

CHAPTER III.

A LOOSE robe of light material from Kashmir thrown around him, Isaacs half sat, half lay, on the soft dark cushions in the corner of his outer room. His feet were slipperless, Eastern fashion, and his head covered with an embroidered cap of curious make. By the yellow light of the hanging lamps he was reading an Arabic book, and his face wore a puzzled look that sat strangely on the bold features. As I entered the book fell back on the cushion, sinking deep into the down by its weight, and one of the heavy gold clasps clanged sharply as it turned. He looked up, but did not rise, and greeted me, smiling, with the Arabic salutation —

“Peace be with you!”

“And with you, peace,” I answered in the same tongue. He smiled again at my unfamiliar pronunciation. I established myself on the divan near him, and inquired whether he had arrived at any satisfactory solution of his domestic difficulties.

“My father,” he said, “upon whom be peace, had but one wife, my mother. You know Mussulmans are allowed four lawful wives. Here is the passage in the beginning of the fourth chapter, ‘If ye fear

that ye shall not act with equity towards orphans of the female sex, take in marriage of such other women as please you, two, or three, or four, and not more. But, if ye fear that ye cannot act equitably towards so many, marry one only, or the slaves which ye shall have acquired.’

“The first part of this passage,” continued Isaacs, “is disputed; I mean the words referring to orphans. But the latter portion is plain enough. When the apostle warns those who fear they ‘cannot act equitably towards so many,’ I am sure that in his wisdom he meant something more by ‘equitable’ treatment than the mere supplying of bodily wants. He meant us to so order our households that there should be no jealousies, no heart-burnings, no unnecessary troubling of the peace. Now woman is a thing of the devil, jealous; and to manage a number of such creatures so that they shall be even passably harmonious among themselves is a fearful task, soul-wearying, heart-hardening, never-ending, leading to no result.”

“Just what I told you; a man is better with no wife at all than with three. But why do you talk about such matters with me, an unbeliever, a Christian, who, in the words of your prophet, ‘shall swallow down nothing but fire into my belly, and shall broil in raging flames’ when I die? Surely it is contrary to the custom of your co-religionists; and how can you expect an infidel Frank to give you advice?”

“I don’t,” laconically replied my host.

"Besides, with your views of women in general, their vocation, their aims, and their future state, is it at all likely that we should ever arrive at even a fair discussion of marriage and marriage laws? With us, women have souls, and, what is a great deal more, seem likely to have votes. They certainly have the respectful and courteous service of a large proportion of the male sex. You call a woman a thing of the devil; we call her an angel from heaven; and though some eccentric persons like myself refuse to ally themselves for life with any woman, I confess, as far as I am concerned, that it is because I cannot contemplate the constant society of an angel with the degree of appreciation such a privilege justly deserves; and I suspect that most confirmed bachelors, knowingly or unconsciously, think as I do. The Buddhists are not singular in their theory that permanent happiness should be the object."

"They say," said Isaacs, quickly interrupting, "that the aim of the ignorant is pleasure; the pursuit of the wise, happiness. Pray, under which category would you class marriage? I suppose it comes under one or the other."

"I cannot say I see the force of that. Look at your own case, since you have introduced it."

"Never mind my own case. I mean with your ideas of one wife, and heavenly woman, and voting, and domestic joy, and all the rest of it. Take the ideal creature you rave about——"

"I never rave about anything."

"Take the fascinating female you describe, and for the sake of argument imagine yourself very poor or very rich, since you would not enter wedlock in your present circumstances. Suppose you married your object of 'courteous service and respectful adoration;' which should you say you would attain thereby, pleasure or happiness?"

"Pleasure is but the refreshment that cheers us in the pursuit of true happiness," I answered, hoping to evade the direct question by a sententious phrase.

"I will not let you off so easily. You shall answer my question," he said. He looked full at me with a deep searching gaze that seemed hardly warranted by the lightness of the argument. I hesitated, and he impatiently leaned forward, uncrossing his legs and clasping his hands over one knee to bring himself nearer to me.

