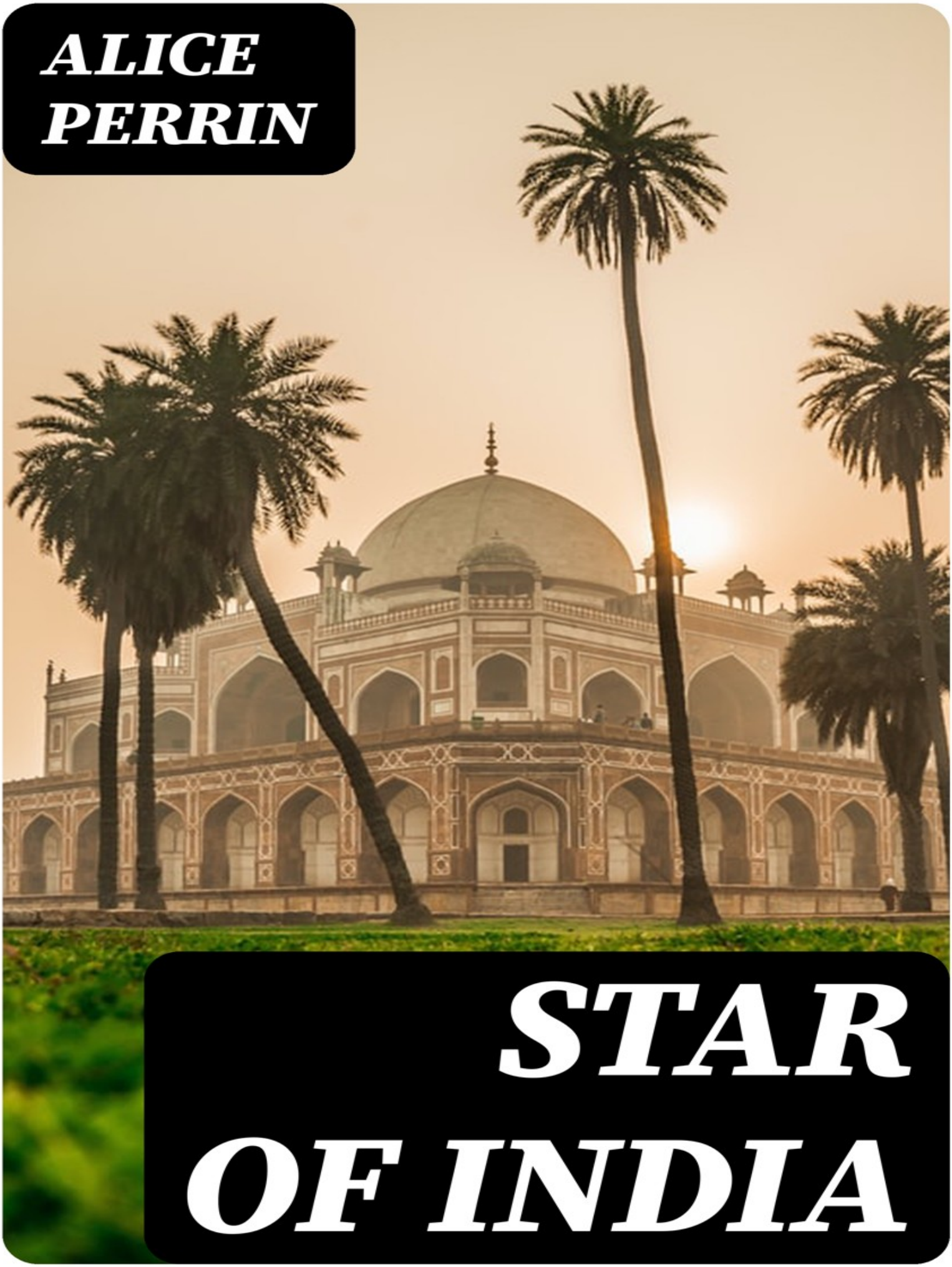
ALICE PERRIN



STAR OF INDIA

Alice Perrin

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EAN 8596547376491

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER XI

PART I

CHAPTER I

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I dare not choose my lot;
I would not if I might.
Choose thou for me, my God,
So shall I walk aright.

The rustic portion of the congregation shouted the familiar hymn with laborious goodwill, overpowering the more cultivated voices that rose from the chancel and the front pews—almost defeating the harsh notes wrung from the harmonium by the village schoolmistress, who also led the singing in a piercing key, supported raucously by her pupils gathered about the unmusical instrument. Even in the early 'nineties nothing so ambitious as an organ or a surpliced choir had as yet been attempted in this remote west-country parish, though with the advent of the new vicar innovations had begun; actually, of late, the high oak pews had been removed to make way for shining pitch-pine seats that in the little Norman church produced much the same effect as a garish oleograph set in an antique frame. Most of the parishioners approved the change; certainly it had the advantage of permitting everyone to observe at leisure who came to church, what they wore, and how they behaved during the sermon, even if those who were somnolently inclined found the publicity disconcerting.

