



"Quickly approaching, they discovered it to be the body
of Stephen." (Page 318.)

The Centipede]

[*Frontispiece*

THE CENTIPEDE:

HE OF ONE HUNDRED LEGS.

BY

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CONTENTS.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE CENTIPEDE AT HOME	7
II.—THE CENTIPEDE SEES THE JEWELS . . .	30
III.—THE CENTIPEDE SECURES THE JEWELS . .	53
IV.—THE WOUNDED MAHARAJAH IS DISCOVERED .	73
V.—THE CENTIPEDE ESCAPES.	94
VI.—THE OUTCOME OF THE ROBBERY	115
VII.—THE WOMAN APPEARS	137
VIII.—THE CENTIPEDE LEAVES CHITTARRE . .	157

BOOK II.

I.—BAINFORD DECIDES TO MARRY	175
II.—WEAVING THE WEB	197
III.—THE MARRIAGE TAKES PLACE	217
IV.—BLANCHE PLAYS HER TRUMP CARD. . . .	239
V.—THE CENTIPEDE PREPARES FOR INDIA . .	258
VI.—LURGAN DEALS WITH THE MAHARAJAH . .	276
VII.—LURGAN PAYS THE PENALTY	296
VIII.—STEPHEN ATTAINS HIGH HONOUR . . .	315

THE CENTIPEDE

BOOK I.

HE OF ONE HUNDRED LEGS.

CHAPTER I.

THE CENTIPEDE AT HOME.

" THEN, I take it, it is useless for me to try any further to dissuade you from this absolutely foolhardy enterprise ? "

" Yes, most assuredly. "

" Good Heavens, I wonder if you realise what it means should you fail ! The penalty of failure is death, and such a death !—far too awful to let one's mind dwell upon for an instant. "

" Gregory Lurgan, I'm not given to failing. You of all men should know that by this time. We've worked together now for over ten years, and I don't think you can honestly say that you have known me to fail, seriously fail I mean, in any enterprise that we have had in hand. "

" I'm quite prepared to admit that much. "

But still, it does not follow that you will always succeed. Moreover, this scheme of yours does not commend itself to me in the least. It's far too risky, too frightfully hazardous."

"I take all risks. If I don't return in three weeks' time you can be anxious."

"I shall be."

"If not in four weeks' time, you can be worried."

"I shall be, long before that."

"If not in six weeks—well, you can scratch my name off the list ; for I shall be dead, and nothing more will be required of me in this world."

"Don't talk like that. You know I hate to hear you jest on the subject of death as you do."

"I don't jest. I simply make a statement of fact. I shall be dead, if you don't see me in six weeks' time."

"Dead, yes, dead—and, Heavens, what a death ! I can picture the whole scene in my mind's eye. Bound to a post, a hungry and half-mad tiger let loose upon you, whose cruel teeth tear your flesh to pieces, while the sport is eagerly gloated over by your captor."

"Very graphic indeed, but I am unmoved."

"Imagine yourself, perhaps, dropped into a pit with twenty cobras, or buried up to your chin in sand and your head shaved and covered with honey."

"My imagination is not so lively as yours. I will take my chance."

“Chance? By Jove, it is a chance! I’ve just given you a few samples of the pleasant experiences that are likely to befall the man who is caught red-handed, trying to rob the Maharajah of Gavalcore of his beloved jewels, which, it is well known, are the chief delight of his black, cruel heart. It would be bad enough if you were a native; but, should he discover you to be an Englishman, the chances are ten thousand to one that he’d devise some extra special torture for you. You know he hates the English like poison, and with all his craft and cunning he can’t help shewing it.”

“Despite the agreeable possibilities you so ably describe, I will risk it. In my time I have taken worse chances than this. I would back the Along Bay pirate to be neat and nimble in his tortures. Commend me to a Chinaman for inventive genius in matters of cruelty; and I have risked his displeasure more than once. The Dervish, too, is a gentleman dangerous to trifle with; yet I’ve bested him and come off scot free. The Armenian and the Turk are not the softest-hearted folk in the world; I have also taken my chance of their malice on occasions; and, you see, I’m still alive and unscathed. Gregory, my good friend, at this period in my career I’m not going to begin fearing the fury of an Indian Potentate, whose precious jewels I intend to have.”

“Why? What on earth for? You don’t want more money. We’ve made enough to

pass the rest of our lives in luxury. Surely that is not the reason ? ”

“ True—it is not. I’ve made up my mind that this shall be the last and greatest *coup*. Every man likes to retire into private life after a successful career, finishing up with a triumph, and I intend to do so. The day I return here with the world-famous Gavalcore jewels, that day I close the Book of the Centipede, never again to be re-opened. Then I begin a volume in another hand, and God alone knows what I shall write in it. I have my ideas, I admit, but at present they are more or less vague. As the case stands, I intend to enter the Palace of the Maharajah of Gavalcore, and to come away possessor of his Highness’s trinkets, worth a king’s ransom, probably one of the hundred wonders of the world ; after that—Kismet ! ”

“ Aye, verily, Kismet.”

“ You know, Gregory Lurgan, sage and thinker, I’ve not been known as ‘ The Centipede : he of one hundred legs ’ throughout the East for nothing. I’ve a reputation to lose, good, bad, or indifferent, and I confess that I’d rather lose my life than lose that.”

“ There’s not a single police official in India who has not heard of you, and who would not give all he possessed to lay you by the heels.”

“ Well ? ”

“ Rewards are offered for your apprehension in no less than six languages. Only a few weeks ago I read your description, which, I

confess, made me laugh, on a placard at Delhi Station."

"Surely that's a reputation to be proud of. From Aden to the Saghalien Coast, from Kurachi to Rangoon, I'm wanted, and wanted badly ; but rest assured I shall come out of this enterprise as well as I have out of the others, safe and alive. You need have little fear on that score."

"Fear ? How can I help fearing ? I'm not so strong in my sense of determination as you are, and I must confess I am more than sorry that you will not listen to reason. Of course, I know that I can trust you to do the right thing in any emergency, but I am nervously anxious for your safety. I live in constant apprehension when you are gone on these dangerous adventures. You cannot tell how I long for the time when you give up this kind of life and we can live in peace. After all, your life and mine are so bound up together, that your safety means everything to me. Remember, we are not David and Jonathan for nothing."

Stephen Bainford looked up at the speaker from the writing-table with a pleased smile on his handsome, strong face.

"Gregory, no man knows that better than I do. For over ten years we've been the best of friends and comrades. Some day I hope to be in a position to give you proof of my appreciation. At present you must take it for granted. But, at the same time, I tell you

that it is quite impossible for you to make me relinquish my scheme. Now I want to finish my work."

With that, he turned to his writing, while Gregory Lurgan watched him, the while he blew clouds of cigarette smoke slowly and thoughtfully through his thin lips.

Lurgan was a man whose age it was difficult to estimate. His grey hair, somewhat thin about the temples, and his thoughtful, slightly lined face suggested forty or forty-five, while a habit of knitting his almost flat eyebrows gave him a stern look ; a broad, high forehead, a pointed nose, a straight-set mouth, and square determined chin, all went to make up a face of more than ordinary power and intelligence, and yet a very gentle and prepossessing one. In stature, he was of the average height, slightly built, with a stoop in the shoulders conveying the impression that he was more of the student than the athlete, which, indeed, he was ; for, in days gone by he had been one of the most brilliant of scholars. Educated at Eton and Oxford, he passed out into the world with a chance of a fine career before him. For a time all went smoothly and well, and he began to be spoken of very highly. Obtaining an important Australian post under the Government, he started to climb the ladder of fame at a great pace, until there was a sudden stop—a scandal, in which his name became very prominent ; whereupon he found that it was incumbent upon him to quit that country. From the

day he left to the day that he met the Centipede in an opium-den in Singapore, he went steadily to the dogs. Drugs and drink ruined him until Stephen Bainford took him in hand, struck by the very remarkable brilliancy of the man when sober and in his sane senses.

Learning who he was, what he had done, and the details of his downfall, the Centipede proposed that he should come to help him in his schemes. His influence gradually brought the man back to his normal state, and at last he succeeded in overcoming the habit of drink, though he could not bring himself entirely to give up the drugs.

Stephen Bainford, known throughout the world as "The Centipede," was a man of most extraordinary fascination. Very tall and good looking, with almost black hair and eyes, a clear-cut face, determination and strength written in every line and feature, he commanded notice at once. Possessing an imperious and strong personality, brooking no contradiction, he had proved himself a born leader of men. When he had once made up his mind on a point, there was no power on earth that could change it. A man of Herculean strength, iron constitution and nerve, combined with a plentiful supply of mother-wit, he entered into the most hazardous schemes and undertakings with a thoroughness and grip worthy of a better cause. His perceptive nature never allowed him to err one

iota from the wisest course in any matter that he undertook ; even the minutest details were considered and weighed at the outset, and nothing was left to chance. Such was the charm and fascination of his manner that no matter with whom he came in contact, all and sundry were his admirers. Even after some of the most audacious robberies, the robbed had been known to declare that if it was fated they should be robbed by anyone, they preferred it to be by the Centipede.

Though he was now on the eve of the most hazardous and risky undertaking of his adventurous career, he appeared as unconcerned and cheerful as though he were only entering up his diary. With cigarette between his lips, he sat at the writing table and drove his pen at a great pace over the paper before him.

No one had ever known anything of his history—who he was or whence he sprang ; on the subject he was completely silent, even to Lurgan ; it was quite sufficient that he had earned for himself a reputation, or rather notoriety, from one end of the civilised world to the other as the perpetrator of the most astounding and dare-devil acts of robbery, deeds that could have left nothing to be desired in the mind of the most exacting lover of excitement.

In India his name was a household word. His career and adventures were the every-day topic of the people. His doings were discussed

and written of even more than those of the Viceroy himself.

In Australia his skill and resource had set him on a pinnacle of fame as the most daring and audacious of bushrangers, to whom nothing ever came amiss.

In Persia and Turkey he made the rich merchants' lives a terror, owing to his robberies of valuables from their caravans and trading expeditions, so much so that every one of them offered daily a fervent prayer to Allah to protect their goods from his hands.

In Dutch Pearl Fisheries he hoodwinked and outwitted the most watchful of warships, poaching the finest beds with impunity.

In Burmah and South Africa the mine-owners feared the very sound of his name ; in fact, in every country he had made his appearance like a meteor, finished his work and departed unscathed, after succeeding in taking the most valuable hauls of booty. Rumour had it that the plunder was stored away in some great cavern in the Himalayas, and that millions of pounds' worth of jewels and valuables of every kind reposed there.

To the various Governments he was a cause of the very gravest concern. All the cleverest and most astute detectives schemed to effect his capture, but, as no one had ever set eyes on him in his proper person, it was most difficult even to get a clue. Nearly every undertaking was carried out in the most wonderful disguise, which enabled him to be

off and away before the authorities could secure him.

It was this remarkable talent for getting away unharmed that earned for him the soubriquet of "The Centipede; he of one hundred legs."

Legion were the stories told of this remarkable man's achievements. It was said that on one occasion he dined at the Viceregal table as a distinguished American; afterwards danced at the State ball and was voted by men and women alike a most charming fellow; then disappeared in good time before the discovery that the Viceroy's wife had lost her valuable jewels.

The room in which the two men conversed was the audience chamber in the ruined palace of the ancient kings of Chittarre in Northern India, lost and buried hundreds and hundreds of years in the centre of the almost impenetrable jungle. The place is most difficult of access, even by those who are aware of its secret entrance. It is three hours' ride through the densest of jungles to the edge of the desert, then six hours across the desert into civilisation.

Chittarre proved a wonderful hiding-place for the Centipede; here he made his headquarters with Lurgan and three faithful servants, and here it was that he rested and worked out the schemes that made him so notorious.

Here it was that the proceeds of his work

were brought, and the jewels removed from their settings for eventual conversion into money. It was the Centipede's chief hobby to dispatch these proceeds to an account in the name of Stephen Bainford in the Bank of England, where, by this time, a great fortune reposed.

Few, if any, people enter Chittarre; its situation and difficulties of approach are against it. Very occasionally an antiquarian has visited it, but by some extraordinary system the Centipede was warned of the arrival of strangers, who disappeared as suddenly as they came, declaring the place to be haunted. For none could stand the strain of hearing voices all around them whispering and shrieking to the echoes of the dead city, so grim and ghostly in its black emptiness, so bound and fettered by the gnarled and clinging drapery of the jungle as to be beyond the pale of civilisation. Therefore Chittarre proved a secure hiding-place and refuge to these adventurous outlaws, whose capture was so much desired by their enemies.

Hundreds of years before, the kings of Chittarre had built the wonderful city and reigned in majesty. From here they went forth to battle with other provinces and kings. Here they brought their captives to slavery and torture. Here dwelt thousands upon thousands of the kings' subjects, now long since forgotten and dead.

On every hand is desolation and silence, save

Now a huge boar pushes his way through the undergrowth and trots off with a grunt down the silent highway where, as all around, Nature alone is mistress of the situation.

Such was Chittarre, the home and resting place of the Centipede. Every part of the place was intimately known to him; every possible passage and cellar, house and temple, had been explored and searched, and he never tired of conjuring up its record of blood and cruelty, peace and prosperity, sorrow and gladness. •

It was his chief delight to trace the streets, to examine the wonderful carvings, to open up the houses, to drag the tanks, and to search high and low for the hidden records of the past.

The city itself stands upon comparatively high ground, and covers an area of over three square miles. The king's palace is in the centre, approached by a magnificent flight of marble steps with superbly carved and fretted balusters, most of which have fallen into complete decay.

These steps lead to a marble terrace from which the king's palace is approached. On the right hand facing the terrace stood the Zenana, or women's quarters, guarded by a high wall, but little of this remains beyond a heap of ruins. On the left were the apartments of the king, now roofless and decayed. In the centre was the Audience Chamber, with a few rooms attached, and it was here that the Centipede had his home. This is practi-

cally the only portion of the city with a roof. The rest of the palace is almost entirely gone to decay.

Below was the market square, and from the terrace can be traced the narrow streets with a few white walls peeping through the gnarled tree trunks, and the immense tanks with steps leading down to the water where the religious once assembled in their thousands to bathe.

Away to the left can be seen portions of the walls of the king's elephant stables, and one • can almost picture the great brutes swinging at their pickets, and hear their trumpeting as they call for their food. Quite close to this stood the arena in which the king's fighting animals were wont to be pitted against one another—tigers, leopards, fighting elephants, rams, and others. There still remains the raised marble platform from which the king watched the battles in security. Even the tank where the elephants drank and bathed can be distinguished.

On the right, cleft out of the solid rock, is the Tomb of the Kings—great caves where once reposed the dust of the warlike and blood-thirsty tyrants who held their sway for hundreds and hundreds of years over the people. Near this stands the Temple of Siva, of which a considerable portion remains, and the god's image with the cobra's expanded hood is shown in relief upon its arches and walls.

As Lurgan looked down upon what remained of this wonderful City of Chittarre there came

over him a feeling of the most intense melancholy, made more acute by the sound of the scratching of the quill pen driven so fast over the paper by the hand of the man at the writing table.

To his highly-strung nerves this very sound was agony, and he clutched at the marble top of the balcony to prevent himself from giving vent to his feelings. Do what he would he could only see disaster and terror as the outcome of his friend's scheme, and something seemed to cry aloud in his brain that he must find some means to prevent the foolhardy undertaking.

But it was easier said than done, for he knew well enough that nothing in the world would turn the man from his purpose, and to argue with him was only to make matters worse. What was he to do?

At last the scratching of the quill ceased, and he heard the Centipede rise from the table and gather up the sheets of paper, then cross over to his side.

Together they stood and gazed over the wonderful prospect that lay stretched at their feet for miles and miles, over the ruins and past the jungle, away to the purple distance. Neither seemed inclined to speak, and it was some minutes before the Centipede opened the conversation. At last he threw away the stump of the cigarette that he had been smoking, and broke the silence.

"Well, Gregory, old man, everything is in

order. Here is a sealed envelope containing a letter, which gives all details of my scheme. I want you to preserve it very carefully. Should I not return here in six weeks' time, you are to act on the minute instructions that I have written at the end. I have made every arrangement, and can see no reason why there should be any hitch that can possibly lead to failure. I have made up my mind to succeed, and succeed I shall. But enough of this—let us have a meal now, as I shall very soon be having to get ready."

With that he summoned a servant with a loud "*Koihai!*" and in answer a native appeared.

"Huzoor?"

"Bring food at once, and tell Ram Lal that I shall be starting at sundown. Therefore let him have horses prepared; he will accompany me to the desert edge."

The servant retired after making a deep obeisance, and the two friends turned once more to the beauties of the view.

"Do you know, Gregory," said the Centipede after a few moments' silent contemplation, "for the first few days after I leave this place on any enterprise, I am seized with the utmost longing to get back again. I have learnt to love this deserted palace as my home—to feel that it is the only safe and pleasant harbour of refuge left for us. Here I can think and act, walk and talk, as the whim takes me, without fear for my safety or regard

for the opinion of my neighbour. I love every stick and stone of it. Let its history be as bloody and cruel as it may, to me it is a spot of peace and security, away from all the abominations that go to make up our modern existence."

"But how on earth did you come to find such a place, and what induced you to take up your abode here? You have never yet told me the circumstances of it."

"Well, I happened some twelve years ago to be able to render a service to a poor devil, who knew every inch of the place, and on his death-bed he left me as a legacy all the information that he possessed as to its secret ways and passages, and not unnaturally when I came to see the wonders of it I jumped to the conclusion that here and here only should I find real security, and, up to the present my assumption has proved correct. Of course I have taken the greatest precaution to secure our safety in times of trouble, but I do not fear any. Most likely if we return here in twenty years we shall find everything but the jungle just as we left it."

"God forbid that the necessity should ever arise," answered Lurgan with a sigh. "Once you get this business over, I want you to come away with me to write in the new volume you spoke of."

"So I will, Gregory, so I will," was the answer, and both turned to find Mir Ali entering with the food.

The meal that followed was an almost silent one. Neither of the men seemed anxious to talk, and at last the Centipede rose from his chair and declared his intention of making preparations for his journey.

With a sigh Lurgan watched him go out of the room, and then, taking the inevitable cigarette, he rose and went to the balcony, leaving the servant to clear away the remains of the food.

It was a magnificent place in which they lived. Imagine an apartment some sixty feet long, forty feet broad, and perhaps thirty feet high. The walls built of white marble with a deep frieze carved in relief with scenes depicting the chase, a domed ceiling, also wonderfully carved and enriched. A marble floor and two great fretted doorways leading to other apartments. In the front four slender columns supported the roof, and below was a balustrade carved to represent the trees of the jungle, with monkeys leaping from bough to bough.

At the far end of this noble room there stood the remains of the king's throne, raised and approached by six steps, the throne itself being formed by two splendid peacocks with tails spread. In ancient days these tails were resplendent with the most wonderful precious stones ; even now there were remains of silver and lapis lazuli in what was left of the sculptured feathers of the birds.

The furniture of the room was entirely

Oriental. Great divans were set about with luxurious silk cushions ; a splendid Persian carpet covered the floor, Indian and Persian rugs and needlework hung upon the walls, while the intervening space was filled with a superb collection of weapons, consisting of tulwars, kutters, khandas, battle-axes, and suits of chain mail. Superb skins of tigers, shot by the Centipede, were thrown upon the floor, evidences of his prowess with the rifle.

The tables and chairs were wonderful specimens of carved ivory and ebony, all the work of skilled Eastern hands. On every side were rare and choice examples of pottery and porcelain. On a small table stood a silver huka, and on a black marble slab were set great crystal goblets, together with a whisky decanter, not to mention an English seltzogene. A beautifully inlaid writing cabinet with filigree silver hinges was set against one wall. The whole room was eloquent of the good taste and knowledge of a connoisseur, who spared no expense or trouble to secure the best of art treasures that could be obtained.

After gazing over the city in silent admiration for a while, Lurgan turned and threw himself into a chair, taking up a book, in the reading of which he became deeply engrossed for a considerable period.

Suddenly hearing a slight noise he looked up, and to his astonishment saw standing before him at the balcony steps the tall

gaunt figure of a Faquir clad in the filthiest of garments, his long unkempt hair and beard lending the most horrible expression to his dark and sun-tanned face.

The feeling of surprise soon turned to fear as the thought flashed through his brain that perhaps this grim figure portended the beginning of trouble.

Starting to his feet, he stepped quickly over to the balcony, and addressed the man in Mewari—

• “What brings thee here? How didst thou enter?”

“Heaven-born, I am a priest from Rahajmere, a man of holiness. I come with warning that the police are on the path of the master.”

“Ah! Who sent thee, O holy man?”

“None sent me; I am his servant, O Sahib. Thus it was that hearing this evil report I journeyed hither to warn him.”

“How can we tell that this is the truth. Dost thou know that if thou art speaking falsely thou wilt never leave this place alive?”

“Heaven-born, I speak truly. Even now an Englishman, a police sahib, maketh his way to this spot over the desert.”

“Give me the signal, that I may know thee.”

Here the Faquir crossed the first two fingers of his right hand with those of the left and placed them against his forehead.

At that Lurgan strode towards the door leading to the Centipede's room. Just as he

reached it he heard the voice of the man behind him.

"Stay, Gregory—it is I, Stephen Bainford ! Well, I'm perfectly safe if *you* cannot recognise me."

"Good heavens, Stephen, you amaze me ! I was quite sure you were a Faquir with the worst of news. You have relieved me, indeed. I feared the end was upon us."

"Not yet, old chap, not yet. I only imagined the trouble. What do you think of my make-up ?" •

"Wonderful—most wonderful. You would deceive the master of lies himself."

"Thanks for the compliment. I'm quite ready to start now. Call Mir Ali."

There was no look of astonishment on the face of the servant as he entered the room. Nothing surprised him in the doings of the Centipede—his thousand and one disguises were too common to be noticed.

"In half an hour we start, Mir Ali. The moon is full to-night and rises early, so we shall have ample light to get through the jungle. Bid Ram Lal get ready."

The native departed, and the two friends discussed the details of the scheme until the sound of horses' hoofs was heard below, and they looked over the balcony to see them standing ready at the foot of the steps.

In a few minutes they were making their way down the steps and the Centipede mounted, and after a silent shake of the hand

they parted. Lurgan stood for a while, watching the horses as they trotted off to the secret passage to the jungle outside the city walls.

Once more he returned to the palace and sat for a long period with a feeling of intense melancholy upon him, gazing over the dead city as if he expected to see his friend return through the streets.

Then darkness came on, and later the great moon rose up with silent majesty high into the heavens, flooding the peaceful city with its silver light, casting deep shadows across the ground, throwing up the ruined buildings in high relief, shimmering on the waters of the sacred tanks until the whole aspect of the place seemed to change, and Lurgan began to fancy that he could see the grim ghostly figures of men of centuries dead and gone come out of the houses and fill the streets and market places, and pass to and fro as they did ages ago.

