

to be embarrassed if left alone with a woman, or to embarrass her. He was too full of tact, and his sensibilities were so fine that, with his easy command of language, he must be agreeable *quand même*; and such an opportunity would have given him an easy lead away from the athletic Kildare, whom I suspected strongly of being a rival for Miss Westonhaugh's favour. There is an easy air of familiar proprietorship about an Englishman in love that is not to be mistaken. It is a subtle thing, and expresses itself neither in word nor deed in its earlier stages of development; but it is there all the same, and the combination of this possessive mood, with a certain shyness which often goes with it, is amusing.

"Griggs," said Isaacs, "have you ever seen the Rajah of Baithopoor?"

"No; you had some business with him this morning, had you not?"

"Yes — some — business — if you call it so. If you would like to see him I can take you there, and I think you would be interested in the — the business. It is not often such gems are bought and sold in such a way, and besides, he is very amusing. He is at least two thousand years old, and will go to Saturn when he dies. His fingers are long and crooked, and that which he putteth into his pockets, verily he shall not take it out."

"A pleasing picture; a good contrast to the one we have left behind us. I like contrasts, and I should like to see him."

"You shall." And we lit our cheroots.

CHAPTER V.

"WE will go there at four," said Isaacs, coming into my rooms after tiffin, a meal of which I found he rarely partook. "I said three, this morning, but it is not a bad plan to keep natives waiting. It makes them impatient, and then they commit themselves."

"You are Machiavellian. It is pretty clear which of you is asking the favour."

"Yes, it is pretty clear." He sat down and took up the last number of the *Howler* which lay on the table. Presently he looked up. "Griggs, why do you not come to Delhi? We might start a newspaper there, you know, in the Conservative interest."

"In the interest of Mr. Algernon Currie Ghyrkins?" I inquired.

"Precisely. You anticipate my thoughts with a true sympathy. I suppose you have no conscience?"

"Political conscience? No, certainly not, out of my own country, which is the only one where that sort of thing commands a high salary. No, I have no conscience."

"You would really write as willingly for the Conservatives as you do for the Liberals?"

"Oh yes. I could not write so well on the Conservative side just now, because they are 'in,' and it is more blessed to abuse than to be abused, and ever so much easier. But as far as any prejudice on the subject is concerned, I have none. I had as lief defend a party that robs India 'for her own good,' as support those who would rob her with a more cynical frankness and unblushingly transfer the proceeds to their own pockets. I do not care a rush whether they rob Peter to pay Paul, or fraudulently deprive Paul of his goods for the benefit of Peter."

"That is the way to look at it. I could tell you some very pretty stories about that kind of thing. As for the journalistic enterprise, it is only a possible card to be played if the old gentleman is obdurate."

"Isaacs," said I, "I have only known you three days, but you have taken me into your confidence to some extent; probably because I am not English. I may be of use to you, and I am sure I sincerely hope so. Meanwhile I want to ask you a question, if you will allow me to." I paused for an answer. We were standing by the open door, and Isaacs leaned back against the door-post, his eyes fixed on me, half closed, as he threw his head back. He looked at me somewhat curiously, and I thought a smile flickered round his mouth, as if he anticipated what the question would be.

"Certainly," he said slowly. "Ask me anything you like. I have nothing to conceal."

"Do you seriously think of marrying, or proposing to marry, Miss Katharine Westonhaugh?"

"I do seriously think of proposing to marry, and of marrying, Miss Westonhaugh." He looked very determined as he thus categorically affirmed his intention. I knew he meant it, and I knew enough of Oriental character to understand that a man like Abdul Hafizben-Isâk, of strong passions, infinite wit, and immense wealth, was not likely to fail in anything he undertook to do. When Asiatic indifference gives way under the strong pressure of some master passion, there is no length to which the hot and impetuous temper beneath may not carry the man. Isaacs had evidently made up his mind. I did not think he could know much about the usual methods of wooing English girls, but as I glanced at his graceful figure, his matchless eyes, and noted for the hundredth time the commanding, high-bred air that was the breath of his character, I felt that his rival would have but a poor chance of success. He guessed my thoughts.

