CHAPTER VII

THE PHOTOGRAPH

WHILE Baram Singh was clearing the table Ballantyne lifted the box of cheroots from the top of the bureau and held it out to Thresk.

"Will you smoke?"

Thresk, however, though he smoked had not during his stay in India acquired the taste for the cheroot; and it interested him in later times to reflect how largely he owed his entanglement in the tragic events which were to follow to that accidental distaste. For conscious of it he had brought his pipe with him, and he now fetched it out of his pocket.

"This, if I may," he said.

"Of course."

Thresk filled his pipe and lighted it, Ballantyne for his part lit a cheroot and replaced the box upon the top, close to a heavy riding-crop with a bone handle, which Thresk happened now to notice for the first time.

"Be quick!" he cried impatiently to Baram Singh, and seated himself in the swing-chair in front of the bureau, turning it so as not to have his back to Thresk at the table. Baram Singh hur-

riedly finished his work and left the marquee by the passage leading to the kitchen. Ballantyne waited with his eyes upon that passage until the grass-mat screen had ceased to move. Then taking a bunch of keys from his pocket he stooped under the open writing-flap of the bureau and unlocked the lowest of the three drawers. From this drawer he lifted a scarlet despatch-box, and was just going to bring it to the table when Baram Singh silently appeared once more. At once Ballantyne dropped the box on the floor, covering it as well as he could with his legs.

"What the devil do you want?" he cried, speaking of course in Hindustani, and with a violence which seemed to be half-made up of anger and half of fear. Baram Singh replied that he had brought an ash-tray for the Sahib, and he placed it on the round table by Thresk's side.

"Well, get out and don't come back until you are called," cried Ballantyne roughly, and in evident relief as Baram Singh once more retired he took a long draught from a fresh tumbler of whisky-and-soda which stood on the flap of the bureau beside him. He then stooped once more to lift the red despatch-box from the floor, but to Thresk's amazement in the very act of stooping he stopped. He remained with his hands open to seize the box and his body bent over his knees, quite motionless. His mouth was open, his eyes staring, and upon his face such a look of sheer terror was stamped as Thresk could never find words to describe. For the first moment he imagined that the man had

had a stroke. His habits, his heavy build all pointed that way. The act of stooping would quite naturally be the breaking pressure upon that overcharged brain. But before Thresk had risen to make sure Ballantyne moved an arm. He moved it upwards without changing his attitude in any other way, or even the direction of his eyes, and he groped along the flap of the bureau very cautiously and secretly and up again to the top ledge. All the while his eyes were staring intently, but with the intentness of extreme fear, not at the despatch-box but at the space of carpet—a couple of feet at the most—between the despatch-box and the tent-wall. His fingers felt along the ledge of the bureau and closed with a silent grip upon the handle of the riding-crop. Thresk jumped to the natural conclusion: a snake had crept in under the tent-wall and Ballantyne dared not move lest the snake should strike. Neither did he dare to move himself. Ballantyne was clearly within reach of its fangs. But he looked and—there was nothing. The light was not good certainly, and down by the tent-wall there close to the floor it was shadowy and dim. But Thresk's eyes were keen. The space between the despatch-box and the wall was empty. Nothing crawled there, nothing was coiled.

Thresk looked at Ballantyne with amazement; and as he looked Ballantyne sprang from his chair with a scream of terror—the scream of a panic-stricken child. He sprang with an agility which Thresk would never have believed possible in a

man of so gross a build. He leapt into the air and with his crop he struck savagely once, twice and thrice at the floor between the wall and the box. Then he turned to Thresk with every muscle working in his face.

"Did you see?" he cried. "Did you see?"

"What? There was nothing to see!"

"Nothing!" screamed Ballantyne. He picked up the box and placed it on the table, thrusting it under Thresk's hand. "Hold that! Don't let go! Stay here and don't let go," he said, and running up the tent raised his voice to a shout.

