

CHAPTER IX

AN EPISODE IN BALLANTYNE'S LIFE

THE Reptons lived upon the Khamballa Hill and the bow-window of their drawing-room looked down upon the Arabian Sea and southwards along the coast towards Malabar Point. In this embrasure Mrs. Repton sat through a morning, denying herself to her friends. A book lay open on her lap but her eyes were upon the sea. A few minutes after the clock upon her mantelpiece had struck twelve she saw that for which she watched: the bowsprit and the black bows of a big ship pushing out from under the hill and the water boiling under its stem. The whole ship came into view with its awnings and its saffron funnels and headed to the north-west for Aden.

Jane Repton rose up from her chair and watched it go. In the sunlight its black hull was so sharply outlined on the sea, its lines and spars were so trim that it looked a miniature ship which she could reach out her hand and snatch. But her eyes grew dim as she watched, so that it became shapeless and blurred, and long before the liner was out of sight it was quite lost to her.

"I am foolish," she said as she turned away,

and she bit her handkerchief hard. This was midday of the Friday and ever since that dinner-party at the Carruthers' on the Monday night she had been alternating between wild hopes and arguments of prudence. But until this moment of disappointment she had not realised how completely the hopes had gained the upper hand with her and how extravagantly she had built upon Thresk's urgent questioning of her at the dinner-table.

"Very likely he never found the Ballantynes at all," she argued. But he might have sent her word. All that morning she had been expecting a telephone message or a telegram or a note scribbled on board the steamer and sent up the Khamballa Hill by a messenger. But not a token had come from him and now of the boat which was carrying him to England there was nothing left but the stain of its smoke upon the sky.

Mrs. Repton put her handkerchief in her pocket and was going about the business of her house when the butler opened the door.

"I am not in——" Mrs. Repton began and cut short the sentence with a cry of welcome and surprise, for close upon the heels of the servant Thresk was standing.

"You!" she cried "Oh!"

She felt her legs weakening under her and she sat down abruptly on a chair.

"Thank Heavens it was there," she said. "I should have sat on the floor if it hadn't been." She dismissed the butler and held out her hand to

Thresk. "Oh, my friend," she said, "there's your steamer on its way to Aden."

Her voice rang with enthusiasm and admiration. Thresk only nodded his head gloomily.

"I have missed it," he replied. "It's very unfortunate. I have clients waiting for me in London."

"You missed it on purpose," she declared and Thresk's face relaxed into a smile. He turned away from the window to her. He seemed suddenly to wear the look of a boy.

"I have the best of excuses," he replied, "the perfect excuse." But even he could not foresee how completely that excuse was to serve him.

"Sit down," said Jane Repton, "and tell me. You went to Chitipur, I know. From your presence here I know too that you found—them—there."

"No," said Thresk, "I didn't." He sat down and looked straight into Jane Repton's eyes. "I had a stroke of luck. I found them—in camp."

Jane Repton understood all that the last two words implied.

"I should have wished that," she answered, "if I had dared to think it possible. You talked with Stella?"

"Hardly a word alone. But I saw."

"What did you see?"

"I am here to tell you." And he told her the story of his night at the camp so far as it concerned Stella Ballantyne, and indeed not quite all of that. For instance he omitted altogether to

relate how he had left his pipe behind in the tent and had returned for it. That seemed to him unimportant. Nor did he tell her of his conversation with Ballantyne about the photograph. "He was in a panic. He had delusions," he said and left the matter there. Thresk had the lawyer's mind or rather the mind of a lawyer in big practice. He had the instinct for the essential fact and the knowledge that it was most lucid when presented in a naked simplicity. He was at pains to set before Jane Repton what he had seen of the life which Stella lived with Stephen Ballantyne and nothing else.

"Now," he said when he had finished, "you sent me to Chitipur. I must know why."

And when she hesitated he overbore her.

"You can be guilty of no disloyalty to your friend," he insisted, "by being frank with me. After all I have given guarantees. I went to Chitipur upon your word. I have missed my boat. You bade me go to Chitipur. That told me too little or too much. I say too little. I have got to know all now." And he rose up and stood before her. "What do you know about Stephen Ballantyne?"

"I'll tell you," said Jane Repton. She looked at the clock. "You had better stay and lunch with us if you will. We shall be alone. I'll tell you afterwards. Meanwhile——" and in her turn she stood up. The sense of responsibility was heavy upon her.

She had sent this man upon his errand of know-

ledge. He had done, in consequence of it, a stronger, a wilder thing than she had thought, than she had hoped for. She had a panicky feeling that she had set great forces at work.

“Meanwhile——” asked Thresk; and she drew a breath of relief. The steadiness of his eyes and voice comforted her. His quiet insistence gave her courage. None of her troubles and doubts had any place apparently in his mind. A nervous horse in the hands of a real horseman—thus she thought of herself in Thresk’s presence.

