

'CLOUDLESS AFTERNOON

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A Story

BY

P. G. DEVASHER

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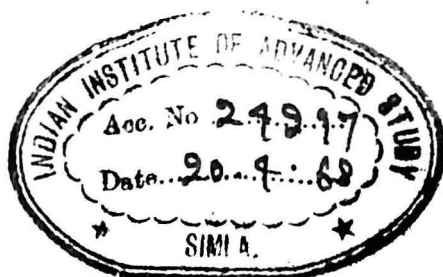
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Any attempt to relate the events narrated in it with real incidents, persons, atmosphere or environment would be futile. The theme turned up suddenly ; and was developed in the luxurious ease of a soldier's 'afternoon off'—a soft, mellow afternoon—in the course of which a whole lot of imagination ran away with a small, floating fragment of reverie.

P. G. D.

NEW DELHI,
January, 1949.

THE TRAIN

Travelling North by Military Mail from our Depot in South India some time ago I met two Officers on the train who, like me, were from Lahore. Had gone to College in Lahore, that is ; actually my own. One of them had been a contemporary of mine with whom I had had a nodding acquaintance ; the other had gone up altogether after our time and was a complete stranger. Neither of them was the type I particularly care for. But they were both pleasant chaps and, in the ordinary course, it should have been great fun meeting them. But it wasn't. For each of them suggested a line of inquiry into the days and doings of my youth and just then I wasn't any too anxious to rake up ashes that had lain dead and cold for years. This is how it was.

Both these men were younger than me, one of them by several years. The one I had known at college was a class-mate of the girl I had been very much in love with ; the other (it turned out) was related to a man who had married a distant cousin of mine, who also had strongly fascinated me at one time. Inevitably the names cropped up in the course of conversation at meals during our long three day journey. Meeting these two men like that was disturbing. This was not the first time I had met somebody who knew Ellen, (the girl at College) or the other one ; but on no

previous occasion had I been so influenced by the chance encounter. I could count many such ; in station clubs in various parts of India, on River Steamers on the Brahmaputra, in crowded and noisy Reinforcement Camp Messes in South East Asia, and in other places ; but at no time had the revival of an old memory meant much more than a laugh and a joke, and a drink, perhaps. Not so this time. The sands of the Southern shore gave place to the wild uplands of Central India ; these in turn were left behind for the arid plain of Hindustan ; the perpetual bread-and-butter puddings of the Madras and Southern Marhatta Railway were replaced by a just-as-definite breakfast of porridge-and-eggs-and bacon at Delhi, on the North Western Railway. But Ellen and the other girl persisted. They would not go.

I was a tired man on that journey. For only a week before I had travelled right down the length of India on transfer to the Madras Grenadiers Depot deep in the South from a station not far removed from the one I was heading for now. Having arrived there I had been handed an order posting me to Rurpindi and had left the place within thirty six hours of reporting. Normally I like travelling ; but this long double journey in the hot weather over a section that I had traversed over and over again was wearisome. Then on the train were these two chaps and with them turned up the two ladies in the case. And talking about them was not like sitting down and contemplating some soft

and beautiful square in the patchwork quilt of the past. Rather the whole thing was upsetting. Partly because both the 'affairs' had been such complete and utter fiascoes in which (for different reasons) I had made such an infernal fool of myself, partly because that was all so long so, and partly because I was so tired it was annoying running into those two fellows like that. It is doubtful if the college episode could claim the dignity of an 'affair'; and it is certain that the "other girl" was not, at any stage of the proceedings, even remotely aware of the depth of my feelings for her. Both had now been married for years, by all accounts happily. And yet they wouldn't let me alone. This disturbed mood lasted full two days and nights and then, somewhere on the dry and desolate plain of Hindustan, a possible solution began to emerge and take shape. Why not try and remember everything I could about them? Why not do that instead of trying to brush them off the mind when they only kept coming back? So pleased was I with hitting upon this interesting way out of the difficulty that I felt half relieved already. That morning, after breakfast, I shut myself up in my carriage, had a large block of ice put in to keep it cool, and deliberately selecting Ellen as the first in order of sequence, journeyed back two decades to recollect where and how I had first seen her.

We had been back in Lahore for about a month after the long vacations. One windy November afternoon, with the leaves of Autumn falling all around her, she had come sailing down

the College drive on her bicycle, her 'blue water' *Sari* floating behind her, her hair streaming down in twin plaits and that strange, far away look in her eyes with which I was to become so familiar. A friend and I, having finished classes for the day, were leaving for our lodgings. Coming out of a long, dark corridor into the sharp, cold afternoon we had run slap into her cycling down the deserted drive. So extraordinarily beautiful was she and yet so completely did she fit into that bleak wilderness of wind and withered leaves that, for an undergraduate student of literature, there was only one name for her that afternoon: "Flowering Wilderness". The next day inquiries were set afoot and the co-ordinates firmly fixed. She was Ellen something. (The 'something' doesn't matter). She was a year junior to us but her subjects were much the same as ours. Mine and Bill's, that is. (Bill was Bill Cox, an Anglo-Indian youth and my particular friend). It was further discovered that she was a very scholarly and shy young person who had recently transferred to us from a local Women's College, which was the reason we had not seen her before.

If ever there was a case of love at first sight I reckon it was this one. And if ever there was a case of love feeding on nothing at all and growing in the teeth of opposition that also was this one. And if ever there was a case of a young fellow hardly out of his teens, an undergraduate without a career yet in sight,

entrenching himself in the belief that he had hit upon the great romance of his life—and making an ass of himself into the bargain—again it was this one. From the very start the thing was a washout. I was mortally afraid of speaking to the lady. A lot of courage went into the first few words I had with her.

We had a literary society in the college known as the "Lake School", so called because it was devoted mostly to the study of literature of the Romantic Revival. It was very exclusive; membership was limited to Post Graduate students of literature and just a very few undergraduates, of whom I was one, and such members of the staff as were interested in literature. Actually, old Parkasham, the Head of English and of the society, never let the number of student members rise above twenty or twenty five. Owing to a combination of causes; new admissions, people shaking down in Hostels and lodgings after the summer holidays, and the like, these societies did not start functioning effectively till about the end of November. So when the notice for the first meeting of the society went up, together with a list of members for the academic year, I was not a little thrilled to find Ellen's name among them. As this was going to be the inaugural meeting of the session Professor Parkasham had invited his opposite number from another college to read a paper. What with the interest and expectation naturally attaching to an outside speaker, the interesting discussion that was expected to follow—that indeed

always did follow however poor the original lecture—and Ellen's presence, it promised to be a great meeting altogether. Here was a chance for me to break the ice and speak to her, or at any rate attract her attention by taking part in the discussion. Accordingly, on the day fixed for the meeting, I sat late in the Library reading up the subject. I was leaving the college all keyed up for the evening when, glancing at the notice board in passing, I discovered that owing to the indisposition of the speaker the meeting had been put off. I cycled back to the "White House" (where I lived) in mingled feelings of disappointment and relief. I do not know which was predominant. For though desperately wanting to, I was dreading speaking to her. I sat about reading or writing in my room till about six o'clock when it suddenly struck me that Ellen might have missed the notice. It was evidently put up late in the afternoon and quite possibly after she had gone home. Jumping on to my bicycle I rushed to the College and there, sure enough, was she standing outside the locked library door waiting for it to open. I cycled round the building once and at last taking courage in both my hands dismounted besides her and asked if she had come for the meeting of the Lake School.

"Yes", she replied simply. "I have come to tell you that it is off. Actually, there is a notice up". I managed to get the words out, with, I have no doubt, many 'punctuations' in speech. Saying "Thank you", she mounted her bicycle and glided out of the place leaving me standing

by my own bike in the dark, silent square, in the seventh heaven.

Shortly after this we had a sort of youth conference in the College under, I believe, the auspices of some International student organisation with which the Principal's wife was intimately connected. These conferences were a regular annual feature of University life in Lahore and were always very 'high-brow' affairs. The number of delegates was kept down to between fifty and sixty with a strong sprinkling of Professors from the various Colleges and Departments thrown in to give the proceedings respectability. The noisy and vocal kind of student 'leader' was there, no doubt, together with the more normal type, but care was taken to keep the scruffy sort out. We took ourselves very seriously. Each time some important problem supposed to be confronting youth and threatening to sweep it off its feet was deliberated upon. Some big shot set the ball rolling; a most consequential discussion followed, after which we split up into committees and sub-committees in which all sorts of relevant and irrelevant aspects of the matter were thrashed out. Eating together was an essential part of the proceedings. At the end came the plenary session in which the chairmen of the various committees presented their reports and after a good deal of discussion and attempts at summing up the President delivered valedictory speech and declared the conference (which had of course succeeded "beyond his expectations") to be closed—closed; that is, but

for the social evening in the Principal's House where we said good bye to each other and finally dispersed.

I can't remember ever contributing much to the deliberations of the conference but always went because I was invited to, and also because it was fashionable to do so.

Among the student delegates were sure to be a number of girls—most of them good looking—for in our College at least membership of the conference was a token of belonging to the 'intellectual set' to which all good looking girls, irrespective of talent, were supposed to belong. At all previous and subsequent conferences I was more or less a passive spectator, quietly watching from my place those ardent young ladies and gentlemen casting down the bad old world and building up a brave new one in its place. But this time it was different. Ellen was there. I managed to sit next to her at tea once and also served on the same sub-committee. I forget now what the main subject of the conference was but remember that our sub-committee dealt with religion. Now, those days there was a great deal of talk about the different religions being so many "labels" and the whole issue being between the "haves" and "have-nots". I, with my traditional upbringing, had (and have) no time for humbug of that sort and found myself sharply at variance with an important section of the house. And the part of the house I came into conflict with was its most vocal part and the part that had its

facts marshalled and ideas put neat and pat in the attractive language of the extensive "Yellow Cover" literature of the day. Therefore, I am afraid, I cut rather a sorry figure and failed to "impress" which, of course, had been my primary object. But I had the solid achievement of having poured out a cup of tea for Ellen. I had also been formally introduced to her. A very successful conference.

THE WHITE HOUSE

The Principal's Hall, where I lived in Lahore, was not a regular hostel of the College. It was a bungalow—or more correctly about half a dozen bungalows thrown about in a single compound that the authorities had taken on rent to house the overflow of boarders who could not find places in the regular hostels. It was situated on a lonely and rather sorry looking road on the outskirts of the city, in the direction in which Lahore had least developed. The main mission of that road seemed to be to provide access to the Muslim grave-yard which was adjacent to us and practically all around us. It certainly looked as if it had been metalled once, but when we knew it it was simply one long progression of potholes joined together by lengths of more or less level ground. A broad belt of finely ground dust hung permanently over the road, completely permeating every leaf and branch of the stunted trees and cactus plants that lined it. Opposite us, a little

to the right, was a large muddy pool where cattle could be seen drinking and bathing almost any time. In character the place belonged more to the country than to the town of which it was a part. It wasn't exactly the line where the town ended and the country began. Rather it was a salient of the country jutting into the town. Our road formed one side of it. It began at the "House of the Four Towers" a couple of hundred yards down and ended on the far side of the graves, near old Dr. Parkasham's house.

Partly because it was so far out, partly because of the peculiar personality of its environment, and partly because most of those who originally came to it were "throw outs" from the proper Halls of Residence, the Principal's Hall had a very definite atmosphere of its own. (When it was first taken, seeing that it was so far away, the Principal thought he should, and in fact did, take a special interest in the place. Hence the name). There was such a charm and spell about the place that once you went to live there you never came out of it. You returned to it year after year. You never even thought of living in the College. There was a friendliness and comradeship about the Principal's Hall difficult to describe but of which one was conscious all the time. That is not to say that everybody knew everybody else by his Christian name. Far from it. For within the hostel itself there was a very pronounced "bungalow feeling." For instance we of the White House—so called because its outside had apparently once been washed white.

—thought we were something special. Similarly the residents of the Double Decker at the back exchanged meaning glances among themselves when they passed us on the road. But one always felt that one was among friends. The grounds were large, dusty, and badly tended, with buildings and out houses stuck haphazardly all over the place. During winter, after dark, it required considerable will power to visit somebody in a different house. Such visits took place rarely and then only within well defined circles. The common room was not particularly popular and the Dining Room was hardly ever used. A quiet place, but good and friendly.

Egdon Heath—as we used to call our part of the world—had its borders clearly marked. Right opposite the “T” where our road took off the High Road stood (and still stands) the “House of the Four Towers,” a vaguely historical monument which in fact has only three towers but to which popular sentiment has never denied the one that was left unbuilt. Though we lived in close proximity to it for three years and passed it at least twice a day we never set foot inside it. I have an idea that it was built sometime during the period of the decline of the Moghul Empire by a Governor of Lahore at the behest of his daughter. I am not sure. But it is a sad looking and uncertain sort of place, lacking the vigour and individuality of the edifices of earlier ages. Any way, though far indeed from the ancient “Walled City,” it marks the traditional boundary of Lahore towards the South-West. Under its

shadow was a little cigarette and beetle leaf shop—literally a tin-pot place—kept by an old Moham-medan who, judging by his language and manner, must have hailed from the United Provinces. Here we would see country gentlemen, seated in lofty “Yakkas” or mounted on shaggy little ponies, refresh themselves with *pan* and glasses of brightly coloured soda water before proceeding to tackle the fickle ways and men of the town. The old *Panwallah* had a majestic appearance with a fine grey beard and a gaunt body. He was also a philosopher. Whenever any of us wandered down to his place in the evening to buy a packet of cigarettes or a box of matches he was sure to come out with one of those wise sayings which seem to flow so naturally and glibly from the mouths of the inhabitants of his Province.

At the opposite extremity of the heath dwelt another philosopher, a real one, Dr. Parkasham of our English Department. A South Indian, he was a character that old students of the College never forgot. Everything about him, his appearance, his learning, his powers of expression and teaching, the way he took his Christianity, was unique. Short and slight, he was always neatly and very ‘fully’ dressed: he wore a waistcoat in the hottest weather. A most profound scholar, gifted with a facile and stately manner of speech, it was an experience reading poetry with him. When he spoke about the “glory of Lake and Mountain”, the “mystery of the Gothic aisle”, or the “radiance of the

attic marble" he imparted to us some of that glory and mystery and glowed with the radiance himself. The most remarkable thing about him was his earnestness. Every word of his—whether it occurred in the "verse for today" with which he invariably began his classes or in the discourse on some remote bed of daffodils that Wordsworth had chanced upon—was soaked in it. He also had a fund of stories and anecdotes with which he was wont to intersperse his conversation with students, much to their alternate delight and embarrassment. He was inclined to be very much Johnsonian on these occasions for which reason he was known as "the Great Doctor". But it was as a teacher of Poetry that he excelled. To this task he brought a deep understanding of human nature and the emotions that sway men. When, on some dark winter evening, he was seen on that road, complete with overcoat, felt hat, and walking stick, walking down briskly—as he always did—to pay us one of his rare visits he never failed to seem to be part of the natural fauna of the place and to sum up its sombre, unspoken philosophy.

My most intimate friend, Bill Cox, was not in the Hostel; he lived with friends somewhere on the other side of the town. But he was a frequent visitor. There were also two from amongst the boarders that I was very friendly with; Ram Lal, a strong athletic type, and Om Parkash, a bright, pleasant looking youth who knew his Physics backwards. As far as I can remember Lal had no pronounced bias in

the matter of things worth learning; but Parkash was a wizard. He set up all sorts of gadgets in our rooms from piratical wireless sets to electric bells and illicit contrivances for heating water. Whereas the first contravened only orders of the Government—possessing a radio set without paying the prescribed fee and taking a licence—the last named transgressed something much more important, College regulations. For it was strictly forbidden to use electrical energy for any purpose other than lighting. But the arm of authority was weak in such an outlying area as the Principal's Hall. So we used our heater to boil water for tea regularly for three years. And I don't think I can quite claim that nobody was any the wiser. The Warden looked as if he knew, but him we squared up by making him drink contraband tea and listen to untaxed music. The same with some other members of the staff. But one representative of the Law there was whom there was no way of appeasing—that was the old hostel *Chapراسى*. Frequently the current would go off just as our kettle—and doubtless many others—were coming to boil. And as this happened only in the afternoon, when there was no particular necessity for the current to be on, we had to put up with it; for this was not a matter we could complain about directly.

I had the large central room of the White House, many times the size of a normal hostel room. It had one architectural advantage over most students' rooms in India in that it had a

fire place, and one that was actually used quite a bit in the cold weather. I always had a fire going when a member of the staff came in to tea. My best friend, and most frequent visitor was Professor Walker, an elderly Englishman who, together with Parkash formed the mainstay of the English Department. Others used to come, too. On such occasions the whole of our "gang" would be present, made up of Bill, Lal, Parkash and some people from the other hostels; in all about ten. This was not an entirely harmonious body. I am bound to say (at the risk of appearing to blow my own trumpet) that I was the tension member of the structure. The men from the College Hall were mostly our seniors and inclined to be snobbish because of that and because of their place of residence. Lal and Parkash they absolutely refused to recognise the existence of, and of Bill they loftily disapproved as being "neither here nor there". (They were all very much 'here' themselves belonging, as they all did, to the indigenous races and religions of the country). But this disapproval was more a matter of principle than personal and directed more at me (for chumming up with such an individual) rather than at him. And it was all very good humoured anyhow. One dislike there was, however, that we all shared in common; a hearty disapproval of the normal methods of exercising the body, i.e. by playing games. Excepting Lal and Parkash all of us came from the country and had available to us the more outdoor forms of sport (if we cared to indulge in

them) during the holidays. Any way we all considered Piggy a much better type of recreation than hitting a ball around a field with twenty others. And we all—again with the exception of Lal and Parkash—had a strong common interest in literature. Frequently one of these parties in my room would precede a session of the "Lake School" and, under the leadership of Walker, we would talk about the subject to be discussed at the forthcoming meeting. Naturally not all members of that body were present; nor were they all invited. But there was one I would have given anything to have present—Ellen; though I never once had the courage of even asking her if she would come. Nor did the others ever allow me to forget the fact of her absence. Collectively and severally these gentlemen played an important part in bringing me to the state of mind that I came to eventually. They bullied, ragged, and cajoled me into believing that I was genuinely in love with Ellen and that I wanted her to become my wife. And I don't think I was then quite twenty.

I have described the White House and its environment in some detail because thinking of Ellen has inevitably brought back the physical atmosphere in which I then lived and against which my emotions played out their solo drama. It was as the mistress of the White House that I had always pictured Ellen, and after the lapse of all these years—and everything that has happened—I cannot say that the picture has altered much. True enough it is now dim and

faded and has become overlaid with the dust of the years but it has not altogether gone. I find it is still there. I am almost inclined to forgive those two chaps for being on the same train with me—for which, of course, there was not the slightest necessity.

THE RIDDLE OF THE PIR

By and by I said good bye to my two travelling companions and, finally, to the train as they reached their several destinations. Another day's journey brought me to the great garrison town of the North which was the "Peace" Station of the Force to which I was posted.

For reasons which form no part of this story I returned from my fleeting visit to South India to find troops deployed far and wide in aid of Civil Power in the Northern regions of the country. In this task naturally the Force to which I was posted took a leading part. On arrival I found my own Battalion dispersed over the countryside, in Company and Platoon Posts with only Battalion Headquarters in Rurpindi. I came too late to take part in the initial "going in" operations, too late even to get an outside job. But as there was nothing for me to do in the office I started going out with the colonel on his visits of inspection to our detachments and outposts and gradually became a sort of self-appointed Tactical Assistant to him. We used to go out twice or thrice a week with a small escort, two

jeep loads in all, visit one or two of the Company or Platoon Posts, returning home late in the evening. The next day I would write up my notes for the C. O. to work on and the day after we would go somewhere else. During these long drives in that pleasant, upland countryside what struck one most was the silence and apparent peace that prevailed everywhere. But it was the peace of the grave. Every village we went into, whether it was tucked away in some tiny "V" in the hills or whether it sprawled loosely at the foot of a slope, was the same. One part was a mass of burnt dwellings and rubble and the other was intact.

There were no men about ; only women and children and they withdrew indoors at our approach. We would stand awhile looking at the ruins and wreckage of the homes of people who had been killed or had fled and would then come away. The only men we met were odd shepherds sitting under large shady trees or, very occasionally, a bunch of villagers working on some little mantlepice of a hillside field. And, not unnaturally, these people knew nothing, absolutely nothing about what had happened. Of course investigation was a responsibility of the Police, not of the Army. But it was difficult to see what the Police could do in the vast majority of cases. Most of the essential witnesses were dead and nearly all of the less essential ones had fled their homes. A difficult business.

One day we went to a village deep in the country, standing in a grove of ancient planes,

where we were met by a pale, hot looking young officer who was very obviously sick and was equally obviously going to get worse. There was only one thing to do ; to get him to hospital. I was to take over the Post, temporarily at any rate. While he was getting ready the Colonel hurriedly explained to me the local situation and the commitments of the Post. The disturbances had been rather bad in the village and the locality. A great deal of damage to property (too obvious) looting, killing, and abduction of women. Yes, abduction of women : a speciality, that. One man had apparently abducted about a score, "married" the lot of them, and was still absconding. The Policeman—there was a Constable in the village—would tell me all about that. Our job was mainly patrolling and dealing with trouble, should any start again. Work in with the Police, collate their information with my own observations, help them in making arrests and so on. The usual "In aid of Civil Power" stuff. In addition, as O. C. of the Post I was also to exercise certain magisterial powers under the Insurrection Act. There was one thing, however, slightly out of the usual about the place. There was a big landowner, a man of great influence among the populace who had exerted himself on the side of Law and Order during the insurrection and had done his best to prevent the trouble spreading. He had failed, of course. But now he was proving to be of considerable assistance to the Government in restoring Public confidence and as a source of information. He lived in the

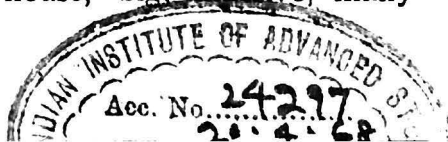
big house yonder : a man I was to keep in touch with. The Colonel said he would come back the following afternoon to take me to call on him. Too late that day ; because he had to return to town—about forty miles of none-too-good track distant—see the sick man bedded down in hospital, and send out my kit and servant while it was still light. And, incidentally, this man was also supposed to be a bit of a religious divine. Apparently the family was that sort. They were the hereditary keepers of a well known shrine in the neighbourhood.

The Colonel had been gone about half an hour when a man arrived from the big house and presented the compliments of his master together with an invitation to tea. The Pir Sahib—that is how he was known—had learnt with great concern about the illness of young Lieutenant "X". He wanted to know about him and also to welcome me to the village. So would I please honour him with my company at tea ? That was something I was not quite prepared for. The Colonel had said nothing about my not visiting him by myself and of course he could not have meant to restrict my discretion in the matter. But obviously he wished me to go carefully with the old man. However, both public policy and good manners demanded an immediate decision. I politely refused the invitation to tea on the ground that I had had mine—which was perfectly true—but said that unless it was inconvenient to the Pir Sahib I proposed to call at the House a little later in the evening and make his acquaintance.

A few minutes after the messenger had gone I, too, went out with the senior VCO of the Detachment to take a look round and find my bearings.

The village was situated on the Southern edge of a vast natural amphitheatre of low hills surrounding a more or less circular hollow of tilled ground. Apparently there was a break—or breaks—in the hills for the hollow was perfectly drained. Our billets were in the village school, now innocent alike of scholars and masters, built on a spur of rising ground in the rear of the village. Beyond, on the edge of the wall of hills, stood the big yellow house, completely intact and looking aggressively undamaged. In between lay the village, sacked, burnt and silent.