"Baram Singh!" and lifting the tent-door he called to others of his servants by name. Without waiting for them he ran out himself and in a second Thresk heard him cursing thickly and calling outside the tent in panic-stricken tones just close to that point of the wall against which the bureau stood. The camp woke to clamour.

Thresk stood by the table gripping the handle of the despatch-box as he had been bidden to do. The tent-door was left open. He could see lights flashing, he heard Ballantyne shouting orders, and his voice dwindled and grew loud as he moved from spot to spot in the encampment. And in the midst of the noise the white frightened face of Stella Ballantyne appeared at the opening of her corridor.

"What has happened?" she asked in a whisper. "Oh, I was afraid that you and he had quarrelled," and she stood with her hand pressed over her heart.

"No, no indeed," Thresk replied, and Captain Ballantyne stumbled back into the tent. His face was livid, and yet the sweat stood upon his forehead. Stella Ballantyne drew back, but Ballantyne saw her as she moved and drove her to her own quarters.

"I have a private message for Mr. Thresk's ears," he said, and when she had gone he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Now you must help me," he said in a low voice. But his voice shook and his eyes strayed again to the ground by the wall of the tent.

"It was just there the arm came through," he said. "Yes, just there," and he pointed a trembling finger.

"Arm?" cried Thresk. "What are you talking about?"

Ballantyne looked away from the wall to Thresk, his eyes incredulous.

"But you saw!" he insisted; leaning forward over the table.

"What?"

"An arm, a hand thrust in under the tent there, along the ground reaching out for my box."

"No. There was nothing to see."

"A lean brown arm, I tell you, a hand thin and delicate as a woman's."

"No. You are dreaming," exclaimed Thresk; but dreaming was a euphemism for the word he meant.

"Dreaming!" repeated Ballantyne with a harsh laugh. "Good God! I wish I was. Come. Sit

down here! We have not too much time." He seated himself opposite to Thresk and drew the despatch-box towards him. He had regained enough mastery over himself now to be able to speak in a level voice. No doubt too his fright had sobered him. But it had him still in its grip, for when he opened the despatch-box his hand so shook that he could hardly insert the key in the lock. It was done at last however, and feeling beneath the loose papers on the surface he drew out from the very bottom a large sealed envelope. He examined the seals to make sure they had not been tampered with. Then he tore open the envelope and took out a photograph, somewhat larger than cabinet size.

"You have heard of Bahadur Salak?" he said.

Thresk started.

"The affair at Umballa, the riots at Benares, the murder in Madras?"

"Exactly."

Ballantyne pushed the photograph into Thresk's hand.

"That's the fellow—the middle one of the group."

Thresk held up the photograph to the light. It represented a group of nine Hindus seated upon chairs in a garden and arranged in a row facing the camera. Thresk looked at the central figure with a keen and professional interest. Salak was a notorious figure in the Indian politics of the day—the politics of the subterranean kind. For some years he had preached and practised

sedition with so much subtlety and skill that though all men were aware that his hand worked the strings of disorder there was never any convicting evidence against him. In all the three cases which Thresk had quoted and in many others less well-known those responsible for order were sure that he had devised the crime, chosen the moment for its commission and given the order. But up till a month ago he had slipped through the meshes. A month ago, however, he had made his mistake.

"Yes. It's a clever face," said Thresk.

Ballantyne nodded his head.

"He's a Mahratta Brahmin from Poona. They are the fellows for brains, and Salak's about the cleverest of them."

Thresk looked again at the photograph.

"I see the picture was taken at Poona."

"Yes, and isn't it an extraordinary thing!" cried Ballantyne, his face flashing suddenly into interest and enjoyment. The enthusiasm of the administrator in his work got the better of his fear now, just as a little earlier it had got the better of his drunkenness. Thresk was looking now into the face of a quite different man, the man of the intimate knowledge and the high ability for whom fine rewards were prophesied in Bombay. "The very cleverest of them can't resist the temptation of being photographed in group. Crime after crime has been brought home to the Indian criminal both here and in London because they will sit in garden-chairs and let a man

take their portraits. Nothing will stop them. They won't learn. They are like the ladies of the light opera stage. Well, let 'em go on I say. Here's an instance."

