

***FLORA ANNIE
WEBSTER STEEL***



***THE MERCY
OF THE LORD***

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"God movesn--a--mystere'ras way
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Craddock was polishing the brass of his safety valve and singing the while at high pressure between set teeth: his choice of a ditty determined by one of his transitory lapses into conventional righteousness. The cause of which in the present instance being an equally transient admiration for a good little Eurasian girl fresh from her convent.

As the sun--which shines equally on the just and the unjust--flamed on his red face and glowed from his corn-coloured beard it seemed to me--waiting in the comparative coolth of the pointsman's mud-oven shelter till the one mail train of the day should appear and disappear, leaving the ribbon of rail which spanned the desert world to its horizon free for our passaging--that both he and his engine radiated heat: that they gave out--as the burning bush or the flaming swords of the paradise-protectors must have given out--a message of fiery warning that suited the words he sang:

"Eplants 'isfootsteps--inthesea."

Craddock punctuated the rhythm with an appropriate stop of shrill steam which ought to have startled me: but it did not, because my outward senses had suddenly become slaves to my memory. The desert was a garden full of cool fragrance which comes with the close of an Indian day, and the only sound to be heard in it was a glad young voice repeating these words:

"Oh! God of the Battle! Have mercy! Have mercy! Have mercy!"

"Bravo! young Bertram!" said someone--even those who scarcely knew whether Bertram were his Christian or his surname called him that--"Easy to see you're fresh from the Higher Standard."

Young Bertram smiled down on us from the plinth of the marble steps leading up to the marble summer house which stood in the centre of this Garden-of-Dead-Kings.

Posed there on his pedestal, holding orb-like in his raised right hand the battered bronze cannon ball whose inscription--roughly lettered in snaky spirals--he had just translated, young Bertram reminded me of the young Apollo.

"You bet," he answered, gaily. "But what does it mean, here on this blessed ball? Who knows the story?--for there is one, of course."

The company looked at me, partly because as a civilian such knowledge was expected of me; mostly because I was responsible for the invasion of this peaceful Eastern spot by a restless, curious horde of Westerns; my only excuse for the desecration being, that as the most despicable product of our Indian rule, a grass widower bound to entertain, I had naturally clutched at the novelty of a picnic supper and dance some few miles out of the station.

Perhaps, had I seen the garden first, I might have relented, but I took it on trust from my orderly, who assured me it held all things necessary for my salvation, including a marble floor on which a drugget could be stretched.

It held much more. There was in it an atmosphere--not all orange blossom and roses, though these drugged the senses--which to my mind made a touch of tragedy lurk even in our laughter.

Though, in sooth, we brought part of the tragedy with us: for a frontier war was on, and all the men and half the women present, knew that the route might come any moment.

Some few--I, as chief district officer, the colonel and his adjutant--were aware that it probably would come before morning: but ours were not the sober faces. Our plans were laid; all things, even the arrangements for the women and the children and the unfit-for-service, were cut and dried: but the certainty that someone must--as the phrase runs--take over documents, and the uncertainty as to who the unlucky beggar would be, lent care to a young heart or two.

Not, however, to young Bertram. As he stood questioning me with his frank blue eyes, even the white garments he had donned (because, he said, "It might be a beastly time before he wore decent togs again") told the same tale as his glad voice--the tale of that boundless hope which holds ever the greatest tragedy of life.

"Who is that pretty boy?" said a low soft voice at my elbow.

I did not answer the spoken question of the voice, but as I replied to the unspoken question of many eyes I was conscious that of all the many incongruous elements I had imported into that Eastern garden this Western woman who had appraised young Bertram's beauty was the most incongruous. It was not the Paris frock and hat, purchased

on the way out--she had only rejoined her husband the day before--which made her so. It was the woman inside them. I knew the type so well, and my soul rose in revolt that she should soil his youth with her approval.

"I've no doubt there are stories," I replied; "but I don't happen to know them. I'm as much a stranger here as you all are. So come! let us look round till it's dark enough to dance."

