A Soldier and a Gentleman

Yasmini Series, #1

by Talbot Mundy, 1879-1940

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Chapter I

Gentlemen, Sir!

My creed is this: God is a gentleman.
And if God made the Universe, and made it well,
And since our duty is to be like God,
Therefore the things that common mortals do
Are better done; the thoughts the others think
Are better thought, by gentlemen.

THE steam went up, and the stink and the miasma, over green and gruesome Rajahbatkhowa; and with the frequency and fluency of horsemen to the manner born the Tail-Twisters cursed Bengal and the Bengal Government, all Bengalis, the climate, food, flies, high heaven and any minor matter on which a curse could hang.

The Tail-Twisters are not Bengalis. They—so help them—are a regiment of Bengal Cavalry, paid for by the Bengal Government, but altogether undefiled thereby.

Their officers are Englishmen, mostly younger sons, rightly and righteously possessed of an ambition to prove themselves better than the next man.

Cowardice is the only cardinal sin they recognize, although there are one or two admitted indiscretions that they frown at; not being "fit" for instance, is awfully poor form. They admit, too, that their creed would not fit cads; it is registered and patented and leased only to gentlemen.

And the men—the native officers, and the grim, black-bearded, swaggering rank and file—are the lean-ribbed, lineal descendants of fighting men from another part of India, where it is thought an honor, and not a disgrace, to salute a better fighting man—because respect begets respect.

The horses—and there are no such horses in any other army in the world—could run rings round anything on legs. The defaulter sheets were curiosities—about as necessary as a Christian chaplain; Mohammedan sons of landed gentry who are voluntary soldiers do not get into clink. The Regiment was clean five ways, and ready, and aware of it.

But it stood in tented lines and swore and sweated, and its language was infinitely more abominable than that of the army which once swore in Flanders.

The men's tongue, made for swearing and enriched with military terms, could evolve profanity beyond the ken of even steam shovel drivers or Billingsgate fish porters; and it worked both watches under.

The Mess did its best, and led the blasphemy in clean clipped English—all, that is to say, but Colonel Stapleton. He swore only in action and then seldom.

Nobody swore at the police because they, of course, are beyond the pale or reach of anything the human mouth can compass. The Mess was civil to the District Superintendent, and avoided all reference to his trade—they would not have dreamed of calling it profession—they were sorry for him and, when he looked in on them every third day or so they made him drunk. But they could have done the same thing to the Devil or a Russian, had he turned up.

The Colonel would ask him once and only once, in just so many words, "Situation beyond you yet?"

He would answer: "No. Not yet, sir."

Then the listening Mess would sigh in unison and talk volubly of other things.

Day after steamy, sweltering day they exercised their horses, ate the awful chicken of the country and the more than awful goat, and wished all the luck there is to the dacoits. The only thing that cheered them was the intermittent news of fresh atrocities—of a village sacked, of some one crucified on an anthill near a crossroads, of a baboo held to ransom, or of a policeman who had been too active in the hunt, captured and cut to pieces and left in baskets at the police camp entrance. Then there would be a thrill of pleasure through the lines. Some trooper would take his saber to the squadron swordsmith to have imaginary dints smoothed out, and the officers would look to revolver mechanisms.

But the upshot was invariably the same; the police (with three European officers to a district of eight hundred square miles) still thought that they could handle the dacoits without the military, and the Tail-Twisters ate their heads off still—hot, scornful and impatient.

Gopi Lall was out and on the rampage. Gopi Lall was a sportsman, according to his lights, and a man of acumen. Gopi Lall could have given the Tail-Twisters a ride and a fight that would have satisfied even them. There was a price on his head; there had been a dozen murders proved against him personally and half a hundred against his followers. He had looted, burned, blackmailed and run away until the District writhed; so he was fair, clean quarry.

The Tail-Twisters would have cheerfully surrendered the blood money to the police, and five times that much in addition, subscribed among themselves, for a two-day chance at him. But the horses pawed along their lines in vain, and Gopi Lall continued to bribe the native police with one hand, terrify them with the other, and feather his undiscoverable nest among the jungle-clad hills with other people's property.

The police officers still proclaimed their faith in their men's integrity and skill, the Governor of a Province held his hand, the native press grew daily more volubly indignant, and Gopi Lall laughed at all of them until the clean, sunlit barracks back at Balibhum seemed after all like paradise that had been left behind. The Tail-Twisters had been glad to come away but they were soldiers; they objected to being merely "a measure of precaution," and they would have been overjoyed now to get their marching orders back again.

“The trouble is, you see,” said Colonel Stapleton, when the cloth in the stuffy Mess tent had been withdrawn from the trestle table and the Madeira was going round the same way as the sun, “that policemen—police officers, I mean—are forced to handle men” who know everything that’s crooked. They deal with crooks—I mean the men do, not the officers—and they become crooked. That reacts on the officers again. It doesn’t make them crooks, for thank God a gentleman remains a gentleman under any circumstances. But it makes them in the end ignore things that they shouldn’t overlook. It blunts their finer feelings.”

He looked round the table, not for approval—for the Colonel of a Regiment says what seems good to him and that again is law—but for attention. He had it. The eight who sat with him were men who, each in turn, was almost worshiped by a native officer and a hundred stiff-chinned soldiers, who wasted no worship or respect on anything else less manly than themselves. But when Colonel Stapleton laid down the law, the eight would listen as shaven friars to their abbot.

“Now God forbid that we soldiers should become policemen! Let us remain soldiers before everything! The proudest boast that England has to her name is the raising of such regiments as this. Is there another nation that could call on native gentlemen, pay them nothing, or practically nothing, ask them to clothe and horse and feed themselves, form them into regiments, swear them in for three years and keep them for thirty, discipline them, let them officer their own troops, but put our own officers over theirs; and in spite of a difference in religion, language, customs and point of view produce such regiments? No, gentlemen! England stands alone in that particular, and long may she stand alone!”

“I wish he wouldn’t preach!” whispered young Boileau—he who won the Guzerat pig sticking cup the season before, and took everything for granted except money. He mostly had to borrow that.

“They should pick native gentlemen to be policemen too,” continued the Colonel. “Failing that, in a case of this kind they ought to make use of us promptly. As for being conversant with the despicable details, why the very fact that we know nothing of them is in our favor! Dirt and the ruts it lies in should be handled at the lance point. The police hunt rats like ferrets; they go in after them and defile themselves. Rats should be smoked out into the open and then killed off. The Government of this country is making a terrible mistake.”

“Wish to the deuce the Government ’ud muzzle him!” whispered Boileau, and Stapleton caught what he said.

“Captain Boileau—stand up, sir!

Boileau flushed and did as he was told. The Madeira had scarcely more than started on its rounds; they had toasted the Queen perhaps ten minutes before, so the glass in front of him was not more than his second. Hence the flush was due to either shame or irritation.

“I overheard your remark, sir. I prefer to believe that it did not refer to me. Let me remind you, though, that there are no circumstances under which a soldier can not remain a gentleman—no conceivable circumstance, sir. A gentleman is deferential to his seniors. A gentleman is courteous and polite. A gentleman does not make irreverent and irrelevant remarks in undertones at a time when his senior is speaking. Sit down, sir; but remember that your calling

is the highest, without exception, that there is, and that there is no excuse—not even momentary forgetfulness—for diverging from that rule."

He suppressed his impatience with an effort.

"As I was saying, gentlemen, I name no names, but the Government is making a mistake. The police serves a certain purpose and is a necessary evil. But when dacoity breaks out it is a serious error of judgment to employ any but gentlemen to extinguish it. To set a thief to catch a thief is wrong. To round up thieves one needs men who are incorruptible and who will stoop to nothing that is beneath a soldier's dignity. I have said as much in my letter to his Excellency; I put it strongly, and there may be results. The dawn may see the beginning of the end of Gopi Lall."

He had hardly finished speaking—he had barely more than waved away the decanter that was passed to him—when he and the rest of them sat bolt upright and listened hard.

"Oh, only a policeman," ventured Boileau.

But policemen do not ride as a general rule as this man rode. They could hear him some distance off but his horse seemed scarcely to touch the ground, and he was coming like an arrow.

"Shod horse!" said Colonel Stapleton. "Ah! There's the challenge."

"Yes, and barely a pause. He's coming on—at a trot now. No, he's galloping again. Despatches, by the Great Lord Harry!"

"It's our own man," swore Colonel Stapleton. "It's Dost Mohammed."

"Can't be, sir. He only left us the day before yesterday at noon."

"It's Dost Mohammed. A trooper would draw rein. It's Dost Mohammed with good news; else why in a hurry?"

"You're right, sir, it is."

There was a sound outside as of a cataclysm—brought to sudden sparking halt. A saber clattered, a pair of loose-roweled spurs jangled, and a deep voice growled. Then suddenly, framed against the outer darkness, Dost Mohammed stood in the tent door and saluted.

"Rung Ho, Bahadur!"

They made room for him, to let him sit beside the Colonel. British and native officers neither eat together nor discuss their women; but in all save creed and caste they are blood brothers, whose Regiment is father, mother, honor and religion to them all. Dost Mohammed was a man of men—a born soldier, proved out, and more than welcome. But he stood first before the Colonel, holding out a letter.

"I bring good news, Huzoor!"

The Colonel seized what he brought and tore it open.

"Gentlemen!" he said. "It is as I told you. His Excellency has seen reason. He has ordered us to move at once to put an end to the dacoity. We will start after Gopi Lall at dawn."

Chapter II

A Gentleman Does His Duty.

Find ye the woman! Trail her down

By matched intrigue—by counter plan
By hound—through spies—in field or town
Find her! Then find the man!

CRIME, of course, is geographical. So is virtue. And Yasmini was a heroine. Heaven—who gave her eyes unfathomable—knows too the unfathomable secret of her name and origin; for she was not of Bengal near of Madras. She was of India, and all India knew of her, though none knew whence she came.

Some said she was a high caste woman; others that a Maharaja once had brought her from the Hills, to be a plaything in the death-watched depths of his zenana. That story added that the Maharaja died. And all who knew her, or knew of her, said that her little slender wrists could force a dagger home as artfully as her little jeweled ankles danced, or as her eyes could lure; and they sang songs about her eyes from Peshawur to Cape Cormorin. She herself sang some of them, and they were not at all moral songs, as morals are expounded in the West.

Art was the essence of her. She was suppleness and subtlety and studied grace in every attitude and word. And she was not married; for marriage, in the East at all events, would have been the sepulcher of artistry like hers. None knew whence her money or her jewels came, and none dared ask—just as none dared question her prerogative of dwelling in the Panch Mahal or her right to call it by that name. She could even change a language. She did exactly as she chose, and what she chose was mostly unexpected.

India, which of all the countries of the world alone could produce a Yasmini, alone has other wonders to unfold—old cities, undismantled, uncrumbled, uninhabited, and unexplained; cities in whose streets the jungle fights for room between the ton piece granite curbstones and the lords of the jungle make their lairs in latticed palaces.

There had been such a city once, close to Rajah-batkbowa, and a hundred thousand men all armed with axes might have cleared it still to shine in the jungle coaxing sun. But only one piece of it stood in the open—carved and painted, cupolaed and domed; a wonder building round a courtyard where fountains used to play in long forgotten ages; and there lived Yasmini. She called the place the Panch Mahal; and that, in a language of the cleaner, braver North, means “the playground of the ladies.”

The North-born troopers under Colonel Stapleton’s command knew well the meaning of the words; and they knew to a big, thigh-booted gentleman the road that led through twisted jungle to the building she had named. Through the long hot afternoons there were often ten or twenty of them chatting in the latticed windows on the upper floor, or testing their soldier wits against the readier, trained repartee of Yasmini’s handmaidens. She herself paid little heed to them, and less respect; she condescended only to sufficient courtesy to keep them coming there, and made her women keep them well supplied with cigarettes and strange, wonder-scented brands of sherbet.

But every now and then a native officer would swagger, spur jingling and saber clanking, underneath the arch to call on her; and then there would be a fluttering in the nest above, and Yasmini herself would come almost but not quite as Cleopatra came to Antony. She would stand at the stair head auraed in some pale blue muslin stuff, and she would greet him as the dawn greets night.

Like night, his strength and resolution and conceit would vanish. But Cleopatra was in love with Antony.

Yasmini would dance for him, talk to him, bring him sherbet with her own amazing hands and sing a song or two that punned and played subtly round his warriorhood, her womanhood, and paradise where both might sit enthroned. Then while the troopers drew away into the corners in envious obedience, the officer would whisper to her things he should not have whispered, in return for promises that she did not intend to keep.

When evening came—for those were evenings of the eve of martial law, and darkness had to find the Regiment prepared—she would send him off, flattered and fooled; fierce-bearded, as empty of secrets as an egg the crows have found, to chew the bitter cud of recollection until memory of her overcame remorse, and his servant polished up his spurs for him and he threw discretion to the winds and came again.

Always the troopers came and were entertained and given sherbet. Now and then the native officers would jingle in, and be shown a glimpse of what Allah has provided for the truly brave and good in paradise. And daily, sometimes hourly, Gopi Lall, up in his fastness in the hills, received news of the Regiment's intentions, and was told how long yet he might dare to loose his following, red- handed, on the countryside.

The tastes and the inclinations of Yasmini would be as difficult to follow as the movements of her twinkling feet. Her eyes were laughing pools of mystery; her tongue an instrument of subtly woven, smothered, underhand intrigue; and her beauty could, and did, procure for her the abject slavery of any man on whom she had designs. She could pick the wearer of her favors from among the best spurred and booted bloods of India. Yet—

Gopi Lall was a Bengali, while she was from the North, where they despise his nationality and creed and speech and habits as a hadji hates a giaour. And at that, he was a Bengal outcast. His one sound eye was baleful, lit by greed and overhung by a lid devoid of lashes. His lips were slit and scarred where once a knife that he carried in his mouth had been hammered inward by an intended victim's fist. His hair—for he did not shave his head—was a shock of black, bewildering beastliness, uncombed, unoiled, unwashed. And his creed was the worst of him:

"I am the enemy of all the gods—of virtue, pity, charity, faith, mercy, love. I am the friend of fear and hate and hell. I have no human friends; who are not my servants are my enemies."