At last he fell asleep in his chair, and dreamt that he saw the Centipede, bound and fettered, brought back to Chittarre to be tortured to death.

CHAPTER II.

THE CENTIPEDE SEES THE JEWELS.

AT a break in the rocky hills stands ancient, Mhurrapuir, the most precious jewel in the crown of Rajputana. Mhurrapuir the fair, Mhurrapuir the wanton, set in her glorious frame of rugged dark green hill and purple distance.

To the antiquarian and lover of beauty the place is a dream of delight ; to the jaded traveller, worn and weary with the heat and toil of the dusty highways and burnt up plains of Rajputana, an oasis of peace, plenty, and soul-satisfying content. What matter that its past history is blood-stained and cruel ? In all India there is no city that surpasses it in wondrous charm and hoary antiquity.

Hundreds of years have passed and gone since the last of its enemies hurled themselves against its battlemented walls, now grown grey and worn with stress of time and circumstance. Yet it has withstood all, and to-day exists, as of old, to show men something of the wonders of its ancient strength and greatness, albeit

faded and sere. The same double-towered gateways, all wondrous in their delicate and minute carvings, lead to its streets and market places through which the rajahs marched their victorious armies, bringing their captives to slavery and torture. But where are victors and conquered now? Where are the surging multitudes that gathered and shouted themselves hoarse in acclaiming the entrance of their valorous Princes? Gone like shadows—long since faded away into the dim mystery of the past. Now, no magnificent entries of triumph pass into Mhurrapur. Its sword rusts in the scabbard. Its panoplies of battle are all put aside, and, in their place, only the cloak of peace is worn.

Few Indian cities can show a more varied and truer phase of Eastern life than this ancient spot, whose decayed and dilapidated houses harbour the most motley assortment of human beings imaginable, who, from morning till night, throng its narrow streets and bazaars.

Splendid men, magnificent specimens of humanity, of all types and castes, are to be met with here. The majestic Sikh, the well set-up Punjabi, the warlike fierce-bearded Rajput, the Jhat, Mohammedan, and many others. Not only is the city famous for its men, but Mhurrapur has also a reputation for the beauty of its tall, well built, and extremely graceful women.

Watch them as they gather at the wells, carrying on their heads great brass water chattis with the utmost grace and elegance of movement, dressed in garments of the most subtle and wonderful shades of colour, their arms and ankles heavy with bracelets which jingle musically as they walk, their noses and ears pierced with small gold rings, a not at all unbecoming adornment. Or see them sitting at the grinding mills before their doors, crooning the strange native songs as they work—songs that are curiously in keeping with the quaint nature of the scene. In the shops may be observed every possible form of handicraft. Dyers drying long strips of red, green, or blue cloth in the sun before their doors; the coppersmith busily engaged upon his great pots and trays; the gold and silversmiths, jewellers, and wire drawers, all intent upon their several occupations. Shoemakers working at the quaint upturned pointed shoes; potters, weavers, carpenters, cotton ginners, huka makers, and followers of many other trades. Here a barber shaves his customer at the edge of the street, while another man makes his ablutions in the sight of all men; here sits the letter-writer awaiting a client, while he passes the time away by chatting with a portly money-lender. On every hand are stalls laden with bright flowers, fruit, and vegetables, the whole forming a mass of colour and movement, wholly fascinating and delightful.

During the day a confused jumble of traffic of every possible description passes through the streets ; bullock carts laden with straw, millet, or cotton, whose oxen grunt and snort as they slouch along under the heavy yoke with lolling tongues or blowing the dust from their choked nostrils ; gurgling camels, gaily caparisoned elephants, sturdy mules bearing merchandise ; the smart little cart of the British sahib, squealing polo ponies led by syces, native troopers with pennant-tipped lance, and the thousand and one creatures and styles of conveyance, all add to the ever changing charm of the picture.

It is difficult to put into words the extreme beauty of the city. Its winding streets and alleys, a tangled mass of white and yellow houses, are perfect specimens of Hindoo architecture, whose high projecting balconies and windows, all richly carved and ornamented, overhang the street in wanton irregularity. Here and there in the narrow and tortuous ways one comes upon quaint stone-built temples richly ornamented with superb carvings of the most delicately intricate description, worn smooth and polished by the hand of time. There are palaces and temples, mosques and tanks, bazaars and gateways, jumbled together as it were, in one heterogeneous mass, all going to make up a city of the most remarkable interest.

But the gem of Mhurrapuir is its palace, proudly standing in all its glory of dazzling

whiteness upon the top of a rocky hill commanding a splendid view of the city. Rising majestic as a statue, tier upon tier of fretted balcony, graceful arch, and gilded dome, beautiful with minute carving, it stands without its peer in all India. There are marble columns and arcades, wide white terraces and flights of steps, alcoves and fretted doorways that might have graced the palace of Aladdin itself.

At the foot of the palace rock are the gardens—a paradise of flowers and shrubs, orange and lemon trees, pomegranates and palms, winding walks, fountains, marble seats, and nooks; here every flower that India can grow thrives and flourishes in profuse luxuriance. Created for the use of the Maharajah's Zenana women, they form quite the most glorious gardens in any Indian city. Magnificent trees cast their cool shade across well-kept lawns and terraces, while above towers the great dark grey rocky hill surmounted by the palace, whose fretted and carved walls of white marble glisten and sparkle in the intense Indian sun-glare.

At the foot of the rock, outside the garden walls, is situated the great tank flanked on both sides by curiously carved ghauts, in the centre a number of steps lead down to the water's edge. Splendid tamarind trees spread their branches over the waters and give shade to a motley throng of humanity, intent upon washing clothes, bathing, or gossiping.

Such is Mhurrapuir at its best. In its high

places it is great and beautiful, but the other side of the picture is not so delightful. In its low parts, its slums and alleys, dirty and disease-stricken to the last degree, exist the most despised and wretched of the people. Thieves, murderers, loathsome beggars, and low-caste people of all conditions and grades dwell here, and the record is one long tale of blood-shedding, vice, and iniquity.

Whenever sedition and rebellion occur, it may always be taken as certain that Mhurrapuir's low quarters harbour some of the originators.

They are a perpetual source of trouble to the police, whose never-ceasing watchfulness is needed to cope with the recurring crimes.

Colonel Macquoid, the Political Resident in Mhurrapuir, whose arduous duty it was to guide and assist his Highness the Maharajah of Gavalcore in the government of the province, had no easy task to contend with. From morning till night, year in and year out, he was forced to keep all his wits about him when dealing with his august master, for, truth to tell, the Maharajah left no stone unturned to make his political guardian's existence as harassing and full of worry as possible. Every suggestion brought forward by the official was met with distrust and adverse criticism, yet with perfect politeness and courtesy. It was only with the utmost tact and force of character that Colonel Macquoid obtained his way.

The Province of Gavalcore was, and always had been, a cause of the greatest anxiety and concern to the Government. In the days of the Mutiny there was no more bitter or implacable enemy than its then Maharajah, and even now, no conspiracy, scheme, or undercurrent of discontent but was secretly aided and abetted by the present ruler, while to circumvent these movements the Government were bound to employ a most complete staff of intelligent officials to cope with the work.

Colonel Macquoid had been chosen as the chief official on account of his strength of character and indomitable patience and perseverance, combined with a wonderful power of perception; and these characteristics set him far and away above any other official in the management of this particular province. But he was often hard pushed to continue the struggle—not that there was any open breach between the two, but always a strained feeling which made matters extremely unpleasant for the Colonel. For some days things had not been going well in Mhurrapur; among the dregs of the populace there was a decided undercurrent of rebellion and seditious movement, which was difficult to account for. Do what they would, the authorities could not arrive at the source of the disturbance. All that they could discover was that a Deliverer was hourly expected to arrive in the city, whose mission was to free the people from the yoke of their oppressor, the British,

and who would relieve their wants and give them all the riches they desired.

The Secret Service discovered these rumours, and knew for a certainty that there was some mysterious power working secretly among the lowest classes, and every effort was being made to ascertain whence they emanated, but, up to the present, without success.

Day after day the feeling became stronger and the murmurings more violent, until the official mind was plainly expecting an open revolt, so soon as the Deliverer appeared. But who this mysterious personage was, or whence he was journeying, could not be ascertained.

It happened that one day there came to Colonel Macquoid's bungalow a tall, well-bred, handsome man of aristocratic bearing, who brought an introduction from a prominent statesman in England. The Colonel, always a hospitable man, invited the other to take up his quarters at his bungalow, and very soon the two men found their acquaintance ripening into warm friendship.

The pressure of his official duties did not admit of the Colonel giving up much time to social affairs, but he soon discovered his guest's nature to be so charming and sympathetic, that he took the very keenest pleasure in his society, and even admitted him into his entire confidence.

It is quite reasonable to suppose that had he been aware that his guest was none other than the notorious Centipede, his feelings might

have been different. He little knew that the man who had come to him with a fictitious letter of introduction was worming himself with consummate ease and assurance into his confidences and good graces, with a sinister object in view.

The Centipede was masquerading as Digby Belmore, a rich globe-trotter and sportsman ; and about a week after his arrival in the city, affairs in Mhurrapuir began to assume an unsatisfactory aspect, and events took an unpleasant turn, which kept the Colonel at his official duties more closely than he cared for.

It happened on the day in question that when the Centipede strolled into his host's private room he found him very plainly disturbed and worried.

The abstracted manner in which the Colonel paced up and down pointed indubitably to the fact. His habit of driving his right fist into the palm of his left hand when anxious was very noticeable to-day, and suggested that things were not going as he desired they should.

The Centipede, seated in a deep wicker chair with a cigar between his teeth, watched him as a cat does a mouse, while the Colonel paced the office, with his eyes bent upon the floor.

So engrossed was he with his own thoughts, that he hardly appeared conscious of the fact that the Centipede was in the room at all. At last he stopped dead before his guest and spoke.

THE CENTIPEDE SEES THE JEWELS. 39

“Look here, Belmore, I’m in the veriest quandary in which it’s possible for a man in a responsible position to be. Here I am, aware of a seditious conspiracy brewing among the dregs of this wretched city. Yet, do what I will, I can obtain no reliable information to enable me to put my hand on any of the ring-leaders. The Maharajah, I am convinced, is in entire sympathy with the movement. You know it is my duty to inform him of what is going on in his realm. Yesterday I called upon him to ask permission to sift the matter to the bottom and to request his assistance. His answer was, ‘No, I cannot help you, Colonel Macquoid ; you English are so wise and clever, you have taken from me the greater part of my power as a ruler. You try to govern the State. How is it possible that I can help you mend your quarrels with people of low caste or position ? There is no doubt I could bring the trouble to a head at once, but I do not intend to do so, because—because, well, no matter ; it will not be done by me.’ Knowing the man as I do, I felt it was wiser to take no notice of his tone, but I came away inwardly raging, knowing all the while that he was entirely in sympathy with the malcontents, and would probably assist them in every way against me. I can tell you, Belmore, it requires the nerves of an engine driver, the tact of a statesman, and the temper of a saint to have anything to do with such a man. He’s as vindictive as a cobra and as wily as a fox.”

"You have my sympathy, Colonel. It must be intensely riling to have to deal with such a man."

"Riling? That puts it far too mildly. I'm badgered to death with his slippery ways. The fact is, I'm one of those unfortunate officials continually worried by the troubles of others. My existence—official existence, I mean—is one continual example of dissimulation and diplomacy varied by private outbursts of rage, to let off steam, as it were. Now, only a few days ago I was congratulating myself upon the vastly improved state of affairs in this extremely troublesome province. I was imagining to myself the satisfaction that this happy condition would bring to the Government of India, and how I should very shortly be receiving the thanks of a generally dissatisfied and ungrateful officialdom. Yet, within two days I'm in the throes of a fanatical conspiracy consequent upon the expected arrival in the city of a person whose emissary is stirring up strife and sedition among the lowest classes, so much so that we are hourly expecting an outbreak."

"But the worst of the whole affair is, that I am bound to submit to the treatment of this Maharajah with the best grace possible. I must not, dare not, show my teeth without the consent and approval of the Government. Now you see this gold cigarette-box that has just arrived as a present from the Maharajah, together with an invitation to bring you up to

see him this morning. Whenever we have any scenes, the potentate sends me a rich present, and we are forced to kiss again and be friends, metaphorically I mean. I've ordered the cart to take us to the Palace at 11.30. Will you be ready to go with me? You will, I think, find it very interesting."

"You may rest assured of that, Colonel; I shall be delighted above all things. I want to meet the Maharajah and see the wonders of his Palace. I suppose he's not difficult to get on with."

"Not in the very least, my dear fellow. Most people, who don't know the man as well as I do, look upon him as a perfect brick. No doubt he is, to the outside world. But you must tell me what you think of him afterwards."

"By the way, what are his tastes?"

"Oh, the usual ones of a fabulously wealthy rajah: horses, polo, shooting, and everything that tends to excitement—war, if possible."

"Well, I think I am capable of making conversation on these topics."

"Stay, I had forgotten his chief hobby, that of collecting jewels. I suppose his collection is almost unique."

"Indeed? That is extremely interesting. I am passionately fond of stones myself. I must try and induce him to show me his collection. I shall use all my persuasive power."

"If you can only get him on the topic, I have not the slightest doubt he will let you

have a look at them ; but I can tell you that it is an honour seldom paid to any man."

At that moment the Colonel's cart was announced, and in a very short while the two men were seated in the smart little conveyance driving off towards the city. Passing through the main street, they proceeded to mount the steep road that winds around the rocky hill and eventually comes out at the main entrance to the Palace. The feelings of the Centipede were curiously mixed as he sat by the side of the tall, grey-haired soldier who was taking him to meet the man he had planned to rob. The whole scheme seemed to plan out so well, his carefully-laid plot to apprise the lowest classes of the fact that a deliverer was about to come, to give them all the wealth they could desire, had produced just the effect that he hoped for ; and now, all that he required was to find out how and where the Maharajah kept his jewels and the best means by which he could secure them ; so that the final phase of the enterprise could be accomplished. Very soon they found themselves at the top of the white road looking down upon the city, a broad, colonnade-flanked courtyard before them. Here they stopped, and the cart and pony were taken away to the stables by a syce. Then the Centipede followed the Colonel into the Palace through splendid audience-chambers and up a majestic white marble staircase, and finally into a beautiful room panelled in cedar-wood and furnished in an entirely European style,

with excellent pictures on the walls, Turkey and Persian rugs spread on the highly polished floor, and books and papers on the many tables.

As they awaited the arrival of the Maharajah the Centipede gazed round the room at the different works of art, and was surprised to note their quality, so different from that of the usual possessions of the native prince, whose tastes generally run to cut-glass chandeliers and gaudy silk-covered furniture. But here were Sheraton and Hepplewhite chairs, banded bookcases, excellent bronzes, and china worthy of a museum. Sporting prints of value were introduced amongst excellent water colour and exceptionally fine oil paintings. In fact, the whole room appeared to be tenanted by a man of extremely cultivated and refined tastes.

"His Highness appears to have superior ideas in the way of furniture, Colonel," he remarked, as he completed the survey of the room.

"Yes ; he's a man of extraordinary culture and refinement. When you know him, you will be amazed at the general knowledge and taste he possesses. That, to my mind, makes the treatment he metes out to us the more remarkable."

The Centipede turned to the window and gazed over the superb panorama that stretched away for miles. Below was the city, a mass of colour and variety, its great Tank and winding streets dotted with people and conveyances like ants moving here and there. A more beautiful and interesting scene could hardly

be imagined, with the sunlight glinting upon the walls and roofs of the houses, temples, mosques, and bazaars, and the exquisite garden directly below spreading out like a green carpet around the base of the rocky hill.

So engrossed was he in the delights of the view that he did not notice the entrance of the Maharajah, and it was only on hearing the voice of the Colonel that he turned and faced the man who meant so much to him.

With the most charming of smiles he returned the hand-shake of the Maharajah after the introduction by the Colonel.

"You must really excuse my absent-mindedness, your Highness ; but the beauty of your room and the exquisite picture I have been looking down upon have quite taken my breath away. I never have seen anything in all my travels to equal it."

"I am pleased to think you like it, Mr. Belmore ; I pride myself that it is unique. When you come to realise all the episodes that this Palace has looked down upon in the course of its existence, I think it becomes doubly interesting."

"Indeed, that is so. Colonel Macquoid has done me the honour to put up with my presence for over a week, and I can assure you I've thoroughly enjoyed roaming about your delightful city. I have learnt its history in peace and war, and I shall always look back upon my visit to Mhurrapuir with the utmost pleasure."

"Are you making a long stay ? I should

like to show you more of the place. I think you would find me a satisfactory guide."

"I am obliged to your Highness. Unfortunately, to-morrow I start for Kashmir to meet a man—a long standing engagement. After that we go to Russia."

"For my own sake I'm sorry that I shall not again have the pleasure of entertaining you."

"It is not certain that I shall not be troubling your Highness again very shortly. I have enjoyed myself so much during my short visit that I may take you at your word and surprise you."

The Centipede laughed, and the thought occurred to him of the bitter irony of the speech, seeing that it was his intention to visit his host once more and very shortly, only under another guise and without being the recipient of so much courteous hospitality.

"Allow me to offer you a cigar and a peg. You see that I am endeavouring to be as English in my tastes as possible. Your country interests and fascinates me to a degree. The Colonel here knows how much I love the English."

The Centipede glanced at the Colonel over the top of his glass as he carried it to his lips, just to see what impression the speech of the Maharajah had upon him; but the Colonel shewed no sign or movement of his features whatsoever. He only took the cigar handed to him, and after cutting it accepted a match from his host.

Of extraordinary stature, the Maharajah possessed the handsome, finely-shaped head and clear-cut features of the high caste Rajput. His black beard, carefully parted in the centre and brushed well back on each side, gave him rather a fierce expression ; but it was his eyes, coal black and very brilliant, that were the most striking feature of his face ; while his thin lips, just showing under his fiercely brushed moustache, gave an added expression of strength and determination. His age might have been anything between forty and fifty, and to all appearance he was a man of very vigorous and active habit. A great rider and sportsman, he was generally popular with all Englishmen, who saw him only in his character as a host, and a very excellent one at that. Very few knew anything of his political designs and intrigues.

Having broken the ice so well, the Centipede then proceeded to make himself thoroughly agreeable to the Maharajah, and no man living had a more engaging manner or a more unostentatious way of centring the conversation upon himself than he.

With the greatest tact and diplomacy, he led the conversation round to the topic that he desired, and soon began to notice that his august host was listening to his remarks with the keenest interest. He charmed and delighted his listeners with a fund of anecdote of exciting adventure that he related as having happened to himself, which was likely enough,

in view of all the episodes of his adventurous career. The Maharajah listened with flattering attention, and inwardly voted his guest one of the best and most entertaining men that he had ever met.

After a while the Centipede deftly turned the talk to weapons, of which he could see that his host possessed a very fine collection.

This led them to speak of Malay, China, Borneo, New Guinea, and at last they hit upon Australia. From cow-punching and bush-work the Centipede went on to speak of the Torres Straits and the pearl fisheries, asking the Maharajah whether he had ever visited them.

"No," he answered ; " the only experience of Australia I have is in the matter of horses. I am the happy possessor of a number of good ones bred in that country."

" I must confess," said the Centipede, " I enjoyed Australia extremely. I think I saw everything that was possible, and did all that is expected of the globe-trotter ; but the place that interested me most was Thursday Island. I went out to stay with a friend who owned a number of pearl luggers, and I lived there some months. In fact, so interested did I become in the industry, that I even went down into the depths of the sea several times and worked the bottom myself, as a diver. This pearl I wear now as a pin I obtained by my own prowess. It's a beauty."

As he said this he removed a magnificent black pearl pin from his tie and handed it to the

Maharajah. As the Prince took it into his hands the Centipede carefully watched his face and noted the sparkle in the eye as he gazed on the beautiful jewel.

"Mr. Belmore, it's as fine a pearl as I have ever had the pleasure of looking upon, and I think I am a judge."

"Yes, it's a beauty. I was extremely proud of having found it myself. But I don't want to bore your Highness with any further recitals of my pearly prowess."

"Bore me? I'm deeply interested. Did you get any more?"

"Yes; I have here the finest pearl, I should say, ever taken out of the sea. I did not get it myself; a Solomon Islander found it. I carry it for safety here."

And he took a little gold box with a screw lid, hanging on his watch chain, and opening it showed to the astonished gaze of the Maharajah and Colonel Macquoid a pearl of great size and incomparable shape and lustre, a perfect sphere and without a flaw. The Maharajah was amazed. His avaricious eyes gloated over the treasure, and it seemed as if he could hardly bring himself to return it to the Centipede.

"What do you consider it is worth, your Highness?"

"I should think, half a lac of rupees. I have not a finer in my collection."

"I'm lucky, then, to be the possessor?"

"Would you sell it, Mr. Belmore?"

"Well, no. You see, I'm a fairly rich man. I don't want money. No ; I'm taking it home to show to the King of England. It's worthy of a place among the Crown jewels."

"I should like that pearl more than I can say. If you'll put a price on it, I'll buy it at your figure."

"I'm not inclined to part with it for money."

"Will you exchange it for diamonds? Women like diamonds."

The Centipede laughed.

"You tempt me, your Highness, very greatly. But I'm afraid I cannot. I expect in your collection you have something far finer."

"My friend, I'll show you. Would it please you to see some of my trinkets?"

"Indeed, it would. I'm intensely fond of jewels from a connoisseur's point of view."

The Maharajah put his hand into the breast of his robe and took a small key from a chain round his neck, which the Centipede pretended not to notice.

"That little key never leaves my person," he said with a laugh. "I can assure you, Mr. Belmore, that there are few people who can say they have seen what you are going to see."

The Centipede breathed hard as he realised what was about to happen—that his eyes were going to rest on the wondrous magnificence of the possessions of this monarch. He keenly noted every movement of the hand of the Prince as he carefully took the little key from the chain on which it hung, and walking across

the room slid a small panel back in the wood-work, and passing his hand into the square opening turned the key. As he did so, the whole of the panelling swung back, and the two men standing at a short distance off noted that a long narrow chamber was within. Double windows lit the place, well guarded with huge steel bars securely let into the stonework. It would have been quite impossible for anyone to have broken into this treasury from the outside. Pretending to examine a work of art which hung on the wall farthest away from the entrance to the strong room, the Centipede took careful note of the exact position of the small panel, but so cleverly had the door been introduced into the wall that it was extremely difficult to see where it could be joined. However, his perceptive brain measured almost instantly the height to the ceiling and the distance from a great window, and he marked the place by the nearest pictures or arms that rested against the wall.

Then the Maharajah having opened the door called the two men to enter, and the Centipede passed across the room, followed by Colonel Macquoid. It was with beating heart and suppressed excitement that he walked into the chamber. There he saw row upon row of steel boxes standing upon shelves, each of them opened by small keys hanging on nails above them.

