CHAPTER V

THE QUEST

THE next night Henry Thresk left Bombay and on the Wednesday afternoon he was travelling in a little white narrow-gauge train across a flat yellow desert which baked and sparkled in the sun. Here and there a patch of green and a few huts marked a railway station and at each gaily-robed natives sprung apparently from nowhere and going no-whither thronged the platform and climbed into the carriages. Thresk looked impatiently through the clouded windows, wondering what he should find in Chitipur if ever he got there. The capital of that state lies aloof from the trunk roads and is reached by a branch railway sixty miles long, which is the private possession of the Maharajah and takes four hours to traverse. For in Chitipur the ancient ways are devoutly followed. Modern ideas of speed and progress may whirl up the big central railroad from Bombay to Ajmere. But they stop at the junction. They do not travel along the Maharajah's private lines to Chitipur, where he, directly descended from an important and most authentic goddess, dispenses life and justice to

his subjects without even the assistance of the Press. There is little criticism in the city and less work. A patriarchal calm sleeps in all its streets. In Chitipur it is always Sunday afternoon. Even down by the lake, where the huge white many-storeyed palace contemplates its dark-latticed windows and high balconies mirrored in still water unimaginably blue nothing which could be described as energy is visible. You may see an elephant kneeling placidly in the lake while an attendant polishes up his trunk and his forehead with a brickbat. But the elephant will be too well-mannered to trumpet his enjoyment. Or you may notice a fisherman drowsing in a boat heavy enough to cope with the surf of the Atlantic. But the fisherman will not notice you—not even though you call to him with dulcet promises of rupees. You will, if you wait long enough, see a woman coming down the steps with a pitcher balanced on her head; and indeed perhaps two women. But when your eyes have dwelt upon these wonders you will have seen what there is of movement and life about the shores of those sleeping waters.

It was in accordance with the fitness of things that the city and its lake should be three miles from the railway-station and quite invisible to the traveller. The hotel however and the Residency were near to the station, and it was the Residency which had brought Thresk out of the crowds and tumult of Bombay. He put up at the hotel and enclosing Repton's introduction in

a covering letter sent it by his bearer down the road. Then he waited; and no answer came.

Finally he asked if his bearer had returned. Quite half an hour he was told, and the man was sent for.

"Well? You delivered my letter?" said Thresk.

"Yes, Sahib."

"And there was no answer?"

"No. No answer, Sahib," replied the man cheerfully.

"Very well."

He waited yet another hour, and since still no acknowledgment had come he strolled along the road himself. He came to a large white house. A flagpost tapered from its roof but no flag blew out its folds. There was a garden about the house, the trim well-ordered garden of the English folk with a lawn and banks of flowers, and a gardener with a hose was busy watering it. Thresk stopped before the hedge. The windows were all shuttered, the big door closed: there was nowhere any sign of the inhabitants.

Thresk turned and walked back to the hotel. He found the bearer laying out a change of clothes for him upon his bed.

"His Excellency is away," he said.

"Yes, Sahib," replied the bearer promptly. "His Excellency gone on inspection tour."

"Then why in heaven's name didn't you tell me?" cried Thresk.

The bearer's face lost all its cheerfulness in a second and became a mask. He was a Madrassee

and black as coal. To Thresk it seemed that the man had suddenly withdrawn himself altogether and left merely an image with living eyes. He shrugged his shoulders. He knew that change in his servant. It came at the first note of reproach in his voice and with such completeness that it gave him the shock of a conjurer's trick. One moment the bearer was before him, the next he had disappeared.

"What did you do with the letter?" Thresk asked and was careful that there should be no exasperation in his voice.

The bearer came to life again, his white teeth gleamed in smiles.

"I leave the letter. I give it to the gardener. All letters are sent to his Excellency."

"When?"

"Perhaps this week, perhaps next."

"I see," said Thresk. He stood for a moment or two with his eyes upon the window. Then he moved abruptly.

"We go back to Bombay to-morrow afternoon."

"The Sahib will see Chitipur to-morrow. There are beautiful palaces on the lake."

Thresk laughed, but the laugh was short and bitter.

"Oh yes, we'll do the whole thing in style to-morrow."

He had the tone of a man who has caught himself out in some childish act of folly. He seemed at once angry and ashamed.

None the less he was the next morning the

complete tourist doing India at express speed during a cold weather. He visited the Museum, he walked through the Elephant Gate into the bazaar, he was rowed over the lake to the island palaces; he admired their. marble steps and columns and floors and was confounded by their tinkling blue glass chandeliers. He did the correct thing all through that morning and early in the afternoon climbed into the little train which was to carry him back to Jarwhal Junction and the night mail to Bombay.

"You will have five hours to wait at the junction, Mr. Thresk," said the manager of the hotel, who had come to see him off. "I have put up some dinner for you and there is a dâk-bungalow where you can eat it."