"Pleasure or happiness?" he repeated, "which is it to be?"

A sudden light flashed over my obscured intellect.

"Both," I answered. "Could you see the ideal woman as I would fain paint her to you, you would understand me better. The pleasure you enjoy in the society of a noble and beautiful woman should be but the refreshment by the wayside as you journey through life together. The day will come when she will be beautiful no longer, only noble and good, and true to you as to herself; and then, if pleasure has been to you what it should be, you will find that in the happiness attained it is no longer counted, or

needed, or thought of. It will have served its end, as the crib holds the ship in her place while she is building; and when your white-winged vessel has smoothly glided off into the great ocean of happiness, the crib and the stocks and the artificial supports will fall to pieces and be forgotten for ever. Yet have they had a purpose, and have borne a very important part in the life of your ship."

Having heard me attentively till I had finished, Isaacs relaxed his hold on his knee and threw himself back on the cushions, as if to entrench himself for a better fight. I had made an impression on him, but he was not the man to own it easily. Presumably to gain time, he called for hookahs and sherbet, and though the servants moved noiselessly in preparing them, their presence was an interruption.

When we were settled again he had taken a nearly upright position on the couch, and as he pulled at the long tube his face assumed that stolid look of Oriental indifference which is the most discouraging shower-bath to the persuasive powers. I had really no interest in converting him to my own point of view about women. Honestly, was it my own point of view at all? Would anything under heaven induce me, Paul Griggs, rich, or poor, or comfortably off, to marry any one—Miss Westonhaugh, for instance? Probably not. But then my preference for single blessedness did not prevent me from believing that women have souls. That morning the question of the marriage of the whole universe had

been a matter of the utmost indifference, and now I, a confirmed and hopelessly contented bachelor, was trying to convince a man with three wives that matrimony was a most excellent thing in its way, and that the pleasure of the honeymoon was but the faint introduction to the bliss of the silver wedding. It certainly must be Isaacs' own doing. He had launched on a voyage of discovery and had taken me in tow. I had a strong suspicion that he wanted to be convinced, and was playing indifference to soothe his conscience.

"Well," said I at last, "have you any fault to find with my reasoning or my simile?"

"With your simile—none. It is faultlessly perfect. You have not mixed up your metaphors in the least. Crib, stocks, ocean, ship—all correct, and very nautical. As for your reasoning, I do not believe there is anything in it. I do not believe that pleasure leads to happiness; I do not believe that a woman has a soul, and I deny the whole argument from beginning to end. There," he added with a smile that belied the brusqueness of his words, "that is my position. Talk me out of it if you can; the night is long, and my patience as that of the ass."

"I do not think this is a case for rigid application of logic. When the feelings are concerned—and where can they be more concerned than in our intercourse with women?—the only way to arrive at any conclusion is by a sort of trying-on process, imagining ourselves in the position indicated, and striving

to fancy how it would suit us. Let us begin in that way. Suppose yourself unmarried, your three wives and their children removed ——”

“Allah in his mercy grant it!” ejaculated Isaacs with great fervour.

“—— removed from the question altogether. Then imagine yourself thrown into daily conversation with some beautiful woman who has read what you have read, thought what you have thought, and dreamed the dreams of a nobler destiny that have visited you in waking and sleeping hours. A woman who, as she learned your strange story, should weep for the pains you suffered and rejoice for the difficulties overcome, who should understand your half spoken thoughts and proudly sympathise in your unuttered aspirations; in whom you might see the twin nature to your own, and detect the strong spirit and the brave soul, half revealed through the feminine gentleness and modesty that clothe her as with a garment. Imagine all this, and then suppose it lay in your power, was a question of choice, for you to take her hand in yours and go through life and death together, till death seem life for the joy of being united for ever. Suppose you married her — not to lock her up in an indolent atmosphere of rosewater, narghyles, and sweetmeats, to die of inanition or to pester you to death with complaints and jealousies and inopportune caresses; but to be with you and help your life when you most need help, by word and thought and deed, to grow more and more a part of you, an essen-

tial element of you in action or repose, to part from which would be to destroy at a blow the whole fabric of your existence. Would you not say that with such a woman the transitory pleasure of early conversation and intercourse had been the stepping-stone to the lasting happiness of such a friendship as you could never hope for in your old age among your sex? Would not her faithful love and abounding sympathy be dearer to you every day, though the roses in her cheek should fade and the bright hair whiten with the dust of life's journey? Would you not feel that when you died your dearest wish must be to join her where there should be no parting — her from whom there could be no parting here, short of death itself? Would you not believe she had a soul?”

