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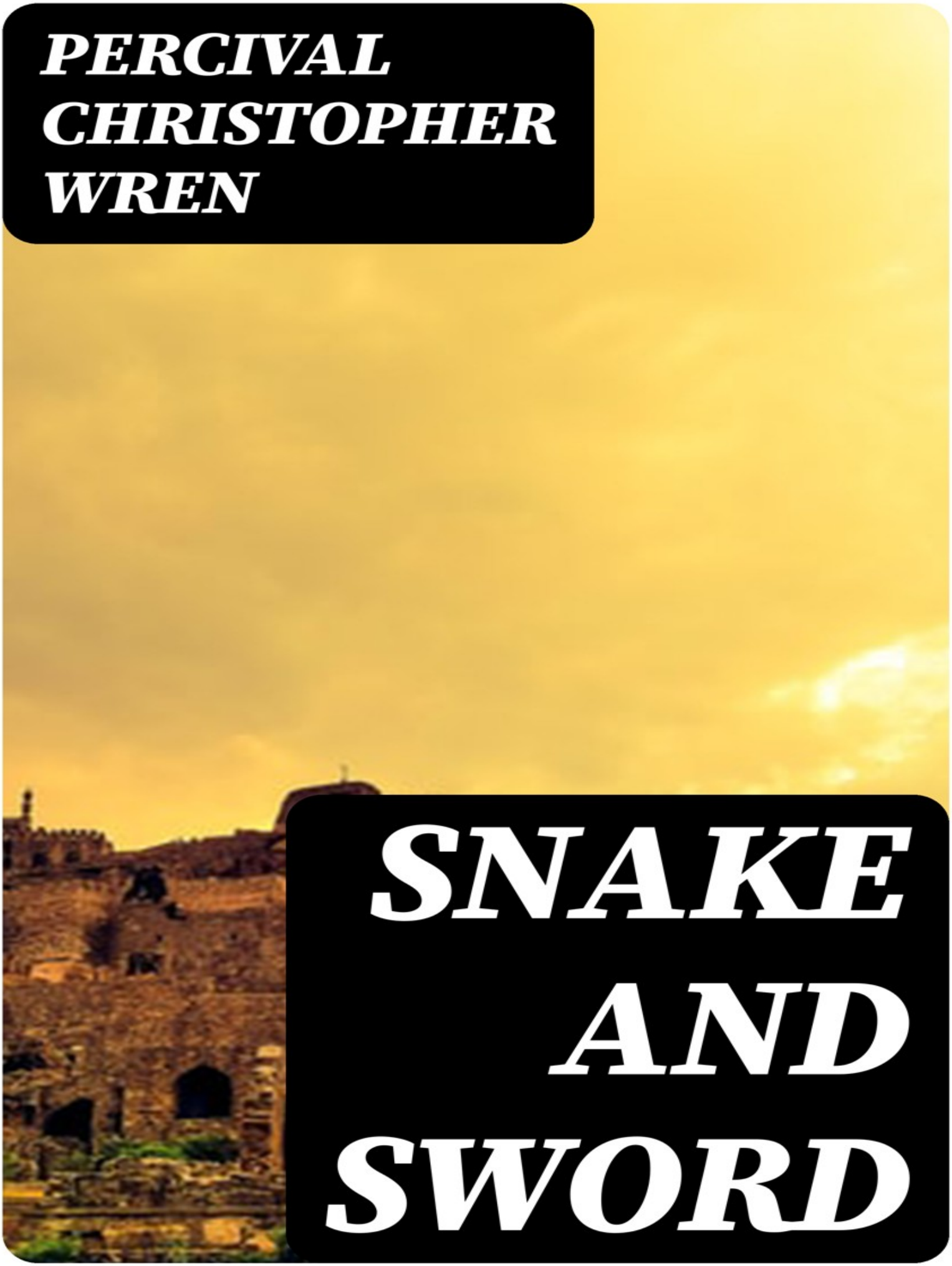

SNAKE AND SWORD

Percival Christopher Wren

Snake and Sword

A Novel

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PART I.

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THE WELDING OF A SOUL.

CHAPTER I.

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THE SNAKE AND THE SOUL.

When Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne, V.C., D.S.O., of the Queen's Own (118th) Bombay Lancers, pinned his Victoria Cross to the bosom of his dying wife's night-dress, in token of his recognition that she was the braver of the twain, he was not himself.

He was beside himself with grief.

Afterwards he adjured the sole witness of this impulsive and emotional act, Major John Decies, never to mention his "damned theatrical folly" to any living soul, and to excuse him on the score of an ancient sword-cut on the head and two bad sun-strokes.

For the one thing in heaven above, on the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth, that Colonel de Warrenne feared, was breach of good form and stereotyped convention.

And the one thing he loved was the dying woman.

This last statement applies also to Major John Decies, of the Indian Medical Service, Civil Surgeon of Bimariabad, and may even be expanded, for the one thing he ever *had* loved was the dying woman....

Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne did the deed that won him his Victoria Cross, in the open, in the hot sunlight and in hot blood, sword in hand and with hot blood on the sword-hand—fighting for his life.

His wife did the deed that moved him to transfer the Cross to her, in darkness, in cold blood, in loneliness, sickness and silence—fighting for the life of her unborn child against an unseen foe.

Colonel de Warrenne's type of brave deed has been performed thousands of times and wherever brave men have fought.

His wife's deed of endurance, presence of mind, self-control and cool courage is rarer, if not unique.

To appreciate this fully, it must be known that she had a horror of snakes, so terrible as to amount to an obsession, a mental deformity, due, doubtless, to the fact that her father (Colonel Mortimer Seymour Stukeley) died of snake-bite before her mother's eyes, a few hours before she herself was born.

Bearing this in mind, judge of the conduct that led Colonel de
Warrenne, distraught, to award her his Cross "For Valour".

One oppressive June evening, Lenore de Warrenne returned from church (where she had, as usual, prayed fervently that her soon-expected first-born might be a daughter), and entered her dressing-room. Here her Ayah divested her of hat, dress, and boots, and helped her into the more easeful tea-gown and satin slippers.

"Bootlair wanting ishweets for dinner-table from go-down, [1] please,

Mem-Sahib," observed Ayah, the change of garb accomplished.

"The butler wants sweets, does he? Give me my keys, then," replied Mrs. de Warrenne, and, rising with a sigh, she left the dressing-room and proceeded, *via* the dining-room (where she procured some small silver bowls, sweet-dishes, and trays), to the go-down or store-room, situate at the back of the bungalow and adjoining the "dispense-khana"—the room in which assemble the materials and ministrants of meals from the extra-mural "bowachi-khana" or kitchen. Unlocking the door of the go-down, Mrs. de Warrenne entered the small shelf-encircled room, and, stepping on to a low stool proceeded to fill the sweet-trays from divers jars, tins and boxes, with guava-cheese, crystallized ginger, *kulwa*, preserved mango and certain of the more sophisticated sweetmeats of the West.

It was after sunset and the *hamal* had not yet lit the lamps, so that this pantry, a dark room at mid-day, was far from light at that time. But for the fact that she knew exactly where everything was, and could put her hand on what she wanted, she would not have entered without a light.

For some minutes the unfortunate lady stood on the stool.

Having completed her task she stepped down backwards and, as her foot touched the ground, she knew *that she had trodden upon a snake.*

Even as she stood poised, one foot on the ground, the other on the stool, both hands gripping the high shelf, she felt the reptile whipping, writhing, jerking, lashing, flogging

at her ankle and instep, coiling round her leg.... And in the fraction of a second the thought flashed through her mind: "If its head is under my foot, or too close to my foot for its fangs to reach me, I am safe while I remain as I am. If its head is free I am doomed—and matters cannot be any the worse for my keeping as I am."

And she kept as she was, with one foot on the stool, out of reach, and one foot on the snake.

And screamed?

No, called quietly and coolly for the butler, remembering that she had sent Nurse Beaton out, that her husband was at polo, that there were none but native servants in the house, and that if she raised an alarm they would take it, and with single heart consider each the safety of Number One.

"Boy!" she called calmly, though the room swam round her and a deadly faintness began to paralyse her limbs and loosen her hold upon the shelf—"Boy! Come here."

Antonio Ferdinand Xavier D'Souza, Goanese butler, heard and came.

"Mem-Sahib?" quoth he, at the door of the go-down.