She had drifted with her entourage of waiting women from a hatchery of treason on the outer wall of Delhi to her present strange abiding place, and Gopi Lall had sent her soon afterward one love missive–through the window. It was gory, and the blood was barely dried. Its eyes, wide opened, had been forced into a squint when dead, or during death from torture; and the lips had been attended to as only a dacoit's imagination could direct. It was not easy to recognize the once alluring face of Yasmini's particular pet handmaiden; but then Yasmini, too, had imagination beyond the ordinary. She buried the mistreated head and sent no word of it to the police.

Her answer had been unexpected, as nearly all that she directed was. She sent another maid, an innocent, sweet featured girl who had not seen the horror tossed in through the window; she sent her with a note to wait where Gopi Lall's men were known to pass occasionally. The note read:

Here is another. And if my lord would deign to visit me there are more than a dozen who are at his service.

The second girl had come back, well frightened, but alive, and with an answer. It was not in writing, nor on paper; but Gopi Lall's thumb mark done in blood on a piece of calico was a known passport on that countryside. It meant leave to live, and it was never violated while its holder had it; should he relinquish it through fear or at the feel of torture too devilish to name, that would entail no breach of faith by Gopi Lall. He had been known to keep one of his thumb print licensees alive for fourteen days, and then to let him go because the suffering wretch swallowed what he would not willingly surrender.

While she had that piece of calico, then, Yasmini was free to dwell in what she called her Panch Mahal, and she used her freedom to send messages by devious routes and unsuspected hands to the butcher who had thinned down her establishment. But Gopi Lall never came to her himself.

Up in some hell-stained aerie, Heaven knew where among the hills, he ruled a thousand outlaws. Perhaps a dozen of them, more or less, knew Gopi Lall. They were his Generals of rapine, who handed down his orders to the rest. Each of his Generals held in hand a horde of other ruffians who, oftener than not, were peaceful countrymen, to all appearance living decent lives in unsuspecting villages, befriended by their victims' relatives, and known to the police and to the courts as honest men.

When one of these paid a chance visit to the house of Yasmini and sold a cord of wood perhaps, or brought trapped wild fowl or a bunch of jungle flowers as his tribute to her beauty, there was neither suspicion nor excuse for it. It was nothing but the ordinary, decent, humble way of rustic simpletons, who—as their betters did less innocently—might surely worship at the shrine of loveliness.

But, through channels undiscoverable, Gopi Lall became aware of all the news and of every move that the police might contemplate against him; and he knew, too, that the soldiers were still doomed to inactivity. And all the clue there was as to who might be in league with him was that certain villagers grew strangely rich—for villagers. That and one other thing.

Yasmini—bejeweled and beguiling, very much besought, ever coaxing information from strong men self-trained in secrecy, and giving neither explanation for her presence in fever-fouled Bengal nor rewarding any man with more than smiles and promises—watched daily for a man who did not come and talked long and often with the villagers who drifted in to pay her their respects, or sell something or bring her flowers.

Soon a rumor grew that she loved this one-eyed monster of the hills. Soon it became common knowledge that she loved him. The story spread and grew by spreading, until even Europeans heard of it. Some said that she had loved him in another part of India, had seen him once in passing and had lost her heart to him; that she had followed, and had placed herself deliberately where he could come and seize her and carry her away.

Others said that she had only heard of him, and that, tigress-like, she had loved at a distance a fabled, visionary Gopi Lall, described to her as an outlaw, but the flower of chivalry. These swore that, had she seen him, she would have recoiled in horror from the thought of being wooed or won by such a bloody, revolting brute.

And there was Colonel Stapleton. He was the last to hear the rumors, and he let his officers believe whatever ribald impropriety they chose. He, first among soldiers, and soldier among gentlemen, believed the version that was mildest, and diluted even that with gallantry. To him it was unthinkable that any woman could love or let herself be loved by the real Gopi Lall. Therefore she had heard false stories of him. Therefore—it followed as the night the day—it was his duty to do something in the matter.

Her propriety or lack of it; her right to claim the treatment accordable to women of less questionable standing; her creed, if she had any; her caste, color, history, or hopes were nothing to him. She was a woman, he a gentleman. The rest was obvious.

To send for her would be impossible, even had he more than humor for his reason; for in India even ladies such as Yasmini observe sufficient of the purdah law to preclude visits to a European officer. And, should he send a native officer alone, he doubted that his message would reach her worded and delivered just as he intended—gallantly, without a hint of impropriety or interference.

He decided, after quite a lot of thought, to go himself, accompanied by a native officer. And since Dost Mohammed was the man of all his eight commissioned charges whom he trusted most, the Colonel took him—weary after his two-day ride, but unreluctant.

“You see, Dost Mohammed,” he explained, “we leave at dawn. This is the apparent duty of gentlemen. We don’t know how much harm this Gopi Lall may do before we round him up, so we’ll warn her now—you and I together—before it’s too late. “

“As you say, Huzoor,” growled Dost Mohammed. And because of that ban on discussing women folk, he saw fit not to tell his Colonel certain things he might have told. It was little that Dost Mohammed knew, except some fragmentary history; but even that much might have saved the trip.

So Dost Mohammed rode beside him to the gilded dwelling on the jungle edge, and waited in the courtyard listening to the murmurings and gigglings above, and watching the shifting lights and shadows passing. And after an interminable wait Yasmini herself came down, close-veiled as if all the virtues of the East and West alike were concentrated in her loveliness.

Speaking in Hindustani, the lingua franca of India, Colonel Stapleton told her what he had to say of Gopi Lall, and of the rumor that she loved him. Yasmini thanked him, bowing low as a woodland fairy might have bowed to Oberon. With a little titter of embarrassment she disclaimed all knowledge of and certainly all love for the outlaw. She professed profound horror of him, and the pious hope that such a monster among men might meet a quick-found slow-drawn Nemesis.

She satisfied the Colonel; but when he and his fierce coadjutor had ridden off—almost before the hoofbeats had died down in the steamy night mist—Yasmini laughed long and merrily; laughed with the tinkling cadence of a peal of fairy bells; lay on a cushoned divan and laughed; laughed as her maidens undressed her; and later, laughed herself to sleep.

“Are all men fools?” she laughed. “Nay. Find me another word! Princes and priests and statesmen—they are fools: But soldiers, Englishmen—oh, women, soothe me; rub my ribs; pray Hanuman, the monkey god, to find a word for them!”

Chapter III

The Old Man Lands on Boileau.

Youth—and a woman!
The youth left solitary in a place
Where comrades lately laughed; feeling the bite
Of earned opprobrium, and face to face
With self—and sorrow—and an Indian night—
And debts—and drudgery—and prickly heat—
Youth, with a grown man's soldierly desire
For action! Warn him—cajole him—entreat—
Advise him! But he'll find the fire
That's lit by woman!

GOPI LALL, like other bandits of less visionary latitudes, had a half developed, half mocking notion of his own almost divinity. And, as greater men have done before him, he left his own country with neither following nor prospects, and came back to it an all-crowned king. The price put on his head by another Province had wrought the change for him.

He was certainly a humorist, in his own grim way. Three thousand rupees—at which a smarting and indignant Government valued him—was a fortune in itself; and, when he came back with policemen on his trail to his own Bengal, he was penniless. So he decapitated the first tax paying villager he could find whose size and general ugliness were something like his own, doctored the head with a knife, removed one eye, dried out the socket, and sent the resulting horror in a basket to police headquarters by the hand of a trusted lieutenant. He also sent a dozen witnesses to identify the thing and lay low himself until the blood reward was paid.

Of course feud followed, for the lieutenant claimed one-third of the money, and the witnesses all clamored for their share as well. As the logical result all thirteen men lay pegged out one afternoon on anthills, and to cap his quaint conceit Gopi Lall sent their heads to the police, with an accompanying homily, laboriously written out in blood. It was typically babooese, and it ended with a moral such as Æsop might have penned, but the concentrated gist of it was, "Such should be the end of all dishonest men!"

So the Government, which has no sense of humor, loved him, and did its ceaseless best to capture him, that it might hug him properly—with a slip knot and a hempen rope. And since Bengal breeds Bengalis, as well as snakes and jungle fever and the Indian Penal Code, Gopi Lall had ample opportunity to exercise his wit. If any knew where his hill-and-jungle-hidden ærie was, none dared tell of it; and, as for the native press, it used him as political ammunition, treating him one day as a national hero in revolt against bureaucracy, and the next as proof of crass incompetence on everybody's part.

The police, of course, used him as a scapegoat, and gave him warning of their moves whenever their three English officers were indiscreet enough to drop a hint.

They robbed right and left, and gave Gopi Lall the credit for it. But credit was not passed on and taken at its mere face value. When a robbery occurred that he had had no hand in, his share of it had to be left in some hiding place where he knew where to look for it, or else a dead policeman would be found within a day or two, staring up at the sun without his eyelids. He was not afraid of the police, and he was at much pains to make the fact apparent.

But the Tail-Twisters were another matter altogether. The man who can buy, blackmail, coax away, or steal the honor of a Rajput gentleman who wears a regimental crest could bribe high Heaven; and that Regiment, pawing and perspiring in its tented lines, was something that made Gopi Lall afraid. He took no liberties with it, and sent no greased night creepers to steal the horse feed and accouterments. Nor did he waylay the troopers who swaggered now and then along the jungle paths.

But he worked hard and quickly in an opposite direction. He made a levy on the villages to the north of him that exceeded all of his previous exactions, and with the money thus extorted he bribed the native press of eight cities to declaim against the Government for ordering out troops. For that once, the police became national heroes, or very nearly so, and even the Governor in person was denounced as an iconoclast for contemplating such a thing as the supersession of the "honorable constabeels."

Lithographed one-thousand-copy circulations hummed with indignation at the thought of turning loose a thousand "predatory horsemen" on the suffering countryside. So the Government of India, which always listens for a while before it acts and then smites hard and fast, kept the "brutal and licentious soldiery" in camp.

And Yasmini sang songs to her guitar, and danced, and melted strong men's hearts. And Colonel Stapleton wrote letters. And young Boileau—"Bandobust Boileau," who could lead a squadron like a gray wolf on a breast high scent, but who could not hold his tongue—talked just a little bit too loudly in his tent of "old women in the Service nowadays," and of "Don Quixotes who should be at home in padded cells."

So at dawn one morning when the Tail-Twisters swooped like a jingling whirlwind out of camp to round up Gopi Lall, in a tent that thrummed already with the morning heat sat Boileau, with a pile of documents in front of him that would keep him busy for a dozen days—him and the baboo. When the Colonel of a regiment does need to tame the rising flood of youthful insolence, there are always plenty of blue indent forms, and payment vouchers that need auditing, and other things even less interesting to the military type of wit.

He sat and watched the dust go up above the Regiment; saw the glittering lance heads rise, and dip, and vanish; heard the thunder of the hoofs die down; and then faced the task in front of him. He realized that the fault was his, and that the more quickly the red-tape- tied routine was waded through, the sooner he would lead his men again; but he felt like a schoolboy kept in after hours, with the sting of temporary ostracism added to the drudgery.

"Must admit the old man landed on me where I'd feel it," he told himself. "Did it neatly, too. 'Captain Boileau, I have to leave one officer behind to attend to details. I've selected you.' Cuss him! Left me to think out the reason for myself, and—blast his stateliness!—let the men think what they liked, too!"

A man, whose job, and honor, and promotion all depend on making sons of the sons of soldiers regard him as a demigod is vulnerable where he keeps his pride.

He toiled at the maddening "returns in triplicate" until the flies drove him from the tent. In spite of the netting and the squeaky improvised punkah, even the ink pot was full of flies, and even the baboo gave up regarding them as essential elements like air and earth.

He went to the gloomy, empty Mess tent, where a solitary servitor provided him with curried goat and flies.

There were more flies in his whisky peg and in the butter, and even the boy he sent for to stand behind his chair failed to keep the still uncooked ones from promenading on his cheek.

So he went back to the office tent again and tried to drown his consciousness of the hot, pestilential loneliness in hard work.

But the official office working hours in salubrious Bengal are limited, and the Bengali baboo, who has his uses, is a man who also knows his rights.

The clerk had gone without his noonday two-hour snooze in deference to Boileau's wishes, but, as he expressed it, he was "theoreticallee antagonistic, sir, to policy of working overtime without increased emolument."

So Boileau cursed him thoroughly and let him go at three o'clock. He did not see the force of borrowing money, at sixty odd percent, from the baboo's relatives to spend even fractions of it on the baboo.

For the next few hours he sat and swore and read the three-weeks-old Home newspapers alternately. Then he went out and looked his horses over. Then the thought of dinner all alone again, with mosquitos this time instead of flies, swept over him, and for a while nostalgia had him in its depressing maw. And after that, of course, the particular red devil who sits on tree tops all over India and beckons to the lonely European drew nearer and held converse with him.

Youth called, and the fire of youth that leads the Anglo-Saxon into mischief. Mischief he must have, or see, or do within an hour or two, or else weep; and no soldier has any hankering for tears. Besides, for what is mischief, unless for the amusement of men of stamina?

"Who is this Yasmini?" he asked of the first native he could find.

The man waxed interminably eloquent, after the eloquence which belongs to the East alone.

"What language does she speak?"

"All languages; the language of love, sahib, is a common tongue."

"Does she make love in English?"

"Nay, sahib. Who could? Neither does she make love, ever. The gods, who made her, made that unnecessary. When she lacks love, men bring it to her."

