle early and been there when the doctor made his call. The doctor expressed the opinion that Giles' excellent constitution would see him through the crisis.

Stanley also reported that the body of Lord Albert Peel had been found and a small, private service would be held at the local chapel.

Priscilla worried, "I do not like to deny the child the right to attend her father's funeral."

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Stanley gave a deep sigh. He said, "Suppose I try breaking the news to her. Tell her he died that night as a result of the quarrel. That may be the best way."

"I'm beginning to understand that truth is the only way," Priscilla said. "I'd appreciate your talking to Emily."

A respectable crowd turned out for the funeral. And after the burial the local magistrate took Priscilla aside to inform her, "The matter is closed as far as the law is concerned. You need have no more worries."

"Thank you," she said.

"Mrs. Peel will serve a long prison sentence and she has renounced all rights to title and property," the magistrate went on. "So Emily is now Lady Peel. The court will ask you to act for her until she is of age."

"I will hear from you later concerning that," she said.

"Yes," the magistrate agreed. "We will be in touch with you in a week or two."

Emily was very quiet about it all. But the main thing she wanted to do was stop by and visit with Giles Parton for a moment. Priscilla received permission for the visit from the doctor. So they both briefly returned to Peel Castle to see the convalescent giant.

Giles Parton was in a bedroom of the servant's quarters on the lower floor of the house. He smiled at Emily and held out a great hand for her to take.

"You've missed your pony rides," he said.

"I don't want to go riding until you are well, Giles," the child said, holding his hand tenderly.

The big man smiled. "That's a nice thing for you to say, Miss Emily. And I promise it won't be too long before I'll be back at the stables."

Priscilla smiled at him. "Thank you for all that you did."

"I'd do it again, ma'am," the big man said.

She and Emily left him to rest and started the walk back to the Baxter house. Emily held on to her hand.

Emily said, "Now that my father is dead I only have you."

"You have Giles," she said.

"And Giles! And the Baxters! I like them," she went on.

"Good, I like them too," she said. "I have an errand I must do. I'll have to go to London. I'd like to leave you with the Baxters. Would you mind?"

"Just so long as you come back," Emily said in a small frightened voice. "I mustn't lose you!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

That evening she left Emily in charge of Jane while she and Stanley Baxter went out for a stroll down a quiet country lane.

He said, "I did very well getting up that secret stairway last week. I think my leg is improving all the time."

"I had a feeling it would."

He smiled. "Still, I don't want to go without the cane. It's something to rely on."

"I know," she said. Then she halted and asked earnestly, "Would you and Jane take Emily away on a few days holiday? I think the seaside might be nice."

"When?"

"Tomorrow if you can manage it," she said.

Stanley looked slightly mystified. "I think I can. We

have cousins in Dover who have been asking us to visit them. Why not now?"

"Thank you," she said, gratefully.

"What about you? You could come along. There's nothing to keep you here."

She said quietly, "I have to go to London."

"I see," he said. "I should have understood. You are going to look for him."

"Thomas Manley?" she said with a sad smile. "I wish that were my only reason. Stanley, I'm going to London to pay a debt."

"A debt?"

"Yes. One that is long overdue. I killed a man and I must answer to the court. I'm a murderess just as much as Charity."

He stared at her. "I don't believe it!"

"It's true," she said.

"Tell me about it," he said, his manner calm.

And so she did, all that had happened. "Then I came to Peel Castle," she concluded. "You know all that followed that."

Stanley took her in his arms. "I'm glad you've told me. I do not believe you will be held and punished for what you did. I do not even think you need to return to London and give yourself up. Let it be our secret. Wipe it from your mind."

"No," she said. "I wish I could. But I cannot."

He sighed. "Very well, go to London! My love will be with you. And if you do not find Thomas Manley I shall be waiting."

"Dear Stanley," she said in a soft voice.

He stopped her from saying more with his kisses. It could have been the happiest moment of her life but for the haunting knowledge of what lay ahead of her in London.

She left first, taking the early stage to London. The Baxters and Emily were going to Dover for a week. It was agreed they would all meet at the Baxters' at the end of that time.

She was in a strange, almost dazed mood all the way to London. When she arrived at the coaching inn she stood confused by its bustle. Should she go to the police at once? She was finding herself more frightened than she'd expected. Then she thought of kindly old James Baker! James Baker of Murray Street! That is where she would begin!

A cab took her to the familiar house and she trembled as she rang the bell. The butler answered and when he saw her his sour face lit up. "Miss Brentwood! Do come in! Mr. Baker will be more than delighted to see you!"

And the jolly old man was! He took her in his arms and hugged her and said, "I had a feeling something good was going to happen to me today!"

She smiled. "You have always been so kind to me."

