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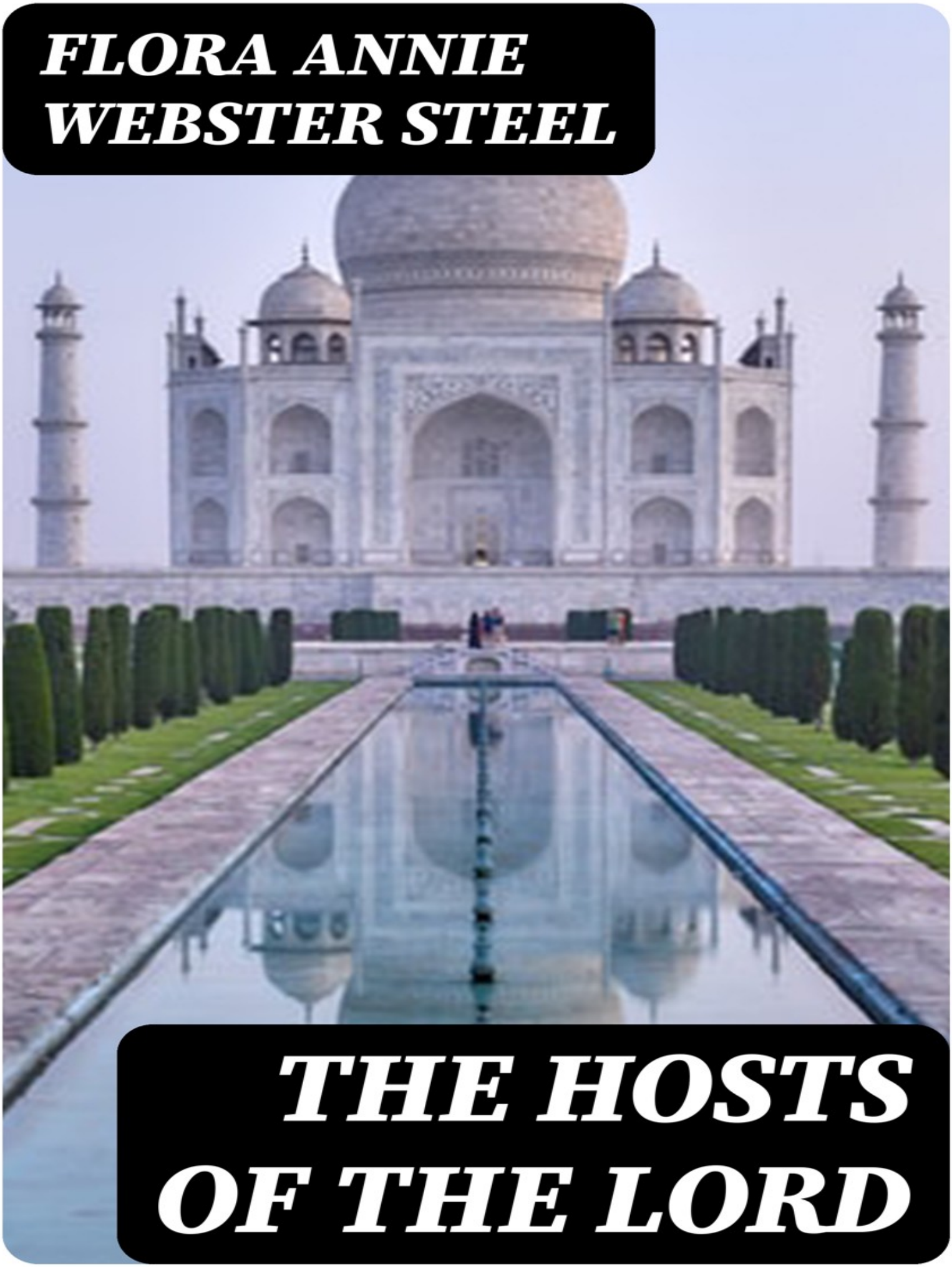