"She sounds amusing."

"Sahib—she is Yasmini."

"Um-m-m! D'you think she would receive me?"

"Who knows, sahib?" responded the native. "He who can tell the color of an unborn infant's eyes might know perhaps what Yasmini will do. There be dead men, sahib, who might tell, too, what good they had from her—none other!"

"Then, babooji, you wouldn't care to call on her, eh?"

"Sahib, have you seen a serpent hypnotize a bird? Would you be that bird? Have you watched a moth that fluttered round a lamp, and envied him?"

"I've seen the moths at it, baboo. But how about the notion of skating over thin ice?"

"Yasmini and ice, sahib, are as different as Kin-chinjunga from the Plains."

"Which is the nearest way to where she lives? You've got me interested, babooji. I'll call on the lady."

"Nay, God forbid, sahib! I have warned you. I will not direct you to your undoing! There are women of the countryside in hundreds who–"

"Chup!" commanded Boileau. So the baboo held his tongue.

But fifteen minutes later Boileau's servant came to him, carrying his Panama to replace the helmet that in that climate in the daytime a man must wear even inside his tent.

"D'you know the way to Yasmini's?" he asked.

And the wicked, wrinkled old Abdullah grinned.

"I'll not bother about dinner. As soon as it's dark bring a lamp and lead me to her."

"Will the sahib dress?" he asked deferentially.

"Um-m-m-n-yes. She's a—ah—a—er—she's what we white men call a lady, isn't she?"

"Sahib, she is Yasmini. There is no woman like her in the world!"

"Yes, I'll dress as though for dinner. And—ah—Abdullah—"

"Sahib?"

"Hold your tongue!"

Abdullah grinned again.

Chapter IV

A Villager Earns His Salt.

There's Bengal Horse behind you, man, a crisscross trail ahead;
One plan to make;
Ten paths to take;
One slip—one fault—you're dead!
There's hue and cry, and clank of sword; hark! hear the trumpet call!
The pennants dance
On hungry lance!
Think quickly, Gopi Lall!

OLONEL STAPLETON was not a man to inveigh against policemen and then adopt their tactics or avail himself of their assistance. Nor had he risen to the rank of Colonel in a regiment that admitted no superior on earth without being a soldier in every courtly inch of him. The Stapleton of drawing rooms and mess tables—if the truth were known, of somewhat prosy platitudes, and rather too fastidious ideas—was another person than the man who led the Tail-Twisters when their lances rippled in the open, and their chargers strained behind him and the trumpeter.

He was still courtly. A lone woman would have picked him still of all his Regiment as the right man to apply to for protection. But a general of division,

too, would have picked him to lead a rally, or a quick-sent charge to turn the tide of battle in a crisis—him and his Regiment.

He led his Regiment now—at an easy canter to take full advantage of the morning cool—straight toward the hazy line of hills where Gopi Lall was currently supposed to have his lair. The District Superintendent of Police, warned of the change in the direction of affairs too late to interfere, wore out an Arab pony in pursuit of him, and brought him to a momentary halt within a mile of the ragged foothills.

"I understand, sir, that you have been placed in charge of things," he panted, wiping off the perspiration.

"Yes sir. You have not been misinformed."

"Then don't you want the police to cooperate?"

"No, sir."

"But—"

"I prefer to act independently. I won't deprive you or your policemen of any credit that may accrue to you. If I interfered with your plans, or availed myself of your men, it might be said afterward, if your men captured him, that my Regiment had done the work."

He started to ride on.

"But, Colonel Stapleton—"

"Well, sir?"

"You won't be able to ride right up to him like that! Why, he's certain to have had notice of your start already; this country's honeycombed with spies. He'll be miles away by the time you get to where he may have been last night."

"At least I'll find his buzzard's roost," said Colonel Stapleton, "and make it a bit too hot to hold him for some time to come! I suppose you know where his headquarters are?"

"Nobody seems to know exactly. I know about within ten miles."

"I'm going to know exactly, and within two hours. If he bolts, look out for him and if you catch him, you do it to your own advantage. I'll set him moving, and keep him on the run, but no man of my Regiment will claim the reward unless one of my men bags him."

"Will you wait one hour, sir, while I ride back and telegraph? He'll bolt toward the north, I'm sure of it. He's probably on his way now. I'd like to get a cordon of my men in place to intercept him."

"D'you mean to tell me that you haven't had a cordon drawn these three weeks past?"

"Yes, but I'd like to warn the men."

"Through a—ah—baboo telegraphist?"

"How else?"

The Colonel smiled at him.

"I'll wait for no one, sir. Good morning!"

Before the sun was two hours up the Tail-Twisters were in among the foothills, split up troop by troop, and scouring every trail that led toward the center of the hills. And a half troop under Dost Mohammed was busily rounding up outraged, expostulating villagers. They tried on him the tactics that for months past had foiled or fooled or suited the police. But he found a way to change their attitude; lances and sabers, fierce eyes and upbrushed beards and blunt directness, warhorse-carried, did what the police had failed in

signally. Soon Dost Mohammed rode with a prisoner up behind him who knew Gopi Lall's nest and the road to it, and dared not refuse to show the way.

What threats the grim Mohammedan growled to him as they rode were never entered in the Regimental history; but they seemed to be fierce enough, and backed with enough reality nearly to scare the soul out of the wretch. For, as they rode nearer in an ever narrowing arc of troops, to where a ring of trees stood on a dome-shaped hill, the prisoner showed signs of fright such as it is not exactly good to watch.

Time and again he begged to be left behind. Over and over he swore that from now on the road was straight and easy. But to his prayers and oaths the native officer answered nothing that any save the prisoner could hear. Had the Colonel heard, he might have felt disposed to deny the statement, given on the honor of a soldier, that he, Stapleton, was infinitely worse, more cruel, more ingenious, and less amenable to reason than the bloodsome Gopi Lall himself!

After a while, though, even that inducement lost its spur. The prisoner argued that he knew from grim experience what Gopi Lall was capable of doing, whereas the Colonel's tendencies were hearsay. He threw himself down from Dost Mohammed's horse and lay where he fell, shuddering on the ground. He would not rise, even when they urged him with a lance butt. He swore that he preferred death there to the chance of what might happen should Gopi Lall see who had led his enemies.

So, lest Gopi Lall recognize him, they tore two eye-holes in his loin cloth and wrapped that round his head, and put him on the horse again and started on.

"The Government will pay me for my cloth?" he wailed.

"Hold, Colonel sahib!" called the native soldier. "This black fellow of the foothills is playing with us!"

"What makes you think that?"

"He is not so frightened as he seems."

They formed a ring round the trembling prisoner; he was trembling now in earnest.

"I will more than terrify him, Colonel sahib, if I may."

"No, Dost Mohammed!"

"Huzoor, we–"

"We are not policemen, even if we are doing policeman's work! I'll have no dog's tricks here."

At the word "dog's tricks" the soldier glowered, for it was hovering dangerously near an insult; Mohammedans and dogs are not associable, even in metaphor.

"If he's not afraid, why is he shamming fear?"

"I know not, Colonel sahib. A dog might smell the reason."

The native officer had chosen the wrong moment to display resentment at imaginary insults, as he divined on the instant. If Colonel Stapleton was courtly and considerate on every possible occasion, he was a stickler, too, for deference to himself and fully capable of enforcing it. His eye alone, when he was roused, was quite enough to cow most ordinary men. The native officer changed his tune in a hurry, before the Colonel could have time to speak.

"It was but a soldier's joke, Huzoor. Let this man hunt, as a dog hunts, quartering the ground while the Regiment waits. I will soon see what he knows. If he wishes salt let him earn it."

That was a pun that either in English or the native language might have had several meanings; the Colonel ignored all of them. He was in a hurry to get on, and too impatient to read riddles.

"Ride on with him," he ordered. "You and ten men."

So Dost Mohammed rode with him, feeling in his saddle bag to make quite certain that he had what he needed. He and his ten rode over a ridge, and down into the dip beyond; and then he called halt unexpectedly, and threw the prisoner to the ground.

"Bind him!" he ordered; and without a word, or even a look of astonishment, the troopers trussed him and cross trussed him with their hobble ropes. Then Dost Mohammed reached into his saddle bag again. He did not dismount himself.

"A pinch or two will serve," he ordered, passing a little package to the nearest trouper. Another trooper forced open the prisoner's jaws, and the first man took the package and poured something into the gaping mouth.

"Be careful lest he swallow it too quickly, and see that he spit out none!"

They squeezed the wretch's throat to prevent his swallowing, and one man stuck a finger on his tongue and rubbed the dose well over it.

"So! Now let him rise. Kick him up. So—now!"

He legged his horse up beside the prisoner, and watched him with blazing eyes.

"Thou hast thy salt. Now pay for it. Salt without water is payment for thy service in advance. There will be water when we reach the den of Gopi Lall."

The troopers mounted, and for two minutes sat in a half circle, watching the varying emotions play across their prisoner's face. Their own faces were immovable, like the masks of Fate. The prisoner looked at the trees above him, and the hills around, and at the ground between his feet. Then he began to swallow hard, and next his eyes fell on a little tinkling stream that ran winding fifty yards away. He made a dash to reach it, but a trooper spurred his horse, and a drawn saber flashed between him and the stream.

"There will be water—cool water—in the den of Gopi Lall!" said Dost Mohammed.

The man went on his knees, but no answer came from the troopers. They sat and waited for the quite inevitable. He threw his tied hands up in an attitude of piteous appeal; not daring to speak, for fear of getting more salt saliva down his throat. But the troopers waited.

"Lead us to Gopi Lall," said Dost Mohammed.

Another minute the prisoner sought for a way out. Then he surrendered. He came to Dost Mohammed's saddle bow, and waited to be lifted up, for he could not mount alone with his hands tied. A trooper reined in beside him and seized him under the arms and swung him up behind the officer. Then:

"Fours—right about! Trot! Canter!" ordered Dost Mohammed. Within fifteen minutes from the start they were back to where the Colonel waited.

But the punctured loin cloth was over the prisoner's head again, and nobody could see that the wretched man was undergoing torture.

"Why is he tied?" demanded Colonel Stapleton.

"He tried to escape, Huzoor."

"Oh. What did you discover?"

“He was acting fear, to throw us off the scent. To make us believe that we were nearing Gopi Lall’s headquarters, he pretended that he was more and more afraid. He will now show us the true road. Shall I lead on, Huzoor?”

So, extended to twenty horses’ lengths apart, the Regiment wheeled and rode back at a canter ten miles along the road by which they came. Then, at a sign from the hooded prisoner—he gave it with his leg, for he could neither move his hands nor speak—Dost Mohammed wheeled and swung uphill suddenly along a track that was cleverly concealed by scrub. No trumpet sounded; but at a sign from Colonel Stapleton the troops split up, and snooped in different directions to surround the knoll above the jungle to which the track quite evidently led. And one troop and Colonel Stapleton himself followed Dost Mohammed and his ten.

The track wound and twisted almost on itself, through blind, black jungle; it was so narrow that for nearly all the way they had to ride in single file. Half way up Dost Mohammed rode into a string stretched above the path. A blunderbuss fixed in a near-by tree burst the same instant; and although it burst from overloading, scattering the slugs and nails harmlessly, the noise it made would have been enough to alarm the Seven Sleepers.

“Ride!” roared Colonel Stapleton from behind. “Crack on the pace, Dost Mohammed!”

But the native officer had spurred and settled down to ride in deadly earnest even before the instant order came. With a crash that set the jungle thundering as if a herd of elephants were stampeding through it, the troop whirled on until it reached a clearing—checked for an instant—swung out into line—and swept forward at a gallop.

“Halt!” roared Stapleton.

Before them was a fort, or something like one, made only of thin mud walls and rough stones here and there, but pierced for rifle firing. There was no flag above it, and no sign to show whether those who held it were outlaws or peaceful citizens. Only a babel from the interior proved that panic reigned inside. A minute later crash after crash resounded from eight different directions, and from four ways at once troop after troop, torn and bleeding from the jungle thorns, broke out into the open. The fort was surrounded, and retreat cut off.

“Order them to bring out Gopi Lall.”

Dost Mohammed rode ahead, still with his prisoner up behind him, and engaged in altercation at the gate. A moment later the gate swung open, and a weird procession came out sheepishly—fifteen men, a dozen women, two children, and a skew-bald native pony, lame and saddle-galled.

“Line them up and look them over.”

There were no weapons in the whole procession, and there surely was no Gopi Lall. Dost Mohammed dropped his prisoner and let him drink deep at a spring that bubbled from the ground before the gate.

“What made that man so thirsty?” asked the Colonel.

“Fear, Huzoor.”

“Um-m-m!”

He stared very hard at Dost Mohammed for a minute, but the Rajput’s eyes did not so much as quiver.

“Well—we’re wasting time.”

He took a troop himself, and searched the whole fort thoroughly.

The troopers drove their lances or their saber points into every crack and cranny; they probed the stamped earth floor and prodded in among the beams and around the eaves. But there was neither sign of Gopi Lall nor hidden loot.

The prisoners admitted readily enough that the fort was Gopi Lall's headquarters, and that he had slept there overnight; but more than that they would not say. Two among them were the bandit's captives, held for ransom; but, with truly Eastern logic, they were the least communicative. They had had trouble enough, and did not intend to risk the outlaw's vengeance by betraying anything they knew.

There was scarcely any evidence there worth preserving, and no clue whatever to Gopi Lall's present whereabouts. A few old blunderbusses and some native swords were found in corners, but they showed no signs of recent use. The soldiers carried these into the open and stacked them and later made the prisoners carry them. But first the Colonel ordered fire set to the fort thatch.

"At least I'll spoil his rendezvous," he swore. "And if there's anything we didn't find there, he won't have the use of it."

When the flames had burst, and blazed, and werebeginning to die down again, he called his troop commanders to him.