"Is it?" asked Thresk. "Surely that photograph was taken a long time ago."

"Nine years. But he was at the same game. You have got the proof in your hands. There's a group of nine men—Salak and his eight friends. Well, of his eight friends every man jack is now doing time for burglary, in some cases with violence—that second ruffian, for instance, he's in for life—in some cases without, but in each case the crime was burglary. And why? Because Salak in the centre there set them on to it. Because Salak nine years ago wasn't the big swell he is now. Because Salak wanted money to start his intrigues. That's the way he got it—burglaries all round Bombay."

"I see," said Thresk. "Salak's in prison now?"

"He's in prison in Calcutta, yes. But he's awaiting his trial. He's not convicted yet."

"Exactly," Thresk answered. "This photograph is a valuable thing to have just now."

Ballantyne threw up his arms in despair at the obtuseness of his companion.

"Valuable!" he cried in derision. "Valuable!" and he leaned forward on his elbows and began to talk to Thresk with an ironic gentleness as if he were a child.

"You don't quite understand me, do you? But a little effort and all will be plain."

He got no farther however upon this line of attack, for Thresk interrupted him sharply.

"Here! Say what you have got to say if you want me to help you. Oh, you needn't scowl! You are not going to bait me for your amusement. I am not your wife." And Ballantyne after a vain effort to stare Thresk down changed to a more cordial tone.

"Well, you say it's a valuable thing to have just now. I say it's an infernally dangerous thing. On the one side there's Salak the great national leader, Salak the deliverer, Salak professing from his prison in Calcutta that he has never used any but the most legitimate constitutional means to forward his propaganda. And here on the other is Salak in his garden chair amongst the burglars. Not a good thing to possess—this photograph, Mr. Thresk. Especially because it's the only one in existence and the negative has been destroyed. So Salak's friends are naturally anxious to get it back."

"Do they know you have it?" Thresk asked.

"Of course they do. You had proof that they knew five minutes ago when that brown arm wriggled in under the tent-wall."

Ballantyne's fear returned upon him as he spoke. He sat shivering; his eyes wandered furtively from corner to corner of the great tent and came always back as though drawn by a serpent to the floor by the wall of the tent. Thresk shrugged his shoulders. To dispute with Ballantyne once more upon his delusion would be the

merest waste of time. He took up the photograph again.

"How do you come to possess it?" he asked. If he was to serve his host in the way he suspected he would be asked to, he must know its history.

"I was agent in a state not far from Poona before I came here."

Thresk agreed.

"I know. Bakutu."

"Oh?" said Ballantyne with a sharp look. "How did you know that?"

He was always in alarm lest somewhere in the world gossip was whispering his secret.

"A Mrs. Carruthers at Bombay."

"Did she tell you anything else?"

"Yes. She told me that you were a great man."

Ballantyne grinned suddenly.

"Isn't she a fool?" Then the grin left his face. "But how did you come to discuss me with her at all?"

That was a question which Thresk had not the slightest intention to answer. He evaded it altogether.

"Wasn't it natural since I was going to Chitipur?" he asked, and Ballantyne was appeased.

"Well, the Rajah of Bakutu had that photograph and he gave it to me when I left the State. He came down to the station to see me off. He was too near Poona to be comfortable with that in his pocket. He gave it to me on the platform in full view, the damned coward. He wanted to show that he had

given it to me. He said that I should be safe with it in Chitipur."

"Chitipur's a long way from Poona," Thresk agreed.

"But don't you see, this trial that's coming along in Calcutta makes all the difference. It's known I have got it. It's not safe here now and no more am I so long as I've got it."