"Dark enough to sit out, he means," said someone to the Paris frock and hat, whereat there was a laugh, but not so general and not half so hearty as the one which greeted young Bertram's gravity as he replaced the cannon ball on the plinth with the profound remark:

"Something about a woman, you bet."

"Do introduce me!" pleaded the Paris frock and hat as the lad came down, bearing the brunt of chaff gallantly; but I pretended not to hear, though I knew such diplomacy was vain with women of her type--women whose refinement makes them shameless.

Yes! she was a strange anomaly in that garden, though, Heaven knows, it appealed frankly enough to the senses. So frankly that it absorbed even such meretricious Western additions as cosy corners and iced champagne--on tables laid for two--without encroaching a hair's--breadth on the inviolable spiritual kingdom of the ivory orange blossom, the silver jasmine stars, even the red hearts of the roses.

They were lighting up the lines of the cressets about the dancing floor when we began to reassemble, and as each star of light quivered into being, the misty unreal radiance grew around the fretted marble of the summer house until

arch and pilaster seemed to lose solidity, and the whole building, leaving its body behind in shining sleep, found freedom as a palace of dreams.

And there, as a foreground to its mystical beauty, was young Bertram dangling his long legs from the pedestal and nursing the battered old bronze ball on his lap as if it had been a baby.

"I've found out all about it," he said, cheerfully. "That chap"--he pointed to a figure below him--"told me a splendid yarn, and if you like,"--he turned to me--"as they haven't done lighting up yet, and we can't dance till they finish, he could tell it again. I could translate, you know, for those who can't understand."

The innocent pride made me smile, until the Paris frock said, "I shall be so grateful if you will, Mr. Bertram," in a tone of soft friendliness which proclaimed her success and my failure. Both, however, I recognised were inevitable when I remembered that she was the wife of the lad's captain, a silent, bullet-headed Briton of whom he chose to make a hero--as boys will of older men who are not worthy to unlatch their shoes.

The figure rose and salaamed. It was that of a professional snake charmer, who had evidently come in hopes of being allowed to exhibit his skill: for his flat basket of snakes, slung to a bambu yoke, lay beside him.

"And it *was* about a woman, as I said," continued young Bertram, with the same innocent pride. "She was of his tribe--the snaky tribe, and so, of course, he knows about it all."

I had my doubts--the man looked a cunning scoundrel--but there was an awkward five minutes to fill up, so chairs and cushions were requisitioned, and on them and the marble steps we circled round to listen: the Paris dress, I noticed, choosing the latter, close to the translator.

He performed his task admirably, catching not only the meaning of the words but the rhythm of the snake charmer's voice, and so quickly, too, that the message for the East, and for the West, seemed one; yet it seemed to come from neither of the speakers.

"'Oh, God of the Battle! have mercy, have mercy, have mercy!' Such was her prayer to the Bright One, and this is the tale of it:

"Straight was her soul as the saraph who tempted Eve--mother, but crooked her body as snakes that deal death in the darkness--crookt in her childhood--crookt in the siege of the town by a spent shot which struck her, asleep in her cradle (the ball that you nurse on your knee, sahib--they found it beside her--her crushed limbs caressing the foe that destroyed her).

"She grew in this garden, a cripple, but fair still of face, and twice cursed in such gifts of beauty all barren and bitter--so bitter she veiled it away, hiding loveliness, hatefulness, both, from the eyes of the others: a soul stricken sore ere the battle began, yet insatiate of life, insatiate of blessing and cursing, insatiate of power. And, look you! she gained it! Most strangely, for fluttering through thickets like birds that are wounded and dragging herself like a snake to the blossoms, she threaded the jasmine to necklets and pressed out the roses to perfume,

so giving to women uncrippled love-lures for the fathers of sons.

"Hid in the jasmine and screened by the trails of the roses, here, on this spot stood her chamber of charm for the secret distilling of *itr*, the silent repeating of ritual, the murmur of musical *mantras*.

"And none dare to enter since Death lurked unseen in the thickets, and serpents, her kinsmen, slid swift to the threshold to guard it, and watched with still eyes her command.

"'It was witchcraft,' they said, with a shudder, those fortunate women, yet came in the dusk for her charms!

