

better half. The wind rose and soughed drearily through the rhododendrons and the pines; and Kiramat Ali, the pipe-bearer, shivered audibly as he drew his long cloth uniform around him. We rose and entered my friend's rooms, where the warmth of the lights, the soft rugs and downy cushions, invited us temptingly to sit down and continue our conversation. But it was late, for Isaacs, like a true Oriental, had not hurried himself over his narrative, and it had been nine o'clock when we sat down to smoke. So I bade him good-night, and, musing on all I had heard and seen, retired to my own apartments, glancing at Sirius and at the unhappy-looking moon before I turned in from the verandah.

CHAPTER II.

IN India—in the plains—people rise before dawn, and it is not till after some weeks' residence in the cooler atmosphere of the mountains that they return to the pernicious habit of allowing the sun to be before them. The hours of early morning, when one either mopes about in loose flannel clothes, or goes for a gallop on the green *maidán*, are without exception the most delicious of the day. I shall have occasion hereafter to describe the morning's proceedings in the plains. On the day after the events recorded in the last chapter I awoke as usual at five o'clock, and meandered out on to the verandah to have a look at the hills, so novel and delicious a sight after the endless flats of the northwest provinces. It was still nearly dark, but there was a faint light in the east, which rapidly grew as I watched it, till, turning the angle of the house, I distinguished a snow-peak over the tops of the dark rhododendrons, and, while I gazed, the first tinge of distant dawning caught the summit, and the beautiful hill blushed, as a fair woman, at the kiss of the awakening sun. The old story, the heaven wooing the earth with a wondrous shower of gold.

“Prati 'shya sunarī janī” — the exquisite lines of the old Vedic hymn to the dawn maiden, rose to my lips. I had never appreciated or felt their truth down in the dusty plains, but here, on the free hills, the glad welcoming of the morning light seemed to run through every fibre, as thousands of years ago the same joyful thrill of returning life inspired the pilgrim fathers of the Aryan race. Almost unconsciously, I softly intoned the hymn, as I had heard my old Brahmin teacher in Allahabad when he came and sat under the porch at daybreak, until I was ready for him —

The lissome heavenly maiden here,
Forth flashing from her sister's arms,
High heaven's daughter, now is come.

In rosy garments, shining like
A swift bay mare ; the twin knights' friend,
Mother of all our herds of kine.

Yea, thou art she, the horseman's friend ;
Of grazing cattle mother thou,
All wealth is thine, thou blushing dawn.

Thou who hast driven the foeman back,
With praise we call on thee to wake
In tender reverence, beauteous one.

The spreading beams of morning light
Are countless as our hosts of kine,
They fill the atmosphere of space.

Filling the sky, thou openedst wide
The gates of night, thou glorious dawn —
Rejoicing run thy daily race !

The heaven above thy rays have filled,
The broad beloved room of air,
O splendid, brightest maid of morn !

I went indoors again to attend to my correspondence, and presently a gorgeously liveried white-bearded *chuprassie* appeared at the door, and bending low as he touched his hand to his forehead, intimated that “if the great lord of the earth, the protector of the poor, would turn his ear to the humblest of his servants, he would hear of something to his advantage.”

So saying, he presented a letter from the official with whom I had to do, an answer to my note of the previous afternoon, requesting an interview. In due course, therefore, the day wore on, and I transacted my business, returned to “tiffin,” and then went up to my rooms for a little quiet. I might have been there an hour, smoking and dreaming over a book, when the servant announced a sahib who wanted to see me, and Isaacs walked in, redolent of the sunshine without, his luminous eyes shining brightly in the darkened room. I was delighted, for I felt my wits stagnating in the unwonted idleness of the autumn afternoon, and the book I had taken up was not conducive to wakefulness or brilliancy. It was a pleasant surprise too. It is not often that an hotel acquaintance pushes an intimacy much, and besides I had feared my silence during the previous evening might have produced the impression of indifference, on which reflection I had resolved to make myself agreeable at our next meeting.