THE HOSTS OF THE LORD

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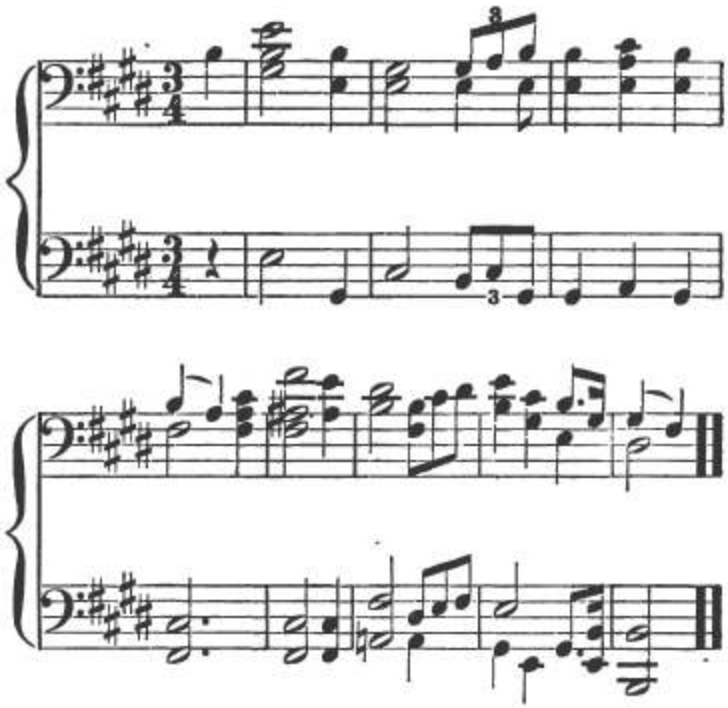
THE TRUTH



THE HOSTS OF THE LORD

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CHAPTER I

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A SHADOW

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"Understand! Of course you don't. I don't, though I've been here two years. And what's more, I don't want to," retorted a rather undersized Englishman, whose white drill suit made him look like a stem to the huge mushroom of a pith hat which he wore. Despite this protection his face was brown exceedingly, and faintly wrinkled through sheer exposure to sun-bright, sun-dried air. The fact enhanced the monkey type of his features, and made his clear, light-blue eyes--so set that they were shadowless below and cavernous above--look quite aggressively cool, inquisitive, intelligent.

"So long as we don't understand them," he went on, "and they don't understand us, we jog along the same path amicably, like--well! like the pilgrims to the 'Cradle of the Gods,' and the telegraph-posts to the Adjutant General's office up the road yonder--and I'll trouble you to cram more space than that between two earthly poles! No! It is when we begin to have glimmerings that the deuce and all comes in--" He paused in the molten gold of sunlight, which made the yellow sand, the corn-coloured tussocks of tiger-grass still yellower and still more corn-coloured, to glance round,

as if measuring the distance between the long, low line of mud enclosure they had left but a few hundred yards behind--yet which, already, was losing itself in an illimitable sand stretch beyond--and a bigger tuft in the sand stretch ahead; a tuft of spear-points and horses, bayonets and men, waiting beside the first faint semblance of a reed-paved road. Then he took out his watch. Apparently he found leisure at his disposal, for he walked on. "There's a nursery rhyme they taught me," he continued, "when my moral nature was at the mercy of any fool who chose to take an interest in it--'*But if poor Pussy understood, she'd be, indeed, a naughty creature!*' It didn't run so consecutively, of course; in fact 'creature' rhymed to 'teach her'--but I learnt it that way. Children do that sort of thing a sight deal oftener than their elders think."

The younger of the two men in uniform with whom he was walking laughed--the honest, elated, conscious laugh of one who has not many good stories about himself, and happens on an opportunity for telling one of them.

"*I* used to say, '*Six days shalt thy neighbour do all that thou hast to do, and the seventh day shalt thou do no manner*--'"

"Shut up, Lance!" interrupted his elder companion with a laugh. "It is a ripping excuse for your intolerable laziness, but I don't believe--"

"Fact, I assure you," protested Lance Carlyon aggrievedly, "and considering I really thought that was the proper version for ten years of my life, I--"

Dr. George Dillon took off his mushroom hat suddenly, and wiped his forehead as if to smooth away the wrinkles

which his smiles had brought to it. "Lordy! It's a queer world," he put in. "There is really no good in understanding most things. As for this place--! Great Scott! What would happen if my fifteen hundred scoundrels, whom you saw digging like babes in the open just now, were to understand that I--one Englishman in charge--had virtually no *force majeure*--"

"Don't insult us, Dillon!" remonstrated Captain Vincent Dering, a certain swagger underlying his jest. "Eshwara is a garrison town, remember, now; I'm commandant, and Carlyon's staff--"

He had, in fact, ridden that morning as far as Dr. Dillon's house in charge of a troop of native cavalry and some Sikh pioneers who had gone on, under a native officer, to take up their temporary quarters in the half-ruined Fort, just beyond the old town of Eshwara. And now, having thus secured their breakfasts, he and his lieutenant were on their way towards the horses and escort they had bidden await them at the boat bridge which lay between them and their destination. For George Dillon was in control of a large industrial gaol, whose inmates had for months been digging the head works of a canal, which was to take off just below the town, on the farther side of the river.

