

CHAPTER VI

IN THE TENT AT CHITIPUR

THE marquee was large and high. It had a thick lining of a dull red colour and a carpet covered the floor; cushioned basket chairs and a few small tables stood here and there; against one wall rose an open escritoire with a box of cheroots upon it; the two passages to the sleeping-tents and the kitchen were hidden by grass screens and between them stood a great Chesterfield sofa. It was, in a word, the tent of people who were accustomed to make their home in it for weeks at a time. Even the latest books were to be seen. But it was dark.

A single lamp swinging above the round dinner-table from the cross-pole of the roof burnt in the very centre of the tent; and that was all. The corners were shadowy; the lining merely absorbed the rays and gave none back. The round pool of light which spread out beneath the lamp was behind Ballantyne when he turned to the doorway, so Thresk for a moment was only aware of him as a big heavily-built man in a smoking-jacket and a starched white shirt; and it was to that starched white shirt that he spoke, making his apologies. He was glad too to delay for a second or two the

moment when he must speak to Stella. In her presence his eight long years of effort and work had become a very little space.

"I had to come as I was, Captain Ballantyne," he said, "for I have only with me what I want for the night in the train."

"Of course. That's all right." Ballantyne replied with a great cordiality. He turned towards Stella. "Mr. Thresk, this is my wife."

Now she had to turn. She held out her right hand but she still covered her throat with her left. She gave no sign of recognition and she did not look at her visitor.

"How do you do, Mr. Thresk?" she said, and went on quickly, allowing him no time for a reply. "We are in camp, you see. You must just take us as we are. Stephen did not tell me till a minute ago that he expected a visitor. You have not too much time. I will see that dinner is served at once." She went quickly to one of the grass-screens and lifting it vanished from his view. It seemed to Thresk that she had just seized upon an excuse to get away. Why? he asked himself. She was nervous and distressed, and in her distress she had accepted without surprise Thresk's introduction to her as a stranger. To that relationship then he and she were bound for the rest of his stay in the Resident's camp.

Mrs. Repton had been wrong when she had attributed Thresk's request for a formal introduction to Ballantyne to a plan already matured in his mind. He had no plan, although he formed one

before that dinner was at an end. He had asked for the letter because he wished faithfully to follow her advice and see for himself. If he called upon Stella he would find her alone; the mere sending in of his name would put her on her guard; he would see nothing. She would take care of that. He had no wish to make Ballantyne's acquaintance as Mrs. Ballantyne's friend. He could claim that friendship afterwards. Now however Stella herself in her confusion had made the claim impossible. She had fled—there was no other word which could truthfully describe her swift movement to the screen.

Ballantyne however had clearly not been surprised by it.

"It was a piece of luck for me that I camped here yesterday and telegraphed for my letters," he said. "You mentioned in your note that you had only twenty-four hours to give to Chitipur, didn't you? So I was sure that you would be upon this train."

He spoke with a slow precision in a voice which he was careful—or so it struck Thresk—to keep suave and low; and as he spoke he moved towards the dinner-table and came within the round pool of light. Thresk had a clear view of him. He was a man of a gross and powerful face, with a blue heavy chin and thick eyelids over bloodshot eyes.

"Will you have a cocktail?" he asked, and he called aloud, going to the second passage from the tent: "Quai hai! Baram Singh, cocktails!"

The servant who had met Thresk at the door came in upon the instant with a couple of cocktails on a tray.

"Ah, you have them," he said. "Good!"

But he refused the glass when the tray was held out to him, refused it after a long look and with a certain violence.

"For me? Certainly not! Never in this world." He looked up at Thresk with a laugh. "Cocktails are all very well for you, Mr. Thresk, who are here during a cold weather, but we who make our homes here—we have to be careful."

"Yes, so I suppose," said Thresk. But just behind Ballantyne, on a sideboard against the wall of the tent opposite to that wall where the writing-table stood, he noticed a syphon of soda, a decanter of whisky and a long glass which was not quite empty. He looked at Ballantyne curiously and as he looked he saw him start and stare with wide-opened eyes into the dim corners of the tent. Ballantyne had forgotten Thresk's presence. He stood there, his body rigid, his mouth half-open and fear looking out from his eyes and every line in his face—stark paralysing fear. Then he saw Thresk staring at him, but he was too sunk in terror to resent the stare.