"What do you think of me?" he asked, smiling. "Will you back me for a place? I have advantages, you must allow — and worldly advantages too. They are not rich people at all."

"My dear Isaacs, I will back you to win. But as far as 'worldly advantages' are concerned, do not trust to wealth for a moment. Do not flatter yourself that there will be any kind of a bargain, as if you were marrying a Persian girl. There is nothing venal in that young lady's veins, I am sure."

"Allah forbid! But there is something very venal

in the veins of Mr. Currie Ghyrkens. I propose to carry the outworks one by one. He is her uncle, her guardian, her only relation, save her brother. I do not think either of those men would be sorry to see her married to a man of stainless name and considerable fortune."

"You forget your three incumbrances, as you called them last night."

"No—I do not forget them. It is allowed me by my religion to marry a fourth, and I need not tell you that she would be thenceforth my only wife."

"But would her guardian and brother ever think of allowing her to take such a position?"

"Why not? You know very well that the English in general hardly consider our marriages to be marriages at all—knowing the looseness of the bond. That is the prevailing impression."

"Yes, I know. But then they would consider your marriage with Miss Westonhaugh in the same light, which would not make matters any easier, as far as I can see."

"Pardon me. I should marry Miss Westonhaugh by the English marriage service and under English law. I should be as much bound to her, and to her alone, as if I were an Englishman myself."

"Well, you have evidently thought it out and taken legal advice; and really, as far as the technical part of it goes, I suppose you have as good a chance as Lord Steepleton Kildare."

Isaacs frowned, and his eyes flashed. I saw at

once that he considered the Irish officer a rival, and a dangerous one. I did not think that if Isaacs had fair play and the same opportunities Kildare had much chance. Besides there was a difficulty in the way.

"As far as religion is concerned, Lord Steepleton is not much better off than you, if he wants to marry Miss Westonhaugh. The Kildares have been Roman Catholics since the memory of man, and they are very proud of it. Theoretically, it is as hard for a Roman Catholic man to marry a Protestant woman, as for a Mussulman to wed a Christian of any denomination. Harder, in fact, for your marriage depends upon the consent of the lady, and his upon the consent of the Church. He has all sorts of difficulties to surmount, while you have only to get your personality accepted—which, when I look at you, I think might be done," I added, laughing.

"*Jo hoga, so hoga*—what will be, will be," he said; "but religion or no religion, I mean to do it." Then he lighted a cigarette and said, "Come, it is time to go and see his Saturnine majesty, the Maharajah of Baithopoor."

I called for my hat and gloves.

"By-the-bye, Griggs, you may as well put on a black coat. You know the old fellow is a king, after all, and you had better produce a favourable impression." I retired to comply with his request, and as I came back he turned quickly and came towards me, holding out both hands, with a very earnest look in his face.

"Griggs, I care for that lady more than I can tell you," he said, taking my hands in his.

"My dear fellow, I am sure you do. People do not go suddenly into trances at a name that is indifferent to them. I am sure you love her very honestly and dearly."

"You and she have come into my life almost together, for it was not until I talked with you last night that I made up my mind. Will you help me? I have not a friend in the world." The simple, boyish look was in his eyes, and he stood holding my hands and waiting for my answer. I was so fascinated that I would have then and there gone through fire and water for him, as I would now.

"Yes. I will help you. I will be a friend to you."

"Thank you. I believe you." He dropped my hands, and we turned and went out, silent.

In all my wanderings I had never promised any man my friendship and unconditional support before. There was something about Isaacs that overcame and utterly swept away preconceived ideas, rules, and prejudices. It was but the third day of our acquaintance, and here was I swearing eternal friendship like a school-girl; promising to help a man, of whose very existence I knew nothing three days ago, to marry a woman whom I had seen for the first time yesterday. But I resolved that, having pledged myself, I would do my part with my might, whatever that part might be. Meanwhile we rode along, and

Isaacs began to talk about the visit we were going to make.