“There is no end of your ‘supposing,’ but it is quite pretty. I am half inclined to ‘suppose’ too.” He took a sip of sherbet from the tall crystal goblet the servant had placed on a little three-legged stool beside him, and as he drank the cool liquid slowly, looked over the glass into my eyes, with a curious, half earnest, half smiling glance. I could not tell whether my enthusiastic picture of conjugal bliss amused him or attracted him, so I waited for him to speak again.

“Now that you have had your cruise in your ship of happiness on the waters of your cerulean imagination, permit me, who am land-born and a lover of the chase, to put my steed at a few fences in the difficult country of unadorned facts over which I propose to

hunt the wily fox, matrimony. I have never hunted a fox, but I can quite well imagine what it is like.

"In the first place, it is all very well to suppose that it had pleased Allah in his goodness to relieve me of my three incumbrances—meanwhile, there they are, and they are very real difficulties I assure you. Nevertheless are there means provided us by the foresight of the apostle, by which we may ease ourselves of domestic burdens when they are too heavy for us to bear. It would be quite within the bounds of possibility for me to divorce them all three, without making any special scandal. But if I did this thing, do you not think that my experience of married life has given me the most ineradicable prejudices against women as daily companions? Am I not persuaded that they all bicker and chatter and nibble sweetmeats alike—absolutely alike? Or if I looked abroad——"

"Stop," I said, "I am not reasoner enough to persuade you that all women have souls. Very likely in Persia and India they have not. I only want you to believe that there may be women so fortunate as to possess a modicum of immortality. Well, pardon my interruption, 'if you looked abroad,' as you were saying?——"

"If I looked abroad, I should probably discover little petty traits of the same class, if not exactly identical. I know little of Englishmen, and might be the more readily deceived. Supposing, if you will, that, after freeing myself from all my present

ties, in order to start afresh, I were to find myself attracted by some English girl here"—there must have been something wrong with the mouthpiece of his pipe, for he examined it very attentively—"attracted," he continued, "by some one, for instance, by Miss Westonhaugh——" he stopped short.

So my inspiration was right. My little picture, framed as we rode homeward, and indignantly scoffed at by my calmer reason, had visited his brain too. He had looked on the fair northern woman and fancied himself at her side, her lover, her husband. All this conversation and argument had been only a set plan to give himself the pleasure of contemplating and discussing such a union, without exciting surprise or comment. I had been suspecting it for some time, and now his sudden interest in his mouthpiece, to conceal a very real embarrassment, put the matter beyond all doubt.

He was probably in love, my acquaintance of two days. He saw in me a plain person, who could not possibly be a rival, having some knowledge of the world, and he was in need of a confidant, like a schoolgirl. I reflected that he was probably a victim for the first time. There is very little romance in India, and he had, of course, married for convenience and respectability rather than for any real affection. His first passion! This man who had been tossed about like a bit of driftwood, who had by his own determination and intelligence carved his way to wealth and power in the teeth of every difficulty. Just

now, in his embarrassment, he looked very boyish. His troubles had left no wrinkles on his smooth forehead, his bright black hair was untinged by a single thread of gray, and as he looked up, after the pause that followed when he mentioned the name of the woman he loved, there was a very really youthful look of mingled passion and distress in his beautiful eyes.

"I think, Mr. Isaacs, that you have used a stronger argument against the opinions you profess to hold than I could have found in my whole armoury of logic."

