

CHAPTER VIII

AND THE RIFLE

THRESE, alone in the tent, looked impatiently towards the grass-screen. He wanted half-a-dozen words with Stella alone. Here was the opportunity, the unhoped-for opportunity, and it was slipping away. Through the open doorway of the tent he saw Ballantyne standing by a big fire and men moving quickly in obedience to his voice. Then he heard the rustle of a dress in the corridor, and she was in the room. He moved quickly towards her, but she held up her hand and stopped him.

“Oh, why did you come?” she said, and the pallor of her face reproached him no less than the regret in her voice.

“I heard of you in Bombay,” he replied. “I am glad that I did come.”

“And I am sorry.”

“Why?”

She looked about the tent as though he might find his answer there. Threse did not move. He stood near to her, watching her face intently with his jaw rather set.

“Oh, I didn't say that to wound you,” said Stella, and she sat down on one of the cushioned basket-

chairs. "You mustn't think I wasn't glad to see you. I was—at the first moment I was very glad;" and she saw his face lighten as she spoke. "I couldn't help it. All the years rolled away. I remembered the Sussex Downs and—and—days when we rode there high up above the weald. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"How long was that ago?"

"Eight years."

Stella laughed wistfully.

"To me it seems a century." She was silent for a moment, and though he spoke to her urgently she did not answer. She was carried back to the high broad hills of grass with the curious chumps of big beech-trees upon their crests.

"Do you remember Halnaker Gallop?" she asked with a laugh. "We found it when the chains weren't up and had the whole two miles free. Was there ever such grass?"

She was looking straight at the bureau, but she was seeing that green lane of shaven turf in the haze of an August morning. She saw it rise and dip in the open between long brown grass. There was a tree on the left-hand side just where the ride dipped for the first time. Then it ran straight to the big beech-trees and passed between them; a wide glade of sunlight, and curved out at the upper end by the road and dipped down again to the two lodges.

"And the ridge at the back of Charlton forest, all the weald to Leith Hill in view?" She rose

suddenly from her chair. "Oh, I am sorry that you came."

"And I am glad," repeated Thresk.

The stubbornness with which he repeated his words arrested her. She looked at him—was it with distrust, he asked himself? He could not be sure. But certainly there was a little hard note in her voice which had not been there before, when in her turn she asked :

"Why?"

"Because I shouldn't have known," he said in a quick whisper. "I should have gone back. I should have left you here. I shouldn't have known."

Stella recoiled.

"There is nothing to know," she said sharply, and Thresk pointed at her throat.

"Nothing?"

Stella Ballantyne raised her hand to cover the blue marks.

"I—I fell and hurt myself," she stammered.

"It was he—Ballantyne."

"No," she cried and she drew herself erect. But Thresk would not accept the denial.

"He ill-treats you," he insisted. "He drinks and ill-treats you."

Stella shook her head.

"You asked questions in Bombay where we are known. You were not told that," she said confidently. There was only one person in Bombay who knew the truth and Jane Repton, she was very sure, would never have betrayed her.

"That's true," Thresk conceded. "But why?"

Because it's only here in camp that he lets himself go. He told us as much to-night. You were here at the table. You heard. He let his secret slip: no one to carry tales, no one to spy. In the towns he sets a guard upon himself. Yes, but he looks forward to the months of camp when there are no next-door neighbours."

"No, that's not true," she protested and cast about for explanations. "He—he has had a long day and to-night he was tired—and when you are tired—— Oh, as a rule he's different." And to her relief she heard Ballantyne's voice outside the tent.

"Thresk! Thresk!"

She came forward and held out her hand.

"There! Your camel's ready," she said. "You must go! Goodbye," and as he took it the old friendliness transfigured her face. "You are a great man now. I read of you. You always meant to be, didn't you? Hard work?"

"Very," said Thresk. "Four o'clock in the morning till midnight;" and she suddenly caught him by the arm.

"But it's worth it." She let him go and clasped her hands together. "Oh, you have got everything!" she cried in envy.

"No," he answered. But she would not listen.

"Everything you asked for," she said, and she added hurriedly, "Do you still collect miniatures? No time for that now, I suppose?"

Once more Ballantyne's voice came to them from the camp fire.

"You must go."

Thresk looked through the opening of the tent. Ballantyne had turned and was coming back towards them.

"I'll write to you from Bombay," he said, and utter disbelief showed in her face and sounded in her laugh.