"Did you hear anything?" he said in a whisper.

"No."

"I did," and he leaned his head on one side. For a moment the two men stood holding their breath; and then Thresk did hear something.

It was the rustle of a dress in the corridor beyond the mat-screen.

"It's Mrs. Ballantyne," he said, and she lifted the screen and came in.

Thresk just noticed a sharp movement of revulsion in Ballantyne, but he paid no heed to him. His eyes were riveted on Stella Ballantyne. She was wearing about her throat now a turquoise necklace. It was a heavy necklace of Indian make, rather barbaric and not at all beautiful, but it had many rows of stones and it hid her throat—just as surely as her hand had hidden it when she first saw Thresk. It was to hide her throat that she had fled. He saw Ballantyne go up to his wife, he heard his voice and noticed that her face grew grave and hard.

"So you have come to your senses," he said in a low tone. Stella passed him and did not answer. It was, then, upon the question of that necklace that their voices had been raised when he reached the camp. He had heard Ballantyne's loud and dominant, the voice of a bully. He had been ordering her to cover her throat. Stella, on the other hand, had been quiet but defiant. She had refused. Now she had changed her mind.

Baram Singh brought in the soup-tureen a second afterwards and Ballantyne raised his hands in a simulation of the profoundest astonishment.

"Why, dinner's actually punctual! What a miracle! Upon my word, Stella, I shan't know what to expect next if you spoil me in this way."

"It's usually punctual, Stephen," Stella replied with a smile of anxiety and appeal.

"Is it, my dear? I hadn't noticed it. Let us sit down at once."

Upon this tone of banter the dinner began; and no doubt in another man's mouth it might have sounded good-humoured enough. There was certainly no word as yet which, it could be definitely said, was meant to wound, but underneath the raillery Thresk was conscious of a rasp, a bitterness just held in check through the presence of a stranger. Not that Thresk was spared his share of it. At the very outset he, the guest whom it was such a rare piece of good fortune for Ballantyne to meet, came in for a taste of the whip.

"So you could actually give four-and-twenty hours to Chitipur, Mr. Thresk. That was most kind and considerate of you. Chitipur is grateful. Let us drink to it! By the way what will you drink? Our cellar is rather limited in camp. There's some claret and some whisky-and-soda."

"Whisky-and-soda for me, please," said Thresk.

"And for me too. You take claret, don't you, Stella dear," and he lingered upon the "dear" as though he anticipated getting a great deal of amusement out of her later on. And so she understood him, for there came a look of trouble into her face and she made a little gesture of helplessness. Thresk watched and said nothing.

"The decanter's in front of you, Stella," continued Ballantyne. He turned his attention to his own tumbler, into which Baram Singh had

already poured the whisky; and at once he exclaimed indignantly.

"There's much too much here for me! Good heavens, what next!" and in Hindustani he ordered Baram Singh to add to the soda-water. Then he turned again to Thresk. "But I've no doubt you exhausted Chitipur in your twenty-four hours, didn't you? Of course you are going to write a book."

"Write a book!" cried Thresk. He was surprised into a laugh. "Not I."

Ballantyne leaned forward with a most serious and puzzled face.

"You're not writing a book about India? God bless my soul! D'you hear that, Stella. He's actually twenty-four hours in Chitipur and he's not going to write a book about it."

"Six weeks from door to door: or how I made an ass of myself in India," said Thresk. "No thank you!"

Ballantyne laughed, took a gulp of his whisky-and-soda and put the glass down again with a wry face.

"This is too strong for me," he said, and he rose from his chair and crossed over to the tantalus upon the sideboard. He gave a cautious look towards the table, but Thresk had bent forward towards Stella. She was saying in a low voice:

"You don't mind a little chaff, do you?" and with an appeal so wistful that it touched Thresk to the heart.

"Of course not," he answered, and he looked

up towards Ballantyne. Stella noticed a change come over his face. It was not surprise so much which showed there as interest and a confirmation of some suspicion which he already had. He saw that Ballantyne was secretly pouring into his glass not soda-water at all but whisky from the tantalus. He came back with the tumbler charged to the brim and drank deeply from it with relish.

