CHAPTER XI

THRESK INTERVENES

THRESK reached his hotel with some words ringing in his head which Jane Repton had spoken to him at Mrs. Carruthers' dinner-party:

"You can get any single thing in life you want if you want it enough, but you cannot control the price you will have to pay for it. That you will only learn afterwards and gradually."

He had got what he had wanted—the career of distinction, and he wondered whether he was to begin now to learn its price.

He mounted to his sitting-room on the second floor, avoiding the lounge and the lift and using a small side staircase instead of the great central one. He had passed no one on the way. In his room he looked upon the mantelshelf and on the table. No visitor had called on him that day; no letter awaited him. For the first time since he had landed in India a day had passed without some resident leaving on him a card or a note of invitation. The newspapers gave him the reason. He was supposed to have left on the *Madras* for England. To make sure he rang for his waiter; no message of any kind had come.

"Shall I ask at the office?" the waiter asked.

"By no means," answered Thresk, and he added: "I will have dinner served up here to-night."

There was just a possibility, he thought, that he might after all escape this particular payment. He took from his pocket his unposted letter to Stella Ballantyne. There was no longer any use for it and even its existence was now dangerous to Stella. For let it be discovered, however she might plead that she knew nothing of its contents, a motive for the death of Ballantyne might be inferred from it. It would be a false motive, but just the sort of motive which the man in the street would immediately accept. Thresk burnt the letter carefully in a plate and pounded up each black flake of paper until nothing was left but ashes. Then for the moment his work was done. He had only to wait and he did not wait long. On the very next morning his newspaper informed him that Inspector Coulson of the Bombay Police had left for Chitipur.

The Inspector was a young man devoted to his work, but he travelled now upon a duty which he would gladly have handed to any other of his colleagues. He had met Stella Ballantyne in Bombay upon one of her rare visits to Jane Repton. He had sat at the same dinner-table with her, and he did not find it pleasant to reflect on the tragic destiny which she must now fulfil. For the facts were fatal.

At daybreak on the morning of the Friday a sentry on the outer edge of the camp at Jarwhal

Junction had noticed something black lying upon the ground in the open just outside the door of the Agent's big marquee. He ran across the ground and discovered Captain Ballantyne sprawling, face downwards, in the smoking-suit which he had worn at dinner the night before. The sentry shook him gently by the shoulder, but the limpness of the body frightened him. Then he noticed that there was blood upon the ground, and calling loudly for help he ran to the guard-room tent. He returned with others of the native levies and they lifted Ballantyne up. He was dead and the body was cold. The levies carried him into the tent and opened his shirt. He had been shot through the heart. They then roused Mrs. Ballantyne's ayah and bade her wake her mistress. The ayah went into Mrs. Ballantyne's room and found her mistress sound asleep. She waked her up and told her what had happened. Stella Ballantyne said not a word. She got out of bed, and flinging on some clothes went into the outer tent, where the servants were standing about the body. Stella Ballantyne went quite close to it and looked down upon the dead man's face for a long time. She was pale, but there was no shrinking in her attitude—no apprehension in her eyes.

"He has been killed," she said at length; "telegrams must be sent at once: to Ajmere for a doctor, to Bombay, and to His Highness the Maharajah."

Baram Singh salaamed.

"It is as your Excellency wills," he said.

"I will write them," said Stella quietly. And she sat down at her own writing-table there and then.

The doctor from Ajmere arrived during the day, made an examination and telegraphed a report to the Chief Commissioner of Ajmere. That report contained the three significant points which Repton had enumerated to Thresk, but with some still more significant details. The bullet which pierced Captain Ballantyne's heart had been fired from Mrs. Ballantyne's small rook-rifle, and the exploded cartridge was still in the breech. The rifle was standing up against Mrs. Ballantyne's writing-table in a corner of the tent, when the doctor from Ajmere discovered it. In the second place, although Ballantyne was found in the open, there was a patch of blood upon the carpet within the tent and a trail of blood from that spot to the door. There could be no doubt that Ballantyne was killed inside. There was the third point to establish that theory. Neither the sentry on guard nor any one of the servants sleeping in the adjacent tents had heard the crack of the rifle. It would not be loud in any case, but if the weapon had been fired in the open it would have been sufficiently sharp and clear to attract the attention of the men on guard. The heavy double lining of the tent however was thick enough to muffle and deaden the sound that it would pass unnoticed.