As he looked at me, the whole field of possibilities seemed opened. I must have been mistaken in thinking this marriage impossible and incongruous. What incongruity could there be in Isaacs marrying Miss Westonhaugh? My conclusions were false. Why must he necessarily return with her to England, and wear a red coat, and make himself ridiculous at the borough elections? Why should not this ideal couple choose some happy spot, as far from the corrosive influence of Anglo-Saxon prejudice as from the wretched sensualism of prosperous life east of the Mediterranean? I was carried away by the idea, returning with redoubled strength as a sequel to what I had argued and to what I had guessed. "Why not?" was the question I repeated to myself over and over again in the half minute's pause after Isaacs finished speaking.

"You are right," he said slowly, his half-closed

eyes fixed on his feet. "Yes, you are right. Why not? Indeed, indeed, why not?"

It must have been pure guess-work, this reading of my thoughts. When he was last speaking his manner was all indifference, scorn of my ideas, and defiance of every western mode of reasoning. And now, apparently by pure intuition, he gave a direct answer to the direct question I had mentally asked, and, what is more, his answer came with a quiet, far-away tone of conviction that had not a shade of unbelief in it. It was delivered as monotonously and naturally as a Christian says "Credo in unum Deum," as if it were not worth disputing; or as the devout Mussulman says "La Illah illallah," not stooping to consider the existence of any one bold enough to deny the dogma. No argument, not hours of patient reasoning, or weeks of well directed persuasion, could have wrought the change in the man's tone that came over it at the mere mention of the woman he loved. I had no share in his conversion. My arguments had been the excuse by which he had converted himself. Was he converted? was it real?

"Yes—I think I am," he replied in the same mechanical monotonous accent.

I shook myself, drank some sherbet, and kicked off one shoe impatiently. Was I dreaming? or had I been speaking aloud, really putting the questions he answered so quickly and appositively? Pshaw! a coincidence. I called the servant and ordered my hookah to be refilled. Isaacs sat still, immovable,

lost in thought, looking at his toes; an expression, almost stupid in its vacancy, was on his face, and the smoke curled slowly up in lazy wreaths from his neglected narghyle.

"You are converted then at last?" I said aloud. No answer followed my question; I watched him attentively.

"Mr. Isaacs!" still silence, was it possible that he had fallen asleep? his eyes were open, but I thought he was very pale. His upright position, however, belied any symptoms of unconsciousness.

"Isaacs! Abdul Hafiz! what is the matter!" He did not move. I rose to my feet and knelt beside him where he sat rigid, immovable, like a statue. Kiramat Ali, who had been watching, clapped his hands wildly and cried, "Wah! wah! Sahib margyâ!" — "The lord is dead." I motioned him away with a gesture and he held his peace, cowering in the corner, his eyes fixed on us. Then I bent low as I knelt and looked under my friend's brows, into his eyes. It was clear he did not see me, though he was looking straight at his feet. I felt for his pulse. It was very low, almost imperceptible, and certainly below forty beats to the minute. I took his right arm and tried to put it on my shoulder. It was perfectly rigid. There was no doubt about it — the man was in a cataleptic trance. I felt for the pulse again; it was lost.

I was no stranger to this curious phenomenon, where the mind is perfectly awake, but every bodily

faculty is lulled to sleep beyond possible excitation, unless the right means be employed. I went out and breathed the cool night air, bidding the servants be quiet, as the sahib was asleep. When sufficiently refreshed I re-entered the room, cast off my slippers, and stood a moment by my friend, who was as rigid as ever.

Nature, in her bountiful wisdom, has compensated me for a singular absence of beauty by endowing me with great strength, and with one of those exceptional constitutions which seem constantly charged with electricity. Without being what is called a mesmerist, I am possessed of considerable magnetic power, which I have endeavoured to develop as far as possible. In many a long conversation with old Manu Lal, my Brahmin instructor in languages and philosophy while in the plains, we had discussed the trance state in all its bearings. This old pundit was himself a distinguished mesmerist, and though generally unwilling to talk about what is termed occultism, on finding in me a man naturally endowed with the physical characteristics necessary to those pursuits, he had given me several valuable hints as to the application of my powers. Here was a worthy opportunity.