One question had been puzzling Thresk ever since he had seen the look of terror reappear in Ballantyne's face. It was clear that he lived in a very real fear. He believed that he was watched, and he believed that he was in danger; and very probably he actually was. There had, to be sure, been no attempt that night to rob him of it as he imagined. But none the less Salak and his friends could not like the prospect of the production of that photograph in Calcutta, and would hardly be scrupulous what means they took to prevent it. Then why had not Ballantyne destroyed it? Thresk asked the question and was fairly startled by the answer. For it presented to him in the most unexpected manner another and a new side of the strange and complex character of Stephen Ballantyne.

"Yes, why don't I destroy it?" Ballantyne repeated. "I ask myself that," and he took the photograph out of Thresk's hands and sat in a sort of muse, staring at it. Then he turned it over and took the edge between his forefinger and his thumb, hesitating whether he would not even at this moment tear it into strips and have done with

it. But in the end he cast it upon the table as he had done many a time before and cried in a voice of violence:

"No, I can't. That's to own these fellows my masters, and I won't. By God I won't! I may be every kind of brute, but I have been bred up in this service. For twenty years I have lived in it and by it. And the service is too strong for me. No, I can't destroy that photograph. There's the truth. I should hate myself to my dying day if I did."

He rose abruptly as if half ashamed of his outburst and crossing to his bureau lighted another cheroot.

"Then what do you want me to do with it?" asked Thresk.

"I want you to take it away."

Ballantyne was taking a casuistical way of satisfying his conscience, and he was aware of it. He would not destroy the portrait—no! But he wouldn't keep it either. "You are going straight back to England," he said. "Take it with you. When you get home you can hand it to one of the big-wigs at the India Office and he'll put it in a pigeon-hole, and some day an old charwoman cleaning the office will find it, and she'll take it home to her grandchildren to play with and one of them'll drop it on the fire, and there'll be an end of it."

"Yes," replied Thresk slowly. "But if I do that, it won't be useful at Calcutta, will it?"

"Oh," said Ballantyne with a sneer. "You've

got a conscience too, eh? Well, I'll tell you. I don't think that photograph will be needed at Calcutta."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes. Salak's friends don't know it, but I do."

Thresk sat still in doubt. Was Ballantyne speaking the truth or did he speak in fear? He was still standing by the bureau looking down upon Thresk and behind him, so that Thresk had not the expression of his face to help him to decide. But he did not turn in his chair to look. For as he sat there it dawned upon him that the photograph was the very thing which he himself needed. The scheme which had been growing in his mind all through this evening, which had begun to grow from the very moment when he had entered the tent, was now complete in every detail except one. He wanted an excuse, a good excuse, which should explain why he missed his boat, and here it was on the table in front of him. Almost he had refused it! Now it seemed to him a Godsend.

"I'll take it," he cried, and Baram Singh silently appeared at the outer doorway of the tent.

"Huzoor," he said. "Railgharri hai."

Ballantyne turned to Thresk.

"Your train is signalled," and as Thresk started up he reassured him. "There's no hurry. I have sent word that it is not to start without you." And while Baram Singh still stood waiting for orders in the doorway of the tent Ballantyne walked round the table, took up the portrait very deliberately and handed it to Thresk.

"Thank you," he said. "Button it in your coat pocket."

He waited while Thresk obeyed.

"Thus," said Thresk with a laugh, "did the Rajah of Bakutu," and Ballantyne replied with a grin.

"Thank you for mentioning that name." He turned to Baram Singh. "The camel, quick!"

Baram Singh went out to the enclosure within the little village of tents and Thresk asked curiously:

"Do you distrust him?"

Ballantyne looked steadily at his visitor and said:

"I don't answer such questions. But I'll tell you something. If that man were dying he would ask for leave. And he would ask for leave because he would not die with my scarlet livery on his back. Are you answered?"

"Yes," said Thresk.

"Very well." And with a brisk change of tone Ballantyne added: "I'll see that your camel is ready." He called aloud to his wife: "Stella! Stella! Mr. Thresk is going," and he went out through the doorway into the moonlight.