

## CHAPTER X

### NEWS FROM CHITIPUR

A LONG silence followed upon his words. Jane Repton turned to the mantelshelf and moved an ornament here and another one there. She had contemplated this very consequence of Thresk's journey to Chitipur. She had actually worked for it herself. She was frank enough to acknowledge that. None the less his announcement, quietly as he had made it, was a shock to her. She did not, however, go back upon her work; and when she spoke it was rather to make sure that he was not going to act upon an unconsidered impulse.

"It will damage your career," she said. "Of course you have thought of that."

"It will alter it," he answered, "if she comes to me. I shall go out of Parliament, of course."

"And your practice?"

"That will suffer too for a while no doubt. But even if I lost it altogether I should not be a poor man."

"You have saved money?"

"No. There has not been much time for that, but for a good many years now I have collected

silver and miniatures. I know something about them and the collection is of value."

"I see."

Mrs. Repton looked at him now. Oh, yes, he had thought his proposal out during the night journey to Bombay—not a doubt of it.

"Stella, too, will suffer," she said.

"Worse than she does now?" asked Thresk.

"No. But her position will be difficult for awhile at least," and she came towards Thresk and pleaded.

"You will be thoughtful of her, for her? Oh, if you should play her false—how I should hate you!" and her eyes flashed fire at him.

"I don't think that you need fear that."

But he was too calm for her, too quiet. She was in the mood to want heroics. She clamoured for protestations as a drug for her uneasy mind. And Thresk stood before her without one. She searched his face with doubtful eyes. Oh, there seemed to her no tenderness in it.

"She will need—love," said Mrs. Repton.

"There—that's the word. Can you give it her?"

"If she comes to me—yes. I have wanted her for eight years," and then suddenly she got, not heroics, but a glimpse of a real passion. A spasm of pain convulsed his face. He sat down and beat with his fist upon the table. "It was horrible to me to ride away from that camp and leave her there—miles away from any friend. I would have torn her from him by force if there had been a single hope that way. But his levies would have

barred the road. No, this was the only chance: to come away to Bombay, to write to her that the first day, the first night she is able to slip out and travel here she will find me waiting."

Mrs. Repton was satisfied. But while he had been speaking a new fear had entered into her.

"There's something I should have thought of," she exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"Captain Ballantyne is not generous. He is just the sort of man not to divorce his wife."

Thresk raised his head. Clearly that possibility had no more occurred to him than it had to Jane Repton. He thought it over now.

"Just the sort of man," he agreed. "But we must take that risk—if she comes."

"The letter's not yet written," Mrs. Repton suggested.

"But it will be," he replied, and then he stood and confronted her. "Do you wish me not to write it?"

She avoided his eyes, she looked upon the floor, she began more than one sentence of evasion; but in the end she took both his hands in hers and said stoutly:

"No, I don't! Write! Write!"

"Thank you!"

He went to the door, and when he had reached it she called to him in a low voice.

"Mr. Thresk, what did you mean when you repeated and repeated if she comes?"

Thresk came slowly back into the room.

“I meant that eight years ago I gave her a very good reason why she should put no faith in me.”

He told her that quite frankly and simply, but he told her no more than that, and she let him go. He went back to the great hotel on the Apollo Bund and sent off a number of cablegrams to London saying that he had missed his steamer and that the work waiting for him must go to other hands. The letter to Stella Ballantyne he kept to the last. It could not reach her immediately in any case since she was in camp. For all he knew it might be weeks before she read it; and he had need to go warily in the writing of it. Certain words she had used to him were an encouragement; but there were others which made him doubt whether she would have any faith in him. Every now and then there had been a savour of bitterness. Once she had been shamed because of him, on Bignor Hill where Stane Street runs to Chichester, and a second time in front of him in the tent at Chitipur. No, it was not an easy letter which he had to write, and he took the night and the greater part of the next day to decide upon its wording. It could not in any case go until the night-mail. He had finished it and directed it by six o'clock in the evening and he went down with the letter in his hand into the big lounge to post it in the box there. But it never was posted.