"Are you?" replied the doctor, with a look of pity; "then I hope you'll both forget the fact. We've got on all right without you, hitherto. So if you'll stick to marking out the Viceroy's camp, and generally preparing the way of the Lord-sahib, I'll be obliged to you. By the way, is he coming to open the canal on the 10th, really?"

"So they say. That is, if you are ready for the show by then. I believe he could put it off till the 11th or 12th. Dashwood said something to that effect."

"Then Dashwood's an ass. The 10th is bad enough. The place will be filling up even then."

"Filling up! How?"

"Pilgrims. But on the 11th and 12th! By George! you should see them! The 'Assyrians came down like a wolf on the fold,' is nothing to it; only these are the Hosts of the Lord, I suppose. And so Dashwood suggested the 11th or 12th--the *Vaisakh* festival, did he? Well, he is an ass! But that's always the way. We try to understand feelings, instead of trying to know facts. However, we shall be ready for the opening, never fear. Smith expects his C. S. I. over it, he says, and that's enough guarantee. You know Smith, don't you, Dering? Walsall Smith--I think his wife said she knew you."

"Yes," he interrupted, with rather unnecessary decision, "Mrs. Walsall Smith is a great friend of mine, a very great friend."

"Jolly for you, having friends in Eshwara," assented Lance, in uneasy haste. "I suppose they are about the only people here, eh, doctor?" he went on, changing the subject; but the latter's clear eyes and brain were occupied for a moment in taking stock of Captain Dering's singular, if a trifle *voyant* personal attractions; one of the most noticeable of which was the perfect curve of his throat and cheek.

"I beg your pardon--people, did you say?" asked Dr. Dillon, after the pause. "Plenty of people, if you count

padrés--the place swarms with missions, you know. But if you mean polo--" He shook his head.

Lance Carlyon's honest young face clouded, then grew cheerful again. "Well! there must be a lot of black partridge, and I expect there's fish in the river. Besides, it's an awfully picturesque place--By Jove! it is, Dering, isn't it?"

They had reached the tuft of spear-points and horses, men and bayonets, and before them lay Eshwara, sun-saturate, shadowless, in the April noon.

So seen, across the still lagoon of water formed by the junction of the two streams, the Hara and the Hari, which edged the low-lying triangular spit from which its fortified, temple-set walls rose, Eshwara seemed at the very foot of the blue barrier of hill behind it, whose serrated edge, paler than the blue sky above it, claimed three-quarters of all things visible for this world.

That, indeed, was the noticeable point in the picture presented to the eye. As a rule Heaven claims the larger half of all perspectives. Here, the three elements, earth, air, water, lay across the view in three broad bands of blue, curiously similar in tint; for the sky was pale with excess of light, the hills with excess of heat, and the water paler than either by reason of a white silt which it brought with it from the snows; a white silt which a recent flood had left in a fine film upon the sand stretches that showed here and there in the broad basin.

"It is a gypsum *detritus*," explained the doctor--"from the 'Cradle of the Gods'--the cave, you know, where the rivers rise. The pilgrims go, in fact, for this very stuff. Find it in the ice crannies, call it 'the clay of immortality,' smear

themselves with it, and then die happy, in hundreds, of pneumonia! Those are the facts. I don't profess to understand them; and as I told you I don't want to. It's dangerous. As that cracked old Jesuit, Father Narâyan, admitted, with that unfathomable smile of his, when all the other parsons were at me for refusing to allow them access to a postulate or a catechumen, or someone of that sort, who was sent to my jail '*the Church has always admitted the value of invincible ignorance*.'"

"Father Narâyan!" interrupted Lance Carlyon eagerly, "I suppose that's the Father Ninian Bruce who has lived here fifty years, and has a sort of Begum in tow, a descendant of General Bonaventura's, who was the Nawabs' favourite. I want to see that old chap; he must be a character. My grandmother, old Lady Carewe, used to tell me about him; long yarns, though she hadn't met him since she was in her teens in a convent at Rome, and he was father confessor, I suppose--she's a Holy Roman, you know, and was a desperate flirt too."

"So am I," said Vincent Dering quickly. "I mean a Catholic--at least my people are. So I can tell you one thing, Dillon; Father Ninian isn't a Jesuit. I was talking about him at the Club, when I knew I was coming here, and Father Delamere was indignant at the idea--said he was a disgrace to his cloth."

George Dillon's dry face grew dryer. "Did he, indeed! I quite agree that *he* is, but I didn't think Delamere would have admitted the fact himself! As for Pidar Narâyan, as the natives call him, he--he--" here the dry face melted. "Bless the man," he continued, and the dry voice grew soft, "he

thinks he knows more about doctoring than I do, and the worst of it is--" here a perfectly charming smile took possession of every wrinkle--"he does, in a way; for the natives believe in him, and the 'saffron bag' is the best of all remedies. You see, when he was younger, he used often to go with the pilgrims and try to pull some of the poor devils out of the fire--or rather out of the snow--for the 'Cradle of the Gods' lies yonder."