"Bring a lamp quickly," said Lenore de Warrenne in a level voice.

The worthy Antonio, fat, spectacled, bald and wheezy, hurried away and peremptorily bade the *hamal*[2], son of a jungle-pig, to light and bring a lamp quickly.

The *hamal*, respectfully pointing out to the Bootlair Sahib that the daylight was yet strong and lusty enough to shame and smother any lamp, complied with deliberation and care,

polishing the chimney, trimming the wick, pouring in oil and generally making a satisfactory and commendable job of it.

Lenore de Warrenne, sick, faint, sinking, waited … waited … waited … gripping the shelf and fighting against her over-mastering weakness for the life of the unborn child that, even in that awful moment, she prayed might be a daughter.

After many cruelly long centuries, and as she swayed to fall, the good Antonio entered with the lamp. Her will triumphed over her falling body.

"Boy, I am standing on a snake!" said she coolly. "Put the lamp—"

But Antonio did not stay to "put" the lamp; incontinent he dropped it on the floor and fled yelling "Sap! Sap!" and that the Mem-Sahib was bitten, dying, dead—certainly dead; dead for hours.

And the brave soul in the little room waited … waited … waited … gripping the shelf, and thinking of the coming daughter, and wondering whether she must die by snake-bite or fire—unborn—with her unhappy mother. For the fallen lamp had burst, the oil had caught fire, and the fire gave no light by which she could see what was beneath her foot—head, body, or tail of the lashing, squirming snake—as the flame flickered, rose and fell, burnt blue, swayed, roared in the draught of the door—did anything but give a light by which she could see as she bent over awkwardly, still gripping the shelf, one foot on the stool, further prevented from seeing by her loose draperies.

Soon she realized that in any case she could not see her foot without changing her position—a thing she would *not*

do while there was hope—and strength to hold on. For hope there was, inasmuch as *she had not yet felt the stroke of the reptile's fangs*.

Again she reasoned calmly, though strength was ebbing fast; she must remain as she was till death by fire or suffocation was the alternative to flight—flight which was synonymous with death, for, as her other foot came down and she stepped off the snake, in that instant it would strike—if it had not struck already.

Meantime—to call steadily and coolly again.

This time she called to the *hamal*, a Bhil, engaged out of compassion, and likely, as a son of the jungle's sons, to be of more courage than the stall-fed butler in presence of dangerous beast or reptile.

"*Hamal*: I want you," she called coolly.

"Mem-Sahib?" came the reply from the lamp-room near by, and the man approached.

"That stupid butler has dropped a lamp and run away. Bring a pail of water quickly and call to the *malli*[3] to bring a pail of earth as you get it. Hasten!—and there is baksheesh," said Mrs. de Warrenne quietly in the vernacular.

Tap and pail were by the door of the back verandah. In a minute the *hamal* entered and flung a pail of water on the burning pool of oil, reducing the mass of blue lambent flames considerably.

"Now *hamal*," said the fainting woman, the more immediate danger confronted, "bring another lamp very quickly and put it on the shelf. Quick! don't stop to fill or to clean it."

Was the pricking, shooting pain the repeated stabbing of the snake's fangs or was it "pins and needles"? Was this deadly faintness death indeed, or was it only weakness?

In what seemed but a few more years the man reappeared carrying a lighted lamp, the which he placed upon a shelf.

"Listen," said Mrs. de Warrenne, "and have no fear, brave Bhil. I have *caught* a snake. Get a knife quickly and cut off its head while I hold it."

The man glancing up, appeared to suppose that his mistress held the snake on the shelf, hurried away, and rushed back with the cook's big kitchen-knife gripped dagger-wise in his right hand.

"Do you see the snake?" she managed to whisper. "Under my foot!
Quick! It is moving ... moving ... moving *out*."

With a wild Bhil cry the man flung himself down upon his hereditary dread foe and slashed with the knife.

Mrs. de Warrenne heard it scratch along the floor, grate on a nail, and crush through the snake.

"Aré!! Dead, Mem-Sahib!! Dead!! See, I have cut off its head! Aré!!!!
Wah!! The brave mistress!——"

As she collapsed, Mrs. de Warrenne saw the twitching body of a large cobra with its head severed close to its neck. Its head had just protruded from under her foot and she had saved the unborn life for which she had fought so bravely by just keeping still.... She had won her brief decoration with the Cross by—keeping still. (Her husband had won his permanent right to it by extreme activity.) ... Had she

moved she would have been struck instantly, for the reptile was, by her, uninjured, merely nipped between instep and floor.