Close to the foot of the staircase stood a tape-machine, and as Thresk descended he heard the clicking of the instrument and saw the usual small group of visitors about it. They were mostly

Americans, and they were reading out to one another the latest prices of the stock-markets. Some of the chatter reached to Thresk's inattentive ears, and when he was only two steps from the floor one carelessly-spoken phrase interjected between the values of two securities brought him to a stop. The speaker was a young man with a squarish face and thick hair parted accurately in the middle. He was dressed in a thin grey suit and he was passing the tape between his fingers as it ran out. The picture of him was impressed during that instant upon Thresk's mind, so that he could never afterwards forget it.

"Copper's up one point," he was saying, "that's fine. Who's Captain Ballantyne, I wonder? United Steel has dropped seven-eighths. Well, that doesn't affect me," and so he ran on.

Thresk heard no more of what he said. He stood wondering what news could have come up on the tape of Captain Ballantyne who was out in camp in the state of Chitipur, or if there was another Captain Ballantyne. He joined the little group in front of the machine, and picking up the ribbon from the floor ran his eyes backwards along it until he came to "United Steel." The sentence in front of that ran as follows:

"Captain Ballantyne was found dead early yesterday morning outside his tent close to Jarwhal Junction."

Thresk read the sentence twice and then walked away. The news might be false, of course, but if it were true here was a revolution in his life.

There was no need for this letter which he held in his hand. The way was smoothed out for Stella, for him. Not for a moment could he pretend to do anything but welcome the news, to wish with all his heart that it was true. And it seemed probable news. There was the matter of that photograph. Thresk had carried it out to the Governor's house on Malabar Point on the very morning of his arrival in Bombay. He had driven on to Mrs. Repton's house after he had left it there. But he had taken it away from Chitipur at too late a day to save Ballantyne. Ballantyne had, after all, had good cause to be afraid while he possessed it, and the news had not yet got to Salak's friends that it had left his possession. Thus he made out the history of Captain Ballantyne's death.

The tape machine, however, might have ticked out a mere rumour with no truth in it at all. He went to the office and obtained a copy of *The Advocate of India*,—the evening newspaper of the city. He looked at the stop-press telegrams. There was no mention of Ballantyne's death. Nor on glancing down the columns could he find in any paragraph a statement that any mishap had befallen him. But on the other hand he read that he himself, Henry Thresk, having brought his case to a successful conclusion, had left India yesterday by the mail-steamer *Madras*, bound for Marseilles. He threw down the paper and went to the telephone-box. If the news were true the one person likely to know of it was Mrs. Repton.

Thresk rang up the house on the Khamballa Hill and asked to speak to her. An answer was returned to him at once that Mrs. Repton had given orders that she was not to be disturbed. Thresk however insisted :

“ Will you please give my name to her— Henry Thresk ? ” and he waited with his ear to the receiver for a century. At last a voice spoke to him, but it was again the voice of the servant.

“ The Memsahib very sorry, sir, but cannot speak to any one just now ; ” and he heard the jar of the instrument as the receiver at the other end was sharply hung up and the connection broken.

Thresk came out from the telephone-box with a face puzzled and very grave. Mrs. Repton refused to speak to him !

It was a fact, an inexplicable fact, and it alarmed him. It was impossible to believe that mere reflection during the last twenty-four hours had brought about so complete a revolution in her feelings. He to whom she had passionately cried “ Write ! Write ! ” only yesterday could hardly be barred out from mere speech with her to-day for any fault of his. He had done nothing, had seen no one. Thresk was certain now that the news upon the tape was true. But it could not be all the truth. There was something behind it— something rather grim and terrible.

Thresk walked to the door of the hotel and called up a motor-car. “ Tell him to drive to the Kham-

balla Hill," he said to the porter. "I'll let him know when to stop."

The porter translated the order and Thresk stopped him at Mrs. Repton's door.

"The Memsahib does not receive any one to-day," said the butler.

"I know," replied Thresk. He scribbled on a card and sent it in. There was a long delay. Thresk stood in the hall looking out through the open door. Night had come. There were lights upon the roadway, lights a long way below at the water's edge on Breach Candy, and there was a light twinkling far out on the Arabian Sea. But in the house behind him all was dark. He had come to an abode of desolation and mourning; and his heart sank and he was attacked with forebodings. At last in the passage behind him there was a shuffling of feet and a gleam of white. The Memsahib would receive him.

