

CHAPTER VI.

"WHY did you not come and see the game? After all your enthusiasm about polo this morning, I did not think you would miss anything so good," were the first words of Miss Westonhaugh as we met her and Kildare in the narrow path that leads down to Annandale. Two men were riding behind them, who proved to be Mr. Currie Ghyrkins and Mr. John Westonhaugh. The latter was duly introduced to us; a quiet, spare man, with his sister's features, but without a trace of her superb colour and animal spirits. He had the real Bombay paleness, and had been steamed to the bone through the rains. As we were introduced, Isaacs started and said quickly that he believed he had met Mr. Westonhaugh before.

"It is possible, quite possible," said that gentleman affably, "especially if you ever go to Bombay."

"Yes — it was in Bombay — some twelve years ago. You have probably forgotten me."

"Ah, yes. I was young and green then. I wonder you remember me." He did not show any very lively interest in the matter, though he smiled pleasantly.

Miss Westonhaugh must have been teasing Lord

Steepleton, for he looked flushed and annoyed, and she was in capital spirits. We turned to go back with the party, and by a turn of the wrist Isaacs wheeled his horse to the side of Miss Westonhaugh's, a position he did not again abandon. They were leading, and I resolved they should have a chance, as the path was not broad enough for more than two to ride abreast. So I furtively excited my horse by a touch of the heel and a quick strain on the curb, throwing him across the road, and thus producing a momentary delay, of which the two riders in front took advantage to increase their distance. Then we fell in, Mr. Ghyrkins and I in front, while the dejected Kildare rode behind with Mr. John Westonhaugh. Ghyrkins and I, being heavy men, heavily mounted, controlled the situation, and before long Isaacs and Miss Westonhaugh were a couple of hundred yards ahead, and we only caught occasional glimpses of them through the trees as they wound in and out along the path.

"What are those youngsters talking about, back there? Tigers, I'll be bound," said Mr. Ghyrkins to me. Sure enough, they were.

"What do you suppose I found when we got back this afternoon, Mr. Griggs? Why, this hairbrained young Kildare has been proposing to my niece —" his horse stumbled, but recovered himself in a moment.

"You don't mean it," said I, rather startled.

"Oh no, no, no. I don't mean that at all. Ha!

ha! ha! very good, very good. No, no. Lord Steepleton wants us all to go on a tiger-hunt to amuse John, and he proposes — ha! ha! — really too funny of me — that Miss Westonhaugh should go with us.”

“I suppose you have no objection, Mr. Ghyrkins? Ladies constantly go on such expeditions, and they do not appear to be the least in the way.”

“Objections? Of course I have objections. Do you suppose I want to drag my niece to a premature grave? Think of the fever and the rough living and all, and she only just out from England.”

“She looks as if she could stand anything,” I said, as just then an open space in the trees gave us a glimpse of Miss Westonhaugh and Isaacs ambling along and apparently in earnest conversation. She certainly looked strong enough to go tiger-hunting that minute, as she sat erect but half turned to the off side, listening to what Isaacs seemed to be saying.

“I hope you will not go and tell her so,” said Ghyrkins. “If she gets an idea that the thing is possible, there will be no holding her. You don’t know her. I hardly know her myself. Never saw her since she was a baby till the other day. Now you are the sort of person to go after tigers. Why do you not go off with my nephew and Mr. Isaacs and Kildare, and kill as many of them as you like?”

“I have no objection, I am sure. I suppose the *Howler* could spare me for a fortnight, now that I have converted the Press Commissioner, your new

deus ex machinâ for the obstruction of news. What a motley party we should be. Let me see — a Bombay Civil Servant, an Irish nobleman, a Persian millionaire, and a Yankee newspaper man. By Jove! add to that a famous Revenue Commissioner and a reigning beauty, and the sextett is complete.” Mr. Ghyrkins looked pleased at the gross flattery of himself. I recollected suddenly that, though he was far from famous as a revenue commissioner, I had read of some good shooting he had done in his younger days. Here was a chance.

