

## CHAPTER III

### IN BOMBAY

IT was not until a day late in January eight years afterwards that Thresk saw the face of Stella Derrick again; and then it was only in a portrait. He came upon it too in a most unlikely place. About five o'clock upon that afternoon he drove out of the town of Bombay up to one of the great houses on Malabar Hill and asked for Mrs. Carruthers. He was shown into a drawing-room which looked over Back Bay to the great buildings of the city, and in a moment Mrs. Carruthers came to him with her hands outstretched.

"So you've won. My husband telephoned to me. We do thank you! Victory means so much to us."

The Carruthers were a young couple who, the moment after they had inherited the larger share in the great firm of Templeton & Carruthers, Bombay merchants, had found themselves involved in a partnership suit due to one or two careless phrases in a solicitor's letter. The case had been the great case of the year in Bombay. The issue had been doubtful, the stake enormous and Thresk, who three years before had taken silk, had

been fetched by young Carruthers from England to fight it.

“ Yes. We’ve won,” he said. “ Judgment was given in our favour this afternoon.”

“ You are dining with us to-night, aren’t you ? ”

“ Thank you, yes,” said Thresk. “ At half-past eight.”

“ Yes.”

Mrs. Carruthers gave him some tea and chattered pleasantly while he drank it. She was fair-haired and pretty, a lady of enthusiasms and uplifted hands, quite without observation or knowledge, yet with power to astonish. For every now and then some little shrewd wise saying would gleam out of the placid flow of her trivialities and make whoever heard it wonder for a moment whether it was her own or whether she had heard it from another. But it was her own. For she gave no special importance to it as she would have done had it been a remark she had thought worth remembering. She just uttered it and slipped on, noticing no difference in value between what she now said and what she had said a second ago. To her the whole world was a marvel and all things in it equally amazing. Besides she had no memory.

“ I suppose that now you are free,” she said, “ you will go up into the central Provinces and see something of India.”

“ But I am not free,” replied Thresk. “ I must get back immediately to England.”

“ So soon ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Carruthers. “ Now isn’t that a pity ! You ought to see the Taj—

oh, you really ought!—by moonlight or in the morning. I don't know which is best, and the Ridge too!—the Ridge at Delhi. You really mustn't leave India without seeing the Ridge. Can't things wait in London?"

"Yes, things can, but people won't," answered Thresk, and Mrs. Carruthers was genuinely distressed that he should depart from India without a single journey in a train.

"I can't help it," he said, smiling back into her mournful eyes. "Apart from my work, Parliament meets early in February."

"Oh, to be sure, you are in Parliament," she exclaimed. "I had forgotten." She shook her fair head in wonder at the industry of her visitor. "I can't think how you manage it all. Oh, you must need a holiday."

Thresk laughed.

"I am thirty-six, so I have a year or two still in front of me before I have the right to break down. I'll save up my holidays for my old age."

"But you are not married," cried Mrs. Carruthers. "You can't do that. You can't grow comfortably old unless you're married. You will want to work then to get through the time. You had better take your holidays now."

"Very well. I shall have twelve days upon the steamer. When does it go?" asked Thresk as he rose from his chair.

"On Friday, and this is Monday," said Mrs. Carruthers. "You certainly haven't much time to go anywhere, have you?"

"No," replied Thresk, and Mrs. Carruthers saw his face quicken suddenly to surprise. He actually caught his breath; he stared, no longer aware of her presence in the room. He was looking over her head towards the grand piano which stood behind her chair; and she began to run over in her mind the various ornaments which encumbered it. A piece of Indian drapery covered the top and on the drapery stood a little group of Dresden China figures, a crystal cigarette-box, some knick-knacks and half-a-dozen photographs in silver frames. It must be one of those photographs, she decided, which had caught his eye, which had done more than catch his eye. For she was looking up at Thresk's face all this while, and the surprise had gone from it. It seemed to her that he was moved.

"You have the portrait of a friend of mine there," he said, and he crossed the room to the piano.

Mrs. Carruthers turned round.

"Oh, Stella Ballantyne!" she cried. "Do you know her, Mr. Thresk?"

"Ballantyne?" said Thresk. For a moment or two he was silent. Then he asked: "She is married then?"

"Yes, didn't you know? She has been married for a long time."

"It's a long time since I have heard of her," said Thresk. He looked again at the photograph.

"When was this taken?"

"A few months ago. She sent it to me in October. She is beautiful, don't you think?"

"Yes."