He pointed to where, faint and far, a peak showed paler than the rest.

"Why don't they smear themselves here?" asked Lance stolidly.

"Why? Because they don't. Besides, there isn't much to come and go upon for a robe of righteousness here. Look! the breeze is blowing it away already!"

In truth the sun, which with the other three elements of earth, and air, and water, give us, in all religions, the whole spiritual life of man,--the world of his probation, the heaven of his hopes, the means of his purification, and the fire of his retribution--had scorched the fine film to dust, and the wind, blowing where it listed, was sweeping it away, leaving the sand stretches unregenerate as ever.

"An extra touch of pipe-clay!" laughed Vincent Dering, dusting his knee as he settled himself in his saddle. "Well! good-by, old chap. I shall see you again soon, for I shall be coming over to the Smiths' pretty often, and I suppose your regiment of ruffians leaves you off duty sometimes. Carlyon, make Dillon an honourary member of the headquarters mess!"

George Dillon, leaning with his hands in his pockets against the rail of the first pontoon, watching the little cavalcade start, nodded. "Thanks. I'm over pretty often at the Palace. Pidar Narâyan plays the fiddle, and the Begum,--as you call her,--Miss Laila Bonaventura, has a voice. Besides, Babylon--I mean Eshwara--amuses me."

"Why Babylon?" asked Captain Dering, stooping to straighten his stirrup.

The doctor laughed, as his lounge changed to a start homeward. "Means the same thing. Esh-dwarra--or in another tongue, Bab-y-lon,--is 'the Gate of God,' though Babylon stands for something else nowadays, doesn't it? That's why I say it's never any use to find out the meanings of things. They change so. Stick to facts; they don't. Well, ta-ta. I'll see you to-morrow, most likely, at the Palace. They have a sort of concert-practice-afternoon on Wednesdays--some of the Mission ladies sing jollily in parts--and the old man is sure to ask you. He sets great store on his ward's position; besides, I told him you were a nailer at the piano."

Vincent Dering made a wry face. "The deuce you did! My dear fellow, I couldn't play hymn tunes to save my life. I shall refuse."

"Pity," replied Dr. Dillon over his shoulder, as he swung off in strides which emphasized the undue shortness of his trousers, "for I heard Mrs. Smith say they wanted a good accompanist. She sings *alto*--rather well."

"Oh, does she?" said Captain Dering, in a different tone.

As they set their faces different ways, there was a smile on both, but the doctor's was scarcely a pleasant one; it

would, in fact, have been wholly sardonic but for the touch of impatient weariness it brought with it.

So, through the sun-bright, sun-dried air, while George Dillon walked back to his fifteen hundred malefactors, the little trail of spear-points and bayonets, men and horses, drifted at a foot-pace across the frail bridge towards the town; drifted unsteadily, the yielding boats swaying, the wooden girders giving and groaning over their burden. Seen so, with but a plank between it and the milky water creased by the faint current, there was something unreal in the gay troop of colour and glitter making its way to the quaint, storeyed town, ablaze in the sunlight, which turned each golden temple-spike to a star. A cool breeze fluttered the lance-pennants, and brought that faint film of white to horse and man, warm flesh, and cold steel.

And far away on that pale peak, a little white cloud had rested, hiding the "Cradle of the Gods."

"There must be fish here," remarked Lance dogmatically. "I'll get out my rods to-morrow and try for a '*mahseer*.'" And the earnestness of his face, as he lifted his eyes skyward to watch a couple of cormorants, would have suited a knight-errant of old on the quest of the Holy Grail.

"It won't be half bad, I expect--for a time, at any-rate," assented Vincent Dering, still with that content upon his face. "We will get up some fun while the camp is here, of course; and after that--" he paused, and the content became greater--"we'll manage for the month or so we have to stop. At least I shall."

His voice was soft. He might have been another knight-errant of old, riding across to the enchanted castle of his

beloved.

"I beg pardon, sir," said a voice behind him; a voice with a strong native accent, yet with a curiously English phrasing in it, "but by dismounting here you will reach the Fort in a few minutes on foot. The road is longer."

Captain Dering turned, as if surprised, to the speaker, a native officer who sat his horse at the salute; then smiled, and with a clatter of accoutrements slipped to the ground.