The report was considered at Ajmere and forwarded. It now brought Inspector Coulson of the Police up the railway from Bombay. He

found Mrs. Ballantyne waiting for him at the Residency of Chitipur.

"I must tell you who I am," he said awkwardly.

"There is no need to," she answered, "I know."

He then cautioned her in the usual way, and producing his pocket-book asked her whether she wished to throw any light upon her husband's death.

"No," she said. "I have nothing to say. I was asleep and in bed when my ayah came into my room with the news of his death."

"Yes," said the Inspector uncomfortably. That detail, next to the dragging of the body out of the tent, seemed to him the grimmest part of the whole tragedy.

He shut up his book.

"I am afraid it is all very unsatisfactory," he said. "I think we must go back to Bombay."

"It is as your Excellency wills," said Stella in Hindustani, and the Inspector was startled by the bad taste of the joke. He had not the knowledge of her life with Ballantyne, which alone would have given him the key to understand her. But he was not a fool, and a second glance at her showed to him that she was not speaking in joke at all. He had an impression that she was so tired that she did not at the moment care what happened to her at all. The fatigue would wear off, no doubt, when she realised that she must fight for her life, but now she stood in front of him indifferent and docile—much as one of the native levies was wont to stand before her husband. The words which

the levies used and the language in which they spoke them rose naturally to her lips, as the only words and language suitable to the occasion.

"You see, Mrs. Ballantyne," he said gently, "there is no reason to suspect a single one of your servants or of your escort."

"And there is reason to suspect me," she added, looking at him quietly and steadily.

The Inspector for his part looked away. He was a young man—no more than a year or two older than Stella Ballantyne herself. They both came from the same kind of stock. Her people and his people might have been friends in some pleasant country village in one of the English counties. She was pretty, too, disconcertingly pretty, in spite of the dark circles under her eyes and the pallor of her face. There was a delicacy in her looks and in her dress which appealed to him for tenderness. The appeal was all the stronger because it was only in that way and unconsciously that she appealed. In her voice, in her bearing, in her eyes there was no request, no prayer.

"I have been to the Palace," he said, "I have had an audience with the Maharajah."

"Of course," she answered. "I shall put no difficulties in your way."

He was standing in her own drawing-room, noticing with what skill comfort had been combined with daintiness, and how she had followed the usual instinct of her kind in trying to create here in this room a piece of England. Through the window he looked out upon a lawn which was

being watered by a garden-sprinkler, and where a gardener was at work attending to a bed of bright flowers. There, too, she had been making the usual pathetic attempt to convert a half-acre of this country of yellow desert into a green garden of England. Coulson had not a shadow of doubt in his mind Stella Ballantyne would exchange this room with its restful colours and its outlook on a green lawn for—at the best—many years of solitary imprisonment in Poona Gaol. He shut up his book with a snap.

"Will you be ready to go in an hour?" he asked roughly.

"Yes," said she.

"If I leave you unwatched during that hour you will promise to me that you *will* be ready to go in an hour?"

Stella Ballantyne nodded her head.

"I shall not kill myself now," she said, and he looked at her quickly, but she did not trouble to explain her words. She merely added: "I may take some clothes, I suppose?"

"Whatever you need," said the Inspector. And he took her down to Bombay.

She was formally charged next morning before the stipendiary for the murder of her husband and remanded for a week.

She was remanded at eleven o'clock in the morning, and five minutes later the news was ticked off on the tape at the Taj Mahal hotel. Within another five minutes the news was brought upstairs to Thresk. He had been fortunate. He was in a

huge hotel, where people flit through its rooms for a day and are gone the next, and no one is concerned with the doings of his neighbour, a place of arrival and departure like the platform of a great railway station. There was no place in all Bombay where Thresk could so easily pass unnoticed. And he had passed unnoticed. A single inquiry at the office, it is true, would have revealed his presence, but no one had inquired, since by this time he should be nearing Aden. He had kept to his rooms during the day and had only taken the air after it was dark. This was in the early stages of wireless telegraphy, and the *Madras* had no installation. It might be that inquiries would be made for him at Aden. He could only wait with Jane Repton's words ringing in his ears: "You cannot control the price you will have to pay."