"That's better," he said, and with a grin he turned his attention to his wife, fixing her with his eyes, gloating over her like some great snake over a bird trembling on the floor of its cage. The courses followed one upon the other and while he ate he baited her for his amusement. She took refuge in silence but he forced her to talk and then shivered with ridicule everything she said. Stella was cowed by him. If she answered it was probably some small commonplace which with an exaggerated politeness he would nag at her to repeat. In the end, with her cheeks on fire, she would repeat it and bend her head under the brutal sarcasm with which it was torn to rags. Once or twice Thresk was on the point of springing up in her defence, but she looked at him with so much terror in her eyes that he did not interfere. He sat and watched and meanwhile his plan began to take shape in his mind.

There came an interval of silence during which Ballantyne leaned back in his chair in a sort of stupor; and in the midst of that silence Stella suddenly exclaimed with a world of longing in her voice :

“And you’ll be in England in thirteen days! To think of it!” She glanced round the tent. It seemed incredible that any one could be so fortunate.

“You go straight from Jarwhal Junction here at our tent door to Bombay. To-morrow you go on board your ship and in twelve days afterwards you’ll be in England.”

Thresk leaned forward across the table.

“When did you go home last?” he asked.

“I have never been home since I married.”

“Never!” exclaimed Thresk.

Stella shook her head.

“Never.”

She was looking down at the tablecloth while she spoke, but as she finished she raised her head.

“Yes, I have been eight years in India,” she added, and Thresk saw the tears suddenly glisten in her eyes. He had come up to Chitipur reproaching himself for that morning on the South Downs, a morning so distant so aloof from all the surroundings in which he found himself that it seemed to belong to an earlier life. But his reproaches became doubly poignant now. She had been eight years in India, tied to this brute! But Stella Ballantyne mastered herself with a laugh.

“However I am not alone in that,” she said lightly. “And how’s London?”

It was unfortunate that just at this moment Captain Ballantyne woke up.

“Eh what!” he exclaimed in a mock surprise. “You were talking, Stella, were you?”

It must have been something extraordinarily interesting that you were saying. Do let me hear it."

At once Stella shrank. Her spirit was so cowed that she almost had the look of a stupid person; she became stupid in sheer terror of her husband's raileries.

"It wasn't of any importance."

"Oh, my dear," said Ballantyne with a sneer, "you do yourself an injustice," and then his voice grew harsh, his face brutal. "What was it?" he demanded.

Stella looked this way and that, like an animal in a trap. Then she caught sight of Thresk's face over against her. Her eyes appealed to him for silence; she turned quickly to her husband.

"I only said how's London?"

A smile spread over Ballantyne's face.

"Now did you say that? How's London! Now why did you ask how London was? How should London be? What sort of an answer did you expect?"

"I didn't expect any answer," replied Stella. "Of course the question sounds stupid if you drag it out and worry it."

Ballantyne snorted contemptuously.

"How's London? Try again, Stella!"

Thresk had come to the limit of his patience. In spite of Stella's appeal he interrupted and interrupted sharply.

"It doesn't seem to me an unnatural question for any woman to ask who has not seen London

for eight years. After all, say what you like, for women India means exile—real exile.”

Ballantyne turned upon his visitor with some rejoinder on his tongue. But he thought better of it. He looked away and contented himself with a laugh.

“Yes,” said Stella, “we need next-door neighbours.”

The restraint which Ballantyne showed towards Thresk only served to inflame him against his wife.

“So that you may pull their gowns to pieces and unpick their characters,” he said. “Never mind, Stella! The time’ll come when we shall settle down to domestic bliss at Camberley on twopence-halfpenny a year. That’ll be jolly, won’t it? Long walks over the heather and quiet evenings—alone with me. You must look forward to that, my dear.” His voice rose to a veritable menace as he sketched the future which awaited them and then sank again.

“How’s London!” he growled, harping scornfully on the unfortunate phrase. Ballantyne had had luck that night. He had chanced upon two of the banalities of ordinary talk which give an easy occasion for the bully. Thresk’s twenty-four hours to give to Chitipur provided the best opening. Only Thresk was a guest—not that that in Ballantyne’s present mood would have mattered a great deal, but he was a guest whom Ballantyne had it in his mind to use. All the more keenly therefore he pounced upon Stella. But in pouncing he gave Thresk a glimpse into the real man

that he was, a glimpse which the barrister was quick to appreciate.