"Come along, Carlyon. I was forgetting that Roshan Khân is up to the ropes here. You belong to Eshwara, don't you, *risaldar sahib?*"

The man to whom he spoke had slipped from his saddle also, and stood, smart as uniform could make him, still as discipline could hold him. He was a good-looking young Mahomedan of about thirty, curiously English in his movements, curiously native in his exaggeration of martial airs.

"*Huzoor!*" he assented. "We are connected with the late Nawab's house."

He spoke with absolute indifference, but Captain Dering, as they left the bazaar, which led from the bridge, for a short flight of steps and a narrow alley cleaving it's way through crowded, shouldering houses, remarked aside:--

"I believe that means he is about the nearest relation left. The Colonel, I know, wasn't sure about the wisdom of his coming here; but then the Colonel is that sort. So I insisted. One wants somebody who can tell you things in a new place. What's that, in there, Roshan?"

They had come to a long, high wall, with trees showing above it, which stretched away on their right hand for two or

three hundred yards, until it ended in an arched tunnel through a massive block of buildings at right angles to it.

"The palace garden, sir; and that is the palace. There is no entrance this side."

"The women's apartments, I suppose?"

"*Huzoor*," assented Roshan Khân once more. "The Miss *Sahib* lives there now, and the *Padré* has his chapel there too. The river runs along the side, and it is pleasant."

"Pleasant and cool," echoed Lance, as the shadow of the tunnel closed in on them. "I'd no idea it was so hot outside. By Jove! what a quaint place."

They were emerging on a wide, square courtyard of which the palace formed one side, the fort another, a flight of steps leading down to the river a third, while the fourth was apparently, a wing of the palace. All three walls were absolutely blank save for a low door at each of the four corners; and these were, so to speak, connected with each other by pathways raised two steps above the rest of the courtyard. A similar footpath crossed it in the middle and so completed the resemblance to a union-jack; for the pathways were of white marble and red Agra stone, the courtyard of purple-blue brick. These paths met in a round platform in the centre, where, on a stone carriage, stood an old cannon.

"That's a big gun," said Vincent Dering, when, with a quickened clink of his spurred steps he had reached it; so, laying his hand lightly on the cylinder, he vaulted to it, as on to a horse, and stooped to read an inscription on the riveted band about the breech.

"Sanskrit," he said--"that stumps me! it's so confounded straight. Ah! here it is in Persian too--that's better."

There was a faint clash of steel on stone, for, as he read the motto aloud, Roshan's hand, stiffening on his sword-hilt, made ground and scabbard meet.

Captain Dering slipped to his feet again with a laugh.

"'Teacher of religion, and instructor of souls;' that's about a correct translation, isn't it, *risaldar sahib?* Well! I'd back a Maxim against old Blunderbore as a missionary agent nowadays. Hullo! they worship it still, do they?" He pointed to a faded chaplet of marigolds around the muzzle, and a red hand printed on the marble below.

The Mahomedan's face took on the expression of his race and creed; all unconsciously, too, he reverted to his own language.

"The idolators do that when they come to bathe; and they give alms to the saint, when he is inside."

"Inside!" echoed Captain Dering. "What! Inside the gun?"

Here Lance, who had promptly peered down the muzzle, came up from it excitedly, asserting that the saint was there now; he could see the brute's fuzzy head half way down, so he must have crawled in feet foremost--one of those naked brutes who smeared themselves with ashes, to judge by his *chignon*.

"Make a ripping mop," laughed Vincent Dering, after glancing down in his turn; "clean the gun nicely,"--then the *insouciance* of his face disappeared, its curves hardened--"and by God! I'll make him. I'm not going to have my guns worshipped! eh, Roshan?"

"*Huzoor*," assented the Mahomedan once more, this time joyfully, as--a decorous two paces behind--his spurs jingled in harmony with his captain's across the raised union-jack towards the river-end of the courtyard where, in a projecting bastion right upon the bathing steps, the low arched door stood which gave access to the Fort.

In order to reach it they had to pass the solitary visible occupant of the wide, sunlit courtyard. This was a man--of what rank, education, occupation, none could tell--who having raised a square of two-inch-high mud wall between his twice-born purity and the world, was preparing his daily food. Naked, save for his waistcloth, and the thread of the twice-born over his left shoulder, he was isolated even from his kindred. Alone with himself and his God.

Before him in the mud-plastered square, as he sat immovable, was the mud fireplace on which his wheaten dough-cake was cooking; beside him was a leaf-platter of curds, a brass vessel of milk; a sight to be seen a hundred times a day in India; one which should never be forgotten.

The noon was almost shadowless; yet, even so, as he led the way, Captain Dering, from sheer habit, swerved to step further from the sacred square. Doing so his foot slipped an instant on the lower step. He gave an impatient exclamation and passed on. A minute later the door of the fort clanged behind the little party, cutting short an English laugh.