Speechless with admiration, the Centipede feasted his eyes upon the superb wonders of

the jeweller's art that his host handed to him. The collection included perfect and flawless specimens of nearly every precious stone in existence. There were magnificent necklaces and rings, bracelets of diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, opals, and amethysts, single cut stones of rare beauty and water, ropes of pearls and chains of turquoise. In fact, the collection was almost priceless. The Maharajah told the eagerly listening men the history of a number of the most wonderful specimens ; how his ancestors had gone to war with other kings and provinces to secure them. It was almost a shock to realise the amount of bloodshed and cruelty that it must have cost to obtain possession of these jewels.

All the time the Centipede was carefully taking mental notes of the boxes which contained the most valuable stones, so that on his next visit he might secure them without unnecessary delay. His keen eye also noted all the possibilities of escape and danger that the rooms possessed, and nothing was overlooked.

At last, the whole collection having been examined and discussed, he thanked his host for the courtesy he had shown in exhibiting the treasures to him.

" Your Highness most certainly has a perfect collection. I've read of the treasures of the East in books, but I never thought that I should have the delight of gazing upon such wonders."

" I am proud to be able to show them to you. I take an immense pleasure in them, and am

continually adding to the list. But, Mr. Belmore, I want that pearl. Will you not sell to me ? ”

“ No, your Highness, I could not sell ; but I’ll tell you what I will do : I will exchange it for one of your jewels, to be chosen by you as a memento.”

“ That’s very gracious of you, and I accept the offer. Here are three splendid diamonds. Will that satisfy you by way of an exchange ? ”

“ Perfectly. I know that my precious pearl will repose in good hands, so I readily agree. Here it is. I should like to see where it will rest.”

The exchange was duly made, the Maharajah placing the beautiful pearl in a bed of cotton wool, and locking it away in the last box.

“ There it rests, Mr. Belmore. The next time you come to Mhurrapuir, should you like to see it again, I think you will find it safe.”

The thought flashed through the Centipede’s brain that before many days were passed he would be looking again upon the jewel, but it would be in his own possession.

The Maharajah then proceeded to close the strong room, and the Centipede stood by conversing with him, all the while taking the most careful note of the exact position of the small opening.

The Prince then proposed that he should show them the Palace, which invitation was gladly accepted, and the next hour was spent in wandering through its magnificent rooms.

CHAPTER III.

THE CENTIPEDE SECURES THE JEWELS.

THE day after his visit to the Maharajah, the Centipede took leave of Colonel Macquoid. Both men genuinely regretted the parting, for they had learnt to like one another during their short acquaintance, and there was no doubt the Centipede had thoroughly enjoyed his stay at Mhurrapuir. But the time was now ripe for action, and it was necessary that he should get to work without further delay ; therefore, having obtained all the information he required as to the whereabouts of the treasures of the Maharajah, together with the best means of getting at them, he prepared to depart.

Having made his preparations and wished the Colonel good-bye, giving his promise to come and stay with him again, he took his seat in the ekka that was awaiting him and departed, ostensibly setting off for the railway *en route* to Peshawur.

Two days later there strode into Mhurrapuir a tall Faquir clad in the filthiest of garments, his long, thin beard reaching nearly to his waist, his hair knotted and unkempt, his arms, neck, and face smeared with ashes, and his skin burnt almost black with the heat of the sun, while he stared straight before him as he walked, taking no notice of anything or anybody that he saw.

Passing through the great double-towered gateway that gives entrance to the city, he made his way to the lowest quarters, and arriving at an open space where a large tree spread its branches and afforded some shade from the burning rays of the noonday sun, he squatted down with his back to the stem, placed his alms-bowl before him, and assumed the stoical expression of the ascetic.

Very soon the bowl began to fill with small pieces of money dropped into it by the passers-by, whose requests for his blessing produced a few muttered words which appeared to have the effect of pleasing one and all.

For hours he sat in exactly the same position, until the sun began to sink like a ball of fire behind the distant hills; and at last there came towards him a woman bearing a couple of brass water-chattis slung in nets at the ends of a pole, which she carried with the utmost grace and ease across her shoulder.

She was a tall, handsome woman of queenly figure, dressed in a dull dead-green dress sewn all over in a pattern with small pieces of glass that glittered and sparkled in the rays of

the fast declining sun ; her ankles and wrists heavy with bracelets that jingled musically as she walked ; her small ears were pierced with large gold ear-rings, while one nostril had a small gold ring through it. As she drew near the Faquir, he raised his eyes and addressed her.

“ Daughter, give me, I pray thee, a gourd of water, for I have come from afar and would quench my thirst.”

Without answering a word, she slung the bar from her shoulder and filled the gourd that he held out to her from one of the brass chattis.

After he had quenched his thirst, he set the gourd down and gave her his blessing : “ May thy children’s children be sons, and thy joy in them perpetual.” Then in a low voice he added, “ Delalki, dost thou not know me ? The Master.”

The woman started in astonishment, but only for a moment. There were one or two natives passing at the time, and it was very necessary to be cautious.

“ Daughter, I would ask of thee room in thy house to rest me this night ; for I am in this city at a loss, as a blind man without guide.”

“ Oh, holy man, if thou wilt but honour my poor house, then indeed shall we be blessed.”

Without a word more the Faquir arose, and taking his alms-bowl and staff, strode majestically after the woman, who led the way through the crowded streets to her home.

Having admitted him, she proceeded to make things as comfortable as possible, and set

out a meal of dried fish, boiled rice, and vegetable curry. It was a great relief to the Centipede to throw off the character of Faquir that he had been assuming, and to talk earnestly to the woman with whom he had been associated in matters of a similar kind before, and whom he had known, together with her husband, for many years ; it was through their instrumentality that he had spread abroad among the people the rumours of the advent of their deliverer.

Many and many a time she had proved herself to be reliable ; and her skill in concealing the source of the reports on this occasion won the Centipede's profound admiration and approval. He learnt from her lips all the rumours that had spread like wild-fire among the scum of the city, but she never enquired what was the object of the instructions that had been given her. She obeyed implicitly, for she knew that the Master was engaged on some serious work, and that she would be well paid, she and her good man ; that was quite sufficient.

"Delalki, thou has done well, and I will reward thee richly. The time is come when I must act in the matter that I have set my hand to do ; therefore, the leaders among the people may now know that their deliverer hath appeared ; but first I desire that the news of my arrival shall be made known only to the Maharajah. Tell me how may this be brought about."

"Truly, that were an easy thing to per-

form. Doth not my husband himself serve at the Palace, and is it not made plainer still, for my husband's brother hath the honour of serving the Maharajah in his presence. I will this night speak to my man, so that he, being prepared, may bring the matter early before his brother, thus the Prince may hear thereof."

"So be it, Delalki ; speak with thy man, and, further, let him ask for a price as reward, so that his brother may put the matter as a great service before the Maharajah, seeing that he hath brought the knowledge to his ears that a deliverer hath come to the people, who will set himself up against him."

"It shall be done, O Master."

"And, further, let it be put into the mind of the Prince that he sendeth at once to bring this usurper before him, so that he may have speech with me. Is it plain to thee, Delalki ?"

"It is plain."

"Then, when I have gone to have speech with the Maharajah, should it so happen that things fall out as we desire, let the populace know that he who is expected hath arrived. After that, I will take the matter in hand myself. Here is thy reward for all that thou and thy man have done on my behalf. I am well pleased. Now will I go to rest, for I am tired."

With that, he strode away and left the woman to examine the purse of money that he handed to her, and which was sufficient to keep them in luxury for years.

When the woman's husband returned, his

astonishment was great on being told by his wife that the Master had arrived ; and they sat late discussing the best plan to carry out the wishes of the Centipede. At last it was arranged between them that in the morning the man should seek out his brother and tell him the news, and, as the man well knew, his relative was of an exceedingly grasping and avaricious nature, so it was quite certain that the most would be made of the circumstance with the object of getting a substantial reward from the Prince.

It happened that the next morning, on arriving at the Palace, he at once ran across his brother, the personal attendant upon the Maharajah. Bursting with importance, he related the fact of the Faquir having come to his house to seek shelter the evening before.

The brother eagerly devoured the news ; for he at once saw the possibility of making capital out of it with his royal master ; but, being of a cautious and diplomatic turn of mind, he proceeded to warn his brother against allowing the knowledge to leak out that he had harboured the holy man even for one night, for it would most certainly be an invitation to the police to take action against him.

"I pray thee," said the poorer brother, "that thou wilt speak for me to the Maharajah, so that I receive some reward for my information."

After he had obtained this promise, which he knew would never be kept, the men parted, and the elder brother made his way to the

presence of his august master ; and, when the occasion presented itself, informed the monarch of what his brother had told him.

The Maharajah was naturally somewhat concerned on hearing the news that the mysterious deliverer of his people was within the city walls, and pondered over the subject for some hours, until he determined to take the matter up, and to that end sent for Mir Singh, his attendant.

" Tell me, Mir Singh, didst thou inform me that it was to the house of thy brother that this man had come ? "

" Even so, Heaven born, to seek lodging. "

" Then I desire thee that thou goest with thy brother immediately to bring hither this much presuming deliverer, that I may see for myself what manner of man it is that would thrust me from my throne. Convey him here to me by the garden staircase, so that none may know of his coming. Go now, immediately, for I am all impatience to have speech with him. "

The man bowed low and left the room, and proceeded to find his brother to carry out the instructions received.

In a very short while the pair had made their way to the city and reached the younger brother's house.

Here he spoke. " Let me enter and speak to the holy man alone, as it may so happen that we may have trouble in getting him away. I will go to him and say that the leader of the people would have speech with him, and he may thus go easily with us. "

Now Mir Singh was a man of peace, not given to battles and fightings. His disposition was towards the getting together of wealth by any means save that of personal violence, at which he drew the line; for there is an old Indian proverb that suited his feelings exactly—"He who would be wealthy, must live peaceably."

So he was pleased to fall in with his younger brother's arrangement, and condescended to hold converse with the wife while the other interviewed the Faquir.

Passing through the house, he gained the room, where he found the Master seated writing some notes on a sheet of paper. He thereupon informed his guest that the Maharajah had sent him with his brother to bring him to the Palace. On learning this news, the Centipede asked which way he was to be taken, and then requested the man to make the possibility of escape easy, should it lay in his power.

Although the Centipede fully expected that this summons would come, he did not realise that it would be so soon. His nerves were usually proof against surprises, but this time the very fact that the crisis of his enterprise was about to be reached caused him to experience that curious feeling which accompanies acute anxiety, and on these occasions makes the very molehills of chance appear to be magnified into mountains of circumstance.

However, it needed but a short while to brace his nerves together, secure certain impedimenta that he always carried in case of emer-

gency, arrange his dirty and torn garments about him, take his gourd and his staff in his hand, and follow the elder of his guides as instructed.

Walking with bowed and thoughtful mien along the hot and narrow alleys, which he knew led to the garden entrance to the Palace, he instinctively felt to see if the precious revolver was safely secreted in the folds of his garments, and also for the tiny bottle that he always carried slung in a wash-leather bag round his neck, in case of the direst necessity. This bottle contained a clear and very pungent liquid, whose deadly secret he had learned from a Tamil in Ceylon. Such was the extraordinary power of this fluid, that the victim before whose nose the same had been held for a few seconds, became completely and profoundly insensible. With this safeguard upon him, he felt that he was prepared for almost any emergency that might arise.

Passing along the narrow and tortuous passage they at last came out into the main thoroughfare, and presently he saw the man in front stop at a little door studded with nails which was set in a solid stone wall some fifteen to twenty feet high, above which, but at some distance back, towered the immense rock with the white Palace glistening at its summit.

Opening the gate, the man passed in and beckoned to the Centipede to follow him, which he did, while the second man closed and locked the door behind them.

He found himself in an exquisite garden, beautifully planted with tall palms, bread fruit, and tamarind trees, that grew most luxuriantly on every side, and innumerable flowers, giving out most delicious perfumes that stole over his senses with a charm that was indescribable after the vile odours that he had perforce to put up with in the course of the last few days in his sordid and dirty quarters.

Well-kept shady walks and paths branched off on all sides ; here and there were marble fountains and fish ponds, summer houses and quaint seats, and hundreds of exquisitely kept beds of flowers. The whole scene was a very striking and beautiful one, and became fixed upon the Centipede's memory for many a long day after.

Following his guide, he walked quickly along until he found himself close up to the foot of the rock, and before him a steep flight of steps hewn out of the solid granite. These they proceeded to mount, and having climbed for about fifty or sixty feet stopped at another nail-studded door ; as this was being unlocked, the Centipede turned and gazed down upon the city below, with its irregular and picturesque streets of houses set in their frames of green mango trees, through which the flat, white roofs showed with intensity. For the moment he forgot his purpose and became wrapt in mute admiration, and it was only on feeling the hand of his guide upon his arm that he was brought to his senses with a start.

He followed into another narrow and very steep staircase guarded by the door, which he noticed the second man closed but did not lock after him. The only light that entered the passage way came from narrow slits cut in the rock at every nine or ten yards. Up and up they toiled, until it seemed to him that they must have ascended thousands of feet. At last they came upon another door, upon which Mir Singh knocked thrice.

Not one of them spoke—they only stood and breathed hard.

Minute followed minute in silence, which, in the semi-darkness of the passage, was most unnerving. The Centipede did not feel any too safe. What if the door before them should suddenly open and armed men rush upon him? Once in the hands of the Maharajah, should that august monarch discover his errand, he knew exactly what to expect. The very thought of it made him clutch at his revolver and determine to sell his life as dearly as possible, reserving one chamber for himself.

After knocking again three times, the sound of the turning of a key in the lock broke upon his listening ear. Very soon the door swung back upon its hinges, and he saw the huge figure of the Maharajah standing in the entrance.

He wore a splendid robe of green silk, embroidered with pearls and gold, and a saffron turban with a knot of emeralds hanging over one temple. His black beard was carefully

brushed back to his ears, while his jet black eyes fixed themselves like a snake's upon those of the Centipede.

"Enter, thou Faquir, in peace. I would have speech with thee on certain rumours that have come to mine ears. Close the door, Mir Singh; thou and thy brother can leave the room by the other door. I will converse with this holy man awhile. See, therefore, that none disturb us; I would be alone with him until I warn thee."

Both men bowed low, crossed the apartment, and went out, leaving the Prince alone with the Faquir.

The Centipede stood with his head bowed low on his chest, and his hands clutching the staff that he held. The Maharajah seated himself at a table and fixed his eyes upon the man before him. It was an extremely trying moment for the Centipede, as he well knew that there would be but scant mercy shown him if the Maharajah should recognise his guest of three days before. It seemed to him to be hours before the Prince spoke.

"Thou art silent, O Faquir. Loose thy tongue, that I may hear thee speak."

The Centipede drew himself up to his full height and looked the monarch straight into his piercing black eyes, so searching and cruel.

"It is not meet that one so lowly as I should begin speech with an illustrious Prince such as thou," he answered in a deep voice, slow and strong.

"Whence comest thou, O holy man?"

"From afar. I have journeyed out of Peshawur. My mission is a sacred one."

"Dost thou not know that thy presence in my city is causing thee to be suspected among men as a traitor and felon, and that thou dost run risks that, couldst thou but realise them, would set thee trembling in very terror? It is spoken of thee that thou art a schemer and breaker of the peace and wouldst set thyself up against me, so that my kingdom is in turmoil."

"The lips that spoke thus unto thee, O Prince, lie. I am no traitor nor schemer against thee, but only for thee and thine. I fear no punishment. It is given to me to see in thee a great and wise ruler of all people."

"These are but idle boastings and vain imaginations, O Faquir. They are empty as the wind that shaketh the cinnamon trees in my garden. By what madness of brain canst thou conceive that I shall do these things?"

"Because it is written, O Prince. Because it is in the Book of thy Fate. I have travelled from afar to come near unto thee because it is so ordained. O great and noble ruler, look down upon the city over which thou holdest sway. Let thine eyes rest but for one moment on the thousand and one houses therein. In them dwell thy people, oppressed and enslaved by the hand of the British, so that none know freedom of speech nor purpose. O Prince, give ear to my words! Where now is the glory of thy power that but a few short years ago

was the wonder of the universe ? Gone—all has gone, passed away, become nothing but a memory. Yet it is given to my poor eyes to tear aside the veil that covers the future, and to see thee lord over all Hindostan, reigning with justice and mercy over thy people, whose number shall be even as the sands of the sea.

“ Is it not something, O great Prince, to free thy land from misery and slavery, to cast out this hated tyrant usurper, who hath so long set up laws that are become irksome and grievous to all ? Prince, I charge thee let thy hand again seek the hilt of the sword that now rusts in its scabbard. Let thy power be shown, that men may see thou art still strong as of yore, and can cast out the tyrant from our midst.”

During the latter portion of the Faquir's impassioned oration the Maharajah gazed in mute astonishment at the audacity of the man addressing him. Never before in the whole course of his life had such suggestions been put to him. It was only in his heart of hearts that he thought of these things.

“ Thou speakest big words, O Faquir. It will be no easy matter to cast out the British. Remember we tried once and failed. Will the next time prove more successful ? ”

“ I have spoken. It is ordained, by powers that we cannot resist. Here I have with me a paper that will tell thee all the princes that are with us in the cause, so that thou mayest see once and for all that I speak no idle words, but true and faithful ones.”

The sharp ears of the monarch took in the last speech in a flash. Here indeed was an admission. Now he would learn who the great people were that made opposition to the British Government. Then with this knowledge, if he thought no more of the scheme, he could at least make capital out of the information that he possessed in the names of the would-be rebels. The secret service pay handsomely for knowledge of the kind, and no doubt he would receive great honour from high quarters. These were the thoughts that flashed through his mind as he watched the man take a paper from his clothing and, smoothing it out, come to his side to lay it before him on the table.

The Maharajah's intense interest was at once centred on the writing. Here was the Centipede's opportunity.

Like a flash his hand produced the small bottle of liquid from the wash-leather bag, and in a moment he had the Maharajah round the neck in his strong grip and the bottle at his nostrils. In a few seconds the struggling man became quiet and deadly grey. Letting his head fall back against the chair the Centipede gave him a few seconds more of the pungent fumes, then put the bottle back again in its little bag, took up the paper that he had set before his victim, and placed it in safety beneath his dress.

Then he locked all the doors save the one that led to the staircase, in which he left the key, and returned to the insensible monarch.

Carefully undoing the dress of his victim he found the little key hanging on the golden chain and removed it from the swivel ; then, looking fixedly at him for a few seconds he turned to the wall where he knew that the panel was. It took him a minute or two to find the exact spot, but at last he touched the spring and the small door opened under his hand. Within he saw the safe keyhole, and placing the key therein he turned it and the big iron door swung back noiselessly upon its hinges, and before him were the steel boxes set out on their shelves. It did not take him very many minutes to secure the best of the jewels, including his own pearl, and he placed as many as he could in small pockets of wash-leather sewn in his clothes. With a sigh of relief he locked all the cases and shut the great door and turned the key, then closed the little panel again and quietly stepped over to the Maharajah.

Taking the gold chain in his fingers he slipped on the key, when suddenly he felt the Maharajah's hands go up in a flash to his throat. Like lightning he realised the fact that the drug had not acted sufficiently.

Then began such a fight as he had never known before. The Maharajah, though still dazed with the power of the drug, was strong as Hercules, and the Centipede felt that he would have to use all the arts that he knew of if he wished to save himself. In a moment the two men were on their feet, each grimly determined to overcome the other.



He caught the Centipede's bare arm in his strong white teeth.'

The Centipede could feel the strong fingers of his adversary tighten on his throat until it seemed he must strangle. By dint of extraordinary strength and agility he managed to get his arms up and thus prevent the furious monarch from using all his force. Round and round they went, grunting and straining like wild beasts in their efforts to gain an advantage. Suddenly the Maharajah changed his tactics, and letting go the throat he caught the Centipede's bare arm in his strong white teeth and bit it to the bone. With a sharp cry of agony the Centipede sprang away and the two men stood facing one another. During the struggle the Centipede's false beard and wig had been torn away, and the now clear-headed monarch saw that his opponent was no Faquir, but to his intense astonishment recognised the face of his guest of a few days before.

It was only a short respite, but it was sufficient to enable the Centipede to get his revolver into his hand, but only just in time, for with a howl of rage like a tiger, the Maharajah snatched up a dagger from a table and sprang at his adversary.

As the huge man came towards him, with his brilliant black eyes burning like those of a maniac, and the long dagger in his hand, he presented the most awful appearance, and the Centipede well knew that it meant death if he succeeded in reaching him. With a bound like a tiger the Prince was upon him and had seized

him by the arm with his left hand, while the right was raised to stab him to the heart.

Suddenly there was a sharp crack of a pistol, and the big man rolled in a heap on the floor at the feet of the Centipede.

Not for one second did he lose his presence of mind. He knew that there was nothing for it now but to escape, and that as quickly as possible, for there was no telling whether the shot fired had been heard ; very probably, even now someone was on the way to ascertain the cause of the report. But before taking his departure it was essential that he should cover his tracks.

First he strode over to the door leading to the Palace to see that it was securely locked and that the key was on the inside. Then he closed and fastened all the windows and turned over a few more chairs as if to give the appearance of an extremely fierce fight having taken place. The wounded man had fallen upon his side and lay at full length, with his head towards the window and his feet to the strong-room door, and the Centipede therefore hastily cleared away the rugs to form an uninterrupted passage over the highly-polished floor from the prostrate figure to the staircase door.

He then took the key from the lock and passed it through the space between the floor and the bottom of the door, and, satisfied that there was sufficient room to slide it quite easily without fear of its jamming, he pro-

ceeded to draw a red herring, as it were, across his own track.

Taking a reel of cotton from his pocket he tied a small knot at the end, and passing it under the foot of the Maharajah he brought the ends outside the door. Having turned the key on the outside, he proceeded to make a loose hitch in the cotton round the key handle ; then laying it on the polished floor he proceeded to draw it very cautiously towards the foot of the wounded man. When in due course it reached the obstruction its progress was stopped, and the hitch becoming loosened he drew the cotton back again to himself, leaving the key beneath the foot of the Maharajah, carefully examining the end to see that none had broken off, and finding the knot to his satisfaction smiled to himself as he thought of the nice little mystery that his disappearance with the doors locked on the inside and all the windows closed and the key reposing beneath the wounded man would cause to the police when they came to examine into the affair.

Then he proceeded down the staircase as fast as he could, and at length reached the garden, to find that the darkness was closing in. He determined that the best thing he could do was to hide somewhere until the night was well advanced, when he could make his escape ; for his appearance in his present condition would most certainly attract attention in the city and probably be his undoing. He had no intention of going back

to Delalki's house, but of making his way to Chittarre with as little delay as possible, after he had transacted a little business that first claimed his attention. Fortunately for him, the approaching darkness would prevent his being seen by anyone at the window of the palace, but still he was too careful to run any risks, and he therefore proceeded with the very greatest caution to select a hiding place at the far end of the garden in a thick belt of shrubs that would effectually protect him from observation should anyone chance to pass along the walks.