Truly, had I asked myself the cause of a certain attraction I felt for Mr. Isaacs, it would have been hard to find an answer. I am generally extremely shy of persons who begin an acquaintance by making confidences, and, in spite of Isaacs' charm of manner, I had certainly speculated on his reasons for suddenly telling an entire stranger his whole story. My southern birth had not modified the northern character born in me, though it gave me the more urbane veneer of the Italian; and the early study of Larochefoucauld and his school had not predisposed me to an unlimited belief in the disinterestedness of mankind. Still there was something about the man which seemed to sweep away unbelief and cynicism and petty distrust, as the bright mountain freshet sweeps away the wretched little mud puddles and the dust and impurities from the bed of a half dry stream. It was a new sensation and a novel era in my experience of humanity, and the desire to get behind that noble forehead, and see its inmost workings, was strong beyond the strength of puny doubts and preconceived prejudice. Therefore, when Isaacs appeared, looking like the sun-god for all his quiet dress of gray and his unobtrusive manner, I felt the "little thrill of pleasure" so aptly compared by Swinburne to the soft touch of a hand stroking the outer hair.

"What a glorious day after all that detestable rain!" were his first words. "Three mortal months of water, mud, and Mackintoshes, not to mention the

agreeable sensation of being glued to a wet saddle with your feet in water-buckets, and mountain torrents running up and down the inside of your sleeves, in defiance of the laws of gravitation; such is life in the monsoon. Pah!" And he threw himself down on a cane chair and stretched out his dainty feet, so that the sunlight through the crack of the half-closed door might fall comfortably on his toes, and remind him that it was fine outside.

"What have you been doing all day?" I asked, for lack of a better question, not having yet recovered from the mental stagnation induced by the last number of the serial story I had been reading.

"Oh—I don't know. Are you married?" he asked irrelevantly.

"God forbid!" I answered reverently, and with some show of feeling.

"Amen," was the answer. "As for me—I am, and my wives have been quarrelling."

"Your wives! Did I understand you to use the plural number?"

"Why, yes. I have three; that is the worst of it. If there were only two, they might get on better. You know 'two are company and three are none,' as your proverb has it." He said this reflectively, as if meditating a reduction in the number.

The application of the proverb to such a case was quite new in my recollection. As for the plurality of my friend's conjugal relations, I remembered he was a Mohammedan, and my surprise vanished.

Isaacs was lost in meditation. Suddenly he rose to his feet, and took a cigarette from the table.

"I wonder"—the match would not light, and he struggled a moment with another. Then he blew a great cloud of smoke, and sat down in a different chair—"I wonder whether a fourth would act as a fly-wheel," and he looked straight at me, as if asking my opinion.

I had never been in direct relations with a Musulman of education and position. To be asked point-blank whether I thought four wives better than three on general principles, and quite independently of the contemplated spouse, was a little embarrassing. He seemed perfectly capable of marrying another before dinner for the sake of peace, and I do not believe he would have considered it by any means a bad move.

"Diamond cut diamond," I said. "You too have proverbs, and one of them is that a man is better sitting than standing; better lying than sitting; better dead than lying down. Now I should apply that same proverb to marriage. A man is, by a similar successive reasoning, better with no wife at all than with three."

His subtle mind caught the flaw instantly. "To be without a wife at all would be about as conducive to happiness as to be dead. Negative happiness, very negative."

"Negative happiness is better than positive discomfort."

"Come, come," he answered, "we are bandying terms and words, as if empty breath amounted to anything but inanity. Do you really doubt the value of the institution of marriage?"

"No. Marriage is a very good thing when two people are so poor that they depend on each other, mutually, for daily bread, or if they are rich enough to live apart. For a man in my own position marriage would be the height of folly; an act of rashness only second to deliberate suicide. Now, you are rich, and if you had but one wife, she living in Delhi and you in Simla, you would doubtless be very happy."

"There is something in that," said Isaacs. "She might mope and beat the servants, but she could not quarrel if she were alone. Besides, it is so much easier to look after one camel than three. I think I must try it."

