

CHAPTER IV

JANE REPTON

Mrs. CARRUTHERS kept her promise. She went in herself with Henry Thresk, as she had always meant to do, but she placed Mrs. Repton upon his left just round the bend of the table. Thresk stole a glance at her now and then as he listened to the rippling laughter of his hostess during the first courses. She was a tall woman and rather stout, with a pleasant face and a direct gaze. Thresk gave her the age of thirty-five and put her down as a cheery soul. Whether she was more he had to wait to learn with what patience he could. He was free to turn to her at last, and he began without any preliminaries, without delay.

“ You know a friend of mine,” he said.

“ I do ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Who is it ? ”

“ Mrs. Ballantyne.”

He noticed at once a change in Mrs. Repton. The frankness disappeared from her face; her eyes grew wary.

“ I see,” she said slowly. “ I was wondering

why I was placed next to you, for you are the lion of the evening and there are people here of more importance than myself. I knew it wasn't for my *beaux yeux*."

She turned again to Thresk.

"So you know my Stella?"

"Yes. I knew her in England before she came out here and married. I have not, of course, seen her since. I want you to tell me about her."

Mrs. Repton looked him over with a careful scrutiny.

"Mrs. Carruthers has no doubt told you that she married very well."

"Yes; and that Ballantyne is a remarkable man," said Thresk.

Mrs. Repton nodded.

"Very well then?" she said, and her voice was a challenge.

"I am not contented," Thresk replied. Mrs. Repton turned her eyes to her plate and said demurely:

"There might be more than one reason for that."

Thresk abandoned all attempt to fence with her. Mrs. Repton was not of those women who would lightly give their women-friends away. Her phrase "my Stella" had, besides, revealed a world of love and championship. Thresk warmed to her because of it. He threw reticence to the winds.

"I am going to give you the real reason, Mrs. Repton. I saw her photograph this afternoon on Mrs. Carruthers' piano, and it left me wondering

whether happiness could set so much character in a woman's face."

Mrs. Repton shrugged her shoulders.

"Some of us age quickly here."

"Age was not the new thing which I read in that photograph."

Mrs. Repton did not answer. Only her eyes sounded him. She seemed to be judging the stuff of which he was made.

"And if I doubted her happiness this afternoon I must doubt it still more now," he continued.

"Why?" exclaimed Mrs. Repton.

"Because of your reticence, Mrs. Repton," he answered. "For you have been reticent. You have been on guard. I like you for it," he added with a smile of genuine friendliness. "May I say that? But from the first moment when I mentioned Stella Ballantyne's name you shouldered your musket."

Mrs. Repton neither denied nor accepted his statement. She kept looking at him and away from him as though she were still not sure of him, and at times she drew in her breath sharply, as though she had already taken upon herself some great responsibility and now regretted it. In the end she turned to him abruptly.

"I am puzzled," she cried. "I think it's strange that since you are Stella's friend I knew nothing of that friendship—nothing whatever."

Thresk shrugged his shoulders.

"It is years since we met, as I told you. She has new interests."

"They have not destroyed the old ones. We remember home things out here, all of us. Stella like the rest. Why, I thought that I knew her whole life in England, and here's a definite part of it—perhaps a very important part—of which I am utterly ignorant. She has spoken of many friends to me; of you never. I am wondering why."

She spoke obviously without any wish to hurt. Yet the words did hurt. She saw Thresk redden as she uttered them, and a swift wild hope flamed like a rose in her heart: if this man with the brains and the money and the perseverance sitting at her side should turn out to be the Perseus for her beautiful chained Andromeda, far away there in the state of Chitipur! The lines of a poem came into her thoughts.

"I know ; the world proscribes not love,
Allows my finger to caress
Your lips' contour and downiness
Provided it supplies the glove."

Suppose that here at her side was the man who would dispense with the glove! She looked again at Thresk. The lean strong face suggested that he might, if he wanted hard enough. All her life had been passed in the support of authority and law. Authority—that was her husband's profession. But just for this hour, as she thought of Stella Ballantyne, lawlessness shone out to her desirable as a star.

"No, she has never once mentioned your name, Mr. Thresk."

Again Thresk was conscious of the little pulse of resentment beating at his heart.

"She has no doubt forgotten me."

Mrs. Repton shook her head.

"That's one explanation. There might be another."

"What is it?"

"That she remembers you too much."

Mrs. Repton was a little startled by her own audacity, but it provoked nothing but an incredulous laugh from her companion.

"I am afraid that's not very likely," he said. There was no hint of elation in his voice nor any annoyance. If he felt either, why, he was on guard no less than she. Mrs. Repton was inclined to throw up her hands in despair. She was baffled and she was little likely, as she knew, to get any light.