Stella Carrington, for one, infinitely preferred the new seats. Though no longer a child—seventeen last birthday—she could never quite forget the hours of misery she had

endured in the old pew; the smell of dust and hassocks, the feeling of captivity, the desperate impulse that would assail her to kick open the door, to fling a prayer-book over the barrier, to jump up on the seat; only the fear of grandmamma's wrath had restrained her from such antics. This Sunday, as she stood between Aunt Augusta and Aunt Ellen, singing the hymn that preceded the sermon, recollections returned to her of her childhood's trials in the high pew, and with these, unaccountably, came the old sense of imprisonment. The feeling disturbed her; she searched her mind for the cause, and became conscious that it was somehow connected with the presence of Maud Verrall, seated with her parents in the religious preserve of the Squire and his family in the chancel. The Verralls had been absent from The Court for a considerable period, and now here was Maud, who when Stella last saw her had been in short petticoats with her hair down her back, transformed into a young lady; she had a curled fringe, bangles and puffed sleeves; her dress touched the ground, she had a waist, and her hat, of a fashionable sailor shape, was set well to the back of her head. And all this though she was no older than her former playmate, Stella Carrington, whose skirts even now barely reached her ankles, whose hair still hung in a plait, whose hat, in her own opinion, was more suited to a child in a perambulator than to a girl of seventeen. No wonder she felt stifled, cramped! She realised why the memory of her tortures in the old box-like pew had recurred to her mind; and then suddenly the hymn that she knew so well and had sung on such countless Sundays, paying no special heed to the words, struck her as

the acme of hypocrisy. She ceased singing, amazed that the recognition had not come to her sooner. Surely whoever was responsible for the wording of this hymn could never have known the tedium for a young person of living with a stony-hearted grandmother and two maiden aunts in a small village where nothing ever happened; the author must have belonged to people like the Verralls, who were, of course, satisfied with their "lot," and did not want to change it; people who could "dare" do anything they pleased. If she, Stella Carrington, could choose her lot at this moment, she would change places with Maud Verrall; and she wondered how Maud would feel if she found herself forced to accept the lot of Stella Carrington! Would Maud still humbly proclaim that she would not change it even if she might?...

Only when Aunt Augusta, regarding her severely, touched her arm did Stella discover that the hymn was ended; that the congregation was settling down for the sermon. She sank to her seat, blushing, abashed.

Summer had set in early that year, and the sun poured through the stained glass window subscribed for by the parish to a former Squire Verrall, casting kaleidoscopic patterns of purple and crimson on to grandmamma's brown silk bonnet; a premature bumble-bee droned and bumped up and down the panes, the atmosphere felt airless, and Aunt Ellen sniffed elegantly at her green salts-bottle. Stella grew drowsy; she could not attend to the sermon, and her thoughts strayed on in confusion.... Would Canon Grass, the vicar, dare to change his lot if he might? Perhaps he would like to change Mrs. Grass, who was older than himself, for the pretty visitor who was one of The Court party in the

chancel pew.... And how about Mrs. Daw, who was so artistic, and considered her talents wasted in her position as wife to a country doctor; who complained that no one in the village really understood or appreciated "Art".... How much happier Mrs. Daw would be in London had she the opportunity of changing her lot—of converting her husband into a West End physician. And as to the villagers; everyone knew that they were never contented, no matter what was done for them. At this point in her reflections Stella fell asleep.

The service over, she followed grandmamma and the aunts slowly down the aisle, while the school children clattered through the porch. The Court party left the building by the chancel door, and Stella saw them pace down the slope of the churchyard between the tombstones and the yew trees to where a carriage and pair of horses awaited them at the gates. Squire Verrall went first, in a black coat and a square hat like a box, his whiskers were brushed smartly aside from his ruddy cheeks, his large nose shone in the sun, he waved his malacca cane to the school children marshalled on either side of the pathway; Mrs. Verrall followed, delicate, smiling, sweet, in dark green satin, and a white ostrich feather floating from a boat-shaped hat; with her came the pretty visitor, who walked with a Grecian bend ... and Maud. Stella observed that Maud was "showing off"; that she minced and looked down her nose as she passed between the rows of bobbing, saluting children and villagers. Stella was filled with an envious contempt for such conceit; such airs and graces! Three maid-servants completed the procession; even they would drive back to

The Court, on the rumble of the big carriage, while Stella Carrington would walk through the lanes to The Chestnuts pulling her grandmother's chair, Aunt Augusta pushing behind, Aunt Ellen shielding the old lady with a green-lined umbrella. They would wait on themselves at luncheon; probably there would be boiled mutton and a milk pudding....