"Now separate," he ordered. "Divide the whole country into sections, and scour it thoroughly. Don't leave a single nook or cranny or hut or hiding place unsearched. And don't trust to the police cordon to the north. In other words, don't dally. Ride him down. The brute was here last night, so he can't have got far. Overtake him.

"And, in case he doubles back, or hides in the jungle, keep on scouring the country until you get him. Take any food you want and give vouchers for it; I'll cash the vouchers back at Rajabatkhowa. Send in reports to me there."

There was no place for the Colonel of a regiment then except headquarters, with the gleeful men split up in detachments and no possibility of centralized control.

So, a little sadly, he took one half troop as an escort and for camp guard duty, rounded up his prisoners, and started back to where young Boileau was supposed to be concentrating all his powers on writing up the Regiment's "returns."

Chapter V

Boileau Runs a Risk.

Tales that were tenderly told,
Rumors of love for the bold
Deadlier dangerous, friend of mine,
Jokes men made as they passed the wine,
Sent him to spy on Yasmini.
Sleepless, unslaked desire,
Memory's maddening fire,
Deadly resolve to spy again.
Madness of moths was all his gain

That, and no more, from Yasmini.

THE fireflies danced like a myriad fairy lights; the jungle beside them whispered weird night sounds through the steaming dark, and their footfalls on the rotted leaves were like the creeping of conspirators, as Boileau and his servant took the ax-cleared, winding path that led to Yasmini's. The servant went ahead, swinging the lantern to betray the tree roots.

Boileau, a dozen yards behind, felt guilty; and the sense of guilt brought him a thrill he had not experienced since Aurang Zeb, his charger, ran away with him and brought up all standing on the railway line in front of the Bombay Mail Express. He knew too much of Indian caste and custom to expect to be received, even where the men of his own troop might lounge; but he vaguely guessed that Yasmini and Adventure and himself were all three mates that night.

Abdullah, grinning, set the lantern down on the courtyard tiles and went to scrabbling with his fingers on a narrow door. It was newer than the carved stone niche it fitted, and looked like one of Yasmini's pre- cautions, for it was strongly reinforced with bars of iron and big, flat-headed nails. No more than one man could have entered through it at a time. Soon Abdullah started whispering, and Boileau—with a strange impatience in his veins, and a stranger sense of standing on the edge of every thing—looked up and watched the shadows flitting by the window. There seemed to be excitement up above, if nothing else.

"What's happening, Abdullah?" he asked, after many minutes of hissed argument through a little hole that opened in the panel. The hole was not square; no lance could have been thrust through it, and its outer end was too small for an eye to look through it over a pistol barrel. It closed, like a bunghole, with a peg.

"Patience a little, sahib. She is considering."

"Is that the famous Yasmini beyond that hole?"

"Nay, sahib, but her maid. She went once and returned again, and now she is gone for the second time."

"What's all the trouble?"

"No trouble, sahib. Yasmini would know."

"Know what?"

"Whether she confers an honor or receives one."

"'Pon my soul, I'd give a month's income to know the same thing!" laughed Boileau to himself. And then the door opened grudgingly and Abdullah beckoned to him and bowed him through, and squatted on the step outside with the dog- like patience of the Indian native servant.

Inside were darkness, and the smell of musk—black darkness, made blacker yet by a curtain at the stair head. Some one whom he could not see replaced the peg in the peephole; and an unseen soft hand that trembled at his touch but did not draw away, took his.

"Lead on, McDuff!" said Boileau, throwing off his sense of helplessness, and kicking out to find the bottom step. But his dress spur caught in gauzy drapery and something ripped. He stood on one leg, and tried to free himself, but the wearer of the gauze pulled, too, to free it. He felt his balance going and kicked out again, and fell. A second later he was struggling on the ground with a

giggling woman, laughing from sheer appreciation of the unforeseen, but expecting every second to feel a long knife in his ribs.

Then before he could regain his feet the curtain parted at the stair top and a radiance appeared in the middle of it—Yasmini herself. There was no doubt—she must be Yasmini. He had thought of her as black, or dull olive color at the best. He saw an ivory and old rose tinted damsel, who might or might not be twenty years of age. He had thought of black hair, drawn back in straight lined waves. He saw a mass of burnished copper-gold, that fell in curling cataracts from crown to knees. He had thought of thin, cruel lips, dyed blue perhaps, and even of a nose ring. What he saw were features that would be May-crowned in the West, and lips—-red lips, uncarmined; lips that a shaven anchorite would have fought half the world to kiss.

She stood forward on the step and smiled down at him, framed in an aura of gold light between black curtains. He could see her feet, pale pink and ivory, encased in gilded slippers. Above them, some pale-blue filmy stuff encircled her as mist enfolds the morning, hinting at loveliness and making it far lovelier—by concealment. He could neither speak nor laugh now, nor find his feet. He lay spellbound, looking upward at her, until his eyes met hers. And he had thought of almond eyes, brown or perhaps hazel!

No man that ever lived could tell the secret of the color of her eyes. Few dared look into them longer than to bear away a memory of smoldering loveliness—of molten jewels, lovelit under drooping lids. But Boileau was a man whose every breath of life was daring, and he stared—and stared—and forgot the power of speech.

Yasmini spoke first and what she said, in a velvet voice that sounded vaguely like the love call of a nightingale, was in a language Boileau did not understand. But the maid understood it and found her feet at once; and Boileau guessed. However purred, through lips however sweet, the tongues of the ancient East are apt at framing comment on such matters as a man and a maiden in the dark.

“What did she say?” asked Boileau, feeling the blushes rise from somewhere down his neck and race beneath his hair until his ears glowed crimson. But the girl only giggled and pushed him toward the stairs.

So up went Boileau, swaggering to get his self-possession back, letting his spurs clank handsomely and twirling at his waxed mustache. And Yasmini made way for him, bowing before him mockingly—half, he suspected, to let him realize her supple grace, and half because she really was amused. Eight maids—all dark- skinned contrasts to the queen of this strange jungle bower—attended her, and seemed to know her thoughts. They piled the cushions high on a long, low divan by the window, and motioned Boileau to it; and, feeling like an idiot, he sat on it, and sank deep down among the soft embroidery. It was impossible to sit; he sprawled, and felt more like an idiot than ever.

But Yasmini herself came over and sat near him on a pile of cushions, pushing out one slippered foot so that he could see the greenish veins under the transparent skin. And he began to forget his awkwardness in amazed contemplation of what the curtained East could lay bare when it chose.

A maid extinguished most of the lamps, and left only half a dozen hanging, jeweled lights that glowed mysteriously, multicolored, through faint blue sandal smoke. Two maids sat near her. One fanned her, for the heat was stifling; one

watched. Another maid bent over the divan and wafted air at Boileau with a fan of peacock feathers. Yasmini, showing little even pearls of teeth, smiled like the soul of early morning, leaned on her elbow and began to talk.

She spoke now in Hindustani, which Boileau understood. For all its other qualities that is a language that can sound, and be, like honey on the lips of loveliness.

"What ails my lord?"

She purred it, as though it were an overture to love itself.

"Nothing ails me. I think I am singularly favored."

"You seem displeased. Is aught lacking?"

"Miss Yasmini, I think there is nothing lacking when you are at hand!"

He could not for the life of him bring himself to call her Yasmini without some prefix. It sounded ridiculous, but he, too, felt ridiculous—until he looked into her eyes again. Then he forgot himself and everything except her eyes.

"My lord is pleased to joke with me?"

"'Pon my soul!"

English was the only tongue that suited his dilemma. With her eyes on him, he could not think unless he thought aloud, and he had a foolish notion that if his thoughts were in English she might not understand.

"Does anybody ever joke with you?" he asked in Hindustani.

Her eyes changed—not in color, but as if the light behind them glowed a little more.

"Not often. One did—once. My lord has not yet deigned to tell the cause of the honor that he pays me."

That was a stumper. She waited for his answer as a suppliant waits, pillowed at his feet and looking up at him. There was not a hint of laughter in her eyes, nor the vaguest, least suggestion that she thought him an intruder or a boor, or anything except what he had thought himself an hour ago—a spurred and righteous lord of what he looked at.

"I had heard of you, that's all."

"And came to see me? Why? Why at this hour?"

"'Pon my soul, I—"

"To laugh at me?"

"On my honor, no!"

"To order me away?"

She looked at his spurs and at his military mess jacket; and if she were not afraid she gave a very good imitation of concern.

"I don't suppose there's a man living who would order you away from anywhere!"

"Then I have leave to stay on here?"

"So far as I can give it you have leave to stay here till the crack of doom. I'd hate to see you go. I want to see a lot more of you. I—"

He cursed the unresisting pillows that prevented him from sitting upright. No white man—least of all a soldier—can collect his wits and fence with words reclining in a nest of scented clouds. Besides, a soldier's garments are not made for it; he looks ridiculous.

"Then why at this hour, Heavenborn?"

The last thing that Boileau had expected was to be snubbed for breach of etiquette.

“It isn’t so late as all that, is it?” he stammered awkwardly. He felt for his watch, but had none. He did not want to go, but for the life of him he could think of no excuse for staying. And Yasmini continued to look up at him like a little girl suppliant, awaiting explanations.

“Why—ah—” he twirled at his mustache and tried to seem at ease—“I was busy all day long and—ah—my native servant said—”

“What did he say?”

“Said that he knew the way here and that you might receive me—said he wasn’t sure, but he thought you might.”

“And is that your servant—he who sits below there at the door?”

There was a world of wonder in her voice, and she watched him now through eyelids almost closed; he could no longer see the pools of fire that glowed behind them.

“Yes.”

“Then the way of the sahib log is to ask questions of their-low caste servants—” she shuddered, but even that movement was all suppleness and grace “and to follow their advice in matters pertaining to their visits?”

“Abdullah isn’t a low caste man. He’s—”

“No?”

Boileau remembered then that there are castes within castes, and that even Mohammedans are not without a caste law of their own, so he said nothing.

“And that man—that creature of the devil—said that I would receive you? No wonder that you came! Will the Heavenborn partake of sherbet?”

“No thanks,” said Boileau. “I’m sorry you’ve gathered such a false impression. I—ah—wouldn’t have offended you for worlds—ah—I’ll take my leave now and ah—call—again, perhaps to-morrow, at a more reasonable hour. Didn’t want to meet my own troopers here, you know,” he added, as an afterthought, by way of mild retaliation.

“Have your troopers, too, said strange things of me?”

“Not to me, at all events. We—ah don’t discuss—ah—ladies.”

Yasmini smiled, and he might take her smile to mean exactly what he chose. He rose, and she rose languidly, taking her maid’s hand. She might have been smiling at his tight-kneed effort to escape with dignity from the embracing divan. Whatever the cause of it, her smile bewildered him exactly as his first sight of her had done, and he could not find words as she bowed in front of him, with the same mock worship, and the same lithe grace and led him to the stair.

He went down the stair feeling like an idiot—glad of the darkness—going sidewise to prevent his spurs from catching in the carpet; but in spite of it his spurs did catch and he fell down nearly to the bottom. And his feelings were still further tortured by the sound of peal on peal of tinkling, silvery laughter from the room above, that started immediately the maid opened the narrow door for him. A chorus of laughter from the maids was the last sound that he heard as the door slammed tight behind him.

He walked back like a man in a stupor, stumbling once or twice in spite of Abdullah’s care to hold the lamp over each protruding tree root. He could see Yasmini’s eyes in the dark, but every time he tried to gaze at them, they moved and when he tried to follow them they moved again.

“I’ve not been drinking,” he muttered to himself. “It must be liver. Yes, it’s liver. But ye gods and little fishes, what a woman!”

“Been trying to get cool, Boileau?” said a voice, as he passed down the lines to his own quarters, and he nearly jumped. It was only by a miracle that he recalled his nerve in time. He turned into the tent whence the voice came, and saw his Colonel sitting in a camp chair smoking.

“Didn’t expect you back so soon, sir. Any luck with Gopi Lall?”

“No. Found his nest. Got him on the run, that’s all. The troops are after him. Any cooler out in the jungle there?”

Boileau laughed. “I got a cool reception, sir,” he answered. “I called on Yasmini.”

“The very deuce you did! What’s she like?”

“She’s a wonder, sir. Couldn’t describe her—no man living could.”

“Beautiful?”

“Have to find a new word, sir.”

“Gave you a cool reception did she? I wonder she admitted you. Did you get the least idea as to why she’s here?”

“None whatever.”

“Is she—ah—I mean—what about her morals?”

“Judging by the way she treated me, sir, I would say she was—”

“Well, what?”

“That she belies her reputation. She’s a native, of course, and there’s no means of judging them, any more than a man can tell how the stories about her started. But she’s chaperoned more thoroughly than a seventeen year old débutante at home, and she’s as dignified—for all her witchery—as the deuce himself.”

“Um-m-m! I’d keep away if I were you. I’m not giving orders, but—well—it’s good advice. If trouble came of it—she’s a native woman, mind—you’d run the risk of being neither officer nor gentleman. A deuce of a nasty risk to run! Turning in? Good night.”

Chapter VI

Dost Mohammed Goes on a Still Hunt.

Who sees all that a robber sees—hears what a robber hears—
Learns the lore that a robber knows—
Treads where his trail to hiding goes—
Feels what a robber fears?
None save he who dons his garb, acts as the robber’s mate—
Runs as the robber runs from men
Begs of the other robbers—then
Kicks, too, the robber’s fate.

ALL that the Tail-Twisters, working troop by troop, unearthed was evidence of police complicity and supineness. They found misguided natives who mistook them for policemen, thinking that anything in uniform was some sort of a “constabeel,” and from these they learnt surprising things; as, for instance, that the flood levy had been paid that month to Gopi Lall, and therefore the police would find themselves in trouble if they trespassed.