Very soon he discovered exactly the place that he required, with thick low-growing shrubs on all sides, so situated that no one could approach without his being aware of it. Once he had settled himself down in his hiding-place, he began to feel the pain of his wounded arm ; now that the excitement of the escape had passed, he noticed it ; and as the time went on it became more and more acute, until it almost drove him mad. He tried in every way to alleviate it, but the more he did the worse it seemed to become. Soon a deadly sickness came over him. His teeth chattered in his head, his extremities became cold and numbed. He struggled with all the determination and strength of mind he possessed against the feeling of faintness that kept coming over him. The excitement through which he had gone, the want of proper food, and the extreme pain that he suffered overcame his determination, and he sank into a dead faint.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOUNDED MAHARAJAH IS DISCOVERED.

THE evening passed quickly away, yet no summons to attend upon his august master came to Mir Singh. The Maharajah had been closeted with the Faquir now for hours, and the usual time for his evening meal had long since passed ; this was the more extraordinary as his habits were generally most regular.

Mir Singh was much troubled by these circumstances ; time after time he went up to the closed door and listened for some sound that would ease his tormented mind ; but perfect silence reigned ; no voices, no movement whatsoever. Tremblingly he asked himself what did it mean ? Had his master fallen asleep ? Or was he dead ? In an agony of nervous apprehension he sought out his brother and told him of the state of affairs, and together they made their way to the door of the Maharajah's room to strain their ears for evidence of their master's existence.

Both feared even to touch the door handle, for they had received strict instructions that

he was to be left undisturbed ; and they were well acquainted with the violence of his temper when orders were disobeyed.

In awed whispers they conferred together as to what should be done. The brother suggested breaking in the door, but Mir Singh immediately put his foot on that proposition. The next move suggested by the brother was that they should try the garden staircase, for perchance the Maharajah had gone out that way. This had never struck Mir Singh, and thereupon they descended and made their way to the garden and climbed the steep staircase, only to find the door locked.

There was nothing for it but to return once more through the Palace. Arrived again before the entrance to the room, the brother suggested that they should knock and await an answer. With fear and trembling, Mir Singh, who was at heart an abject coward, consented ; and the brother rapped loudly, but no sound whatever came in response. Then they were both thoroughly frightened.

"What shall be done ? What shall be done ?" demanded Mir Singh, wringing his hands in nervous terror.

"Dost thou not see plainly that the door must be broken open, and that at once ?" replied the brother.

"Fool !" answered Mir Singh. "Thou knowest well that it would mean instant dismissal to me. Nay, nay. We must devise some other scheme than that."

"There is no other scheme, my brother, unless it be that thou wilt go unto the Sahib Macquoid and beg to know what is to be done."

"That would be well, brother," answered Mir Singh, hoping that the responsibility of the affair might thus be shifted on to other shoulders. "I will get me to him at once; he is great and powerful, and will see that we are protected. Stay thou here so that none come near unto the door. I will return with all speed."

This was an excellent idea that the brother had put forward, and should be acted upon at once. He saw the necessity of going himself to see the Colonel, and took his departure there and then, leaving his brother to keep guard over the door.

There was no doubt that something very extraordinary had happened, and it thoroughly frightened Mir Singh. He had never known such an unusual occurrence. Generally he was summoned to his master's presence hundreds of times a day, but for hours to pass without an order was a sure sign that something unusual was toward. The more he thought of it, the less he liked it, especially as he himself was in a sense implicated in the matter, as he had been the means of bringing the Faquir to the Palace. But it was best that Colonel Macquoid should take the matter up at once, and then he would be relieved of any responsibility. But he was frightened, very frightened. An arrant coward at the

best of times, a trouble such as this nearly sent him mad.

Fear lent wings to his usually slow and solemn steps, and the fat groom of the chambers fairly flew over the ground as he made his way to the city, pushing all and sundry aside who dared to bar his way. At last he reached the Colonel's bungalow, and desired, with an ill-assumed arrogance, that his name should at once be taken in to the Colonel.

In the meantime he waited in fear and trembling. What would the Colonel say? Would he cross-examine him? Would he put questions to him that he might find very difficult to answer? He almost wished that he had taken upon himself to order the door to be forced open and run the risk of his master's displeasure, rather than face the stern, business-like Colonel, for whom he entertained the profoundest fear. What if the Maharajah were dead? The very thought of this contingency filled his mind with horror and turned his blood to water.

Colonel Macquoid had finished his dinner and was sitting over his coffee and cigar with a guest, Richard Drew, who was the Chief of Police of the province, a man of remarkable intelligence and administrative ability, who had risen to his present position in an extraordinarily short time, chiefly owing to his indomitable perseverance and tremendous appetite for work.

The two men had been friends for years. Drew always took up his quarters at the Colonel's bungalow whenever his duties brought him to Mhurrapuir. He had only arrived in the city an hour or two before, and, as the pair had not met for some months, they found plenty to talk about during the dinner.

The Colonel, a splendid host, made things exceedingly comfortable for his guests ; and, besides being an excellent conversationalist, was also a good listener. He liked to hear Drew talk, for the man had been through many interesting experiences and knew how to make the most of them. So the meal had been a very pleasant one, and they had lingered a long while over their dessert.

"Bring your coffee and let's sit out on the verandah. It's reeking hot indoors to-night, and perhaps we may be able to get a little more air outside."

So out into the verandah they stepped, and threw themselves into comfortably cool wicker chairs that invited repose and ease.

"Well, what have you been doing with yourself lately ? Tracking the wrong-doer, as usual, I suppose. By the way, old chap, you haven't succeeded in taking your good friend the Centipede yet, have you ?"

"No, damn him. He's too wary a bird."

"Ah ! I feared so. He'll take all the catching you can give him, Dickie," said the Colonel, as he set down his empty cup.

"It's the most extraordinary case that has been known in the whole history of the Indian Police. I was in Calcutta a few weeks ago. They are still moving Heaven and earth to get him. There's a man named Featherstone who is perfectly mad on the subject. He used to be with me years ago in Agra. I wonder if you ever met him. He's a very decent chap, but at present he's completely off his head on the subject of the Centipede. It's quite astonishing. Talks and thinks of nothing else, until one gets insufferably bored with him. However, he's certain he's on the man's track, and swears he can put his hand on him in a week. All the men at the clubs laugh at him ; but I tell you he's in deadly earnest. There's absolutely no question about that."

"What chance do you think he really has of securing the quarry ? You know, he's not the only one who has come to grief over the mysterious Centipede."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I am of opinion that no one will ever catch the man. He's too devilish clever for us ; the masterly manner in which his plans are laid and carried out makes him a prince among criminals."

"It's curious what a long while it is since we had any exciting news of him. I must say he has given me many pleasant moments in the reading of his misdeeds. I confess that with all his wickedness I've a sneaking regard for the man who can dare and do what he does."

"I fear you wouldn't have a sneaking regard for him if you had to put up with all the swearings and cursings that we poor devils in the Police are subject to because we cannot lay our hands on the most cunning and astute criminal of this or any other country, for the matter of that. I've good reason to know how clever he is, for, with all my knowledge of the ways of these people, he took me in like a schoolboy. I blush to think of it even now. The circumstance happened just after Lady Guernsey's jewels were stolen at Simla. I was sent for specially to take up the case, and I set a beautiful net round him and was congratulating myself how easily he would be caught when I received a note from Lady Guernsey, asking me to give an interview to her brother, which, of course, I did. He requested the pleasure of my company to lunch. He was a delightful man, and I enjoyed the meal very much. I told him exactly how we were going to take the Centipede, and we both laughed heartily over the scheme. It was, oh! so simple. After lunch I returned to my hotel, and very soon a servant brought me a note together with a small parcel. Both were from the Centipede, apologising for having to take advantage of circumstances and play the part of Lady Guernsey's brother, also thanking me for the information that I had imparted to him at lunch as to the net I had woven, and saying how very much he had enjoyed meeting me,

and trusting that he might again have the same pleasure on some future occasion. He begged to send with the letter a small present, and hoped I would accept it as a memento of the occasion."

"What was it—eh?"

"The settings of all her ladyship's magnificent stones, which had been, of course, removed. By Jove, you can imagine my feelings, especially as I had woven such a nice net around him and was so cocksure of getting him fixed in it! However, he bested me that time, but I shan't be caught again in a hurry."

"I shouldn't be too certain, old chap. By the way, I've had an awfully good fellow staying here lately. He would have suited you to a nicety. Came with a letter of introduction from Lord Caversham. He was globe-trotting; Belmore was his name, Digby Belmore."

"What!" Drew almost jumped from his chair with excitement.

"Digby Belmore."

"By Gad! Colonel—do you happen to know that's the name under which the Centipede has worked several of his schemes? What was he like?"

"Oh! a very tall, beautifully-built man, black hair and eyes and a drooping moustache. Awfully well groomed and generally turned out. Talks rather slowly, very well-read and intellectual."

"That's an exact description of my man.

He was the most fascinating chap I ever met. He regularly took me in, and I don't mind confessing it. But Digby Belmore was the name he used, and it's a devilish queer coincidence if this Digby Belmore who has been here isn't the same man I had the pleasure of knowing. When did he leave ? "

" Three days ago."

" Where for ? "

" Kashmir. He told the Maharajah he was going to meet a man and going shooting with him."

" Told the Maharajah ? "

" Yes. I was invited to bring him up there to see him."

" Oh, he didn't invite himself ? "

" Well, no, not exactly. He often expressed a wish to meet the Maharajah, to whom I mentioned the circumstance, and accordingly was asked to bring him to the Palace."

" Did he rob him of anything, think you ? "

" No, the Maharajah bested him, I should say."

" How's that ? "

" Why, he got a magnificent pearl worth goodness knows how much out of Belmore in exchange for three diamonds."

" Oh ! he saw the Maharajah's jewels, then ? "

" Certainly, he showed them to us himself."

" Oh ! Oh ! Are you certain he's left Mhurrapuir ? "

" Certain, man. Of course I am. I'm as certain of that as I am of anything."

"What makes you so confident?"

"I said good-bye to him and helped put his baggage into the ekka myself. He is gone, right enough."

"Well, somehow, old chap, I've a feeling on me we shall hear something more of this."

"Huzoor."

"Well! What is it?" asked the Colonel of the servant, who had come to inform him of Mir Singh's arrival.

"A man is here from the Palace, desiring to speak with the sahib on a matter of much importance."

The Colonel sprang from his seat. It was startlingly curious that this should have arisen at the very moment that they had been speaking of the Maharajah. A feeling of dread came over him as he stood there, while the servant waited.

"Go, man, bring him here; don't stand there like a fool. Quick!"

Drew looked at his friend in perplexity.

"What on earth does this mean? Eh!"

"I cannot say. We shall know, however, in a very few minutes."

At that moment Mir Singh, ashen grey and trembling in every limb, was brought on to the verandah; and the Colonel motioned the servant to leave, together with the punka puller.

"Well, Mir Singh, so it's you, is it? What's up?"

"Oh, Sahib, thy servant feareth the worst. The Maharajah——"

"Dead ? "

"We know not yet, defender of the poor."

"Come, come, be more explicit. Tell me all. Here, sit down."

The man was trembling so much with terror that he could not speak connectedly, and it was some moments before he was in a position to say anything. But though the Colonel was extremely anxious to hear what he had to say, he managed to control himself while Mir Singh pulled himself together.

"Sahib, for three hours the Maharajah has given no sign. He is locked in his room with a Faquir, and we fear there is cause for anxiety."

"Tell me all about it, at once ; from the beginning. Hide nothing."

The Colonel had risen and was pacing up and down with his hands behind his back.

"Thy servant will tell all. Yesterday my brother came to me saying that a holy man, a Faquir, had arrived at his house asking that he might have lodging for the night, stating that he was the long-expected Deliverer. My brother hearing this hastened early this morning to the palace to acquaint me of the circumstance, whereupon thy servant straightway informed the Maharajah, who after consideration ordered me to go to my brother's dwelling and bring the Faquir to the palace secretly, so that he might have speech with him. Thy servant did as he was commanded, and the man was brought. The Maharajah ordered us to leave them together, so that he

might be alone to have speech with the holy man ; on no account was he to be disturbed until I was summoned."

" What time was this ? "

" But an hour before darkness, Huzoor."

" What didst thou, Mir Singh ? "

" Thy servant went about his duties, Sahib; It was not until a late hour that we began to be fearful, as there came no summons from our master. Then I, with my brother, went to the door and tried it, so that we might gain admittance, but we found it locked. Therefore, it became necessary to force the door, but we feared to do it without authority ; so, Sahib, thy servant cometh to know what is the best thing to be done."

The Colonel looked at Drew.

" Don't you think we'd better go up to the palace at once ? "

" Most certainly I do."

The Colonel called for a servant and ordered the cart to be prepared immediately.

" Who knoweth aught of this save thou and thy brother ? "

" None other, Huzoor, we alone."

" Good ! "

" My brother keepeth watch even now, so that none may enter or leave. When thy servant found that this thing was as I have stated he came here with despatch that he might acquaint the Sahib thereof."

" Good, Mir Singh, you have done well."

" Drew, I think you'd better send a

messenger to Dr. Singleton to come up immediately to the palace to meet us. Perhaps it may not be as bad as Mir Singh fears. There are pen and ink on the writing table inside. Will you write a line? Mir Singh can deliver it."

Drew did as he was asked, and the letter was handed to Mir Singh with instructions to go at once and request the doctor to come to the palace. He was only too glad to have passed through the ordeal so satisfactorily, and betook himself to Dr. Singleton's bungalow with as much despatch as possible.

Very soon the Colonel's cart was at the door, and the two men set off to the palace. Arriving there they made their way as quickly as possible to the room, where they found Mir Singh's brother guarding the portal, who informed the Colonel that the news had not yet leaked out.

The Colonel instructed him to obtain lights and to bring tools with which to force the lock.

It did not take long to burst the door open, and the three men entered the room.

Great was their astonishment to find the disordered state of the beautiful apartment.

"By Jove, there's been a pretty stiff fight going on here, Colonel," said Drew as his eye wandered round and noted the overturned chairs and the general state of chaos that existed.

"Look!" replied the other. "There's the Maharajah lying on the floor. Is he dead?"

Drew was on his knees in a second by the side of the prostrate figure.

"I don't think he's dead," said Drew. "I can feel a slight movement of the heart, but he's not far off it, I think. It must have been a pretty desperate affair, judging by his condition. I don't think we'd better have him moved until the doctor comes. Ah! here he is! Hallo, Singleton! This looks like an affair for you. Your illustrious patient, I regret to tell you, has been shot; you'd better examine him."

The doctor looked grave as he knelt down and began to make a careful examination.

"He's not dead yet, but that's all. I'm afraid it's a bad case. The best thing to do is to get him to bed at once. He's shot through the lungs. Send for brandy."

"Go for brandy," ordered the Colonel to Mir Singh's brother, who departed on his errand, while the others moved the wounded man to make him easier.

As they did so a key was discovered under his foot.

"By Jove, why here's a door key! I wonder which door it fits! Let's try."

"It must be that one that leads to the staircase, because you see the other has the key in the lock inside and the door was forced as you observe. That staircase leads to the garden, and that's the way the assailant escaped. Open it and see."

Drew went over to the door and tried to open it.

"By Gad, it's locked ! Here, give me the key."

Having received it he opened the door. Then he went to the windows and tried them, but they were all securely fastened.

"Colonel, this is a strange case. The man must be still in the room ; it's quite impossible he can have got out unless—unless the Maharajah shot himself."

"That's out of the question ; the pistol would be here. Besides that, it's evident he has had a fight—look at the state of the room, and see, there's a dagger in his hand."

"Let me look at something for one minute," said the Colonel.

And he then examined the Maharajah's neck to ascertain if the small gold key was still there, and finding that it was, he felt relieved.

When Mir Singh's brother brought the brandy some was administered to the patient, and the heart-beat becoming stronger he was removed to his own room and the doctor was able to make careful examination and to trace the bullet.

The Colonel and Drew stayed in the apartment examining everything and taking the most careful notes. But they were extremely puzzled as to what had become of the Faquir.

"I am convinced that this is the work of the Centipede, Colonel ; it's so villainously clever and thoughtful. But how the devil did he get out ?—that's what puzzles me."

"Well, it's quite possible that he had a duplicate key."

"It's possible, but highly improbable—look at the size of it."

"Well, he's the devil then, and is able to pass through locked doors."

"We must wait patiently until the Maharajah can tell us exactly what has happened. Now I think the only thing that can be done is to leave it to you to get your police on his track. He cannot have gone out any other way than by the staircase, as it would have been extremely dangerous to go through the palace. Besides that, the key was in the lock on the inside, which proves pretty conclusively that it was not that way or through the windows. You had better arrange to search the garden, draw a cordon round the palace, and have every inch searched—not that I think we shall find a trace of him. What's the time now?"

"It's now ten-thirty."

"Well, it becomes dark about eight-thirty, so we may assume that he's had a two hours' start. See to it at once, Drew. Now we'll get back, as I must make official report of this affair. By Jove, it is worrying! There'll be the devil to pay at headquarters."

"What if he dies?"

"Well, someone else will reign in his stead."

"What's the object of it all, I wonder? Robbery, do you think?"

"It may be, but I'm not certain. I looked

for a little gold key that usually hangs on a chain round his neck : that is the precious key, and the only one that opens the strong-room. If that had been missing I should have known that it meant robbery."

" Perhaps they fell out before the assailant had time to get at the key—but how on earth could he know that the Maharajah kept it round his neck? No! It points to a political intrigue, I think."

" By Jove, old man, you've thrown a light upon the mystery! Look here! Three days ago I brought Belmore here. He led the conversation round until we touched on pearls, then he produced to the Maharajah a magnificent one, and that induced our host to show us his jewels. He must have noted the whole operation of opening the door and where the key was kept, but it's evident that he didn't get it, as it is still on the chain. Gad! what a wonderful man he must be! I've no doubt in my mind now that he is the beauty who has been causing us such a delightful lot of worry over this sedition business. No doubt the sedition was part of the scheme to get into touch with the Maharajah."

" I wonder how much of this affair Mir Singh's brother knows? When I get back to the bungalow I shall send for him and ascertain."

" Yes, I should ; but you know one of the Centipede's peculiarities is that he seldom, if ever, works with a confederate."

"Of course, we're jumping to conclusions that this assailant of the Maharajah's is the Centipede. It looks highly probable, but it's rather remarkable. Do you think it possible that the man could leave my bungalow one day and depart with his luggage, and within forty-eight hours be back again in this city disguised as a wandering Faquir and committing such a crime as this?"

"My dear man, anything is possible with the Centipede. Why, what's to prevent him taking the ekka to the nearest village and changing his garb and returning here within three or four hours and taking up the threads of his scheme, which he has doubtless been planning for months? I tell you plainly that when we have worked this affair out we shall find that it's the Centipede who is the chief mover, and that he was after the Maharajah's jewels; but it's evident he didn't get them, Heaven be praised! Why, the whole thing points to a well-thought-out and weighed plan. He comes to you with a letter of introduction, doubtless a forgery, charms and delights you with his manners and pleasant ways, and all the time he is learning what he can. Then he obtains through you an introduction to the Maharajah, who would never suspect anything ulterior in the motives of a friend of Colonel Macquoid. With devilish cunning he leads the Maharajah on to show his superb collection of jewels, and notes exactly how his

host obtains entrance to his strong-room. To make the thing look genuine he parts with a magnificent pearl in exchange for diamonds. Man, he knows perfectly well that he will obtain his pearl again if he is successful in getting into the strong-room, and if not he won't lose, for he has its equivalent in diamonds. Well, then, he's got all the information he requires, so he goes off with his luggage and returns to the city as a Faquir. What his scheme was after that is a little more difficult to surmise, but I expect he knew perfectly well that the Maharajah's sympathy is with the rebellious, and he hoped somehow to get an interview with the Maharajah, and thus secure the key of the strong-room. I've no doubt Mir Singh's brother will be able to throw some light on the affair if he is examined carefully. What about these rumours of rebellion ; how were they spread ? ”

“ We could never find out. I had the cleverest people I possessed on the track, but without success.”

“ Why not Mir Singh's brother ? It's curious that the Faquir comes to his house, seeing Mir Singh is the personal attendant on the Maharajah. It all points in the same direction. This man spread the reports of the coming of the Faquir. When one thinks it out, the whole thing appears plain. I don't think Mir Singh is in it. He's not strong enough—he's only been used as a cat's-paw by the others.”

Now Mir Singh's brother was an astute man and possessed sharp wits, and he managed with his ear to the keyhole to hear the gist of this conversation, and his slight acquaintance with the English language told him that it was necessary to take his departure without further delay. He therefore proceeded downstairs with as much speed as possible and flew like the wind to his house, where he informed his wife what he had heard and all the circumstances of the case, and having put up what valuables they possessed into a parcel, they set out for a long journey.

In the meantime, Colonel Macquoid and Drew finished their enquiries and drove back to the bungalow, where they set to work, Drew to send for the police and arrange to do what he could to endeavour to find some clue to the movements of the Centipede, and the Colonel to write his official report of the almost tragic occurrence that had taken place. But he found great difficulty in concentrating himself upon the work, for there kept on recurring to his mind a keen sense of uneasiness; he could hardly express it, but there was a vague shadowy feeling of resentment that the man he had learnt to like so well and to trust as a friend might have found it in his heart to treat him in so treacherous a manner. Of course, nothing had been established to substantiate the suggestion that the assailant of the Maharajah and Digby Belmore were one and the same person; but still, Drew had

put the suspicion into his mind, and he could not rid himself of the feeling that there was something in it.

He carefully laid out pens and paper preparatory to starting his report. It was an unpleasant duty to perform, but it had to be done whether he liked it or not, and the sooner the better. Each time he tried to commence his work his mind wandered away to the details of the episode and to the primary figure therein. He could hardly realise how it could be that a man he had known only for a few days could possibly make such an impression on him. However, the fact remained that he was quite as much upset by the suspicion of his friend's treachery as by the attack upon the person of the Maharajah. At last he managed to settle himself down to his work, and the next half-hour was passed in drawing up his report.

It was now past midnight, and he had not yet sent for Mir Singh's brother, so he dispatched a messenger to the palace to bring him, who returned with the information that the man had gone to his home. Colonel Macquoid then asked Drew to come with him, and he gave orders that he should at once be taken to the part of the city where the man dwelt.

CHAPTER V.

THE CENTIPEDE ESCAPES.