There was: in her present rebellious mood, the sight of the plain, wholesome food was to Stella as the proverbial last straw. Aunt Augusta carved the mutton; a watery red stream issued from the joint, mingling with the caper sauce that surrounded it.

"None for me, thank you," said Stella, with suppressed fury.

"My dear, why not?" It was grandmamma who made the inquiry, and Stella thought the old lady looked like a sea-gull, seated at the end of the table in her close white cap, her snowy hair looped on either side of her curved nose.

"I hate boiled mutton!" Beneath her rising defiance the girl was conscious of amazement at her own temerity. She pushed back her chair and stood up, quivering—a slim young beauty, giving promise of fine development, though neither beauty nor promise had as yet been recognised by herself or by her guardians.

"Yes, I do hate it!" she cried, and her eyes, the colour of burnt sienna, filled with rebellious tears, "and I hate milk puddings and babyish clothes, and getting up in the morning and going to bed at night with nothing in between —the same every day. How you could all stand up and sing that hymn, '*I dare not choose my lot*,'" she mocked, "'*I*

would not if I might,' as if you meant it! Why, for most of us, it was simply a lie!"

For a space there was a shocked silence. Augusta, the carving knife poised in her hand, looked at her mother; Ellen stared at her plate and extracted her salts-bottle with stealth from her pocket; Stella found her own gaze drawn helplessly to the expressionless old countenance at the end of the table, and, despite her new-born courage, she quailed.

"My dear," said grandmamma smoothly, "you had better go and lie down. The weather has upset you. I think you require a powder."

Stella burst into something between laughter and tears; she made a childish dash for the door and ran noisily up the stairs.

The meal in the dining-room continued as though nothing had happened. It was not a Carrington custom to discuss unpleasant occurrences at meals, or, indeed, at any other time, if such discussions could possibly be avoided; the Carrington elders possessed a fine faculty for ignoring difficult subjects. It was a gift that had carried them apparently unscathed through various trials. When it became imperative to speak of anything painful it was done as briefly and reservedly as possible. It was not until well on in the afternoon, when Mrs. Carrington had awakened from her nap in the drawing-room, that Stella's outrageous behaviour was mentioned.

The drawing-room at The Chestnuts was a long narrow room with three French windows opening on a little paved terrace. Formerly the house had been a farm dwelling, the

last remnant of a property acquired a century ago by a Carrington ancestor with a fortune made in the East and dissipated in the West. The Court, where the Verralls now reigned, had once belonged to this magnificent Carrington, and the ladies of The Chestnuts never forgot the fact. They regarded the Verralls as interlopers, though by now the Verralls had been lords of the manor for several generations.

But though The Court and all its acres were lost to the Carringtons, they had clung as a family to Chestnut Farm, adding to it from time to time as fluctuating fortunes permitted. It was a haven for Carrington widows, unmarried daughters, retired old-soldier Carringtons; a jumping-off place for sons as they started in life, a holiday home for successions of young Carringtons while their parents were abroad; and there was still the family vault in the parish church where they could be buried if India spared them to die in England. Stella's grandfather, whom she could not remember, lay there with others of his name, and it had never entered grandmamma's mind to live or die anywhere but at The Chestnuts.

But to return to the drawing-room—a room that breathed of a people long connected with the East—here were sandal-wood boxes, caskets composed of porcupine quills, coloured clay models of Indian servants, brasses and embroideries. The warmth of the afternoon drew forth faint aromas still stored in these relics, mementoes of travel and service and adventure, the perfume that still hung in the folds of the handsome cashmere shawl draped about old Mrs. Carrington's shoulders.

It was she who opened the debate; failing her lead, neither of her daughters would have dreamed of alluding to their niece's outburst at the luncheon table.

"What do you imagine is wrong with Stella?" The old lady's sunken dark eyes, that yet were quick and bright, turned from one daughter to the other. The rest of her muscles were perfectly still.

"She is growing up," said Augusta boldly. She was the elder of the two and more nearly resembled her mother, physically and mentally, than did faint-hearted Ellen.

"She is still a child!" pronounced Mrs. Carrington, oblivious of the fact that she herself had been married at the age of seventeen, had sailed to India and returned with three children before she was twenty-one.