"But she gave them not always, for years brought her wisdom. She learnt the love lore of the flowers, the close starry heart of the jasmine, the open red heart of the rose, told their dream of fair death through the ripening of seed, and her voice would grow bitter with scorn....

"'Go! find your own lures for your lovers--I work for the seed--for the harvest of men.'

"High perched on the wall of the city the balcony women waxed wroth. It was money to them till the cripple who fought them with flowers prevailed in the battle for life to the world.

"And Narghiza, the chief of them all, felt her youth on the wane....

"So, one night in the darkness, ere dawning, men crept to the garden where only the women might enter. Men, heated by wine and by lust, inflamed by the balcony lies--yea! the witch who wrought evil to all--who had killed Gulânâr in her

prime by a wasting--whose frown was a curse, must be reckoned with, killed, and her devilish chamber destroyed.

"But the sound of the rustling leaves as the snakes slid soft in the darkness made even the wine bibbers think, so that secret and soft as the snakes in the thickets they crept back to safety; till there--in the darkness, the fragrance of flowers, but one man remained, a man who grew old! Beautiful, tired of the life he had squandered, and reckless, yet angered because of the girl who had wasted to death--a girl he had paid for.

"'Cowards!' he said with a smile, and crept on in the dark. A rustle, but not of a snake! In the leaves a faint glimmer of white, and a voice--such a beautiful voice!

"'In this garden of women what seek you, my lord?'

"'I seek *you*, for your death.' But as swift as his hand with the dagger, around him there rose in a shimmering shelter the wide-hooded curves of the serpents, their still, watchful eyes giving out a cold gleaming that shone like a halo about her.

"'What harm have I done?' Such a beautiful voice! 'Come and see, if you will.'

"On his head fell the spent leaves of roses, the frail stars of jasmine were hers as she dragged herself on, and he followed through darkness and fragrance and flowers. The serpents lay thick on the threshold; she stayed them with this:

"'Wait, friends, till he touches me.'

"Opened the door and said scornfully:

"'There stands my charm.'

"The dim light of the cresset showed emptiness save for yon ball with its legend ('tis scratched, as you see, in the shape of a snake, sahib). She read it aloud, and then turned to him:

"'Yea! that is all! I appeal to the God of the Battle of Life, and I call unto Him to have mercy, have mercy, have mercy--What mercy He chooses----'

"Her voice sank to silence. The cresset's dim light showed the folds of her veiling to him, and to her showed his beauty of face as he knelt to her crippledom.

"'Mercy!--his voice was a whisper--'have mercy--the charm lies within--let me see it....'

"His hand sought the folds of her veil and, responsive, the shelter of snakes rose about her.

"'Wait, friends, till he touches me!'

"Swift, with quick fear in it, came the stern warning, and then there was silence.

"Oh! beautiful night with spent stars of the jasmine, spent leaves of the roses, spent life nigh to death 'mid its darkness, its fragrance.

"Oh! beautiful face, free of veiling with spent stars of eyes and spent rose leaves of lips.

"'My beloved!'

"Like a sigh came the whisper, and slowly as stars in the evening their eyes grew to brightness, and closer and closer their lips grew to kisses.

"'Wait, friends, till he touches me.'

"That was her order, and swift to the second, the snakes struck between them.

"Oh, beautiful death by the kiss of a lover! Oh, merciful poison of passion."

The sing-song ceased, and, as if to take its place, the first notes of the *Liebestraum* waltz sounded from the rose and jasmine thicket in which the band had been concealed.

"That's a mercy of the Lord, anyhow," laughed some young Philistine. "I thought they'd never stop, or the band begin!"

In a moment the listening circle had changed into an eager hurrying of couples towards the dancing floor.

But young Bertram still sat on the pilaster nursing the old bronze ball, his glad young face strangely sober.

"I think this is our dance," said the Paris frock, in a voice of icy allurement which positively rasped my nerves.

Young Bertram sprang to the ground hastily.

"I beg your pardon! By George, what's that?"

He had upset one of the snake charmer's flat baskets, and there was a general stampede as the occupants slid out.

"Don't be alarmed," I cried, "they always have their fangs drawn, and he will get them back in a moment."

