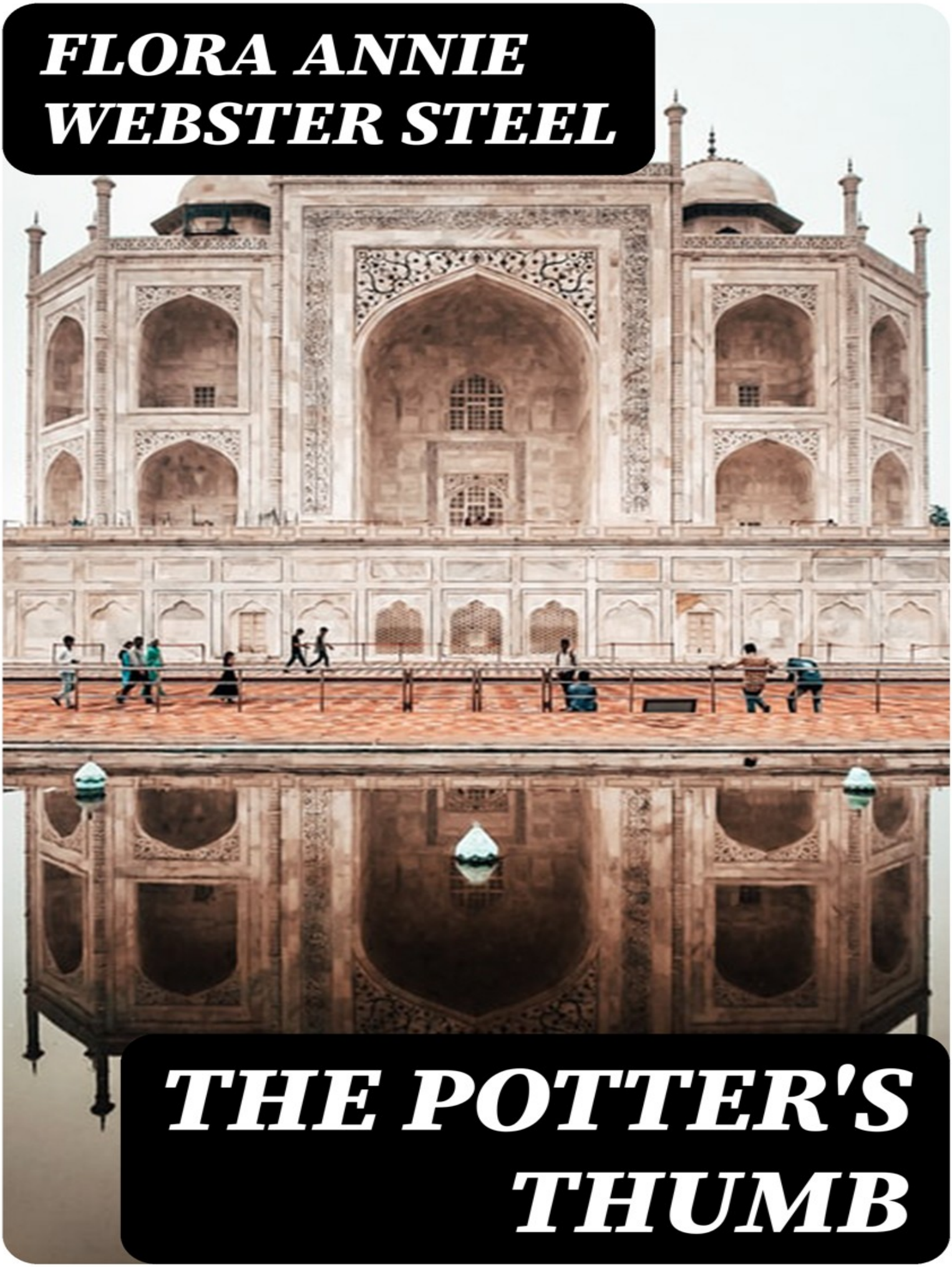
FLORA ANNIE WEBSTER STEEL



THE POTTER'S THUMB

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The Potter's Thumb

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CHAPTER I

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'Tis only the potter's thumb, Huzoor.'

As she raised the parti-coloured rag covering the child's body, the noonday sun streamed down upon a pitiful sight. Yet her eyes, despite the motherhood which lay in them, accepted it, as the sun did, calmly. Emotion, such as it was, being reserved for the couple of Englishmen who stood by: and even there curiosity and repulsion froze the surface of pity, especially in the younger of the two faces.

In good sooth, not a pleasant sight for mankind, to whom sickness does not as a rule bring that quick interest born of a desire to aid which it does to most women. The brown skin was fair with the pallor of disease, and the fine, sparse, black hair showed the contour of the skull. The unnatural hollows of the temples emphasised the unnatural prominence of the closed eyelids, round whose ragged margin of clogged lashes the flies settled in clusters. Below this death's-head was an over-large body, where, despite its full curves, each rib stood sharply defined, and whence the thin limbs angled themselves in spidery fashion.