At first there would be disillusionment, for a trooper of the Bengal Horse is not exactly flattered by being likened to a civilian, and to a policeman least of all. The butt of a lance thrust with an oath of explanation at the erring rustic's stomach would bring acknowledgment of error. But once it was known that they were troops, and not police, the channels of information dried, so after awhile they pretended to be a new brand of "constabeel" whenever the pretense was possible.

From time to time they came on villagers who offered them rupees; and he who has tried to tip a Bengal cavalryman for service rendered may have a good idea of what reception that met. They will loot, those fierce, black-bearded troopers, in time of war—none more readily or thoroughly; but gratuities, in money or in kind, are rather more to be withheld than verbal insult. Their pride is not of the made-for-show description.

Whether hunting through the tangled thickets where thatched huts were hidden in tiny clearings, or scouring on a chance-encountered trail from village to hill village, they found evidence in plenty of the outlaw's doings and of the terror he had established, but never a sign of Gopi Lall himself.

"Where is his woman?" demanded Dost Mohammed twenty times a day at least. And the answer was always the same—often in the same words:

"Huzoor, what woman dare refuse him?"

"Which woman loves him most?"

"None love him. All fear him!"

"Which, then, does he most love?"

"Huzoor, does a he wolf love the sambur? Does a tiger love the village buffalo?"

Then, "May Allah rip the vitals out of every Jungli in Bengal!" Dost Mohammed would swear, and spur his charger on to the next village.

Cross quartering the country they searched, as eagles search, minutely, for signs of any guard that might betray the whereabouts of the robber's hidden loot; but either he had trusted nobody to guard or else the men he trusted were too shrewd to show that they were watching.

They made prisoners who led them along half hidden trails to where the outlaw once had been; and once thus guided they discovered underneath a waterfall a secret cave, where possibly his loot had once been hidden. There was one rupee there, fallen in a crack between the rocks; a trooper forced it out with his saber point. But there was neither other loot than that one coin there, nor track of Gopi Lall.

Once they fell in with a posse of police, who grinned at them and asked what they had done with the outlaw's head. That nearly brought about a fracas, and it was only the timely arrival of their English officers that stopped them from teaching the "constabeels" how a charger-and-Rajput-driven lance point feels. The police, under questioning from the officers, swore that Gopi Lall had left the country and would not return.

They began almost to believe that Gopi Lall had been a myth, and several officers became converts to the theory that he was in reality a syndicate of robbers, who had taken one collective name for the sake of mystery and convenience. Acting on that suggestion they began the search all over again, rounding up the inhabitants of every village and making the headmen give an account of each. But still there was no result worth mentioning. They

succeeded in corroborating the fact of an actual, single, Gopi Lall's existence, but nothing more.

Then Dost Mohammed became possessed of an idea, and asked for leave to hunt alone.

"Why, Dost Mohammed?"

The senior Major lacked not a little of the Colonel's tact. "For the reward?"

The Rajput flushed under his dark skin. "Because thus I will hunt better, sahib."

The Major pulled out a copy of the printed proclamation from his saddle bag and looked it over.

"The reward is offered to any person or persons who procure or bring such information as shall lead to the arrest and conviction of the outlaw known as Gopi Lall.' That means, Dost Mohammed, that the first man to hand in the information gets the money."

Dost Mohammed sat his horse in silence, glaring.

"It says, too, at the bottom, 'in addition to the above named reward for information, a sum of rupees three thousand will be paid to whomsoever shall produce the head or body or both of the above named Gopi Lall.' That would be five thousand rupees all told—nothing much to divide among a Regiment, but a tidy little sum for any one man; what?

"Since when, sahib, has an officer of this Regiment been subject to suspicion such as recruits for the Regulars merit?"

"You say you have a private clue. If you followed it and found the man you would be within your rights if you claimed the whole reward."

"I said nothing of a private clue, sahib, nor of a clue at all, nor of my rights. I said that I had an idea, and a good one, that I could best carry out alone. All the rights I claim are the right to be treated as a man of honor. As for the reward—"

He leaned slightly from the saddle and spat, with a gesture that was eloquent.

"Then if I let you go alone, you'll only claim one share in any case?"

"You had no need to ask, sahib. I will neither claim nor accept one copper piece of the reward!"

"I have to consider the Regiment, Dost Mohammed."

"And I, sahib, who have served her Majesty but twenty years as yet, thought naturally only of the money! Have I your leave to go?"

"Look here, Dost Mohammed, I had no intention of offering you an insult, and you know it. You've no right to take my remarks that way. You're hovering dangerously near a breach of discipline."

The native officer saluted and sat still.

"D'you understand that I was taking an ordinary elementary precaution on the other men's behalf?"

"I understand, sahib, that you misunderstood me."

"And you me. Very well then."

The Mohammedan did not answer, but he did not have either the air of a man who had not understood his superior officer.

"You'd better tell me what this plan of yours is."

"Sahib, you would only laugh at me."

"I give you my word of honor I will not."

"Neither will you agree, sahib, if I tell you."

"You want me to take both you and your plan on trust, eh? Very well. I'll prove my faith in you. You have leave. Now, tell me."

"I will be Gopi Lall."

"You!"

"I, sahib."

"How—why—what the—?"

"Sahib, on this countryside there are dozens—there must be—who are his friends; who know which way he would run; probably who know which way he did run—who advised him or would advise him—"

"But man alive! Dost Mohammed! You don't look in the least like Gopi Lall. You couldn't make yourself look like him even if you plucked one eye out."

"And sahib, would Gopi Lall—with a hue and cry behind—travel undisguised? His ugliness is a byword even where he is not known. Men know that he has but one eye and tangled hair that never knew the comb, and lips that are like sun- cracked pollution. Would he journey with his name and number on his face for all the world to see, as a trooper wears his crest?"

"But—what language does he speak?"

"From choice? Bengali."

"And you?"

"I speak it too, as well as he."

"It's a deuce of a risky sort of plan, Dost Mohammed!"

"The risk is mine, sahib."

"I hardly know what to say. You see, you're an officer; it seems hardly the proper work for a commissioned man. It 'ud hardly be creditable to the Regiment if you got knifed or shot or run through by one of our own men while disguised as a murdering thief."

"Will it be a credit to the Regiment, sahib, to go back to the lines without his head; to do no better than the rascally police; to have even the little children ask us where are the soldiers, since the Bengal Horse became constabeels?"

"Why not let a trooper try it?"

"Because I already have permission, sahib!"

"True. You hold me to my word? Very well. Go then, and good luck to you. But for the love of goodness be careful, Dost Mohammed."

"Sahib, I will be careful at least to live until I track down Gopi Lall."

Chapter VII

Boileau Calls Again.

When lovely woman stoops to scorn,
Know this at least—the truth lies bare.
But when soft-murmured words entrance,
When sweet persuasive dimples dance,
When eyes allure, and smiles adorn,
Beware!

NOW, Captain Fitzherbert Cholmondeley Boileau was something of a devil of a man. There was no mistake about that, and nobody doubted it, least of all

himself.He deliberately cultivated the impression. There was nothing really vicious, of course, in his whole makeup or he could neither have come by a commission in the Tail-Twisters, nor, once in the Regiment, have retained it. But he liked to be considered daring, and he was always on the lookout for an opportunity.

The blood that ran in his veins was the same sort that makes a brave and efficient officer of ordinary clay in any country; but in his case it ran rather more racily than usual, and the thought of danger to be courted, and above all of a dangerous woman to be courted, was like ozone to his nostrils.

Yasmini was dangerous. He had been warned against her by more than one native, by his brother officers on various occasions, and by his Colonel. And Yasmini had snubbed him and laughed at him. Therefore—the corollary was obvious—he and Yasmini were destined to cross foils at least once again.

The clerical work of the Regiment grew no less irksome to him as the sultry days wore on, and now that the Colonel had come back, and there was little chance of his getting a ride with the Regiment in any case, his ambition to get the red tape business over and done with died down in him. And he recalled most distinctly how the Colonel had been careful to advise, and not to order, him with reference to Yasmini.

It took him next to no time to make up his mind. On the third afternoon following his evening adventure at the Panch Mahal he got into civilian clothes and set off to Yasmini's strange jungle nest, this time unaccompanied.

She received him on this occasion without keeping him waiting, and with no exhibition of surprise. She seemed almost to have expected him. Evidently he had been seen approaching, for he had not stood for one minute before the little iron-studded door before the same maid that had admitted him the last time swung it open for him again, and smiled a welcome.

Yasmini came as before to the head of the narrow stair to meet him, and bowed again low to him as if he were the lord of all the East and she his handmaiden. But wonder of wonders in the East!—she provided a European chair, on which he could sit, and even cross his knees, with dignity.

When he came before, she had deliberately tried to make him ill at ease by studied mockery. Now, though, she did exactly the opposite. Without asking him, she sent for sherbet, took the scented, colored stuff from the maid who brought it, and gave it to him with her own little jeweled hands. He drank it from pure politeness and wished immediately that he hadn't; but she betrayed no amusement at his efforts to straighten out his face and seem appreciative.

She was neither amused, nor yet suppliant. Her raiment was the same—as gorgeous and as wonderful—though slightly modified in color in artful regard to the altered light. It was she who had changed. She wore a look and manner of artless, ingenuous camaraderie.

"I want you to come here often," she smiled at him, standing before him for a minute, then subsiding with amazing grace among the billowy cushions by the window. He saw no waiting maids in evidence; but he did see that a curtain to her right moved gently, and he guessed that they were neither unseen nor unheard.

"That's awfully good of you, I'm sure." He would have liked to kick himself the moment he had said it; but with her eyes on him, even when in her present mood, he could voice nothing but mechanically ready platitudes. Yet he was the

Tail-Twisters' one expert in the game of flirting, just as he was their only Adonis, and the only white-skinned wrestler in the Regiment.

He was no one-sided, overbalanced ladies' man, but an all around soldier, with sporting instincts, ready wit, and steel wire nerve. But Yasmini—perhaps a hundred pounds of her—could hold him at her mercy! He did not understand the circumstance. On his way to her he had walked with the gait and buoyancy of youth in search of fresh adventure. In her presence he could only sit and let his ears grow red and finger his mustache.

"Are there no other officers whom you could bring with you?" she purred.

That, for the moment, brought him to his senses.

"No. Thank goodness, there are not. I'm full of the idea of enjoying your acquaintance all to myself for the next day or two."

She smiled, and drooped her eyelids. Suddenly she clapped her hands and called for cigarettes. When the maid brought them she lit one, and ordered the rest set down between herself and Boileau.

"Are you then all alone?" she asked.

"No. There's the Colonel sahib."

"And he? Could he not come?"

"He could. He might. But why? Why ask him? Won't I do?"

"You? You are only one—and young and—"

She blew great rings of cigarette smoke and if she finished the sentence Boileau, at all events did not catch the words.

"And the Colonel sahib," he aswered, "is old—and stiff mannered—and pompous—and—"

"The others?"

"Won't be back for days, most likely. There's no knowing when. They're after Gopi Lall."

She reminded him of a snake the second he said that, though he could not have told why. There was nothing snake-like in her attitude, nor in her eyes; they glowed. He thought it must be something passing in her mind that reached him telepathically. After a few years in the East even the most materialistic, incredulous of men come to believe implicitly in things that savants of the West call foolishness.

"And where do they look for Gopi Lall?"

"Everywhere."

"How?"

"Oh, by quartering the country and asking questions, and keeping a bright lookout."

"And, should they fail to find him—?"

"They won't fail."

Now, she really did seem amused, and made no effort to conceal it.

"Will they find him because the men who look for him are mostly Rajputs, or because their officers are English?"

"For both reasons, I expect. But, tell me, why do you want all the other officers to call on you?"

Her eyes changed again, and the momentary display of amusement left her. Now it was a look of almost business acumen that stole across her face; she was a partner all at once, exchanging confidences.

“Because—because people in these parts, strangers to me, who know nothing of me and of whom I know nothing, have been saying things that they have no right to say.”

“What sort of things?”

“Bad things. That I plot against the government.”

Boileau whistled.

“I hadn’t heard of it.”

“And if the officers of your famous Regiment should visit me from time to time, and see what passes here, and know what company I keep, whom I receive, of what they speak, then—then men will still talk, for no woman’s tongue is the equal of a man’s at slandering! But they will talk to little purpose.”

“What harm could that kind of gossip do to you in any case?”

“Much harm. I want to stay here. I choose to stay here. I like this place.”

She was almost vehement.

“But none can buy this house or the ground it stands on, since it has no owner. What, then, could I do were the police to come and order me away? Could I argue with them, or have I friends more powerful—yet? But if your officers should come, and come often, then the police would not dare interfere with an honored friend of theirs.”

“Well, since you put it that way—mind you, I think you’re needlessly alarmed—I’ll ask Colonel Stapleton sahib to call on you.”

“Will you? Please!”

“I suppose that means I sha’n’t get another opportunity of seeing you alone?”

He was recovering his nerve, now that she betrayed symptoms of not being quite at ease herself.

“We are not alone.”

He eyed the curtain, that still moved gently from time to time.

“No? But—the maids are yours—an order—”

She raised her eyebrows very slightly, but enough to warn Boileau that he was what he would have called “running wide.”

“Do your memsahibs receive our native gentlemen alone?” And that was an argument that was unanswerable.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I ever saw,’ he said quite truthfully, but with a soldier’s motive. He had of course the cavalryman’s ingrained belief in flank tactics.

“Yes?”

She seemed scarcely interested.

“That is why you called a second time?”

“That is why I want to see you alone—why I don’t want to bring the Colonel sahib or the others.”

“You need not bring the others—”

He started almost to his feet.

“You could send them, one by one or two by two, whichever would be better, and come yourself some other time.”

“Some evening? I am busy in the daytime.”

“Some other time. You will be welcome. You will all be welcome.”