Even as I spoke the hollow quavering of the charmer's gourd flute began, and three snakes stayed their flight to sit up on their tails and sway drowsily to the rhythm.

"There was a fourth one, wasn't there?" said young Bertram. "It slipped our way, didn't it?"

He spoke to the Paris frock, which had taken refuge on the opposite pilaster, so that the whole expanse of the wide marble steps now lay between them.

"Huzoor, no!" interrupted the owner of the snakes, hastily, "there were but three--there could only have been three--for see! my serpents obey me."

He was slipping the brutes back to prison again as he spoke, but I noticed his eyes were restless.

"Are you quite sure?" I asked.

He gave me a furtive glance, then carelessly held up a loathsome five-footer. "Cobras like these are very easily counted, Huzoor; besides, as the Presence said, they are all fangless."

The one whose jaws he as carelessly prized open certainly was, and I should have dismissed doubt had not young Bertram at that moment taken up the flute gourd, and with the gay remark, "Let me have a shot at it," commenced--out of fastidiousness as to the mouthpiece, no doubt--to blow into it upside down.

I never saw fear better expressed in any face than on the snake charmer's when he heard the indescribable sound which echoed out into the garden. It grew green as without the least ceremony he snatched the instrument away.

"The Presence must not do that--the snakes do not like strangers."

Young Bertram laughed, "Nor the noise, I expect! The beastly thing makes a worse row wrong side up than right--doesn't it?"

What the Paris frock replied I do not know, as they were already hurrying up to make the most of the remaining dance.

Not that there was any necessity for hurry to judge by the number of times I saw his white raiment and her fancy

frills floating round together during the next hour or so.

The Adjutant--a man I particularly disliked (possibly because he seemed to me the antithesis of young Bertram)--remarked on it also when he found me out seeking solitude in one of the latticed minarets.

"Going it!" he said, cynically. "He won't be quite such a young fool when he comes down from the hills."

I turned on him in absolute dismay. "The hills? but surely you're going on service?"

The Adjutant shrugged his shoulders. "Someone has to take over, and he'll soon console himself."

I felt I could have kicked him, and was glad that the "Roast Beef" called me to my duties as host.

They had laid the supper table where we had listened to the snake charmer's chant; somehow through all the laughter I seemed to hear that refrain going on: "Oh! God of the Battle! have mercy! have mercy! have mercy!"

What mercy would she show him? None. And what chance would he have in an atmosphere like that of Semoorie? None. Even the husband, whom rumour said was bullet-headed to some purpose, would be away.

We were very merry in spite, or perhaps because of, an insistent trend of thought towards impending change, and I was just about to propose the health of my guests with due discreet allusion to the still doubtful future when it was settled by the appearance of a telegraph peon.

In the instant hush which followed, I observed irrelevantly that our brief feasting had made a horrid mess of what not half an hour before had seemed food for the gods!

Then the Colonel looked up with a grim conscious smile which fitted ill with the fragrant lantern-lit garden behind him.

"The route has come, gentlemen, we start to-morrow at noon."

He checked a quick start to their feet on the part of some of the youngsters by addressing himself to me:

"But as everything has been cut and dry for some days we needn't spoil sport yet awhile. There's time for a dance or two."

"In that case I'll go on," I replied, "and with greater will than ever."

Somehow it never struck me what was likely to happen, seeing that young Bertram was junior subaltern and in addition the pride of his fellows, until I heard the calls for "our speaker" to return thanks. He had been sitting, of course, next to the Paris frock, and beside him had been the Adjutant, looking, I had noticed, as if he thought he ought to be in young Bertram's place. I wish to God he had been.

They both rose at the same moment; the Adjutant to work, no doubt--for, pushing his chair back, he left the table; young Bertram to his task of responding.

I saw at once that he knew his fate. I think he had that instant been told of it by the Adjutant: and perhaps in a way it was wiser and kinder to tell him before--so to speak--he gave himself away.

He stood for an appreciable time as if dazed, then pulling himself together, spoke steadily, if a trifle artificially.