There was a pause, during which he seemed settling the destiny of the two who were to be shelved in favour of a monogamic experiment. Presently he asked if I had brought any horses, and hearing I had not, offered me a mount, and proposed we should ride round Jako, and perhaps, if there were time, take a look at Annandale in the valley, where there was polo, and a racing-ground. I gladly accepted, and Isaacs despatched one of my servants, the faithful Kiramat Ali, to order the horses. Meantime the conversation turned on the expedition to Kabul to avenge the death of Cavagnari. I found Isaacs held

the same view that I did in regard to the whole business. He thought the sending of four Englishmen, with a handful of native soldiers of the guide regiment to protect them, a piece of unparalleled folly, on a par with the whole English policy in regard to Afghanistan.

"You English—pardon me, I forgot you did not belong to them—the English, then, have performed most of their great acts of valour as a direct consequence of having wantonly exposed themselves in situations where no sane man would have placed himself. Look at Balaclava; think of the things they did in the mutiny, and in the first Afghan war; look at the mutiny itself, the result of a hair-brained idea that a country like India could be held for ever with no better defences than the trustworthiness of native officers, and the gratitude of the people for the 'kindly British rule.' Poor Cavagnari! when he was here last summer, before leaving on his mission, he said several times he should never come back. And yet no better man could have been chosen, whether for politics or fighting; if only they had had the sense to protect him."

Having delivered himself of this eulogy, my friend dropped his exhausted cigarette, lit another, and appeared again absorbed in the triangulation of his matrimonial problem. I imagined him weighing the question whether he should part with Zobeida and Zuleika and keep Amina, or send Zuleika and Amina about their business, and keep Zobeida to be a light

in his household. At last Kiramat Ali, on the watch in the verandah, announced the saices with the horses, and we descended.

I had expected that a man of Isaacs' tastes and habits would not be stingy about his horseflesh, and so was prepared for the character of the animals that awaited us. They were two superb Arab stallions, one of them being a rare specimen of the weight-carrying kind, occasionally seen in the far East. Small head, small feet, and feather-tailed, but broad in the quarters and deep in the chest, able to carry a twelve-stone man for hours at the stretching, even gallop, that never trembles and never tires; sure-footed as a mule, and tender-tempered as a baby.

So we mounted the gentle creatures and rode away. The mountain on which Simla is situated has a double summit, like a Swiss peak, the one higher than the other. On the lower height and the neck between the two is built the town, and the bungalows used as offices and residences for the Government officials cover a very considerable area. "Jako," the higher eminence, is thickly covered with a forest of primeval rhododendrons and pines, and though there are outlying bungalows and villas scattered about among the trees near the town, they are so far back from the main road, reserved as I have said for the use of the Viceroy, as far as driving is concerned, that they are not seen in riding along the shady way; and on the opposite side, where the trees are thin, the magnificent view looks far out over the spurs of the

mountains, the only human habitation visible being a Catholic convent, which rears its little Italian *campanile* against the blue sky, and rather adds to the beauty of the scene than otherwise. As we rode along we continued our talk about the new Afghan war, though neither of us was very much in the humour for animated conversation. The sweet scent of the pines, the matchless motion of the Arab, and the joyous feeling that the worst part of the tropical year was passed, were enough for me, and I drank in the high, rarefied air, with the intense delight of a man who has been smothered with dust and heat, and then steamed to a jelly by a spring and summer in the plains of Hindustan.

The road abounds in sharp turns, and I, as the heavier mount, rode on the inside as we went round the mountain. On reaching the open part on the farther side, we drew rein for a moment to look down at the deep valleys, now dark with the early shade, at the higher peaks red with the westering sun, and at the black masses of foliage, through which some giant trunk here and there caught a lingering ray of the departing light. Then, as we felt the cool of the evening coming on, we wheeled and scampered along the level stretch, stirrup to stirrup and knee to knee. The sharp corner at the end pulled us up, but before we had quite reined in our horses, as delighted as we to have a couple of minutes' straight run, we swung past the angle and cannoned into a man ambling peaceably along with his reins on one finger and his

large gray felt hat flapping at the back of his neck. There was a moment's confusion, profuse apologies on our part, and some ill-concealed annoyance on the part of the victim, who was, however, only a little jostled and taken by surprise.