Having realized this, Lenore de Warrenne fainted and then passed from fit to fit, and her child—a boy—was born that night. Hundreds of times during the next few days the same terrible cry rang from the sick-room through the hushed bungalow: "It is under my foot! It is moving ... moving ... moving ... *out!*"

* * * * *

"If I had to make a prophecy concerning this young fella," observed the broken-hearted Major John Decies, I.M.S., Civil Surgeon of Bimariabad, as he watched old Nurse Beaton performing the baby's elaborate ablutions and toilet, "I should say that he will *not* grow up fond of snakes—not if there is anything in the 'pre-natal influence' theory."

PART II.

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THE SEARING OF A SOUL.

CHAPTER II.

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THE SWORD AND THE SNAKE.

Colonel Matthew Devon De Warrenne, commanding the Queen's Own (118th) Bombay Lancers, was in good time, in his best review-order uniform, and in a terrible state of mind.

He strode from end to end of the long verandah of his bungalow with clank of steel, creak of leather, and groan of travailing soul. As the top of his scarlet, blue and gold turban touched the lamp that hung a good seven feet above his spurred heels he swore viciously.

Almost for the first time in his hard-lived, selfish life he had been thwarted, flouted, cruelly and evilly entreated, and the worst of it was that his enemy was—not a man whom he could take by the throat, but—Fate.

Fate had dealt him a cruel blow, and he felt as he would have done had he, impotent, seen one steal the great charger that champed and pawed there at the door, and replace it by a potter's donkey. Nay, worse—for he had *loved* Lenore, his wife, and Fate had stolen her away and replaced her by a squealing brat.

Within a year of his marriage his wife was dead and buried, and his son alive and—howling. He could hear him

(curse him!).

The Colonel glanced at his watch, producing it from some mysterious recess beneath his belted golden sash and within his pale blue tunic.

Not yet time to ride to the regimental parade-ground and lead his famous corps to its place on the brigade parade-ground for the New Year Review and march-past.

As he held the watch at the length of its chain and stared, half-comprehending, his hand—the hand of the finest swordsman in the Indian Army—shook.

Lenore gone: a puling, yelping whelp in her place.... A tall, severe-looking elderly woman entered the verandah by a distant door and approached the savage, miserable soldier. Nurse Beaton.

"*Will* you give your son a name, Sir?" she said, and it was evident in voice and manner that the question had been asked before and had received an unsatisfactory, if not unprintable; reply. Every line of feature and form seemed to express indignant resentment. She had nursed and foster-mothered the child's mother, and—unlike the man—had found the baby the chiefest consolation of her cruel grief, and already loved it not only for its idolized mother's sake, but with the devotion of a childless child-lover.

"The christening is fixed for to-day, Sir, as I have kept reminding you, Sir," she added.

She had never liked the Colonel—nor considered him "good enough" for her tender, dainty darling, "nearly three times her age and no better than he ought to be".

"Name?" snarled Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne. "Name the little beast? Call him what you like, and then

drown him." The tight-lipped face of the elderly nurse flushed angrily, but before she could make the indignant reply that her hurt and scandalized look presaged, the Colonel added:—

"No, look here, call him *Damocles*, and done with it. The Sword hangs over him too, I suppose, and he'll die by it, as all his ancestors have done. Yes—"

"It's not a nice name, Sir, to my thinking," interrupted the woman, "not for an only name—and for an only child. Let it be a second or third name, Sir, if you want to give him such an outlandish one."

She fingered her new black dress nervously with twitching hands and the tight lips trembled.

"He's to be named Damocles and nothing else," replied the Master, and, as she turned away with a look of positive hate, he added sardonically:—

"And then you can call him 'Dam' for short, you know, Nurse."

Nurse Beaton bridled, clenched her hands, and stiffened visibly. Had the man been her social equal or any other than her master, her pent-up wrath and indignation would have broken forth in a torrent of scathing abuse.

"Never would I call the poor motherless lamb *Dam*, Sir," she answered with restraint.