Then, not till then, the man in that square of purity showed signs of life. He rose quietly, almost unconcernedly, took the half-baked cake from the embers, the leaf-platter of curds, the vessel of milk, and going down to the river's edge, flung his dinner into it, to feed the fishes.

In that stumble, the plume-like fringe of Vincent Dering's high peaked turban had sent a shadow to overtop the two-inch barrier between one man and his fellows.

CHAPTER II

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"HE SHALL FEED HIS FLOCK LIKE A SHEPHERD"

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The garden of the old palace at Eshwara had been rightly described by Roshan Khân as a pleasant place. Longer than it was broad, its shady walks and orange groves clung to the river, raised above it by a balconied wall against which the current ran dimpling. On two of the remaining sides, a twenty-feet high barrier of sheer masonry, buttressed and bastioned, blocked out all curious eyes. On the third, separating it from the courtyard where the big gun stood, rose the palace. Seen thus intimately from within, the latter had changed its character. No longer severe, stern, giving a blank stare at the world from the narrow slits of infrequent windows, it had grown fanciful, almost fantastic, full of canopied turrets and inconsequent little latticed retreats.

At least in the two upper storeys; for the lower one was more solid, its chief feature being a wide, aisled passage leading right through it to a door which gave on the courtyard. Being exactly opposite the one in the corner of the Fort bastion on the other side, this door opened, as the latter did, on one of the slantwise limbs of the quaint union-jack of raised paths which centred in the cannon.

It was not necessary, however, to go round by this in crossing from one door to the other, as by keeping to the river steps, you could do so on the same level.

In old times the guardians of the frail beauties for whose delectation the garden had been made, had lived in the crypt-like vaulted rooms which opened out from this aisled passage; so keeping the gate against illegal wanderings. Since the only other exit from the garden, save by boat, was through the second storey of the women's apartments, and as this was by a door leading directly into the royal rooms (which were on the other side of the tunnel that gave access to the courtyard, and also divided the palace into two portions--male, and female), the butterfly prisoners had had no chance of fluttering to strange honey. In those days, therefore, the door had always been bolted and barred.

It stood wide open, however, showing a vista of green at the farther end of the passage, when Captain Dering and Lance Carlyon came over to it in reply to the intimation that Miss Laila Bonaventura was "*At Home for music on Wednesday afternoons*," which had been brought to the Fort overnight by an old pantaloon. A very old pantaloon with a wizened face, a few sparse hairs--dyed flaming red--standing at right angles to his cheeks, and a marvellous livery, consisting for the most part of yards upon yards of tarnished tinsel cloth, twisted and twined about head and waist like Saturn's rings. The oldest of old pantaloons, with a back curved by a life-time of obeisances, a toothless mouth, still full of sonorous titles, and a wicked old eye, watchful for the least want of the master, be it good or evil. A pantaloon, with Heaven knows what history of unutterable things

hidden in his old brain, such as is to be seen, even in these days, lingering round the ruins of a native court; a figure despicable enough, yet real; so in a way pathetic, by reason of its absolute lack of real interest in things as they are.

And now as the two Englishmen paused,--partly because the swift change from the glare without to the gloom within was startling,--this same pantaloon, with a white muslin robe superadded to the livery as a badge of his dignity as door-keeper, precipitated himself upon them from the shadows, with ancient skips of alacrity and loop-like salaams; then with crab-like sidlings led the way, the young men following.

"I must have that old chap on paper before I leave," said Vincent Dering; "he's too good to be lost."

So, their steps echoing cheerfully with their laughter, they went on until, towards the middle of the passage, the aisle to their left widened, and through a maze of pillars and arches, a glimpse or two of air and sunlight showed sharply.

Lance took a curious step towards them. "Opens on to the river, I expect; jolly cool it must be in the hot weather! By Jove! those old sinners knew how to be comfortable. Hullo!"--he paused in a sort of horror--"I say, Dering! I believe it's a chapel. Yes! it is!" He took off his cap instinctively, and moved another step forward to see better.

But Captain Dering called impatiently, "Oh, come along, do, Carlyon! I didn't promise to go to church! Hymns are bad enough in all conscience."

Lance, however, stood rooted to the spot, cap in hand. "Hush!" he said in a low voice, "I believe they are having service." As he spoke a robed figure showed between the

arches against the sunlight beyond them; showed with something in its lifted hands, then passed to some unseen altar.