"Perhaps," ventured Ellen, "seeing Maud Verrall in church dressed as a grown-up young lady made her feel a little—well, I hardly know how to express myself—rather kept back?"

Ellen herself had been guiltily conscious of a vague feeling of envy caused by the sight of The Court people in all their prosperity and finery.

"Kept back from what?" demanded Mrs. Carrington. "Would you wish to see Stella trigged out like that forward monkey Maud Verrall?"

"Maud was always a most underbred child," said Augusta.

Ellen hastily took up the cue. "Yes, don't you remember the day she came to tea and broke the vase, and allowed Stella to be blamed? I saw her break it myself, but of course

we could say nothing as Maud was our guest, and dear little Stella said nothing."

"But what has that to do with the way Stella behaved to-day?" inquired her sister. Ellen thought this rather unkind of Augusta.

"Oh! nothing, of course," Ellen admitted. "Only it just shows——"

"We are all aware that Stella has spirit," said grandmamma, ignoring this passage, "she is a true Carrington, but spirit in certain circumstances is a danger and not to be encouraged, just as in others it may be admirable. Now if the child had been a boy——"

The old lady's gaze turned to a portrait that hung over the mantelpiece—that of a gentleman in a blue velvet coat with lace and silver buttons, powdered hair and bold, bright eyes that seemed to smile on the little feminine conclave in amused toleration. "Spirit" in a man was to be accepted and, whatever its consequences, condoned; but in a female, particularly in a young girl, it should be guarded against, suppressed. Ellen Carrington's eyes turned also to the portrait. Long years ago she had shown symptoms of "spirit" in connection with the attentions of a dashing young cousin who had strongly resembled the portrait. Mamma was antagonistic; he had sailed for India (just as had all male Carringtons one after the other), and the ship had gone down; so that his vow to return with a fortune and claim his sweet Ellen was never fulfilled.

Augusta, so far as anyone was aware, had known no romance. The family spirit in Augusta found outlet in a fierce devotion to her mother, and in the maintenance of a

pathetically pretentious sort of state in the household; the very manner in which she would ring the bell might have argued the existence of a host of retainers. Not for worlds would she have answered the front door herself, neither would she have permitted Ellen or Stella to do so. Her attitude towards the domestic staff at The Chestnuts—old Betty, with a daily slave from the village, and the aged, bad-tempered factotum out of doors—was almost that of a Royal personage, punctilious in the matter of good mornings and thank yous, yet carefully distant as became the upholding of class distinction.

"It's a pity she was not a boy," said Augusta, "then she could have gone to school—a little more discipline——"

"Yes, Stella's education——" interrupted Mrs. Carrington, and paused thoughtfully. Her daughters listened. Augusta was responsible for Stella's arithmetic, geography, history; Ellen for her progress in music, needlework, drawing. Was fault to be found with these educational efforts?—which in truth were not altogether congenial to the teachers, conscientiously though they pursued them. Stella was frequently tiresome, and she did such odd things—for example, she had "a trick," as they called it, of rising at dawn and rambling about the woods and commons and returning late for breakfast, and then she would be listless and inattentive for the rest of the day. At times she was "wild" and disobedient, although at others disarmingly docile and quick and affectionate. On the whole, the aunts were proud of their pupil; what was mamma about to say concerning Stella's education?

Mamma said: "Though unfortunately Stella is not a boy, I have lately been thinking that if a suitable school can be found—— What was the name of that friend of yours, Augusta, who years ago started a school for young ladies at Torquay?"

"Jane Ogle," said Augusta shortly. In the opinion of Augusta, Jane Ogle had lost caste when she opened a school. As the daughter of an officer, Jane should not have descended to such depths as the earning of her living when she had plenty of relations with any of whom she could have made her home in genteel idleness. Still, if mamma had any serious notion of a school for Stella it was so far fortunate that Miss Ogle had thus bemeaned herself, seeing that none of them knew anything about boarding schools for girls, institutions which were to be regarded with suspicion.

"Then you really think, mamma," said Augusta incredulously, "that Stella needs different tuition, or at least different management?"

"Her behaviour to-day would point to it," mamma replied. "Perhaps you would write to Miss Ogle, my dear, and make inquiries as to her methods and terms. I am inclined to think Stella is getting a little beyond us in every way."