'The potter's thumb?' echoed Dan Fitzgerald interrogatively. He was a tall man, broad in the shoulders, lean in the flank, and extraordinarily handsome; yet the most noticeable quality in the face looking down at the very ordinary woman squatting upon a very ordinary dust-heap, was not its beauty, but its vitality. 'Is that a disease?' he added, almost sharply.

She gave the native cluck of emphatic denial. 'No! Huzoor. The child dies because it does not drink milk properly; yet is it the potter's thumb in the beginning. Lo! many are born so in this place. The doctor-sahib who put the *tikka* on the arms for smallpox said Hodinuggur was too old for birth--that it was a graveyard. I know not. Only this is true; many are born with this; many die of it.'

'Die of the potter's thumb--what potter?'

Her broad face broadened still more into a smile. 'The Huzoor doth not understand! Lo! when the potter works on the clay, his hand slips sometimes in the moulding. It leaves a furrow, so,'--her brown finger, set with tarnished silver rings, traced a girdle round the baby's naked breast--'then in the firing the pot cracks. Cracks like these,'--here the finger pointed to the sherds among which she sate,--'so when children are born as this one, we say 'tis the potter's thumb. Sometimes there is a mark,'--again the finger softly followed the line it had traced before--'this one had it clear when he came; sometimes none can see it, but 'tis there all the same, all the same. The potter's thumb has slipped; the pot will crack in the firing.'

Her voice took a cadence as if accustomed to the words.

'What *is* she saying?' interrupted George Keene impatiently. He was a middle-sized lad of twenty or thereabouts, powerfully made, with grey eyes and white teeth gleaming in an aquiline, sunburnt face.

'Something ghastly,' replied Dan. 'It always is so, you'll find, my dear boy, when you dip below the indifferent calm of these people. It's like deciphering a tombstone. But come on. We are due already at the World, the Flesh, and the

Devil's.' Then he paused, gave a short laugh, and flung out his hands in an impulsive gesture. 'By the Powers!' he went on, his face seeming to kindle with the fuel of his own fancy, 'it's gruesome entirely. This heap of dust they call Hodinuggur, as they call thousands of such human ant-hills all over India; for wherever when you dig, the bricks grow bigger and bigger till, *hocus pocus*! they vanish in the dust from which God made man--*that* is Hodinuggur; the old city, it means. What city? who knows! Then in the corner of this particular one a survival'--his eager hand pointed to the pile of buildings before them--'not of those old days, for no Moghul in India dates beyond Timoor, and these people are Moghuls; but of that Mohammedan civilisation which overwhelmed the older one, just as we in our turn are overwhelming the Moghul--who in the meantime bullies the people by virtue of an Englishman's signature on a piece of parchment----'

'But I suppose we found the Diwân in possession when we annexed----' began George stolidly.

Dan scorned the interruption and the common-sense. 'Oh, 'tis queer, looked at any way. A mound of sherds and dust higher than the gateway of the palace. I'll go bail that reed hut yonder on the top is higher than old Zubr-ul-Zamân's tower. He lives up there winter and summer, does the old Diwân, looking out over his world and the strength of it--that's what his name means, you know. His son, Khush-hâl Beg, lives in the next storey. A Jack Falstaff of a man--that's why I call him the Flesh. Then Dalel, the Devil, roams about seeking whom he may devour.'

'A charming trio; and what part have I to play in the drama?' asked George with a laugh.

'St. George, of course.'

The lad laughed louder. 'So I am in baptism. George for short. Born on the saint's day--father a parson--fire away, old chap--don't let me pull Pegasus.'

'Sure! my dear boy, and aren't you sent to fight them all? Sent into this wilderness of a place to be tempted----'

'Oh, don't talk rot, Fitzgerald! I suppose you mean about the sluice-gate; but it's sheer folly.'

'Is it? My two last subordinates didn't find it so. Perhaps the potter's thumb had slipped over their honesty. So the authorities gave me you--a real white man--and said it was my last chance. Think of that now, my boy, and be careful.'

George Keene frowned perceptibly.

'That's a fine old gateway,' he said, to change the subject. As they approached it a flock of iridescent pigeons rocketed from the dark niches to circle and flash against the sky. It was a great square block of a building cut through by one high arch of shadow, and showing the length of the tunnel in the smallness of the sunlit arch beyond. On the worn brick causeway, as they entered, half in the sunshine, half in shade, lay the scattered petals of a pomegranate blossom which some passer-by had flung aside.

'By Jove, what a colour!' said Fitzgerald: 'like drops of blood.'

George Keene frowned again. 'If I had your diseased imagination I'd engage lodgings in Bedlam. Seriously, I mean it. Fellows like you are get rid of it in words--all froth and fuss; but if that sort of thing ever got a real grip on me--

Hullo! what's that?' He flushed through his tan in sheer vexation at his own start. From the deep recesses, which on either side of the causeway lost themselves in shadow, came a clash as of silver bells, and something through the arches showed white yet shadowy; something of exceeding grace, salaaming to the *sahib-logue*; something sending the scent of jasmine flowers into the hot air.