WHEN the Centipede returned once more to consciousness, he found that it was the dead of night. The intense heat seemed to hang like a pall over the garden, and the whole place was still and silent as the grave. Although the pain of his wound was almost intolerable, yet he braced himself sufficiently to get upon his feet and move about in the darkness, endeavouring to discover some means of escaping from the grounds, where he felt he was caged like a rat in a trap.

What had happened while he had been in this faint ? How long had he been insensible ? It must have been for hours, as he well remembered that it was just darkening when he left the palace. Had there been a hue and cry after him ? These queries ran through his mind as he groped about in the darkness trying to find the high garden wall, which he knew could not be far off. It was some minutes before his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, but at last he was able

to distinguish the branches of the trees, and made his way as stealthily as possible through the shrubberies until at last he reached the masonry. He knew perfectly well that it was quite impossible to scale this without the aid of a ladder, but he determined to walk as near as he could until he should select a tree that grew with its branches overhanging, so that he might at least swing himself on to the top and take his chance of finding a way to climb down the other side. At all costs he must leave the garden before dawn and get away from the city, for it was certain that the police would be searching high and low for a clue to enable them to put their hands on the Maharajah's assailant, and almost the first place to be examined would be the palace gardens.

He had not walked far before he discovered the very kind of tree that he required, although its branches were considerably higher than the wall ; with a little agility, he thought, he could bring himself to swing down with the aid of a limb on to the top of the stonework.

The idea had no sooner occurred to his mind than he acted on it, and proceeded to climb as noiselessly as he could into the tree. Having reached a branch that hung well over the wall, he moved cautiously along until it became too thin to be comfortable, when he let himself down and moved hand over hand and could see the top of the stonework some two feet below him. His weight bent the branch so much that he expected every moment to hear

it crack ; but now all that was required was a good swing of the body and then to drop at the right moment. It needed a considerable amount of skill and pluck to do it in the darkness, but it was a question perhaps of life or death.

Giving an energetic kick, he felt the bough from which he was suspended bend ominously, and it flashed through his mind what would happen if it gave way and he fell to the ground the wrong side of the wall. Suddenly he let go and dropped. His feet touched the masonry and he tried to balance himself there, but in the darkness he could not do it. For a second or two he hesitated, then felt himself going, and knew that he must take his chance as to where he should land when he touched the ground. It was a big jump, and it seemed ages before he reached the earth and lay prone for a minute or two on the hard ground. It took him some time to get over the shock, but luckily he had dropped on a low and dense bush which broke the force of his fall. No bones were injured, and he had arrived safely on the right side of the wall, attaining the object he desired. It was extremely fortunate for him that he fell upon the shrub, for he discovered, after rising to his feet and stumbling a few yards, that the ground was strewn with large boulders, and had he dropped upon one, it would probably have finished his career abruptly.

Remembering that the palace wall abutted

on to the road where the entrance gate to the garden was situated, he was surprised to find that he had not landed in the thoroughfare. In the dim light he could distinguish what appeared to be buildings some distance off, and proceeded to make his way towards them, trusting that he might be able to discover some means of obtaining a change of clothing, as his present attire would most certainly attract the attention of anyone who saw him.

As he drew near the building, his footsteps, cautious as they were, caused a dog to start barking, and he therefore made off as quickly as possible. Straight before him was a narrow lane, which he quickly discovered led to the poorer quarters of the city. Passing along, taking care to observe any danger that might threaten, he at last came to a part that seemed familiar to him, and at once saw that he was in the vicinity of Delalki's house. Although he had intended not to come near the dwelling, yet, being there, he wondered if he could possibly attract the woman's attention, and secure a change without causing her to run any risk.

As he approached the house he was astonished to see a tall man standing before the door, knocking softly on the panel, endeavouring to arouse the inmates. He instantly recognised the portly figure of Mir Singh, Delalki's brother-in-law. He watched him for awhile, wondering what the man could want at his brother's house at the dead

of night. There was little doubt his visit was in connection with the occurrence at the palace, and it behoved the Centipede to find out at once ; and beside that, if he could but induce him to come inside with him, he might manage to secure his clothes in exchange for those of the Faquir. It seemed evident that no one was at home, so he made a *détour* and climbed over a low wall at the rear of the house, and got into the premises with ease. After he had struck a match and set light to a candle that he found in the back room, he stealthily made for the door. He could still hear Mir Singh outside, and, assuming the high-pitched voice of a woman as nearly as he was able, he asked in a whisper, " Who is there ? "

" Unlock the door. It is I, Mir Singh, thy husband's brother. I would have speech with thee at once."

The Centipede smiled to himself as he admitted the man into the house and closed the door after him.

" Go thou into the inner room, my brother," he whispered, " and I will call my husband."

Mir Singh did as he was told and walked into the room.

It took only a few seconds for the Centipede to make up his mind what to do. Before Mir Singh had time to cross the apartment the Centipede had entered and faced the astonished man.

" This is an unexpected pleasure, Mir Singh. I did not hope to see you again so soon ! "

The wretched man was terrified beyond words. He went grey and green in the face and his knees shook under him, while he picked at his fingers in despair. Suddenly he made a bound and tried to pass out of the room, but the Centipede swung him back again by the sleeve of his garment.

"Wait a little bit, my friend. You and I have some business to transact first. Do you know who I am? No! Well, for your private information I will tell you. I'm the Centipede! I wonder if you have ever heard of him. I expect you have!"

"O Sahib, spare me! I have done nothing against you."

"I didn't suppose that you had, my friend. If I thought so I should pretty soon teach you a lesson. Now look here, Mir Singh, you know very well what has occurred at the palace. I'm not going to hurt you provided that you do exactly as I tell you. If you refuse, well, I'll put a bullet through your ugly carcase with this!"

Here the Centipede produced his revolver, and Mir Singh shrank back against the wall in terror.

"Mercy, Sahib, mercy!" he cried.

"Then take off your clothes, do you hear?"

Mir Singh never moved; he was too frightened.

"I'll give you while I count twenty to make up your mind. Are you going to obey me? If not, look out!"

Mir Singh did not hesitate further. He commenced to divest himself of his garments with lightning speed, for the Centipede kept him covered with the revolver.

Then the Centipede took the clothes belonging to Mir Singh, and having removed his own, put the others on, after seeing that the small bags which contained the jewels were safely secured in the money belt that he wore round his waist. Then he threw the ragged ones of the Faquir to the terror-stricken man and commanded him to put them on at once. When they were both dressed Mir Singh was forced to seat himself upon a wooden stool to which the Centipede tied him securely, with a piece of rope that he found in the room, and placed a handkerchief over his mouth to prevent his shouting. All being completed he prepared to take his departure, but before doing so he addressed his captive :

“ I’m sorry, Mir Singh, to have to treat you in such an unpleasant fashion as this, but necessity compels caution ; I trust, however, that before long someone will come and release you. Forgive me for saying so ; I fear you are too compromising to the safety of my scheme to be allowed to have your liberty until I’m well away. So farewell, my friend. It’s the fortune of war. I wish you the best of luck ! ”

With that he blew out the candle and left the room, closing the door after him, and the trembling Mir Singh heard him leave the house climb over the wall at the back, and depart.

It would be impossible adequately to describe the feelings of the wretched man, bound hand and foot to the stool and gagged until he could hardly draw breath, aching in every limb, and left entirely alone in the darkness and silence of the empty house. The strongest-minded man might have been excused for feeling frightened under the circumstances, but Mir Singh, a craven to start with, was prostrated with terror.

The cords cut into his aching limbs, already cramped and numbed, and added to the agony that he suffered. How long, he wondered, would he have to remain in this extremely trying position ? It might be days before anyone came into the house, and in the meantime he would very probably starve to death. In vain he struggled and writhed in his endeavours to free himself from his bonds, but all his efforts were useless ; the more he struggled the tighter the knots became.

His nervous condition, too, was considerably affected by the scuttling and squeaking of numerous rats that ran about the room. In the darkness this was absolute horror to him. What if they should suddenly take it into their heads to attack him and eat him alive ? Sitting there, bound to the stool, he kept on imagining that he could feel one of the creatures climbing over him, until he soon became reduced to a state of mind bordering on insanity.

At length, overcome with weakness and pain, he fainted away, and knew nothing

more until he was brought to his senses by a feeling of chill caused by water being dashed in his face.

Meanwhile, Colonel Macquoid and Drew had started for the city with a guide who knew where the man lived.

In due course they arrived at the dwelling and knocked at the door, but could make no one hear ; for fully twenty minutes they stood there endeavouring to arouse someone. At last Drew thought perhaps he could gain admission from the back, and making his way round, entered the premises in the same manner as the Centipede had done. Passing through the house, he admitted the Colonel, and together they entered the rooms in search of an occupant. When they came to the back room they were astonished to find the figure of the Faquir bound to the stool.

As the light of the candle that Drew carried fell upon the face of the man, Colonel Maquoid ejaculated, " Why, it's Mir Singh ! What on earth does this mean ? He's insensible, by Jove ! "

" I fear there has been something of a mysterious nature going on here as well. I shouldn't be surprised to find that it's our friend the Centipede again, seeing that Mir Singh wears the Faquir's garments. It's not anything to do with the brother, I'm convinced of that, as it's evident that he has taken his departure long since."

" I expect the Centipede returned here to

see if he could not get a disguise to enable him to leave the city."

"And, by Jove! he appears to have done it, too. Poor Mir Singh, I'll be bound, has not enjoyed himself lately."

"I think the best thing that can be done is for you to find some water while I cut him loose."

"Very well, I'll go at once."

When Drew had departed on his errand, the Colonel took out his knife and cut the cord that bound Mir Singh to the stool, and after having taken the handkerchief from his mouth, laid him down upon the floor. As he did so, he noticed that there was a rustling sound in the costume of the senseless man, and he put his hand into the inside of the garment and discovered a paper, of which he took possession.

Smoothing it out he passed over to a table on which stood the candle, and proceeded to read the document, which was written in native characters and evidently drawn up by an educated hand.

He was amazed at the importance of the information that it contained. Here he had the details of an anti-British rising, with the names of the Kings, Princes, and people of high position who were mixed up in it. There was no knowing what might not result from the discovery of this document. When Drew returned with a basin of water, the Colonel showed it to him and requested his opinion on

it. During his perusal Drew's eyebrows were continuously raised as he came across the names of persons who had hitherto been looked upon as far above suspicion.

Having finished reading it, he handed it back to the Colonel, who placed it carefully in his coat pocket.

"Well, what do you think of that find, my friend?" asked the Colonel.

Drew did not answer for a moment; he was carefully considering the affair and weighing the matter in his mind.

"All I can say is," he replied at last, "that if one-tenth of the things contained in that paper are founded on fact and can be authenticated, we have in our midst the beginnings of such a huge rebellion as will take the whole of the British Empire to cope with. Do you realise that on that paper are some of the first names in all native India? But I should take the whole thing *cum grano salis*, for if this emanates from our amiable friend the Centipede, and the affair is a concoction of his fertile brain, you may be certain that he has done it with the object of hoodwinking someone. However, on the face of it there is the appearance of fact. How does it strike you?"

"I am inclined to agree with you, but I'll keep it, anyway, as I may discover something in it after careful thought. Now don't you think we had better proceed to bring this man round, as perhaps we may get something out of him that will give us a clue to these mysteries?"

"Yes, I'll throw some of this water over him—he'll come to soon enough."

In a few minutes Mir Singh opened his eyes.

When he saw that Colonel Macquoid was one of the figures standing over him all his old fears returned, and he burst into a torrent of words imploring mercy.

"Silence, you miserable old coward!" cried the Colonel with contempt. "No one is going to hurt you. It's lucky for you that we came here when we did, or you would soon have been dead. Now tell us, what is the meaning of the extraordinary position we find you in, and why are you dressed in this garb?"

"Oh! Sahib, I have suffered greatly—no one will ever know what terrors of mind thy servant hath experienced these last few hours."

"Well, come, man, tell us all about it."

"After I delivered the letter to Dr. Singleton, I made my way here so that I might have speech with my brother, and, arriving at the house, I knocked loudly at the door, when I was admitted in the dark and brought to this room, as I thought, by my brother's wife. On a sudden I found that it was none other than the Faquir that attacked my master, who had admitted me, and who has been the cause of all this trouble. Huzoor, under threats of murder I was compelled to change clothes with him; afterwards he gagged my mouth so that I should not cry out. Then he departed, leaving me alone in this horrible place. After that I fainted and knew no

more. All these things are true, Sahib, and just as they happened unto thy servant, and, further, the man told me that he was none other than the Centipede."

"Ah! You see, Colonel, our suspicion is correct after all!"

"Yes, I'm afraid that there is little doubt on that point."

"But tell me, Mir Singh, what has become of your brother? We came here specially to speak with him on the subject of the occurrence at the palace."

"Sahib, I know not. I came myself to speak with him on the like matter."

"It seems pretty evident that he has taken his departure together with his wife. What is the reason of this, Mir Singh?"

"Thy servant knoweth not. It would seem that he is fearful of facing the position. But, Sahib, I know nothing more of the matter. All I do know I have told."

"Well, it is quite plain that there is nothing to be gained by staying here, so, Mir Singh, you can take your departure as soon as you please; but remember that I shall want you to give a satisfactory answer to the authorities, should they require to hear further from you on this subject; therefore hold yourself in readiness to do so."

Mir Singh, nothing loth to be off, promised that he would do all in his power to assist, and proceeded to make for his home as quickly as he could, vowing to himself that

if he got out of this scrape nothing on earth would induce him to mix himself up in any further affairs of a like nature. He felt weak and nervous after the very trying time that he had passed through, and as he walked, he glanced quickly behind him to see that there was no one following him.

Colonel Macquoid and Drew also took their way from the house, and proceeded to the Bungalow, declaring their intention of getting to bed without further delay, as the occurrences of the last few hours had been very tiring, and Drew had been travelling all the early part of the day.

But unfortunately for them there was to be no peace that night, for when they arrived at the bungalow they found that a messenger from Dr. Singleton was awaiting them, who produced a note that caused the Colonel to turn pale.

"Read this. I'm afraid things are pretty bad up at the palace. I suppose there is nothing for it but to go up there again."

Drew took the note that was handed to him and read as follows :—

"My dear Colonel Macquoid,—I'm sorry to say that the Maharajah is in an extremely critical condition. About an hour ago he became conscious, and one of the first persons he asked for was Colonel Macquoid, and, because you were not at hand, he raved like a madman and declared that you had a hand in the attempt to murder him, but of course

he was half delirious. However, to pacify him, I promised that you should be sent for.

"He declared that his jewels had been stolen by a man who is a friend of yours, and with whom you were in league. Come up and have a talk with me. He's delirious again now, and I am rather fearful of the outcome of all this excitement. Yours very sincerely,
"JOHN SINGLETON."

Drew returned the letter to the Colonel, and proceeded to light his pipe before he answered.

"Yes, I suppose we must go up again. I am afraid that I was right when I said that you would find we should have much trouble as the outcome of this affair if Belmore was the Centipede. You see, it is evident to me that the Maharajah recognised the assailant as your friend, and puts two and two together, saying you put him up to the scheme. But what he means by the stealing of the jewels I can't make out. You told me that you were satisfied there had been no robbery, as the key was still round the neck of the Maharajah. Is that not so?"

"Yes, it is. I was particularly careful to look for the key of the strong-room on the chain. If it had not been there, I should have been extremely anxious."

"I see your reasoning. It might be assumed that the attempt to rob was a failure—if indeed there was any attempt at all. But it is not like our friend the Centipede

to mix himself up in a political scheme unless there is some substantial loot to be gained at the end of it."

"No, I suppose not. I confess, however, that I am very anxious on the subject. I think we had better go up to the palace again at once, although I feel more like bed than anything."

Half an hour later they were waiting in an ante-room at the palace for an interview with the doctor, who did not keep them waiting long.

"Well, how's the patient?" eagerly enquired the Colonel as the doctor entered the room.

"Just a shade easier at the moment. Half an hour ago I was afraid he would slip through my fingers. But he has a magnificent constitution, and if he pulls through it will be owing to that."

"Now tell me, what has been the excitement?"

"About an hour and a half ago I managed to get him conscious, and for a while he lay perfectly still. I hoped that this desirable state of things would continue, but unfortunately it suddenly seemed to dawn upon him what had happened; he at once called for me and declared that he must get up, as he must at once visit his strong-room, and it was only by dint of absolutely holding him down on his bed that I prevented him. All the while he was calling out that your friend had tried to murder and rob him of his jewels;

also that you were in league with him. I could plainly see that if this sort of thing was going to continue he stood very little chance of recovering. Then he desired that you should be sent for immediately, as he intended to get at the bottom of the affair. To pacify him I despatched a messenger asking you to come. But fortunately the delirium returned again ; later he fell asleep, and no doubt will be better when he awakes. But I can tell you one thing that's certain, and that is, if the Maharajah should ever run across the man who attacked him, that man stands an extremely poor chance of surviving the meeting."

"It would seem so."

"Colonel, I tell you I've met in my life some strange characters, but I don't remember ever meeting a man of so vindictive and unforgiving a nature as the Maharajah. It will go badly with anyone he suspects of having a hand in this matter. Of course, when he spoke of you being an accomplice, I put it down to delirium. But I thought it would be as well to let you know what he says in his aberration."

"Thanks, Singleton ; I'm obliged to you. I think the best thing to be done is to wait patiently until he is sufficiently recovered to go himself to the strong-room to satisfy his mind that his fears of robbery are without foundation. I admit that the whole affair is most mysterious. But tell me, when do you think he will be strong enough to tell us what happened to him ?"

"It will probably be quite a week before

he is fit to discuss anything, and then only if he remains calm and quiet. But forgive my saying so, Colonel, and I say it because I have a great regard and affection for you, the Maharajah, I feel convinced, has a bitter enmity to you, and will probably try to injure you as much as he can. Knowing his evil nature as I do, I tell you that for some reason known only to himself he suspects you to be in league with his enemies against him personally, and he is not going to forget it."

"Well, Singleton, I wonder if you know who the man really was who committed this assault upon your patient?"

"I'm told it was a Faquir."

"It was the Centipede."

"NO!"

"We have the best of reasons for suspecting it. Now I ask you, do you think that I would knowingly have been in league with the Centipede?"

The doctor said that the Colonel's suggestion was absurd. "It's hardly worth while discussing the matter further," he added.

"But, my dear friend, it is well that we should discuss it, and now, for very soon the whole of India, and perhaps the world, will be ringing with the news that the Maharajah has been assaulted and robbed. You may remember that I have recently had staying with me a man named Belmore."

"Yes, I met him at your bungalow—a charming fellow."

" Well, it appears that he was none other than the Centipede, who, with devilish cunning, came to me with a fictitious letter of introduction, wormed himself into my confidence, and obtained an interview with the Maharajah, whom he charmed and delighted and then induced to show his jewels. We imagine that he obtained the secret of where the Maharajah kept the key of the strong-room, then went away and returned once more to the city disguised as a Faquir, obtaining by some means an interview with the Maharajah, at which he attacked him, but whether he entered the strong-room or not has yet to be ascertained. The fact that the key was on the chain round the Maharajah's neck when we found him lying wounded on the floor points to his not having done so."

Here Drew interrupted.

" Does it not strike you, Colonel, knowing the Centipede as we do, and his thoroughness in detail, that he might have plundered the strong-room and then put the key back ? "

" You mean, that the Centipede shot the Maharajah, took the key, robbed the strong-room, returned it to its chain, and departed ? "

" That's about it."

" Don't you think it would be as well," said Dr. Singleton, " to get the key now, and ease your mind as to whether the jewels are safe or not ? "

" It certainly did occur to me to do so, but I couldn't risk it. We must wait patiently

until he is better, and can either go himself or give orders that someone does so for him."

At this moment there resounded through the quiet palace such a blood-curdling yell as would have startled the most iron-nerved of men.

"By Heavens, what's that?" ejaculated the Colonel.

"It's someone in the Maharajah's room," cried Singleton, making for the door, followed by the two other men.

Mounting the stairs two at a time, they darted into the sitting-room where the fight had taken place, and there they saw the Maharajah in his silk sleeping-attire standing in the strong-room supporting himself against the frame of the door.

All the small steel boxes were opened and jewels scattered here and there as the Centipede had left them when he chose the finest of the collection.

The face of the monarch was hideous to a degree, so distorted with fury and passion as to appear terrible beyond expression in the light of the small lamp that he had set on a chair close by.

"Gone! gone!" he shouted, glaring around with eyes of fury. "My jewels—all gone—all gone!"

Suddenly he drew a dagger from beneath his robe; then, before a word could be said, he caught sight of the Colonel, dashed straight at him, and plunged the dagger into his breast.

"Thief! thief!" he cried. "Thus do I serve those who would rob and murder me!"

The Colonel sank back into the arms of Drew, while Singleton stepped forward to seize the Maharajah, but he tottered and fell insensible.

Help being instantly called for, the attendants of the Maharajah came in grievous terror, while Singleton cursed them soundly for allowing him to move. Then he ordered them to carry him back to his bed, and on no account allow him to move should he become sensible.

He then turned his attention to the Colonel, who was stretched at full length on the floor with a cushion under his head.

"I'm afraid his case is hopeless; the blow was a murderous one, and entered deep into the heart."

He never spoke again, but died in the arms of his friend Drew a few minutes later. When the two men realised what had happened, they were bowed down with grief and sorrow. Greatly beloved by all who knew him, the Colonel had proved himself to be one of the most capable and excellent organisers in the whole of India, and that he should die by the hand of the Maharajah, whom he had been appointed to guard and protect, only made the matter more terrible. For some time they continued in subdued converse, until at last Drew threw a cloth over the face of his dead friend, and then turned and passed out of the Palace, after a silent handshake with the doctor.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OUTCOME OF THE ROBBERY.

AFTER leaving Delalki's house, the Centipede was in a position to make his way through the city very confidently, without fear of being particularly noticeable, owing to the dress that he was wearing. It was his intention to proceed with all despatch to Agra, as he had certain matters of business to attend to with a native jeweller, which matters would brook of no further delay. Therefore, soon after dawn, when the city gates were opened, he chartered an ekka and set out for the railway, where in due course he arrived after a hot and tiring journey. Eventually, Agra was reached without any untoward experience, and he at once proceeded to make for the dwelling place of Gunga Dass, the jeweller. Every part of the extremely interesting old city was intimately known to him, and he did not hesitate in his movements for one moment, but made straight for the place in question, and enquired if Gunga Dass was within ; and, hearing from the assistant that his master was at home and

would attend him immediately, he took a seat in the shop and gazed with deep interest at the collection of curiosities therein.

It was a quaint old place, and contained a wonderful and varied assortment of articles that appealed to his artistic eye as a connoisseur. Fine specimens of pottery and porcelain stood upon shelves around the walls, choice examples of weapons with jewelled and inlaid handles, long-barrelled firearms and ancient flint-locks were piled up in one corner. Richly inlaid boxes, beautiful pieces of needlework, quaint images modelled in bronze, gold, and silver, rare carpets, carved stools and chairs, brass and copper bowls and dishes, and innumerable other articles were jumbled together on all sides. A glass case against one wall contained a number of curiously contrived specimens of native jewellery, while the whole pointed to the substantial business of a general dealer in antiquities and articles of vertu.