Stella, after rushing from the dining-room and up the stairs in such unladylike fashion, had thrown herself on her bed and wept until her ill-humour evaporated and she began to think more kindly of milk pudding and boiled mutton. Then, feeling hungry and rather ashamed, she had bathed her eyes and "tidied" her hair, and for a while sat and gazed from the low window of her bedroom—gazed on the familiar lawn sloping to a narrow stream that had been

the cause of many punishments in her childhood, what with her attempts to jump it, the catching of imaginary fish, the sailing of paper boats, all of which had involved "getting her feet wet," a crime in the view of grandmamma and the aunts. The cedar tree on the lawn had also been a source of trouble, for Stella had never fought the temptation to climb it, and the climbing of trees was forbidden as not only hoydenish but disastrous to clothes—the same with the high wall of the kitchen garden. There seemed hardly a spot in the limited domain that for Stella was not associated with punishment; yet she adored "the grounds," as Aunt Augusta entitled the garden, at all seasons of the year, and at this season she still found it heavenly to dabble in the stream, to climb the branches of the cedar tree, even to roll on the fragrant turf.... She loved the old house as well, though two of the rooms she had always avoided instinctively—grandmamma's bedroom was one; Stella felt it held secrets, there was something mysterious and "dead" in its atmosphere. The painted toy horse and the wooden soldier, the half-finished sampler, and the shabby doll enshrined on the chest of drawers seemed to her ghostly objects, sad reminders as they were of uncles and aunts who had never grown up. When, for any reason, she was obliged to enter the room it was as if these little dead uncles and aunts still hovered about the big bed with its faded chintz curtains, as if they were listening, watching, hating her for her being alive.

Aunt Augusta's room she also disliked; it might have been a spare room, so cold, so polished, so neat, and the enlarged photographs of bygone Carringtons, framed and

hung on the walls, were hideous—all crinolines and strings of black beads and stove-pipe hats and long whiskers.... Aunt Ellen's room was different; it harboured an apologetic air of frivolity, imparted by gay little ornaments and a screen covered with Christmas cards and pictures cut from illustrated papers. Whenever Stella studied this screen she found something she had never noticed before. Above all, in one corner stood a cabinet containing drawers full of birds' eggs and butterflies collected by her father as a boy. Aunt Ellen was the only person who would answer Stella's eager questions about her father, and even those answers told her too little—only that he had gone to India as a very young man, like all the Carringtons; that he was brave and handsome, that he had died in battle when his little daughter was about two years old.

And concerning her mother Stella had never succeeded in extracting definite information.

"She is dead, my dear," was all Aunt Ellen would say with grave reserve, "she died when you were born—in India." Was there a picture of her? No, there was no picture. What was she like? We never saw her. What was her Christian name? It was Stella—and clearly the name itself was not approved—considered foolish, fantastic.

Indeed the child's periodical questions on the subject of her mother were torture to the three secretive, old-fashioned women, who shrank from all remembrance of the shameless being who had bewitched their "poor Charles" and led him astray, dragging the name of Carrington through the divorce court. At the time of the scandal they had blamed Charles for marrying the abandoned creature,

and when she died, a year later, they were glad, though she left an unwelcome infant who was promptly sent home by the widower to The Chestnuts. The child was, of course, received, but under protest, a protest that vanished when "poor Charles" was killed in a frontier skirmish, a death (for his country) that in the eyes of his mother and sisters fully atoned for his backslidings and the disgrace he had brought on a name that had ever been associated with brave deeds in the East.

India!—the very word held a magic fascination for the child of "poor Charles." Stella loved the smell of the curios in the drawing-room, and her "great treat" on wet days was permission to open the camphor-wood chest on the landing; fingering the contents, she would feel almost intoxicated with the sight and scent of fine muslin veils heavily embroidered, funny little caps, tinsel-encrusted; a packet of pictures painted on talc of Indian ladies, black-haired, almond-eyed, smiling, wonderfully robed. At the bottom of the chest were pistols and daggers, and swords, all chased and inlaid with ivory and gold; and there was a carved box full of tiger claws, and silver ornaments, bracelets, anklets, and necklaces that jingled.... In addition to the camphor-wood chest there was the lumber room, a low attic that ran the length of the roof; here were stacks of other interesting relics, horns and moth-eaten skins of wild animals, hog-spears and clumsy old guns shaped like trumpets. Also piles of old books and pamphlets, packets of letters and papers, yellow, crumbling, tied up with string and thrown into cardboard boxes.

On this luckless Sunday afternoon Stella's mind turned to the lumber room. As yet she had not the courage to descend and face grandmamma and the aunts after the scene she had made at the dining-table; and presently she stole into the passage, that was lined with a wall-paper depicting Chinese scenes, square bordered, then ran up the ladder-like stairs leading to the long attic in the roof.