"Mr. Commissioner, Ladies, and Gentlemen! I thought a minute ago that I was the last person to return thanks for

our host's regrets and good wishes. I know now that I am really the only person in the regiment who could do it honestly; because I am the only person who can sympathise with him thoroughly--who can, like he does, regret the regiment's departure, and--and at the same time give it God-speed, while I--I----"

He paused, and suddenly the strenuous effort after conventional banalities left his young face free to show its grief--almost its anger.

"It's no use my trying to talk bosh," he broke out, and swept away by realities: "As you know, I'd give everything not to say God-speed, but I suppose I must."

And then a sudden remembrance seemed to come to him, he turned in swift impulse, his face alight, leapt to the pedestal behind him, and there he was again with that blessed battered old ball in his raised right hand.

"And I don't think I can do it better than this does it. This---" his voice had the notes of life's divine tragedy of hope in it--"fits us all--fits everything!--And so," his eyes sought mine, "we thank you, sir, for all and everything, and wish that the God of the Battle may have mercy all round."

For a second he stood there, almost triumphant, beautiful as a god, below him the guttering candles and disorder of the supper table, above him the stars of heaven: then, with a light laugh, he was calling for the band to begin and heading the hurried return to the dancing floor.

As he passed me, gallant and gay, I heard the Paris frock quote in a consoling whisper, "They also serve who only stand and wait."

The grateful admiration of his eyes told the delicacy of her art. I realised this again when shortly after I had an opportunity for one word of consolation also.

"She said that, too," he replied, his voice trembling a little. "She's been awfully good to me, you know--but so you all are--and I daresay it is all right."

I knew that to be impossible, but I resolved to do my level best to protect him.

Then my duties claimed me. Despite the Colonel's coolness, the party began to drift away to preparations, their measure of responsibility shown by the order of their going, until only a dozen or so of lighthearted youngsters were left for another and yet another waltz, the prime instigator of delay being, of course, young Bertram.

I never saw the lad look better. An almost reckless vitality seemed to radiate from and invade the still scented peace of the whole garden.

I found myself trying to evade it by wandering off to the furthest, stillest corner, where I could smoke in peace till called on finally to say good-night--or good-morning--to my guests.

I must have fallen asleep in one of the latticed minarets, and slept long, for when I woke a grey radiance was in the sky that showed above the scented orange trees. Dawn was breaking, the garden held no sound save a faint rustle as of leaves. And not a sign remained of Western intrusion. The swiftness of Indian service had taken away as it had brought. As I made my way to where we had danced and supped, the immediate past seemed a dream, and I strained

my eyes into the starred shadows of the jasmine thicket half expecting to see a white veil creeping like a snake.

What was that? I had no time to find fancy or fact--my eyes had caught sight of something unmistakable at the foot of the marble pedestal.

It was young Bertram.

He was lying as if asleep, his cheek caressing the battered bronze ball that he had encircled with his arms.

His face turned up to the stars showed nothing but content.

* * * * *

He must have stayed on after the others had gone, probably to think things out--the legend of appeal must have drawn him back to the very spot where the snake charmer's basket had been upset--like it had to me, the fragrant peace must have brought to his weariness sleep.

For the rest. Had there really been a fourth snake? Was it true that serpents always revenged themselves for wrong charming? Or were those two faint blood spots on the rose leaves of young Bertram's lips

* * * * *

"An 'E' willmakeit--plain."

Craddock's rolling baritone mingled with a shriek of steam welcoming a swift speck on the horizon.

With a roar and a rush it was on us, past us.

"Ef that 'ymn 'ad bin wrote these times, sir," remarked Craddock blandly, as he turned on steam, "the h'author

might 'ave put in a H'engin. There ain't anythin' more mysterious in its goin's on--except per'aps wimmen. I'd ruther trust for grace to the mercy o' the Lord than to them any day."

SALT DUTY

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I

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"Lo! nigh on fifty years have passed since that dark night; just such a night as this, O! Children-of-the-Master! and yet remembering the sudden yell of death which rose upon the still air--just such an air as this, hot and still.... Nay! fear not, Children-of-the-Master! since I, Imân (the faithful one so named and natured), watch, as I watched then ... and yet, I say, the hair upon my head which then grew thick and now is bald, the down upon my skin which then was bloom and now is stubble, starts up even as I started to my feet at that dread cry, and catching Sonny-*baba* in my arms fled to the safer shadows of the garden. And the child slept...."