Thresk was shown into the drawing-room. That room too was unlit. But the blinds had not been lowered and light from a street lamp outside turned the darkness into twilight. No one came forward to greet him, but the room was not empty. He saw Repton and his wife huddled close together on a sofa in a recess by the fireplace.

"I thought that I had better come up from Bombay," said Thresk, as he stood in the middle of the room. No answer was returned to him for a few moments, and then it was Repton himself who spoke.

"Yes, yes," he said, and he got up from the sofa.



"I think we had better have some light," he added in a strange indifferent voice. He turned the light on in the central chandelier, leaving the corners of the room in shadow, like—the parallel forced its way into Thresk's mind—like the tent in Chitipur. Then very methodically he pulled down the blinds. He did not look at Thresk and Jane Repton on the couch never stirred. Thresk's forebodings became a dreadful certainty. Some evil thing had happened. He might have been in a house of death. He knew that he was not wanted there, that husband and wife wished to be alone and silently resented his presence. But he could not go without more knowledge than he had.

"A message came up on the tape half an hour ago," he said in a low voice. "It reported that Ballantyne was dead."

"Yes," replied Repton. He was leaning forward over a table and looking up to the chandelier as if he fancied that its light burnt more dimly than was usual. "That's true," and he spoke in the same strange mechanical voice he had used before.

"That he was found dead outside his tent," Thresk added.

"It's quite true," Repton agreed. "We are very sorry."

"Sorry!"

The exclamation burst from Thresk's lips.

"Yes."

Repton moved away from the chandelier. He

had not looked at Thresk once since he had entered the room ; nor did he look towards his wife. His face was very pale and he was busy now setting a chair in place, moving a photograph, doing any one of the little unnecessary things people restlessly do when there is an importunate visitor in the room who will not go.

“ You see, there’s terribly bad news,” he added.

“ What news ? ”

“ He was shot, you know. That wasn’t in the telegram on the tape, of course. Yes, he was shot—on the same night you dined there—after you had gone.”

“ Shot ! ”

Thresk’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“ Yes,” and the dull quiet voice went on, speaking apparently of some trivial affair in which none of them could have any interest. “ He was shot by a bullet from a little rook-rifle which belonged to Stella, and which she was in the habit of using.”

Thresk’s heart stood still. A picture flashed before his eyes. He saw the inside of that dimly lit tent with its red lining and Stella standing by the table. He could hear her voice: “ This is my little rook-rifle. I was seeing that it was clean for to-morrow.” She had spoken so carelessly, so indifferently that it wasn’t conceivable that what was in all their minds could be true. Yet she had spoken, after all, no more indifferently than Repton was speaking now ; and he was in a great stress of grief. Then Thresk’s mind leaped to the weak point in all this chain of presumption.

"But Ballantyne was found *outside* the tent," he cried with a little note of triumph. But it had no echo in Repton's reply.

"I know. That makes everything so much worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Ballantyne was found in the morning outside the tent stone-cold. But no one had heard the shot, and there were sentries on the edge of the encampment. He had been dragged outside after he was dead or when he was dying."

A low cry broke from Thresk. The weak point became of a sudden the most deadly, the most terrible element in the whole case. He could hear the prosecuting counsel making play with it. He stood for a moment lost in horror. Repton had no further word to say to him. Mrs. Repton had never once spoken. They wanted him away, out of the room, out of the house. Some insight let him into the meaning of her silence. In the presence of this tragedy remorse had gripped her. She was looking upon herself as one who had plotted harm for Stella. She would never forgive Thresk for his share in the plot.

Thresk went out of the room without a word more to either Repton or his wife. Whatever he did now he must do by himself. He would not be admitted into that house again. He closed the door of the room behind him, and hardly had he closed it when he heard the snap of a switch and the line of light under the door vanished. Once more there was darkness in the drawing-room.

Repton no doubt had returned to his wife's side and they were huddled again side by side on the sofa. Thresk walked down the hill with a horrible feeling of isolation and loneliness. But he shook it off as he neared the lights of Bombay.