"I think," he said, "that you had better know something about this matter beforehand. The way is long, and we cannot ride fast over the steep roads, so there is plenty of time. Do not imagine that I have idly asked you to go with me because I supposed it would amuse you. Dismiss also from your mind the impression that it is a question of buying and selling jewels. It is a very serious matter, and if you would prefer to have nothing to do with it, do not hesitate to say so. I promised the maharajah this morning that I would bring, this afternoon, a reliable person of experience, who could give advice, and who might be induced to give his assistance as well as his counsel. I have not known you long, but I know you by reputation, and I decided to bring you, if you would come. From the very nature of the case I can tell you nothing more, unless you consent to go with me."

"I will go," I said.

"In that case I will try and explain the situation in as few words as possible. The maharajah is in a tight place. You will readily understand that the present difficulties in Kabul cause him endless anxiety, considering the position of his dominions. The unexpected turn of events, following now so rapidly on each other since the English wantonly sacrificed Cavagnari and his friends to a vainglorious love of bravado, has shaken the confidence of the

native princes in the stability of English rule. They are frightened out of their senses, having the fear of the tribes before them if the English should be worsted; and they dread, on the other hand, lest the English, finding themselves in great straits, should levy heavy contributions on them — the native princes — for the consolidation of what they term the 'Empire.' They have not much sense, these poor old kings and boy princes, or they would see that the English do not dare to try any of those old-fashioned Clive tactics now. But old Baithopoor has heard all about the King of Oude, and thinks he may share the same fate."

"I think he may make his mind easy on that score. The kingdom of Baithopoor is too inconveniently situated and too full of mosquitoes to attract the English. Besides, there are more roses than rubies there just now."

"True, and that question interests me closely, for the old man owes me a great deal of money. It was I who pulled him through the last famine."

"Not a very profitable investment, I should think. Shall you ever see a rupee of that money again?"

"Yes; he will pay me; though I did not think so a week ago, or indeed yesterday. I lent him the means of feeding his people and saving many of them from actual death by starvation, because there are so many Mussulmans among them, though the maharajah is a Hindoo. As for him, he might starve tomorrow, the infidel hound; I would not give him a

chowpatti or a mouthful of *dal* to keep his wretched old body alive."

"Do I understand that this interview relates to the repayment of the moneys you have advanced?"

"Yes; though that is not the most interesting part of it. He wanted to pay me in flesh — human flesh, and he offered to make me a king into the bargain, if I would forgive him the debt. The latter part of the proposal was purely visionary. The promise to pay in so much humanity he is able to perform. I have not made up my mind."

I looked at Isaacs in utter astonishment. What in the world could he mean? Had the maharajah offered him some more wives — creatures of peerless beauty and immense value? No; I knew he would not hesitate now to refuse such a proposition.

"Will you please to explain what you mean by his paying you in man?" I asked.

"In two words. The Maharajah of Baithopoor has in his possession a man. Safely stowed away under a triple watch and carefully tended, this man awaits his fate as the maharajah may decide. The English Government would pay an enormous sum for this man, but Baithopoor fears that they would ask awkward questions, and perhaps not believe the answers he would give them. So, as he owes me a good deal, he thinks I might be induced to take his prisoner and realise him, so to speak; thus cancelling the debt, and saving him from the alternative of putting the man to death privately, or of going through dan-

gerous negotiations with the Government. Now this thing is perfectly feasible, and it depends upon me to say 'yes' or 'no' to the proposition. Do you see now? It is a serious matter enough."

"But the man—who is he? Why do the English want him so much?"

Isaacs pressed his horse close to mine, and looking round to see that the saice was a long way behind, he put his hand on my shoulder, and, leaning out of the saddle till his mouth almost touched my ear, he whispered quickly—

"Shere Ali."