There, poring over old papers and pamphlets and books, she forgot Maud Verrall and all that young person's advantages, forgot grandmamma and the aunts, and boiled mutton and her rebellious outburst against her own "lot"—forgot everything but India, the land of elephants and tigers, tents and palanquins, rajahs and battles, and marvels without end. She thrilled again as she read of Carringtons who had fought at Plassey and Paniput, in the Mahratta wars, and before the walls of Seringapatam. A Carrington had perished in the Black Hole of Calcutta, a Carrington had been the friend of Warren Hastings, in the Mutiny a Carrington had performed noble deeds; Carrington women and children had been sacrificed for the honour of their country....

To-day Stella realised for the first time that her father must have been the last male Carrington of the line. No more Carrington exploits would be recorded in the history of British India. The name of Carrington in the East belonged solely to the past. Why, oh! why—had not she been born a boy?

CHAPTER II

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Maud Verrall threw down her tennis racket; she said she was tired—a polite excuse for the termination of a game that afforded her no excitement. Stella Carrington was not a stimulating opponent; if she did not miss the ball, she sent it sky-high or out of court.

Stella saw through and sympathised with the excuse. "You see," she said regretfully, "I have had so little chance of practice. Even if we had a tennis court at The Chestnuts, there is no one for me to play with."

"Let's go into the Lovers' Walk and talk till tea-time," Maud Verrall suggested; if Stella could not play tennis she might at least prove a satisfactory recipient of confidences, and Maud had much to impart that would surely astonish the unsophisticated girl from The Chestnuts.

Arm in arm they strolled up and down the shady retreat arched over with lilac, laburnum, syringa, while Maud discoursed on the charms of the latest comic opera that had taken London by storm, and sang snatches of the songs to her envious companion; from that she went on to tell of boy-and-girl dances, and bicycling parties, and this led to disclosures concerning "desperate" adorers who were "perfectly mad" about Miss Verrall. There was one in particular—his name was Fred Glossop.

"Poor dear, he is awfully gone. I feel sorry for him. Would you like to see his photograph?" She drew a folding leather case from her pocket and displayed to the other's interested

gaze the portrait of a handsome youth with curly hair and a distinct shade on his upper lip.

"Are you going to marry him?" inquired Stella.

"Oh! I shan't marry just yet," explained Maud. "I have told him so frankly. Perhaps in a couple of years, if I meet no one I like better, he might do. He is quite good looking, and he's going into the Army. I let him write to me—mother never bothers about my letters; but while I was still at school he had to write as if he was my dearest girl-friend—signed himself 'Lily'—because all our correspondence that was not in the handwriting of parents was opened. I'm to "come out" when we go back to London. I shall make my people give a fancy dress ball. What do you think of a Greek dress—white, with a key pattern in gold, and a big peacock feather fan?"

Stella was ruefully silent. She felt small and humble; there were no balls, no young men, no "coming out" on her dull horizon.

"And what about you?" asked Maud with kindly, if belated, interest; "you must have a deadly time in this hole all the year round. I'm tired of it already. How can you stand it?"

"I have to stand it!" said Stella, grimly resigned. "But I'm going to school—to a school at Torquay."

"How awful—a horrible place. I went there once after I had measles; and school, too, at your age! Hasn't the term begun?"

"I suppose so, but it does not seem to matter. Anyway, it will be a change."

"It won't be so bad if they take you to concerts and lectures, and you go out riding. Our riding master was a picture; lots of the girls were mad about him; but he liked me best because I didn't take too much notice of him. Believe me, my dear, men think all the more of you if you don't run after them. There was a creature always at the lectures we went to who gazed at me the whole time and used to follow us when we went out, trying to get near enough to speak to me. The other girls were frantic with jealousy. Once or twice I gave him the chance of slipping a note into my hand; it's quite easy—you put your hand behind your back, like this, and gaze in another direction, and if a governess happens to be too close, you just speak to her and distract her attention. I only once got into a row—it was coming away from church." ...

This line of conversation was pursued whenever Stella was invited to The Court as company for Maud, and when Maud visited her friend at The Chestnuts. What, oh! what would have been the feelings of grandmamma and the aunts could they have overheard such vulgar, pernicious talk? To women of their type and upbringing this dawning of the most powerful of all instincts would have seemed a matter for the severest censure—not a natural symptom to be guided into safe and open channels, but a danger to be dealt with as sinful, corrupt. Intuitively Stella felt that Maud's enthralling confidences would be condemned with horror by her relations; and when Aunt Augusta, vaguely suspicious, inquired one day what the two young people found to talk about, self-preservation prompted a careless

and misleading reply: "Oh, I don't know; Maud's school, and all that sort of thing."

Reassured, Aunt Augusta considered this perfectly satisfactory and natural, seeing that Stella was soon to begin school-life herself.