But it was not the beauty of the girl who had ridden along the South Downs with him eight years ago. There was more of character in the face now, less, much less, of youth and none of the old gaiety. The open frankness had gone. The big dark eyes which looked out straight at Thresk as he stood before them had, even in that likeness, something of aloofness and reserve. And underneath, in a contrast which seemed to him startling, there was her name signed in the firm running hand in which she had written the few notes which passed between them during that month in Sussex. Thresk looked back again at the photograph and then resumed his seat.

"Tell me about her, Mrs. Carruthers," he said. "You hear from her often?"

"Oh no! Stella doesn't write many letters, and I don't know her very well."

"But you have her photograph," said Thresk, "and signed by her."

"Oh yes. She stayed with me last Christmas, and I simply made her get her portrait taken. Just think! She hadn't been taken for years. Can you understand it? She declared she was bored with it. Isn't that curious? However, I persuaded her and she gave me one. But I had to force her to write on it."

"Then she was in Bombay last winter?" said Thresk slowly.

“Yes.” And then Mrs. Carruthers had an idea. “Oh,” she exclaimed, “if you are really interested in Stella I’ll put Mrs. Repton next to you to-night.”

“Thank you very much,” said Thresk. “But who is Mrs. Repton?”

Mrs. Carruthers sat forward in her chair.

“Well, she’s Stella’s great friend—very likely her only real friend in India. Stella’s so reserved. I simply adore her, but she quite prettily and politely keeps me always at arm’s length. If she has ever opened out to anybody it’s to Jane Repton. You see Charlie Repton was Collector at Agra before he came into the Bombay Presidency, and so they went up to Mussoorie for the hot weather. The Ballantynes happened actually to have the very next bungalow—now wasn’t that strange?—so naturally they became acquainted. I mean the Ballantynes and the Reptons did. . . .”

“But one moment, Mrs. Carruthers,” said Thresk, breaking in upon the torrent of words. “Am I right in guessing that Mrs. Ballantyne lives in India?”

“But of course!” cried Mrs. Carruthers.

“She is actually in India now?”

“To be sure she is!”

Thresk was quite taken aback by the news.

“I had no idea of it,” he said slowly, and Mrs. Carruthers replied sweetly:

“But lots of people live in India, Mr. Thresk. Didn’t you know that? We are not the uttermost ends of the earth.”

Thresk set to work to make his peace. He had not heard of Mrs. Ballantyne for so long. It seemed strange to him to find himself suddenly near to her now—that is if he was near. He just avoided that other exasperating trick of treating India as if it was a provincial town and all its inhabitants neighbours. But he only just avoided it. Mrs. Carruthers, however, was easily appeased.

“Yes,” she said. “Stella has lived in India for the best part of eight years. She came out with some friends in the winter, made Captain Ballantyne’s acquaintance and married him almost at once—in January I think it was. Of course I only know from what I’ve been told. I was a schoolgirl in England at the time.”

“Of course,” Thresk agreed. He was conscious of a sharp little stab of resentment. So very quickly Stella had forgotten that morning on the Downs! It must have been in the autumn of that same year that she had gone out to India, and by February she was married. The resentment was quite unjustified, as no one knew better than himself. But he was a man; and men cannot easily endure so swift an obliteration of their images from the thoughts and the hearts of the ladies who have admitted that they loved them. None the less he pressed for details. Who was Ballantyne? What was his position? After all he was obviously not the millionaire to whom in a more generous moment he had given Stella. He caught himself on a descent to the meanness of rejoicing upon that. Meanwhile Mrs. Carruthers rippled on.

“Captain Ballantyne? Oh, he’s a most remarkable man! Older than Stella certainly, but a man of great knowledge and insight. People think most highly of him. Languages come as easily to him as crochet-work to a woman.”

This paragon had been Resident in the Principality of Bakuta to the North of Bombay when Stella had first arrived. But he had been moved now to Chitipur in Rajputana. It was supposed that he was writing in his leisure moments a work which would be the very last word upon the native Principalities of Central India. Oh, Stella was to be congratulated! And Mrs. Carruthers, in her fine mansion on Malabar Hill, breathed a sigh of envy at the position of the wife of a high official of the British *Raj*.

Thresk looked over again to the portrait on the piano.

“I am very glad,” he said cordially as once more he rose.

“But you shall sit next to Mrs. Repton to-night,” said Mrs. Carruthers. “And she will tell you more.”

“Thank you,” answered Thresk. “I only wished to know that things are going well with Mrs. Ballantyne—that was all.”