"Oh, come along, do! there's a good chap, and let's get out of the way," repeated Captain Dering, sharply. "It's Father Narâyan, I suppose,--he's as mad as a hatter, and boshes the whole business--at least, so Delamere said. I told you we were a bit early, but you would start; still it's too bad of the old man to have his chapel in the front hall! Come along! and let us wait in the garden--it looks an awfully jolly one--awfully--"

He paused, perhaps at the change, this time, from gloom to glare, perhaps at the sudden sense of anticipation, the sudden quickening of the pulse of life, which made him draw a long breath involuntarily.

It was not unfamiliar to him, that sudden stir of vitality, of expectation; and with a curious smile on his face he crossed to the edge of the marble plinth on which the passage opened, and leaning over the balustrade, looked down to a terrace below, and so on to the garden itself.

A perfect wilderness of common flowers, sown broadcast, lay at his feet, hemming in a shallow marble tank, which was nearly covered with the dewy leaf-cups of the lotus, and set round with mosaic arabesques. From this tank two aqueducts led to the edge of the terrace, and ended in steep slopes of fretted marble, where cascades had once wimpled and dimpled down to the water-maze which lay below--a shiny lake, cobwebbed over by narrow marble paths just wide enough for the bare, flying feet of a laughing girl. Beyond was scented shade, with glints of water-courses

gleaming here and there; while here and there came a peep of a latticed balcony overhanging the river; a balcony just large enough for a laughing girl and her lover.

Yet there was not even a butterfly to be seen hovering over the flowers. All was still, all was silent, until Vincent Dering's careless laugh echoed through the stillness, the silence.

"Can't you imagine it--all lit up--they used to put coloured lamps behind the cascades, I'm told, and play 'Catch who can' up and down and all around the place! On the whole I expect they enjoyed themselves--better than the type-writing girls of to-day do, for instance."

"Got beastly sick of enjoying themselves before they had done with it, I expect," replied Lance, succinctly, "especially if there was always such a confounded strong smell of orange blossoms. Bah! I'd prefer a polecat; but," he gave a distasteful glance at his companion, "I believe you like strong scents."

"Why not?" laughed Vincent Dering, drawing out a handkerchief deluged with white-rose, and sniffing at it, "it's a harmless taste," here his jest passed to earnest, and his eyes took a half soft, half cynical expression,--"so's the other, in a way. It isn't altogether despicable to let yourself loose in Paradise without an *arrière pensée* of flaming swords. Especially if you can give pleasure to someone else thereby. One could act Romeo and Juliet nicely in this garden. And have your choice of balconies, too," he continued, returning to jest, "even if the young woman--"

He glanced back as if to verify his remark from the *façade* of the palace, but what he saw behind him brought a

sudden straightening of his lounge, and rather an elaborate doffing of his sailor hat; for he was always a trifle ornate in his courtesy towards women, and the girl who stood within a pace or two of him was distinctly attractive, if--even at the first glance--a little too bread-and-buttery for his taste; too young, too clumsy as to waist, too massive in the contours of face and figure. For Captain Vincent Dering's taste had remained constant for the last three years to a different type of beauty; a type which, for the first time in his life, had made him sentimental, romantic, more or less unselfish. Still the girl was handsome, even in that babyish frock of starched white muslin, girt about with a yellow silk sash. The dress, he told himself,--for he was a connoisseur in *chiffons*, and had a pretty turn for painting in addition--would have been better soft, and creamy; but thank heaven! the sash was not blue, like the marker of the missal she carried in her hand. It might have been; for it was impossible to fathom the lack of all sense of fitness in some women. Yet the result would have been to take all the ivory tints from this girl's complexion, and leave it jaundiced. And the ivory was charming.

"I am Miss Bonaventura," she began in a set way, which convinced Captain Dering that she had been sent to say those very words, and none other; "my guardian, Father Ninian Bruce, will be here directly. Won't you come upstairs to the drawing-room? I am sorry we did not know it was so late."

"It is our fault; we are disgracefully early," put in Captain Dering. "I told Carlyon--" then he paused, feeling curiously at a loss before the girl's look of stolid gravity.

"Perhaps your watch is too fast," she suggested, "and then my guardian likes to go by the sun. He says it never needs winding up. But I think it is inconvenient, when everybody else has a watch. It is always better to do as other people do."

Her voice was very sweet and full; but a country-bred accent spoilt its beauty, and brought a grimace to Captain Dering's face, as he and his companion dutifully followed the speaker up one of the curved flights of steps, which led from the plinth to a wide loggia on the second storey. Like the room seen through its arches, this was lavishly decorated with fragments of looking-glass fashioned into flowing designs with gilt stucco. The afternoon sun, at this height shining full into the loggia, made it a veritable star chamber.

"What a charming place," went on Captain Dering in his best manner. "Doesn't it remind you of the Arabian Nights, Carlyon?"