“Meanwhile I’ll give you one reason why I wanted you to go. My husband’s time in India is up. We are leaving for England altogether in a month’s time. We shall not come back at all. And when we have gone Stella will be left without one intimate friend in the whole country.”

“Yes,” said Thresk. “That wouldn’t do, would it?” and they went in to their luncheon.

All through that meal, before the servants, they talked what is written in the newspapers. And of the two she who had fears and hesitations was still the more impatient to get it done. She had her curiosity and it was beginning to consume her. What had Thresk known of Stella and she of him before she had come out to India and become Stella Ballantyne? Had they been in love? If not why had Thresk gone to Chitipur? Why had he missed his boat and left all his clients over there in England in the lurch? If so, why hadn’t they married—the idiots? Oh, how she wanted to know all the answers to all these questions! And what

he proposed to do now! And she would know nothing unless she was frank herself. She had read his ultimatum in his face.

"We'll have coffee in my sitting-room. You can smoke there," she said and she led the way to it. "A cheroot?"

Thresk smiled with amusement. But the amusement annoyed her for she did not understand it.

"I have got a Havana cigar here," he said. "May I?"

"Of course."

He lit it and listened. But it was not long before it went out and he did not stir to light it again. The incident of which Mrs. Repton had been the witness, and which she related now, invested Ballantyne with horror. Thresk had left the camp at Chitipur with an angry contempt for him. The contempt passed out of his feelings altogether as he sat in Mrs. Repton's drawing-room.

"I am not telling you what Stella has confided to me," said Mrs. Repton. "Stella's loyal even when there's no cause for loyalty; and if loyalty didn't keep her mouth closed, self-respect would. I tell you what I saw. We were at Agra at the time. My husband was Collector there. There was a Durbar held there and the Rajah of Chitipur came to it with his elephants and his soldiers, and naturally Captain Ballantyne and his wife came too. They stayed with us. You are to understand that I knew nothing—absolutely nothing—up to that time. I hadn't a suspicion—until the afternoon of the finals in the Polo Tournament.

Stella and I went together alone and we came home about six. Stella went upstairs and I—I walked into the library.”

She had found Ballantyne sitting in a high arm-chair, his eyes glittering under his black thick eyebrows and his face livid. He looked at her as she entered, but he neither moved nor spoke, and she thought that he was ill. But the decanter of whisky stood empty on a little table at his side and she noticed it.

“We have some people coming to dinner to-night, Captain Ballantyne,” she said. “We shall dine at eight, so there’s an hour and a half still.”

She went over to a book-case and took out a book. When she turned back into the room a change had taken place in her visitor. Life had flickered into his face. His eyes were wary and cunning.

“And why do you tell me that?” he asked in a voice which was thick and formidable. She had a notion that he did not know who she was and then suddenly she became afraid. She had discovered a secret—his secret. For once in the towns he had let himself go. She had a hope now that he could not move and that he knew it; he sat as still as his arm-chair.

“I had forgotten to tell you,” she replied. “I thought you might like to know beforehand.”

“Why should I like to know beforehand?”

She had his secret, he plied her with questions to know if she had it. She must hide her knowledge. Every instinct warned her to hide it.

“The people who are coming are strangers to India,” she said, “but I have told them of you and they will come expectant.”

“You are very kind.”

She had spoken lightly and with a laugh. Ballantyne replied without irony or amusement and with his eyes fixed upon her face. Mrs. Repton could not account for the panic which seized hold upon her. She had dined in Captain Ballantyne’s company before often enough; he had now been for three days in her house; she had recognised his ability and had neither particularly liked nor disliked him. Her main impression had been that he was not good enough for Stella, and it was an impression purely feminine and instinctive. Now suddenly he had imposed himself upon her as a creature dangerous, beastlike. She wanted to get out of the room but she dared not, for she was sure that her careful steps would, despite herself, change into a run. She sat down, meaning to read for a few moments, compose herself and then go. But no sooner had she taken her seat than her terror increased tenfold, for Ballantyne rose swiftly from his chair and walking in a circle round the room with an extraordinarily light and noiseless step disappeared behind her. Then he sat down. Mrs. Repton heard the slight grating of the legs of a chair upon the floor. It was a chair at a writing-table close by the window and exactly at her back. He could see every movement which she made, and she could see nothing, not so much as the tip of one of his fingers. And of his fingers

she was now afraid. He was watching her from his point of vantage; she seemed to feel his eyes burning upon the nape of her neck. And he said nothing; and he did not stir.

It was broad daylight, she assured herself. She had but to cross the room to the bell beside the fireplace. Nay, she had only to scream—and she was very near to screaming—to bring the servants to her rescue. But she dared not do it. Before she was half-way to the bell, before the cry was out of her mouth she would feel his fingers close about her throat.