Maud Verrall's egoistical communications, innocent enough in themselves (though scarcely to be commended), led, indirectly, after the manner of trivial happenings, to far-reaching results. One of the immediate consequences of Stella's newly awakened interest in the opposite sex was her expulsion from Miss Ogle's high-principled establishment before her first term was over.

From the moment of her arrival at Greystones Stella was in constant hot water. According to the school standards she was backward, and her capabilities were hopelessly unequal; she wasted hours that should have resulted in progress over work she disliked, whereas in the subjects that attracted her she outstripped her class. Her talent for music was undeniable, but she shirked the drudgery of practice, and her fatal facility for playing by ear was ever in the way. She was not popular, for she made no concealment of her contempt for sickly adorations and fashionable fawnings on governesses and senior girls. The life irked her, and her disappointment was keen to find that at Greystones there was no question of concerts and lectures; that no finishing extras figured on Miss Ogle's programme such as might have afforded the sort of excitement described by Maud Verrall as an antidote to the monotony of school existence. She hated the daily crocodile walk; true, there was a tennis court, but the game was a monopoly of the

first class, while the rest of the school marched two and two along dusty roads and uninteresting byways. Stella moped.

Then, one fatal afternoon, the daily procession passed through the town, a treat permitted once in the term, and as they all tramped the pavement of the principal thoroughfare, past fascinating shops that held the attention of governesses and girls, a flashy looking youth, loitering on the kerb, caught Stella's eye. She remembered Maud Verrall and that daring young person's adventures; what a triumph if she could tell Maud, in the summer holidays, that she had attracted the admiration of a real live young man! Maud had advocated a swift side-glance, especially if one had long eyelashes. Stella tried the experiment in passing the youth, who wore a loud waistcoat and had an immature moustache. She felt rather alarmed at her success. The young man responded with alacrity, and proceeded to follow the school at a discreet distance; followed when the "crocodile" turned to climb the hill; and was still in attendance when it reached the gate of the short drive.

Stella throbbed with excitement. She wondered what he would do now; would he linger outside; would he return to-morrow and be there when they emerged for the walk, just to obtain a glimpse of her as they passed? She thought his appearance rather dreadful; but at any rate, he was a young man, an admirer; all that she regretted was that she could not write now and tell Maud Verrall how he had followed the school on a blazing hot day up a steep hill, all on her, Stella's, account!

A game of tennis was in progress as the girls filed up the sloping drive and scattered on the edge of the lawn, and at

this moment, as it happened, a ball was sent over the privet hedge into the road below. Stella saw her chance.

"All right!" she shouted to the players. "I'll run and get it." And she raced back down the drive and through the open gate. There was the admirer lurking on the sidepath! He darted forward, an eager expression on his countenance that, even in her agitation, Stella remarked was sallow and spotty; also, as he grinned, she saw that his teeth were bad. What a pity! But it flashed through her mind that such drawbacks need not, when the time came, be cited to Maud. She would tell Maud, when they met, that he was "a picture!"

Affecting not to see him, and with a fluttering heart, Stella pounced on the tennis ball that lay in the middle of the road; and "the picture," murmuring something she could not catch, pounced also, and thrust a piece of paper into her hand. Just at that moment, by all the laws of ill-luck, Miss Ogle herself came in sight, advancing along the road, with floating veil and fringed parasol, returning from a private constitutional.

The letter that brought the appalling news to The Chestnuts of Stella's disgrace was addressed to Miss Augusta Carrington. Even the customary ignoring of unpleasant facts was not proof against such a staggering blow. Stella! the granddaughter, the niece, the child they had cherished and guarded and reared with such care—to think that she should have been detected in a vulgar intrigue, and could no longer be harboured at Greystones lest she should contaminate her schoolfellows! It was almost too terrible to contemplate, and for once the three ladies

permitted themselves the freedom of natural behaviour. Augusta very nearly stormed; Ellen wept bitterly; grandmamma said: "Like mother, like daughter," in an awful voice, and "What's bred in the bone will out in the flesh." The household was steeped in gloom. They all regretted that there was no male head of the family to whom they could turn for advice in this distressing difficulty; and it was Augusta who at last suggested that Stella's godfather, Colonel Crayfield, should be consulted. Was he not an old friend of "poor Charles"? And only a few days ago there had come a letter from him saying that he was at home on short leave from India, asking for news of his little goddaughter.