'That is Chândni,' said Dan, passing on regardless of the salutation, 'she generally sits here.'

George, imitating his companion, felt the thrill still in his veins. 'Chândni!' he echoed, 'that means silvery, doesn't it?'

'Moonshine also. They call her Chândni-rât or Moonlit-night as a rule. If tales be true, there is a good deal of the night about her. She and Dalel--but here he comes, innocently, from a side door. The Devil loves moonshiny nights.'

The figure approaching them was not outwardly of diabolic mould, being altogether too insignificant. The oval face was barely shadowed by a thin beard curling in an oiled tuft on either side of the retreating chin, and the only Mephistophelian feature was the narrow line of moustache waxed upwards towards the eyes. The dress was nondescript to absurdity. A biretta-shaped Moghul cap, heavy with church embroidery, sate jauntily on the long greasy hair; a blue velvet shooting-coat, cut in Western fashion, was worn over baggy, white cotton drawers, and these again were tucked away into sportsmanlike leather gaiters, ending in striped socks and patent leather highlows. Such was Mirza Dalel Beg, the Diwân's grandson. Behind him came lesser bloods of the same type: one with a falcon

on his wrist; all with curious eyes for George Keene, the new-comer.

'Hullo, Dalel sahib!' cried Dan in English. 'Keene, let me introduce you in form to his Highness.'

The Mirza thrust out a small, cold, clammy hand; but thereinafter relapsed into such absolute inaction, that George found no little difficulty in finishing the ceremony.

'Ana, I see!' said his Highness jerkily, in a voice many tones too low for his chest measurement. 'Glad to see you, Keene. You shoot, I lend you gun or rifle. You hawk, we go hawk together. You hunt, you use my crocks. Come, see my stable.'

Dan's eyebrows went up expressively. 'Don't tempt him to-day, Mirza sahib,' he interrupted gravely. 'We are already due at the State audience with your grandfather. Aren't you to be there as heir-presumptive?'

Dalel crackled with a high-toned laugh which did not match his voice. 'Bosh! My gov'nor is there in swagger dress. He likes. I am different. Good-bye, Keene. You must come often, and we will go shoot, hunt, polo, billiard, and be jolly. Ta, ta! I go to stables.'

The two Englishmen walked on in silence for a while. Then George Keene looked at his companion with a queer smile.

'So, that's the Devil?--that--that heterogeneous bounder----'

'Heterogeneous bounder is good--parlous good,' replied Dan, still gravely; 'but here is our reception party, so, for heaven's sake, look dignified, and don't shake hands, mind,

unless they offer to do so. They know their own rank, you see; you don't know yours--as yet.'

The lad, as he obeyed orders, felt that he knew very little of anything in India; the fact being evident in the surprise with which he noted the squalid appearance of all things, save the ruinous masonry; even of the state-room where, on a cane-bottomed chair, set on a filthy striped carpet, a mountain of flesh awaited them. It did not need his companion's whisper to make him understand that this must be the heir-apparent Khush-hâl Beg, for the fat man, coming forward to the appointed stripe--thus far and no further--held out his hand.

'The Huzoor is young,' he wheezed in a stately dignified voice. 'But youth is a great gift. With it even the desert need not be dull. 'Tis only as we grow older----' He paused and crossed his hands over his fat stomach with a sigh, as if to him the only consolation for age lay there. Dan shot one of his almost articulate looks at his companion as they passed on to a narrow stone stair where there was barely room for single-file order up the steep steps. Up and up it went seemingly in the thickness of the wall, with little loopholes sending a faint light at the turns; up and up, breathlessly, till the party emerged on the roof of the Diwân's tower, where, in a pavilion set round with arched arcades, they found the old man himself, backed by a semi-circle of shabby retainers, whose gay clothes showed tawdry in the pitiless sunlight.

Yet Dan's whisper of 'the World' provoked no smile in his companion, for there was nothing to smile at in Zubr-ul-Zamân, old and shrunken as he was. So old that those steep

stairs cut him off from his kind; so old that his chin lay upon his breast, his palms upon his knees, as though both head and hands were weary of the world. What his heart thought of his ninety and odd years of life none knew. None could even guess, for the simple reason that Zubr-ul-Zamân had never showed that he possessed a heart. Of brains and skill he had no lack even now; but of pity, love, tenderness, only this was certain, that he had never sought them even in others. Yet the English boy had eyes only for that wrinkled, indifferent face, while Dan Fitzgerald, seated on one of the two cane-bottomed chairs set opposite the Diwân's red velvet one, explained in set terms why George came to be seated in the other. Not a pleasant tale altogether, told as it was with official boldness of expression. Briefly, the sluice-gate of the canal had been opened too often, and Government did not intend it to occur again.