She was eying him very narrowly now, and he was conscious of it. He knew perfectly well, too, that she was fencing with some definite end in view, quite different from the one she had professed. It needed little knowledge of the East to divine that much. Nothing in the East is ever done directly, least of all love

making. Boileau remembered, then, that he was a very handsome man; and next, he realized again that she was eying him through lowered lids. With a flash of intuition it occurred to him that one English officer on the calling list of a native lady would be likely to cause scandal, whereas the better part of a dozen, calling constantly, would silence it. The rest would be a most effective blind. The one would—

"I begin to understand," he said, working away at his mustache.

She smiled at him bewitchingly, and he felt the blood go mounting to his temples. But he could not guess whether she was laughing at him, or was in love with him, or was approving his ready recognition of her subtlety.

"Then bring the Colonel sahib as a beginning," she said, nodding sagely. "Later, when the others come from seeking Gopi Lall, send them here also."

"Send the Colonel sahib now, you mean to-day?"

"Why not to-day? Will the sudden summons disconcert him?"

Boileau laughed aloud at the idea of anything—of even a woman, however lovely—disconcerting Colonel Stapleton; he knew his Colonel from experience as being a man with a polite speech and a precept and a plan for every possible occasion.

"Is he very fierce? Is he unmannerly? I have seen him from a distance; his mustaches go like this."

She imitated, very prettily, the motions of a military gentleman attending to the dressing of his upper lip.

"You'll find him courtlier than even your own native Princes when they come to ask favors of our Viceroy."

"Then bring him. Send him."

"Very well. But, Yasmini—"

"My lord?"

"Don't, for the love of goodness, make eyes at him. He'd get young again! We all want him to grow old; he's standing in the way of promotion."

"I? I make eyes at him?"

She bowed him out with a dignity that somewhat undermined his growing sense of intimacy. But she smiled at him again as he started down the stairs.

Chapter VIII

„Gopi Lall".

When scent is stale, when down the vale
The pack is cast, and cast in vain,
'Tis then the younger hounds give tongue,
But old hounds find the scent again.

FEW natives of the North of India would find it difficult to change their appearance, so far as their heads are concerned. Under their turbans they wear long black hair, that can be twisted and tangled into knots or let fall disheveled. It took Dost Mohammed less than half a minute to make himself look like a devil, or a fakir—which is much the same thing—or anything he chose to call

himself, except a soldier. He made the change, though, well out of eyesight of the Regiment, for his own pride's sake.

A patch over one eye was easily arranged, and a cloth wrapped round his mouth prevented anyone from knowing whether or not his lips were horrible. But his clothing was a different matter. So was his horse.

Two things were certain. Gopi Lall had not taken with him, and could not have obtained, a charger such as Dost Mahommed's; and Dost Mohammed would not think of starting on any kind of hunt without his horse.

The problem would have beaten any ordinary man. He did not dare, for instance, to borrow clothing from a villager, or to take it by main force, for news of such extraordinary conduct would have spread like wildfire, and if Gopi Lall should happen to be hiding anywhere within a radius of forty miles he would know within a day or less that an officer was after him disguised. Dost Mohammed had to find another way than that.

First, he let the troop ride out of sight of him. Then he picketed his horse in a hollow down among some trees, where he could not be overlooked. Nobody had troubled to ask him why he kept back a live goat from the tiny flock the Regiment had bought for sustenance, but now he proceeded to kill the beast, slicing off its head with one clean blow of his saber. Next he removed his stirrup irons and smeared them thoroughly with blood, and put more blood on the horse's withers and on his mane. Then he smeared plenty of the blood about himself, and eyed the whole result.

It was good. Anyone might reasonably think that he had slain the horse's rider and ridden off on him. He stripped off his uniform and cached it together with his scabbard; but the saber itself he kept, smearing it with blood and holding it naked in his hand.

After a cautious look around him, he mounted and spurred out of the hollow at a gallop, careering like a man possessed, and giving a good imitation of a rider frightened of his horse, or not at ease on him.

He drew the horse up on his haunches at the first hut he came to, left him standing, and sprang like a lunatic, bare legged and blood-smeared, to the hut door, which he proceeded to hammer with his saber hilt until the frightened owner came. The man was speechless from sheer amazement—Dost Mohammed speechless for reasons of his own. Instead of speaking, he began to tear the loin cloth from the man's middle, hitting him a smart rap on the head with the saber hilt when he resisted. He had donned the loin cloth, leaped on his horse again, and ridden off before the man had time to more than realize that he had been attacked. Dost Mohammed left in the opposite direction to that his troop had taken, with the certainty in his mind that whether Gopi Lall were in the neighborhood or not the rumor of his being there would scatter broadcast within an hour.

He rode, now, to another hollow, and hid there until evening, with the double purpose of giving the rumor time to percolate, and the darkness a chance to hide what was probably a very poor resemblance to the robber. In the dark, with the story of his coming on ahead of him, he anticipated little or no risk of detection.

When the low moon rose above the tree tops and the jungle noises had begun to greet the night, he rode out again, but this time far more leisurely, taking little care to look about him, but keeping his ears open for the sound of forage parties from his own Regiment. Before he had ridden twenty minutes at a walk,

a woman slipped out of the scrub beside him and brought him a cooked chicken, with the whispered information that the troopers were in camp for the night, many miles away.

He seized the chicken, broke off a leg, and devoured it hungrily.

"Where is she?" he demanded, taking care to growl surlily from behind his mouth cloth, and looking anywhere but at her.

"She waits at home."

That was enough for the first try. This woman evidently knew Gopi Lall, and might possibly detect the disguise; but he had established one fact. There really was a particular one woman.

"So-ho!" thought Dost Mohammed. He drove his spurs in and decamped, cantering away without a word of thanks. He ran no risk in assuming that the real outlaw was a mighty ungrateful gentleman.

But "at home" was a vague direction, and soon he began almost to despair of ever getting nearer to the mark. No more women came to him surreptitiously, and the few shadowy forms he did see vanished the moment that he challenged them. He chased one man for nearly a quarter of a mile, only to lose him in the darkness—a piece of clumsiness for which he cursed himself soundly. Gopi Lall had a reputation for absolutely never missing anything or anybody, and, if he wanted to live on the outlaw's record for a while, it seemed he would have to be less punctilious.

He had determined to ride down and run through the next man who failed to halt when challenged, instead of trying to capture him; but the next man seemed to guess his thougths, and threw up his hands, and went down on his knees, begging for mercy.

"Where is she I seek?" growled Dost Mohammed.

"Sahib—Heavenborn—Prince of dacoits—how should I know?"

"Answer, or—"

"Honorable one! Mercy! What have I done? What have I not done? I saw her but an hour ago, and she was yet there. But how do I know that she is there now?"

"Thou liest!"

"Nay, nay, Heavenborn! Tiger of the hills! How should I lie, who truly fear thee? I say I saw her—I say truth."

"I say thou liest!"

"If I lie, oh Gopi Lall—"

It was well! The disguise had worked so far at all events, and the rumor had spread, and there really was a woman!

"Harken! It is not my view to let men lie to me unpunished. Lead on! In case she be not there, pray to thy gods on the way thither, Jungli!"

"But, Heavenborn, I was going home—but a little way from here—my children wait—my little ones—my—"

"Lead on!"

"But, Prince of plunderers, let me go just one little minute to my home. I would warn my children; then I will go with thee willingly."

The saber whistled round the wretch's head, close enough to have shaved him had his beard been two days older. No Gopi Lall, nor any other expert, could have performed that feat better. The man's complaints came to a sudden end. He turned and settled down to run in front of the horse.

Under the cloth that hid his mouth, Dost Mohammed chuckled to himself; but he rode carefully, with his saber pointing downward to the peasant's back and with his ears and eyes on the alert. Three times they passed other men walking homeward, and because he did not challenge them, they made profound obeisance instead of running. One man even lay face downward on the path and beat the earth with flattened hands.

"The Colonel sahib was right," swore Dost Mohammed. "Too much honor is not good! As a soldier and a man of honor no man ever treated me to this."

For the best part of an hour they moved into the darkness as fast as the frightened peasant could run, Dost Mohammed noting his bearing carefully with the aid of the compass that every true fighting man should carry in his head. They were moving in a direction at right angles to that the extended troops had taken; before long, he calculated, he would cross a line between the Tail- Twisters and their quarters at Rajahbatkhowa.

They reached a clearing in the jungle, and there Dost Mahommed chose to stop and feed his horse.

"But, Heavenborn, why do this here? With but a quarter of a coss to go, and safety there, why wait?"

"An excellent reason!" thought Dost Mohammed. "Allah knows what will happen when I get there! Chup!" he growled aloud.

"The Heavenborn knows best."

"Chup! I ordered. Black earthworm!"

Twenty minutes later they went on again, and in less than five minutes after that they emerged into another clearing where a hut loomed darkly in the misty moonlight.

"There, Prince of plunderers! Said I not so? She waits!"

"Then go thy way and thank thy jungle gods!"

The man was gone more quickly than a frightened jackal; he turned, tucked his head down, and was gone. Dost Mohammed, with the cloth about his face drawn even higher yet, rode on.

"Oh, Gopi Lall?" It was not a soft voice.

"Quietly!" growled the Rajput.

He dismounted by a low fence, and stood waiting on the near side of his horse, fumbling with the stirrup.

"There are none here who listen. Thou mayest trust me! The troops—may Allah whelm them—are miles away. Oh, Gopi Lall, thou greatest fool of fools! You trust that woman, who is naught but a tigress and an enemy, while I, who truly love thee, wait alone. Come—eat, beloved."

"How knowest thou where I have been?" He answered huskily, and stood behind the horse where the moonlight could not fall on him.

"They have harmed thee? What is that? Thy throat? My Prince of—"

"Silence! The hurt is nothing. I asked, how knowest thou where I have been?"

"How! Hear him! Who sent thee all those mes- sages? Who waits for thee always? Who but Yasmini? Sahib—Heavenborn—my lord! Trust not that tigress instead of me! She will slay thee in the dark, or hand thee over. She is thine enemy—naught else!"

Dost Mohammed, wondering what the real outlaw would have done if given such advice, took a chance and laughed. It seemed he had guessed right, for the woman behaved as if she quite expected it.

“Aye, laugh! Laugh on! Did she laugh, think you, when you slew her lover? Think you she forgot? Think you she came here from the distant North to sing you love songs? Bah! Thou art a madman, Gopi Lall! Thy head is turned by flattery. When did I ever flatter thee? Therefore, I who love thee wait alone, while she, who lies and lies and lies again, gets thee ever tighter in her clutches! Thou fool of fools!”

But Dost Mohammed knew enough. His thoughts came quick as lightning. The Regiment was twenty miles away, and in the wrong direction. To Rajahbatkhowa was roughly forty miles, and his charger was fresh enough to make the distance; for all his height the Rajput was a lightweight, and he could ride as only a born horseman of the North can. He was mounted and away, and thanking God that he had fed his horse, before the woman knew that he was starting; and a minute later he was down tight in the saddle, headed straight for the mess tent where his Colonel ought to be.

Ten minutes after he had gone, a dozen troopers burst in from the jungle and made the woman prisoner. They had with them the trembling peasant who had served as guide for Dost Mohammed.

“Where is thy man, Gopi Lall?” they demanded. But they might as well have asked the dead. Now the woman understood why he had galloped off without a word, and more than ever she idolized her robber lord, who could hear and see with his one eye so infinitely better than the eagles! She only prayed that he had not ridden off to Yasmini.

They questioned and cross questioned her for fifteen minutes, and threatened her with coarse military-Rajput oaths; but all her answers were denials.

“Good for thee,” said a Rissaldar at last, turning to the trembling guide, “that we found thee on our way to camp, and not twenty miles from here! We would have hanged thee else. Go!”

And with that they booted him and spurred him and lance-pummeled him and chased him to the roadway.

Chapter IX

The Panch Mahal’s Back Door.

The trumpet sends men roaring on to death;
The cold gray dawn sees strong men grim and white;
Fire, water, and the devastating breath
Of pestilence breed panic’s fright.
But, death in darkness—lurking, sheenless steel
The grip of unseen hands—the hot, hissed breath
The silent, gruesome fight with hand and heel
Unguessed at, unexpected—that is death.

COLONEL STAPLETON proved difficult in the matter of calling on Yasmini that evening, but Boileau stuck to his point. His private reason, of course, was that he wanted an excuse for going back again at once, but the reason he gave was one calculated to work on the Colonel’s well known gallantry.

“Of course, sir, it’s unusual, I know. But there you are. She’s a lone woman, and she’s frightened. She has a strange idea that the police will order her away unless we show we’re friendly.”

“But if she’s up to no mischief, why on earth should she be afraid of the police?”

“You said yourself, sir, not so very long ago that the police lose all sense of decency, or words to that effect. They could make things pretty uncomfortable for an unprotected woman. You’d never believe, sir, how anxious she was for me to bring you along.”

“I advised you not to go there again, you’ll remember.”

“I know you did, sir. I can only say I’m glad those weren’t orders. I’d like you to see for yourself what kind of woman she is. Then you’d understand my calling there again.”

The Colonel leaned back in his chair and looked hard at him for half a minute.

“I understand that much, at least, perfectly!” he answered. “Well—I’ll go, since she’s so anxious. But I shall give her plainly to understand that I can offer her no protection from the consequences of any action of her own, and I shall advise her to go away from here.”

“Will you come this evening?”

“Yes, I’ll come now and get it over.”

So the Colonel called for his horse, and he and Boileau rode together to the Panch Mahal, with a trooper behind and a lantern bearer in front and a great display of dignity.

“It’s a deuce of a strange hour to go calling on a native woman, Boileau, and I must confess I don’t at all like it.”

“You’ll find she’ll receive us well enough, sir.”