Augusta had answered the letter; how humiliating now, in the light of this subsequent catastrophe, to recall the hopeful description she had given of poor Charles's child! The confession of Stella's downfall, should they decide to consult Colonel Crayfield, would be a painful undertaking; but he was such a worthy, dependable character, and who could be more fitted, as they all agreed, to give counsel in such a terrible predicament than the child's own sponsor—the trusted friend of the dead father, since there was no male member of the Carrington family to whom they could appeal?

Last time Colonel Crayfield came home, ten years ago, he had spent a couple of days at The Chestnuts—rather a trial for hostesses who were unaccustomed to the entertaining of gentlemen, but on the whole the visit was felt to have been a success. Mamma and Augusta had even suspected that he was attracted by Ellen, though, according to Carrington custom, neither had voiced the idea. Ellen,

however, could have given him no encouragement, for nothing came of it, suitable as such an alliance would have seemed on both sides. Colonel Crayfield was that amphibious production of the Indian services—a military man in civil employ, holding responsible, well-paid office; on the occasion of his brief visit to The Chestnuts he had not disagreed with Miss Augusta when she expressed her admiration of missionary efforts in the East; he had only just tasted the wine that was offered him; he had not smoked in the house, though the pantry was at his disposal for the purpose. All these good points were recalled during the discussion that ensued as to whether he should be approached for advice concerning his goddaughter's future, and such recollections went far towards shaping the final decision of grandmamma and Augusta, tearfully supported by Ellen. The whole dreadful truth should be written to Colonel Crayfield, with an urgent invitation to visit The Chestnuts once more.

Meantime Stella was on her way home, shamefaced, unhappy. The fuss at Greystones had been frightful, the whole affair bewildering—the condemnation, the feeling of hopeless inability to defend herself; then the hasty packing, the self-righteous, disparaging attitude of the girls, and the stares of the servants; the humiliating departure, sentinelled to the last moment by Miss Ogle herself, wrathful and stern, who put her into a compartment for ladies only, in the care of the guard.

The time that elapsed between her return to The Chestnuts and the day of Colonel Crayfield's arrival was to Stella a species of purgatory. Grandmamma and the aunts

hardly spoke to her, she was forbidden to go beyond the garden, no explanation of her conduct was invited, though, indeed, what explanation could she have given, since it was perfectly true that Miss Ogle had caught her receiving a note from a strange young man; and with it all she had not even had a chance to read the note—she would have given *worlds* to know what the young man had written!

The culprit was sent to the station in the village wagonette to meet her godfather, and she welcomed the distraction, awkward though it would be to face Colonel Crayfield in the uncomfortable circumstances. The situation struck her as almost grotesque; here she was, driving through the familiar lanes in the late July sunshine, as an outcast and a sinner, to meet an old gentleman who had been summoned to sit in judgment upon her! And, after all, she had done nothing worse, nothing half so bad, as Maud Verrall; and Maud had not been expelled from school as a sort of leper. She wished Maud was at The Court; but that happy young creature was disporting herself in London, and Stella had not the spirit left to write to her.

Arrived at the little countryside station, a six-mile drive from The Chestnuts, she seated herself on a bench to await the train from London, and gazed vacantly at the white palings, at the dazzling herbaceous border, butterflies floating above it. She felt sorely oppressed, but more from a sense of misfortune than from shame or repentance. How unlucky she was! The future held nothing enjoyable; she saw herself living on at The Chestnuts indefinitely. Grandmamma might die some day, but she and the aunts would grow older and older, and they would all continue to

sing in church that they dared not choose their lot, and would not if they might. Stella remembered the case of Miss Spurt, the only daughter of a clergyman in a neighbouring parish, who, two or three years back, had run away with her father's groom-gardener. The scandal had petrified the county; whispers of it had reached Stella's sharp ears, though the subject was never mentioned in her presence at The Chestnuts. Now she wondered what had become of Miss Spurt, and she even began to sympathise with the poor girl's mad action.

Supposing she herself were driven to do the same sort of thing; to elope, for example, with the solitary porter who stood leaning against the waiting-room wall, should he suggest such a desperate step! She regarded him with idle attention, feeling stupefied with the prevailing somnolence of the station, the heat of the shadeless, empty platform; he was a fresh-looking boy, with a cap on the back of his head and a curl of glistening hair plastered to his forehead. Suddenly he stood erect, stretched his arms, gave a loud yawn, and seized a handbell that he rang with deafening clamour. So here was the train at last, thank goodness!

One or two people hurried, perspiring, breathless, on to the platform; a few more ran over the rails from the opposite side, there being no footbridge; the station-master emerged from his office and took up a commanding position. The train rumbled in.

During the long, hot journey from London, Colonel Crayfield had been repenting his good-natured acquiescence to what seemed to him a rather exacting, inconsiderate request. At first his fancy had been tickled by