The voice, declamatory yet monotonous, paused as if the speaker listened.

"It is always so with the Master-Children," it went on, tentatively, "they sleep...."

The second and longer pause which ensued allowed soft breathings to be heard from the darkness, even, unmistakable, and when the voice continued something of the vainglorious tone of the *raconteur* had been replaced by a note of resignation.

"And wherefore not, my friends, seeing that as masters they know no fear?"

Wherefore, indeed?

Imân Khân, whilom major-domo to many sahibs of high degree, now in his old age factotum to the Eurasian widow and children of a conservancy overseer, asked himself the question boldly. Yet the heart which beat beneath the coarse white muslin coatee starched to crackle-point in the effort to conceal the poorness of its quality, felt a vague dissatisfaction.

In God's truth the memory of the great Mutiny still sent his old blood shivering through his veins, and some of the tribe of black-and-tan boys who slept around him in the darkness were surely now old enough to thrill, helplessly responsive, to the triumphal threnody of their race?

Yet it was not so. The tale, on the contrary, was a sure sleep-compeller; indeed, he was never able to reach his own particular contribution to the sum total of heroism before sleep came--except in his own dreams! *There* he remembered, as he remembered so many things. How to decorate a ham, for instance--though it was an abomination

to the Lord!--how to ice champagne--though that also was damnable!--when to say "Not at home," or dismiss a guest by announcing the carriage-- though these were foreign to him, soul and body.

Out there, beyond the skimp verandah, amid the native cots set in the dusky darkness in hopes of a breath of fresher air, old Imân's imagination ran riot in etiquette.

And yet the faint white glimmer of the Grand Trunk Road which showed beyond the cots was not straighter, more unswerving than the *khânsâman's* creed as to the correct card to play in each and every circumstance of domestic life.

His present mistress, a worthy soul of the most doubtful Portuguese descent, knew this to her cost. It was a relief, in fact, for her to get away at times from his determination, for instance, to have what he called "sikkens" for dinner. But then she did not divide her world into the sheep who always had a savoury second course in their menu, and the goats who did not. To him it was the crux of social position.

So, an opportunity of escape having arisen in the mortal illness of a distant relation, she had gone off for a weeks holiday full of tears and determination, while away, to eat as much sweet stuff as she chose, leaving Imân Khân in charge of the quaint little bastion of the half-ruined caravanserai in which she was allowed free quarters in addition to her pension.

He was relieved also. He had, in truth, a profound contempt for her; but as this was palpably the wrong game, he covered his disapproval with an inflexible respect which allowed no deviation from duty on either side. Yet it was a

hard task to keep the household straight. Sometimes even Imân's solid belief in custom as all-sufficing wavered, and he half regretted having refused the offers of easier services made him by rich natives anxious to ape the manner of the alien. But it was only for a moment. The claims of the white blood he had served all his life, as his forbears had before him, were paramount, and whatever his faults, the late *E-stink Sahib*, conservancy overseer, had been white--or nearly so! Did not his name prove it? Had not *Warm E-stink Sahib* (Warren Hastings) left a reputation behind him in India for all time? Yea! he had been a real master. The name was without equal in the land--save, perhaps, that which came from the great conqueror, *Jullunder* (Alexander).

Undoubtedly, *E-stink Sahib* had been white; so it was a pity the children took so much after their mother; more and more so, indeed, since the baby girl born after her father's death was the darkest of the batch. It was as if the white blood had run out in consequence of the constant calls upon it. For Elflida Norma, the eldest girl--they all had fine names except the black baby, whom that incompetent widow had called Lily--was....