"And why not? You're pretty enough to warrant it," he said, laughing at his own joke.

She said, "I have come to London on an important errand."

"First, you must tell me all about yourself. How you made out in India and what brought you back here."

"I'm here to give myself up to the police," she said.

"For what?" the fat man wanted to know.

"For killing Sir Alfred Coombs. You can't have forgotten!"

The fat man roared with laughter. "I wrote you about that. Did you not get my letter? I sent it in care of my friend."

"I married on the ship," she said. "I decided not to go to him."

The fat man's eyebrows lifted. "My word!" he said. "Then you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That old devil recovered nicely and lived a good twelve months longer. It is said he died of a heart attack in a house of ill-fame on the morning of this New Year. But that was the end expected of him!"

She was fortunately seated and even so she thought she would faint. In a small voice, she said, "No! It can't be true! You're telling me that to make me feel better!"

"Let me get you some brandy!" the fat man said and hurried to fetch it. When she felt a little better, he assured her, "Every word is true. There's been a great search for you. You're a rich widow!"

"I don't want his money!" she said with disgust.

The fat man shook his head. "Take it! It is rightfully yours. Since the old bugger didn't change his will, he must have wanted you to have it."

"And my aunt and uncle?"

"Are both hoping you'll be found so they can share your new bounty!"

She said grimly, "I can promise you whether I take the money or not, they'll get none of it!"

"Smart girl!" he said. "Now let us have dinner. I'm starved."

It was like old times, sitting here at the table with the jolly James Baker, and knowing that she had no murder on her conscience. It was then she began to wistfully wonder about Thomas Manley and wonder how he had fared. And she felt there was one place she might find out.

She asked James Baker, "Will you take me to the club tonight? I'd like to see Harry Layton again."

The fat man paused over his sirloin to say, "I never miss an opportunity to show a pretty girl on my arm!"

So later that evening she found herself entering the club with the fat man. The doorkeeper was quick to say, "No ladies, Mr. Baker. You know the rules!"

"Bother the rules," the fat man said. "Don't you know this girl? She's a friend of Harry's. She used to work here."

The new doorman stepped back. "Well, in that case!"

The club was busy and she saw many familiar faces and some new ones. James Baker led her straight into Harry Layton's office. The red-faced man looked up and a great smile crossed his face.

"Priscilla! Priscilla Brentwood, you're back!" And he came and put his arms around her and kissed her.

"Lady Coombs, to be correct," James Baker reminded him.

"That's right," Layton said. "Sir Alfred Coombs is dead. And you are his widow."

"Not my favorite role," she said wryly. And she was just going to ask him about Thomas Manley when Meg came into the room. She was dressed in a lovely gown and looked very much the lady.

Harry Layton said, "Meet your successor!"

Priscilla said, "We've already met. In fact, we're old friends."

Meg stood there looking a little strained. "Yes, that is true," she finally said. "We are good friends." She had much improved her manner of speaking and now would pass well in any social group.

Harry Layton said, "Meg is a favorite here. I think she's as well-liked as you were. Can't top that!"

Priscilla took the other girl aside and said, "Where is Thomas?"

Pain showed on Meg's pretty face. "You don't know?"

"Tell me!" she urged, feeling the news would not be good.

"Dead," Meg said simply. "A gambling dispute and a duel. He said you always predicted it would end that way."

"Poor Tom!" she whispered, her eyes blurred with tears.

"We were married. Did you know that?"

"No!"

Meg nodded with a sad smile. "So I have that to cherish. And I know you were the one who told him he should."

"He was in love with you. We both knew Thomas well enough to know he wouldn't have married anyone he didn't love."

"I believe that," Meg said. "And I'm happy here. Harry is good to me."

"Harry is a good man," Priscilla agreed.

Meg said, "And you?"

She said, "A long story. I'll tell you later."

And she did. Then she had to spend several days seeing the solicitors in charge of Coombs' estate. The old lecher had left her a princely sum.

When the week ended and it was time to leave London it was James Baker saw her to the stage. The fat man said, "I want you to return to London soon and bring that little girl and the Baxters with you! You're my family now! Plenty of room at Murray Street!"

"You're an old dear!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him to the immense amusement of the others getting on the stage.

His face purpled and in a flustered tone, he said, "Be careful, Lady Coombs! You're giving me young ideas!"

The journey back to Cobham was more pleasant than the one to London. When she arrived there she hired a carriage to take her to the Baxters. As the carriage entered the Baxters' driveway, Stanley came out, leaning

on his cane, a happy look on his thin, intelligent face. He waved and came limping toward her.

She got down from the coach and ran to meet him. She let him take her in his arms and kissed him. She said, "I'm back!"

"For how long?" he asked.

"To stay!" she said. "For always!" And because no other words were necessary they kissed again.

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