"Thank you," said Thresk, and the train moved off. The sun had set before he reached the junction. When he stepped out on to the platform twilight had come—the swift twilight of the East. Before he had reached the dâk-bungalow the twilight had changed to the splendour of an Indian night. The bungalow was empty of visitors. Thresk's bearer lit a fire and prepared dinner while Thresk wandered outside the door and smoked. He looked across a plain to a long high ridge, where once a city had straggled. Its deserted towers and crumbling walls still crowned the height and made a habitation for beasts and birds. But they were quite hidden now and the sharp line of the ridge was softened. Halfway between the old city and the bungalow a cluster

of bright lights shone upon the plain and the red tongues of a fire flickered in the open. Thresk was in no hurry to go back to the bungalow. The first chill of the darkness had gone. The night was cool but not cold; a moon had risen, and that dusty plain had become a place of glamour. From somewhere far away came the sound of a single drum. Thresk garnered up in his thoughts the beauty of that night. It was to be his last night in India. By this time to-morrow Bombay would have sunk below the rim of the sea. He thought of it with regret. He had come up into Rajputana on a definite quest and on the advice of a woman whose judgment he was inclined to trust. And his quest had failed. He was to see for himself. He would see nothing. And still far away the beating of that drum went on—monotonous, mournful, significant—the real call of the East made audible. Thresk leaned forward on his seat, listening, treasuring the sound. He rose reluctantly when his bearer came to tell him that dinner was ready. Thresk took a look round. He pointed to the cluster of lights on the plain.

"Is that a village?" he asked.

"No, Sahib," replied the bearer. "That's his Excellency's camp."

"What!" cried Thresk, swinging round upon his heel.

His bearer smiled cheerfully.

"Yes. His Excellency to whom I carried the Sahib's letter. That's his camp for to-night. The keeper of the bungalow told me so. His Excel-

lency camped here yesterday and goes on to-morrow."

"And you never told me!" exclaimed Thresk, and he checked himself. He stood wondering what he should do, when there came suddenly out of the darkness a queer soft scuffling sound, the like of which he had never heard. He heard a heavy breathing and a bubbling noise and then into the fan of light which spread from the window of the bungalow a man in a scarlet livery rode on a camel. The camel knelt; its rider dismounted, and as he dismounted he talked to Thresk's bearer. Something passed from hand to hand and the bearer came back to Thresk with a letter in his hand.

"A chit from his Excellency."

Thresk tore open the envelope and found within it an invitation to dinner, signed "Stephen Ballantyne."

"Your letter has reached me this moment," the note ran. "It came by your train. I am glad not to have missed you altogether and I hope that you will come to-night. The camel will bring you to the camp and take you back in plenty of time for the mail."

After all then the quest had not failed. After all he was to see for himself—what a man could see within two hours, of the inner life of a married couple. Not very much certainly, but a hint perhaps, some token which would reveal to him what it was that had written so much character into Stella Ballantyne's face and driven Jane Repton into warnings and reserve.

"I will go at once," said Thresk and his bearer translated the words to the camel-driver.

But even so Thresk stayed to look again at the letter. Its handwriting at the first glance, when the unexpected words were dancing before his eyes, had arrested his attention; it was so small, so delicately clear. Thresk's experience had made him quick to notice details and slow to infer from them. Yet this handwriting set him wondering. It might have been the work of some fastidious woman or of some leisured scholar; so much pride of penmanship was there. It certainly agreed with no picture of Stephen Ballantyne which his imagination had drawn.

He mounted the camel behind the driver, and for the next few minutes all his questions and perplexities vanished from his mind. He simply clung to the waist of the driver. For the camel bumped down into ditches and scuffled and lurched up out of them, climbed over mounds and slid down the further side of them, and all the while Thresk had the sensation of being poised uncertainly in the air as high as a church-steeple. Suddenly however the lights of the camp grew large and the camel padded silently in between the tents. It was halted some twenty yards from a great marquee. Another servant robed in white with a scarlet sash about his waist received Thresk from the camel-driver.

He spoke a few words in Hindustani, but Thresk shook his head. Then the man moved towards the marquee and Thresk followed him. He was con-

scious of a curious excitement, and only when he caught his breath was he aware that his heart was beating fast. As they neared the tent he heard voices within. They grew louder as he reached it—one was a man's, loud, wrathful, the other was a woman's. It was not raised but it had a ring in it of defiance. The words Thresk could not hear, but he knew the woman's voice. The servant raised the flap of the tent.

"Huzoor, the Sahib is here," he said, and at once both the voices were stilled. As Thresk stood in the doorway both the man and the woman turned. The man, with a little confusion in his manner, came quickly towards him. Over his shoulder Thresk saw Stella Ballantyne staring at him, as if he had risen from the grave. Then, as he took Ballantyne's extended hand, Stella swiftly raised her hand to her throat with a curious gesture and turned away. It seemed as if now that she was sure that Thresk stood there before her, a living presence, she had something to hide from him.