A sudden vague surprise and interest came to the girl's face, lightening it infinitely.

"Have you read the *Alif Laila?*" she asked. "My *moonshi* brought it--I have to learn Urdu, you know, because my guardian thinks I ought to be able to speak to the people, as he does--and I wanted to read it, because it is my name, you see--Laila--it means 'night,' I believe--but my guardian did not wish it. He gave me the 'Mirror of Virtue' instead. It is a very, very long--"

Her almost childish garrulity ceased in a faint flush over the ivory of her face, and she reverted to her lesson, and her indifference--"The other people will be here directly; but

they will come from the city, across the tunnel, and go straight into the drawing-room. Would you like to come in there, or stay here?"

"Oh! stay here, please!" said Vincent, desperately. The young woman was getting on his nerves.

"Then perhaps you would like to try the piano?" persisted Miss Bonaventura. "My guardian has it brought out here on Wednesday afternoons, because it sounds well among the arches. Will you try it?"

Her hand--it was ivory also, Vincent observed, and had long filbert-shaped nails--held the cover of the keyboard open stolidly; and Lance Carlyon, feeling a bit desperate also, said appealingly:--

"Do, Dering. He is a nailer at the piano, I assure you, Miss Bonaventura, and he sings too."

"So my guardian--" she began, when Vincent's patience gave way and, with a perfect devil of exasperation roused in him, he sat down on the music-stool and with a crash burst into a naughty little love song he had picked up at Brindisi on the way out. He did it simply to soothe himself; so, to do him justice, he nearly fell off the music-stool in horror when, at the refrain of the second verse, a very full round *mezzo-soprano* joined in it with a *verve* and *abandon* far exceeding his own.

He scarcely knew whether to apologize, or go on; but Miss Bonaventura apparently had no doubts. She finished with a gay little *staccato* note which would have made her fortune at a music hall, and then turned to the accompanist with a smile which showed an absolutely flawless set of teeth. "What funny words; but I like them, and the tune too.

What is it called? I should like to get it and sing it to my guardian."

Vincent, who had begun a stammering regret that he had not remembered her nationality, altered his phrase, with a sense of relief, to "You know Italian very well, I suppose, Miss Bonaventura?"

She returned to her indifference immediately. "My guardian and I speak it. He loves Italy and the Italians. He knew my grandmother there. She was a princess; but he never speaks of her, so I don't know very much about it. Only Mother at the convent said that my guardian--"

She was off, gaily, on the childishly confidential tack again, when the sight of someone coming up the stairs made her veer towards dignity once more. "There is my guardian," she said; "he is very sorry to have kept you waiting."

Evidently this was the last bit of her lesson, for she closed the piano with great decision.

The figure which came slowly towards them was that of a very old man, yet one older, by many years, than his looks. For he was still straight, save for a slight stoop in the neck; but this, by the backward poise of the head thus made necessary to enable his brown eyes to meet all things, after their habit, squarely, if softly, gave him an air of alertness. He was dressed in an ordinary black *soutane*, but wore a fine white embroidered muslin skull-cap, such as natives wear, instead of a black one. His grey hair showed, still luxuriant, beneath it; and the wide sash of faded lilac silk, with tasselled ends, which was tied in a bow about his waist, set off his still slim and still graceful figure.

"I hope my little girl has been doing the honours properly," he began, pausing a pace or two from the young men, and not offering to shake hands; but his voice was a welcome in itself, and had that nameless *cachet* of absolute good breeding which makes offence impossible. There was a slight hesitancy in it too, now and again, which was overcome by a look that took the listener into its confidence, and appealed for friendly forbearance--"but she is only just back from school at Calcutta, and the good nuns did not see much company, did they, Laila?" Then in an undertone of solicitude he added, in Italian, "Didst tell them, *cara mia?*--didst remember it all?"

Laila Bonaventura looked at him with a faint resentment. "I think so, guardian," she replied, in English. "Didn't I?"

The last came with such swift, almost savage, challenge of voice and eyes, that Vincent Dering, the recipient, felt glad of the diversion caused by the arrival, through the drawing-room, of some more guests to claim the attention of the host and hostess, and so leave him in peace.

"I say, that girl has got splendid hair, hasn't she?" he said in an undertone to Lance, as they stood a little apart, watching the new comers.

"That tall one, you mean--don't admire it. Puts me in mind of that devil of a chestnut who nearly killed me at polo; a chestnut with white stockings; awfully handy, but--"

He paused as Father Ninian came up to them. "You can scarcely know any of your neighbours as yet, Captain Dering," began the old man with the ceremony of a past age, "so perhaps you will give me the privilege of presenting you to some of our good mission ladies."