When he ceased, the Diwân raised his head slowly, and George felt an odd thrill at his first sight at those luminous dark eyes; a thrill which continued as, at a sign from the old man, the court rhetorician standing surcharged with eloquence at the Diwân's right hand, burst into a stream of polished Persian periods which, hitting the keynote of the empty pavilion, roused a murmurous echo in its arcades. It reminded George of the general confession in his father's church on a week-day when the choir was absent; one certain note followed by faint efforts after repentance. The fancy, indeed, clung closer to facts than his ignorance of the language allowed him to perceive, as the speech dealt chiefly in regrets for the untoward events in the past which had made it incumbent on '*Gee Uff Keene sahib bahâdur*' to

languish in the wilderness of Hodinuggur, though doubtless the presence of the said '*Gee Uff Keene sahib bahâdur*' would cause that desert to blossom like a rose, despite the want of water. These reiterations of his own name made George feel a sense of unknown responsibility, as of a baby at its own christening. He looked anxiously at Dan, his sponsor, but the latter was now conversing with the Diwân in the usual explosive sentences followed by the decorous silences due to dignity, while the attendants brought forward divers round brass trays covered with Manchester pocket-handkerchiefs and laid them at the visitors' feet. George's share consisted of three, one containing dried fruits and sugar, one of various rich cloths topped by a coarse white muslin *pugree*, the third conglomerate. A French clock, with Venus Anadyomene in alabaster, some pantomime jewelry, a green glass tumbler, a tin of preserved beetroot, a lacquered tray with the motto 'for a good boy,' and various other odds and ends. Among them a small blue earthenware pot. Was it blue after all, or did a gold shimmer suggest a pattern beneath the glaze? A queer, quaint shape, dumpy, yet graceful. That broad, straight ring around it should have marred its curves but failed to do so; strange! how these people had the knack of running counter to recognised rules, and yet---- Here George was recalled to the present by Dan whispering--

'Take it, man! Take it!'

Looking round he saw the latter removing something from a tray, and his own head being full of the blue pot, his hand naturally went out towards it.

'No! no!' continued Dan, in the same voice, 'the *pugree*.'

'But I've got one already!'

The instinctive greed of the reply made his companion smile as he explained that the *pugree* was put there on purpose. But, as he spoke, the Diwân signed to an attendant who stepping forward, transferred the blue pot to the tray of dried fruits.

'It is nothing,' came the courteous voice, setting aside all disclaimers; 'our potter makes them.'

'I did not know they could put such a good glaze on nowadays,' remarked Fitzgerald, yielding the point. 'A first-rate piece of work indeed; does the man live here?'

Khush-hâl Beg turned to the speaker breathlessly. 'He is crazy, Huzoor. The Lord destroyed his reason by an accident. The old wall fell on his house one night and killed his daughter. Since then he lives away, where naught can fall, like the crazy one he is.'

The stress and hurry of the speech were evident, even though the fat man was still suffering from the stairs.

'Thank the Lord! that's over,' said Dan piously, when the last diminishing tail of escort left them with but one orderly to carry the spoil. 'I ought to have warned you about the *pugree*--but there! you might have done worse--the French clock, for instance. Come! let's strike home across the mound. I want to show you a dodge of mine on the canal cut.'

He plunged headlong, after his wont, into professional matters till even George, fresh from college technicalities, could scarcely follow him, and found himself wondering why a man of such vast capacity should have succeeded so indifferently; for Dan Fitzgerald was not a *persona grâta* at

headquarters. To be that, a subordinate often has to conceal his own talents, and this man could not even conceal his faults. Some folk are so self-contained that a burden of blame finds no balance on their shoulders; others are so hospitable that they serve as hold-alls both for friends and foes; and there was plenty of room both for praise and blame in Dan Fitzgerald's excitable Celtic nature.

'What's that?' cried George suddenly. With the best intentions his attention had wandered, for everything in that circle of dun-coloured horizon domed with blue was new to him. Dan paused, listening. An odd rhythmic hum came from the highest hut, which was separated from the others by palisades of plaited tiger-grass shining in the afternoon light like a diaper of gold.

'The potter's wheel!' he cried, his face changing indescribably in an instant. 'Come on, Keene, and let us see the man who made your first bribe!'

He gave no time for reply, but turning at right angles through a gap threaded his way past piles of pots and sherds until he ran the sound to earth. Literally to earth--a circle of the solid earth spinning dizzily in front of a man buried to his waist. At least so it seemed at first to George Keene's ignorance of potters and their wheels. A circle, dazzling at its outer edge, clearer at the centre where something beneath a steady curved hand shot up, and bulged; then, as the whirr slackened, sank into a bomb of clay.

'Salaam alaikoom!' came a pleasant voice as the worker sat back in his seat-hole so as to ease his feet. He was a mild-faced old gentleman with nothing remarkable about

him save a pair of shifty eyes--the light hazel eyes seen so rarely in a native's face.

'Salaam alaikoom,' returned Dan. 'The little sahib has never seen a wheel worked. Will you show him?'