Having made this brief survey of the terrain we started walking towards the big house. The way lay through the main street, narrow and angular after the manner of village streets, and absolutely cluttered up with rubbish. But the sun and air of the Northern Hills had kept the place remarkably clean and free from offensive smell. I do not know if it was because of my years in the Army or just because of the mood I was in at the time, but all that scene of ruin and destruction and the story of human conflict and suffering it so eloquently told, left me curiously unmoved. I don't even remember saying "damn" to myself. Turning a corner we suddenly came upon the back of the house, big, massive, many



stories high, and silent. There were only about half a dozen windows opening towards the village, and those appeared to be on the upper floors, all tightly shut. A high stone wall running down from the house like two sides of a triangle cut it off from the rest of the village. At the main gate, which was set about half way down the wall, a man armed with a shot gun and wearing a bandolier of cartridges stood on guard. He sloped his gun as we approached and gave a butt salute of a sort. Inside the gate we found ourselves in a large outer courtyard with low, barrack like buildings on three sides of it, obviously servants quarters, store rooms, and such like. On the fourth side was the rim of the ridge which fell away, in a terraced garden, to the hollow below. In one corner was a mosque. Everything was remarkably, even offensively, bright and clean. At the entrance to the main house we were met by another retainer of the Pir, an old man carrying a pistol, who bowed low and led us, across a dark inner court to a long, lofty room on the ground floor. A single carpet covered the entire length of the floor and on the walls were several pieces of old armour. The furniture mostly belonged to an earlier generation and was good to look at if uncomfortable to sit on. But by the door were some horribly modern chairs and some cheap photographic prints of film actresses, which looked utterly incongruous beside the half broken chandeliers and old swords. The

ancestral hall of fiction, but there was something, wrong, something besides mere neglect. Presently the Pir came in, introduced himself and bade us make ourselves "comfortable. Whereupon we all sat down on those horrid chairs under the beaming smiles of a couple of glamorous young ladies from Bombay.

"My first duty, Sir", began the Pir, "is to welcome you to this poor afflicted village of ours and to thank you for honouring me by setting foot in my humble house."

In the circumstances this was hardly a statement I could swallow whole. It was duty that had brought me to the village; and as for the house, well, only a minute ago my Subedar had told me that it had over sixty rooms excluding the out-offices. In reply, therefore, I thanked him for the welcome, said something about why I was there, adding that I hoped my predecessor would soon be able to resume his duties. "Ah, yes; what went wrong with him? He was here only the other day", asked the Pir.

"Fever", I replied, "I expect it is only strain and fatigue. He is in safe hands now and should be all right in a few days time". "That is good, he is such a bright young man," said the Pir, "And now I am sure you will do me the honour of accepting a little refreshment." So saying he turned to a tray of drinks that a servant had brought, and poured out three glasses of fresh lemon crush. A surprisingly

dignified man, I thought, as I sat sipping his excellent *nimboo-pani*. His appearance certainly had all the outward marks of aristocracy; he was tall and slight, wore a fine grey beard and had sharp, regular features. When he spoke it was with the calm assurance born of generations of privilege and acknowledged overlordship. And yet the feeling that there was something wrong which had assailed me on entering the room had only been heightened, not dissipated, by the presence and personality of the old Pir. He was so enigmatic. I do not know if it was because this was the first time I was dealing with real 'blue blood' on serious matters and literally on its own ground, or because of the gloom that seemed to permeate the place like a fog, but his voice did not ring honest to my ears. What he said was true enough, but he seemed to be keeping something back; though I had no reason or evidence for so assuming. Here was a person of influence and position who had remained loyal to the Government during a fierce insurrection and with whom I had been instructed to work. But as we sat in his drawing room, exchanging the common politenesses, I made no attempt to speak about the terrible events that had brought us together. I resolved to let him open the subject himself which he did very abruptly.

"That man, Ismail, is hiding in the high mountains, across the water."

Ismail Shah was our much married friend and the 'water' was a small stream separating the

foothills from the parent range. "That is interesting; how did you find that out?" I asked.

"One of my best spies came in today with the news."

The Pir's "Intelligence Service" was a recognised, though not always accurate, source of information available to the Government. "Indeed", said I, "I must pass that on to Headquarters. As you know my patrol doesn't extend beyond the river. If, as you say, he is over the water then somebody else will have to start looking for him". "Yes", agreed the Pir, "and the sooner the better, because, given time, there is no knowing what he might not do. He might escape over the high passes to Central Asia, he might murder those poor women, or sell them away to scoundrels like himself and then make good his escape. The swine, he is one of the worst".

I heartily agreed with him and thanking him for the information rose to go. Coming out into the blue dusk he saw us to the front door and said in parting, "Remember, Sir, that your first task is to find that wicked Ismail, dead or alive, and those unfortunate women, alive if possible. Let no small doubts regarding jurisdiction stand in your way. And may Allah protect you and guide you in your task". Promising myself, no less than him, to do my best I left the house, deep in thought. There was something about the old man I had not liked, some suspicion that

my subconscious mind had formed that had not yet become conscious knowledge.

Picking our way carefully up that heaped up street, one behind the other, in the dark, I stumbled sharply on something and the whole thing clicked. I discovered in a flash what I had been trying so hard to find for the last few minutes. I suspected the Pir of having been a party to the abduction of those women and of keeping them prisoner in that big house of his. Yes, that was what was wrong with the old man as far as I was concerned. And in the wake of the old gentleman and his troop of kidnapped ladies goose stepped Ellen and the "other girl," all smiles and tears like long lost friends, fell in step lightly on either side of me looking as if to say "We lost you for a while, but here we are now and here we stay".

CHRISTMAS CARD COTTAGE

Years ago my father had been stationed at Rurpindi. That was where I had first met the "other girl". This is not where she enters the game in earnest, and this is not where she joined hands with Ellen on the winning side of the pitch. But this is where she made her bow, standing by a bookshelf in our hall, near the telephone. That night, after I had sent off my daily report to Headquarters over the wireless and had said good night to my "Staff" I retired to my room,—evidently the school office—and sat

at the Headmaster's desk for a long time trying to gather my thoughts. The old Pir, the kidnapped women, Ellen and the "other girl" all hummed like bees round my head. The last named I gently but firmly put aside. All in good time. It was clear that there was nothing I could do about the old man till something happened, or without consulting my superiors. So I shut him out too, and with him the kidnapped women. Ellen remained.

Yes, Ellen remained to keep me company in that bare school room in the ruined highland village, lit by the pale, sickly light of a flickering oil lamp with a couple of dilapidated school maps rattling now and again on the wall behind me in the cool, fresh breeze. Sitting smoking with my feet cocked up on the desk, I picked up the threads where I had left them some days ago and started disentangling the knotted and weighted down lines of my youth once again.

Where were we? In Lahore—yes, at College, shortly after that conference. I was feeling tremendously elated at being in love. It was something I had never experienced before and was, for all its heart ache, something wonderful. It opened up an altogether new and marvellous horizon of possibility. About half a dozen years before, a book on Geography had opened up the glorious vistas of adolescence down which ran towering mountain ranges, lordly rivers and all manner of things of wonder and beauty. Youth—and Ellen—had opened only a

small and constricted horizon but one that was infinitely more beautiful and infinitely more compelling. Instead of the great open spaces and lonely mountain trails all I wanted now was a cottage in the woods, a room with a couple of easy chairs set before the fire, and Ellen bringing in the supper ; the night being dark and stormy outside. A Christmas Card Cottage, a cottage in Arcadia. The surprising thing is that Ellen was not in the least guilty of "leading me up the garden path" or lending me a hand in building my dream cottage. Yet walk up the garden path I did, all by myself, and felt hurt and indignant at finding nobody there. But such, I suppose, is sometimes the way of a first flame.

Just before breaking up for the Christmas holidays we used to have the mid-winter examinations, and about the middle of January the results were posted up and the papers returned to the students, marked and corrected. It was clear that Ellen had done extraordinarily well, standing first or second in almost every subject. Immediately there was a great demand from all sides for the perusal of her answer books. Now, in the Lahore of those days this was a favourite dodge of getting a line on somebody, specially a pretty girl. I do not know if Ellen was aware of this ; but highly flattering as the request was she could not but comply with it, though not without a becoming reluctance and many disclaimers of any special merit or brilliance. Asking to see

her work was something I couldn't very well do, being her senior and consequently having covered the course already. In the end, however, I did muster up the nerve to do so because one heard a lot about the excellence of her style. I received a shock when I made my request: Style was a personal matter, I was informed. One should try and develop one's own and not imitate another person's. In any case people had been borrowing her answer books and she had no idea where they had got to. Which, of course, was another way of saying that she wanted to have nothing to do with me. An attitude of which now, in the light of maturer experience, I entirely approve. Because she could not but have noticed that I had gone daft on her and, sensible girl that she was, decided to keep me at arm's length. But at the time, needless to say, I thought it most unkind of her not to speak to me as readily as she did to many others. For there was no doubt that, mainly as a result of this paper borrowing business, she had shed a good deal of her former shyness and was now quite willing to enter into a friendly conversation regarding studies or college activities with other students. But for some reason she was not prepared to do that with me. To this day I wonder why exactly that was so. The only reason I can think of is that she took an instant and instinctive dislike to me. Because I was not the only one who fancied himself 'in love' with her: there were

several others. But it was only me she didn't seem to be particularly anxious to speak to. She made that plain.

Ellen was extraordinarily beautiful. It would be no exaggeration to say that she was the most beautiful woman I have ever met. Of Grecian form and features and milk white complexion she was no less talented than she was beautiful. It was a terrible thing to be in love with her. It was mixture of desperate want and fearful happiness. Because she was the first girl I had ever taken any interest in and because of her unique person and address, my love for Ellen was no vulgar affair of sex. It was something poetic, something of the sky and the air. But completely "gone" as I was, I knew only too well that no girl could reasonably be expected to cook a man's supper for him unless he was, in the first place, winning his own bread and hers too. And this I was a long way from doing. To this end, therefore, I resolved to direct all my energies. I would yet win her. I would work hard, get a First Class Honours, gate-crash into the Indian Civil Service and then return in triumph to make my claim. Not many girls refused to sit at the head of the table in a District Collector's house. And how Ellen would grace the table, the house, everything. There would be invitations from their Excellencies for us to stay in Government House when I took her into town to enable her to do her shopping or go to the theatre once every six months or so. Not more often, for an I. C. S. man had work to do. I

would select the United Provinces to serve in ; it was never satisfactory to work in one's own province. We would ride about my District in the cold weather, spending bright sunny days in camp, happy in work and love. And during summer, at night, we would wander about the grounds of our rambling old house at District Headquarters, thick with the scent of champak and jasmine and bathed in the silvery moon beams. In the long monsoon evenings we would sit in the Drawing Room laughing and talking about our good old Lahore days with the old Collectors of the District looking down on us from the walls. And on party nights Ellen would outshine every other woman present in grace, beauty, and charm. It would be grand.

But this was a long term plan. The immediate objective was the University Examination which loomed ahead in the Spring. It was about the end of January already and I realised with a jerk that, with the work I had done in the term I could hardly hope to get a decent pass, let alone a First. I, therefore, got down to work solidly, easing off my feelings regarding Ellen by talking about her and the kind of future I had designed for her with my friends. Soon the thing was all over the place. But of this I was, as yet, blissfully ignorant. Towards the beginning of February most teachers stopped taking the "examinee" classes regularly, letting the students work on their own and meeting them individually or in small groups. We in the Principal's Hall had a way of work of our own. People would start

seriously after dinner, work right through the night, sleep the best part of the day, waking up only when the cook refused to keep the mid-day meal any longer. This business of keeping awake was encouraged by the strong cups of tea that were brewed and drunk by most people several times in the course of the night. It was no longer very cold ; that and the imperative necessity of comparing notes with one's fellows made inter-house visits the order of the day—or rather, the order of the night, to be strictly correct. People who throughout the term had gone about as if they hardly knew where the White House was were now frequent visitors. I, too, discovered my way to certain rooms in the Double-Decker and other bungalows in the Hall. Literature, Philosophy, Science, Art would be discussed and hotly disputed over cups of tea of varying kind and quality in different rooms and at all hours of the night. During the day—or what was left of it after the previous night's rest had been taken—one would see tutors and Professors, or just go down to the College to see if it was still there. I used to cycle down in the afternoon, spend an hour in the Library, see one or the other of the teachers, and then go on to meet my friends of the College Hall. Usually we would have tea together, either in the College Tuck-shop or in somebody's room. Bill, whose own programme was much the same as mine was often one of the company. We had made a pact not to use these parties as study hours. We just laughed and talked and consumed tea and sweets. As was

inevitable when I was present in this lot I always came in for a good deal of chaff regarding Ellen. Living in the College as they did they saw her about the place a good deal. She had no University examination that year and therefore attended classes. These people invented, for my benefit, several "affairs" that she was supposed to be carrying on. They all knew and unanimously disapproved of the plan that I had made. I should never get into the I.C.S. in the first place, but they wanted something simpler and more immediate, any how. As she had definitely "rejected" me and as I apparently still wanted her as badly as ever, the only thing that I, as a self respecting man, could do was to abduct her ! One of them, a scion of a great house, offered to help me in carrying her away to his country home in an Indian State renowned for such high-spirited goings on. All that I had to do was to induce her to enter a certain car which would then proceed on its way. Before twelve hours were out we should be in his ancestral domain, well within the frontiers of the State in which the word of a member of his family went a long way. He would take care of every thing, even on British Indian territory. All I had to do was to ask her to tea, offer to drive her home, do anything that would make her enter that car. Needless to say this 'scheme' was never meant as anything but a joke but we certainly talked about it a good deal. As a group we were not popular. Being neither politicians, nor artists, nor interested in the usual games, nor yet

to be counted in the vast, tame majority of the student body there was only one thing that we could be—snobs. Soon the story went round that the “snobs” had hatched a nefarious plot for kidnapping Ellen, a plot of which I was the central figure and which was to be put into effect immediately after the examination. I was then living in such a world of my own—work, rest, and work again—that I was totally unaware of the harm our innocent pastime was doing. I had made up my mind not to see Ellen before the examination was over and only then go and say good-bye before leaving Lahore for home. At last the day came when the B.A. examination was safely behind. Feeling quite pleased with myself—for I had had quite a good exam—I cycled down to the College determined to catch hold of her and say not only good-bye but a few other things besides, if she would let me. I came upon her sitting reading alone in the English Seminar in the Library. She looked up from her book as I approached, full of all the things I was going to say. But before I had had the time to speak a word she told me that she did not wish to speak to me. A most direct and unqualified statement if ever there was one. In a moment she had gathered her books and papers and was gone. End of Winter and Term.

BY THE TWO TANKS

To get back to the hills. The next day I took out the usual patrol, visited half a dozen villages and came back about lunch time wondering what good all that had done. As expected, the villages had been properly burnt and sacked in the proper places and, again as expected, the men who had done it were all away. But "flag-marching" was supposed to create moral effect, and so we went. When the Colonel arrived that afternoon I told him about what had happened after he had gone the previous day. He thoroughly approved my going to see the Pir and at the same time refusing to go to tea but was not quite sure when I confessed my suspicion to him. There was absolutely no evidence for suspecting the old man. The civil authorities would not thank the Army if we aggravated an already delicate situation by arresting him or searching his house on a mere 'hunch'! And he did not care to think of the row there would be if nothing came out of it. Of course should any evidence of any sort, kind or description come to light which supported my view I had the fullest liberty of action. Even if a peasant came up to me with a specific complaint against the Pir I was to investigate it fully and immediately. But not before something like that turned up. I was, therefore, to keep my eyes and ears open and form my own conclusions; but in the meantime I was not, in any circumstances, to allow the old fellow to begin to suspect me. That would be

fatal. And to show that there was no ill-will we both went up to the House to call on him for a few minutes before the Colonel returned to Rurpindi.

So that was that. And quite right, too. It was absurd to expect the higher ups to authorise precipitate action on a whim of mine. But that the whim or suspicion or hunch or whatever it was had taken root in my mind there could be no denying. Side by side grew the conviction that if I kept on digging up the past I should resolve the doubts and uncertainties with which I was presently surrounded. Walking out that evening I came to the village tank, a place I had not yet seen. It was a lovely little masonry tank with rich green grass growing all round it. A bunch of fine old plane trees stood scattered about, almost screening it from view. Lighting a cigarette I sat down on the steps in the deep violet dusk of that Sub-Himalayan region, suddenly switched back twenty years. For, long ago, I had sat on the steps of another tank, far away from this one, and tried to sort out my thoughts, even as I was trying to do now. It was in my own village in the Central Punjab where I had gone in the autumn of the year in which I had taken the B.A. Examination. I had gone to look into a couple of things for my father and also to see my grand-mother and such other of the old folks who had not yet forsaken the old plantation, before returning to Lahore to take up a post-graduate course of study. (I was yet underage and hardly the standard of academic attainment.

required for the old I.C.S. examination.) I always looked forward to these visits to my village home, though now they were nearly always saddening. For I remembered the time when the house used to be full—of men, women, and children no less than of human love and laughter. By and by the problem of finding the daily bread, the centrifugal tendencies of the changing times, and death, had broken up the family so that now my grand-mother and a widowed aunt and her children were the only people living in the old house. There was also a family of cousins living in the village, but not in the house. My own people hardly ever visited the place now. It was all very sad.

But these were not my thoughts as I sat on the steps of that tank twenty years ago. Rather, I sat turning over in my mind the events of the long vacation that was just drawing to a close. I had left Lahore feeling cruelly hurt at the way Ellen had treated me. True enough I now realised, to my bitter regret, that what we had considered to be completely harmless "tonic" for our tired nerves—all that rubbish about kidnapping Ellen—had been carried to her by some body or bodies who did not particularly like us and that had been chiefly responsible for her attitude. But the fact that there was, in reality, no justification for it, rankled. Specially when, quite obviously, she had no objection to saying "so long" heartily and cheerfully to many others, several of whom were persons we did not care to take much notice of. Perhaps we *were* snobbish; but there are lots of things in the world worse than

snobbery. It seemed wholly unkind that Ellen should have listened to others and decided "ex-parte" that I was too bad a person to be spoken to. The simple fact that it was entirely for her to decide whom she was going to speak to and whom she was going to leave out did not occur to me. On the other hand, such is the hope and resilience of youth that I had hardly been home for two days that I had practically ceased to harbour any grudge against Ellen and was once more engrossed in the great thought of my dream cottage.

Every summer I was allowed a month's holiday in the hills. I could go wherever I liked and whenever I liked. But this year there was only one place for me to go to: Kashmir, for that was where she had gone with her parents. I had made it a rule, however, to stick at home right through the real hot weather and the monsoon and take my holiday in September, when weather in the hills is glorious. But this year, what with one thing and another I could not get away till well into September, which meant that I could have only about a fortnight in Kashmir. ('Home,' at this time was at Rurpindi, where my father had recently been transferred). I decided, therefore, not to go hiking or trekking but to stay on in Srinagar. It was almost time for people to come down from Gulmarg, Pahlgam, and camps on the high slopes to spend a few days in the capital before returning to Lahore and other places in the plains for another year of work. This is also about the time the

State Exhibition opens and, provided one is persevering enough, one has a sporting chance of meeting almost any visitor to Kashmir on its premises. My programme, therefore, resolved itself into quite a simple one. Having got through the morning and the afternoon some-how, every evening would find me in the Exhibition grounds, wandering about the place by myself, looking for a certain face in the throng of smart and fashionable people, but never finding it. Night after night I walked back to my quarters, having drawn a blank, tired, and angry with myself. The days passed. Soon it was almost time for me to go, and I had not even seen her. She and her parents were in Srinagar and in the very grounds of the Exhibition I met people who had been on friendly visiting terms with them at Pahlgam where they had been staying. It was very hard. But when I did see her it was with such suddenness and, for all my plodding about in search of her, so unprepared was I that I immediately lost her. I was standing at one of the booths, buying a walking stick—the only purchase I made in the place that year. Turning a little to the side to see if the length of the stick I had selected suited my height I saw them all just passing me; Ellen, her parents, sisters, kid brother, and all. As Ellen came level with me, she looked into the shop. But just then a man who seemed to have been walking behind them, suddenly quickened his pace and came exactly in line between us. She passed without seeing me. I paid the man and collected my change as fast

as was possible and set off in the direction in which they had gone. But it was no good. I dashed in and out of shops, marched and countermarched about the place, but them I could not find. Found and Lost. But losing did not take much away from the joy of finding. I left Srinagar the following day heartened like a song. For she had looked marvellous that night in that crowded and brightly lit place, dressed in a plain gossamer *sari* without any supporting embellishments save those of the superb grace of her form and the glow of health lighting up her perfect, unpowdered face and complexion.

Returning home to Rurpindi, full of "the way you look tonight" feeling whom should I find in the house but the "other girl" and her people on a brief passing through visit! As I have said somewhere before we were relations, but neither close enough nor intimate enough to know each other well. As a matter of fact, as I was to discover to my despair later, my own parents nourished an unreasoned but quite definite prejudice against them and were never really pleased to see them and never spoke of them without some trace of sarcasm or disapproval. But while they were guests under our roof everyone was, of course, on his or her best behaviour. In any case whatever the ill-feeling and the cause thereof, these were things unknown to the young people. Almost the first thing I saw on reaching home, hot and dusty after my long motor journey, was a strange young lady standing by a bookshelf

in the hall, looking through a book. Before either of us had got over our mutual embarrassment my elder sister walked in and, after greeting me, introduced us. It is possible, of course, that we had met as children—actually I remember vividly a visit we had all paid to them in a little station on the Punjab border ages ago—but neither of us could recall having done so and, to all intents and purposes, this was our first meeting. And a very pleasant one it was, too. It was like sitting next to a stranger in a Railway carriage and discovering that he was one of the clan.

Sheila—that was her name—must have been about seventeen or eighteen at this time, tall and well set up, with pleasant features, a rich beige complexion, and large, dark eyes. A “Punjabi type”; rather on the broad side in form and feature, but a very handsome girl and one totally unsophisticated. She behaved as a Hindu girl in the house of relations always does; with perfect natural manners and grace, though with a becoming reserve. It transpired that she had just passed the Matriculation and was now debating what to read at the University. As, in consequence of having taken a degree myself, I had become the family expert in matters educational my advice was sought and eagerly given. Altogether, my sister, Sheila, and I spent a very pleasant two days discussing courses of study, books, authors, examinations, and other ills that beset a student. I was now in the comfortable position of

being able to sit back and speak pontifically on these matters while a pretty girl sat listening in admiration. It was very flattering. Now, the Indian house parties of those days resolved themselves into three distinct groups—the ladies, the gentlemen, and the boys. The girls were supposed to go with the ladies; but on this particular occasion—due to the presence on the scene of my sister, the absence of any other boy, and this educational business—I saw quite a lot of Sheila. And it was soon clear that, though she did not openly say so, my mother did not take a very bright view of it all. It was also clear that it was not regard for custom or social propriety that was behind this attitude of hers. But Sheila's mother appeared to be quite pleased with the way things were going. She seemed to like seeing us sitting and talking together. So far from calling her daughter away she often came and joined our conclave for a while and went away perfectly happy. I made a mental note of all this, meaning to ask my sister about it later. But in the preoccupation of their departure, and my own, which soon followed, I forgot about this and did not recall it till I was in our village home down in the Doab country, a few days later. I was talking to my grand-mother, giving her all the news, when on hearing Sheila's name her face lit up and she exclaimed:

"Sheila! yes, she must be a big girl now; what does she look like?"