That prophecy proved justified. Yasmini outdid herself. She was coquetry, and subtlety, and dignity and grace in one; and though she left no stone unturned to win her way to Colonel Stapleton’s good graces, she let Boileau see that she was deeply in his debt for having brought him. If Boileau chose to misinterpret some of the soft glances that she sent him, that was understandable at least; and he was too overcome by Yasmini’s spell, and too amused by the Colonel’s evident amazement, to reason like a man of sense.

He forgot for the time being the gulf that separates the Englishman and native women of far lower caste than Yasmini; forgot that though the purdah might be absent for the once the rule of centuries remained the same; and remembered only that he was a very handsome man and she a lovely woman.

The Colonel told Yasmini what he had said he would. But he put it so delicately, in punctilious and perfect Hindustani, that all of the sting was taken out of it; he sounded more like a courtier assuring her of everlasting homage than a cavalry colonel declining his moral and material support.

“You see,” he said, “it’s no business of mine to ask you why you happen to be here. Any man with half an eye can see at a glance that you are charming, and as clever as you are beautiful. Therefore, madam, if you’ll excuse my saying so, people are quite justified in wondering why you don’t look for more healthful quarters. The neighborhood of this jungle can not be too wholesome; now, can it?”

“I have good reasons for being here—very good ones, Colonel sahib. Colonel sahib, may not a woman have her little secrets—or her big ones?”

“Certainly she may—and always does.” He bowed as a man conferring privileges.

“But she must not blame mere man for wondering what those secrets are,” he added.

He rose to go, but she begged him not to. She offered him refreshment, entertainment, anything; she called for her maids to dance and play on their guitars, and then, because he still persisted with his air of courteous but unpersuadable dignity, she drew him aside and whispered to him.

“I would like to tell you why I stay here, Colonel sahib; but it must be only for your ears. Then you will understand, and will protect me.”

“I can promise you nothing,” he warned. “Nothing, that is to say, more than is due to any woman from any man.”

“But I must tell it to you alone.”

“You’d better go, Boileau!” he said across his shoulder.

He was facing Yasmini, looking down into her eyes, and beginning to feel her spell. Boileau got up, bowed, and started for the stairs, but she left the Colonel and came over to him.

“He won’t remain,” she whispered. “I am sure he won’t. But I am frightened. I must have some one here this evening. Will you return?”

“I’ll do anything you say!”

“Then do you go straight home—straight home—” she laid one light hand on his shoulder, and he thrilled—“and when he returns, ride back again to me!”

“Why straight home?” wondered Boileau. “What earthly difference can that make to her?”

He did ride straight home; but when he reached his tent he was still wondering.

“Is she up to mischief with the Colonel now, I wonder? Can’t be! Still—I took him there, and I’m responsible.”

He called for his horse again, and then countermanded the order and sent for his personal servant, who came running with a lantern. Then he once more changed his mind, and took the lantern himself and started off.

Before he had gone a quarter of a mile he saw another lamp, and caught sight of the Colonel’s charger; he turned almost instinctively into a narrow track that led to the right of the main path. He felt ashamed of himself a moment later, but continued since he did not care to let the Colonel know that he had sought concealment and then changed his mind. He suspected that the narrow path that he had taken must come out eventually near the Panch Mahal, since there were no other buildings near to which a used track could lead.

His surmise proved correct. After half an hour of stumbling through the pitchy blackness, shuddering at the thought of snakes, he came out of the jungle at a corner of the Panch Mahal that he had never seen before, and stood still for a moment looking at it. It was not the exact rear of the building, but a wing that projected to the right of the rear in the direction of the thickest jungle, and there were no lights in the windows up above to prove that that part of the building was occupied. He could see the wall; though, clearly, for it was white, and he could make out the shape of the open windows.

The next thing he noticed was that a thick, knotted rope hung down from the top window nearly to the ground, swaying gently in the breeze. Then he heard a

voice, and listened. The words were Hindustani, and the voice beyond doubt Yasmini's.

"Any sign of him yet?"

"Not yet."

He remembered then that two of Yasmini's maids were from Madras, and that she had to use the common tongue of India to communicate with them. All the same, he wondered why he listened, and thought no better of himself for doing so.

"Go further, then, and see if he is coming. There must be at least one white man here to-night!"

"Now, what in blazes is the game?" thought Boileau.

He was not without brains, and, once his suspicions were aroused, not at all easy to trick. He much more than suspected now that Yasmini's desire to see him was not actuated by any admiration. His cavalry training, too, had seeped into his system and made action—prompt, unexpected action—an essential remedy for doubt. He stooped, loosed the straps beneath his insteps that held his trousers tight, and pulled off his spurs. Then he saw some one, whom he took to be Yasmini herself, come to the window, haul up the rope, and hang the coils on some kind of projection. But when she went away the rope fell down again. She had left the window open.

Adventure—and excitement—and something primitive he could not have named—mystery and the lure of it—began to call to Boileau. The military were in charge now of operations against the outlaw, and as an officer he remembered that he had the right to investigate suspicious circumstances. Too—and that was not to be overlooked—his sudden appearance through a window might appeal to Yasmini's feeling for romance. And then, he wanted to; and that was a good enough reason in itself. All of those arguments left quite out of account a feeling deeper down that told him there was danger near at hand. Danger never called to Boileau unanswered.

He walked up and seized the rope and jerked it. It was made fast at the top. A moment later he was shinning up it, as fast as a native would have done, and thanking Heaven that he had left his spurs behind.

He vaulted lightly through the window, and landed on something nearly solid that was on a divan underneath. A second later the something grunted, and an arm like a black snake licked out of the darkness, and he felt the sting of a knife that seared his cheek. Quicker than thought itself he gripped the wrist he could not see, wrenched at it, and sent the knife spinning; he heard it fall some distance away on wood. Next he was locked in a native wrestler's hold that was something new in his experience. Not a word was said nor another sound made but heavy breathing. He was fighting for dear life against a slippery antagonist, who stank enough to sicken him, but whom he could not see!

Chapter X

The Colonel Retracts a Statement.

Oh, any man who is a man can wade into a scrap,
And any man who's half a man can punch a fellow's map,

Can swap hard punches toe to toe
And give the reason why;
But could you—said your orders so—
Go black a lady's eye?

COLONEL STAPLETON sat before his tent, gasping in the stuffiness and trying to forget the spell that Yasmini had cast on him in common with every other man who came within the radius of her eyes. He lit a cigar, and swore at himself—gently, because unless the Colonel of a Regiment respects himself his men will not respect him—but comprehensively.

"I ought to be a long way from my second childhood yet!" he muttered. Then he pricked his ears.

"Headed this way, by gad! Shod horse—tired, too, and ridden hard! News from one of the troops, I'll be bound."

With an outlaw on the rampage, and military stores worth stealing under tents, even a General of Division would have been made to halt and give an account of himself before proceeding. None but members of the Regiment knew the password. But he heard the challenge and the answer, and no even momentary check. It was surely news from the scene of operations.

A foaming horse reeled out of the blackness and stopped, heaving and sobbing, before his tent. From his back a figure leaped who looked like a devil fresh from Tophet—who held a naked saber in his hand—whose long black hair was loose and tangled—but who brought the saber up to the salute like a soldier and a swordsman.

"Rung ho, Bahadur! Again I bring good news!"

"Why, Dost Mohammed! What in Heaven's name?"

"Gopi Lall, Huzoor, is near—-can be taken alive—at Yasmini's!"

"Are you straight from there?"

"No, sahib."

The Colonel sprang to his feet, stepped up to Dost Mohammed, and looked straight into his eyes.

"Are you sure you're sane?" he asked.

"Sane, sahib, and not a little weary—but we lose time!"

"I myself left Yasmini's less than an hour ago—much less. She invited me, and she did her best to prevent my leaving."

"None the less, sahib, Gopi Lall is there."

"What makes you think so?"

"Sahib, is there time for argument? I tracked him—I found his woman in the hills—I listened to her. Colonel sahib, I did not ride like this for the fun of it!"

"But, man alive, if Gopi Lall is really there, why should she ask me of all people not to go away?"

"Proof, Huzoor, if proof were lacking! With your Honor in her house, who would dare suspect her? With you in charge of operations against Gopi Lall, would the police or anyone dare look for him in the house where you were? Would a woman of the race and caste of Yasmini—under your favor, sahib—consent to receive an European in her house on any terms or for any motive not dishonest? Think, sahib! Colonel sahib—think and hasten!"

"Dost Mohammed, we must have other evidence than this. She's a woman—a defenseless woman. I can't on mere hearsay invade her house and search it, and put her to shame and inconvenience. I can have the house watched,

surrounded; I've plenty of troopers here for that. But enter the house, accuse her, without evidence? I think not!"

"Colonel sahib, have I run this risk, put on this shame of a disguise, found his trail, and ridden thus, for nothing? Know you aught of Yasmini? Know you aught of me? Is a high caste woman, who lets down the purdah and receives Europeans, to weigh more in the balance than I? Am I a soldier, or a carrier of nurses' tales? My record—is that nothing?"

He threw his hands up in a gesture of despair—but Colonel Stapleton had come to a decision.

"Orderly!" he called.

A man appeared, like an armed ghost from the shadows.

"Turn-out the guard!"

Half a minute later the clank of sabers told that the order had been obeyed.

"Have you a spare uniform where you can get it, Dost Mohammed?"

"Yes, Colonel sahib."

"Then put it on. Hurry. Take command of the men and start at once. Surround the house unseen and unheard if possible. I will ride to the front door and ask admittance."

The native officer saluted and made off, leading his foundered horse and talking to it caressingly. Colonel Stapleton went back into his tent and picked up a copy of the Indian Penal Code. He turned over the pages hurriedly.

"I always did say," he ground his teeth as he muttered, "that police work is no business for a gentleman. Orderly!" he called. "Send Captain Boileau sahib here to me."

"Ne hai, sahib."

"What? Not here? Not in camp? What d'ye mean? When did he go?"

The orderly told of Boileau's return on horseback, and of his setting out again on foot.

"Then that must have been his lantern that I saw. He's back there, is he? Um-m- m!"

He was growing puzzled, and rather more suspicious than he cared to feel. At the moment he heard the guard ride off, so he called for his own charger and started after them, growing every second more resentful of the circumstances that could put such distasteful duty in his path. He rode alone to Yasmini's little door and tied his horse outside; and Yasmini, alone, admitted him.

"The Colonel sahib—back—again—so soon?"

There were wonder and amusement, but mostly gladness, in her voice. She seemed to think that this was a sending of the gods.

"Madam," he said with dignity (only he used the statelier native word that means 'mistress of many servants'), "I am in receipt of information that has made this visit necessary."

Her eyes opened wide, but she showed no sign of embarrassment—only interest and curiosity.

"Why wait here at the door? Will not the Heavenborn—-?"

Instead of finishing the sentence, she floated up the stairs ahead of him. He could have sworn that her little gilded slippers did not touch the carpet. He could have sworn, too, and much more positively, that though there was no maid there to close it the studded door slammed tight behind him.

He refused to sit. She reclined, cushioned and languorous, on a divan and lit a cigarette. But there were no maids there to protect her, and the Colonel was a man of manners. He stood before her, at least four yards away.

"I am told that the outlaw Gopi Lall is in your house!"

She laughed at him. It was silvery, fairy laughter, spontaneous, musical, irresistible—sheer, frank amusement. He was laughing too before he knew it—laughing and twisting his mustache, and fighting with the tendency to run away.

"Surely that is a wonder of a joke. Who is the wit? Name him, Colonel sahib."

"A man of my own Regiment, mistress of many servants—a man whose word I must respect, at least to the extent of trying at all events to verify it. I have reason to suppose, too, that an officer of mine—the Captain Boileau whom you know—is also here."

This time Yasmini was not amused. Her eyes changed and she clenched her little hands on a cushion in indignant anger.

"By what right—on whose honor—to what end—do you—dares anyone say that?" She snarled it like a tigress, and curled up on one elbow looking—all lovely though she was—like an animal about to spring.

"Curse!" muttered the Colonel to himself.

"Do I, then, keep a trysting place for British officers?"

"As I have already said, madam, I don't know what you keep here, what you do here, or why you stay. You must excuse me if I feel obliged to say that it is hard to believe what you told me this evening. That story about hidden treasure is—ah—well—ah—is—I would like to believe it! Won't you help me to?"

"You mean?"

"I mean that it is necessary that I should see for myself who or what is in this house. No one could regret the necessity more than I, but such is the fact."

"You can not! You dare not!"

Now she was on her feet.

"It is against all custom—contrary to law!"

"The law is, madam, that I must ask admittance, then ask leave to search. If, after a reasonable time for reflection, that leave is refused me, I then have the right to use force if necessary."

"That is not the law!"

She faced him with her chin up, eyes ablaze; and he felt his heart melting inside him at the sight of outraged womanhood.

"Go, sir! Leave me! You are insolent!"

"Madam, I shall be very glad to go when I am satisfied that you have no one hidden here. I have a most unpleasant duty to perform—one that you could make much easier for me if you would."

"You shall not!"

She stamped her foot and looked even lovelier angry than when she purred.

"How dare you to search my house!"

"And I unfortunately must insist, much though I regret it."

It was a deuce of a predicament for a man whose creed was courtesy! He had to keep reminding himself that a soldier was a man who did his duty under any circumstances.

"Are you a man of honor?"

Those amazing, blazing eyes seemed able to read into his mind! She saw that she had made a home thrust, but—cleverer than many of her kind—instead of following it up until the wound was numb, she changed her tactics instantly.

"Colonel sahib!"

Now she was pleading with him—with the pathos in her voice of a cruelly ill treated child. Reproach, petition, dumb questioning unbelief shone out of her eyes, and her movement even was in part.

"It was truth I told you. There is, there must be, treasure hidden here. I am here to find it, that is all. If I told what I know, the half of India would be here with pick and shovel to forestall me."