I rubbed my feet on the soft carpet, and summoning all my strength, began to make the prescribed passes over my friend's head and body. Very gradually the look of life returned to his face, the generous blood welled up under the clear olive skin, the lips

parted, and he sighed softly. Animation, as always happens in such cases, began at the precise point at which it had been suspended, and his first movement was to continue his examination of the mouthpiece in his hand. Then he looked up suddenly, and seeing me standing over him, gave a little shake, half turning his shoulders forward and back, and speaking once more in his natural voice, said—

“I must have been asleep! Have I? What has happened? Why are you standing there looking at me in that way?” Then, after a short interrogatory silence, his face changed and a look of annoyance shaded his features as he added in a low tone, “Oh! I see. It has happened to me once before. Sit down. I am all right now.” He sipped a little sherbet and leaned back in his old position. I begged him to go to bed, and prepared to withdraw, but he would not let me, and he seemed so anxious that I should stay, that I resumed my place. The whole incident had passed in ten minutes.

“Stay with me a little longer,” he repeated. “I need your company, perhaps your advice. I have had a vision, and you must hear about it.”

“I thought as I sat here that my spirit left my body and passed out through the night air and hovered over Simla. I could see into every bungalow, and was conscious of what passed in each, but there was only one where my gaze rested, for I saw upon a couch in a spacious chamber the sleeping form of one I knew. The masses of fair hair were heaped as

they fell upon the pillow, as if she had lain down weary of bearing the burden of such wealth of gold. The long dark lashes threw little shadows on her cheeks, and the parted lips seemed to smile at the sweetness of the gently heaving breath that fanned them as it came and went. And while I looked, the breath of her body became condensed, as it were, and took shape and form and colour, so that the image of herself floated up between her body and my watching spirit. Nearer and nearer to me came the exquisite vision of beauty, till we were face to face, my soul and hers, high up in the night. And there came from her eyes, as the long lids lifted, a look of perfect trust, and of love, and of infinite joy. Then she turned her face southward and pointed to my life star burning bright among his lesser fellows; and with a long sweet glance that bid me follow where she led, her maiden soul floated away, half lingering at first, as I watched her; then, with dizzy speed, vanishing in the firmament as a falling star, and leaving no trace behind, save an infinitely sad regret, and a longing to enter with her into that boundless empire of peace. But I could not, for my spirit was called back to this body. And I bless Allah that he has given me to see her once so, and to know that she has a soul, even as I have, for I have looked upon her spirit and I know it.”

Isaacs rose slowly to his feet and moved towards the open door. I followed him, and for a few moments we stood looking out at the scene below us.

It was near midnight, and the ever-decreasing moon was dragging herself up, as if ashamed of her waning beauty and tearful look.

"Griggs," said my friend, dropping the formal prefix for the first time, "all this is very strange. I believe I am in love!"

"I have not a doubt of it," I replied. "Peace be with you!"

"And with you peace."

So we parted.

CHAPTER IV.

IN Simla people make morning calls in the morning instead of after dark, as in more civilised countries. Soon after dawn I received a note from Isaacs, saying that he had business with the Maharajah of Baithopoor about some precious stones, but that he would be ready to go with me to call on Mr. Currie Ghyrkins at ten o'clock, or soon after. I had been thinking a great deal about the events of the previous evening, and I was looking forward to my next meeting with Isaacs with intense interest. After what had passed, nothing could be such a test of his true feelings as the visit to Miss Westonhaugh, which we proposed to make together, and I promised myself to lose no gesture, no word, no expression, which might throw light on the question that interested me—whether such a union were practical, possible, and wise.

At the appointed time, therefore, I was ready, and we mounted and sallied forth into the bright autumn day. All visits are made on horseback in Simla, as the distances are often considerable. You ride quietly along, and the saice follows you, walking or keeping pace with your gentle trot, as the case may