I told her that not only had she grown up to be a big girl but also a very sweet and good looking one. "Yes", she said eagerly "I always knew she would ; and I am glad you think so. She is the one I want to see you marry, my boy. Her mother claimed you for her when you two were that high. It used to be an accepted thing in the family in the old days. But I don't suppose *your* mother fancies the idea ; she never did".

So that was why mother had frowned at seeing Sheila and me together so much. Ellen had, so far, complete and undisputed possession of my heart and, though I had liked her immensely, Sheila had not in the least attracted me as a woman. But here was my chance of finding out exactly why my people seemed so prejudiced against Sheila's and I decided to get to the bottom of the matter. Without mentioning anything directly I was able to elicit the fact that long ago there had been some talk of a marriage between my father and the younger sister of Sheila's mother. The marriage had never come off ; for the lady had died. Presumably for this reason my mother had never got on with Sheila's mother ; and in the course of time this dislike had come to govern the relationship between the two families. But regarding Sheila and me the views of her mother had never altered. And nor, it seemed, had those of mine !

This was what I had sat thinking about by that tank twenty years ago. It is absolutely

certain that up till that moment I had never thought of Sheila in terms even remotely emotional. But sitting on the steps of that tank that I had known since I could remember, with the *pipal* leaves singing softly above me and the cool, green water lapping gently at my feet, I began to wonder. By and by a picture began to form itself in my mind: Sheila, the perfect wife and mother, Sheila the queen of the home, Sheila the ideal of Hindu womanhood. It is more than probable that but for that talk with my grandmother I would not have indulged in another vain dream and Sheila would not have joined hands with Ellen to play havoc with my heart. But the trick had been done and that hour by the tank completed it. Strange, that. But stranger still that twenty years later I should sit by a tank in the Northern Hills and go over all that till it was dark and time for me to go home.

THE MAGAZINE

It would be wrong to imagine that Sheila drove Ellen out of my heart. Somehow, they both continued to exist side by side, and from now onwards I was equally in love with both of them. I mean genuinely and sincerely in love and not merely infatuated. Nothing was farther from my thoughts than pursuing an "affair" with either of them. It was holy wedlock I wanted; and here I find it difficult to explain, even to myself, how I could feel so towards both of them.

Because, truly and honestly, no vulgar "harem-like" thoughts ever entered my head. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that they resided in two completely and rigidly separate compartments of my emotions. Sheila was a very private and secret love, whereas Ellen burnt like a fierce flame. Sheila was the shy Hindu bride, the devoted wife and mother, the competent and happy mistress of the kitchen, and the affectionate consort with whom I should live the old, slow moving life of grace and beauty. And occasionally we should together tread the Pilgrim's Path to Hardwar, where the sacred Ganges flows out of the mountains, to the burning sands of Rameshwaram, to distant Dwarka, or to the snowy fastness of sacred Kailash. Ellen, on the other hand, was the Collector's wife, the brilliant hostess, and the wonderful companion with whom I should sit reading the "Prelude" on a rainwashed hill-side in the summer twilight, or make new discoveries in Jane Austen's subtle use of irony, seated before the fire during the long, snug winter evenings. They were both marvellous pals.

Anyhow, in Lahore there was no forgetting Ellen. No sooner did I arrive there than Sheila was put away in a distant recess of the mind and Ellen held the stage as before. Admissions to the post-graduate classes took place sometime after the College opened for the Winter Term; therefore when Bill and I got back we found everybody quite happily settled in and everything going fine. A perusal of the contents of the notice board revealed the fact that Ellen had

been elected or appointed to a number of student offices, one of which was Assistant Editorship of the *Forum*, the College journal. That same notice board also revealed the further fact that the post of Editor was vacant and post-graduate students interested might contact the Staff Editor by a certain date. This contact was established within the next ten minutes and my candidature for the post was duly registered. The Editorship of the *Forum* was the senior student office in the College, appointment to which was made by the Principal, and not by election among students. Competition for it was very keen. The fellow who thought he should get it was of the "leader" type ; he claimed to represent "public opinion" and, as such, had an inalienable right to the place from where he could best express and mould that opinion. It was perfectly clear that I represented no body but myself and also that though I was given to writing essays and such like I had never written for any Magazine or Journal before. Seeing that my chances were slender I resolved to use to the utmost whatever assets I did possess to get the job, not only because of Ellen but also for its own sake. It was a much sought-after thing and I was suddenly fired with a zeal for getting it ; in fact I saw no reason why I shouldn't, Paragraphs describing adventurous moments with Traffic Policemen in Lahore, long, lazy days in the country, and afternoons spent amid pines and heather in the Punjab hills were recovered from underneath books and papers and pressed for consideration.

Several other things were done. The result of all this staff work was that it was I and not any of the "leaders" who got the job. Immediately there was an out-cry at the 'injustice' done to the student body in bestowing the Editorial pen on a person whose main qualification was an infatuation for the Assistant Editor; that, and a good "Seventh Paper". (There were six Papers in the M.A., one's personal contacts with teachers constituted the seventh.)

Deputations were led to the Principal, and Ellen was apprised of the danger she stood in. These, of course, did not have the effect desired by the deputationists but—whatever the reason—it was clear from the very start that I was going to have no co-operation from her in regard to the *Forum*. Bill and I had elected to read History instead of Literature in the M.A. and as this was a University School we had no classes in the College. One was in and out all day, of course, but one's contacts with students were severely cut down. This was a bad handicap. Because the success of a students' journal must largely depend on the extent to which the Editor can induce people to write for it. My own "gang" had mostly passed out; and I wasn't any too popular. Having got the Editorship I was confronted with the problem of finding material to put between the covers. Material of a sort there was, of course—for you always get people wanting ardently to see their names in print, regardless of what and how they write—but

hardly of the standard or quality I would have wished to go into the *Forum*. This was where Ellen could have helped an awful lot; for she was tremendously popular, and herself a brilliant writer. A smile and a word from her with a "You will write something for us, won't you, Mr. X?" would not only have produced something but produced something pretty good and pretty quick. The best that Mr. X was capable of. But far from doing so she practically refused to do her own part of the job which was editing the women students' section. The embargo on my speaking to her still existed; it was never lifted. But I refused to recognise its existence on affairs other than personal and never hesitated to address her whenever I had occasion to, on matters concerning the Magazine. The first time she handed in her work—supposed to be a sub-editorial on behalf of the women students, known as the "Co-eds Corner"—it was so absurdly short and frivolous that I came very near losing my temper with her. She rose equal to the occasion. A hard, brittle look, very different from the way she had looked that night in the Exhibition, came into her eyes and she refused to change or modify it in any way. The "Co-eds Corner" was her job and she had done it the way she liked. If I was not satisfied I could go and see the Staff Editor about it. When asked if she would please write something in addition, in view of the marked lack of acceptable material, she replied

that she was fully occupied with her studies and had no time for such "side shows". I was annoyed with her for being so stubborn and unhelpful but did not stop to think why it was so; I was far too pre-occupied with the business of collecting stuff to put into what was going to be my first number of the magazine. The job came first and personal feelings afterwards. I resolved to run the show without her help if she didn't care to give any. She could keep it. I wasn't altogether without friends or resources. Bill, one or two other stragglers from the 'gang' who still remained in the College, and certain people in the Principal's Hall were all urgently enjoined to produce something in black and white within a certain time. I myself unearthed and brushed up some half a dozen pages written two years ago as a consequence of a few days spent in a lonely hill-top temple in the Simla Hills where I had been stranded due to an obscure stream suddenly flooding and cutting off my lines of communication at a critical point. Parkash wove a couple of pages of very attractive non-sense on Popular Physics. When the whole harvest was gathered it turned out to be no despicable effort. Besides essays on Science, Literature and the Arts there were three accounts of holidays in the mountains other than my own. For, unknown to me, two of my friends had also decided to write on the same subject. And there was one rather nice description of a little known part of the Himalayas in the general lot of contributions. This preponderance of

mountain atmosphere did not seem at all odd to me—but it apparently did to some others. As soon as the Magazine came out there was an outburst of indignation. It was declared that an Alpine Club had come into existence in Lahore of which I was the Founder President, Bill the Secretary, and certain others, members. It appeared that this Club had taken over the *Forum* to serve as its own journal leaving a few back pages for the thousand odd students to write in. How long was this to continue? Were the students to be allowed to express themselves and their “aspirations” in their own way or were the pages of the *Forum* to remain sacred to snow-field and glacier and the pines that grew in the valley? In this agitation I noticed that a certain class-fellow of Ellen’s took a very prominent part. One day I passed a number of them—Ellen, this fellow, and some others—seated in a circle having a lively chinwag. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that what was happening was this: Ellen was assuring the others, and they were whole heartedly agreeing, that she had had nothing to do with it, she was not responsible for more than a few lines in the whole issue; it was I who had made the thing what it had become, the journal of a Mountaineering Club. As events were to prove later this was not what was happening. Something very different was actually taking place. But Ellen had never given me the ghost of a reason for so suspecting. I was, accordingly, angry and annoyed with her. She, of all persons, had no right to condemn me

when she had done nothing whatever to help me and had not even done her own job properly. I therefore waylaid her one day and asked what exactly she thought had been wrong with the last number of the Magazine. She was taken aback a little at first but soon rallied to reply that it was a funny question to ask. Surely I could not be unaware of the consensus of opinion on the subject? But she readily added that she herself was fond of the mountains and had rather liked my article about the Simla Hills but what she thought did not matter much. In that case, I demanded, didn't she think that she, as Assistant Editor, owed it to me and to the *Forum* to take a little more interest in it than she had taken so far? It was a foolish thing to say and said in a foolish way. She had been quite reasonably friendly during the last few minutes; but changed immediately on hearing this and said in a hard, incisive voice that she would take just as much interest in the Magazine as she thought she should and no more. So saying she turned to her book as if to say that the interview was at an end.

My reaction to this state of affairs was summed up in one word: I will show her! I will win her yet! In the meantime stubbornness was going to be met with stubbornness. I totally abandoned the line of the trembling lover of last year and spoke to her only on business and then with deliberate coldness and reserve. If she had her prejudices I had my pride. Between us stood the barrier that she had raised, and as time went on indications were not wanting that she would

not refuse to cast it down if only I asked her. I do not mean to suggest that she had suddenly veered round and begun to like me. I don't know about that. But looking back I think I can recall occasions when she must have almost wished I said something. That, however, I had left for her to do. Therefore, when we met at social gatherings—tea parties at Professor's homes, and the like—I made no attempt to speak to her, much as my heart ached to do. If I had done so this story might have been different, in complexion if not in content. Because I believe the agitation against me regarding my handling of the *Forum* had caused in her some slight revulsion in my favour. And if I had taken advantage of it we might have got to know each other. Had this happened—had Ellen and I arrived at the stage of normal, pleasant social relationship which was the privilege of quite a few others—I am certain nothing could have prevented me from getting into I.C.S. All I wanted was ten minutes friendly conversation with her every day. And once in the I.C.S. who can tell what might not have happened? It is true that it was crazy of me to expect her even to think of marrying me, a person who did not profess the same religion as she did, unless she was as crazy over me as I was over her. (Her people were Christian). But then the fact was that I, at least, *was* crazy, and minor difficulties such as difference in religion and the absurdity of thinking in terms of marriage at twenty did not deter me from nourishing my love. Rather these

very difficulties invested it with wonder and charm. If we had cast down the Walls of Jericho and assumed a common, natural relationship—that, I repeat existed between her and practically everybody else—the result might or might not have been what I so fondly and persistently hoped for. But it would have prevented a scar from taking shape, the scar that the years have not healed and which the remaining years will not close. For Ellen was a girl of great and wondrous charm.

THE SUSPECT

Our existence at Plane Tree village was becoming difficult. Day after day we went out on patrol, and day after day we returned having seen no body, arrested no body, having done nothing to bring to justice the perpetrators of unspeakable crimes the evidence of which was all around us. The effect of such a state of affairs on the individual and corporate morale of a body of soldiers stuck out in a remote post is bad; in fact much worse than that of a fair and square reverse suffered in battle. I was seriously contemplating suggesting to the Colonel that we might be relieved by another lot of chaps when a curious episode broke the even, stagnant, tenor of our lives.

One day the old Pir sent me a message to say that he had some important information to give; would I please come. After a suitable

interval I went and, in due course, was seated face to face with the old man in his great, gloomy drawing room. When the lemonade had been served and the servants had retired out of sight if not out of hearing, the Pir solemnly but without any preliminaries declared that a man on a white mare had been seen that morning on the brow of the range of hills running parallel with the river and at a tangent with our own amphitheatre. I was intrigued at this statement, made apparently with such a conviction of importance, but which sounded not far from fatuous to me. Tired of riddles as I was, I said to myself: What is the old twerp up to now? What was wrong with a man on a black, brown, or white mare riding on the top, side, or bottom of a hill? Aloud I asked him what that meant and exactly where that got us.

"Think for yourself", said the Pir, "for weeks no body has been seen in the country side except women and children—you have noticed it yourself—and today, all of a sudden, a man on a white mare appears on the crest of the hill yonder".

He spoke in a grave voice in which a sense of injury was delicately mixed. The effect was certainly impressive. I sat, silenced, pondering over the thing for a few minutes and then rose to go, thanking him for telling me and promising to think the matter over and take such action as suggested itself to me.

That night, after dinner, I shared the news with my Second-in-Command and confidential adviser, the Subedar. He conceded that there might be something in the story, and it might be worth our while getting hold of the gentleman in question. But it would be a wild goose chase. Where some thousand men had remained hidden for so long surely one man and his white mare could do the same? The country was broken, sparsely populated and offered any amount of cover, even to those unskilled in its use. The best that we could do was to keep our eyes open when out on patrol or picket and leave all odd horsemen to *bump us* rather than go hareing off on a hopeless chase ourselves. That sounded like good 'horse' sense to me and I went to bed feeling comparatively relieved because this latest dodge of the old man's hadn't turned out to be so involved after all.

But early the next morning I was shaken out of my smug satisfaction. Soon after day break we set off on patrol as usual, the Subedar and I going in different directions with a truck load of men each, and the first thing that met the eye was horsemen all over the place! They were all off the road—such as it was—and they were now here present in any number. As a matter of fact I don't think I saw even a 'half section', or two riding together. But riding about they undoubtedly were, and in all sorts of directions, coming from or heading for all possible points of the compass. This was most unusual. Only yesterday the country had looked as if it was almost devoid

of human habitation ; had been like that for weeks. But this morning there were all those *sowars* knocking about. At no time during the patrol were they completely out of sight ; three or four of them were visible at various points of the landscape all the time. Most extraordinary, that. But as they all kept well out of our way—and our truck could hardly cut across country—it was impossible trying to catch any of them. It was a very broken and difficult terrain, negotiable only on foot or on horseback : We had no horses ourselves ; and going after one or more of them on foot was out of the question. We should never have caught anybody, and the effect on the men's morale would have been disastrous. Firing at long range would have been an equally unjustifiable tactical risk, and also impolitic. I knew the men were all on edge at seeing this strange phenomenon ; so indeed was I ; but habit and training almost mechanically produced the right reaction : I showed as little concern for the *sowars* as I possibly could and stuck to my pre-arranged programme which was known to the men. On the way back, however, we met with some unexpected luck. We were about four miles from home, driving up wind, when I saw a fellow, a couple of hundred yards to our right, at about "3 o'clock", trotting obliquely across our front, apparently making for somewhere on the other side of the road. Travelling in more or less the same general direction as ourselves he had not seen us, and because of the direction of the wind, had not

heard us yet. We advanced cautiously for some distance, then halted behind a mud bank at a bend in the road till he was about twenty yards from the point where he would cross it. We then dashed forward and fetched up along side him just as he was coming on to the road. He tried to wheel about and gallop away but seeing a couple of rifles levelled at him he thought the better of it and stopped. It was a well executed little manouvre; the men had enjoyed every second of it; but having run him to earth I felt sorry for the fellow. Was it all really necessary? I remember asking myself. Any way, he was searched for arms but nothing infringing the law was found on him. Questioned, he stated that he was going to visit his brother who lived at some distance from his own dwelling—a perfectly lawful function. But the nerves of my little force had been so strung out by a prolonged, passive, and seemingly futile existence in the midst of people who had raped, killed, and looted, and whom we could not touch that I felt that this was the time for breaking the tension before the tension broke us. The man was, accordingly, arrested for further interrogation. He made no protest. I ordered the senior N.C.O. of the party to take over the patrol and drive it back to camp. The prisoner's hands were secured in the front and he was ordered to march between two of the men I had detached from the party. I myself mounted his horse, a bay, and followed at a slow walk a few yards behind. As we neared the village,

about an hour later, I moved up to the front and in this order we entered the camp, myself riding the bay horse at a slow walk followed by the prisoner and escort. The news had naturally preceded us; the entire Company was gathered on one side of the school courtyard. The Subedar Sahib, who had apparently returned from his own patrol, stood in front of the little building. In dead silence I rode through the gateway. The Quarter Guard turned out—to an armed party commanded by an officer—the Subedar called the Company to attention and saluted. I halted, returned the salute and dismounting passed into my room. While pouring out a glass of water for myself from my *sorahi* I heard my Second in-Command give an order that the man was to be taken to the Guard Room forthwith and under no circumstances allowed to come out of it except under his personal orders. Then there was a good deal of noise and shouting outside. I drank off the water and threw myself down full length on my camp bed. Thank God the men had shouted.

The following afternoon was fixed for the trial. I couldn't "try" the man of course, being a witness; but I could and indeed had to, hold a judicial inquiry before committing him for trial. In any event as Officer Commanding a Post I could order the detention of a person for a period of one month pretty much as I liked. I had had no occasion to exercise these magisterial powers before and spent a restless day in consequence. In the meanwhile the arrested man had been

handed over to the local Police to enable them to check up on his statement and make their routine inquiries. I was hoping that something would come out of these ; because I was not feeling too happy about the case. As matters stood he had done nothing wrong. And yet he and his bay horse had appeared on the scene, along with numerous other men and mounts no doubt, on the morrow of the old Pir telling me about that Rider on the White Mare. More important than that, he was the Company suspect. Beyond the shadow of a doubt all my men, from the Subedar down to the cook house boy, believed that in him they had got hold of the root of the trouble. If he was allowed to go, morale would almost certainly crash down the hill like a landslide. A very difficult business altogether.

At 2 o'clock the following day the prisoner was brought before me. The Subedar Sahib was Master of Ceremonies. On my table reposed the charge papers, a copy of the Emergency Regulations from which I derived my authority over the populace and—to mark the occasion a special one—a bunch of wild flowers. The proceedings commenced as in a case of breaking bounds, in which I was going to give the accused twenty eight days R.I. Beyond question the Subedar, the Havildar Major, the Company Clerk and others believed that the case had the character and clarity of Orderly Room in which the erring soldier knew and owned his guilt and in which the Commanding Officer gave his award considering not only the offence committed but also the

discipline and happiness of his command, including that of the person before him. But this was no such case, and there could be no such award. The man was completely inscrutable. That morning he had saddled his pony and set off to visit his brother who lived on his farm at the foot of the flat topped hill behind which the sun went down. About half the way up he had been arrested. I knew what had happened since. He had nothing to fear because he had done nothing wrong. Asked when he had last mounted his horse to go anywhere he answered that it had been just before the harvest, when he had gone into town to buy salt and sugar for his family. The harvest had been two months back.

The court : "Can you explain why you found no call to use your horse all these weeks and suddenly took it into your head to do so this morning?" The Prisoner : "I cannot answer that. Why have all the others taken it into their heads to get their horses out this morning?"

Yes, why indeed? He was an elderly man, but by no means ancient. For all his threadbare clothes and tattered *chaplis* he carried himself erect and with dignity. His eyes gave no clue to his thoughts. There was no expression in them save what looked like the passing shadow of some distant sadness, and sometimes the glimmerings of a strange fire. I didn't know what to make of him ; there was no case against him ; the Police had verified his statement that his brother's homestead and his own were some miles

apart and had found it to be true. They didn't have him on their list of wanted men. And yet not only did public policy seem to demand some sort of action but, try as I would, I could neither bring myself to believe in the man's innocence nor in his guilt. I tried to brush away from my mind all thoughts of the possible effects of an order of acquittal on the men. But the dark cloud of doubt regarding the man himself remained. Somebody has spoken of the "appalling loneliness of High Command". High Command—or any Independent Command, high or low—is lonely, yes ; but no more so than the man who tries to judge, at however humble a level, between his fellow mortals. He cannot turn to anyone for advice, or moral sustenance ; his decision is his own and he has to square it up with his own conscience. I felt that no useful purpose would be served by remanding the accused for trial by Higher Authority, or by adjourning the case for considering my decision. It would only sink me deeper and deeper into the morass of doubt and uncertainty. I, accordingly, ordered him to be detained for a period of one month under the Insurrection Act and committed him to Rurpindi prison to serve his sentence. The prisoner received the order without any emotion and was led away.

THE PARTY

On the evening after the trial as I sat debating with myself whether I should write letters or take a walk before my bath I

received a signal message from a neighbouring Grenadier Unit inviting me to a Regimental Guest Night that very night. They were about twenty miles away—nearly fifteen miles of country track and five of the High Road—but I jumped at the invitation because it held out the chance of a most welcome break from the oppressive psychological atmosphere of Plane Tree village. Looking at my watch I calculated that I should just about make it if I tried. Rushing through my bath and changing into a somewhat better looking suit of "Battle Green" than my bearer normally allowed me in Camp, I set off in my jeep fully determined to enjoy the party to the entire exclusion of Pirs, suspects, white mares and bay horses. The cool, sweet air and the natural beauty of the country side, made ten times more beautiful by the soft shades of the evening enabled me to keep up my resolve through the long drive. Arrived at the Dak Bungalow, where the Headquarters and Mess of my hosts was situated, one saw a formidable array of vehicles of all sorts and shapes parked outside and inside a no less formidable array of officers. It was one of the big days of this unit and they had invited every Madras Grenadier whose existence in those parts was suspected, and a good few others out of considerations of neighbourliness or individual friendship. Soldiers are a sociable lot; in particular when the corporate dignity of their Regiment or Corps can be upheld by drinking an extra glass of

wine or eating a course of unusually good food, they are always ready and willing to do so and will often go to great lengths in order that it may be done. It was a very good humoured company, therefore, that had assembled in the big central room of the Dak Bungalow that night. The unit's carefully conserved stock of whisky mixed with clear cold water from a nearby spring, assured universal good will, and also gave rein to sentiment and reminiscence as always happens when soldiers foregather to celebrate a Regimental occasion. Out of those present there were quite a few I had known before; in the Depot; on the Frontier, or on Service during the War. And many were the yarns that were tossed about: The Khaisora Valley Column in 1936 had been a damn good show; so and so had made a shocking mess of Such and Such a scheme in Assam in 1943; some of the letters that issued out of the Depot proved conclusively that a certain gentleman had risen in the ladder of fame through no fault of his own; and so on. Looking around idly during a gap in the conversation I noticed that one of the 'outsiders' present was an S & T Major, an Indian, broad in the beam and rather on the flabby side, who seemed to be concentrating solidly on the business of consuming his drink and putting down the little things that were served with it. Immediately I had a feeling that I had seen him somewhere before. But snug and comfortable as I was in my corner,

sitting besides a man I had once shot ibex with in Baluchistan, I did not bother to tax my memory too much over him. Presently the Mess Havildar announced dinner.

Led by the C.O. we filed out to the "Dining Room" which was out in the open, under the tall poplars that grew in the compound. There was no band, but a gramophone played "appropriate music" as we took over seats on the long progression of tables mobilised for the occasion; their varying dimensions hidden under the dazzling bed sheets which covered them.