"I am here to look for Gopi Lall, not treasure," answered Stapleton. "If he is not here, my search can do no harm."

"No harm? An insult to your honor is no harm, eh, Colonel sahib? Are all soldiers, then, outragers of women's privacy—or are some soldiers better than the rest?'"

He pulled himself together with an effort, remembering that the sooner this beastly business was over and done with the better for him and her.

"Once more, madam, I ask your permission to search this house."

"And I refuse it!"

"And I am a soldier and a gentleman!" thought Stapleton. Aloud he said, "Then I must fall back on my authority, and search without your leave."

He stepped to the nearest door, which was hidden by a curtain to his left and to her right—nearer by two yards to him than her. But she was there before him. Those who had ever seen her dance could have believed anything of her, but to him her movement seemed to have been almost supernatural. She faced him, back against the door, with arms folded on her heaving bosom and her whole blue, gauzy dress vibrating with the passion that possessed her.

"Now! I dare you!"

"Madam, this house is surrounded. No one can get away unseen—not even you or I. There is no sense in trying to prevent me. Why, I could whistle and call up forty troopers to enforce my orders."

"Do it, then! I dare you!"

She was a better hand than he at reading minds. If she were bluffing, she was certainly disposed to go the limit. Was he? Was he prepared to order in half a troop of cavalry, to trample through her house and upset things, and do by force what he could do so delicately? Not while he had one slim chance left of avoiding it!

His suspicions, of course, were thoroughly aroused by this time. No maids, no Boileau, no leave to search, Dost Mohammed's positiveness, Yasmini's concern—there were too many circumstances to explain away. Search he must, and would, although he hated himself more each instant. He reached past her, and felt under the curtain for the fastening of the door. In an instant she was at his throat!

No tigress ever sprang more quickly or more savagely. He felt her grip—and Heavens! how strong her little fingers were! He saw her free hand go to her bosom. Like a flick of light he caught the sheen of steel. So he set his throat muscles, and used both hands and all his strength and energy in the effort to obtain the knife. But she held it out, away from him, and her strong, lithe fingers gripped his throat until he had to spare one hand in the effort to wrench them loose.

Then the knife slithered for his ribs, and he guarded with his forearm only just in time. He seized her around the waist, raised her off her feet—she weighed almost nothing—and swung her round and round and round, hoping to lay her on her back. But her fingers still dug in and the supple, graceful little tigress drew in—in—in along his arms until her face touched his, then writhed, and twirled, and tripped him—him! The six-foot Colonel of a regiment of Bengal Horse lay struggling on his back, with a slip of a woman who weighed a hundred pounds his master!

She had lost the throat grip in the sudden fall, but would he shout for help? Would he let his troopers see him at the mercy of a dancer? Or let them see him fighting with a woman? He saw the gleam of the knife again, and seized her, and crushed her to him, and got the wrist at last. The fight that followed was the worst in his experience.

Even then, he would not hurt her willingly. He wanted the knife; with that in his possession, or tossed out of her reach, he had no doubt of what the end would be. But he could not get the knife. She seemed to want his lifeblood, and fought for it with the ferocity of a tiger-cat—although no animal that ever breathed would have shown half of her brain and courage. Her dancer's muscles were as strong as his, and far more active; her very smallness placed him at a disadvantage, to say nothing of his gentlemanly fear of hurting her. She showed no fear of hurting him!

She tried to get her fingers in his eyes. Her hair was down and round her shoulders, and time and again she used it as a weapon of offense, shaking her head until it fell in waves over his eyes and blinded him. Then the wrist that held the knife would jerk spasmodically, and he would save himself by nothing else than sheer, brute strength. He held on tight to her slender wrist, but it felt like a steel wire hawser gloved in satin; a hold on the lance of a charging enemy would have been as easy!

They fought all over the floor of the room, up on their feet, then down again. His breath came short now, in labored gasps, and he doubted whether he could have shouted loud enough to make the troopers hear, even if he had cared to try. But she had begun to smile, through lips that had grown strangely cruel, and her breath came evenly. She would dance away from him, swoop in again and try to trip him, and dance away.

Once she all but got her wrist free, but he followed and held on; then she came in toward him like a flash of blue light, and tangled herself between his legs and threw him. He reeled to the floor with a crack that brought the sparks.

He heard her chuckle, saw the flash of steel again, collected all his strength for one more effort to draw her in and crush the breath out of her—when, "Hold!" cried a voice he knew. A second later Boileau had her in his arms, tight pinioned from behind, and held her helpless.

"I have the honor to report, sir, that I've just killed Gopi Lall, or somebody who answers his description."

The Colonel rose to his feet, rubbing his head, and wishing he could rub a dozen places all at once. He noticed then that Boileau was panting too, that his mess jacket was blood soaked and torn in ribbons, and that there were bruises on his arms. He stepped up to Yasmini, and took her knife. She surrendered it quite readily.

"I can not fight two gentlemen!" she said, with the accent very strongly on the last word.

“Confound it, Boileau! This is a deuce of an unpleasant business! What did you say? Killed Gopi Lall? Where? How? Hold her! Hold that woman!”

“He need not hold me!” she answered scornfully. “I am helpless. I surrender.”

“Hold her wrists for the present!” commanded Stapleton. “Where did you say you killled him?”

“In the room at the end of that passage, sir.”

“Come and show me. Bring her, too.”

The Colonel took one wrist, and Boileau the other. Between them they led Yasmini along the passage.

“A neat way of repaying hospitality!” she sneered.

But her manner changed the moment that she saw what Boileau had to show.

He had lit two lamps before he left the room, and by their dim light they could make out what the room contained.

On the floor, by the divan near the window, in the room which Boileau had entered by means of the knotted rope, there lay a one-eyed monster of a man, stone dead. His one sound eye was starting from its socket, and the tongue protruded through scarred and ghastly blue-dyed lips. Both arms were curled—fists clenched, above his head in an attitude of dying agony, and from between them foul, greasy, black locks of hair protruded like a nest of snakes.

“Choked him, sir. Had to. Tried to knife me in the dark; then got a brand new hold on me, and tried to break my neck.”

His explanation was cut short by Yasmini. She shrieked, tore her hands loose, then threw her head back and wailed. It sounded like a love song, or a death chant—or else a chant about the death of love. And then she shrieked again. Boileau made a move to seize her wrists.

“Leave her alone!” commanded Stapleton.

Together they stood still and watched her, dry-eyed and terrible in grief—disheveled, and a dozen times more beautiful than ever. There was a knife in the dead man’s cummerbund, but neither of them noticed that.

Suddenly she sprang, seized the knife, and drew it. Stapleton and Boileau jumped on the defensive, ready to disarm her, but she took no notice of them. Instead, she knelt, and stared down at the dead man’s one protruding eye. Then, with a curse that raised the hair of both who watched, she plunged the long knife deep into the eye, and drew it out and plunged it in the body—and drew it out and plunged it in again—again—again!

“By gad, I can’t watch that!” swore Stapleton.

“Shall I—?”

“No. Don’t touch her. Yasmini!”

She stopped, and looked up. Then she rose and glared at both of them. They stepped forward, but she threw down the knife and stood with her bloody hands beside her, so they both stepped back again.

“Dogs! Devils! Rob me, would you, of revenge? You might have taken jewels—money—clothes—I would have laughed! Revenge was all I asked, or sought or lived for! Officers! Lords of India: Mouthers about honor! You have taken my honor from me. What is left?”

She was silent for a minute, fighting back her sobs; but if ever dumb eyes swore, hers blazed blasphemy.

“See—robbers of a woman’s honor!—I will show you.”

Drawing a key from her bosom, she went to another door, opened it, and motioned them to come and look. So they stood beside her and peered in, feeling like men about to pry on some one's sacred secrets.

"I had that ready for him—for tonight! Until midnight my maids were to have watched, lest the police should get on his trail and interfere. I had no fear of soldiers—only the police. Had they come, I had another plan all ready—another place to lure him to. You fools—you honor-robbers—were but meant to allay police suspicions; they have watched this house from time to time of late. See! See what you have saved that murderer by slaying him!"

There was little in the stone-floored room except an iron chair, but the purpose of that was evident. It had twisted wire straps made fast to it; a man could have been bound in the chair with their aid so that he could not move. Beside the chair were braziers, heaped with charcoal; and by them pincers, and little rods of steel, and tiny awls, and lengths of wire, and needles—a complete assortment of instruments of torture!

"He would have lived three days, or more, under my hand!" hissed Yasmini between set teeth.

"But why? What had you got against the man?" Colonel Stapleton was more bewildered now than ever.

"I? Because that pig of pigs, that one-eyed plunderer of offal heaps, that carrion, slew my lover, my Prince, my Maharaja, the one love of my life! He ran! The rat-louse ran! He made suspicion fall on me. But I followed—I, with only a dozen maids to help me. I tricked him. I trapped him. I had a bone to pick with Gopi Lall! I would have picked it, but for you!"

"But how did you get him here?"

"The mad, conceited swine imagined that I loved him—as certain other dogs have done!"

She looked a little too hard at Boileau, when she said that, for his peace of mind.

"Sahib!" called a voice. "Huzoor! Colonel sahib!"

Stapleton walked over to the window and leaned out.

"Is that you, Dost Mohammed?"

"Aye. Have you found him, sahib?"

"Yes. He's here. He's dead."

"Who killed him?"

"Captain Boileau."

"Present my compliments to Captain Boileau sahib. Tell him that his hands will be undefiled when they are washed."

"You'd better send two troopers up here, Dost Mohammed, to take charge of the body and watch until morning. Come up with them. Have you seen anything of the maidservants?"

"They are here, sahib, all here; they were watching in the jungle. We came on them before they could give the alarm."

"Let them come up, then, to wait on their mistress."

Twenty minutes later Colonel Stapleton and Boileau started campward side by side.

"Let this be a lesson to you, Boileau my boy! How did you come to be up there?"

"Saw a rope, sir, and climbed up through a window."

"A bally ungentlemanly thing to do!"

"It put an end to another gentleman's career, sir!"

"Yes. And for that, and another reason, I won't refer to it again. But, as I said, let this be a lesson to you. If ever you get to be the Colonel of a regiment, don't—don't ever—on any grounds at all—insist on helping the police!"

"I'll try to remember it, sir."

"I feel as if I'd robbed that woman though that's absurd of course. If anybody'd told me that once—ever in my life—I would lay hands on a woman, even in self- defense, I would have thought him mad. And here I've actually fought a woman. I had thought, and I have said repeatedly, that there are no circumstances under which a soldier can not be a gentleman. I retract it. There is one. When engaged on police duty he runs a very serious risk!"

Chapter XI

(Which has no verse or title to head it, but which leaves the reader with a feeling that he would like to read some more of Yasmini.)

THE Tail-Twisters rode back to Balibhum after another week had passed, and left the police behind them to gnash their teeth and curse their luck. There were five thousand good rupees not in police pockets that a grudging Government had paid by way of blood reward for Gopi Lall.

What made the police so angry was not so much the fact that the Regiment had "wiped their eye" for them, for the native Indian policeman has neither shame nor sportsmanship nor anything but criminal ideas. Nor was it so much that they did not get the money. It was who did get it that annoyed them.

There were something like a thousand native gentlemen and sixteen officers entitled to a share in that reward. Dost Mohammed had the lion's claim, but he had sworn to touch no copper piece of it. Therefore there were in the neighborhood of five rupees a head to be divided up among the host. And, five rupees is, say, a dollar and two thirds.

The British officers, of course, declined their share, and the native officers all followed suit in Dost Mohammed's wake. It was down to the troopers, then, to make fair division of the spoil; and they took a vote on it.

They had many or them lounged, and smoked, and listened up at Yasmini's.

They had all eye-worshipped her, and some had heard her sing. Some, even, had seen her dance. The rest all wished that they had done these things, and some pretended that they had.

The vote, then, was unanimous. They took the lot to her, in hundred-rupee Bank of India notes, on a salver carried on crossed sabers. And she danced for them in the middle of the courtyard, while they sat their horses in appreciative silence.

And, when the police came a few days later to make trouble, and to order Yasmini away, and (perhaps) receive a little blackmail, Yasmini was gone.

For years after that it was the fashion among subalterns, and civilians, and others who were stony broke but visionary and believing, to ask for leave and travel to Rajahbatkhowa where the Panch Mahal and the hidden jungle city is. There they would hunt for the fabled hidden treasure that was said to have brought Yasmini so far.

They never found a trace of it, though the architectural societies and antiquarians had reason to be thankful—which goes to show how practical the gods who make men mad can be.

But, many years later, long after the sporadic search for hidden treasure had died a natural death and the jungle had covered up again the traces of it, there was a woman up at Delhi who would tell strange stories in the evening, when the fancy seized her, and there were listeners enough. She had once been maid to Yasmini.

She told the story with a thousand varying details—for who wants to listen to the same plain tale twice over?—of the outlaw's death, and of the officer who killed him with his hands, and of the Colonel sahib who fought with Yasmini and got the worst of it. But she added other things that at the time the story happened would have been of most absorbing interest to the police. They had been among the greediest hunters for the fabled hidden treasure; but they had hunted too, and far more thoroughly, for something else.

Where had the outlaw's loot gone? It was commonly computed at a lakh of silver coin, and though a tenth of that would have been quite a considerable sum for an outlaw to amass in such a district, still the estimate increased as years rolled on, and every one believed it. Surely it was hidden somewhere!

But the former maid of Yasmini's would tell how, night after night for three nights, Gopi Lall would come beneath the window of the Panch Mahal, and how she and Yasmini would lower down a rope, and draw up heavy burdens, close-wrapped in cloth. She had no notion what was in the packages, nor yet had anyone—but Yasmini.

And Yasmini, who wove herself most diligently into the inner history of India, never seemed to lack for capital, nor sense to hold her tongue.