"How's London? A lot of London we shall be able to afford! God! what a life there's in store for us! Breakfast, lunch and dinner, dinner, breakfast, lunch—all among the next-door neighbours." And upon that he flung himself back in his chair and reached out his arms.

"Give me Rajputana!" he cried, and even through the thickness of his utterance his sincerity rang clear as a bell. "You can stretch yourself here. The cities! Live in the cities and you can only wear yourself out hankering to do what you like. Here you can do it. Do you see that, Mr. Thresk? You can do it." And he thumped the table with his hand.

"I like getting away into camp for two months, three months at a time—on the plain, in the jungle, alone. That's the point—alone. You've got it all then. You're a king without a Press. No one to spy on you—no one to carry tales—no next-door neighbours. How's London?" and with a sneer he turned back to his wife. "Oh, I know it doesn't suit Stella. Stella's so sociable. Stella wants parties. Stella likes frocks. Stella loves to hang herself about with beads, don't you, my darling?"

But Ballantyne had overtried her to-night. Her face suddenly flushed and with a swift and violent gesture she tore at the necklace round her throat. The clasp broke, the beads fell with a clatter upon her plate, leaving her throat bare.

For a moment Ballantyne stared at her, unable to believe his eyes. So many times he had made her the butt of his savage humour and she had offered no reply. Now she actually dared him!

"Why did you do that?" he asked, pushing his face close to hers. But he could not stare her down. She looked him in the face steadily. Even her lips did not tremble.

"You told me to wear them. I wore them. You jeer at me for wearing them. I take them off."

And as she sat there with her head erect Thresk knew why he had bidden her to wear them. There were bruises upon her throat—upon each side of her throat—the sort of bruises which would be made by the grip of a man's fingers. "Good God!" he cried, and before he could speak another word Stella's moment of defiance passed. She suddenly covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

Ballantyne pushed back his chair sulkily. Thresk sprang to his feet. But Stella held him off with a gesture of her hand.

"It's nothing," she said between her sobs "I am foolish. These last few days have been hot, haven't they?" She smiled wanly, checking her tears. "There's no reason at all," and she got up from her chair. "I think I'll leave you for a little while. My head aches and—and—I've no doubt I have got a red nose now."

She took a step or two towards the passage into her private tent but stopped.

"I can leave you to get along together alone, can't I?" she said with her eyes on Thresk. "You know what women are, don't you? Stephen will tell you interesting things about Rajputana if you can get him to talk. I shall see you before you go," and she lifted the screen and went out of the room. In the darkness of the passage she stood silent for a moment to steady herself and while she stood there, in spite of her efforts, her tears burst forth again uncontrollably. She clasped her hands tightly over her mouth so that the sound of her sobbing might not reach to the table in the centre of the big marquee; and with her lips whispering in all sincerity the vain wish that she were dead she stumbled along the corridor.

But the sound had reached into the big marquee and coming after the silence it wrung Thresk's heart. He knew this of her at all events—that she did not easily cry. Ballantyne touched him on the arm.

"You blame me for this."

"I don't know that I do," answered Thresk slowly. He was wondering how much share in the blame he had himself, he who had ridden with her on the Downs eight years ago and had let her speak and had not answered. He sat in this tent to-night with shame burning at his heart. "It wasn't as if I had no confidence in myself," he argued, unable quite to cast back to the Thresk of those early days. "I had—heaps of it."

Ballantyne lifted himself out of his chair and lurched over to the sideboard. Thresk, watching

him, fell to wondering why in the world Stella had married him or he her. He knew that a blind man may see such mysteries on any day and that a wise one will not try to explain them. Still he wondered. Had the man's reputation dazzled her?—for undoubtedly he had one; or was it that intellect which suffered an eclipse when Ballantyne went into camp with nobody to carry tales?

He was still pondering on that problem when Ballantyne swung back to the table and set himself to prove, drunk though he was, that his reputation was not ill-founded.