'Wherefore not, Huzoor? The sahib could come to none better, seeing we of Hodinuggur have spun the wheel of life for years--for ages and ages and ages.'

The words blent with the rising cadence of the wheel as he leant forward to the task again. Faster and faster upon the wheel with a swaying motion. Only the potter's hand poised motionless above the whirring clay which showed--as children say--like a top asleep. Then suddenly came the turn of the potter's thumb, bringing a strange weird life with it. One protean curve after another swelling, sinking, shifting, falling. The eye could scarcely follow their swift birth and death, until the potter, sitting back once more, the slackening wheel disclosed the hollows and bosses.

'The clay is good,' he said, as if deprecating his own skill, 'and it fires well.'

'When the thumb does not slip,' put in Dan quietly. The potter turned to him in sudden interest.

'The Huzoor knows the sayings of the people, that is well; it is not often so. Yea! it slips--thus.' The wheel still span slowly, he shifted his hand almost imperceptibly and a deep furrow scored itself upon the biggest boss. 'So little does it,' he went on, 'a grit clinging to the skin--a wandering thought. It is Fate. Fuzl Elâhi, the potter, cannot help it.'

'Fuzl Elâhi? Then you are a Mohammedan?'

He shook his head. 'I am as my fathers were. The Moghuls call me so, the Hindus otherwise; but it means the

same. By the grace of God, potter of Hodinuggur since time began. Lo! my fathers and my children are in the clay. I dug a grave in the dust for the boy; the girl dug hers for herself. It was deep, Huzoor. I search for it always; in vain, in vain.' The wheel set up its rhythmic hum once more, but the hands lay idle.

'Poor old chap,' said Dan aside, 'I suppose he is thinking of the accident; but by the powers, Keene, it is a situation. Seated here on a pinnacle--a crazy irresponsible creator----'

'Ask him if he made the pot, please,' interrupted George brutally. 'If I could get a pair, I'd send them to the *mater*. Those things are always in pairs, you know.'

'Pairs! you intolerable Philistine! A potter's vessel trying to be matched before it's broken in pieces. Think of the tragedy--the humour of it.'

'Will you ask, or shall I?'

Fitzgerald grinned maliciously. 'You. I like to hear you stuttering.'

George smiled, rose, and taking the blue pot from the attendant's tray laid it on the potter's wheel.

'Did you make that?' he asked, in English. His meaning was palpable.

'No, Huzoor.'

'If you did not, who did?' he continued, his triumph mixed with anxiety for the future; but the old man's thoughts did duty for an answer.

'Without doubt my fathers made it; since it is an Ayôdhya pot.'

'Ayôdhya,' broke in Dan, 'that means old, Keene; you'll have to send it back. I half suspected it was valuable, from

that old fox's look. But he said it was made here, the sinner! Can you make pots like that, oh! Fuzl Elâhi?'

The old man smiled. 'None can give the glaze, Huzoor, there is a pattern in it, but none can catch the design. Even I know it not; that is the secret of Ayôdhya.'

'What is he saying? What is Ayôdhya?' asked George irritably.

'Same as Hodi--old; it means here the half-forgotten heroic age. Well, as you can't get a pair, we had best be moving. Salaam! potter-ji, and don't let your thumb slip too often in the future.'

'God send it hath not slipped too often in the past,' he replied, half to himself.

An hour afterwards the two Englishmen sat on the low parapet of the canal bridge looking out over a world-circle of dusty plain, treeless, featureless, save for the shadowy mound of Hodinuggur on one side, and on the other a red brick house dotted causelessly upon the sand. A world-circle split into halves by the great canal, which eastwards towards the invisible hills showed like a bar of silver; westwards towards the invisible sea like a flash of gold, at whose end the last beams of the setting sun hung like the star on a magician's wand.

'*Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink*,' murmured Dan Fitzgerald discontentedly. 'Upon my soul, it must be rough on them watching it all day long, and knowing that if they could only get *you* to open the sluice *they* would get rupees on rupees from the Rajah. That's how it stands, you see. It isn't so much for their own bit of land, but for the bribe. I sometimes wish the overflow cut had

been higher up, or lower down; but we had to protect the big embankment against abnormal floods. Confound the thing! what business has it to put hydraulic pressure on us all?'

'Don't feel it much as yet,' said George cheerfully, with his eyes on the palace, which was gaining an unreal beauty from the dust of ages. For the village cattle were homing to the thorn-set folds, and the cloud from their leisurely feet lay in a golden mist between the shadowed plain and the shadowed mound rising against the golden sky. A lingering shaft of light showed the white fretwork of the Diwân's tower clear against the pale purple of the potter's thatch beyond.

'Perhaps not. You will, though. The wilderness plays the dickens with civilisation sometimes.'