“Besides, Mr. Ghyrkins, a tiger-hunting party would not be the thing without some seasoned Nimrod to advise and direct us. Who so fitted for the post as the man of many a chase, the companion of Maori, the slayer of the twelve foot tiger in the Nepal hills in 1861?”

“You have a good memory, Mr. Griggs,” said the old fellow, perfectly delighted, and now fairly launched on his favourite topic. “By Gad, sir, if I thought I should get such another chance I would go with you to-morrow!”

“Why not? there are lots of big man-eaters about,” and I incontinently reeled off half a page of statistics, more or less accurate, about the number of persons destroyed by snakes and wild beasts in the last year. “Of course most of those deaths were from tigers, and it is a really good action to kill a few. Many people can see tigers but cannot shoot them, whereas your deeds of death amongst them

are a matter of history. You really ought to be philanthropic, Mr. Ghyrkens, and go with us. We might stand a chance of seeing some real sport then."

"Why, really, now that you make me think of it, I believe I should like it amazingly, and I could leave my niece with Lady — Lady — Stick-in-the-mud; what the deuce is her name? The wife of the Chief Justice, you know. You ought to know, really — I never remember names much;" he jerked out his sentences irately.

"Certainly, Lady Smith-Tompkins, you mean. Yes, you might do that — that is, if Miss Westonhaugh has had the measles, and is not afraid of them. I heard this morning that three of the little Smith-Tompkinses had them quite badly."

"You don't say so! Well, well, we shall find some one else, no doubt."

I was certain that at that very moment Isaacs and Miss Westonhaugh were planning the whole expedition, and so I returned to the question of sport and inquired where we should go. This led to considerable discussion, and before we arrived at Mr. Ghyrkens' bungalow — still in the same order — it was very clear that the old sportsman had made up his mind to kill one more tiger at all events; and that, rather than forego the enjoyment of the chase, he would be willing to take his niece with him. As for the direction of the expedition, that could be decided in a day or two. It was not the best season for tigers — the early spring is better — but they are

always to be found in the forests of the Terai, the country along the base of the hills, north of Oude.

When we reached the house it was quite dark, for we had ridden slowly. The light from the open door, falling across the verandah, showed us Miss Westonhaugh seated in a huge chair, and Isaacs standing by her side slightly bending, and holding his hat in his hand. They were still talking, but as we rode up to the lawn and shouted for the saices, Isaacs stood up and looked across towards us, and their voices ceased. It was evident that he had succeeded in thoroughly interesting her, for I thought — though it was some distance, and the light on them was not strong — that as he straightened himself and stopped speaking, she looked up to his face as if regretting that he did not go on. I dismounted with the rest and walked up to bid Miss Westonhaugh good-night.

"You must come and dine to-morrow night," said Mr. Ghyrkens, "and we will arrange all about it. Sharp seven. To-morrow is Sunday, you know. Kildare, you must come too, if you mean business. Seven. We must look sharp and start, if we mean to come back here before the Viceroy goes."

"Oh in that case," said Kildare, turning to me, "we can settle all about the polo match for Monday, can't we?"

"Of course, very good of you to take the trouble."

"Not a bit of it. Good-night." We bowed and went back to find our horses in the gloom. After

some fumbling, for it was intensely dark after facing the light in the doorway of the bungalow, we got into the saddle and turned homeward through the trees.

"Thank you, Griggs," said Isaacs. "May your feet never weary, and your shadow never be less."

"Don't mention it, and thanks about the shadow. Only it is never likely to be less than at the present moment. How dark it is, to be sure!" I knew well enough what he was thanking me for. I lit a cheroot.

"Isaacs," I said, "you are a pretty cool hand, upon my word."

"Why?"

"Why, indeed! Here you and Miss Westonhaugh have been calmly planning an extensive tiger-hunt, when you have promised to be in the neighbourhood of Keitung in three weeks, wherever that may be. I suppose it is in the opposite direction from here, for you will not find any tigers nearer than the Terai at this time of year."