Stella Ballantyne was brought up again in a week's time and the case then proceeded from day to day. The character of Ballantyne was revealed, his brutalities, his cunning. Detail by detail he was built up into a gross sinister figure secret and violent which lived again in that crowded court and turned the eyes of the spectators with a shiver of discomfort upon the young and quiet woman in the dock. And in that character the prosecution found the motive of the crime. Sympathy at times ran high for Stella Ballantyne, but there were always the two grim details to keep it in check: she had been found asleep by her ayah, quietly restfully asleep within a few hours

of Ballantyne's death; and she had, according to the theory of the Crown, found in some violence of passion the strength to drag the dying man from the tent and to leave him to gasp out his life under the stars.

Thresk watched the case from his rooms at the Taj Mahal hotel. Every fact which was calculated to arouse sympathy for her was also helping to condemn her. No one doubted that she had shot Stephen Ballantyne. He deserved shooting —very well. But that did not give her the right to be his executioner. What was her defence to be? A sudden intolerable provocation? How would that square with the dragging of his body across the carpet to the door? There was the fatal insuperable act.

Thresk read again and again the reports of the proceedings for a hint as to the line of the defence. He got it the day when Repton appeared in the witness-box on a subpœna from the Crown to bear testimony to the violence of Stephen Ballantyne. He had seen Stella with her wrist bruised so that in public she could not remove her gloves.

"What kind of bruises?" asked the counsel.

"Such bruises as might be made by some one twisting her arms," he answered, and then Mr. Travers, a young barrister who was enjoying his first leap into the public eye, rose to cross-examine.

Thresk read through that cross-examination and rose to his feet. "You cannot control the price you will have to pay," he said to himself.

That day, when Mrs. Ballantyne's solicitor returned to his office after the rising of the Court, he found Thresk waiting for him.

"I wish to give evidence for Mrs. Ballantyne," said Thresk—"evidence which will acquit her."

He spoke with so much certainty that the solicitor was fairly startled.

"And with evidence so positive in your possession it is only this afternoon that you come here with it! Why?"

Thresk was prepared for the question.

"I have a great deal of work waiting for me in London," he returned. "I hoped that it might not be necessary for me to appear at all. Now I see that it is."

The solicitor looked straight at Thresk.

"I knew from Mrs. Repton that you dined with the Ballantynes that night, but she was sure that you knew nothing of the affair. You had left the tent before it happened."

"That is true," answered Thresk.

"Yet you have evidence which will acquit Mrs. Ballantyne?"

"I think so."

"How is it, then," the lawyer asked, "that we have heard nothing of this evidence at all from Mrs. Ballantyne herself?"

"Because she knows nothing of it," replied Thresk.

The lawyer pointed to a chair. The two men sat down together in the office and it was long before they parted.

Within an hour of Thresk's return from the solicitor's office an Inspector of Police waited on him at his hotel and was instantly shown up.

"We did not know until to-day," he said, "that you were still in Bombay, Mr. Thresk. We believed you to be on the *Madras*, which reached Marseilles early this morning."

"I missed it," replied Thresk. "Had you wanted me you could have inquired at Port Said five days ago."

"Five days ago we had no information."

The native servants of Ballantyne had from the first shrouded themselves in ignorance. They would answer what questions were put to them; they would not go one inch beyond. The crime was an affair of the Sahibs and the less they had to do with it the better, until at all events they were sure which way the wind was setting from Government House. Of their own initiative they knew nothing. It was thus only by the discovery of Thresk's letter to Captain Ballantyne, which was found crumpled up in a waste-paper basket, that his presence that night in the tent was suspected.

"It is strange," the Inspector grumbled, "that you did not come to us of your own accord when you had missed your boat and tell us what you knew."

"I don't think it is strange at all," answered Thresk, "for I am a witness for the defence. I shall give my evidence when the case for the defence opens."

The Inspector was disconcerted and went away.

Thresk's policy had so far succeeded. But he had taken a great risk and now that it was past he realised with an intense relief how serious the risk had been. If the Inspector had called upon him before he had made known his presence to Mrs. Ballantyne's solicitor and offered his evidence, his position would have been difficult. He would have had to discover some other good reason why he had lain quietly at his hotel during these last days. But fortune had favoured him. He had to thank, above all, the secrecy of the native servants.