'Does it? I don't believe it will with mine. Not that sort. I haven't your imagination, your sensitiveness, your poetical----'

'Pull up,' said Dan, laughing. 'You'll come to my vices soon, and as I've pet names for most of them, I object to have them scientifically classified. But I wish I hadn't to leave you there.' He pointed distastefully to the red parallelogram of a house with the initials of the Public Works Department stamped on each brick like the broad arrow on a convict. 'It isn't fit for a youngster like you. But as it can't be helped, there's the key. For my sake don't let the World, the Flesh, or the Devil wheedle it out of you.'

'All right,' replied the boy, pocketing the Chubb. 'If you are engaged to be married, go and do it right off. Promotion in due course guaranteed.'

Dan Fitzgerald, looking down at the sliding water, was silent for a minute. 'You've hit the right nail on the head,' he said at last. 'That's why I'm anxious; but by the powers! your work is cut out for you if you are to keep me from getting into hot water.'

'It isn't the water that does it,' muttered George, as they strolled off to dinner, 'it's the spirits.'

That was the truth in more senses than one. George had been living with his superior officer for two months at headquarters, and his cool, clear head had noted the fascination which stimulants of all kinds had for Dan's excitable nature. But he had said nothing, after the manner of men. Therefore it came as a surprise even to himself when that evening something made him say hurriedly--

'Better not, Fitzgerald; you've a long ride before you.'

Dan, his hand on the whisky bottle, paused, surprised in his turn; but George seemed to feel that key in his pocket outline itself against the thumping of his heart.

'Are you afraid I won't leave you any?' asked the elder quickly. 'I'll send you a bottle by post, if that's it. Come! hands off, youngster; don't be a fool! That's enough.'

The angry red was not on his cheek only. It had spread to the boy's, as he stood back in a sudden flare of utterly unexpected dignity.

'Quite enough, Mr. Fitzgerald. 'I've been your guest for two months, I know; but you are mine now. This is my house, and that's my bottle. I'll trouble you to put it down.'

For an instant it seemed on its way to the speaker's head; then it was pushed aside scornfully; the next Dan held out his hand.

'Thanks. No one has taken that trouble for years. What made you do it?'

But the English boy's shame at his own impulsiveness was on George now, and he laughed uneasily. 'I--I believe it was that confounded key,' he began. Dan's smile was transfiguring.

'God bless the boy!' he cried, with the ring of tears and laughter in his rich brogue. 'So you're the Keeper of the Key of the King's conscience, are you? The saints protect you; for see! your sort don't know mine. We leave off the effort after virtue where you begin, and I spend more solid holiness in refusing a glass of sherry than you do in keeping all the Ten Commandments. Sure the sun's got into my head, and I must be off to the water cure.'

He was out of the room, out of the house, standing on the bridge abutment and stripping as for dear life before George caught him up breathlessly and asked if he were quite mad.

'Not yet!' came the joyous voice. 'I'm going to swim up stream till I'm beat, and come down with the current--an epitome of my life!'

The rapid Indian twilight had fallen into night, but the moon had risen, and the air was warm with tho first touch of spring which in Northern India treads close on the heels of the new year. Fitzgerald pausing for a second showed like a white statue on the buttress; then his curved body shot into the shadow with the cry--

'I come, Mother of All!'

Tristram's cry when he sprang to 'the sea's breast as to a mother's where his head might rest,' thought George,

watching with the vague anxiety inseparable from the disappearance of life beneath the water. Ah! there he was--safe; turning his head to call out 'Don't wait, please! Tell the syce to have the mare ready for me in half an hour.'

Yet George did wait, watching the arrowy ripple cleaving the steel-grey path which led straight up to the steel-grey sky where the stars hung sparkling. If, he thought, they were reflected in the still water ahead as they were in the still water below the bridge, Dan must feel as if he was swimming in the ether!

Decidedly, imagination was catching. George Keene was reminded of the fact again as he stood looking over to the mound of Hodinuggur, and listening to the last echo of the horse's hoofs bearing Dan away from the wilderness. There was a light in the Diwân's tower, another in the potter's hut. He wondered vaguely which was really the highest; then, to check such idle thoughts, began on the first duty of youth in a foreign land--home letters.

'Dear father,' he wrote fluently, 'I arrived at Hodinuggur, my headquarters, to-day. It is----'

Half an hour afterwards he tore up the sheet angrily and went to bed.

CHAPTER II

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It was band-night in the public gardens; mail night also; a combination of dancing and picture papers, ensuring a large attendance in the big hall, which had been built, gravely, as a memorial to some departed statesman. But now English girls hurried through its dim corridors to the ladies' dressing-room, intent on changing tennis shoes for dancing slippers. English women took possession of the comfortable nooks between the pillars where there was room for two. English boys lounged about the vestibule, finishing their cigars and waiting for the band to strike up. English men drifted to billiards and whist, or to their own special corner in the reading-room.