Mrs. Repton had begun to tell her story with reluctance, dreading lest Thresk should attribute it to a woman's nerves and laugh. But he did not. He listened gravely, seriously; and, as she continued, that nightmare of an evening so lived again in her recollections that she could not but make it vivid in her words.

“I had more than a mere sense of danger,” she said. “I felt besides a sort of hideous discomfort, almost physical discomfort, which made me believe that there was something evil in that room beyond the power of language to describe.”

She felt her self-control leaving her. If she stayed she must betray her alarm. Even now she had swallowed again and again, and she wondered that he had not detected the working of her throat. She summoned what was left of her courage and tossing her book aside rose slowly and deliberately.

“I think I shall copy Stella's example and lie

down for an hour," she said without turning her head towards Ballantyne, and even while she spoke she knew that she had made a mistake in mentioning Stella. He would follow her to discover whether she went to Stella's room and told what she had seen to her. But he did not move. She reached the door, turned the handle, went out and closed the door behind her.

For a moment then her strength failed her; she leaned against the wall by the side of the door, her heart racing. But the fear that he would follow urged her on. She crossed the hall and stopped deliberately before a cabinet of china at the foot of the stairs, which stood against the wall in which the library door was placed. While she stood there she saw the door open very slowly and Ballantyne's livid face appear at the opening. She turned towards the stairs and mounted them without looking back. Half-way up a turn hid the hall from her, and the moment after she had passed the turn she heard him crossing the hall after her, again with a lightness of step which seemed to be uncanny and inhuman in so heavy and gross a creature.

"I was appalled," she said to Thresk frankly. "He had the step of an animal. I felt that some great baboon was tracking me stealthily."

Mrs. Repton came to Stella Ballantyne's door and was careful not to stop. She reached her own room, and once in shot the bolt; and in a moment or two she heard him breathing just outside the panels.

“And to think that Stella is alone with him in the jungle months at a time!” she cried, actually wringing her hands. “That thought was in my mind all the time—a horror of a thought. Oh, I could understand now the loss of her spirits, her colour, her youth.”

Pictures of lonely camps and empty rest-houses, far removed from any habitation in the silence of Indian nights, rose before her eyes. She imagined Stella propped up on her elbow in bed, wide-eyed with terror, listening and listening to the light footsteps of the drunken brute beyond the partition-wall, shivering when they approached, dropping back with the dew of her sweat upon her forehead when they retired; and these pictures she translated in words for Thresk in her house on the Khamballa Hill.

Thresk was moved and showed that he was moved. He rose and walked to the window, turning his back to her.

“Why did she marry him?” he exclaimed. “She was poor, but she had a little money. Why did she marry him?” and he turned back to Mrs. Repton for an answer.

She gave him one quick look and said:

“That is one of the things she has never told me and I didn’t meet her until after she had married him.”

“And why doesn’t she leave him?”

Mrs. Repton held up her hands.

“Oh, the easy questions, Mr. Thresk! How many women endure the thing that is because it

is? Even to leave your husband you want a trifle of spirit. And what if your spirit's broken? What if you are cowed? What if you live in terror day and night?"

"Yes. I am a fool," said Thresk, and he sat down again. "There are two more questions I want to ask. Did you ever talk to Stella"—the Christian name slipped naturally from him and only Jane Repton of the two remarked that he had used it—"of that incident in the library at Agra?"

"Yes."

"And did she in consequence of what you told her give you any account of her life with her husband?"

Mrs. Repton hesitated not because she was any longer in doubt as to whether she would speak the whole truth or not—she had committed herself already too far—but because the form of the question nettled her. It was a little too forensic for her taste. She was anxious to know the man; she could dispense with the barrister altogether.

"Yes, she did," she replied, "and don't cross-examine me, please."

"I beg your pardon," said Thresk with a laugh which made him human on the instant.

"Well, it's true," said Jane Repton in a rush. "She told me the truth—what you know and more. He stripped when he was drunk, stripped to the skin. Think of it! Stella told me that and broke down. Oh, if you had seen her! For Stella to give way—that alone must alarm her friends. Oh, but the look of her! She sat by

my side on the sofa, wringing her hands, with the tears pouring down her face . . ." Thresk rose quickly from his chair.

"Thank you," he said, cutting her short. He wanted to hear no more. He held out his hand to her with a certain abruptness.

Mrs. Repton rose too.

"What are you going to do?" she asked breathlessly. "I must know. I have a right to, I think. I have told you so much. I was in great doubt whether I should tell you anything. But——" Her voice broke and she ended her plea lamely enough: "I am very fond of Stella."

"I know that," said Thresk, and his voice was grateful and his face most friendly.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I am going to write to her to ask her to join me in Bombay," he replied.