This was an enterprising outfit. Electric lights (taken off signal batteries) hung from the trees—illuminating the table and its immediate vicinity, but emphasizing, if anything, the surrounding darkness. Seated strictly in order of seniority, under the stars and poplars of a Northern clime and during a lull in a Border Campaign, the Madras Grenadiers solemnly commenced eating their *bara khana* to celebrate a memorable day in the history of their Corps. True enough we were not seated in the long Dining Room of the Headquarters Mess, with the numerous trophies of sport and soldiering lining the walls and resting on the table; but we had plenty of fowl to eat and wine to drink. True also that instead of the magnificent Band of the corps in Full Dress we had only a battered old gramophone to provide us with music; but the spirit was the

same and it was in aid of the same thing. I was thoroughly glad I had come. Apart from participating in the Guest Night and renewing a couple of old acquaintances I was enjoying the treat itself, the bright lights, the music and the company of friends. That S & T Major was there, sitting on the opposite side of the table, a few places down Knowing that I had seen him somewhere before and being unable to place him was slightly irritating. He was like a buzzing gnat which kept hovering round one's ear. And then it happened like a lever shot into the bracket, completely and uncompromisingly. We had gone about half way through the meal; the orderlies were changing the plates for a new course when throwing a casual look down the table my eyes came to rest at him. Just then somebody put on the record "Drink to me only" on the gramophone and the line was set. That was the man who had come between me and Ellen that night in the State Exhibition in Srinagar, years and years ago.

The discovery was so instantaneous and complete that it came like the shock of a detonation wave, leaving me stunned and frozen. It all came back with the utmost vividness and clarity. Yes, that was the man who had quickened his pace and stepped between me and Ellen just as she had come level with me and looked my way. I also saw something now, the full significance of which I had missed then in the urgency of my own pursuit and the warm

amplitude of love and youth. He had been walking immediately behind the party and was probably trying to get a line on her, after the manner of numerous young men who frequent places of public assembly mainly to see that the fact of their existence is not lost on any pretty girl or woman who might be present. Had he not come between us and if Ellen *had* seen me she might have spoken to me. After all we were in the generous atmosphere of a hill station holiday, and she was looking so happy and radiant. I might have been introduced to the family, invited to dine with them in the exhibition restaurant, we might even have arranged to travel on the same bus going back. And the way she had looked that night!

I suppose the change in me was noticeable because my friend asked me what had happened and if I was all right. I said nothing had happened and that I was perfectly all right; though, of course, a great deal had happened and I was not feeling quite the same as I was a minute ago. The points had been reversed and the line was set for a long back shunt. As we sat down after the Loyal Toast the C.O. shot a glance at me. At this stage of the proceedings the combined influences of food and drink had started to wear off—as they always do—the air of sentiment and reminiscence in which the evening had begun and people were beginning to live a little more in the present. But I was not, and apparently did not look it.

"What are you thinking about down there?" the C.O. asked through a cloud of cigar smoke and between sips of port. "What is it, a woman?". I hastened to deny the charge, but since it was a correct one I must have betrayed a certain amount of embarrassment.

"A lie, a lie", boomed the Colonel from the head of the table, "Mess Sec: bring the Lie Book." That important component of the unit's Records was duly produced and the following was ordered to be recorded in it, there and then: "At Dinner, on.....Day, the 17th of September, 19.....so and so stated that he was not thinking of a woman when he quite obviously was." The minute was unanimously approved by the company and considered to possess sufficient importance to be reported to the Headquarters Mess for record in the Lie Book of that august establishment so that it might help to "while away the dull moments of the officers of the Corps." I sat through all this impassively neither amused nor annoyed; I was weary and wanted to get away from that place of bright lights and loud laughter. That man with the oily face, having thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing, had turned again to his port. It had had nothing to do with him, of course, but it was an extra pleasant ten minutes that had come his way in the course of a very pleasant evening. Just as Ellen's was a specially fine profile that he had stepped up more closely to inspect for a matter of ten seconds or so that night in Kashmir, twenty years ago. There

had been other fine profiles and pretty faces, too, about the place. That, too, had been a damn good evening altogether. Anyhow the whole episode had provided a neat little couple of lines for bored officers lounging about the Mess Library at Bangalore to smile over sheepishly and say 'twerp' before calling for another drink and making a four for bridge.

Out of the Dak Bungalow compound I put the gear of my thoughts firmly into reverse and started on my back shunt. There was no getting out of it, and I might as well do it now during the long, slow drive that lay ahead of me with its many turns and twists and ups and downs. Usually one let the driver drive one home after a Guest Night; but that night I was stone cold sober. In any case changing the gears and manouvering the wheel helped to think.

Now then, where were we? I was editing the *Forum* wasn't I with Ellen as Assistant Editor? Yes, and the 'Mountain Fever' that my first number had spread in the College was still raging. Hardly had it had time to die down when the *Forum* appeared again and, so far from pouring oil over troubled waters, it added fuel to the flame. There wasn't much of rock and mountain in it, but there was a short article I had myself written giving expression, in veiled language no doubt, to the feelings that had prompted my quest in the exhibition grounds the previous summer and the manner in which it had ended. I suppose I was indiscreet in the way I had "let myself go" in

describing the "Found and Lost" moment, more so in publishing the article under my name instead of anonymously ; perhaps it was a silly thing to do, anyhow. The result was that I was charged, not without justification—I had to admit—with converting the College Journal into a personal column. For my disguised references to "a certain young person" could deceive nobody. They all knew exactly who the certain young person was whom I had found and lost. And what was more that certain young person herself gave every sign of possessing similar knowledge. The clamour was so loud and persistent that I felt in honour bound to resign my post. This was not because my own position as Editor had become difficult but mainly because by continuing as such I should be placing Ellen in an increasingly awkward and embarrassing position. If I didn't leave the *Forum* she would have to. In fact I could now see that I had made a precious mess of the whole thing. In a word the position was as follows : I was hopelessly in love with Ellen and she didn't seem to care the snap of a finger for me ; was not even prepared to speak to me. Everything else was a consequence of this simple fact. Without a doubt my ill considered article had caused the girl the greatest embarrassment. When I had sat down to write it the words had just flowed from my pen coming, as they did, straight from the heart. As she would not speak to me I would write to her ; that is what I had set out to do. But I could see now that my "letter" could only have resulted in

hardening her against me. And the fault was entirely mine.

My place as Editor was taken by that class fellow of hers who had taken such a prominent part in the previous agitation against me. He had always struck me as a bit of an upstart, though I readily concede that jealousy might have played a part in my assessment of his character, because he was one of the fellows Ellen was free with. Shortly after giving up the Magazine I saw something I couldn't at all be expected to like. I was sitting in the outer reading room of the Library, glancing through something, when I saw both of them coming out of the English Seminar. Ellen was in the act of handing him a sheaf of papers—quite obviously the manuscript of an article—and they were talking about it. Presently they parted and she turned to leave the Library. As she did so she looked my way; our eyes met and for a second, held. For a space she stood rooted to the spot and then passed on.

Driving under the great canopy of the stars over that cool, windswept tableland twenty years later I knew what that look had meant. It had said "Come on, you fool, say something". But I didn't know it then. Then I only knew that a minute ago I had seen her give a sheaf of papers to that other fellow and that obviously they contained an article for the *Forum*. I was to discover later that those papers contained no such thing. But they had come out of Fate's bag of tricks to come and stand between me and Ellen

just an that big, fat S & T Major had been thrown up by the currents and cross-currents of the Exhibition to do the same exactly when, without them, something might have come out of it all.

THE HOME TOWN CLUB

That year in Lahore was, in every way, an anticlimax to the warm exuberance of the previous year. Most of my friends had gone down, and of those that remained it was only Bill that I was really intimate with. And he lived with friends, not in the hostel. This meant that his company was not available when I most needed the cheering and softening influence of human society. Lal also had gone away, transferred to the University Law School; Parkash was the only one of the last year's crowd who had returned to the White House at the beginning of the Term. And he was far too young and far too happy-go-lucky a person to make a suitable recipient for the out pourings of a love sick heart. The position vis-a-vis Ellen being what it was, and being practically without friends in the place where I lived, I gave myself up to a slow but long and persistent fever of brooding and melancholy. For hours I would pace up and down my cold, bare room, thinking of God knows what! I still had the goal of the stately old Collector's House in the United Provinces in front of me but found it utterly

impossible to work for it. Unlike last year, when I had worked vigorously and with a will for the B.A. and got the First Class I had determined to get, I could now hardly keep up with day to day class work, let alone prepare for the I. C. S. I could hardly sit down to read for half an hour without throwing away the book and resuming the brooding session. And what made it so bad was the fact that, quite apart from anything else, by virtually ceasing to work I was hardly playing fair by my parents, a good deal of whose hard earned money was going to keep me in Lahore; money they could ill afford to throw away. I knew that; but I also knew that there was hardly anything I could do about it. Things had gone awry.

Cycling back from the University one afternoon in this disturbed and depressing mood I was accosted from behind by somebody with a vaguely familiar voice near the House of the Four Towers. Turning back and dismounting whom should I see climbing down from a *tonga* but Sheila's father! And with him was a tall, well dressed, distinguished looking young gentleman.

"Well met, my boy, how are you?!" exclaimed my uncle heartily as we shook hands. "You are not at all looking as fit and bright as you did in September last". I was sincerely pleased to meet him and said so, also adding something about having been at home on

holiday in September, and being now in Lahore, living in a College Hostel, hoping that that would account for the change in my appearance. "Anyway, let me introduce, my nephew, Sushil Kumar, and Mr. Joshi, of the Punjab Education Department", he said.

Mr. Joshi was no less distinguished in speech and manner than he was in appearance. And he spoke with the calm and somewhat amused assurance that persons conscious of their own personality bear towards others, also perhaps conscious of theirs, but in a different way. It was mid-winter, and it was cold work standing in the open in that deserted place with the shadow of the old House of the Four Towers already beginning to lengthen in the late of afternoon sun. I invited them to a cup of tea in my room in the White House which was just up the road.

"No, thank you, we must be getting along", said my uncle, "but, look here, you come and have tea with us tomorrow. Your aunt will be there—we are on a short visit you know—also Sheila. And perhaps, Mr. Joshi will find time to come. He, too is from the Doab. Do come". I readily and gratefully accepted the invitation and made a note of the address he gave. We then moved off our respective ways.

The next afternoon was a memorable one. The rendezvous was the home of a certain Mr. Dass, a well known member of the Lahore

Bar. He lived in a large "Indian style" bungalow in a quarter populated extensively by members of the legal profession. Actually his house was a famous meeting place for people from our parts, young and old; though curiously enough I had never been there. Anyhow that was where my relatives were staying and when I got there about five o'clock in the evening I found a large party in progress already and tea and *pakorās* going strong.

I was introduced to the host by my uncle who extended to me a warm welcome to what he called the "Home Town Club" and bade me make myself at home. There were so many people there, all apparently talking at the same time, that orderly conversation with any body one didn't know was impossible. My uncle was immediately called back to the circle in which he had been sitting; but before rejoining his friends he took me to the next room where the ladies were. I went up to my aunt and paid her my respects. She was very glad to see me, asked the usual questions about health and safe-keeping, and then told me that Sheila was somewhere in the house, probably with the other girls. By this time somebody had placed a cup of tea in my hands, and a plate of sweets, and I perforce had to sit down on the nearest chair I could find, which happened to be next to her own. I gathered that Sheila was reading at a certain Women's College in Lahore and was living in the college. Presently a number of girls trooped in, laughing and blushing quietly,

and disposed themselves as unobtrusively as possible, mainly in the rear of where their mothers sat. This was an *Arya Samaji* house. There was, therefore, no *purdah* as such. But young girls were not expected to, and in fact did not, shed their reserve. And no young man was expected to go to the ladies room unless invited to do so by the hostess or one of the elderly ladies present; and certainly not address a young girl without a proper introduction. But as we were relations and because her mother obviously wished me to do so, I went across to Sheila to exchange compliments. She was looking charming, dressed in a saffron coloured *Sari* and dark blue blouse which set off her clear beige complexion perfectly. The "air of Lahore" had quite visibly blown through her hair, touching a lock here and a curl there, and a few other things besides. The change in her was subtle but distinct. It was a charmingly shy and sophisticated young lady I saw; one surprisingly different from the plain school girl I had met at home a couple of months ago. But the surprise was mutual. For she was clearly aware of the transformation herself and seemed almost overpoweringly embarrassed by it. Whereas at home we had mixed and talked freely here she dared hardly look at me.

The embarrassment, naturally, was contagious. Therefore after a very few words I left her and collecting my cup of tea from her mother's side drifted into the other room. I must have said something to her when leaving but,

overcome with confusion as I myself was, the only thing I remember is the look of fond pride in her eyes—that, and the large, dark, eyes of her daughter as she looked up for a moment to say good-bye.

I reached the other room somehow—for I was walking like a man drugged—and almost collided with some body else I knew ; actually another cousin whom I had not seen for years. He was from the branch of the family who had not yet turned their backs upon the village, as my own people had done, and consequently, till that minute, we had hardly been aware of each other's existence. As in the case of Sheila's family, here too some rotten old quarrel stood in the way of cordial relations besides the distance which separated the places where we lived. But youth, is youth and blood is thicker than water, and the way we shook hands brought tears to our eyes. In an inexplicably short time it came out that Harish was reading for the Bar at the University Law School and that he was living in Gurudatt House, a hostel-cum-congregation hall built in the memory of a scholar and patriot of a bygone generation. Similar information regarding myself having come forth we decided to quit the place and go to the lodgings of one of us and see how much of each other we could remember. Taking leave of our host and uncle was easy ; they were both busy with their friends and did not mind two youngsters going away early. But

before letting us go the old lawyer charged us to remember that his house was the "Home Town Club" where every exile from Doaba roaming about in Lahore was welcome. This was a full dress meeting but one could come in any time one felt like coming. That it was a full dress meeting was clear from the number of 'exiles' and their wives and daughters present, all apparently quite happy and sparkling in their exile. And they hadn't stopped coming yet, either; for as we were leaving Mr. Joshi walked in through the gate way, faultlessly dressed as before and diffusing the same air of confidence and distinction. He threw a "Hullo" at Harish, but me he regarded in the same half amused, half patronising manner of the day before and said "Seen your auntie and Sheila?" Getting my confirmation he said "That is good", and passed in. "Who the hell is that fellow, anyhow" I asked with some heat as we sought our bicycles. "Why, don't you know?", answered Harish, "He is the son of old Pandit Prem Nath Joshi. He has just come down from Cambridge, where he took a First in some thing or the other. Is an Inspector of Schools now, very lucky". Pandit Prem Nath Joshi was one of the aristocracy of Doaba, a retired educationist himself and a person of consequence and influence throughout the Province. No wonder his son's bearing and address proclaimed his patrician origin. But we were far too preoccupied in eliciting each other's personal history since we had last

met, several years ago, to bother much about schools and their inspectors. We let them be for a while.

As Harish was the elder it was to his place that we went. Gurudatt House was in a locality quite as definite in atmosphere and character as the White House. Though, of course, the character and atmosphere the two places possessed was completely different. The White House was in an obscure and little known part of Lahore and derived its personality from that very obscurity and remoteness. Gurudatt House, on the other hand, was a monument to a fiery patriot and social reformer, every brick of which breathed his strong and robust spirit. In fact it was not far from the pile of buildings and offices sacred to the early days of the Arya Samaj movement of which Gurudatt himself was a vigorous exponent in a later period. This was a Revivalist movement that had originated in the later half of the Nineteenth Century and had as its object the purification of the Hindu religion and society both of which had gathered many corrupt precepts and practices in the course of their long historical development. And it was in the Punjab that the seeds of reform fell upon the most fruitful soil. It was the first time that I had set foot in the midst of scenes of the original ardour and vitality of this great resurgence of reformist thought and I could not but be deeply impressed. Ours was not a Samaj family but no sect or

branch of Hinduism had remained unaffected by its principles and concepts. It was an experience, therefore, sitting in my cousin's room in Gurudatt House, with something of the old spirit of reformist zeal still hanging over the place. Though we did not talk much about religious and social affairs, having so much to say about ourselves and our families, I came away strongly impressed by its atmosphere and associations.

That had been a great evening altogether. I had met Sheila and Harish—the latter after nearly seven years—had been into a home where I could go of an evening now and again, and had spent an hour within an edifice the very air of which carried a virile and invigorating message. The cumulative effect of all these things was to pull me straight out of the dumps and to cheer me up tremendously. That night, after a hearty meal, I fell to work and did not go to bed till I thought I had earned a night's rest.

THE FLAME

I do not remember what happened that Christmas. I must have gone home, I suppose, though nothing stands out in my memory regarding the ten days that broke the Winter Term. But I know that I returned to Lahore a different man. The wonderful evening which had so bucked me up had, in fact, fallen just before Christmas and the long restful days at

home that followed completed the process of setting me on an even keel again. I loved the White House and our little "Egdon Heath" more than ever before; but not on account of the morbid self pity and sense of frustration they had seemed to inspire last month. Rather I liked the place as of old, for its rich, warm humanity and for the sombre, philosophic aspect of its surroundings. I also found it possible to work now and got down to it solidly. But, for the present, I restricted myself to class-work. (One of the results of this return to normality was the receding of the old Collector's House somewhat into the back-ground. It was History that mattered during the next few months). My work being all at the University I resolved to go to the College as seldom as possible. During the holidays, in the placid and orderly routine of our home my feelings regarding Sheila had also sorted themselves out and taken shape. And the shape was much the same as had emerged out of that hour of contemplation by the village tank, four months ago. Only the picture was better developed and its delicate shades bathed in great beauty. Yes, Sheila was the shy and unsoiled Hindu bride, the virtuous wife and devoted life long companion. Her hands would sweeten the daily bread and her love would sweeten life. But this picture of hers, of supreme beauty as it was, was not one to be turned over and looked at frequently. It was a treasured possession, like a child's very special doll, which is kept tucked away somewhere and never taken

out for fear of soiling. Though everybody in the College knew about me and Ellen, about Sheila I mentioned to no one, not even to Bill. Harish was the only person to whom I spoke about her, and that because we were all three of us relations and already knew something about each other. Actually the relationship of his family to hers was a shade closer than ours and it was he who first broached the subject.

"By the way, have you met your other cousin in Lahore, Sheila?" he asked, as we sat in my room one evening in January. "I believe she was at old Dass's party with her mother, but I didn't go and meet them. Should have, though". I told him that I had left them a minute before I had run into him.

"I am glad to hear that; but it is rather strange you know, your going to meet them like that. I thought you hardly knew each other. Last time you two met must have been ages ago, literally". "No", I replied with perfect truth, "last time we met was at home in September last".

"Really", he exclaimed in surprise. "I thought your respective parents didn't quite get on together. It is all family politics, you know; strictly confidential". I said, yes, I had heard something about that, still not quite inclined to say more. But he knew. "In that case, you have also probably heard about the old family argument in regard to you and Sheila", he replied with a chuckle. At which we both laughed and I

related, not without a certain amount of blood rushing up to my cheeks, what grandmother had told me.

"And what about Barkis'?", Harish asked, livening up, "is he willin'?" "Barkis is willin'", I solemnly informed him, at which again we roared with laughter. "Well", he finally pronounced, rounding off the topic, "I can see you are bitten already. She is certainly one of the best ; good-looking, good family, educated, and unspoiled—everything you could want. Get a job and marry her, if you can, and you will never regret it. Though I reckon you will find getting a job considerably easier than getting her, your parents' views in the matter being what they are".

My parents views in the matter—an important snag, that, but one which did not immediately matter. Because till I settled down and became self-supporting there could be no question or thought of marriage whatsoever. As a family we could not afford the luxury of remaining idle. I continued to nourish my love for Sheila, therefore, without giving a second thought to what my people might have to say about the whole proceeding. They were so sensible, anyhow, I told myself.

I have said before that at no time did Sheila drive Ellen out of my heart. And that statement I must here repeat. It is true that on occasions—during the rest of this term for instance—she receded a little from the fore-ground. But my

meeting Sheila at old Dass's party was not the only, not even the primary, cause of that. The fact was that—wrongly, as I now know—I thought she was going out of her way to be unkind to me. She was not prepared to speak to me—she had said so herself—while almost anybody else could go up to her and be assured of a polite conversation. That had perhaps made me a little bitter. Certainly it had been responsible for the “I will show her” attitude and, later on, for the gloom and melancholy which overcame me. Perhaps it cannot be gainsaid that Sheila, in a manner of speaking, caught me on the rebound, but Ellen remained exactly where she was. If I did not hang around in draughty corridors or sit waiting in the Library on the off chance of seeing her come in, it was not because I had forgotten her but because I thought she had been grossly, and without reason, unfair to me and that it was up to her to make amends. I know all this will be rather difficult for the reader to understand. It is so for me, as well.

Returning from a walk late one evening, at some distance from the hostel, I heard the faint but unmistakable s-r-r-r-r of a bicycle. It was February, the month of the year when trees in Northern India are most without leaf, and I was well inside the stretch of road which ran through the graveyard. A more desolate scene would have been hard to find in Lahore. The bare trees, the dustladen, irregularly placed graves, the cold grey twilight of a Winter's eve, the deserted, silent road, and the s-r-r-r-r of a

bicycle in motion. I looked back instinctively but seeing nothing in the half light beyond a blob of dark against the ashen surface of the road kept on walking. The sound closed in on me steadily. I pulled on to one side, as it came nearer, in order to let it pass; but presently it ceased and somebody jumped lightly off a bicycle beside me. "Have you got a match box, please?" Turning half right I found myself standing face to face with Ellen! It was no longer very cold and, simply dressed as she was in a plain silk *sari* and a light coloured woolen pullover, she looked a White Form that had suddenly descended upon the waste from goodness knew where. For a moment I was so overcome with what had happened that I couldn't say a word. Then recovering my composure I hastily produced a box of matches, saying "Good evening, Miss....., Oh yes; you want the lamp lit, don't you? Let me do it for you".

She, too, was visibly taken aback at the encounter.

"Good evening, Mr. Sushil Kumar. I had no idea it was you. Sorry to bother you. Yes, please, if you would light my lamp....." Muttering "No bother at all" I opened the oil lamp of her bicycle and striking a match applied it to the wick. Immediately the whole thing burst into flame, wick and glass and all. I fell back a little, naturally startled, but knowing that it might become awkward if not tackled

at once, proceeded to do so as soon as I could get my handkerchief out. Rolling it into a ball I inserted it into the lamp and clamped it down firmly on the wick. Thus suffocated at source, the flame went out quickly enough leaving a little cloud of black smoke rising from the lamp and the smell of kerosene oil and soot. All this took perhaps a minute during which time my attention had been fully absorbed. Wiping my hands I turned to her saying that she had better not light that lamp—and I was going to say that I could give her my own within a few minutes—when I saw her! She had let go the handle bars; the bicycle was resting against her side; and even against the light coloured *sari* that she was wearing her face stood out white like a sheet; her body stiff and rigid as with breath held in. For a space we stood like that, looking at each other; then softly and imperceptibly her breasts fell and rose again and she said in a voice little more than a whisper, "I thought it was going to hurt you". I told her that it had not hurt me. 'Flowering Wilderness' stood still awhile, the soft breeze fanning the loose folds of her *sari*, her form a patch of white in the surrounding darkness and her close fitting pullover outlining the swell of her marvellous, drooping figure.