"If you take the man you know best of all," she used to say, "you still know nothing at all of what he's like when he's alone with a woman, especially if it's a woman for whom he cares—unless the woman talks."

Very often the woman does talk and the most intimate and private facts come in a little while to be shouted from the housetops. But Stella Ballantyne did not talk. She had talked once, and once only, under a great stress to Jane Repton; but even then Thresk had nothing to do with her story at all.

Thresk turned quickly towards her.

"In a moment Mrs. Carruthers will get up. Her eyes are collecting the women, and the women

are collecting their shoes. What have you to tell me ? ”

Mrs. Repton wanted to speak. Thresk gave her confidence. He seemed to be a man without many illusions, he was no romantic sentimentalist. She went back to the poem of which the lines had been chasing one another through her head all through this dinner, as a sort of accompaniment to their conversation. Had he found it out ? she asked herself—

“The world and what it fears.”

Thus she hung hesitating while Mrs. Carruthers gathered in her hands her gloves and her fan. There was a woman at the other end of the table however who would not stop talking. She was in the midst of some story and heeded not the signals of her hostess. Jane Repton wished she would go on talking for the rest of the evening, and recognised that the wish was a waste of time and grew flurried. She had to make up her mind to say something which should be true or to lie. Yet she was too staunch to betray the confidence of her friend unless the betrayal meant her friend's salvation. But just as the woman at the end of the table ceased to talk an inspiration came to her. She would say nothing to Thresk, but if he had eyes to see she would place him where the view was good.

“I have this to say,” she answered in a low quick voice. “Go yourself to Chitipur. You sail on Friday I think ? And to-day is Monday. You

can make the journey there and back quite easily in the time."

"I can?" asked Thresk.

"Yes. Travel by the night-mail up to Ajmere to-morrow night. You will be in Chitipur on Wednesday afternoon. That gives you twenty-four hours there, and you can still catch the steamer here on Friday."

"You advise that?"

"Yes, I do," said Mrs. Repton.

Mrs. Carruthers rose from the table and Jane Repton had no further word with Thresk that night. In the drawing-room Mrs. Carruthers led him from woman to woman, allowing him ten minutes for each one.

"He might be Royalty or her pet Pekingese," cried Mrs. Repton in exasperation. For now that her blood had cooled she was not so sure that her advice had been good. The habit of respect for authority resumed its ancient place in her. She might be planting that night the seed of a very evil flower. "Respectability" had seemed to her a magnificent poem as she sat at the dinner-table. Here in the drawing-room she began to think that it was not for every day use. She wished a word now with Thresk, so that she might make light of the advice which she had given. "I had no business to interfere," she kept repeating to herself whilst she talked with her host. "People get what they want if they want it enough, but they can't control the price they have to pay. Therefore it was no business of mine to interfere."

But Thresk took his leave and gave her no chance for a private word. She drove homewards a few minutes later with her husband; and as they descended the hill to the shore of Back Bay he said:—
“I had a moment’s conversation with Thresk after you had left the dining-room, and what do you think?”

“Tell me!”

“He asked me for a letter of introduction to Ballantyne at Chitipur.”

“But he knows Stella!” exclaimed Jane Repton.

“Does he? He didn’t tell me that! He simply said that he had time to see Chitipur before he sailed and asked for a line to the Resident.”

“And you promised to give him one?”

“Of course. I am to send it to the Taj Mahal hotel to-morrow morning.”

Mrs. Repton was a little startled. She did not understand at all why Thresk asked for the letter and, not understanding, was the more alarmed. The request seemed to imply not merely that he had decided to make the journey but that during the hour or so since they had sat at the dinner-table he had formed some definite and serious plan.

“Did you tell him anything?” she asked rather timidly.

“Not a word,” replied Repton.

“Not even about—what happened in the hills at Mussoorie?”

“Of course not.”

“No, of course not,” Jane Repton agreed.

She leaned back against the cushions of the victoria. A clear dark sky of stars wonderfully bright stretched above her head. After the hot day a cool wind blew pleasantly on the hill; and between the trees of the gardens she could see the lights of the city and of a ship here and there in the Bay at their feet.

"But it's not very likely that Thresk will find them at Chitipur," said Repton. "They will probably be in camp."

Mrs. Repton sat forward.

"Yes, that's true. This is the time they go on their tour of inspection. He will miss them." And at once disappointment laid hold of her. Mrs. Repton was not in the mood for logic that evening. She had been afraid a moment since that the train she had laid would bring about a conflagration. Now that she knew it would not even catch fire she passed at once to a passionate regret. Thresk had inspired her with a great confidence. He was the man, she believed, for her Stella. But he was going up to Chitipur! Anything might happen! She leaned back again in the carriage and cried defiantly to the stars.

"I am glad that he's going. I am very glad." And in spite of her conscience her heart leaped joyously in her bosom.