"Then call him *Dummy!* Good morning, Nurse," snapped the Colonel.

As she turned to go, with a bitter sigh, she asked in the hopeless tone of one who knows the waste of words:—

"You will not repent—I mean relent—and come to the christening of your only son this afternoon, Sir?"

"Good morning, Nurse," observed Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne, and resumed his hurried pacing of the verandah.

* * * * *

It is not enough that a man love his wife dearly and hold her the sweetest, fairest, and best of women—he should tell her so, morning and night.

There is a proverb (the unwisdom of many and the poor wit of one) that says *Actions speak louder than Words*. Whether this is the most untrustworthy of an untrustworthy class of generalizations is debateable.

Anyhow, let no husband or lover believe it. Vain are the deeds of dumb devotion, the unwearying forethought, the tender care, the gifts of price, and the priceless gifts of attentive, watchful guard and guide, the labours of Love—all vain. Silent is the speech of Action.

But resonant loud is the speech of Words and profitable their investment in the Mutual Alliance Bank.

"*Love me, love my Dog?*" Yes—and look to the dog for a dog's reward.

"*Do not show me that you love me—tell me so.*" Far too true and pregnant ever to become a proverb.

Colonel de Warrenne had omitted to tell his wife so—after she had accepted him—and she had died thinking herself loveless, unloved, and stating the fact.

This was the bitterest drop in the bitter cup of the big, dumb, well-meaning man.

And now she would never know….

She had thought herself unloved, and, nerve-shattered by her terrible experience with the snake, had made no fight

for life when the unwanted boy was born. For the sake of a girl she would have striven to live—but a boy, a boy can fend for himself (and takes after his father)….

Almost as soon as Lenore Seymour Stukeley had landed in India (on a visit with her sister Yvette to friends at Bimariabad), delighted, bewildered, depolarized, Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne had burst with a blaze of glory into her hitherto secluded, narrow life—a great pale-blue, white-and-gold wonder, clanking and jingling, resplendent, bemedalled, ruling men, charging at the head of thundering squadrons—a half-god (and to Yvette he had seemed a whole-god).

He had told her that he loved her, told her once, and had been accepted.

Once! Only once told her that he loved her, that she was beautiful, that he was hers to command to the uttermost. Only once! What could *she* know of the changed life, the absolute renunciation of pleasant bachelor vices, the pulling up short, and all those actions that speak more softly than words?

What could she know of the strength and depth of the love that could keep such a man as the Colonel from the bar, the bridge-table, the race-course and the Paphian dame? Of the love that made him walk warily lest he offend one for whom his quarter of a century, and more, of barrack and bachelor-bungalow life, made him feel so utterly unfit and unworthy? What could she know of all that he had given up and delighted to give up—now that he truly loved a true woman? The hard-living, hard-hearted, hard-spoken man had become a gentle frequenter of his wife's tea-parties, her

companion at church, her constant attendant—never leaving the bungalow, save for duty, without her.

To those who knew him it was a World's Marvel; to her, who knew him not, it was nothing at all—normal, natural. And being a man who spoke only when he must, who dreaded the expression of any emotion, and who foolishly thought that actions speak louder than words, he had omitted to tell her daily—or even weekly or monthly—that he loved her; and she had died pitying herself and reproaching him.

Fate's old, old game of Cross Purposes. Major John Decies, reserved, high-minded gentleman, loving Lenore de Warrenne (and longing to tell her so daily), with the one lifelong love of a steadfast nature; Yvette Stukeley, reserved, high-minded gentlewoman, loving Colonel de Warrenne, and longing to escape from Bimariabad before his wedding to her sister, and doing so at the earliest possible date thereafter: each woman losing the man who would have been her ideal husband, each man losing the woman who would have been his ideal wife.

Yvette Stukeley returned to her uncle and guardian, General Sir Gerald Seymour Stukeley, K.C.B., K.C.S.I., at Monksmead, nursing a broken heart, and longed for the day when Colonel de Warrenne's child might be sent home to her care.

Major John Decies abode at Bimariabad, also nursing a broken heart (though he scarcely realized the fact), watched over the son of Lenore de Warrenne, and greatly feared for him.