"Really, sir," he began. "Oh! Mr. Isaacs. No harm done, I assure you, that is, not much. Bad thing riding fast round corners. No harm, no harm, not much. How are you?" all in a breath.

"How d'ye do! Mr. Ghyrkings; my friend Mr. Griggs."

"The real offender," I added in a conciliatory tone, for I had kept my place on the inside.

"Mr. Griggs?" said Mr. Currie Ghyrkings. "Mr. Griggs of Allahabad? *Daily Howler*? Yes, yes, corresponded; glad to see you in the flesh."

I did not think he looked particularly glad. He was a Revenue Commissioner residing in Mudnugger; a rank Conservative; a regular old "John Company" man, with whom I had had more than one tiff in the columns of the *Howler*, leading to considerable correspondence.

"I trust that our collision in the flesh has had no worse results than our tilts in print, Mr. Ghyrkings?"

"Not at all. Oh don't mention it. Bad enough, though, but no harm done, none whatever," pulling up and looking at me as he pronounced the last two words with a peculiarly English slowness after a very quick sentence.

While he was speaking, I was aware of a pair of

riders walking their horses toward us, and apparently struggling to suppress their amusement at the mishap to the old gentleman, which they must have witnessed. In truth, Mr. Ghyrkins, who was stout and rode a broad-backed obese "tat," can have presented no very dignified appearance, for he was jerked half out of the saddle by the concussion, and his near leg, returning to its place, had driven his nether garment half way to his knee, while the large felt hat was settling back on to his head at a rakish angle, and his coat collar had gone well up the back of his neck.

"Dear uncle," said the lady as she rode up, "I hope you are not hurt?" She was very handsome as she sat there trying not to laugh. A lithe figure in a gray habit and a broad-brimmed hat, fair as a Swede, but with dark eyes and heavy lashes. Just then she was showing her brilliant teeth, ostensibly in delight at her dear uncle's escape, and her whole expression was animated and amused. Her companion was a soldierly looking young Englishman, with a heavy moustache and a large nose. A certain devil-may-care look about his face was attractive as he sat carelessly watching us. I noticed his long stirrups and the curb rein hanging loose, while he held the snaffle, and concluded he was a cavalry officer. Isaacs bowed low to the lady and wheeled his horse. She replied by a nod, indifferent enough; but as he turned, her eyes instantly went back to him, and a pleasant thoughtful look passed over her face, which betrayed at least a trifling interest in the stranger, if stranger he were.

All this time Mr. Ghyrkins was talking and asking questions of me. When had I come? what brought me here? how long would I stay? and so on, showing that whether friendly or not he had an interest in my movements. In answering his questions I found an opportunity of calling the Queen the "Empress," of lauding Lord Beaconsfield's policy in India, and of congratulating Mr. Ghyrkins upon the state of his district, with which he had nothing to do, of course; but he swallowed the bait, all in a breath, as he seemed to do everything. Then he introduced us.

"Katharine, you know Mr. Isaacs; Mr. Griggs, Miss Westonhaugh, Lord Steepleton Kildare, Mr. Isaacs."

We bowed and rode back together over the straight piece we passed before the encounter. Isaacs and the Englishman walked their horses on each side of Miss Westonhaugh, and Ghyrkins and I brought up the rear. I tried to turn the conversation to Isaacs, but with little result.

"Yes, yes, good fellow Isaacs, for a fire-worshipper, or whatever he is. Good judge of a horse. Lots of rupees too. Queer fish. By-the-bye, Mr. Griggs, this new expedition is going to cost us something handsome, eh?"

"Why, yes. I doubt whether you will get off under ten millions sterling. And where is it to come from? You will have a nice time making your assessments in Bengal, Mr. Ghyrkins, and we shall have an income-tax and all sorts of agreeable things."

"Income-tax? Well, I think not. You see, Mr. Griggs, it would hit the members of the council, so they won't do it, for their own sakes, and the Viceroy too. Ha, ha, how do you think Lord Lytton would like an income-tax, eh?" And the old fellow chuckled.