He had not long to wait before Gunga Dass entered the shop in response to his summons.

He was a tall, gaunt man, with a cadaverous face, jet black eyes, a long, thin, white beard, and a large hooked nose. It was a very shrewd and calculating face, and one that suggested great strength of purpose. He did not recognise his customer until the Centipede made a certain sign.

Having ascertained that they would discuss matters of business, he desired to be conducted to a room in which they could talk without

fear of disturbance, whereupon Gunga Dass led the way to his own private apartment; where they would be in perfect security and need fear no intrusion.

"Well, Gunga, my friend, here I am once more, anxious for you to do a little work for me again."

"The sahib is always welcome. In what matter can his servant be of assistance?"

"You can remove one or two stones from their settings as quickly as you like. Afterwards you can obtain for me a suit of English clothes, as you have so often done before, then you can burn these."

"That is an easy matter. May thy servant look upon the jewels?"

As the Centipede produced the bags containing the precious stones in their settings, he said that he did not expect Gunga Dass would think much of them, but he would, nevertheless, be pleased if he could get the required work over as soon as possible, so that he could push on with other matters that pressed.

As he emptied the contents of the bags upon the table, he watched his companion's face to see what effect the wonderful specimens would have upon him. The Centipede was prepared to find Gunga Dass somewhat surprised, but he did not expect to see the look of absolute amazement that spread over the man's features when his black eyes rested upon the glittering wonders that were spread out before him. The expression on his generally im-

mobile face was so curious that it almost made the Centipede laugh.

"You seem astonished, my friend. Are they not of value?"

"Of value, Huzoor? Why, they are simply marvellous. Never before have the eyes of thy servant rested upon such wonders."

"Tell me what you think they are worth, so far as you are able."

"Sahib, there is no setting a value upon them; they are unique. As to what they are worth—it may be a king's ransom. What do you wish me to do with them?"

"I require you to remove the settings now, at once, and as usual you can keep all the gold in payment for the service. You are the most expert valuer of precious stones, I know, in India. Now, tell me, are these, as I think they are, jewels of the first water?"

"They are nearly all perfect, Sahib. They are the most wondrous specimens I have ever seen, and that is saying something."

"Well, get to work, Gunga Dass; get to work."

Without uttering a word more, the man fetched his implements, and the Centipede sat down and watched him as he deftly removed the stones from their gold settings, and put them on one side in a lustrous heap.

"Perhaps you may wonder where I obtained these beautiful jewels, Gunga Dass. I know you won't enquire, but no doubt in a few days you may hear news that will cause you some

astonishment. I can trust you to say nothing, my old friend. Gold is easily melted, and none can swear to it in the smelting-pot, eh ? ”

“ Even so, Sahib, even so ; and it is almost impossible to recognise stones taken from their settings. These are truly wonders, and will sell for great sums of money.”

The Centipede smiled, took them up one by one, and put them back into the bags, and when they were all finished, placed them in his money belt.

“ Now, Gunga Dass, before you go to fetch the clothes I require, I want to hear if you have any news for me from Calcutta ? ”

“ Yes, Sahib ; I have much that is serious to report.”

“ Well, tell me all about it. I am most anxious.”

“ The man Featherstone, whom you desired we should watch, has become acquainted with the secret of the city by some means or other, and but a few days since left Calcutta to make his way thither, taking with him three servants. I have also learnt that the Mem-sahib Gillespie—— ”

“ Eh ? ”

“ She too hath left Calcutta.”

“ Oh ! Blanche, too ? Eh ! what does this mean ? ”

“ The Mem-sahib follows Featherstone to prevent him doing injury.”

“ So she followed Featherstone, did she ? ”

“ Even so, Huzoor ; but he is mad—the man

thinks and speaks of nothing but how he may lay his hand upon the Centipede. I learnt that for nights he knows no rest, the matter he has in hand continuously preying upon his mind."

"You say he is taking with him three servants?"

"Even so, but, Huzoor, I took upon me to alter that. I sent my own man to take the place of one of them, who, as opportunity arose, was to declare to the others that Featherstone has cholera, when he will induce them to leave him. Has thy servant done right? It would never do, should these people find out the secret of the city. It does not so greatly matter that Featherstone should get in. The Sahib will deal with him, I doubt not."

"Gunga Dass, thou hast done well, and I shall not forget it."

"Huzoor, to serve thee is my chief desire. Thy servant cannot forget the many acts of kindness thou hast done him, and is proud to look back upon the ten years of service that he has, in a small measure, been able to render to the Sahib."

"My dear friend, I value your services more than I can say; but there is one more, the last that you will ever render me. I have finished my work. I am now returning to the city to close the Book of the Centipede for ever. In less than a week I shall have departed from India, I hope never to return. But, before doing so, I wish to make certain arrangements for the future of those who have served me so

well, and I have come to the conclusion that you are the fit and proper person to carry out my wishes to my satisfaction. Will you do so?"

"Sahib, you honour me. Most assuredly, whatever is desired will be done to the best of thy servant's power."

"Thank you, Gunga Dass. If you will give me pen and paper I will write you full instructions, with an order to my bankers, and while I am doing so perhaps you will be kind enough to go and buy me what I require in the way of clothing."

Gunga Dass set the writing materials before him, then departed on his errand and left the Centipede to work out a scheme providing for the future of Ram Lal, Mir Ali, and others who had served him conscientiously. He was of a very generous disposition, and made his rewards proportionate to the services that were rendered, and these men would find that on his departure they would be set up for life.

He finished his work and sat back in his chair, when suddenly there came over him a terrible feeling of faintness. The wound on his arm had never ceased to trouble him ever since he recovered from the fainting fit in the Palace garden at Mhurrapuir, and it was only by dint of great strength of purpose that he had borne up so long. He knew how dangerous it was for his health's sake to neglect the wound, but he was in the awkward position of being unable up to the present to consult a medical man.

Now that the reaction had come he felt extremely ill, and when Gunga Dass returned he discovered to his amazement his guest lying back in a dead faint in his chair.

He obtained restoratives with as much speed as he could, and after considerable effort had the satisfaction of seeing the Centipede open his eyes.

He sat still for a short time, until he was sufficiently recovered to speak. Then he said—

“ I am sorry to give you so much trouble, my friend.”

“ Trouble, Sahib ? It is no trouble. I grieve to find you in this state.”

“ Yes, I have had a bad wound on my arm which caused me to faint.”

“ Will the Sahib allow me to see it ? I have some skill in drugs, and perhaps can do some good.”

“ Thanks, Gunga Dass. I shall be extremely grateful if you can ease the pain.” With that he pulled up the sleeve of his garment and showed the ugly wound, cruelly inflamed and angry-looking.

“ This is bad, Huzoor. This is bad. It seemeth to thy servant that it showeth the marks of teeth. Is that so ? ”

“ It is. Can you do anything for me ? ”

“ I can. Let the Sahib sit patiently here. I will go at once for a certain ointment that I know will give great relief.”

Gunga Dass proceeded to fetch the ointment in question, and, on his return, thoroughly

washed and dressed the wound, which gave immediate relief.

"Thy servant will put up the remainder of this ointment for further dressing. But it will be necessary to take the greatest care with this wound, which should have been washed and treated as soon after it occurred as possible, and I fear that it has been neglected too long already."

"I fully realise that, Gunga Dass ; but, you see, I could not do anything until I came here. However, you have eased me very considerably and I am grateful to you for your kindly services. Now that I am better, I think I will make preparations to depart."

The Centipede then changed his garments for those that the jeweller had bought him, and removed the stains from his skin ; then gave orders that the clothes he had worn should be burned immediately, so that no trace of his late adventures might be found.

Then, having completed all his arrangements, he said good-bye to Gunga Dass, whom he never expected to see again, and took his departure.

He went straight to the best hotel in the place and ordered a substantial meal. While he was eating he asked to see the latest newspaper, and anxiously turned over the sheets to ascertain if any news of the robbery of the Maharajah of Gavalcore's jewels had yet found its way into the journals. On the main sheet he discovered a paragraph which read—

"There is a rumour that the Maharajah of

Gavalcore's jewels have been stolen. We give the information with all reserve, as nothing has been substantiated. If true, can this possibly be the work of the notorious Centipede?"

The man in question smiled to himself as he read the few words. In a very short space he knew the whole of India would be ringing with the news, and rumour, that spreads so quickly, would be busy on all sides. Already he expected that Mhurrapuir was in a ferment of excitement. As he sat at the table, he kept wondering what had happened to the Maharajah—whether he was alive or dead, and there came to his mind the anxiety and trouble that the whole matter would cause to Colonel Macquoid.

He had a genuine affection for the Colonel, and if it could have been possible he would have spared him as much as lay in his power. But it was characteristic of the Centipede that he let no personal feeling enter into his calculations. If a scheme had to be carried out, it was to be achieved with the best means procurable, or left alone. He would sacrifice his best friend to ensure the successful issue of any undertaking.

Now that everything so far had planned out to his entire satisfaction, he began to regret that it had been necessary to use the Colonel as a means to the end. He ardently hoped that the matter would cause him no trouble. But he little knew that the man he was thinking of lay cold and still in death, and that he was the primary cause of his fate.

As he folded up the paper, rose from his seat,

and called for his bill, he wondered how long it would be before the journals received full details. Should he wait and see, or should he get back to Chittarre with all speed? After careful consideration he came to the conclusion that it would be as well if he left India with as little delay as possible, and to that end he took the train to Jodphur, so that he might meet Ram Lal at the desert edge at midnight and start off on his journey to the city.

At Mhurrapuir, in the meantime, things had taken a very serious turn. Soon after dawn certain factions in the lower quarters of the city met, and the news of the arrival of the Deliverer spread like wild-fire. Before many hours had passed, several bad cases of rioting had occurred, and there was a continual murmuring among the people. At the first sign of trouble the police hastened to the bungalow of Colonel Macquoid, to acquaint him of the troubled state of affairs. There they heard with dismay of the terrible death of the Political Resident. As the day wore on, the crisis became more acute than ever. The officials did what they could to endeavour to quell the disorders, which had gone from bad to worse. When the news of the attack upon the Maharajah and his very serious condition began to leak out, most extraordinary rumours soon became common talk—the Palace had been attacked last night by an organised force, and the Maharajah had been killed and robbed of all his wonderful jewels. A huge assembly

of people took place round the tank, who occupied themselves in gazing up at the majestic pile of masonry, as if they expected to see soldiers emerge from every window. Then it became whispered that Colonel Macquoid had been murdered by the attacking party, and as this rumour grew and grew, the crowd became restive and angry, and many hostile cries were raised against the authorities. At last, so serious did the aspect of affairs become, that Drew, who was working like a madman, considered it wise to call out the troops. All the while, telegrams were being despatched and received every hour from headquarters, and Drew was informed that an important official was hastening with the utmost speed to take over the reins. Matters came to a climax by the afternoon, and the populace had to be dispersed by the soldiers. Many bad cases of accident had occurred, and the hospitals were full of patients. Police and soldiers were poured into the city, until by nightfall the people had been calmed, and on the arrival of the jaded chief official, hot and wearied by his efforts to reach the place, all was comparatively quiet and safe.

At last the true story of the Centipede's scheme and his successful robbery of the Maharajah's jewels, together with his assault upon him, became authenticated, and the people then did nothing but stand about in groups and discuss the exciting news, and all danger of riot and revolt passed away.

It had been an extremely trying time while it lasted, and Drew, who had borne the burden and heat of the day, was thoroughly tired out, and his experience of the night before had added very considerably to his distress.

On his arrival, the high official drove straight to the Colonel's bungalow, where Drew had given instructions that the body of Colonel Macquoid should be brought from the Palace and laid in state, guarded by his faithful servants, all of whom were devoted to their master and were almost inconsolable in their grief.

Drew received the official, and immediately informed him of the exact state of affairs, his account being taken down and a report despatched to the authorities, detailing the whole of the circumstances.

Then they dined together and discussed the matter further as they did so. The high official was astonished at the manner in which the Centipede arranged his scheme, and the success with which he carried it out.

"Something serious will have to be done, Drew, to secure the man. He is positively becoming a nightmare to us. But this last episode is one that far overshadows all previous efforts of his, and I expect when the authorities get the details they will be fairly amazed."

"It's all very well to say 'something will have to be done'; but if you will allow me to remind you, everyone has been trying to do something for years, but no one succeeds. My experience of the man—and I've had a good

deal—is that without doubt he is the most astute and unscrupulous criminal at large.”

“So it would appear. Colonel Macquoid was one of our most brilliant men, and he seems to have been fairly caught by this Centipede’s plot.”

“Yes, and, what’s more, the Maharajah fell a victim as well, and he’s not to be numbered among the fools either.”

“Can you suggest how it is that no one is able to obtain a clue to the movements of the man and what becomes of him when he completes one of his robberies?”

“I have my own opinion on the subject. It is that he never works in conjunction with anyone, and is therefore not likely to be betrayed. He uses the best disguises and is very skilled in making-up. He never loses his head; he is a good linguist, and a great student of character; and last, but not least, he only goes for jewels or money, and these are not easy to trace. Most probably he has means of disposing of his booty in all parts of the world, and, I expect, gets the utmost value for it.”

“Has no one ever set eyes on him?”

“Yes, I have; and I suppose hundreds of other people have; but, you see, he is generally impersonating someone else, and more often than not someone that you desire to please. By the way, I will fetch the paper that we found in the Faquir’s clothes when Mir Singh was discovered. I know where Colonel Macquoid put it.”

With that he left the room, and soon returned with the document that the Centipede had laid before the Maharajah prior to rendering him insensible. When the high official read it, he sat quite still for a few minutes, pondering over the contents.

"What do you think of it?" asked Drew, after he had allowed the silence to remain unbroken for a short time.

"I hardly know what to make of it," was the reply. "Can there, by any chance, be a connection between this paper and the visit of the Centipede to the Maharajah? It's a frightfully incriminating document to the people mentioned, if there's any truth whatever in it. What is your opinion?"

"My opinion is, as I told the poor Colonel, that it's a document drawn up by the Centipede to hoodwink somebody, most probably the Maharajah, who would be very much interested in the scheme embodied in it. Probably that is how he obtained the interview with the Maharajah in the first place."

"I think perhaps I had better make a copy of this document to send down to headquarters with my report, as it has an important bearing upon the case. I suppose there's nothing that you have not told me. Should anything strike you, will you let me hear it? I think I will go into the office now and get it over."

"By the way, what is to be done about the Colonel's funeral? His brother is arriving to-morrow; I presume he will have a full military

"Yes, I suppose so ; but no doubt we shall have instructions shortly."

"I think I will turn in early, for I've had an extremely tiring day. Is there anything more that I can do to help you ? No ? Well I will wish you good-night."

The two men parted, Drew to go to bed and the high official to spend hours drawing up a detailed account of the recent occurrences.

The next day Colonel Macquoid's brother arrived, and arrangements were made for the funeral to take place with full military honours. When it occurred nearly the whole city turned out to watch the procession as it slowly passed through the streets on its way to the English cemetery.

All the newspapers testified to the great services that the dead man had rendered his country, and were unanimous in their appreciation of his devotion to duty and unfailing kindness and courtesy. The Government sent special representatives to attend the funeral, while the whole of the British residents in Mhurrappur were at the graveside. To Drew the time was one of great sadness, and as he turned from the cemetery, he felt that he had lost his truest and best friend. His official duties carried him away, for which he was rather glad ; as he required some occupation to relieve his mind of the horror that the Colonel's terrible death had left upon him.

However, in the city the episode was quickly forgotten. The Government sent up a new

Political Resident, the place resumed its wonted occupations, and the people forgot their Deliverer, at one time so eagerly expected, who disappeared so soon after it was given out that he had arrived.

But there was one person who did not forget, and that was the Maharajah. His serious state of health continued for some time, until at last his magnificent constitution triumphed and he began to regain strength. All the time of his convalescence, his vindictive and vengeful brain was thinking matters out. He would set himself a task, one that he could work out to the bitter end.

He would spend his life in seeking out the man who had had the temerity to rob him of his dearest possessions, and, when he found him, would wreak his vengeance in such a manner as would startle the world. No mercy would he show. The time might be far off, but of a surety he would find him ; then, ah ! the very thought of what he would do made him determine to get well. Directly he was sufficiently recovered to set about it, he sent for the very best private detective he could obtain and gave him instructions to find out something of the Centipede, and to spare no expense whatever in tracking him. But it was useless to trace the astute criminal by any of the stereotyped methods generally adopted by the detectives of to-day. It required a genius to follow a man who operated with so much skill and forethought, leaving no clue behind

him. However, although they made no progress whatever, still he told himself that he could afford to wait. In time he would find him, and then he would be revenged completely and to his heart's content.

In the meanwhile, the Government asked him awkward questions, and took away honours which they had granted to him ; but he was crafty, and expressed great and apparently genuine regret that during his fever he should have killed the Colonel, who was a man for whom he always had the greatest regard and affection. So the authorities accepted his explanation, only politely suggesting that under the circumstances it would be as well if he took a foreign tour for, say, twelve months, while things had time to settle down again. To this the Maharajah consented, for he fully intended to spare no money or trouble to get news of the Centipede, and he felt that he could do it as well, if not better, in another country, where he was not under such strict supervision.

Therefore, a month later saw him on his way to the railway *en route* for London and Paris, where he intended to get the very finest detectives to take up his case. He meant to spend every penny he possessed, if necessary, to obtain his object and bring his enemy to book.

The matter had, however, rather preyed on his mind, and he began to find it necessary to fall back on stimulants to keep his nerves in order. Champagne and brandy he found

suited his complaint exactly. These gave him necessary vigour to abuse the detectives who had his enquiries in hand and who brought him so little satisfaction, yet who took his money like hawks and in return did nothing.

At last, tired of the continual disappointment, he made his way back to Bombay and thence to Mhurrapuir, after having been away one year. When he reached the city and proceeded to the Palace, he felt as if a generation had passed since he had started.

No longer did he care for his fighting apes and cheetahs. He took no further interest in his elephants or horses. Polo became wearisome to him, and tiger-shooting a thing of the past. From a well set-up handsome man he soon degenerated into a fat and bloated despot, who, unfortunately for his health, sat continuously in his palace drinking champagne and brandy or indulging in opium, and at all times cursing the fate that prevented him from coming face to face with the Centipede, upon whom he longed to wreak his vengeance. And, moreover, the state into which he had brought himself by his intemperate excesses gave him the mind to torment the Government with continual petty worries. The life of the new Political Resident became quite unbearable, until at last his health broke down entirely under the strain, and in a very short space of time he was compelled to resign his appointment. When the Maharajah found that he was in

a position to inflict so much annoyance and trouble, he set about it with much earnestness, and made the life of everyone connected with him a perfect hell on earth.

In former days his Palace was one of the best ordered in India, but now it was fast degenerating into a dirty and unwholesome place. At one time the Maharajah might have been considered an enlightened and moral-minded ruler, but circumstances had changed all that, and he filled his house with people of the most depraved and degenerate order, until at last he cut himself adrift from all who respected themselves in any way. So things went from bad to worse, and Mhurrapuir found its old glories tarnished and its reputation greatly besmirched by the proceedings of its ruler. The native population began to think that they could also follow the example of their Prince and take to courses that suddenly brought the authorities to their senses, and compelled them to set about ruling the city with a firm hand.

All this time the Maharajah was in communication with his detectives, who were receiving large sums from him and taking very little trouble to make enquiries as to the whereabouts of the Centipede. But they knew well enough that this kind of thing could not last. Sooner or later their august patron would kick at having to pay further for worthless information. So the two or three blackguards who were mixed up in the affair had a

meeting to decide what was best to be done to force the Maharajah to continue paying handsomely for their support. But, unfortunately for their scheme, they could not agree upon the *modus operandi*, the outcome of the meeting being that it broke up in a quarrel and the house became divided against itself, with the result that one of the gang proceeded to the Palace of the Maharajah to endeavour to blackmail him first. Fortunately or unfortunately, the information reached the other two as to his nefarious scheme, and they followed him and eventually came upon him in the Maharajah's Palace, where they murdered him in cold blood. This crime led to greater trouble for the Maharajah. A murder trial naturally ensued, in which the name of the Ruler of Gavalcore became unpleasantly prominent, and all sorts of damaging stories were told abroad.

Again he craftily regretted that circumstances had arisen over which he had no control, and promised reform, upon which the Government granted forgiveness, provided that he showed in his future conduct that he meant what he said. But all these efforts needed much consumption of champagne and brandy, and when the affair had blown over a little he shut himself up in his Palace and passed the time waiting for news of the Centipede and indulging in continual drunken orgies. All these worries and troubles went down to the account of the Centipede, and he swore

to add separate torture for each. The time would eventually come, he told himself—some day he would meet the man—and then! Little did he anticipate the circumstances under which he and the Centipede would meet again.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOMAN APPEARS.

GREGORY LURGAN knew no peace of mind during the whole time that the Centipede was away. From the first moment that the Master set out on this adventure he was in a perpetual state of anxiety. It was only by dint of great strength of purpose that he kept his nerves from giving way under the continual strain. As it was, he felt that he must set himself some daily task to occupy his thoughts ; to that end he endeavoured to continue the writing of a Sanskrit work upon which he was engaged ; but as the days advanced and over a fortnight elapsed, the strain of waiting and hoping became almost unbearable, and he felt he should break down unless he received some news at once. Every evening at sundown he sent Ram Lal with horses to the desert edge to wait until dawn for the Master, and for three nights in succession he sat on the terrace listening for the sound of hoofs that he so eagerly expected, only to be disappointed at dawn when the servant returned alone.

Eighteen days passed in this nerve-destroy-

ing manner. He found it quite impossible to give attention to anything. At all times of the day and night he made his way continually to the terrace to strain his ears and eyes for any evidence that might foretell the Centipede's arrival.

On the nineteenth day he dispatched Ram Lal with feverish haste. "Surely he will come to-night" he kept on saying to himself. "Surely he will come to-night." That night the sun went down blood-red in a bed of amethyst and purple, and the darkness that crept over the city seemed to cast a melancholy spell round him. He tried to set himself down to take his evening meal, but could eat nothing. Every mouthful seemed to choke him. Pushing the food away from him he betook himself to the terrace with the inevitable cigarette between his lips, there to wait for the man he desired so much to see.

Hour after hour went by and the moon rose, flooding the city and jungle with its silver light. Nature seemed entirely at rest; nothing disturbed the solemnity and quietude of the scene, save the occasional call of some wild beast in the jungle in search of its prey. But these sounds did not trouble the occupants of the palace, for they had long since become used to them; indeed, it was only the footfall of man that had any terrors for them.