A weird-looking place even at noon was the big hall set round with paste and paper mementoes of the semi-historic festivals held beneath its high arched roof; with shields from the Prince of Wales' ball, flags from the Imperial installation, trophies from the welcome given to our soldiers after an arduous campaign. But seen now by the few lamps lit at one end it looked positively ghostly, as if it must be haunted by a thousand memories of dead men, and women, and children who had flitted across the kaleidoscope of Rajpore society. Up in the gallery the native band, after playing 'God save the Queen' to the Aryan brother outside, was tuning up for dance music. And by-and-bye a couple would come waltzing out of the shadows into the bright reflections of the polished floor, and waltz back again. Then three or four

couples, perhaps ten or a dozen; not more. Viewed from the other end, where the non-dancers sat in darkness, the scene looked like a dim reflection of something going on in another world.

And outside, under the rising moon, the builders of the hall trooped home to the packed highways and byways of the native city, full, no doubt, of that silent, evergreen wonder at the strange customs of the ruling race which is an integral part of native life; that ruling race which, with all its eccentricities, rules better than even the fabled Vicramiditya himself!

In the far corner of the inner reading-room a girl stood looking at the new number of the *Scientific American*, keeping a stern watch the while on the present possessor of the *Saturday Review*. A tennis bat lay on the table beside her, and her workmanlike flannels and tan shoes showed what her occupation had been. For the rest, a well-made, well-balanced girl, looking as if she walked well, rode well, danced well, and took an honest pride in doing so. Her face was chiefly remarkable for a pair of beautifully arched eyebrows, and her best point was undoubtedly the poise of her head with its closely plaited coif of hair.

A sort of snore followed by a thud, told that people were passing in and out through the swing-doors of the outer room. Here, however, as befitted the abode of more serious literature, all was peaceful; almost empty in fact, and its only other female occupant was a medical lady deep in the *Lancet*.

'Oh Gordon!' called a voice from the outer room, 'have you seen my daughter?'

'Miss Tweedie is here, sir,' replied the young man addressed. 'She has been for the last five minutes trying to make up her mind whether to go and dance, or brain Dr. Greenfell for keeping the *Saturday* so long.'

'Really, Mr. Gordon!' cried Rose Tweedie aghast. 'No indeed not--Dr. Greenfell! I didn't really--I mean I was of course, but I don't now--Oh, it's awfully good of you.' Then as the apologetic little doctor moved away, pausing to say a few words to a tall grey-haired man who was entering, she turned aggressively to the offender: 'Why did you say that, Mr. Gordon?'

'Why, Miss Tweedie? Because you insisted yesterday that women preferred the truth, even when it was rude. And it was true. I suppose, as your father wants you, I have no hope of this dance; and I'm engaged for all the others.'

Rose Tweedie's eyebrows went up. 'How lucky for you--I mean, of course, how unlucky for me.' Then she added in more conciliatory tones, 'I'm not dancing to-night; these shoes won't do.' She thrust out her shapely foot with the careless freedom of a child.

'I can see no fault,' he replied artificially, putting up his eye-glass, 'they appear to me quite perfect.'

'Your knowledge of women doesn't apparently extend to their understandings,' she retorted quickly, her voice, as usual when she was irritated, showing a trace of Scotch accent. 'Oh father! if you want me to come home, I'm ready.'

Colonel Tweedie hesitated. A single glance at him suggested that the late Mrs. Tweedie must have been a

women of strong individuality, or else that Rose had reverted to some ancestral type.

'Not, not exactly, my dear. I only--wanted to--er--speak to you.'

'Good-bye, Miss Tweedie,' said Lewis Gordon, taking the hint. 'Oh! by the way, sir, if your daughter will remember I'm a personal assistant, and excuse shop for an instant--Fitzgerald came back to-day from Hodinuggur.'

Rose Tweedie's face lit up. 'Did he say how Mr. Keene liked it?' she asked eagerly.

'I'm afraid not; but he can scarcely be expected to like the desert after--Rajpore. I shouldn't--under the circumstances. That is all, sir; except that he reports everything satisfactory, so far.'

The Colonel gave a little cough; it was his way of starting the official machine inside the social one. 'I hope--for Mr. Fitzgerald's sake it--it--er--may remain so. The past scandals have been a disgrace--er--to the Department.

'Not to him, though,' broke in Rose hotly. 'I think he is quite one of the nicest people I ever met.'

'And what is more, the ablest man we have in our service,' added Lewis Gordon heartily. The girl's face softened at his tone. If he would only speak like that always, instead of simpering and scraping!

'Well, father, what is it?' she asked when he had gone. The other readers had drifted away, and the medical lady looked as if even the last trump would not rouse her from the post-mortem she was perusing, so to all intents and purposes they were alone. Colonel Tweedie gave another

little cough; it was an unusual occurrence in private matters, and she repeated her question with quickened interest.

'I want you, my dear, to go and speak to--to Mrs. Boynton. I've--I've asked her to come into camp with us this time.'

'Why?'

Pages full of words would fail to give a better idea of Rose Tweedie's mental outlook than this simple interrogation. Briefly, she must have a reason, good, bad, or indifferent, for everything. Her father, being her father and knowing this, had several ready.