The Major was an original student of theories and facts of Heredity and Pre-natal Influence. Further he was not wholly hopeful as to the effect of all the *post*-natal influences likely to be brought to bear upon a child who grew up in the bungalow, and the dislike of Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne.

Upon the infant Damocles, Nurse Beaton, rugged, snow-capped volcano, lavished the tender love of a mother; and in him Major John Decies, deep-running still water, took the interest of a father. The which was the better for the infant Damocles in that his real father had no interest to take and no love to lavish. He frankly disliked the child—the outward and visible sign, the daily reminder of the cruel loss he so deeply felt and fiercely resented.

Yet, strangely enough, he would not send the child home. Relations who could receive it he had none, and he declined to be beholden to its great-uncle, General Sir Gerald Seymour Stukeley, and its aunt Yvette Stukeley, in spite of the warmest invitations from the one and earnest entreaties from the other.

Nurse Beaton fed, tended, clothed and nursed the baby by day; a worshipping ayah wheeled him abroad, and, by night, slept beside his cot; a devoted sepoy-orderly from the regiment guarded his cavalcade, and, when permitted, proudly bore him in his arms.

Major John Decies visited him frequently, watched and waited, waited and watched, and, though not a youth, "thought long, long thoughts".

He also frequently laid his views and theories on paternal duties before Colonel de Warrenne, until pointedly asked by

that officer whether he had no duties of his own which might claim his valuable time.

Years rolled by, after the incorrigible habit of years, and the infant Damocles grew and developed into a remarkably sturdy, healthy, intelligent boy, as cheerful, fearless, impudent, and irrepressible as the heart of the Major could desire—and with a much larger vocabulary than any one could desire, for a baby.

On the fifth anniversary of his birthday he received a matutinal call from Major Decies, who was returning from his daily visit to the Civil Hospital.

The Major bore a birthday present and a very anxious, undecided mind.

"Good morrow, gentle Damocles," he remarked, entering the big verandah adown which the chubby boy pranced gleefully to meet his beloved friend, shouting a welcome, and brandishing a sword designed, and largely constructed, by himself from a cleaning-rod, a tobacco-tin lid, a piece of wood, card-board and wire.

"Thalaam, Major Thahib," he said, flinging himself bodily upon that gentleman. "I thaw cook cut a fowl's froat vis morning. It squorked boofly."

"Did it? Alas, that I missed those pleasing-er-squorks," replied the Major, and added: "This is thy natal day, my son. Thou art a man of five."

"I'm a debble. I'm a *norful* little debble," corrected Damocles, cheerfully and with conviction.

"Incidentally. But you are five also," persisted the senior man.

"It's my birfday to-day," observed the junior.

"I just said so."

"*That* you didn't, Major Thahib. This is a thword. Father's charger's got an over-weach. Jumping. He says it's a dam-nuithanth."

"Oh, that's a sword, is it? And 'Fire' has got an over-reach. And it's a qualified nuisance, is it?"

"Yeth, and the mare is coughing and her *thythe* is a blathted fool for letting her catch cold."

"The mare has a cold and the *syce*[4] is a qualified fool, is he? H'm! I think it's high time you had a look in at little old England, my son, what? And who made you this elegant rapier? Ochterlonie Sahib or—who?" (Lieutenant Lord Ochterlonie was the Adjutant of the Queen's Greys, a friend of Colonel de Warrenne, an ex-admirer of his late wife, and a great pal of his son.)

"'Tithn't a waper. It'th my thword. I made it mythelf."

"Who helped?"

"Nobody. At leatht, Khodadad Khan, Orderly, knocked the holes in the tin like I showed him—or elthe got the Farrier Thargeant to do it, and thaid *he* had."

"Yes—but who told you how to make it like this? Where did you see a hand-part like this? It isn't like Daddy's sword, nor Khodadad Khan's *tulwar*. Where did you copy it?"

"I didn't copy it.... I shot ten rats wiv a bow-and-arrow last night. At leatht—I don't think I shot ten. Nor one. I don't think I didn't, pwaps."

"But hang it all, the thing's an Italian rapier, by Gad. Some one *must* have shown you how to make the thing, or you've got a picture. It's a *pukka*[5] mediaeval rapier."

"No it'th not. It'th my thword. I made it.... Have a jolly fight"—and the boy struck an extraordinarily correct fencing attitude—left hand raised in balance, sword poised, legs and feet well placed, the whole pose easy, natural, graceful.