At last Lurgan felt he could stand the strain of waiting no longer. Descending the steps, he walked along the streets, flanked by

the heaps of masonry and ruined houses, their great shadows cast across his path, while the moonlight threw up the carved stonework into high relief. It was a weird scene, and one that suited his frame of mind exactly. On and on he walked until the ruins ceased and the jungle barred the way. Then he retraced his steps and returned to the market square, when he stopped for a moment to look up at the picturesque palace towering above in ghost-like whiteness in the light of the moon.

Suddenly he became aware of a figure standing on the terrace.

"The Centipede, by Gad!" he ejaculated, and sprang up the steps two at a time, only to be confronted by a woman who was awaiting his return.

"Blanche Gillespie, by all that's sacred!" he cried, starting back in amazement when he reached the terrace. "What does this mean? Why are you here?"

"I've come with news of the utmost importance. You remember Gilbert Featherstone, the chief of police in Calcutta, against whom I have so repeatedly warned you?"

"Yes; what of him?"

"He has become aware, by some extraordinary means, of the secret of this city—that it is the Centipede's hiding-place. He left Calcutta a week ago to convince himself of the truth of his information. I followed, determined he should never get here."

"By Jove! Blanche, you've some pluck!"

"He also knows of the retreat in Formosa. It will be quite impossible for you to use that place again with safety."

"He knows all this, does he? Well?"

"And what is more, he knows that when you and the Centipede were so nearly caught in Hong Kong you owed your escape to T'su Chang. Well, T'su Chang is now being watched in the hope that he will do something to incriminate you all."

"The devil! But T'su Chang is not to be caught napping; we need have little fear in that quarter. He won't give us away, even if he could. You certainly have a remarkable talent for obtaining information, my dear Blanche, but why on earth didn't you send a messenger to warn us instead of coming yourself? Why run your pretty head into the tiger's mouth?"

"For the simple reason that I could not find one sufficiently trustworthy, and besides that, there was no time to be lost."

Lurgan made no answer to this, but walked to the terrace and looked over the city. He felt that there was something serious in the story. It was extremely unlikely that anyone, especially a woman, would undertake the risk of crossing the desert, entering the jungle, and finally the city, unless there was some information of extreme value and importance to be reported. Blanche Gillespie came to his side and leant on the marble balustrade.

"It was a terrible journey, Gregory, think of

it. It is hard for you men ; what then must it have been for me ? At first I was an English Mem-sahib on her way to join her husband in Agra ; thence I made my way to Jodphur."

" And Featherstone—what of him ? "

" Oh, I shadowed him to Jodphur, then followed him over the desert."

" What ! alone ? "

" Yes, alone ! "

" You have my profound respect ! "

" It was easy to trace him. Last night they camped at the edge of the jungle. I came upon them very quietly just in time to see his servants depart with all his belongings. I listened to their conversation, and ascertained that he was very ill with cholera. I let them go—it made things easier. Then I drew near and could plainly see that it was brain fever, or madness, for he was raving like a lunatic all about the Centipede and the city. I went near him and he did not recognise me—only took me for a ghost.

" I weighed matters in my mind, and determined that the best course to pursue was to bring him on here. It took me nearly seven hours to drag him foot by foot to the city wall. There I was quite done up, and we had to rest, but at last I managed by almost superhuman strength to get him to the foot of the Palace steps. Then Mir Ali assisted me and brought him in here. I felt that it would never do to leave him in the desert ; no one could tell what might happen to him

or whom he might meet. The servants having abandoned him to his death would say nothing of the matter."

"It would have been almost wiser if you had not frustrated their intention."

"Humanity forbade that I should leave him there alone to perish."

"Humanity does not bid you put halters round our necks. Where is he now?"

"Mir Ali had him put into the ante-room bed-chamber and is watching him. Go and look at him yourself. There is not the slightest doubt about his condition."

"Come in; I'll see him."

The two then entered the Audience Chamber and passed into the room, where they found Mir Ali standing by a bed, upon which the long thin figure of a man lay stretched at full length. His face was terribly haggard and emaciated, while the great eyes burnt like fires.

There was no doubt what was the matter with him—brain fever was stamped there. He was mumbling to himself all the while, until at last he raised himself on one elbow and laughed aloud, a most horrible grating laugh, that rang through the echoing chamber like a Banshee's cry.

"Curse you all, why can't you leave me alone? Don't you see what I have got to do now I have put my hand on him? As true as there is a sun in heaven I've got him—I must push on. Now then, men, look alive—we have no time to lose. I've got the

Centipede—he's mine—mine, you fools, and it's I alone of all men who have found him ! ”

Then he fell back on the bed with a groan. Blanche looked at Lurgan's twitching face and then said, “ You see the state he's in. I did well to bring him here ; it was necessary.”

“ Come,” he answered, “ let us get out into the air.”

Lurgan paced up and down in deep thought. The whole situation was extremely awkward. Blanche Gillespie had always been the one trouble on his mind. She was a daring, clever, and beautiful woman, and her assistance to the Centipede in many of his schemes had proved of incalculable value. But she was a woman, and there was always a danger in that fact alone. No one doubted her devotion to their cause for an instant, but Lurgan always felt that this devotion was a menace to their safety in itself. Knowing the Centipede as he did, it always struck him that trouble would arise should Blanche lose her heart to him, for the Centipede would never reciprocate her love—then the trouble would commence.

As to the man, he did not feel so anxious on his behalf—he knew that the Centipede would deal in the right way with his case.

“ I hope you've acted for the best, Blanche. I don't know how the Centipede will take it, though.”

“ Do you think I would harm him in any way ? ”

“ Ah ! Perhaps you've unconsciously done

so. Are you sure that this fellow is not feigning illness in order to get in here and thus obtain the information he desires ? ”

“ You could see for yourself that he does not recognise anyone.”

“ Perhaps that’s as well for us, and for him.”

There was another pause after this, and it seemed as though Lurgan was making up his mind how to act. At last, with an abrupt change of manner, he turned to her.

“ Now, my dear Blanche, this is all very well, but you know it is hopeless to think you can deceive me.”

“ Deceive you ? What do you mean ? ”

“ You have not told me the real reason of your presence here.”

“ I have been trying to do so.”

“ You certainly furnished me with an ingenious excuse. Has it struck you, however, that the Centipede may not be best pleased ? ”

The woman faced round on him with a quick movement that he was not slow to note.

“ Could he be angry with me for saving him ? ”

“ My dear girl, do you think that he would have embarked upon his last and most desperate enterprise if he set much store upon his safety ? Come, let us be plain with each other. Remember, after this we may never meet again.”

“ Then it is true that he is leaving India ? ”

Lurgan thought to himself—“ ‘ He,’ always ‘ he.’ ” Then aloud, “ Yes, it’s quite true. He

is making a mad attempt to obtain the Maharajah of Gavalcore's jewels. The exploit is destined, I trust, to be the closing episode of the Centipede's career. I cannot say that I shall be sorry. Our life has been, to say the least of it, wearing. I wonder if you know the Maharajah's reputation ? "

" Only too well."

" Then consider the madness of the attempt."

" Surely you could have dissuaded him."

" I tried my utmost, but it was impossible."

" He is disguised, of course."

" Yes, as a wandering Faquir. Nothing could have been truer to life. He even deceived me. Yet, cannot you see that if he forgets himself in the smallest particular nothing can save him ? "

As he said this, Lurgan watched the face of the woman before him ; then very slowly he continued, punctuating each word to give it the utmost force.

" In my dreams I have seen him writhing in agony under the claws of the tiger, or gored to death by the horns of a wild bull, or, perchance, thrown to——"

" Don't, don't—for pity's sake, cease ! I cannot bear it."

" Ah ! I thought as much. The suspicions I have so long entertained are, I find, correct after all. You love him."

She could see that it was useless to disguise the fact any longer, and therefore turning her white face towards him she said :

"I admit it, and why not? You were right just now when you said I might have sent a messenger to warn him. I have come myself—because—well, because—since you desire plain speaking—because I must see him before he goes away for ever."

"What good can it do?"

"What good can it do? Only this, that I could not let him go out of my life without one word of farewell."

Lurgan lit a cigarette with his nervous, shaking fingers, that showed only too well the condition he was in, trying the while to appear calm and collected.

"You must know that what you have in your mind is quite impossible."

The reply came fierce and vehement.

"How can you tell? You don't know his mind."

"I know his ambition," he replied with a shrug of the shoulders; and then continued, almost sadly, "I know, too, that to attain the end he has in view he would sacrifice everything and everybody, even me."

Then she came close to him, and placing her hand upon his arm, spoke in a pleading voice:

"Gregory, you have always called yourself my friend; and now I tell you that I love him with a love that is more to me than life itself. I cannot exist without him. Is it impossible for you to help me?"

"It is quite impossible," he replied bluntly.

"For what reason?"

"If you must have it, Blanche, because it would be useless. Also because—what is far more important still to me—it would endanger his safety. When he leaves the East, the door must be shut behind him and locked, never to be reopened."

"Never to be reopened? What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. The Book of the Centipede is finished. All the deeds that he has done are recorded in it, so the volume must close."

"This, then, is to be the reward to all who have served him with unswerving loyalty. Gregory Lurgan, you are dealing with a desperate woman."

"And probably not for the first time. Admitting the despair, will it make you happier to hurt him?"

"I don't know what I may do if I'm driven to it."

"Who thinks of driving you?"

There was no answer; the woman stood silently gazing down upon the moonlit scene. Lurgan did not disturb her by any word. He only smoked his cigarette and watched the handsome face.

"So the reward for all my services is that I am to be absolutely cast off and forgotten."

"My dear Blanche, experience should have taught you by this time that in this ungrateful world rewards are seldom commensurate with the services rendered. Now, if you will take

my advice, you will go to my room and try to get some sleep—you want it, my dear girl. Most likely the Centipede will return tomorrow morning, and you would not like him to see you looking jaded and worn.”

A ghost of a smile broke over her face as she replied : “ From what you have said, it seems to me that he does not care. But I will go and rest, for I am dead tired.”

After she had gone, Lurgan sat and thought out the whole matter. Perhaps after all it was as well that she had brought the man Featherstone into the city. Here at least he could do no damage, and once in the place it would be extremely easy to prevent him from getting out again if he ever recovered. But Blanche Gillespie was a far greater danger to them. Her coming meant future trouble, for Lurgan well knew the evil that accompanied the thoughts of a rejected woman.

“ Confound her,” he muttered ; “ and the worst of it is that her love was a factor I had always in my mind. If I know anything of the sex, there will be the devil and all to pay before we are quit of her.”

After a few minutes he turned and went into the room and called for Mir Ali.

“ No sign, Heaven-born ! ”

“ No sign, Mir Ali ! ”

“ The dawn is upon us, Huzoor ! Surely the Master will come.”

“ Is this cursed anxiety trying you, as it is me ? ”

"Indeed! thy servant knoweth no peace night or day."

"Oh! Mir Ali, knowest thou that if the Master returns this day 'twill be the last time thou wilt serve him?"

"It is known to me, Heaven-born! And thereat I grieve. It will not be given me to serve such another as he."

Lurgan threw himself upon a divan.

"You may well say that. For eight years the Centipede has pitted himself against all the cunning of the East and has defeated it. Yet that delirious fool in the room yonder believes himself specially appointed by Providence to lay him by the heels."

Then Mir Ali came behind him and whispered in his ear—"Sahib, in there lies one of the police—therefore, at enmity with the Master."

"What matter? Can all be friends?"

"'Twould be but a small thing, Sahib, and thereafter all would be well."

Lurgan never looked round, he knew only too well what was passing in the mind of the man.

"What is this thou hast in thy mind?"

"Only a few leaves, Sahib; they may be gathered in this city."

"Nay! If necessary, there be other means."

"But none so safe," almost hissed the low words. "'Let it be remembered that the dead speak only to the dead.'"

"I tell thee, no. Return to the terrace and watch. Call me shouldst thou see or hear aught."

The man hesitated, as if he were afraid to say what was in his mind. At last he plucked up courage.

"I go. But, Heaven-born, it would be better to act as thy servant hath said. Only a few leaves and none would know. Chittarre is not Calcutta or Bombay. They who walk 'twixt night and morning in this old palace tell no tales."

"Do as I bid thee. Go! It is enough."

When Mir Ali had passed out on to the terrace Lurgan shivered like an aspen. It was an awful temptation. It would be so easy to accomplish. No one would ever know. Stay; Blanche knew he was here. Yet she also knew that he was ill, perhaps dying. What could be easier? Let him die. Dead men tell no tales, true! Would it not be wiser to make sure of him while there was time? Do what he would, he could not rid himself of the presentment that, helpless as Featherstone was at the time, yet he would ultimately harm all concerned. Why not bring the matter to a conclusion now, while the opportunity was with them? No! No! It was too awful. There were depths to which even Gregory Lurgan could not sink.

He had tired himself out by his continual vigils, and very soon fell asleep on the couch. The next thing he remembered was being awakened by Mir Ali.

"He comes, Huzoor—he comes."

The words were hardly uttered before Lurgan was hurrying to the terrace to be met at the door by his friend.

"At last!" he cried as he went forward with outstretched hand. "At last you have come back."

"Yes, back once more after my little outing, my dear Gregory; and glad enough, I can assure you, to see the dear old city again."

He spoke just as if he were returning from an hour's ride, and had been through nothing out of the ordinary. It was one of his peculiar traits of character that he always made light of all difficulties and hardships. Lurgan tried to conceal the emotion that he felt as he took his friend's hand.

"I have been expecting you hour by hour, for I don't know how long—and your non-arrival nearly drove me mad."

"Your hand trembles, Gregory. I thought your nerves were equal to any strain."

"That is because you do not know what the nature of the strain has been."

"You were afraid his Highness of Gavalcore would prove too much for me. You should pay me the compliment of believing that it would be impossible for me to fail."

Lurgan replied almost angrily to this remark.

"At least do me the justice to remember that I was against the project from the very first."

"Because you believed that I was undertaking a task that was absolutely hopeless."

"Well, was I right or wrong?"

"I succeeded," he answered very quietly. "That's all."

Lurgan looked at him incredulously.

"You don't mean to tell me that you have obtained the jewels?"

Without answering, the Centipede produced a wash-leather bag from around his neck and poured a number of magnificent stones upon a cushion, and, pointing to them, said with triumph in his voice—

"Behold the treasure of Gavalcore, the pride of the State, the glory of the Indian Empire, and one of the wonders of the world."

Lurgan stared at the stones and then at the speaker in amazement.

"I can hardly realise it."

"Well, you have the very best of evidence before you."

"But how did you manage it?"

"All things considered, it makes rather an interesting story," he replied, as he returned the stones one by one to the bag.

"I spent a few days with my friend, the British Political Resident at Mhurrapuir, and enjoyed myself immensely, having the pleasure of visiting the Maharajah when there, who showed me his precious jewels, and I learnt the secret of their place of security. After that I went two days' journey and turned myself into a Faquir and re-entered the city as a deliverer of the people, where I took good care his Highness should hear of my arrival to disturb his security. He sent to fetch me, to talk with the mysterious man who was about to deliver his people from the British yoke, and I got

him off his guard, rendered him insensible with my drug, and secured the jewels."

"And the Maharajah?"

The Centipede paused for a moment, and then, with a sudden change of manner, continued—

"His Highness is the one regrettable feature of an otherwise entirely satisfactory affair."

Lurgan looked nervously at his friend.

"I know you too well to be deceived. There is something wrong?"

"Well, to be candid with you," continued the Centipede, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke, "the Maharajah did what thousands of foolish people have done before him. In other words, he made the serious mistake of coming to at the wrong moment. Even then had he paused to summon assistance all might have been well. Unfortunately, however, the fighting blood of the Gavalcores took fire, and we came to grips."

With that he pulled up his left sleeve and showed Lurgan an ugly wound on his forearm.

"Teeth, by heavens!"

"Yes, to the bone. You see, after that, Gregory, one of us had to go down."

There was a pause.

"Well?"

"I have a future before me, and my ambition refused to be set aside. The Maharajah meant to spoil this."

"Good God, you don't mean to say you killed him!"

"I tried not to ; I only wanted to wound him, so that I might escape. I had not time to wait and see what occurred. I escaped at once."

"Go on—go on !"

"In due course I arrived at Jodphur and became an Englishman again. After that I met Ram Lal with the horses, and I'm here alive and kicking."

"Forgive me for saying it, Stephen—you look half dead."

"And no wonder ! The pain of this wound has been most wearing. The Maharajah's teeth are sound and strong ones, and keenly sharp."

"Oh ! it's horrible, horrible ! But this affair will cause a stir from one end of India to the other. We must leave the country without a moment's loss of time."

"My own opinion exactly. Now listen to me. Our original plan holds good. I shall reach Jahlmere by daylight to-morrow morning. Bombay on the third day, catch a boat for Australia on the fifth. You must make for Calcutta and ship by the first vessel you can find for Sydney, *via* Singapore. After that we must both make for Valparaiso. Later we will try the life I have mapped out. Are you agreeable ?"

"I'm only too thankful to bring this horrible life to an end. But I have it in my mind that the sort of life you propose will hardly content you after these last eight years."

The Centipede, lying back on his cushions and blowing smoke rings into the still air, answered—"One cannot of course be sure of anything in this life. However, with wealth, ambition, and a fair understanding of the weaknesses of his fellow-creatures, a strong man may reasonably hope to accomplish something even in these progressive days."

"And all the while the spectre of the past will stand grinning continually at your shoulder, reminding you that there was once such a person as the Centipede."

"And a very interesting personage too, if the authorities of five nations are to be believed."

"Good heavens! I had forgotten for the moment, but your speaking of the authorities reminds me. Blanche Gillespie is here."

"Oh!" replied the Centipede with little appearance of concern. "For what reason are we honoured with a visit from her?"

"The secret of the city has leaked out, and she has come to warn us that Featherstone, the fellow in the Police who has the Centipede on his mind, left Calcutta a week ago to investigate. Fortunately for us, however, he fell ill in the desert and his servants abandoned him. At the jungle edge Blanche discovered him left to die with a bad bout of brain fever."

"Then that good Samaritan, Blanche, bound up his wounds and brought him here. Ah!"

"Who told you that?"

"My dear fellow, you did!"

Lurgan stared at the Centipede in a puzzled manner.

"You told me he fell ill in the desert. I know that neither you nor Mir Ali would desert your posts even for the sake of a dying man. Blanche is here, therefore she must have discovered him."

"Might he not have died before she did discover him?"

"No! for in that case you would not have wasted your time telling me the story. My dear old Gregory, I know you too well for that."

After a pause he rose from the divan and stood facing the arched door leading to the bedrooms.

"My dear young lady," he said as if he were addressing someone outside, "your philanthropy is calculated somewhat to inconvenience your friends." Then he suddenly opened the door and discovered Blanche Gillespie standing on the threshold listening.

With the greatest calmness he asked her in.

Turning to Lurgan he said, "Let Mir Ali prepare a meal at once for me. I must continue my journey in a quarter of an hour."

Blanche stood gazing helplessly from the Centipede to Lurgan, but the latter caught a look from his friend and turned and walked out of the room, leaving the man and woman alone together.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CENTIPEDE LEAVES CHITTARRE.

THE Centipede brought forward a deep easy-chair and waited for Blanche to take her seat. He was perfectly calm and self-possessed, while she was obviously nervous and agitated. The fact that he had discovered her to be listening at the other side of the door was quite sufficient seriously to disconcert her. Seated stiffly in the chair, she kneaded her handkerchief nervously in the palms of her hands, while she kept her eyes fixed on the floor without once looking at the man before her.

"Will you excuse me if I smoke, Blanche? I find that it soothes my nerves wonderfully."

The woman inclined her head, and the Centipede took a cigarette from a box on the table and proceeded to light it very calmly and slowly. It was quite plain to see that he intended she should feel her position as keenly as possible, and to that end took pains to make the silence protracted. At last he threw himself into a chair, and in a voice as even and pleasant as he could make it, opened the conversation.

"And now, my dear Blanche, let me thank you for this most charming surprise."

"Are you sure that you do think it charming?" she answered, not realising how very foolish the words sounded. "I was afraid that you would be angry with me. Gregory thought so too."

"Dear old Gregory! You must not be annoyed with him. He is jealous of everyone who tries to serve me. Surely you know that by this time! Now let us discuss the situation calmly together. I understand that you have made this extremely tiresome journey in order to warn me that I must no longer consider this quaint old city a safe hiding place?"

"That is so, and further, I wanted you to know that the Formosa refuge is unsafe also."

"Indeed! Is that so?"

"And that the police are shadowing T'su Chang."

"Poor old T'su Chang, and he is as innocent as a babe. How very annoying for him! I fear the police will get very little satisfaction in that quarter."

"I thought you had better be warned of all these things at once."

"Yes."

"Especially as I knew that Featherstone had left Calcutta to make his way here."

"It's a thousand pities you should have been put to all this trouble for nothing."

"For nothing! I really don't understand you. To me it seems everything."

"The fact is, I leave Chittarre within the hour, for ever. The Centipede's career is ended. Henceforth he will retire into the obscurity from whence he sprang. But I see that you know this already."

"How can you possibly tell?"

"Because your eyes expressed no astonishment when I mentioned the fact. Forgive my tiresome methods. Now let us talk of yourself."

"Will that be a subject worthy of your consideration?"

"It must necessarily be a matter of concern to me, who—to an old friend. You have rendered me many a service, Blanche, for which I may at least be allowed to be grateful."

"You know that I am always proud of having helped you."

"And I, on my part, shall always recall our co-operation with pleasure."

"With pleasure! that sounds so very commonplace."

"Taken altogether we have not had a very bad innings, have we? Do you remember the day I was so nearly caught in Madras? But for you, and dear old Ditta Mull, I believe my career would have terminated on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion. I wonder what has become of Ditta Mull?"

"It's pleasant to spend our last few moments together talking of Ditta Mull."

The Centipede was very wideawake to the tone of scorn in which she spoke the words.

He was weighing every utterance, and easily realised that a storm was pending.

"Alas!" he continued, "the best of us are apt to grow reminiscent at times."

"You must never do so."

"True. I suppose occasion will arise when I shall have to rely upon my powers of invention to supply the experiences of many years. Gregory will have to keep me well in hand."

"Gregory, of course, will accompany you?"

"Would he ever leave me?" To himself he said, "A false move now, and she will make me pay for it."

Blanche rose from her chair and came over and stood before him.

"Can no one else accompany you? Can no one but Gregory help to save you—to protect you, if necessary, from yourself, as well as from others?"

"I'm afraid I scarcely understand you."

"I mean, am I to be left in India alone?"

"My dear Blanche——"

"Has anyone served you more faithfully than I?"

"I admit that I owe you a debt of gratitude that I can never repay."

"Try to repay a portion of it now."

"It shall, of course, be my first care to see that you are adequately provided for. With an assured income——"

"What! Do you mean that you would offer me money?"