'Dacre's wife isn't strong enough to face the sand, and you must have a chaperon--I mean another lady--you never need a chaperon of course, my dear--but if anything happened--besides, we shall be very busy, and it will be lonely--I thought it better than leaving you at home--it isn't as if she were quite an outsider--she is Gordon's cousin, and he is my personal----'

'The widow of a cousin, you mean,' she interrupted with emphasis. 'A cousin he scarcely knew; and he never even saw *her* till he returned from furlough last year.'

'Didn't he, my dear?' said the Colonel feebly. 'Still, they are relations. Call each other by their Christian names, and----'

This time a laugh interrupted him; rather a hard laugh for a girl.

'What a number of cousins the Rajpore ladies must have!' she began.

'Not Mrs. Boynton, Rose; not Mrs. Boynton,' protested the Colonel with spirit.

'No, I admit it. She is perfectly lady-like. I don't really dislike her a bit.'

'Dislike! my dear Rose! who could dislike so--so----'

'I admit it again, father. She is charming. I catch myself watching her, just as if I were in love with her like all the nice men are.'

'Really, my dear Rose----'

'Well, dear, why not? She is perfectly sweet. Then she has such tact. Do you know she never allows an ungentlemanly man to fall in love with her? I often wonder how she manages it. It's awfully clever of her.' Rose, standing by the fire, shifted a log with her foot and the sparks flew upwards. 'Of course I would rather have had a girl; but I suppose it wouldn't have done. There! don't worry, dear! Go off to your whist. I'll settle it all.'

'My dear girl----'

She told him calmly that there was no need for gratitude, and Colonel James Tweedie, R.E., head of a great Department, slunk away abashed to the card-room. Rose was very fond of her father, though she understood him perfectly--after the manner of modern children; accepting him reasonably, with all his weaknesses, as the parent Providence had assigned to her. And why, if she would have him, should he not marry Mrs. Boynton? The mother, who had died when Rose was born, had been well remembered; the Colonel was still middle-aged, and when his daughter married might have long years of solitude before him. Would it be fair for her to object? It was another of Rose Tweedie's characteristics that this question came uppermost in her

dealings with both friends and foes. No! it would not be fair; there was no reason against it. None.

So she walked off calmly to the big hall, waiting to see Gwen Boynton's graceful figure--paired with some worthy partner, of course--come swaying out into the ring of light. But she was disappointed; for the very simple reason that the lady she sought was sitting with Lewis Gordon in the most comfortable corner in the whole building.

'Miss Tweedie!' said an eager voice behind her, as she stood instinctively marking the rhythm of the dance with one foot. 'Have you seen Mrs. Boynton? I can't find her anywhere.'

She turned gladly. It was Dan Fitzgerald, representing, as he always did, humanity at its handsomest. 'So you're back! No, Mr. Fitzgerald. She is not dancing, anyhow; but as those are the last bars, that is cold comfort. What a pity! when you came down to the hall on purpose.'

He flushed up like a girl; and she pointed to the gardenia in his button-hole.

'You don't go in for decoration except on state occasions,' she continued, 'and then you weren't at tennis. I always keep a look-out for you there; that back-handed return of yours from the line beats me. I've been trying it with the *chuprassie* bowling at me, but it didn't come off somehow. You must teach me when we are in camp.'

'Of course I will,' replied Dan cheerfully. Lewis Gordon would have simpered and said, 'Delighted, I'm sure.' The remembrance vexed Rose by its very appearance; as if it mattered what Gwen Boynton's cousin said or did. And the vexation accounted for the phrasing of her next words.

'Mr. Keene sent me a message, didn't he? No! How stupid of him! It was about his *Nature*. I was to have it, and he was to let me know what he wanted me to do with it.'

Dan's face, which had showed perplexity, cleared. 'Ah, it's the magazine you're meaning. Sure you puzzled me entirely, for it is not nature you want, Miss Tweedie, though, 'tis true, one can't have too much of a good thing.'

It was a distinct compliment, or meant to be one, but Rose listened to it gaily, and five minutes after, despite her shoes, was whirling in and out of the shadows, full of the keen enjoyment which dancing brings to some people.

Lewis Gordon, lounging lazily in his dark corner, noticed her with a certain irritated surprise. It was a more inconsequent, therefore a more womanly action than he expected in a girl who annoyed him by refusing to take either of the two places he assigned to women folk in his Kosmos. There were those of whom wives and mothers could be made discreetly, safely; and those who would be utterly spoilt by the commonplace process. He turned to his cousin feeling no such difficulty in regard to her classification. Yet in the dim light nothing could be seen save the outline of a small head, a huge fur boa, and long curves ending in a bronzed slipper catching the light beyond the shadow in which they sat.

'Shall we not dance?' he asked. 'It is the best waltz of the three. Then I could bring you some coffee and we could rest--on our laurels.'

'No, thanks. I was engaged to Mr. Fitzgerald for the last, and I must give him time to cool down.' The voice was sweet, refined, careless.