"The devil, you say!" I ejaculated, surprised out of grammar and decorum by the startling news. Persons who were in India in 1879 will not have forgotten the endless speculation caused by the disappearance of the Emir of Afghanistan, Shere Ali, in the spring of that year. Defeated by the English at Ali Musjid and Peiwar, and believing his cause lost, he fled, no one knew whither; though there is reason to think that he might have returned to power and popularity among the Afghan tribes if he had presented himself after the murder of Cavagnari.

"Yes," continued Isaacs, "he has been a prisoner in the palace of Baithopoor for six weeks, and not a soul save the maharajah and you and I know it. He came to Baithopoor, humbly disguised as a Yogi from the hills, though he is a Mussulman, and having obtained a private hearing, disclosed his real name, proposing to the sovereign a joint movement on

Kabul, then just pacified by the British, and promising all manner of things for the assistance. Old Baitho, who is no fool, clapped him into prison under a guard of Punjabi soldiers who could not speak a word of Afghan, and after due consideration packed up his traps and betook himself to Simla by short stages, for the journey is not an easy one for a man of his years. He arrived the day before yesterday, and has ostensibly come to congratulate the Viceroy on the success of the British arms. He has had to modify the enthusiasm of his proposed address, in consequence of the bad news from Kabul. Of course, his first move was to send for me, and I had a long interview this morning, in which he explained everything. I told him that I would not move in the matter without a third person—necessary as a witness when dealing with such people—and I have brought you."

"But what was his proposal to invest you with a crown? Did he think you were a likely person for a new Emir of Kabul?"

"Exactly. My faith, and above all, my wealth, suggested to him that I, as a born Persian, might be the very man for the vacant throne. No doubt, the English would be delighted to have me there. But the whole thing is visionary and ridiculous. I think I shall accept the other proposition, and take the prisoner. It is a good bargain."

I was silent. The intimate way in which I had seen Isaacs hitherto had made me forget his immense

wealth and his power. I had not realised that he could be so closely connected with intrigues of such importance as this, or that independant native princes were likely to look upon him as a possible Emir of Afghanistan. I had nothing to say, and I determined to keep to the part I was brought to perform, which was that of a witness, and nothing more. If my advice were asked, I would speak boldly for Shere Ali's liberation and protest against the poor man being bought and sold in this way. This train of thought reminded me of Isaacs' words when we left Miss Westonhaugh that morning. "It is not often," he had said, "that you see such jewels bought and sold." No, indeed!

"You see," said Isaacs, as we neared our destination, "Baithopoor is in my power, body and soul, for a word from me would expose him to the British Government as 'harbouring traitors,' as they would express it. On the other hand, the fact that you, the third party, are a journalist, and could at a moment's notice give publicity to the whole thing, will be an additional safeguard. I have him as in a vice. And now put on your most formal manners and look as if you were impenetrable as the rock and unbending as cast iron, for we have reached his bungalow."

I could not but admire the perfect calm and caution with which he was conducting an affair involving millions of money, a possible indictment for high treason, and the key-note of the Afghan question,

while I knew that his whole soul was absorbed in the contemplation of a beautiful picture ever before him, sleeping or waking. Whatever I might think of his bargaining for the possession of Shere Ali, he had a great, even untiring, intellect. He had the elements of a leader of men, and I fondly hoped he might be a ruler some day.

The bungalow in which the Maharajah of Baithopoor had taken up his residence during his visit was very much like all the rest of the houses I saw in Simla. The verandah, however, was crowded with servants and sowars in gorgeous but rather tawdry liveries, not all of them as clean as they should have been. Horses with elaborate high saddles and embroidered trappings rather the worse for wear were being led up and down the walk. As we neared the door there was a strong smell of rosewater and native perfumes and hookah tobacco—the indescribable odour of Eastern high life. There was also a general air of wasteful and tawdry dowdiness, if I may coin such a word, which one constantly sees in the retinues of native princes and rich native merchants, ill contrasting with the great intrinsic value of some of the ornaments worn by the chief officers of the train.

Isaacs spoke a few words in a low voice to the jemadar at the door, and we were admitted into a small room in the side of the house, opening, as all rooms do in India, on to the verandah. There were low wooden charpoys around the walls, and we sat