Presently she said, in the same low voice, "Let us go, then". And we started moving down the road. I had intended to lend her my own lamp when we passed the White

House but I knew now that that would never do. It would break for ever the tenor of the mood and the moment. In silence we walked down to the "House of the Four Towers" turned on to the High Road and kept on till we came to the street lights. Then she said, "I think you had better go now". We said good-night to each other; she mounted her bicycle and I turned back the way we had come.

Sitting at the wheel of my car returning from the party that night, with the head lights lighting up each succeeding bush and bank, it all came back as if it had happened yesterday. Every second of that walk of about twenty minutes or so, I had known—even as I knew now driving across that windy tableland, under the wide and starry sky—that I had only to say so and the wall that stood between us would be cast down. But I also knew that anything like that would destroy the strange and fascinating beauty of her mood which, captured by a Van Dyke or a Reubens would have fetched a King's ransom. I therefore sacrificed the moment and the opportunity to Art saying to myself that my little request would have to await another time. Little did I know what was to happen before then.

For opening the door on getting back to my room, I found a note from Harish lying on the floor telling me that he had called while I had been away and asking me to go and see him sometime the next day. "I might have something interesting to tell you!" he added. The following afternoon I cycled straight to his

place from the University to be greeted with a broad, pleasant grin." What has happened now?" I asked throwing myself down on a chair. "Read that," he said, handing me a letter, "and see if it means anything to you". The letter was from someone in the village announcing the marriage of one of the girls of the family about a fortnight hence. He had to be there, of course, but various other people had been asked to come and among those who were expected were Sheila and her mother! Her father didn't think he would be able to get leave and my people had also excused themselves for some similar reason. But they had said that they would write and ask me if I could manage to go. That was great news indeed. Sheila at a village wedding with her father and my mother out of the way! What occasion could be more auspicious for getting to know Sheila better than the free and happy atmosphere of a wedding? And I knew that my people were bound to send somebody if they couldn't, or didn't want to, go themselves.

Social obligations as between relations were strictly honoured in those days and it was inconceivable that my family should go unrepresented at a niece's marriage. There was no reason why I shouldn't go. This was not my 'examination' year. I could easily leave Lahore for a few days. I was the eldest son of my parents and as such the obvious person to represent them and to produce their wedding present at the appropriate time. I therefore,

decided to wait a couple of days and if no word came from home in the meantime to write and drop a quiet hint.

THE WEDDING

Sure enough within the next two or three days I heard from my father. He wanted me to go and represent him and mother at the forthcoming marriage. By the same post arrived the wedding present that I was to take with me, a dress for the bride and something, a watch I believe it was, for the groom. As I had no University examination that year, wrote my father, I should have no difficulty in getting leave and, he concluded, it should be a nice change for me to get away from town for a while. "Last time you were home," he said, "you looked as if you could do with some fresh air and good, simple food, both of which you will get down at the village. I think you will enjoy it". "Enjoy it!, I should think I will", I said to myself and jumping on my bicycle rushed off to Gurudatt House to break the good news to Harish and work out a plan of campaign. Getting to his place I found that he himself had just returned from Sheila's College having been to see her regarding the same thing, i.e. our impending visit to the country. (He, being almost a first cousin of hers was expected to, and in fact did, visit her off and on just to see how she was faring and if there was anything he could do for

her. This was something that, in accordance with the usage of those days, 'I couldn't very well do, inspite of her mother's views being what they were; or, indeed, because of them.) Reading my father's letter he proceeded to tell me about Sheila.

She was almost childishly excited about the whole thing. Indian girls in those days did not have very many things to break the even and placid flow of their lives and a relative's marriage was an event less in importance only to one's own. Besides, Sheila had been suddenly uprooted from her home and had been planted in a college in Lahore. That was something which had its compensations but which made home look sweeter than ever. She was therefore very eagerly looking forward to attending the marriage and being among her own people again. The programme was as follows :—

Her mother, attended by a servant, was coming in from her husband's station three days before the appointed day; she was meeting them at the station and they were all three travelling on by a later train the same day. Harish was going to the station to see that she met her mother and did not lose herself wandering about the various platforms and he was staying on to put the whole party on the right train. But he was of the opinion that, taking all things into consideration, we should not travel with them, certainly not I. In fact even my presenting myself at the station that day might be inadvisable. He had already casually mentioned

to Sheila that I might be coming ; now he would equally casually confirm to both her and her mother that I would be coming. And we should both go the following day arriving at the village naturally, and without causing the least embarrassment to anybody, including myself. For he was not sure that my people wouldn't say some thing to me when they heard, as hear they must, that I had gone down along with Sheila and her mother. This looked sound good sense to me and the plan was agreed upon.

Marriages in those days were elaborate affairs. Friends and relatives of the bride's and the groom's families used to start arriving at their respective homes a number of days beforehand ; in any event everybody on the girl's side was expected to be in atleast two days before the groom's party was due to arrive. For there was a great deal of work to be done. Quarters for the visitors had to be arranged, arrangements made for their reception and feeding, the various kitchens set up and provisions properly stored. The actual residence of the bride's father had to be decorated, especially the main front entrance and the large central courtyard where the marriage party was generally fed. These decorations were mostly floral. In particular the *Bedi*—the little bower under which the marriage rites were actually said—was a melody in leaf and flower—a relic of the days when our original Aryan ancestors lived close to Nature and built their camp fires by rippling brooks and in forest clearings in Northern India.

There were these and a hundred other things for the boys to do. The elders, both men and women, concerned themselves with the more serious aspects of the matter, such as expenditure, dowry, and the various religious and semi-religious occasions to be observed from the time the marriage party arrived to its departure two or three days later. But the girls had only one thing to do—sing, dance, and enjoy themselves as much as they possibly could, and a good deal more, judging by the racket they raised. Sheila fully lived up to custom. When Harish and I got home we found her playing the “Dholak” in midst of a room full of girls and children, leading them all in a folk song. Gone was the sophisticated, sari-clad girl of a Lahore College, whom I had seen at old Dass’s party a couple of months back. Instead there was a handsome, hearty Punjabi girl completely at home in her surroundings and full of enthusiasm about it all. In the pandemonium that reigned individual greeting was out of the question. But every body shouted a welcome on seeing us and while we were trying to make our own return compliments heard above the din, the father of the bride appeared on the scene. This uncle of ours was a character. In a large family like ours with many stems and branches there were several ‘uncles’ but he was *the* uncle. Determined and resolute in whatever he undertook, he was blessed with a sense of humour which never deserted him, in good fortune or in bad. He overflowed with it. Actually his whole outlook on life was a fifty-fifty

blend of resolution and humour. He could shed his scruples whenever necessary, but results he always obtained. A truly admirable personality. That was something that not even those who had no reason to think particularly well of him ever denied. He made short work of our salutations, saying, "Now then, you two, take off your boots and suits and get to work. You have come at the last minute as it is. And as for standing around in this room, well if you have brought your wives with you send them up. But *you* get to work ; you and your fine hats". At which we blushed scarlet and retreated down-stairs to the giggles of the entire company.

I have no clear recollection of the course of events of the next few days. The only incidents I recall vividly are those in which some how or other Sheila figures ; that, and our village Band. To take the band first ; It always beat me to make out how the gentlemen who composed it contrived to spend their time ; for the only occasions at which they could pursue their profession—marriages, and visits of inspection by Public Officials—were few and far between in our little part of the world ; and the rest of the time they appeared to be doing nothing, just nothing. But they were always on the job when wanted, and a right proper job they made of it, too. Dressed in apparel of varied and startling hues—invariably discarded Full Dress uniforms—they were present in force at every place and time where their presence was required. Their favourite tune was "God save the King" of which

they knew only the first three bars and which they always played twice over. The various musicians seemed to exercise a fair amount of independence in the composition of their pieces ; but to one thing they most rigidly and unfailingly adhered; rhythm. Actually it was that that made and kept them a band despite all their vagaries in tune and tone. For they all "came to" when the big drum beat or when the kettle-drums rattled. The leader, in time honoured fashion, played a flute ; but it was the master of the big drum who was the king-pin of the show. When he beat his drum not a man dared disobey his summons ; every one brought up his music—and his neck—sharply at his call. A tremendous person.

I have digressed a lot about the band ; but it was a village institution as definite and as unquestioned as the old Tank, with a place in the life of our little community just as clear cut and functions just as precise. It is impossible to think of those few days of ceremony and festivity without thinking of something which flowed through it all as a strong and persistent stream of colour and sound. But to get back to Sheila. There was, of course, no question of my taking advantage of her presence for the purpose of pressing my suit or trying to place myself 'alongside' her. That sort of thing just wasn't done in those days, and if anybody ever gave the slightest indication of such intentions he was sure to be booted out of the place. In any case such a thing simply never

entered one's head. But it was glorious to be under the same roof with Sheila and to see her, bright and happy, bustling in and out of rooms, throwing a word here and a look there. We boys were busy, of course, doing our part of the *bandobast*; there really wasn't much time for people to sit down and talk. And I who had become more or less a stranger to the village and village ways thoroughly enjoyed plunging into the old life again for a while. So, it seemed, did Sheila, for she too had been brought up and had lived largely in a succession of bungalows in the various places where the wandering manner of her parents' life had taken her. I suppose she must have known something about the family legend regarding ourselves but her manner remained perfectly easy and natural and entirely free from embarrassment or awkward inhibitions. Our relationship, though not so close as to positively prohibit marriage, even by the rigid standards of those days, was such that the only form of address we had for each other was 'brother' and 'sister'. This in itself constituted an effective check against any 'romantic' proclivities in conversation, even if we had been so minded. But there were one or two occasions when she dropped the 'brother' and those were occasions to remember. For, with the strict rules of conduct that prevailed then and were accepted, a word, a look, or a fleeting smile went a long way and made serious depredations on the heart.

On the night of the nuptial ceremony

proper we all, I mean the boys and young men went to bed as soon as we could after dinner which was pretty late, for we were to be awakened in the middle of night when the time came for us to take part in the proceedings. The hour for this ceremony under the leaves and flowers of the *Bedi* is set separately for each individual marriage and, as often as not, falls during the night. Certainly it is rendered more impressive if it does. We had gone to bed at about midnight, tired out after a long noisy day, and were woken up apparently five minutes later and told to go below. But going downstairs, with eyes which kept on shutting and feet which felt like blocks of lead, we discovered that we had been called a good hour earlier than we should be required. Immediately this was realised each one of us put himself down in the nearest place where it was possible to assume a posture which would admit of sleep. I sank down on a pile of *durees* and carpets lying heaped up anyhow in a corner, stretched my legs, and closed my eyes. But very soon it was clear that the legs could not remain stretched. The March nights were still chilly, and without covering as I was, I involuntarily huddled up for warmth, becoming more and more awake every minute on account of the cold. Then without any warning I heard a voice: "Here, Sushil, take this". 'This' was a blanket and the voice was Sheila's. It was soft, hardly a above whisper, but not less definitely Sheila's

for that reason. At the moment, however, it was sleep that mattered and it came like magic with the blanket. Again, apparently a minute later, and equally without warning, some body shook me by the shoulder and I heard, "Wake up Sushil, here are your flowers". Sitting up with a start, thoroughly awake now, I found Sheila bending over me, holding out a little tray of flowers, her face clear and white in the cold, pre-dawn light. Quietly emptying the tray in my cupped hands she went and joined the other girls round the *Bedi* where I myself proceeded after sorting myself out of my durrees and blanket. The part of the rites for which we had been summoned was about to commence and it was for that that Sheila had called me and given me the flowers. It is known as *Pushpanjali*—the showering of Flowers—and consists, as the name implies, of Floral offerings to the bride as the Chapter of Blessing is read out from the Sacred Word. This is when the friends and relations of the bride join to bless her and shower flowers upon her as a token thereof. I woke up, therefore, to a scene of singular beauty. The woodland bower under which the rites were being said, the grand cadences of the archaic Sanskrit of the Marriage Service, flower petals raining down from all directions, and the whole place lit up in the clear, cold light of day-break in spring—it was something the beauty and grace of which cannot be adequately described, for it resides so much in emotion and sentiment. Looking across, where the girls were sitting I searched for and found

Sheila—lovely as ever, her eyes alternately smiling and blushing. When the flowers on our side ran out she left her place and brought a large trayful round. Coming to me she said, looking the other way, "Brother Sushil, do you want more flowers?" Did I?

The ceremony at the *Bedi* is followed, some hours later, by a display of the dowry and wedding presents given to the newly married couple by the relatives and friends of the bride. It is a poignant moment, for this is also when the final giving away ceremony takes place. Having lived under her parents' roof so far, the bride prepares to leave them to build a new home among strange people. Her mother and kinswomen sing of her life in their midst and wish her good fortune in her new home—moving, plaintive songs which cannot fail to bring tears to the eyes of her kinsfolk. For some reason Sheila was specially affected and a short time after the ceremony I saw her sitting on the same pile of carpets on which I had slept that morning. She was looking broken and dispirited and I could see that she had cried a lot. I wasn't feeling any too good either, but I knew what I needed—a cup of tea. Tea was something I couldn't get in the village as easily or as good as I could in my own home. Milk was the rule here. But milk can't do what tea can, and in any case it was tea I had been brought up to drink in the afternoon, not milk. I went round to the big kitchen outside, therefore, to see what could be done. After

some tactful handling I was able to induce one of the cook's assistants to put a kettle on the fire and refrain from throwing in the tea, milk and sugar at the same time. The result, much to the surprise of the cook's assistant, was a very passable brew of tea. I had hardly started drinking my glass—there were no cups—when it suddenly struck me that tea might be just what Sheila wanted. She must be missing her tea the same as I was, for she was used to it, too. At once I poured out another glass and carried it inside. She was still sitting on those *durries* in the courtyard, looking very weary and forlorn, and taking no interest in what was going on. I walked straight up to her and holding out the glass said in a quick, soft whisper "Here is some tea, Sheila". Her eyes lit up, she beamed her thanks and took the hot glass between the folds of her *doppatta* ; I turned about and walked away as fast as I had come. That, perhaps, was a courageous thing to do; certainly it was something that could have raised comment. But busy as every body in the courtyard was, packing the dowry and gifts into boxes, I don't think anybody noticed us. In any case I came out and finished my own drink in peace.

That night the marriage party departed and the following morning the guests started doing the same. The proper thing to do is to wait till the daughter and son-in-law return for a brief ceremonious visit a couple of days later. But not many people can do that because of the job or business they must return to. As for

Harish and me, our leave was up and it was time for us to start thinking of getting back. Sheila, like us, had no University examination that year but had a small class examination at the end of April for which, all of a sudden, she remembered that she had done no work at all. In short the proceedings had reached their inevitable anticlimax, a sad empty house, all the noise and colour gone with the newly married daughter, and everybody longing to get back. Her mother wanted to stay on, but seeing that Harish and I were going anyhow Sheila suggested that she might travel with us. After some hesitation and consultation with uncle and grandmother her mother agreed and in due course we three found ourselves in a *yakka* bound for the Railway Station, about seven miles distant.

Our train passed through at about 11 o'clock, I seem to remember, and the journey to the station didn't normally take much more than an hour. But in those days of uncertain axle-pins and obstinate *yakka* ponies anything might happen. For instance, the thing might collapse, or nearly so, necessitating immediate repairs; or the pony might stop somewhere and refuse to go any further, in which case the owner-driver would disappear into the fields and reappear about forty minutes later with another pony. One always set off at least three hours before the known time of departure of the train. Our own journey was not attended by any mishap, but it was not uneventful. Something far more important than a loose wheel and an hour's

detention under the trees, by a roadside Persian wheel, fell to our lot that bright, beautiful Spring morning.

There were several villages between ours and the Railway Station, but there was one bang on the road, strung out on either side of it. Now it so happened that (at the time I am writing of) our village had no school and this one had no band. Whenever, therefore, any luminary of the Education Department visited the school our band went up to receive him with musical honours in consideration of the benefit that we ourselves derived from the institution by sending our boys to it. This was a well known public establishment in our parts, practically every one who could read and write having started learning there. Harish had been a regular student there for several years; I too had attended it for some time. So we both looked out with interest at the old School as we approached it. But, lo and behold ! down the road advanced that immortal band with a solitary horseman riding behind it and the whole village bringing up the rear—quite clearly making for the school. The Insepector of Schools ! there could be no doubt about that. We pulled on to one side to enable him to pass and settled back to enjoy this unexpected spot of entertainment. As the procession drew near Sheila remarked, straining her eyes, "Is that Mr. Joshi?". And sure enough it was. Coming closer he looked at us casually but suddenly became interested—on seeing Sheila, it seemed to me. Anyway he rode up to our *yakka* and

it was her he greeted first, by raising his hat; a somewhat unusual proceeding among our sort of people those days. "This was naturally something that embarrassed Sheila a great deal, with all those people standing there staring, and the band banging away, and every thing. Realising this Mr. Joshi turned to us and said a few words, which we did not hear very well because of the noise, but understood to mean that he had been posted to the Doaba Division and was out on a tour of inspection. I don't know what we said in reply. Saying good bye, first to Sheila and then to us two, he wheeled his horse round and passed into the School.

The whole incident hadn't taken more than a couple of minutes but upset Sheila a little who became quiet as a result of it. In fact we were all rather subdued when, on reaching the station, we discovered that the train was running about an hour behind time. This had a strangely enlivening effect on all of us. One of us suggested that we should take advantage of the delay by eating our lunch while waiting for the train, a plan with which no body could find any fault and which was immediately put into effect. In due course the train arrived, we climbed in, and were back in our respective rooms in Lahore just as the evening lights were coming on. A very "full" week, if ever there was one.

THE CHASE

The day after the party the Colonel arrived at Plane Tree village on one of his periodic visits of inspection and with him came the young gentleman, now fully recovered, who had been the original cause of my staying there. He had seen the normal "Situation Report" in which I had made a brief mention of the "Suspect" but wanted to know more about the case. Actually I was writing a note on the same thing when he arrived and gave him a full verbal report straight away, keeping nothing back, not even my own purely personal and private doubts and difficulties. The Colonel laughed away my twinges in regard to conscience saying that a month in the cooler never did a fellow any harm. "But", he said, "I don't know what to make of all those horsemen you say were knocking about the countryside that day. We certainly didn't see any today". I, too, hadn't, when out on my own patrol in the morning. As a matter of fact, now that I came to think of it, I didn't seem to remember seeing any horseman from the moment the "Suspect" was arrested to the time I rode into camp about an hour later, even on the day in question. What is more, I didn't seem to be able to recall seeing a *white* horse in the whole lot of animals seen that day. The Colonel agreed that all that was very curious and certainly worth investigation.

"I will get the C. I. D. on to that," he finally said with decision, "we are not good enough Policemen for the job. But what do *you* want to do now? I don't want to bring you back to Headquarters just yet; nothing for you to do. Do you think you would like to run about the countryside for about a week or so looking for friend Ismail Shah? Go over the water if you like and let us see you back in Rurpindi by, say, the 20th. I expect I will have a job for you by then". Nothing suited me better. I was getting tired of the dull routine of existence at Plane Tree village and welcomed the chance of a free lance trek in the hills. It was arranged, therefore, that as soon as I had handed back the Post to its permanent commander I should set off with a small party in a truck and do whatever I could to trace the whereabouts of Ismail Shah. I was also to make such further inquiries and observations relative to the temper of the countryside and future indications as were possible. To benefit from their local knowledge, specially the known movements of Ismail Shah, I was to take a man from the local Police with me. The route I was to follow, the places I was to visit, and all the details of "administration" were left entirely to me. Not that there were many. It was a comparatively simple expedition to organise.

A couple of days later then found my little party on the road. We were ten, all ranks, including the Village Constable who was to act

as my friend, philosopher, and guide. Our transport consisted of a light truck and a jeep. The jeep led the way carrying the police man besides myself and the driver, and the truck followed with the Senior NCO in-charge. Before leaving I had spent a couple of hours studying maps of the locality in which I was to ramble about as also the Police reports regarding Ismail. Putting these together I had worked out a plan of campaign: I decided to follow a track running almost due West to a ford on the river, cross over and continue on the other side as far as what looked like a township of some size, then turn back taking a more southerly (and apparently a better known) route and return to the Post from the South-west. When marked out on the map my proposed route resembled roughly a trapezium in shape the sides of which added up to about three hundred miles in length. Just about the right distance to cover in the time we were allowed considering that our task was to investigate and observe and not to win any records in the matter of speed. As far as I could see all the places that Ismail was known to have raided or passed through in the course of his flight lay within the trapezium. Bijnor—the town on the other side that had attracted my attention—was not one of these places, but his movements indicated a general advance in its direction. That, and its obviously central position on the communications system of that remote region decided me to make it the first

objective of my journey. Perhaps something would come our way when we got there. Without telling anybody therefore, without even inviting the comments of the Policeman on my plan, I set the nose of my car towards that ford on the river and beckoned the truck to follow me.

It was getting well into September now and already there was the promise of Autumn in the air. Cool as the plateau was the advent of Autumn was welcome as ever for its keen, cold gusts of wind, and for the glorious play of colour it brings to leaf and tree. This is my favourite season for leave and all day long I thought of nothing but that. As soon as I got back to Headquarters I would ask for the month due to me. How would I spend it? In the usual way. A couple of days at home in the beginning and the end, and the rest on real holiday. I would go to the Kumaon Hills this time and look up a couple of old friends who had retired from the Service and had gone back to their native valleys. I was so engrossed in planning my holiday that we reached the ford about tea time without my having given a moment's thought to the business I was supposed to have in hand. And this in spite of the administrative matters I had had to attend to on the march, such as halting for rest and food. The men looked at me curiously as we debussed at the ford thinking perhaps that I looked slightly madder than usual. Telling the senior N C O to set about making tea I went down to the water's edge

myself to see what the depth and speed of the current were like. These I estimated to be nowhere such as not to allow both our vehicles to cross over with perfect ease. But as it was already afternoon I decided to halt there for the night. Sitting on a stump drinking my mug of *chah* I told the men to start cooking the evening meal and prepare to spend the night where they were. "We cross over tomorrow", I said in conclusion by way of information, throwing a look over the stream. The effect of this simple statement was profound. The men immediately registered approval in their faces and the Havildar declared that the plan was sound. "Yes, Sir", he beamed, "We will go over tomorrow. That is a very good scheme". Soldiers like to be told where they are going and if you can name a new place their approval is assured. In short their reaction was characteristic. I do not know if the reaction of the old Constable was characteristic of the Police Force or not but he certainly was far from pleased at the prospect. On the other hand he showed considerable consternation. Why should we go across? Ismail was certainly hiding somewhere behind us. Besides, the jurisdiction of his Police Station did not extend over the water. It would be most unwise to go across. Here was something I had not bargained for —pretensions to divided authority. Clearly the only thing to do was to scorch them before they became dangerous. Looking him full in the eyes I told him, in a clear, steady voice, so that all might hear, that the matter of jurisdiction

did not concern him, and further that his duty was to render me such advice and assistance as I might require of him and not question the steps I might decide to take. This seemed to come to him like a shock. It might have been the way I spoke or—it occurred to me even as I was speaking—perhaps because he thought that his opinion was worthy of better treatment than summary rejection; I do not know, but he regarded me for a while, stiffened to attention, saluted and fell back.

The next morning after a breakfast of tea and biscuits, we struck camp and crossed the ford without any difficulty on to the other side.

The "other side" was a small border principality ruled by a feudatory chief, consisting largely of high rugged mountains through which threaded one of the lesser known and more difficult passes into Central Asia. Its inhabitants according to the local Gazeteer, were noted more for their pre-occupation with a small and precarious trade with certain Central Asian markets rather than for any warlike propensities; though, in common with all peoples of Mongoloid origin, they were known to possess a streak of cold blooded cruelty. They lived a life apart and had taken no part, at any rate no active part, in the recent upheaval. But, it seemed to me, that for those very reasons the place offered fruitful soil for intrigue and, what was more, an obvious refuge for a fugitive from justice.