Ah! what was not Elflida Norma? The old man, drowsing in the darkness after a hard day of decorum, wandered off still more dreamily at the thought of his darling. *She* did not sleep out on the edge of the high road. Her sixteen years demanded other things. Ah! so many things. Yet the Incompetent one could perceive no difference between the claims of the real Miss-*Sahiba*--that is, *E-stink Sahib's* own daughter by a previous wife--and those of the girl-brat she herself had brought to him by a previous husband, and

whom she had cheerfully married off to a black man with a sahib's hat! For this was Imân Khân's contemptuous classification of Xavier Castello, one of those unnecessarily dark Eurasians who even in the middle of the night are never to be seen without the huge pith hats, which they wear, apparently, as an effort at race distinction.

The Incompetent one was quite capable of carrying through a similar marriage for the Miss-*Sahiba*. Horrible thought to Imân; all the more horrible because he was powerless to provide a proper husband. He could insist on savouries for dinner; he could say "the door is shut" to undesirable young men; he could go so far in weddings as to provide a *suffer* (supper) and a wedding cake (here his wrinkles set into a smile), but only God could produce the husband, especially here in this mere black-man's town where sahibs lived not. Where sahibs did not even seek a meal or a night's rest in these evil days when they were whisked hither and thither by rail trains instead of going decently by road.

Through the darkness his dim eyes sought the opposite bastion of the serai. In the olden days any moment might have brought someone....

But those days were past. It would need a miracle now to bring a sahib out of a post carriage to claim accommodation there. Yea! a real heaven-sent car must come.

Still, God was powerful. If he chose to send one, there might be a real wedding--such a wedding as--there had been--when--he....

So, tired out, Imân was once more in his dreams decorating hams, icing champagne, and giving himself away

in the intricacies of sugar-piping.

When he woke, it was with a sense that he had somehow neglected his duty. But no! In the hot dry darkness there was silence and sleep. Even Lily-*baba* had her due share of Horatio Menelaus' bed. He rose, and crept with noiseless bare feet to peep in through the screens of Elflida Norma's tiny scrap of a room that was tacked on to the one decent-sized circular apartment in the bastion, like a barnacle to a limpet. One glance, even by the dim light of the cotton wick set in a scum of oil floating on a tumbler of water, showed him that she was no longer where an hour or two before he had left her safe.

Without a pause he crept on across the room and looked through the door at its opposite end, which gave on the arcaded square of the serai.

All was still. Here and there among the ruined arches a twinkling light told of some wayfarer late come, and from the shadows a mixed bubbling of hookahs and camels could be heard drowsily.

She was not there, however, as he had found her sometimes, listening to a bard or wandering juggler; for she was not as the others, tame as cows, but rather as the birds, wild and flighty. So he passed on, out through the massive doorway, built by dead kings, and stood once more on the white gleam of the road, listening. From far down it, nearer the town, came the unmelodious hee-haw of a concertina played regardless of its keys.

"Hee, hee, haw! Haw, hee, hee!"

His old ear knew the rhythm. That was the dance in which the sahib-logue kicked and stamped and laughed.

This was Julia Castello's doing. There was a "nautch" among the black people with the sahib's hats, and the Miss-*Sahiba*--his Miss-*Sahiba*--had been lured to it!

Once more, without a pause, the instinct as to the right thing to do coming to him with certainty, he turned aside to his cook-room, and, lighting a hurricane lantern, began to rummage in a battered tin box, which, bespattered still with such labels as "Wanted on the Voyage," proclaimed itself a perquisite from some past services.

So, ten minutes afterwards, a starched simulacrum of what had once been a Chief Commissioner's butler (even to a tarnished silver badge in the orthodox headgear shaped like a big pith quoit) appeared in the verandah of Mrs. Castello's house, and, pointing with dignity to the glimmer of a hurricane lantern in the dusty darkness by the gate, said, as he produced a moth-eaten cashmere opera-cloak trimmed with moulting swansdown:

"As per previous order, the Miss-*Sahiba*'s ayah hath appeared for her mistress, with this slave as escort."

Elflida Norma, a dancing incarnation of pure mischief, looked round angrily on the burst of noisy laughter which followed, and the pausing stamp of her foot was not warranted by the polka.

"Why you laugh?" she cried, passionately. "He is my servant--he belongs to our place."

Then, turning to the deferential figure, her tone changed, and she drew herself up to the full of her small height.