"I am afraid Stella's not very well," he said, sitting heavily down. "But she asked me to tell you things, didn't she? Well, her wishes are my law. So here goes."

His manner altogether changed now that they were alone. He became confidential, intimate friendly. He was drunk. He was a coarse heavy-featured man with bloodshot eyes; he interrupted his conversation with uneasy glances into the corners of the tent, such glances as Thresk had noticed when he was alone with him before they sat down to dinner; but he managed none the less to talk of Rajputana with a knowledge which amazed Thresk now and would have enthralled him at another time. A visitor may see the surface of Rajputana much as Thresk had done, may admire its marble palaces, its blue lakes and the great yellow stretches of its desert, but to know anything of the life underneath in that strange secret country is given to few even of those who for

long years fly the British flag over the Agencies. Nevertheless Ballantyne knew—very little as he acknowledged but more than his fellows. And groping drunkenly in his mind he drew out now this queer intrigue, now that fateful piece of history, now the story of some savage punishment wreaked behind the latticed windows, and laid them one after another before Thresk's eyes—his peace-offerings. And Thresk listened. But before his eyes stood the picture of Stella Ballantyne standing alone in the dark corridor beyond the grass-screen whispering with wild lips her wish that she was dead; and in his ears was the sound of her sobbing. Here, it seemed, was another story to add to the annals of Rajputana.

Then Ballantyne tapped him on the arm.

"You're not listening," he said with a leer. "And I'm telling you good things—things that people don't know and that I wouldn't tell them—the swine. You're not listening. You're thinking I'm a brute to my wife, eh?" And Thresk was startled by the shrewdness of his host's guess.

"Well, I'll tell you the truth. I am not master of myself," Ballantyne continued. His voice sank and his eyes narrowed to two little bright slits. "I am afraid. Yes, that's the explanation. I am so afraid that when I am not alone I seek relief any way, any how. I can't help it." And even as he spoke his eyes opened wide and he sat staring intently at a dim corner of the tent, moving his head with little jerks from one side to the other that he might see the better.

"There's no one over there, eh?" he asked.

"No one."

Ballantyne nodded as he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"They make these tents too large," he said in a whisper. "One great blot of light in the middle and all around in the corners—shadows. We sit here in the blot of light—a fair mark. But what's going on in the shadows, Mr.—What's your name? Eh? What's going on in the shadows?"

Thresk had no doubt that Ballantyne's fear was genuine. He was not putting forward merely an excuse for the scene which his guest had witnessed and might spread abroad on his return to Bombay. No, he was really terrified. He interspersed his words with sudden unexpected silences, during which he sat all ears and his face strained to listen, as though he expected to surprise some stealthy movement. But Thresk accounted for it by that decanter on the sideboard, in which the level of the whisky had been so noticeably lowered that evening. He was wrong however, for Ballantyne sprang to his feet.

"You are going away to-night. You can do me a service."

"Can I?" asked Thresk.

He understood at last why Ballantyne had been at such pains to interest and amuse him.

"Yes. And in return," cried Ballantyne, "I'll give you another glimpse into the India you don't know."

He walked up to the door of the tent and drew it aside. "Look!"

Thresk, leaning forward in his chair, looked out through the opening. He saw the moonlit plain in a soft haze, in the middle of it the green lamp of a railway signal and beyond the distant ridge, on which straggled the ruins of old Chitipur.

"Look!" cried Ballantyne. "There's tourist India all in one: a desert, a railway and a deserted city, hovels and temples, deep sacred pools and forgotten palaces—the whole bag of tricks crumbling slowly to ruin through centuries on the top of a hill. That's what the good people come out for to see in the cold weather—Jarwhal Junction and old Chitipur."

He dropped the curtain contemptuously and it swung back, shutting out the desert. He took a step or two back into the tent and flung out his arms wide on each side of him.

"But bless your soul," he cried vigorously, "here's the real India."

Thresk looked about the tent and understood.

"I see," he answered—"a place very badly lit, a great blot of light in the centre and all around it dark corners and grim shadows."

Ballantyne nodded his head with a grim smile upon his lips.

"Oh, you have learnt that! Well, you shall do me a service and in return you shall look into the shadows. But we will have the table cleared first." And he called aloud for Baram Singh.