Curiously enough, the sword was held horizontal instead of pointing upward, a fact which at once struck the observant and practised eye of Major John Decies, sometime champion fencer.

"Who's been teaching you fencing?" he asked.

"What ith 'fenthing'? Let'th have a fight," replied the boy.

"Stick me here, Dam," invited the Major, seating himself and indicating the position of the heart. "Bet you can't."

The boy lunged, straight, true, gracefully, straightening all his limbs except his right leg, rigidly, strongly, and the "sword" bent upward from the spot on which the man's finger had just rested.

"Gad! Who *has* taught you to lunge? I shall have a bruise there, and perhaps—live. Who's behind all this, young fella? Who taught you to stand so, and to lunge? Ochterlonie Sahib or Daddy?"

"Nobody. What is 'lunge'? Will you buy me a little baby-camel to play with and teach tricks? Perhaps it would sit up and beg. Do camelth lay eggth? Chucko does. Millions and lakhs. You get a thword, too, and we'll fight every day. Yeth. All day long——"

"Good morning, Sir," said Nurse Beaton, bustling into the verandah from the nursery. "He's as mad as ever on swords and fighting, you see. It's a soldier he'll be, the lamb. He's taken to making that black orderly pull out his sword when he's in uniform. Makes him wave and jab it about. Gives me

the creeps—with his black face and white eyes and all. You won't *encourage* the child at it, will you, Sir? And his poor Mother the gentlest soul that ever stepped. Swords! Where he gets his notions *I* can't think (though I know where he gets his language, poor lamb!). Look at *that* thing, Sir! For all the world like the dressed-up folk have on the stage or in pictures."

"You haven't let him see any books, I suppose, Nurse?" asked the
Major.

"No, Sir. Never a book has the poor lamb seen, except those you've brought. I've always been in terror of his seeing a picture of a you-know-what, ever since you told me what the effect *might* be. Nor he hasn't so much as heard the name of it, so far as I know."

"Well, he'll see one to-day. I've brought it with me—must see it sooner or later. Might see a live one anywhere—in spite of all your care.... But about this sword—where *could* he have got the idea? It's unlike any sword he ever set eyes on. Besides if he ever *did* see an Italian rapier—and there's scarcely such a thing in India—he'd not get the chance to use it as a copy. Fancy his having the desire and the power to, anyhow!"

"I give it up, Sir," said Nurse Beaton.

"I give it upper," added the Major, taking the object of their wonder from the child.

And there was cause for wonder indeed.

A hole had been punched through the centre of the lid of a tobacco tin and a number of others round the edge. Through the centre hole the steel rod had been passed so

that the tin made a "guard". To the other holes wires had been fastened by bending, and their ends gathered, twisted, and bound with string to the top of the handle (of bored corks) to form an ornamental basket-hilt.

But the most remarkable thing of all was that, before doing this, the juvenile designer had passed the rod through a piece of bored stick so that the latter formed a *cross-piece* (neatly bound) within the tin guard—the distinctive feature of the ancient and modern Italian rapiers!

Round this cross-piece the first two fingers of the boy's right hand were crooked as he held the sword—and this is the one and only correct way of holding the Italian weapon, as the Major was well aware!

"I give it most utterly-uppermost," he murmured. "It's positively uncanny. No *uninitiated* adult of the utmost intelligence ever held an Italian-pattern foil correctly yet—nor until he had been pretty carefully shown. Who the devil put him up to the design in the first place, and the method of holding, in the second? Explain yourself, you two-anna[6] marvel," he demanded of the child. "It's *jadu*—black magic."

"Ayah lothted a wupee latht night," he replied.

"Lost a rupee, did she? Lucky young thing. Wish I had one to lose. Who showed you how to hold that sword? Why do you crook your fingers round the cross-piece like that?"

"Chucko laid me an egg latht night," observed Damocles. "He laid it with my name on it—so that cook couldn't steal it."

"No doubt. Look here, where can I get a sword like yours? Where can I copy it? Who makes them? Who knows about them?"

"*I* don't know, Major Thahib. Gunnoo sells 'Fire's' gram to the *methrani* for her curry and chuppatties."