"Nikul jao!" she said, superbly; which, being interpreted, is the opprobrious form of "get you gone."

The old man's instinct had told him aright. There, amid that company, the girl in the white muslin she had surreptitiously pinned into the semblance of a ball dress, her big blue eyes matching the tight string of big blue beads about her slender throat, showed herself apart absolutely, despite her dark hair and 'almost sallow complexion.

"The Huzoor has forgotten the time," said Imân, imperturbably; "it is just twelve o'clock, and *Sin-an-hella* dances of this description"--here he looked round at the squalid preparations for supper with superlative scorn--"always close at midnight."

There was something so almost appalling in the answering certainty of his tone regarding Cinderellas, that even Mrs. Castello hesitated, looking round helplessly at her guests.

"In addition," added the old man, following up the impression, "is not the night Saturday? and even in the great *Lat-Sahib's* house, where I have served, was there no nautch on Saturdays--excepting *Sin-an-hellas*."

He yielded the last point graciously, but the concession was even more confounding to Mrs. Castello than his previous claim. Besides, old Imân's darkling allusion to service with a Governor-General was a well-known danger-signal to the whole Hastings family, including Elflida Norma, who now hesitated palpably.

"I t'ought you more wise," insinuated her partner, who had actually laid aside his hat for the polka, "than to have such a worn-out poor fellow to your place. Pay no heed to him, Miss 'Astin', and polk again once more."

Elflida drew herself away from his encircling arm haughtily.

"No, thanks," she drawled, her small head, with its short curls in air. "I am tired of polking--and he is a more better servant than your people have in your place, anyhow."

"But Elfie!" protested Mrs. Castello.

The girl interrupted her step-sister with an odd expression in her big blue eyes.

"It will be Sunday, as he says, Julia; besides, the princess always goes home first from a Cinderella, you know, because----"

"Because why?" inquired Mrs. Castello, fretfully; "that will be some bob-dash from the silly books she adores so much, Mr. Rosario."

Elflida stood for a moment smiling sweetly, as it were appraising all things she saw, from the greasy tablecloth on the supper table to old Imân's starched purity; from the cocoanut oil on the head of one admirer, to the tarnished silver sign of service on the head of the other.

"Because she was a princess, of course," she replied, demurely; and straightway stooped her white shoulders for the yoke of cashmere and swansdown with a dignity which froze even Mr. Rosario's remonstrance.

"Thank you," she said, loftily in the verandah, when he suggested escort; "but my ayah and my bearer are sufficient. Good-night."

So down the pathway, inches deep in dust, she walked sedately towards the glimmer of the lantern by the gate, followed deferentially by Imân. But only so far; for once within the spider's web halo round the barred light, she

sprang forward with a laugh. The next instant all was dark. Cimmerian darkness indeed to the old man as he struggled with the moulting swansdown and moth-eaten cashmere she had flung over his head.

"Miss-*Sahiba!* Miss-*baba!* *norty, norty* girl!" he cried after her, desperately, in his double capacity of escort and ayah. Then he consoled himself with the reflection that it was but a bare quarter of a mile to the serai along a straight deserted high road. Even a real Miss-Sahiba might go so far alone, unhurt; so, after pausing a moment from force of habit to re-light the lantern, he ambled after his charge as fast as his old legs could carry him. Suddenly he heard a noise such as he had never heard before close behind him. A horrid, panting noise, and then something between a bellow and a whistle. He turned, saw a red eye glaring at him, and the next instant the infernal monster darted past him, whirring, snorting. In pursuit, of course, of Elflida Norma!

What tyranny was here! What defiance of custom! Saw anyone ever the like?--on a decent metalled road--and only the ayah--God forgive him the lie!--wanting to make all things in order?

These confused, helpless thoughts ran swifter in the old man's mind that his legs carried his body, as he followed in pursuit of the monster. The lantern, swinging wildly, hindered such light as there might have been without it, but he knew the Thing was ahead of him, by the truly infernal smell it left behind it.

And then from the darkness ahead came a curiously familiar cry, "Hut, hut! (get out of the way). Oh, damn!"