The Survey of India map on which I worked out my course had helped me to form some sort of a picture of the country I was going into. The wall of high mountains, running roughly North-East and South-West, was pierced by a long, narrow re-entrant about a mile wide at the mouth and about fifteen miles long. At the top, literally up against the great mountain wall, was Bijnor. The capital of the State was situated in the belt of low country between the range of mountains and the river, about twenty miles above the ford at which we had made the crossing. Three major routes converged on Bijnor: one down from High Asia, one from the capital over the saddle of a low range, and the one up which I was myself advancing. The capital was, no doubt, connected by a fashionable motor road with the rest of India, but Bijnor was the obvious and natural focal point of the communications of the region and that was why I was going there. All this the map had more or less prepared me for. But what the map had not prepared me for was the contrast that met the eye. The high mountains were completely bereft of vegetation of any sort, except possibly grass in places, but the valley below was a "fair land, of green hills and clear running waters". The place was magnificently wooded; it did the eyes good to see fine old trees and 'picture post-card' patches of cultivated ground here and there. If the table land behind us had held out the promise of autumn,

this nook in the mountains contained its fulfilment; for autumn was here already. The leaves were beginning to turn a faint gold and there was a distinct sharpness in the air which could hardly be described as merely "cool". Into this mellow, cold, wet, sweet world we advanced much to the subdued wonder and admiration of every body. About 11 o'clock we sighted Bijnor, a town of considerable size as hill towns go, built on a small ledge like formation which seemed to stick straight out of the foot of the mountain-side and overhang the floor of the re-entrant like a balcony. I decided to halt there and eat our mid-day meal before proceeding further because, according to the ancients, it is no good trying to tackle a task or land up in a strange place on an empty stomach. While the inevitable tea was being brewed and last night's left over food warmed up I walked on ahead a little to stretch my legs and smoke a quiet cigarette. The place was so beautiful and of a beauty so soft and rich that it seemed sacrilegious to bring motor vehicles into it. And yet who knew what manner of crime and cruelty might not lurk in the midst of it all? Turning back I saw something which sharply awakened my interest. The Policeman, who had hitherto been so glum and indifferent, had suddenly become friendly with the men and was presiding over the cooking operations as if he were the 'big brother' of them all: "Look, you mugs", he was telling them, "*this* is the way to stir

the curry ; not *that*. What the Police don't know is not worth knowing". And then, looking them all over, "Many a smart fellow has found that out before now, and perhaps it wont be long before some one else does the same." At which remark the entire section roared with laughter. So did I—at the time—but it was to give me food for thought later.

THE STREET OF THE VEILED WOMEN

Arrived at Bijnor I proceeded directly to the residence of the Governor or *Hakim* of the town and, it transpired, distrubed the tranquility of his day just as he was preparing to retire for his siesta. But the arrival of a dozen armed men in his front courtyard was hardly something he could refuse to take notice of, specially with all the racket his dogs raised. Presently an old gentleman, dressed in thick, shapeless woollen robes and wearing an enormous 'Astrakhan' type of hat appeared at the door step and stood gaping at us through astonished, sleep heavy eyes. It was, indeed, a remarkable scene, now that I come to think of it. The large, fierce looking dogs straining at their leashes and barking away for all they were worth, the section standing about loosely in an irregular line with myself in front ; and the old man standing staring at us with wide open eyes. The following conversation, carried on

performe at a very high pitch took place :

Self: Are you the *Hakim* of this town ?

Him: I am going to sleep ; go away.

Self: I have come all the way from Rurpindi to see you. Can you tell me where my men and I can stay for a couple of days ?

Him: Go to the *Mehman Khana*.

Self: Where is that ?

Him: He will show you.

"He" was an individual who had appeared from the interior of the house and was placidly watching the proceedings from over the old man's shoulder. With a sudden display of energy the *Hakim* landed a single clout with closed fist on his back which sent the poor man staggering into our midst. Overcoming my surprise at this somewhat drastic proceeding I shouted "Thanks, I am going to sleep myself now ; will come back in the afternoon". Which apparently suited the old man for he shouted back, "Yes, come in the afternoon."

That concluded the extraordinary interview. Then, led by the dazed "he" we proceeded to the *Mehman Khana*, or Guest House, a short distance away. It was a small two storied affair standing in a walled compound similar to the one we had just left and, like it, built on the rising ground at the foot of the mountain side

about half a mile from the town. There were two rooms on the ground floor and a neat little one on top; the rest of the "top" being an open terrace. To reach the upper story one had to go up a ladder set in the courtyard. In spite of this somewhat inconvenient means of access I selected the upper room for my own use. The men quickly disposed of themselves down stairs and the vehicles were parked in a corner of the court-yard. Telling the Havildar to detail a sentry to keep an eye on the place I climbed up to my room much to the surprise of the old care-taker who was indeed completely bewildered by what had happened and was happening. I afterwards discovered that these top rooms were public reception rooms and not rooms meant to be lived in. But I found mine pleasant and airy; and what was more, my camp cot set and the bed made, into which I hopped as soon as I had divested myself of the less essential clothing.

Over my mug of tea about an hour and a half later I turned things over in my mind and began to wonder if I had done a foolish thing after all in coming to this outlandish spot with a very small party. As far as I could see the local inhabitants had not shown the least interest in us. That was curious; not to say ominous. Surely motor vehicles could not be things they saw every day, and yet here we were, complete with jeep and truck and nobody had taken the slightest notice of us—except those persons, of course, on whose attention we had forced

ourselves, such as the old *Hakim*, his servants, and the caretaker of the Guest House. Did that signify anything? And another thing; was there a telegraph office in the place? I had not observed a line coming up but there might be one running over the foot hills from the capital. Must find out. The young fellow at Plane Tree village knew my programme, but I should have made certain of communications before starting. That Police chap could look into that. Perhaps he and the Havildar had better wander down to the town and see what they could pick up. And it was time I went down to see the old bird myself.

Coming down, washed and dressed, I was met at the foot of the ladder by the Police Constable and my Havildar, both obviously waiting for orders. After giving a few preliminary instructions regarding camp arrangements I told them both to go into the town, find out about the telegraph, and anything else they could, and come back before it got dark. I was about to move off when the Constable saluted and said, "Hadn't we better go in plain clothes, Sir"? This was something the wisdom of which was beyond doubt. I said "Yes" feeling a bit sheepish at not having thought of it for myself. "The Police!" I remember saying to myself, "they *will* have the last word".

The old gentleman was thoroughly awake now. Rested and refreshed after a couple of hours in bed his graciousness on the present

occasion more than made up for its lack earlier in the day. Immediately on seeing me the dogs (which were chained in a row to the plinth of the house) started barking which; was a signal for their master to come out of the house and meet me in the courtyard. The preliminary salutations over we proceeded upstairs by means of the usual ladder, passing directly over the heads of the infuriated dogs. Hot on our heels followed servants bearing trays of tea and things to eat. The reception room was a pleasant one, similar in design and construction to the one which served as my temporary quarters but, naturally, far more richly and comfortably furnished. Seated on the *Hakim's* rugs and cushions with a cup of steaming green tea before me I told him briefly who I was and what I was looking for.

"Ah, pray forgive me for my behaviour this morning. I had no idea you were a King's officer. Everything I have is yours", protested my host but added with a chuckle, "though you did land up just as I was going to sleep, you know." I agreed that I had come at the wrong time and hoped that by so doing I had not interfered seriously with his rest. "No," not all, not at all laughed the old man, "I have made up for the few minutes lost, indeed I have. But about this Ismail Shah of yours. It is such a common name. Go into any hamlet inhabited by Mussulmans, you are sure to find one there. Here there are several Ismails that I know of; some local folk and some migratory traders".

"Yes; but this is a very special Ismail. A man with twenty kidnapped women in his train would surely get known".

"I don't know", replied the *Hakim* thoughtfully, "I don't know about that. Let me put it this way. In the course of my duties I have heard of the person you allude to and I have instructions from the Chief to arrest him and send him to Rurpindi. To the best of my knowledge no such person has entered the valley. But I say that if, by intimidation or any other means, he kept those women quiet and went about in an unconcerned, natural manner himself *I would not know* that such a person had passed through my jurisdiction even if he did so. You should try the Street of the Veiled Women."

Catching the unspoken query in my eyes he went on.

"Let me explain. It is like this. There is a regular and recognised traffic in women between certain places in India and certain places beyond there"—he broke off to point at the lofty, rugged, mountain side in the shadow of which we sat talking—"Mostly they get hold of little girls but sometimes young women also. This place, actually the street I mentioned a minute ago, is the clearing house of this traffic. If Ismail brought those women here it was certainly for trafficking. No doubt about that. And it is there that you should look for them". He sat back, sipping his tea,

evidently leaving it for me to make the next move. After a moment of silent bewilderment I said: "But this is horrible".

"It is the custom of the country", rejoined the *Hakim* emphatically, "I repeat that if a woman kept quiet, or *was* kept quiet, while passing through the valley, there would be no occasion for me to take action. And once out of here, well, who ever heard a cry in the High Mountains?" Once again he pointed towards the terrific mountain wall that rose sheer into the sky.

"I see," I said, hardly knowing what I saw, "but one word; why is that street called the Street of the Veiled Women?"

"Because those women are veiled, the others are not. Life in this part of the world is hard and our wives and daughters have to work; work in the home, in the fields, in the orchards, everywhere. But not *those* women, they are veiled". We sat in silence for a few minutes; then rising to go I asked him if he could, in any way, help me in finding out, if the population of that street had recently been augmented through the agency of friend Ismail. I did not care to go there myself or send any of my men. He said he could certainly send for some of the *agents procurer* for me to question but the result of such an inquiry was a foregone conclusion. I had no doubt myself that it was.

Back in the *Mehman Khana* I lay full length on my camp bed contemplating the extraordinary story I had just heard. The sun had set over the valley and most of the mountain side but it still lingered on the top. Looking up, the crest of the high range was aglow with crimson and scarlet; the valley below was a mass of blue turning black every minute. And in between, on the ledge of rock on which the little town was perched, rained a deep mauve dusk. A scene and a moment of surpassing grandeur and beauty. And yet right in the midst of it all flourished a vicious and a degrading human practice. By and by lights began to twinkle in the distance and presently my own orderly brought up an oil lamp into the room and began setting a rough and ready table for a rough and ready dinner. It had certainly become cold with sun down but I felt disinclined to shut any of the windows. There was a strange heaviness in the air; it hardly seemed to be moving. I was on my second cigarette after dinner when the ladder outside started creaking and a moment later the Havildar of the Guard and the Policeman stepped into the room. In answer to my "well?" they reported somewhat as follows:—

The place was not on the Telegraph net. They had purchased some fresh provisions for the party. There was only one place where information regarding Ismail or the women he had kidnapped might be forthcoming. (They did not name the place; but left me into doubt as to

what they meant. In any event I knew). And how was that to be done? By going there, obviously, said the Policeman. And he went on to say that as he and I were the only two persons in the party who could speak the language, or at least make ourselves understood, the investigation would necessarily have to be carried out by us. That decided me. Without raising my voice, without taking my legs off the table, without even taking the cigarette out of my mouth I said, "We leave tomorrow at 9 O'clock". When the full meaning of these words had sunk into him he vehemently protested. "Leave tomorrow? Why, we can never complete the investigation by then, even if we work all night." "We are not pursuing the investigation any more", I said in the same quiet, even voice.

"But why not? That is what we came here for, didn't we? To go away....." He did not complete that sentence.

"We leave tomorrow at 9 o'clock. And I don't expect any one—understand, any one—to leave the camp tonight." And this to the Havildar "I want a haversack meal prepared for the road. That is all".

The whole filthy business had suddenly begun to stink and I wanted to get out of the place. The matter of fact way in which the Policeman had talked about going and starting house to house inquiries in what was obviously the chief Red Light district of a vast geographical region was sickening. Perhaps that was the right—

probably the only—way of going about the job; but I was a soldier and not a Police agent and my men were soldiers. Let the Commissioner write to the Ruler and demand a report; or let him send out a proper Police party to sort things out. As for myself I wanted to get back to the clean honest life of the barrack square and of the line of march. Bijnor and the valley had suddenly become for me the very haunt and habitat of evil out of which I wanted to take myself and my men as fast as was possible.

TILL OCTOBER THEN

A wall of wind struck us as our little convoy climbed up the steep bank of the river to the tableland beyond. It was a most remarkable natural phenomenon; on the other side, in the lee of the great sweep of high mountains it was certainly cold but the air had seemed to hang still and motionless. South of the river it was warmer no doubt—I had to discard my woollen muffler and driving gloves—but the whole place seemed to be heaving with wind and blast. It had taken us the best part of the day to make the crossing; partly because once out of the valley I had decided to stick to my originally planned southerly and longer route for the return journey and also because we had had some trouble with the truck on the way. Starting punctually at 9 O'clock I looked in for a minute at the *Hakim's* place just to tell him that I did not want to see those men

from the town and that I was pushing off. If he found out anything would he please communicate with the Commissioner at Rurpindi in the usual way. As was to be expected he was surprised at this sudden change in plan and appeared concerned that the way I had been received might have had something to do with it. I reassured him on this score, though not without difficulty. Refusing politely but firmly his invitation to *nashta* I said good-bye and doubled back to the vehicles as soon as I decently could, lest I should weaken in my resolve of immediate departure.

We had been on the road barely half an hour, as a matter of fact we were still feeling our way down the ledge to the valley floor, when the inevitable reaction set in and I began to wonder if I had been justified in running away from Bijnor without completing, indeed without even starting, the job I had been sent out to do. I told myself that I was, and why, but all day long I was torn with doubts and misgivings. Once on the broad, windswept platform of the plateau, however, all doubts and misgivings disappeared, as if by magic. They just ceased to exist, blown away by the wind as it were. We had got there about sundown and obviously couldn't go on any further that night. Selecting a couple of dips in the ground in which to bivouac for the night, one for the men and one for myself, I told the Havildar to set up the camp while I stole down to the river myself for a bath. I hadn't had one for two days. The water was beautiful and clear but it was so cold that I ran out of it after no more than

a couple of minutes and stood on the bank numbed and shivering, the wind cutting through the body like a knife. Drying myself as quickly as I could I tied the towel round my waist and grabbing my clothes, raced up to my "quarters". Fortunately I found the camp bed put up, the valise rolled open, and my great coat lying on top of everything as usual. Putting it on I buttoned it up to the chin and then proceeded to dig into my pack for a certain flask I always carry about with me in camp. A good, neat tot taken in full view of the astonished orderly completed the first stage of recovery. Life and blood began to flow back and after a couple of minutes I felt equal to the dressing operations. When these were completed I noticed that that sagacious gentleman, my orderly, was standing in front of me with a glass tumbler in one hand and a chagul of water in the other. The inference was clear! Without a word I poured myself a *chota peg* took a sip and settled back on the camp bed, at peace with myself and the world. Not the sort of thing I normally do, because I regard drinking whisky as a social function and, generally speaking, take it only on certain occasions, and in a certain manner. (Tossing off a teaspoonful to stave off pneumonia is another matter). But, the feel of clean, dry clothes was good, the wind which a few minutes ago had been bitter and cold was now nice and dry, the sunset was rather pretty, and the whisky was good, too. So I rolled back the valise a couple of rolls, propped myself up, lighted a cigarette, and took another sip.

"The heady wine of the past !"—where had I read that ? Got it. In Stuart Cloette's book, "Watch for the Dawn", towards the end, on the very last page, in fact. "In memory the wine is headier, the shade sweeter.....there is no woman like the remembered woman, no home like our childhood's home". Something like that if not exactly the same.

There is no woman like the remembered woman. That had done it. A long journey lay between me and sleep now, a journey that there was no cancelling or putting off. But I had grown used to these journeys and had come to enjoy them, even if they had seemed a little tiresome at first.

On returning to Lahore after the wedding I had found disconcerting news in store for me. That arbiter of our destinies, the University Professor of History, casually mentioned in class one day that he intended to give us a little test before we broke up for the summer holidays towards the end of April. And, after the manner of University Professors, he dreamily went on to prescribe the course for the purpose of the test. I forget the details now but remember it was exactly double the course covered in class. Watching the look of consternation pass over our faces he asked us what we were worried about. It was only a private, unofficial matter between him and each one of us. He merely wanted to know how we were doing and how each one of us stood in relation to his work. And as for the course, well, if any of us had believed that he was not expected

to work independently of what was happening in class it was his own fault. But he imagined such students would be few.

I do not know if such students were few or many but they certainly included me in their number. I knew quite well that the result of this private, unofficial deal between me and the Head might well be an interview in the latter's office in the course of which I might be informed that it would be to my advantage to spend another year in the same class. That, of course, would never do. The next month was, therefore, spent in steady, though by no means hard, work. There was neither the incentive, nor the necessity for the all night sittings of the previous year. I worked during the day and for the most part in my room visiting the College but rarely and that to borrow a book from the library or return one. Ellen, being an "examinee" that year, had had no classes from February onwards though she certainly came in to work in the Library or meet teachers. But our visits never coincided and I didn't see her at all during the month or so that remained before the end of the term. On the other hand Sheila I did see twice or thrice, indeed once she came to tea in my room. Harish and I used often to go out walking together in the evenings and once or twice we dropped into Sheila's place to see how she was getting on. Sitting in the visitors' room of her hostel one evening I extracted from her the promise that she would come in to see me before leaving for home. The day was fixed and the details arranged. On the appointed day Harish escorted her to the

White House in a *tonga*. She was the sophisticated college girl again, looking very cool and fresh in her light summer clothes and charmingly concerned at the "wilderness" in which I lived. We spent a very pleasant couple of hours talking about ourselves, the days down in the village, books, examinations, and other things. As we were preparing to go—my duties as host finished, I could now go out with my guests—who should roll up on his bicycle but Bill Cox? Having cycled down to see me all the way from the other end of the town I couldn't very well tell him to go away. And as our own little test had taken place that morning and we were packing up, this might well be our last meeting before next October. I made my excuses to Sheila for being unable to accompany her to her hostel but as Harish was going in any case it did not really matter. So I watched them drive away in their *tonga* and turned to make a fresh pot of tea for my friend.

"Well, my lad", he said lowering himself into a chair, "you have been a bad boy, trying so hard to get a line on Ellen these two years and having this other girl up your sleeve all the time. Who is she, any how?" I halted dead in whatever I was doing and turned round to face him. I could see that he was joking. But I knew that what he said was true enough though I had never looked at it that way. Bill and I had drifted apart a little that term. We met in class every day, of course, and were still as friendly as ever, but there could be no denying that the old intimacy had become watered down to some extent. We two had been parti-

cularly friendly members of a very friendly crowd, the "gang". But the crowd had scattered, the strong common interest in literature that had kept us together and that had seemed to find such a peculiar haunt in my large, bare room had snapped. We had, therefore, begun to be less and less dependent on each other. The appearance of Harish, soon after the magazine episode, when I most needed human company and sympathy, completed the process. But seeing old Bill in my room after so long and looking at his frank, honest face it all came flooding back. I hadn't told him about Sheila before, but did so now. I also told him about the lamp of Ellen's bicycle.

"Well" he said judicially, putting down his cup, "it seems to me that you have got to make up your mind. Sheila is charming, good looking, your own kind. But you say that you are equally, if not more, in love with Ellen. Beats me, that does. And, incidentally, if you still care for Ellen as much as you say you do you were a damn fool not to have followed up that lighting-the-lamp episode".

Yes, indeed ; why hadn't I followed it up ? A succession of things had intervened ; the wedding, the silly little test, Ellen's own examination, Sheila, Harish and what not. But it was no use telling myself that I hadn't had the time to see Ellen because of these things. I certainly could have seen her—the very next day—if I had tried. "You might find that you

have delayed it far too long already", Bill was saying. "Their examination isn't over yet—and it is a pucca University examination. She must be pouring over her books every minute of the day shut up in her room at home and you might not be able to see her at all before you go. And, another thing, I am certain that you have mostly yourself to blame for what you call her "attitude" towards you. It is your lofty and stuck up attitude that has done it, now that I come to see it all. And then there is this cousin of yours. Well, I don't know about *that* ; but Ellen has suffered a lot on your account".

"How has she suffered on my account?" "I will tell you ; that is what I came here for. I am coming straight from old Walker's—dropped in to say good-bye. Am leaving tomorrow, by the way. Well I found a number of English Honours *wallahs* in his room, having tea and talking examination stuff—same as we used to last year. Ellen was one of them. Almost the first thing Walker said to me was to ask if I knew what had happened to you. 'Havn't seen him for ages' he said, 'he has become a complete stranger'. That is another thing you want your ears pulled for. However, that is not the point. The point is that as soon as your name was mentioned the whole lot of those chaps started talking sarcastically, saying that you were most likely busy starting another magazine or founding another Alpine Club, and such tripe. Ellen listened to all that and, when they had finished, said that, in her opinion, you were one of the few

persons in the College who deserved some respect. Saying that she left, and soon after her, the rest of them".

"But how was I to know....." I tried to butt in.

"Hold on", said Bill sharply, "you havn't heard it all yet. When those fellows had cleared out old Walker told me that the poor girl had had to put up with no end of nagging and bullying from boys and girls over you. You were her secret admirer, her silent admirer, her rejected admirer and God knows what else. She was fond of you, hated you, and died for you according to individual fancies and opinions. She had, and was, sticking it all. But you havn't even said "How do you do" to her all these weeks and months. That is all. Take it all in and figure it out for yourself. Now let us get out of this dump and go and eat some where. No, not here. Then we will go to a flick. Won't see another together for five months."

A great wave of revulsion surged up inside me. There was sentiment and emotion around Sheila but Ellen was Poetry and Romance, a figure in Golden Dreamland. Why had I not seen through all that before? Why had I been such a fool? Why? Spending the night in bitter self-reproach, I went down to the College first thing the next morning. Her class had two papers that day, six solid hours of writing. These were going to be her last papers in the

examination and she might not come to the College after them. At a few minutes to six that evening, therefore, I was outside the University Hall determined to take what looked like my only remaining chance of meeting her.

It was usual those days—I suppose it still is—for friends and relations to meet candidates outside the examination hall and offer words of approbation or encouragement in accordance with whether the paper just finished had gone off well or otherwise. In particular girls were sure to find mothers and sisters waiting for them outside. Not being a “local” and consequently having never had people meet me like this—I hadn’t thought of this at all. But on arriving at the University I found that I was one of a fairly numerous crowd, all there for much the same purpose as myself but most of them with far better credentials. I couldn’t see any of Ellen’s people around; but soon the hour struck and the great building discharged its population of the two thousand odd students it had housed for the last three hours. I had taken my stand at one of the two main exits of the premises, the one I thought Ellen was most likely to take on her way out and the one she did actually take. But she wasn’t alone. With her was her mother and beside them trotted her little sister. Ellen was looking tired and fatigued, the fingers of her right hand smudged with ink,—but she also wore that happy and relieved look that comes with a job well done. Mother and daughter were talking away

pleasantly—evidently about the exam—and obviously that was no time for a stranger to butt in. At least so I thought. I moved back into the grounds a few paces, trying to lose myself in the crowd. But there was a clear line of sight just when she looked my way. Seeing me Ellen's eyes registered a succession of changes in expression, the sum total of which was "I have seen you". Presently they were outside the gate. I watched them walk past Kim's Gun and turn left, in the direction of home. Then they were gone. "Till October then", I said to myself, and turned away to look for my bicycle.