"I do not see the difficulty," he answered. "We can be in Oude in two days from here; shoot tigers for ten days, and be here again in two days more. That is just a fortnight. It will not take me a week to reach Keitung. I am much mistaken if I do not get there in three days. I shall lay a *dák* by messengers before I go to Oude, and between a double set of coolies and lots of ponies wherever the roads are good enough, I shall be at the place of meeting soon enough, never fear."

"Oh, very well; but I hardly think Ghyrkins will want to return under three weeks; and—I did not think you would want to leave the party." He had evidently planned the whole three weeks' business carefully. I did not continue the conversation. He was naturally absorbed in the arrangement of his numerous schemes—no easy matter, when affairs of magnitude have to be ordered to suit the exigencies of a *grande passion*. I shrank from intruding on his reflections, and I had quite enough to do in keeping my horse on his feet in the thick darkness. Suddenly he reared violently, and then stood still, quivering in every limb. Isaacs' horse plunged and snorted by my side, and cannoned heavily against me. Then all was quiet. I could see nothing. Presently a voice, low and musical, broke on the darkness, and I thought I could distinguish a tall figure on foot at Isaacs' knee. Whoever the man was he must be on the other side of my companion, but I made out a head from which the voice proceeded.

"Peace, Abdul Hafiz!" it said.

"Aleikum Salaam, Ram Lal!" answered Isaacs. He must have recognised the man by his voice.

"Abdul," continued the stranger, speaking Persian. "I have business with thee this night; thou art going home. If it is thy pleasure I will be with thee in two hours in thy dwelling."

"Thy pleasure is my pleasure. Be it so." I thought the head disappeared.

"Be it so," the voice echoed, growing faint, as if

moving rapidly away from us. The horses, momentarily startled by the unexpected pedestrian, regained their equanimity. I confess the incident gave me a curiously unpleasant sensation. It was so very odd that a man on foot—a Persian, I judged, by his accent—should know of my companion's whereabouts, and that they should recognise each other by their voices. I recollected that our coming to Mr. Ghyrkins' bungalow was wholly unpremeditated, and I was sure Isaacs had spoken to none but our party—not even to his saice—since our meeting with the Westonhaughs on the Annandale road an hour and a half before.

"I wonder what he wants," said my friend, apparently soliloquising.

"He seems to know where to find you, at all events," I answered. "He must have second sight to know you had been to Carisbrooke."

"He has. He is a very singular personage altogether. However, he has done me more than one service before now, and though I do not comprehend his method of arriving at conclusions, still less his mode of locomotion, I am always glad of his advice."

"But what is he? Is he a Persian?—you called him by an Indian name, but that may be a disguise—is he a wise man from Irân?"

"He is a very wise man, but not from Irân. No. He is a Brahmin by birth, a Buddhist by adopted religion, and he calls himself an 'adept' by profession, I suppose, if he can be said to have any. He

comes and goes unexpectedly, with amazing rapidity. His visits are brief, but he always seems to be perfectly conversant with the matter in hand, whatever it be. He will come to-night and give me about twenty words of advice, which I may follow or may not, as my judgment dictates; and before I have answered or recovered from my surprise, he will have vanished, apparently into space; for if I ask my servants where he is gone they will stare at me as if I were crazy, until I show them that the room is empty, and accuse them of going to sleep instead of seeing who goes in and out of my apartment. He speaks more languages than I do, and better. He once told me he was educated in Edinburgh, and his perfect knowledge of European affairs and of European topics leads me to think he must have been there a long time. Have you ever looked into the higher phases of Buddhism? It is a very interesting study."

"Yes, I have read something about it. Indeed I have read a good deal, and have thought more. The subject is full of interest, as you say. If I had been an Asiatic by birth, I am sure I should have sought to attain *moksha*, even if it required a lifetime to pass through all the degrees of initiation. There is something so rational about their theories, disclaiming, as they do, all supernatural power; and, at the same time, there is something so pure and high in their conception of life, in their ideas about the ideal, if you will allow me the expression, that I do