"But how do you know swords are like this? *That* thing isn't a *pukka* sword."

"Well, it'th like Thir Theymour Thtukeley's in my dweam."

"What dream?"

"The one I'm alwayth dweaming. They have got long hair like Nurse in the night, and they fight and fight like anything. Norful good fighters! And they wear funny kit. And their thwords are like vis. _Egg_zackly. Gunnoo gave me a ride on 'Fire,' and he'th a dam-liar. He thaid he forgot to put the warm *jhool* on him when Daddy was going to fwash him for being a dam-fool. I thaid I'd tell Daddy how he alwayth thleepth in it himthelf, unleth he gave me a ride on 'Fire'. 'Fire' gave a *norful* buck and bucked me off. At leatht I think he didn't."

Major Decies' face was curiously intent—as of some midnight worker in research who sees a bright near glimpse of the gold his alchemy has so long sought to materialize in the alembic of fact.

"Come back to sober truth, young youth. What about the dream? Who are they, and what do they say and do?"

"Thir Theymour Thtukeley Thahib tellth Thir Matthew Thahib about the hilt-thwust. (What *is* 'hilt-thwust'?) And Lubin, the thervant, ith a *white* thervant. Why ith he white if he ith a Thahib's 'boy'?"

"Good Gad!" murmured the Major. "I'm favoured of the gods. Tell me all about it, Sonny. Then I'll undo this parcel for you," he coaxed.

"Oh, I don't wemember. They buck a lot by the tents and then Thir Theymour Thtukeley goes and fights Thir Matthew and kills him, and it'th awful lovely, but they dreth up like kids at a party in big collars and silly kit."

"Yes, I know," murmured the Major. "Tell me what they say when they buck to each other by the tents, and when they talk about the 'hilt-thrust,' old chap."

"Oh, I don't wemember. I'll listen next time I dweam it, and tell you. Chucko's egg was all brown—not white like those cook brings from the bazaar. He's a dam-thief. Open the parcel, Major Thabib. What's in it?"

"A picture-book for you, Sonny. All sorts of jolly beasts that you'll *shikar* some day. You'll tell me some more about the dream to-morrow, won't you?"

"Yeth. I'll wemember and fink, and tell you what I have finked."

Turning to Nurse Beaton, the Major whispered:—

"Don't worry him about this dream at all. Leave it to me. It's wonderful. Take him on your lap, Nurse, and—er—be *ready*. It's a very life-like picture, and I'm going to spring it on him without any remark—but I'm more than a little anxious, I admit. Still, it's *got* to come, as I say, and better a picture first, with ourselves present. If the picture don't affect him I'll show him a real one. May be all right of course, but I don't know. I came across a somewhat similar case once before—and it was *not* all right. Not by any means," and he disclosed the brilliantly coloured Animal Picture Book and knelt beside the expectant boy.

On the first page was an incredibly leonine lion, who appeared to have solved with much satisfaction the problem

of aerial flight, so far was he from the mountain whence he had sprung and above the back of the antelope towards which he had propelled himself. One could almost hear him roar. There was menace and fate in eye and tooth and claw, yea, in the very kink of the prehensile-seeming tail wherewith he apparently steered his course in mid-air. To gaze upon his impressive and determined countenance was to sympathize most fully with the sore-tried Prophet of old (known to Damocles as Dannle-in-the-lines-den) for ever more.

The boy was wholly charmed, stroked the glowing ferocity and observed that he was a *pukka Bahadur*.[7]

On the next page, burning bright, was a tiger, if possible one degree more terrible than the lion. His "fearful cemetery" appeared to be full, judging by its burgeoned bulge and the shocking state of depletion exhibited by the buffalo on which he fed with barely inaudible snarls and grunts of satisfaction. Blood dripped from his capacious and over-furnished mouth.

"Booful," murmured Damocles. "I shall go shooting tigerth to-mowwow.
Shoot vem in ve mouth, down ve froat, so as not to spoil ve wool."

Turning over the page, the Major disclosed a most grievous grizzly bear, grizzly and bearish beyond conception, heraldic, regardant, expectant, not collared, fanged and clawed proper, rampant, erect, requiring no supporters.

"You could thtab him wiv a thword if you were quick, while he was doing that," opined Damocles, charmed,