SHEILA

But that October I was not destined to be anywhere near Lahore. A swift and a sudden change came over my fortunes. For, on getting home, I stepped straight into a family crisis.

My father's health, which had been indifferent for a number of years past, had begun to give cause for concern. It had not actually broken down but he had been given a couple of warnings. It was clear that he could not afford to go on taking liberties with his body by continuing the strenuous existence of a public servant with outdoor duties and would have to go on premature retirement. But the prospect immediately raised a grave financial problem for the family. Being

'Service' people we certainly lived in 'style' but there was very little backing of hard cash to keep it up once the monthly salary stopped coming in. It was imperative, therefore, that I, the eldest son, should become self-supporting as soon as possible. It was costing quite a bit to keep me in Lahore. With that important item of expenditure removed, and with Father's pension plus private income, the family should be able to live in moderate comfort.

There was, indeed, no particular reason why I should stay on in Lahore. I had already graduated, and quite well too, and there was nothing to stop me from reading privately for the Civil Service examination if I wished to. In any case Father couldn't afford to keep me at the University any longer. He had, actually, found work for me. The North Western Railway (which served our part of the world) were embarking upon an extensive construction programme in the coming cold weather and were recruiting a large additional staff for employment on the various projects. Through the kindness of a friend Father had secured for me an apprenticeship in the Engineering Department of the Railway. The apprentices were to be trained through the hot weather and posted out as Temporary Inspectors when work on the projects started in October. There were chances of confirmation for those who did well and my father's friend had arranged that should I apply to be allowed to enter for the I.C.S. I would be permitted to do so. In any case the job itself,

though one of subordinate status to begin with, opened up a fine career for any hardworking and not over ambitious youngster and I was glad enough to take it. Because, apart from considerations of loyalty, no one knew better than I that, as things stood, the chances of my coming out successful in a competitive selection were practical nil. All that I was doing in Lahore was getting more and more entangled in a hopeless emotional mess. I was not, in any sense, 'preparing' for anything. It would do me a world of good to get out into the sun and the air, where I belonged, and put my shoulder to a rail.

Nevertheless the thought of breaking with Lahore so completely and so without warning was a sad one. Never again would I sit with Bill in old Professor Walker's study before a blazing fire, and never again would I cycle down to the College on a cold and frosty winter morning for an early lecture. The White House with its indescribable wonder and charm was also a thing of the past. Harish and Sheila ; well, I might meet them again, perhaps ; but what of Ellen ? and what of next October ?

Before I left home my mother had a little talk with me.

"You met Sheila down in the village, didn't you, Sushil ?" she asked, "and perhaps you have been seeing her in Lahore ?".

I said, "Yes, Mother, why do you ask ?"

"Because it can never be", she replied, looking up at me "Dont ask me why, dear boy. It just cannot be". And that was all.

I resented this intrusion into my private feelings, but did not put much on it. I was more or less prepared for some sort of a lecture on the subject and was, in fact, relieved that it had been so mild and brief. And Father said nothing at all. That was another good sign, I thought. I set great store by his under-lying fairness and practical good sense and was nearly certain that he himself had no strong feelings in the matter. If and when the time came, I argued, I would find him an ally.

But I was not thinking of Sheila at the time. I was thinking of Ellen. Because while, for all that Mother had said, the future course of my life made no particular difference in regard to Sheila—our two families were related and originated from more or less the same place—it might well take me away from Ellen for good and all. Hers was definitely a Lahore family; her people and mine had no knowledge whatever of each other's existence. The difference in religion ruled out, fully and finally, the possibility of any help from the only quarter from which it might otherwise be forthcoming: sympathetic female relatives. I alone had to wage and win my war. I knew that marriage—and I wanted nothing less—simply had to be a 'head over heels' affair on both sides, or else it just could not be. But atleast I was

head over heels, wasn't I ? And that was half the battle, wasn't it ?

Throughout the summer months of training and subsequent months of actual work I played with the idea of writing to Ellen. Several times I sat down to write and actually wrote a couple of paragraphs apologising for my conduct during the previous year, telling her of the change that had come over my fortunes, and asking her..... well, what was one to ask of her ? There I invariably got stuck and put the incomplete composition away, consoling myself with the thought that I was bound to get some leave before long in which I should go to Lahore, seek her out, and have a heart to heart talk with her. It all seemed so easy six hundred miles away.

I had, of course, remained in correspondence with Bill. His news was encouraging. Ellen had passed out with First Class Honours but had not returned to the College for post graduate study. She was, instead, teaching at a children's school. "Now that neither of you is in College and cannot possibly be a source of embarrassment to the other", he wrote, "I feel sure that a free and frank talk could do a lot to undo the mischief your high-hat attitude and the 'kidnapping' nonsense have together cooked. She came to tea at old Parkasham's the other day and asked me about you in very friendly way. Do try and come up this Christmas".

Leave, however, was exactly what we could not get. Every single day of the cold weather

was precious for construction. We were, indeed, to have two days off for Christmas; but from our rail head in the distant province of Sind—twenty four hours journey away—going to Lahore and coming back in the time was a physical impossibility. December drew on and just as I was building up courage to send Ellen a Christmas Card a heaven sent opportunity came my way. The head of our particular project, a Major of the Royal Engineers, decided to visit the central drawing office of the Railway in Lahore and further decided to take 'one of the young fellows' with him to help him with the papers. There were several who wanted to go but his choice fell on me. "You went to school or college in Lahore, didn't you?", he asked me. "Well, then, you can come along and have a meal in your old house". And that settled it.

We were to have only two days in Lahore, and two working days at that. But it was getting there that mattered. If the Major thought I would come away without seeing Ellen, well then he could just stand outside the station and whistle for me, I said to myself.

But come away without seeing Ellen I did. The Fates tossed me neatly and softly into the arms of Sheila! Our first day in Lahore was a very busy one. Cold and hungry when I came out of the office at about five o'clock in the afternoon, my immediate thoughts were tea, and a hot bath, if possible. I started walking briskly down the road, therefore, towards the Staff Rest House (where I was staying) to satisfy these needs

of the body before sallying forth on more important errands. Actually that evening I was intending only to hunt out Bill and work out with him a plan for the following day. He did not know I was in town ; there had been no time to write. But I had'nt gone far when a tonga overtook me and stopped a few yards in front of me. Out of it stepped Uncle, Sheila's father.

It was unthinkable, in accordance with the standards of polite conduct existing in those days, that I should just say 'how do you do' and excuse myself. Equally it would have been more than ungracious on part of Uncle to have exchanged a few formal words of greeting with me and passed on. Accordingly when he said "Finished for the day, hav'nt you ? Well, then come along home and tell us all about your job and have a cup of tea at the same time" there was nothing more natural for me to do than to say "Thanks" and climb into the tonga. During the journey I learnt that, like my father, uncle too had retired and had, for the time being at any rate, settled down in Lahore. In a suburb of Lahore, to be exact, Baghbanpura, near the old Shalimar Garden. This was in the interests of his wife's health. She had an ailment of the heart and had to remain under expert medical supervision which was available only in Lahore. By the end of the winter, he hoped, she would have recovered sufficiently to allow them to move back to our native parts.

Twenty years ago Baghbanpura was a neat and compact little place ; not the dirty, bloated blot on the landscape it is now—a victim of unplanned, fungus like growth of mean, dirty houses and filthy, narrow streets. But it was a dreary and depressing place all the same. And the day was dull, too, with an overcast sky and a chilly wind blowing. As we approached Uncle's place I was'nt at all sure that I was making the best use of my time by coming out so far instead of setting about looking for Bill. But there was no help for it and I resigned myself to the obvious waste of a precious evening.

The family lived outside the little township proper, in a small bungalow standing in a walled compound in the shadow of Shalimar. We proceeded straight to the sick room. It was an ordinary bedroom, really, warm and bright, with a nice little fire burning in the grate. A most welcome change after the long, cold and depressing tonga ride. Unexpected as my appearance was, my aunt was very pleased and surprised to see me. Saying that I was badly in need of a cup of hot, strong tea Uncle passed into his own room for a minute. The old lady bade me sit in her bedside chair and said, "Yes, the first thing is tea for you. It is such a cold day". And then, to my utter surprise, she called out aloud for Sheila. During the drive she had not been mentioned at all and I had taken it for granted that she would be in her College Hostel, several miles away. It was too early for the Christmas holidays to have started yet. Catching my look auntie explained.

"The lady of the house, now, you know," she said in a sad sort of voice, "she has had to leave College because of me, poor girl". Presently the words, "Coming, Mother" drifted into the room from somewhere in the house, followed, a minute later, by soft footfalls of bare feet in the next room. Then a curtain was pulled aside and she stood framed in the doorway.

Sheila had been working in the kitchen. Kneading flour, apparently, because she had come in rubbing it off her hands. Dressed in simple house clothes—plain blue sari and a thick woolen pullover, both of which bore obvious signs of the occupation of the wearer—I had never known her look so richly and completely charming. The kitchen fire had whipped up her soft beige complexion to perfection and, surprised as she was to see me, never before had she blushed so beautifully, never before had her hands flown up so fast to arrange the free end of her sari, and never before, well, never before had she looked and been so overpowering. "The competent and happy mistress of the kitchen, the shy and unsoiled Hindu bride.....". When she turned away to fetch the tea her mother asked her to bring my heart was pounding. The mother regarded me for a moment and then looked the other way. I had tea and stayed to dinner.

When our work was done I left Lahore with the Major without having seen Ellen. I did not try to see her any more than I tried to heed my mother's injunction. There was no choice. The

words of mother just ceased to exist from the moment Sheila's eyes beamed their shy, alluring smile and poor Ellen vanished as if she had never been.

About a fortnight after returning to Sind I had a letter from Uncle. I received it actually as we were setting out for the day's work. After seeing whom it was from I put it away in my pocket without reading it. I knew that the letter contained important news for me and did not want to read it in a hurry, in the midst of distractions of everyday work. That evening, seated on a stool in a tiny mud hut built beside the track in the scrub, I pulled out the letter and spread it on my knee. The hut was a 'flag station' on the line, one of many, and I was waiting for the Staff Shuttle to run through, taking people back to camp after the day's work. The night was cold and dark. A sharp biting wind was sweeping the desert, frequently threatening to blow out the oil lamp by the light of which I sat reading.

His wife was in failing health, Uncle wrote. Medical opinion was none too optimistic. He supposed I was aware of her strong desire to see Sheila and myself married; it used to be an accepted thing in the family in the old days. She now wanted the marriage to take place definitely in the beginning of next winter.

"Quite frankly", Uncle continued, 'I personally have never been too keen on this. Not because I do not like you, but because, well, of other reasons.

In view, however, of the gravely adverse effect the present state of affairs is having on your aunt's health I have given way to her wishes and have agreed to send a formal proposal to your father. But before I do so I must have your own assurance that you whole heartedly and unreservedly desire the marriage. Also that you will strive your utmost to keep my daughter happy. If the answer is "yes" I would like you to write a free and frank letter to your father urging his acceptance of the proposal. I am sure you know how your people feel about the matter. But the marriage is not actually forbidden by the Scriptures and I think that, for the sake of your future happiness, your father will withdraw his objections, whatever they are. In fact I doubt if *he* has any very strong objections. Your mother's case is different. But when every body else is agreed I believe she will, too.

"It is very unusual my writing to you like this", he concluded, "but the whole thing is rather unusual. And I trust that you will see that I am doing so mainly to get my wife something on which she has set her heart, and the withholding of which will most assuredly damage her chances of recovery. Please let me have your reply soon."

The train was late in coming. I thought I might write a letter. There was rather an important one to write. In the cold, draughty little block hut, stuck right out in the wilderness, miles from anywhere, I produced my pad of

office note-paper and wrote. To Ellen. It was a brief letter and quite friendly. I told her where I was and why, and ended up by the clear, precise statement that I was engaged to be married. From somewhere I unearthed an envelope and sealed and addressed the letter. Back in camp I slipped it into the station mail bag before passing on to my quarters. And all this before my courage had had the time to fail me. Because I was burning my boats, sails and oars and all, lest I might waver and try to tack again. It took a lot to do that.

From the camp I wrote to Father and Uncle, as also to Harish, who was still in Lahore, sharing the news with him. In due course the replies arrived: from Ellen, Uncle, and Harish. Ellen was surprised to hear from me, she said. Generally speaking, her correspondence was restricted to her family circle and a few girls she knew. But news of the welfare and happiness of a fellow student was always welcome, specially when the fellow student happened to be such an important person as a former editor of the *Forum*. She congratulated me on my engagement, wished me happiness in marriage and success in my career. Very neat and pat. Something I read through hurriedly and put away among my papers because it made me a trifle hot to read it. Uncle was glad to note what I had written and further to see that I had written to Father on the subject. He had sent off the formal proposal for marriage immediately on getting my letter. Auntie was overjoyed and

was anxiously awaiting my parents' acceptance. Harish simply said that for my sake and the old lady's he hoped that the marriage would come off.

But Father remained silent. The days went by and not a word from him. By the end of January I was getting seriously worried. Because not only had Father not replied to my letter, there had been no further news from Uncle either. In despair I was making up my mind to write to somebody when I had a letter from him. It was a brief one line affair containing terrible news. Sheila's mother was dead! In high anger I wrote off to Father, saying that it looked as if he had treated Uncle's letter much the same as he had treated mine. For otherwise the poor old lady might well have been spared her life. To this, rather to my surprise, there was a prompt reply. I was mistaken in believing, Father said, that he had not replied to Uncle. He had received a letter proposing marriage between me and Sheila to which he had instantly replied saying that that was quite unacceptable to him. (And I had thought that he was so fair and sensible!) "But that", he went on to say, "is only as far as your mother and I are concerned. You seem to have been negotiating behind your parents' back for your own marriage. By all means continue the negotiations, if you wish to. Only we can have nothing to do with them". "Go ahead and court your wonderful Sheila, if you like," he concluded disdainfully. You may find that things are not quite so bright as you thought they were".

"Go ahead and court your wonderful Sheila, if you like"—what was the meaning of that? I was spared the pain of remaining in the dark for too long. Harish made the meaning clear, and what a meaning!

"This is going to be a bad blow", he wrote, "but I feel that you should know. I am afraid that you will have to give up thinking of Sheila. This is how it is: I suppose you know by now that your father returned as unacceptable uncle's proposal for marriage. But that is not all. What you do not know, and what I did not know till recently, is that Sheila, too, had to be taken into account. She, too, had a heart to lose.

"Do you remember young Joshi, the Inspector of Schools? We met him outside old Dass's house sometime last winter. Well, he is posted here in Lahore now and has been a frequent visitor in Baghbanpura ever since the family moved down. And he has won Sheila's heart. However much you might dislike it, and however much I might dislike it—for your sake—it is hard to blame the poor girl. For Joshi is a brilliant young man, polished, refined, very well settled in life and straight off the top shelf in regard to social standing.

"Needless to say, the parents soon sensed it and the father tried his best to persuade the mother to agree to the match. Because from his point of view it was an excellent match, ensuring as it did, his daughter's happiness in every way.

But ultimately both the father and the daughter yielded to the bed ridden mother's constant exhortations—your last visit to Lahore seems to have settled that—and uncle approached your people, with the results that you know. This summary and unceremonious rejection of the hand of her first born was a cruel shock to the old lady. For a couple of days she remained completely silent. Then she called Sheila to her bedside and told her to seek her happiness where her heart led her.

"Sheila is a simple and a homely girl. I have no doubt that if your parents had agreed to the marriage she would have made you a good and affectionate wife. Alternatively, if you two had married without your people's blessings—such things do happen even in our country and community—then, too, things would have worked out allright in the end. I dont think your mother, for all her dislike and prejudice, would have been able to resist the charm of Sheila for long. But without consent for the one and basis for the other existing things were impossible.

"I need hardly say how very sorry I am to have to write all this. But naturally it was best that you should know."

THE DIAGNOSIS OF THE TROUBLE

The exit of Sheila from the stage of my youth coincided neatly with the return of my patrol

to Plane Tree Village. Awaiting me there was something which jerked me sharply out of my reverie : a signal recalling me to Headquarters forthwith. Back at Rurpindi, after an absence of over three weeks, I learnt that I was required to stand in for a certain Staff Officer who had been urgently called away elsewhere. This meant putting off my leave for a while but I had no option other than to sit down and get along with the job.

That last night on the plateau had blown away the oppressive, befogged mood that had clouded my mind for so long and I returned to Rurpindi rested and refreshed. I was, therefore, able to view the happenings of the weeks just passed more or less objectively. Even so, try as I might, I could not rid myself of the conviction that there was some dark business going on out on the plateau, business in which the Pir, the Suspect, the Village Constable and Ismail Shah were somehow mixed up. But as I was fully and fairly occupied now I did not waste much time on what seemed to be a fruitless mental effort. Then suddenly things started resolving themselves.

Mine was an "Intelligence" job. And, as we were operating 'in aid of Civil Power', collecting and piecing together Civil intelligence was the most important part of it. Looking idly through the back numbers of the local vernacular newspaper, one slack afternoon, I came across something that pulled me up sharp :

an obituary notice recording the death of the Pir's wife ! It read : "Zohra Begum, the beloved wife and consort of Hazrat the Pir Shaib of Plane Tree Village, discarded her earthly garb and departed to take up abode in the Garden of Eden on the night of 26th September, 19—. Died of illness patiently borne. Buried in the West Cemetery, outside Kabul Gate". Why Rurpindi ? Because she had died in Rurpindi, obviously. But why did she die in Rurpindi, why not in the village ? I did not know the answer to that one but I did know that had the event taken place in the village it most certainly would have been reported by the Post Commander. Whereas here, in town, it had found no place in any Intelligence Diary, military or civil; the only mention of it was in a corner of a vernacular paper of local and limited circulation.

On the face of it the news meant nothing. It was perfectly likely and natural that the Pir should have a house in town where his sick wife should be moved from the country for treatment and where she might ultimately have died. It was also perfectly natural and correct that people outside the household should know nothing of the lady's illness. Old fashioned Oriental gentlemen, specially those bearing a semi-sanctimonious character such as the Pir undoubtedly did, did not discuss their wives' health with wayward strangers like Officers of the Madras Grenadiers. But I was not satisfied. There was something wrong.

All the same, I was reluctant to voice my doubts aloud. I had done so before and had been discomfited. Concrete evidence was what the Colonel had wanted and that I did not have. But within a couple of days of my coming upon the obituary notice help came from an unexpected quarter and in an unexpected manner. I received a note from the Chief of Police of the District forwarding a report from the Constable at Plane Tree Village for my 'information and remarks'. In brief, the Constable said that while in Bijnor, his observations had led him generally to believe that certain useful inquiries relative to the case of Ismail Shah could be pursued there. In so doing he had been prevented by me. But he was still of the same opinion and suggested that if an investigation was carried out some information regarding the abducted women and their abductors might be forthcoming from the Street of the Veiled Women. The Chief wanted to know what I had to say about it.

Picking up the telephone I rang through to the local prison, gave them the details of the "Suspect's" case, and requested them to let me know if the prisoner was still with them, though I was afraid he wouldn't be, because the month I had given him looked like having run out. And so it had. They rang me back after a quarter of an hour to say that he had been discharged four days ago on the expiry of his sentence.

Looking at the Constable's report I noticed that it was dated three days back. The day, it

seemed to me, the "Suspect's" return to his native parts, and to freedom, would become known at the village. Was there no connection between the two events? Or was there? I felt I could wait no longer. Calling up the Superintendent of Police—that was his official designation—I made an appointment to see him at his bungalow that evening. That done, I made out a sequence of events which read as follows:

1. Pir's wife dies at Rurpindi, night 26/27 September; self away in Bijnor.
2. "Suspect" released, 7th October.
3. Constable's report dated 8th October.

The Superintendent of Police—or "S.P." for short—was a large boned, loud voiced, kindly, shrewd man, many years my senior. He was, in fact, my opposite number in the Civil Administration. But he had just come to the District and had not yet had the time to take a grip on the local situation. He listened to me in silence and with attention. When I had finished he sat smoking for a while and then, sitting back in his chair, started speaking:

"What I have just heard from you", he began, "is about one quarter fact and three quarters fancy. However, there is nothing wrong with fancy if you follow it back as you would a normal clue. And quick appreciation of atmosphere on part of those charged with investigation is necessary to the solution of almost any serious crime. Now, in this case, you have formed definite impressions about three persons

and two places. Persons: the Pir, the "Suspect", the Constable. Places: the old man's house in the village and the Street of the Veiled Women at Bijnor. This sensitiveness to personality and atmosphere is good. But you have'nt traced anything back. Not your job, perhaps; and perhaps you wouldn't have known how to set about it. But let us examine your impressions, one by one. To take the places first; your dislike of the "Street" I am inclined to discount as not being a genuine reaction. You did not visit the place yourself and your dislike sprang from knowledge obtained extraneously; from the *Hakim* and from what the Constable said to you. Your feeling in regard to the Pir's house is tied up with the old man himself and how he struck you. We are, therefore, left with the three persons. Any objections so far?"

To such logic there could be only one answer. No.

The S. P. continued: "Right, let us carry on then. As you know I am new to the District; have'nt had a chance to get around yet and have'nt met or even seen any of the persons in question. I have only your word to go by; your vague misgivings about the three men and your conviction that these three events here"—he broke off to tap the paper on his desk—"are connected with each other and with Ismail Shah". "Do you think there is anything in that?", I butted in eagerly.

"I don't think anything yet", reproved the Policeman, "but let us diagnose the symptoms

and see if we can give a name to the trouble. Now, when you suspect a man just because he strikes you that way what you really suspect is his character. You feel that he is not an honest piece of work. In this case, I think you will find that my subordinate at Plane Tree Village is a fairly honest bit of work. Only he occasionally accepts some gratification to do some small job for somebody and sometimes actually does the job. But only when he considers that it will not seriously interfere with the course of law. Generally speaking, loyalty to the Force is strong, and really disloyal policemen are few”.

“But why should he delay his report for so long?” I could hardly help asking.

“Exactly. Why should the date of the report and the return of your prisoner to the country so neatly coincide? A connection is certainly suggested, though none may actually exist. But that brings us to your prisoner. In this whole business your suspicions regarding him are the vaguest. What did you suspect him of?”, he asked me. “Nothing at all”, I answered readily, “He was one of those horsemen that day—the only one we could get hold of—and hence became the “Company Suspect”. That is why. But he really impressed me rather than aroused any suspicions. He impressed me by his fine spirit and dignified bearing. But he was so enigmatic, would’nt say anything.”

“Sounds like a Village Hampden”, the S.P. mused, “there are many men of courage and

character in these villages destined to live out their lives in obscurity and want. But they are swayed by human love and hate, all the same, often more powerfully than you or I. This man, for instance, may have been nursing some private sorrow". The policeman lapsed into silence for a few minutes and then asked suddenly, "Did you, at any time at all, receive any communication from the Pir about the case?"

"None whatever," I replied.

"And the Constable——"

"——behaved normally".

"Does'nt get us far, that does'nt", pronounced my colleague thoughtfully, "the only possible connection so far is the time of his release and that of the Constable's report. And there may be nothing in that. But let us take up the Pir now. With him we are on much firmer ground". The big man's eyes gleamed with interest. "How?", I queried eagerly, my own interest awakened. "Because luckily you suspect him of something concrete. You suspect him of being a distant or near abettor of Ismail in the abduction of those women."

"I am certain he is. I wanted to search the house——" I started very self-righteously. But the S.P. cut me short.

"No, no, no, not that way," he said impatiently, "that would be the best way of making certain that the evidence disappears.