"That letter will never reach me," she said lightly, and she went up to the door of the tent. Thresk had a moment whilst her back was turned and he used it. He took his pipe out of his pocket and placed it silently and quickly on the table. He wanted a word with her when Ballantyne was out of the way and she was not upon her guard to fence him off. The pipe might be his friend and give it him. He went up to Stella at the tent-door and Ballantyne, who was half-way between the camp-fire and the tent, stopped when he caught sight of him.

"That's right," he said. "You ought to be going;" and he turned again towards the camel. Thus for another moment they were alone together, but it was Stella who seized it.

"There go!" she said. "You must go," and in the same breath she added:

"Married yet?"

"No," answered Thresk.

"Still too busy getting on?"

"That's not the reason"—and he lowered his voice to a whisper—"Stella."

Again she laughed in frank and utter disbelief.

"Nor is Stella. That's mere politeness and good manners. We must show the dear creatures the

great part they play in our lives ;” and upon that all her fortitude suddenly deserted her. She had played her part so far, she could play it no longer. An extraordinary change came over her face. The smiles, the laughter slipped from it like a loosened mask. Thresk saw such an agony of weariness and hopeless longing in her eyes as he had never seen even with his experience in the Courts of Law. She drew back into the shadow of the tent.

“In thirteen days you’ll be steaming up the Channel,” she whispered, and with a sob she covered her face with her hands. Thresk saw the tears trickle between her fingers.

Ballantyne at the fire was looking back towards the tent. Thresk hurried out to him. The camel was crouching close to the fire saddled and ready.

“You have time,” said Ballantyne. “The train’s not in yet,” and Thresk walked to the side of the camel, where a couple of steps had been placed for him to mount. He had a foot on the step when he suddenly clapped his hand to his pocket.

“I’ve left my pipe,” he cried, “and I’ve a night’s journey in front of me. I won’t be a second.”

He ran back with all his speed to the tent. The hangings at the door were closed. He tore them aside and rushed in.

“Stella !” he said in a whisper, and then he stopped in amazement. He had left her on the very extremity of distress. He found her, though to be sure the stains of her tears were still visible upon her face, busy with one of the evening pre

parations natural in a camp-life—quietly, energetically busy. She looked up once when he raised the hanging over the door, but she dropped her eyes the next instant to her work.

She was standing by the table with a small rook-rifle in her hands. The breach was open. She looked down the barrel, holding up the weapon so that the light might shine into the breach.

“Yes?” she said, and with so much indifference that she did not lift her eyes from her work. “I thought you had gone.”

“I left my pipe behind me,” said Thresk.

“There it is, on the table.”

“Thank you.”

He put it in his pocket. Of the two he was disconcerted and at a loss, she was entirely at her ease.

“You are looking at my little rifle,” she said.

“No! Stella! I have only a moment——” But Stella went on as though he had not spoken.

“I am seeing that it is clean and ready for tomorrow,” and Ballantyne’s voice was heard speaking with some urgency close to the tent.

“Have you found it?” he called and he pushed his way in. “The train’s coming into the station now. It has a ten minutes’ wait, but it will take you all that time and more and I don’t want to keep it longer than can be helped.” He noticed Stella’s occupation. “You are looking at Stella’s pop-gun,” he said contemptuously. “My wife’s pretty smart with it. She allows no back-talk from the rabbits, I can tell you. Come along.”

"Yes," said Stella, "it's time. Once more, goodbye, Mr. Thresk;" and there was a little note of emphasis in her voice. Thresk turned with a sudden abruptness.

"Goodbye," he said, and he went up with Ballantyne to the door. But he was to hear her voice again that night, though it was not to him she spoke, for as they were passing out into the open she said to her husband:

"I suppose you are going to the station with Mr. Thresk?"

"No," he replied. "I am just going to see him start from the camp."

It struck Thresk that a shadow of disappointment passed across Stella's face, but at that distance and in the dim light he was not sure. The curtain closed behind them and hid her from his sight.

Thresk climbed up on to the camel behind the driver, whilst a servant held the beast's head.

"Sit firm," said Ballantyne, "or you'll be pitched off as he gets up."

The camel rose, unfolding himself in sections, while Thresk was shot forwards and backwards like a child upon a rocking-horse.

"There, you are all right now," cried Ballantyne. "Hold on and good-night."

"Good-night," said Thresk.

The camel moved out of the glare of the fire into the haze of the moonlight. The noise of the camp dropped away behind him. He heard only the soft padding of the camel's feet.