We reached the end of the straight, and Isaacs reined in and bid Miss Westonhaugh and her companion good evening. I bowed from where I was, and took Mr. Ghyrkins' outstretched hand. He was in a good humour again, and called out to us to come and see him, as we rode away. I thought to myself I certainly would; and we paced back, crossing the open stretch for the third time.

It was almost dark under the trees as we re-entered the woods; I pulled out a cheroot and lit it. Isaacs did the same, and we walked our horses along in silence. I was thinking of the little picture I had just seen. The splendid English girl on her thoroughbred beside the beautiful Arab steed and his graceful rider. What a couple, I thought: what noble specimens of great races. Why did not this fiery young Persian, with his wealth, his beauty, and his talents, wed some such wife as that, some high-bred Englishwoman, who should love him and give him home and children—and, I was forced to add, commonplace happiness? How often does it happen that some train of thought, unacknowledged almost to ourselves, runs abruptly into a blind alley; especially when we try to plan out the future life of some one

else, or to sketch for him what we should call happiness. The accidental confronting of two individuals pleases the eye, we unite them in our imagination, carrying on the picture before us, and suddenly we find ourselves in a quagmire of absurd incongruities. Now what could be more laughable than to suppose the untamed, and probably untameable young man at my side, with his three wives, his notions about the stars and his Mussulman faith, bound for life to a girl like Miss Westonhaugh? A wise man of the East trying to live the life of an English country gentleman, hunting in pink and making speeches on the local hustings! I smiled to myself in the dark and puffed at my cigar.

Meanwhile Isaacs was palpably uneasy. First he kicked his feet free of the stirrups, and put them back again. Then he hummed a few words of a Persian song and let his cigar go out, after which he swore loudly in Arabic at the eternal matches that never would light. Finally he put his horse into a hand gallop, which could not last on such a road in the dark, and at last he broke down completely in his efforts to do impossible things, and began talking to me.

"You know Mr. Ghyrkins by correspondence, then?"

"Yes, and by controversy. And you, I see, know Miss Westonhaugh?"

"Yes; what do you think of her?"

"A charming creature of her type. Fair and

English, she will be fat at thirty-five, and will probably paint at forty, but at present she is perfection — of her kind of course," I added, not wishing to engage my friend in the defence of his three wives on the score of beauty.

"I see very little of Englishwomen," said Isaacs. "My position is peculiar, and though the men, many of whom I know quite intimately, often ask me to their houses, I fancy when I meet their women I can detect a certain scorn of my nationality, a certain undefinable manner toward me, by which I suppose they mean to convey to my obtuse comprehension that I am but a step better than a 'native' — a 'nigger' in fact, to use the term they love so well. So I simply avoid them, as a rule, for my temper is hasty. Of course I understand it well enough; they are brought up or trained by their fathers and husbands to regard the native Indian as an inferior being, an opinion in which, on the whole, I heartily concur. But they go a step farther and include all Asiatics in the same category. I do not choose to be confounded with a race I consider worn out and effete. As for the men, it is different. They know I am rich and influential in many ways that are useful to them now, and they hope that the fortunes of war or revolution may give them a chance of robbing me hereafter, in which they are mistaken. Now there is our stout friend, whom we nearly brought to grief a few minutes ago; he is always extremely civil, and never meets me that he does not renew his invitation to visit him."

"I should like to see something more of Mr. Currie Ghyrkins myself. I do not believe he is half as bad as I thought. Do you ever go there?"

"Sometimes. Yes, on second thoughts I believe I call on Mr. Currie Ghyrkins pretty often." Then after a pause he added, "I like her."

I pointed out the confusion of genders. Isaacs must have smiled to himself in the gloom, but he answered quietly —

"I mean Miss Westonhaugh. I like her — yes, I am quite sure I do. She is beautiful and sensible, though if she stays here much longer she will be like all the rest. We will go and see them to-morrow. Here we are; just in time for dinner. Come and smoke afterwards."