Remember what I said about suspecting a man's character? First and foremost we must determine this: Is it in the character of the Pir to have any dealings with a man like Ismail? What are his own relations with women like? Is he partial to them himself? Does he keep any concubines? and so on. And to help us in finding the answer we have this clue here, the only real clue in the case so far, this bit about his wife's death in the paper".

"What do we do?", I asked, a little bewildered.

"I think I will telegraph immediately for an expert C.I.D. team from Lahore. There are one or two very good men I know. When they are here they can nose around the place and find out the circumstances of Zohra's death and—far more important than that—get a line on the romantic and matrimonial proclivities of the Pir. In due course we should know how many wives or women he has, how many times he has married, and whether he intends marrying again".

"Marrying again?", I exclaimed incredulously, "why, I should have thought he was past that sort of thing".

"Dont you believe it", admonished the Policeman, "I have known fellows to marry till their dying day".

"What about your Constable and my 'Suspect,' then?", I asked, rising.

"We just let them be for the moment", said the S. P. firmly, "any move that we might make out in the country is bound to be sensed by the Pir, in one way or another. And that would be fatal to the success of the investigation. The Lahore people, when they come, are going to have their activities rigidly confined to the local mosques, quacks, and flesh-pots. And incidentally, I don't want any of you military chaps putting into practice bright ideas of your own and mucking up the case ! "

"Agreed", I promised, somewhat pleased with myself, and asked "so you think there is something in what I have all along felt, after all?"

"It is certainly a line of inquiry", answered the Superintendent of Police.

AND THE REMEDY

Having handed over the case to the Head of Police I felt very much easier in mind and conscience. With plenty of useful and interesting work to do and with the amenities of a large garrison station to draw upon I devoted myself to the normal soldier's life of work and recreation that had been interrupted by the events and circumstances of the preceding weeks. Ellen, alone now, poor girl, popped up now and again, but I kept her firmly back. She and Sheila had nursed me long and lovingly through the

'Pir fever'. And now that the sickness was gone and the end of convalescence was in sight I did not wish to associate them with the mean business any more. I now waited for the Ghost of Disquiet, which stalked the plateau, to be finally laid before I sought their precious company again. I did not have long to wait.

One evening, about a fortnight after I had seen him in his house, the S.P. walked into my room in the Mess. By way of opening the conversation he suggested that I might send my servant away.

"Well, it seems that your wonderful Pir goes in for marriage in a big way"; he began when we were alone. "He has, or had till a month ago, all the four wives authorised for the Faithful by the Prophet. And poor Zohra's place is going to be filled as soon as the forty days of ceremonial mourning are over. Or atleast so his Pirship hopes ! This is the setting."

And he proceeded to relate the results of the secret inquiries of his department. The C.I.D. men from Lahore had ably executed a most difficult commission. This was the gist of their report : The Pir had a town house, not in any of the fashionable streets of the city but in the mean and disreputable quarter of Katra Kamal. Zohra Begum was moved down from the country sometime during September and she died in the house in Katra Kamal on the night between 26th/27th September. Cause of death could not be ascertained unless direct methods of

investigation were adopted, such as exhuming the body or interrogating servants, physicians, etc. The Pir intended to marry again immediately after the prescribed period of mourning. The woman the Pir was going to marry was believed to be in the house in Rurpindi. General habits and character : The Pir was never known to have kept women other than his wedded wives ; but of these he always had four. As soon as one died he married another to keep the number up. In former generations the family had claimed a sort of semi-feudal, semi-religious 'right of the overlord' among their followers and tennantry. But for the last three generations atleast the right had not been exercised. There were some whispers that the present Pir had tried—unsuccessfully—to revive the practice soon after ascending the *gaddi* of his ancestors, but no reliance could be placed on these.

"That is grand", I said when I had heard it all, "I suppose you still wont let these wonder workers of yours go out into the country ? "

"Absolutely", answered the Policeman, " I am certain the big house in Plane Tree Village is a barometer on which the appearance of each new face and influence in the countryside is registered. Besides, I am convinced that the most vital clue and bait is right here in Katra Kamal".

" What is that ? ", I asked.

" The woman the fellow is going to marry".

"Well, he is entitled to marry four ; I dont see——"

"Yes, yes, I know that", cut in the S.P. sharply, "but dont you see, man ? Why is she living in the old scoundrel's own house ? Even a Pir's prospective bride would live in her parents' and not her future husband's house till she was married. *I say she is being kept there.* She may not be one of Ismail's lot, but she is certainly *an* abducted woman".

"Let us go and get her out, then; that should be easy", I suggested.

"Yes, get her out and ruin the case. No, my dear man, I want to gather in the entire harvest in one sweep. Now, listen, this is what is going to happen——".

One morning, early in November, a number of motor vehicles full of armed men swooped down upon the dirty and sordid quarter of Katra Kamal in the town of Rurpindi. Halting in a weedy, stinking square the men debussed and doubled away round and about a certain house, no different from the others in appearance, but very much bigger and taller and standing by itself. When the cordon was complete a piercing blast on a whistle sent a small but rather special looking party rushing up the front steps. They forced the door and dashing through the forecourt and a couple of rooms came to a halt in the inner courtyard. And there, much to the dismay of those participating, they interrupted a marriage ceremony in progress.

The bridegroom and the father of the bride were somewhat unceremoniously prevented from executing their respective offices. For the groom was the Pir Sahib of Plane Tree Village and the 'father-in-law' was immediately recognised as one of the chief Lieutenants of Ismail Shah, a gentleman who, together with his principal, figured prominently on the Government's little red book. The Police—in uniform now and quite frank about it all—got to work and very soon functionaries such as the officiating priest, the Steward of the Household, the Master of the Wedding Feast, and others, were willing and eager to talk. It was all somewhat noisy and confusing. For the Police frequently forgot their manners; and the others, their dignity. But when the Inspector came with his report it was disappointing. The bride's 'father' was no kinsman of the bride, no doubt about that; but she was not one of Ismail's twenty. He had simply been paid to bring down a certain girl from Bijnor. That was all that he had done and that was all he knew. The girl herself said that she had been an inmate of a certain house in the Street of the Veiled Women for years. She knew nothing about Ismail, the insurrection, or indeed anything about the world outside. She only remembered that as a child she had lived in a house outside which the sun beat strong and the wind blew hard. This, and that her father's name was Mirza Gul. That got us nowhere, the Inspector said. There were just about as many Mirza Guls in the countryside as

houses like the one that she had described. Perhaps if we examined the Pir Sahib as we had the others——

I wasn't listening. Mirza Gul might be the name of a hundred others, but it was also the name of the "Suspect". Putting her in a car, still wearing her veil, we headed straight for the plateau. And there, on its broad and windswept bosom, in the shadow of a flat topped hill, she cast down her veil and walked forth into the midst of her people.

That was no time for strangers to hang around but we had a job to do and could hardly go away without listening to Mirza Gul's story. Over the Jubilee feast—glasses of steaming green tea—and between laughter and tears, he told us.

When he brought home his bride, years and years ago, the Pir—just succeeded to the *gaddi* himself—indicated his wish to exercise his seignorial right. Mirza Gul refused. Time passed. For many years it did not please God to bless his home with a child. In the fullness of time, however, his wife conceived and, in due course, their one and only child was born, a daughter. One day, about ten years ago, when the child was about five or six years old, she disappeared from the place, just disappeared. And we had brought her back. He had never doubted that it was the hand of the Pir which had plucked his daughter away from him. But he did not go to him in sack cloth and ashes.

Nor did he go to the Police. Instead, he held his head aloft and went about his way, hoping, praying, waiting for justice to visit both him and the Pir.

"The Village Hampden, didn't I tell you?", said the Superintendent as we started on our return journey. "However everything is clear now. Have you worked out the diagnosis or do you want mine?"

"Let us have yours", I replied. I was prepared to listen.

"Right ; here it is", began my friend, putting the gear into top. "When the Pir was thwarted in his amorous—and what he no doubt considered to be rightful—intentions towards Mirza Gul's wife he could have done a number of things. He could have had the woman brought to him forcibly, he could have had the fellow put away or persecuted into submission. Tried to do all those things, I mean. Such things happen. But he thought of a far more satisfying method of healing his wounded pride. He bided his time, had Mirza's little daughter kidnapped when she was the right age for the purpose, and sentenced her to Bijnor ; there to be kept in that dark, unvisited prison—the Street of the Veiled Women—till she was old enough to soothe his wounds. We can take it that she was well looked after there, well groomed year after year, and also left untouched. Her 'coming of age' coincided with your silly little insurrection with which, I feel sure, the old fruit had nothing to do as such.

But the girl had to be brought down and with troops knocking about the countryside as if they owned it that became a specialist's job. And the firm that specialises in that sort of thing around here just now is Ismail and Co."

"So you do think he was mixed up in that lot?" I asked eagerly, recalling my own original notion.

"Yes", assented the S.P., "but only to the extent of getting the girl down from Bijnor. I don't think he helped or abetted Ismail in any other way. But his Pirship was confronted with a further and far more serious difficulty. He already had four wives living. He was a strictly religious man, in his own way. One of them had to die before he could marry Mirza's daughter. He never had any 'keeps.'"

"But he tried atleast once to have a temporary keep, anyway", I objected.

"I know", rejoined the Policeman, "but even that was based on a mistaken notion of his spiritual office. Remember, he tried it only once, and that just after becoming Pir. He probably sincerely believed that the woman and her husband would be the principal beneficiaries of the act. He was already nearly forty at the time. What we know about his youth is singularly free from any suggestion of 'wild oats'. In any case we know that since this episode he has kept on the straight and narrow, sticking to his wedded four and no mucking about. No, one

of the *existing* four *had* to die before he could consort with Mirza's daughter and make him pay for his sin of independence".

"But why did she have to die? Divorce is so easy in Muslim Law, specially for a man. He could have easily divorced Zohra", I persisted.

"That is arguable", conceded the S.P. "and that is going to be the main plank of the defence. But poor Zohra was murdered, you can bet your boots on that, and was moved down to Katra Kamal for this express purpose. The charge, however, is going to be a difficult one, and we may not be able to prove it. I give you that. But I am not worried. There is the original charge of kidnapping, or causing to be kidnapped, the child against him, and the present one of attempting a fraudulent marriage. Those two should together give his Pirship seven years to think things over in".

We drove on in silence for a while. I was not quite satisfied. For it seemed to me that Ismail—the real case against him—had hardly been touched.

"Dont you believe it", laughed the Policeman, "with his Second-in-Command in the jug it wont be long before he and the whole shoot come in, too. The gent we caught hold of this morning is probably dictating a confession now. But don't let us wander from the diagnosis. To continue: Well, the bride-to-be had to be brought down from Bijnor and Zohra had to be done away

with. And with a company of soldiers quartered right in the place Plane Tree Village was an inconvenient place both for the reception of the one and the death of the other. Katra Kamal was selected to be the venue of the two events. The second act of the play was successfully put through, but a difficulty arose in regard to the first when you went on that jaunt of yours and awkwardly insisted on going to Bijnor. That is why the Constable tried to stop you from going there. On getting there, however, he seems to have discovered that the job had been done and was, therefore, anxious that you should stay there and inquire and investigate to your heart's content. But when you rode him roughshod again I don't believe he was particularly upset. I don't think he had any intention of reporting the matter at all but the Pir made him—when Mirza Gul complicated matters by returning to the plateau after his sojourn in gaol just when they were tuning up for the final act. The point was a minor one. Mirza Gul knew nothing of what was happening in Katra Kamal. But it was a good added precaution to have the eyes of Authority trained on colourful Bijnor when his plans were maturing and nearing fruition”.

“The precaution that may cost him seven years and more”, I commented, “because without the Constable's report I don't think I should have been induced to come to you”.

“Exactly”, responded the man of Law, “but the criminal has got to slip up somewhere and

this is where this one slipped up. And that, incidentally, is all I think the Constable had to do with it. I don't think he was privy to the murder of Zohra or the Mirza Gul angle of the case. He simply knew that a certain girl had to be brought down from Bijnor for the Pir and had given the moral support of his silence, no doubt at a price. And he wrote that report when the old bird asked him to, again, doubtless, at a price. And that I think finishes the list of your mental trials and tribulations, all clearly resolved: The Pir fixed up and Ismail nearly so, the Constable explained, your "Suspect" a suspect no longer, his daughter restored to him, and his anguish gone! Anything more?"

I thought for a minute. "Oh yes", I said remembering, "we haven't dealt with those horsemen yet. Who were they?"

"You have got me there," the S.P. replied thoughtfully, "most probably sent out by the Pir to support that yarn of his about the man on the white mare. I bet you didn't see more than twenty or thirty all told. The cover is so good and cross country tracks so many. You might have seen the same lot thrice over". He drove on in silence for a few minutes.

"I know what", he said, suddenly brightening up, "to hell with it all. Let us be romantic for a minute and regard them as genuine revolutionaries thrashing corn on horseback! How is that?"

Grand. And with that the ghost was laid.

ELLEN

Soon after the events recorded in the previous chapter the man for whom I had been answering returned to his post and I was able to take my leave. Going down country the train one usually took was the great South-bound Express which passed through the place about mid-day. But I wanted to spend a day in Lahore and this train, besides involving one in a fatiguing all day journey, reached there somewhat inconveniently late in the evening. I therefore decided to take the slower and less fashionable night train which ran into Lahore early in the morning. In order to be on the safe side regarding accomodation I rang up the station and asked them for a sleeping berth reservation. The clerk noted down my name but said that it was'nt really necessary ; the Kashmir traffic having stopped there was always plenty of room on the night train.

Kashmir traffic and the night train ! There was something vaguely reminiscent about it, fragrant of Ellen and Sheila, though I could not actually remember what it was. In fact this was the first time in the course of my reverie that I had become conscious of it. The faint, sweet, whiff of perfume persisted, unidentified, through the operations of packing and preparing for departure. I knew that it would declare itself, fully and without any effort on my part, when it bumped the right mental association. And so it did, flower and scent and all, at the

station that night. Looking for my own place on the train I passed a carriage full of women and children somewhat exuberantly settling down for the journey. Yes, that was it. I had seen Ellen and her family on this very train nearly twenty years ago. Had forgotten all about it.

It was after that holiday in Kashmir when, having seen Ellen for a brief, brilliant moment in the exhibition, I had returned home to Rurpindi to find Sheila and her people staying with us. It was very nearly the end of the Summer Vacation ; about time for people to get back to jobs and studies. I had come down before them, of course, but I calculated, to within three days, when Ellen and her folk must pass through Rurpindi enroute to Lahore. On each of those three nights I walked down to the station to have a look at this train. Because, then as now, returning holiday makers from Kashmir reached Rurpindi by car or bus in the afternoon and took the night train for Lahore. I rather think the first of these nights fell while our guests were still with us. But that made no difference because I had not formed anything like an emotional attachment for Sheila yet. In any case only the last attempt was fruitful.

I was late at the station that night. In fact the engine was whistling when I got there. Making straight for the forward end of the train I started walking back from there anxious not to miss any part of it. They were in

one of the very last carriages ; the whole family, travelling with friends, apparently. A high spirited crowd consisting of a couple of men and several girls, women, and children noisily sorting out their belongings and shaking down for the night. Ellen was standing in a corner, looking hot and none-too-sleek after the long road journey, busily combing out her hair and talking away with somebody at top speed all the time. An argument seemed to be in progress. Presently the comb stopped going up and down, a neat little speech commenced, in the midst of which—evidently to emphasize a point—she broke off to point outside with the comb, capping the gesture with a look in the same direction. And in so doing her eyes caught mine, standing outside, on the platform. For a second they held and the comb stayed where it was. Then she turned away and briskly resumed her combing and arguing, looking as if to say : "Allright, allright, I have seen you. Now go away. I am busy". Just then the train started moving and she was lost to view.

It was an isolated little incident which could not possibly have lasted more than a minute, if that, and which influenced the subsequent course of events not at all. But the memory of it was singularly sweet. Because, as far as I could remember, in the whole course of my association with Ellen, this was the only moment that was entirely pleasant. In all the others some jarring note hummed its discordant noise : If she was'n't angry, I was; if I wanted to say something, she

would'nt listen ; or if she wanted to speak I was glum; and so on. But this little hair-do business was wholly beautiful. Recalling it was like settling down for an hour with a tumbler of heady wine. It seemed to me as good a setting as any for completing the last stage of my journey of remembrance. In any event there was no help for it. Ellen would no longer keep away.

Harish's letter putting an end to my wifely dreams of Sheila reached me in the construction camp in Sind about mid-February. It is unnecessary to say how I felt about it. As soon as I was able to I proceeded to sort out and destroy all letters, papers, and mementoes associated with the business. One letter, however, I did not consign to the flames : Ellen's; her reply to mine in which I had informed her of my 'engagement'. "News of the welfare and happiness of a fellow student is always welcome", I read, "specially when the fellow student happens to be such an important person as a former editor of the *Forum*". What she meant was plain. It stuck out a mile. On account of my silly articles and still sillier talk she had had to stand no end of nagging and back chat. And I had'nt even said "sorry" for all that. On the other hand, here was I, telling her bravely that I was engaged to be married. A flood of remorse and regret surged up in me sweeping away the bitter, stony, stream of humiliation that had flowed from Harish's letter. But what could I do? Had I not burnt my boats? Had'nt I written that letter with that set purpose?

One thing was certain. I felt I just couldn't stay on at the project, with all its memories of plans gone wrong and dreams come to naught. The construction season, at the end of which I could easily sign out being only a temporary hand, still had a month to run. But I couldn't wait that long. Seeking an interview with the Major I told him I wanted to go. He was an elderly man, a hard task master, but also kindly and understanding. Though I had come in for my share of 'ginger' I rather thought that on the whole he was not dissatisfied with my work. I had been quite hopeful that I should be one of the 'young fellows' he would recommend for confirmation when the reports came to be written. I was, therefore, not surprised when he said, "Not quite so easily, my lad, not quite so easily. You will have to tell me a bit more about it than that".

Very briefly, and without mentioning any names, I told him.

"Ah, one love affair gone wrong and the other not put right," he laughed, "yes, I can see that you should want to get away. But where do you intend to go? What are you going to do when you get away from here?"

I hadn't the least idea where I was going or what I was going to do.

"I thought so", said the Major, almost to himself. He was silent for a while and then started speaking with decision.

"Look", he said, "this has nothing to do with me, but here is a bit of advice. You can go tomorrow, if you like, but you must have work, and plenty of it. How would you like going into the Army? You are over age for the normal Entrance Examination but quite young enough to enter the ranks as a candidate for a Commission. You will have to undergo the full nine months' recruits' training at a Depot and then go to an active battallion for a few months. If not selected for a Commission you will be entitled to take your discharge. I can give you a letter to a friend commanding a Depot down in Central India. Want it?"

I did. I knew my parents would be scandalised, but I was past caring for that sort of thing now.

"Good for you", said the Major, "by this time next year I am sure you will be taking a different view of things. In any case it is a far better opening than this. But you will have to work, eh? You have worked quite well enough here, but as one of the top dogs. In the barracks it will be different. Don't let them break you."

By that time next year I was, indeed, taking a somewhat different view of things. A year of ceaseless work and exercise and the constant company of tough, unimaginative, slow-and-sure yeomen kicked all sentimental nonsense effectively into the background. When I went to my active battallion my one thought

and aim was to pass the selection for the Army Cadre of the Military Academy. I had no sort of love for the lower deck as such. I meant to get on, or get out, quick.

As, I suppose, must be fairly obvious I did not have to get out but went to the Military Academy instead. During my 'ranker' days I had deliberately cut myself off from my old life and world. I had taken no home leave—how could I go home wearing black boots?—and had reduced my correspondence to a minimum. I wrote to Bill but rarely and had definitely warned him not to write about Ellen in his letters. By the time I had risen to the dignity of an Officer-Cadet he had left Lahore himself—to become a schoolmaster somewhere in the *mofussil*—and could give me little news of her, anyhow. And so the months and the years passed and Lahore became a dim and distant memory. Though it never quite faded, for Ellen was wont to come back and bide with me awhile now and again and, every time I opened a letter from Bill, my heart still missed a beat.

Razmak, North West Frontier. My company formed the garrison of a small fort about ten miles from Camp, watching a break in the hills. The Company Commander was on leave and I was the Captain of the Host. I had spent nearly three years—all my service—in Waziristan and its rugged solitudes had cast their spell upon me. To those whose experience of

the 'wilds' is limited to a holiday camp in the Kashmir valley or a picnic lunch round the corner of Mussourie the very existence of these inhospitable wastes must seem somewhat unnecessary. But that is not so. They pull the best out of some people and give some others a new courage and a new philosophy. During those early years in that High Waste—following my Company Commander on Brigade Columns and, later, on garrison duty in my lonely command—I began to view my association with Ellen in a different light. So far I had only thought of her in terms of what she had not been to me; now I also became aware of what she had been: Love's first dream, a dream that could never cease to be wonderful because it was unattainable. Through my life the brief year I had known her rang like a bar of great music. The piece was incomplete, and the music without its counterpoint, but it was great music all the same, tumultuous and vibrant, the notes of which could never die. That alone was something to keep.

One day, early in the Autumn, came the news which I had known would sooner or later reach me, by one route or another. I opened my paper, the "Civil & Military Gazette" of Lahore, to find that Ellen was engaged to be married. There was a notice, in the usual form, in the personal column.

To say that I welcomed the news would, of course, be wrong. But my new found wisdom

eabled me to view it without bitterness ; not only with resignation but also with philosophy. I was myself betrothed now (very correctly and respectably, with a girl I had never seen or heard of before) and Ellen's affairs were hardly a concern of mine. But I wrote to her ; a long, full letter in which, after 'explaining' whatever there was to explain, I hoped that she was well and happy presently and wished her further happiness and felicity in marriage.

The reply came about a fortnight later. I had been out, visiting posts and picquets, and saw the letter on getting back to the fort towards sundown. I read it up in my room, later that night, after turning in.

"Your letter was a surprise", Ellen wrote, "yes, I am well and happy and hope you are so, too.

"There was no call on you to 'explain' anything. However, since you have been so good as to do so, I thank you for it. But what am I to say about it all—now—except this that I understand ?

"It was kind of you to have thought of me and to have wondered about my happiness. I am living my life from day to day and am tolerably happy. Absolute happiness is nobody's lot on this earth. By adjusting oneself with one's environment one can achieve a fair measure of happiness. That is what I hope

to do in my marriage. And, incidentally, thanks for your kind wishes.

“Is your curiosity satisfied now ?

“Finally, would you permit me to wish you similar contentment and satisfaction in your own life ?

“I suppose you realise yourself that there is no need for further correspondence. With my best wishes for your future, I am, yours——”.

The autumn nights were getting cold in the Northern wastes. A sharp bitter wind howled down the pass and rose and fell outside, sending a shiver through the room as it beat against my window every few minutes. For a long time I sat on my bed, muffled up in clothes, looking at the pale, flickering flame of the lamp. Blowing it out atlast I got into bed. But it was not good. I could see Ellen clearly ; the way she had come sailing down the College drive that windy November afternoon ; the way she had looked that night in the State Exhibition in Kashmir, and when standing by her bicycle on our dark, silent road in Lahore, with her lamp smoking and smelling of oil and soot.

And now, travelling down to Lahore twenty years later, I could see her standing in a corner of a crowded, noisy carriage, draped in the long, silken folds of a sage green sari, her face hot and flushed, comb glistening through the hair,

and her thin, filmy blouse clinging to her arms and breasts.

The train was [“]slow, but none-the less sure for that, and kept on putting the miles behind her.

THE END