"Are we not friends—the very best of

friends ? In that case I claim the right of a comrade to provide for you. As I have already said, with an assured income even Calcutta may present possibilities—— ”

“ Take care, Stephen Bainford ; you are laughing at me. So long as you needed me, you used me for your own ends ; when that need is passed you think you can easily get rid of me with a gift of money—cast me aside as a child would a broken toy. But you forget that it may be in my power to retaliate.”

“ Blanche, what are you saying ? You know that it is not my habit to forget anything. I am entirely in your hands, and, believe me, I do not regret it for one instant. Now you are inclined to be angry with me, but you will forgive me later, if only for old times’ sake.”

Blanche stood before him, her face working with suppressed emotion, every nerve strung to the utmost tension. Several times she tried to speak, but the words failed her. At last, throwing herself on her knees before him, at which he rose instantly to his feet, she seized his hand in both of hers.

“ Take me with you, Master. Take me with you ! I implore and beseech you. I cannot—I dare not be left behind ! I swear by all that I hold sacred that I will serve you as faithfully as a dog, and not even Gregory will do more. I will dare anything if only you will let me be with you. Is it so much to ask ? ”

The Centipede tried to raise her from her knees, and in a voice full of distress replied :

"Blanche, if it were within the bounds of possibility for me to take you with me, I would wish for no better companion. As matters stand, however, it would be madness for me to think of such a thing. So, if you would help me and at the same time promote your own happiness, you can best do so by forgetting that such a man as myself ever existed."

"Stephen, it is easy for you to speak to me like this, because you do not care what happens to me, but, God knows how different it is to me, because—because I love you! You are my leader, my king!—everything that makes life worth living for me, and I care not who knows it. Surely you will not spurn such a great love as mine. I would only too gladly go to the ends of the earth with you. Don't kill me by refusing to take me!"

"Blanche, you must not, you shall not talk like this. I have told you that it cannot be—it is hopeless! I shall never alter my decision. You know well how inflexible is my determination."

"Ah—then you hate me."

"I have no such feeling towards you; indeed, I have a very sincere and genuine regard and admiration for you. But what you ask can never be, both for your sake and mine."

"Then it is useless for me to tell you of my devotion. I who have toiled, struggled, and feared nothing for your sake, that you might gain the ends you desired. Can you forget that I have risked all that a woman holds



suddenly there came an interruption of a nature that brought

dear, life, future, well-being—my very soul—to aid you in your schemes, and this is to be my reward! Day after day I have waited and hoped that you would send for me. Now I see only too plainly that I was deceived. Oh! what a fool, a grievous fool, I have been all along—a dupe, a tool. Oh! my God, it's too cruel, too cruel."

Flinging herself on her knees before a chair and burying her face in a cushion, she burst into a paroxysm of weeping, while the Centipede, genuinely affected, did his utmost to restore her to calmness, but without success.

Suddenly there came an interruption of a nature that brought them both to their senses. A tall, thin figure, with drawn and haggard face and great fever-burning eyes, staggered into the room; reeling like a drunken man, he stood glaring at them; then, throwing his arms wildly about, he shouted—

"Who are you? Why do you come here to interfere with me? Can't you let me get to work? I must relieve Culliver. Poor devil; they say his wife is dying. Can't see the week out and what—Oh! these everlasting hammers beating in my head. Why can't I think? Why can't I think? There they go again. These cursed noises; will they never cease?

"I must get to work—I must; it's imperative. I've got to find the Centipede. My reputation demands it. Do you know where he is? They say he's in the desert. Heaven, this cursed desert—will it never end? Nothing

but sand, nothing but sand. Is that you, Blaithewait ? No, you're dead, man—stand aside. Why, I helped to bury you myself. Curse you, can't you tell me where the Centipede is ? The man haunts me like a nightmare. Who are you ? Ghosts come to torment me. But you shan't. Why don't you leave me alone ? Can't you see I'm going to secure the Centipede ? I'm——”

Suddenly he fell forward with a crash on to his face.

In a moment the Centipede called for Mir Ali, and the three of them carried the insensible form back once more to the bedroom. Asking Blanche to stay with him for a few minutes while he went to get a drug from his medicine-chest that would probably subdue the fever, and telling Mir Ali to come with him, he departed to his own bedroom and opened his medicine-chest, taking from it two small bottles ; one he handed to Mir Ali, and the other he put into his pocket.

“ Mir Ali,” he said to the waiting servant, “ thou hast been true and faithful to me throughout thy long service, but the time has now come when we can no longer stay here with safety. This day is the last that will see us. Therefore, I desire to reward both you and Ram Lal for all the good services that you have rendered to me, and to that end I have made arrangements to pay you such a sum of money that will be sufficient to keep you both for the rest of your lives. This will

be paid to you by Gunga Dass. Should I require you again, I will send to you. But, first, there are one or two more services that I require of you ; I wish you to take this bottle, for I have fears that the Mem-sahib Gillespie may prove troublesome at the moment of our leaving. You know what I want of you: When she is insensible, keep her safe here for at least a week. No violence, remember. A week will suffice. That will give us time to get well away. When we are gone, pack all the things that can easily be moved, and have them taken to Jodphur, as in this letter of instructions, which tells you how you are to act. The big pieces of furniture you can leave here ; we shall not require them again. Is all plain ? ”

“ Sahib, it is plain. Thy servant will do all that is required.”

The man spoke no more, for he was used to obeying the Centipede's every wish without question. He knew that any instructions given him must be carried out to the letter, and the Centipede could always rely on the fullest satisfaction being done to his wishes. Though it cost the faithful servant many a pang to part with his master, yet he obeyed him implicitly. At that moment Lurgan entered the room.

“ Where's Blanche, Gregory ? ”

“ She's with Featherstone; I've just left her.”

“ Good. Mir Ali, go to the Mem-sahib and say that I will bring the medicine immediately.

And see that she does not leave the room until I come."

Mir Ali left the apartment, taking with him the small bottle that the Centipede had given him.

"I've had a scene with Blanche, Gregory—luckily, Featherstone interrupted the *tête-à-tête*. But all our plans must be changed, for she knows just what our movements are ; at least, I think she must have heard ; and I shall therefore consider a new scheme of movement as we cross the desert, for we must not take any risks at this juncture."

"Let us start at once. I am all anxiety to set off."

"Yes ; the best thing to be done is for you to see that we have the horses ready to set out in ten minutes. Let food be prepared to take with us ; I have given Mir Ali instructions, and all arrangements are made in that quarter ; so I will now go to Blanche, and will meet you on the terrace in ten minutes ; so have everything ready."

"I shall be only too glad."

"In ten minutes. Now for Blanche."

The Centipede then left the room and proceeded to Featherstone's.

Here, he found Blanche pacing up and down the room, evidently very much upset. Mir Ali was standing near the entrance, and Featherstone lay stretched upon the bed. The Centipede could see that something had been occurring during his absence from the room by

the angry look that was in the eyes of the woman.

As he entered the Centipede thought to himself that the sooner the interview was over, the better for all parties concerned.

Not that he had any feelings other than those of a perfectly friendly nature towards Blanche Gillespie—indeed, he had a genuine regard and admiration both for her wit and intelligence, not to mention her beauty and devotion to his cause. But it was extremely inconvenient at the present time that she should have taken it into her head to come to the city, and, more, that she should have expressed the love that she had for him. He could not help recognising the very serious position in which he was placed. If he refused to reciprocate her feelings, he well knew that she would bitterly resent it. If he did reciprocate, he would then be compelled to take her with him, which was, for all their sakes, undesirable so far as their safety was concerned.

He could see no other course to pursue than to leave the place and trust to his being able to get away from India without her knowing where he had gone. After that, he would take his chance as to her future movements. He had already made a generous settlement upon her, and he knew that her welfare so far as money was concerned was amply provided for.

As he entered the room she turned upon him like a tigress.

“Stephen, I am greatly surprised that you

give orders to your servants to prevent my leaving this room. It is a most unwarrantable insult, and I do not understand what it means."

"If I gave instructions to Mir Ali, my dear girl, you may be sure that it was done with the best intentions."

"I do not understand—kindly explain."

"I would rather not do so, Blanche. It is sufficient that I gave instructions that you were not to be allowed to leave this room without my consent. It was for your good, as I have already said."

"Well, I refuse to accept the explanation you have given. It seems to me that you try to prevent me because you are afraid to trust me. It is plain that you think I am in league with this poor fool here."

"Blanche, that is absurd. Nothing would make me doubt you."

"Then please tell me the reason of the extraordinary order that you have seen fit to give."

"I warn you that if I do so, you will not be pleased."

"I do not care ; I want to know."

"Well, I wished, for your good, to prevent you endeavouring to come with me when I leave this city. My kindly feeling for your welfare tells me that only evil would result from such a proceeding, and therefore, to save you from lasting sorrow, perhaps disgrace, I intend to prevent your committing the rash act of forcing me to take you. Unless you give

me your promise that you will not endeavour to follow me, I shall be compelled to prevent you, so far as it lies in my power. Don't think that I wish to do you the smallest injury. I tell you in all sincerity that it is just the opposite. I wish to save you from yourself."

"It is a lie, Stephen, and you know it," retorted the angry woman. "Don't think that you can get rid of me with a tale of this kind. I can easily see that you don't want me, that my very presence is distasteful to you, and that my services, whatever their value may have been in the past, are no longer required, so I can shift for myself. Very well, so be it. The same treatment you choose to mete out to me, I will give to you. Remember, I warn you now, that by the action you are taking you will make a bitter and implacable enemy of a once warm and devoted friend."

"My dear Blanche, pray do not be foolish and jump to conclusions. Let us discuss the matter calmly and dispassionately. You ask me to take you away from India with me. You will forgive me for putting it bluntly, you will never make a success of such a scheme. You and I have to look back upon the past as a business transaction—one in which we have been partners, and from which we have retired, after having brought matters to a successful issue; and I ask you to allow me to pay you your share of the profits arising from the transaction in a business-like manner. There can be no other way of settling matters. Thus

we part in the most friendly spirit, with nothing to regret on either side. But, no ; it would seem that you have done me the honour—and, believe me, I shall never forget it—of expressing other feelings towards me, which—again I ask your pardon for the bluntness—I cannot reciprocate.”

“ Ah ! ”

“ Blanche, it is quite impossible. I don't want to humiliate you further by repeating what I have already said. But I tell you now that I am departing at once. This man Featherstone knows too much. Come, let us part amicably. Give me your hand in friendship and let me go away feeling that I have your good wishes.” Here the Centipede came forward with extended hand ; but Blanche drew back.

“ What ? ” she cried. “ You are going now, at once ? ”

“ I am. I leave within five minutes.”

“ For ever ? ”

“ Yes, for ever.”

“ Alone ? ”

“ No ; Gregory goes with me.”

“ Then, by Heavens, you never shall. I will not submit to such treatment. It's brutal, mean, despicable to leave me here alone.”

“ You seem to forget, my dear girl, that you came here at your own invitation.”

“ Yes, but I came to claim the right that I am justly entitled to for my services to you.”

“ Ah ! I was under the impression that you

told me you had come to warn me that the police knew too much."

"Don't mock me now in my trouble."

"Well, I fear I cannot wait to argue further. It's life or death now. Good-bye, Blanche."

The woman stood before him with her face deadly white and drawn, and her eyes gazing steadily at him. That the man she loved so passionately should refuse in his cold, calculating way to have anything further to do with her was a blow that half stunned her. She knew very well that he meant exactly what he said, and that he never changed his mind on any subject ; but she had come to the end of her arguments, and now there was nothing left but either to let him go—or——. As she looked at him standing there, cool and collected before her while she was suffering such mental torture, she seemed suddenly to go mad, and burst into a passion of hysterical laughter.

"If you do go away now, you will go with my curses resting on your head ; my love has turned to hate, and I will never rest until I have brought you to your knees. You may think now that you can overcome me in every way, but you will find that you are grievously mistaken. The time will come, most assuredly, when I shall be even with you. Then you can ask for mercy in vain. Stephen Bainford, clever as you are, you will find that I shall revenge this insult. You think you will always be able to conquer everyone with your cruel, calculating brain, but I can retaliate for this

bitter humiliation, and shall take care to do so. It may not be for years, but it will come, it will come."

Then she burst into a fit of weeping, such as he had never before witnessed. The Centipede approached, endeavouring to calm her ; but she shook him off.

"Don't dare to touch me!" She drew a small revolver and pointed it at him. The Centipede never moved, but stood before her with his arms folded, prepared to receive a shot. He knew that Blanche was quite capable of firing at him in her present state.

Suddenly Mir Ali made his appearance from behind a curtain, and the Centipede could see that he carried in his hand the small phial of liquid.

"You stand before me, absolutely at my mercy, Stephen Bainford. If you stir one inch you know what to expect. You can keep Gregory waiting for a while."

"My dear Blanche, I'm not afraid of you," he replied in a voice as cool and even as if he were only making a casual remark. "In one minute, I intend to leave this room, and you will probably shoot me dead in cold blood—murder me, in fact. Gregory, Ram Lal, Mir Ali, all of them, including perhaps Featherstone, will be able to prove how I died. Now then, shoot."

With that he stepped towards the door and she fired, but her aim was spoilt by Mir Ali, who knocked up the pistol and instantly

placed his arm round her neck from behind and the small bottle at her nostrils. In a few seconds she was insensible, and he laid her upon the floor with a cushion beneath her head, and then turned to the Master for instructions.

The Centipede, perfectly calm and collected, prepared to leave the room. Looking down on the prostrate figure, he said half under his breath, "Blanche, you are a good girl, but you cannot keep yourself under control, and impetuosity has ruined more than one good scheme. I daresay if you'd played the game differently I might have taken you with me, but violence never succeeds with me."

Then to Mir Ali he said—

"You can leave her where she is for a few minutes longer, Mir Ali ; come and see us off."

With that he passed out of the room and on to the terrace, where he could see Gregory and Ram Lal standing with the horses at the foot of the steps.

Quickly descending, he mounted his horse, while Gregory was already in the saddle. Then they bade farewell to their faithful servants and set off for the passage that led to the jungle.

Before they plunged into the darkness of the tunnel, the Centipede reined up his horse and looked back at the ruined palace towering high into the air against the deep blue of the sky, and then right and left, as if imprinting the whole scene on his memory, so that he might never forget it.

Upon the terrace they could distinguish

Ram Lal and Mir Ali watching them, and the Centipede could easily realise the feelings of these faithful servants as they saw the two men depart, whom they had served so long and into whose lives they had entered so deeply.

It was an extremely trying moment both for the Centipede and Gregory, for it had been their home and resting place for years, and the one spot in which they felt they were entirely safe, and now they were leaving it for ever, to begin a new career in a new country with all its possibilities and chances, and no one could tell what would be the outcome of it. Both men sat gazing about them in silence for awhile. Then the Centipede spoke.

"Gregory, I wonder if either of us will ever visit this old city again. If so, what will it be like, I wonder? However, I'm Bainford now. The Centipede expired as I left the palace. Please remember that."

Gregory could not answer, he was so sadly affected. At last, Bainford turned his horse and Gregory did the same, and together they entered into the passage and eventually the jungle.

So ended the refuge at Chittarre. Could they but have looked into the future and seen the circumstances under which they would again enter it, perhaps they might have given up the idea and sought some other existence, but a merciful Providence does not permit man to forsee the future.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

BAINFORD DECIDES TO MARRY.

WENTWORTH VERNON VILLIERS-FROBISHER, fifteenth Earl of Remenham, decapitated his second egg in quite a scientific manner, and smiled to himself as if in appreciation of his dexterity. He enjoyed a good breakfast, and always took his time over it, while he glanced at his correspondence and his sporting newspapers, or listened to his wife's reading of the letters that came to hand by the morning's post.

The Countess had a voluminous correspondence. She was gifted with a great epistolary faculty, and accordingly laid herself out to swamp her friends, acquaintances, and enemies with chatty chronicles of her own and other people's doings and affairs—mostly other people's. They were not always discreet letters, but they were extremely amusing ones, and she duly earned for herself a reputation as a wit.

She was not a woman of any great brain power, but she certainly possessed a keen

sense of humour, and also that rare gift of being able to entertain people for a long while with amusing small talk without boring them. As excellent conversationalist and an exceptionally good hostess, she was very popular in society. Her house in Grosvenor Place was the Mecca of the smart London world, and beneath its roof all the lions of the day foregathered. Painters, poets, writers, actors, politicians—indeed, everyone who was anybody of note.

She was justly celebrated also for her beauty, despite the forty-seven years which sat so lightly upon her shoulders, and she might well have been ten years younger. A woman without the smallest trace of conceit, kind-hearted and unselfish, she was a general favourite both in London society and among the country folk in the vicinity of Remenham Park in Leicestershire. The poor people of her neighbourhood worshipped the whole family, and there was no joy or sorrow that entered the Park but was shared to the full by the villagers. To her husband she was everything. He detested society functions, and it was only for her sake that he could be induced every season to undergo what was generally a period of terrible boredom for him. But, to please her, he agreed to spend some weeks in the spring of each year in Grosvenor Place, and dine and drive out and do general penance with her at the shrine of Fashion, but the doing of it was martyrdom

to him. He had dedicated his life to race-horses, hunters, yachts, fishing, and kindred sports, and nothing else interested or amused him. The hour that he looked for was that which found him seated in the railway carriage wearing a tweed suit, with a pipe in his mouth, his gun case on the rack, and his favourite sporting papers on the cushions beside him. This was the hour of relief from duty for which he breathed a deep sigh of gratitude for delivery from purgatory.

Of an easy-going and charming nature, he never worried himself about anything but his own sports. As for the House of Lords, it seldom came into his head, save on special occasions, to enter its solemn precincts.

"Life's too short to be botherin' one's head about politics and twaddle of that kind," he used to say when asked by his father-in-law, who was the Prime Minister of England, why he didn't take a greater interest in the duties of the State, as became a peer of the realm.

"I know I'm a fool at things of that kind and know nothing about 'em. I oughtn't to have been a peer; I was built for a farmer. You see, I'm an ass at thinking out things. The dear old governor brought me up to believe that the only thing required of a man was to ride straight, shoot straight, and go straight, and let the chaps who are clever look after the country."

The wise old statesman who chided him

looked at his handsome son-in-law, and turned away, remarking that probably he was right ; anyway, he told himself, Remenham's heart and hands were clean, and that, after all, was the best thing.

But in his own way he was celebrated. There was no better master of hounds in the land ; his stud of racehorses, all bred by himself, were the pride and delight of his trainer. He could work his own racing yacht and land a trout or a salmon with any man in the three kingdoms, while as a judge of hunters and hounds he had no equal.

Possessed of a large estate and an exceptionally good income, which had been considerably augmented by his wife's private fortune, he was in a position to take life just as easily as he liked.

They had been married when the Countess was twenty-five, and there were two children, the Lady Audrey Villiers-Frobisher, aged twenty-two, and Lord Netley, aged twenty, both extremely handsome young people, idolised by their parents and spoilt by their grandparents.

Lady Audrey inherited all the wit and beauty of her mother, together with the brains and accomplishments of her grandfather, who was one of the most brilliant men in England. With her advent into the world she began to rule the household, and at once made her personality felt and appreciated. Her father positively worshipped her, even more than

he did his beloved racehorses and hunters, which is saying something. As soon as she could walk, he placed her upon the back of a pony and set about making her the most accomplished horsewoman, and before very many years had passed there were few men who could give her a lead. Absolutely fearless, she soon set herself on a pinnacle of fame as a brilliant and undaunted rider. He never tired of relating her prowess in the hunting field, which was genuine enough, as the annals of the Quorn can testify. He kept the best hunters for her sole use and schooled her himself ; it was small wonder that she exceeded his expectation.

An accomplished dancer and musician, and perfectly educated, she took her place in the world, when she came out, as a brilliant girl, although she was at heart a loving and lovable child, devoted to her father and mother, adoring her brother, and thinking ill of none.

Everybody wondered who would be the fortunate suitor to secure her hand. When she made her appearance at a ball given in her honour by her grandmother she caused an instantaneous impression upon all present, and was unanimously declared to be the beauty of the year. After this her success was fairly well established, and, before the end of the season, there were several candidates for her hand.

Her father was much amused at these episodes, and kept a small diary which he

called a "Register of Entries and Acceptances." This consisted of the names of the men who had requested permission to pay their addresses to Lady Audrey. To all and sundry he replied in the same strain—that he would speak to his daughter on the subject and, on hearing her views, would communicate with them later. He took a peculiar delight in formulating a special stereotyped letter to the rejected.

Still, she met her admirers in exactly the same pleasant manner as she did before they declared their feelings, danced with them, sat out with them, and went in to supper with them without making the slightest difference, though, more often than not, her very presence served to add fuel to the fire of their admiration. She told them, one and all, that she appreciated the honour they did her, but she was not marrying for a long time, perhaps for years. She was perfectly happy as she was, and would not change her state for worlds.

As for young Lord Netley, he was a handsome well set-up youth, of a manly and affectionate disposition, but, like his mother, somewhat superficial in character, though for all that a gentleman and a man. He had lately been honoured with a commission in the Guards, and was exceedingly proud of his position and admired himself not a little in his splendid uniform, which admiration was shared by his devoted sister.

On the occasion referred to at the opening

of this chapter, Lord Remenham was greatly amused at the various letters that his wife read to him. She was arranging a charity bazaar on a large scale, and had requested her friends and admirers to give their services in the good cause, or to subscribe to the funds ; most of her pet lions had consented to do things, and had written her letters full of gush and insincerity, warmly consenting to do their mite to help in the carrying out of her " really too sweet idea " for the poor dear cripples, at the same time firmly wishing Lady Remenham and her charities at the bottom of the sea, and sincerely trusting that something would occur before the date arranged to prevent them from helping " dearest Lady Remenham."

In the middle of the meal Lady Audrey appeared ; she had been for a walk in the Park with her dogs, and took a seat at the table looking the picture of health and beauty in a simple gown that became her to perfection. Her mother pointed out the large number of letters that she had received by the morning post.

" I think I have opened twenty already, and still have quite ten to read," and she turned over those that remained. At the bottom was one in a man's handwriting.

" Who is this from, I wonder ? The writing seems familiar."

For the next few minutes she was silently perusing the letter.

"It's from Mr. Longford, Vernon. Such a generous letter. Read it," and she threw the epistle over to him.

He read that Longford had received Lady Remenham's letter, and although he was afraid he could not promise to be present at the bazaar on account of his political duties, yet, if she would allow him, he would be glad to pay all the expenses of the function on one condition, and that was, that his name and his connection with the matter should not be mentioned to anyone whatever. Hoping that she would agree to this proposition, he enclosed a bank-note for £500 to make a start.

"By Jove!" remarked Lord Remenham as he finished the letter and handed it to Audrey. "That's generous of him—but I have always looked upon Longford as one of the very best fellows going—notwithstanding the fact that he's so jolly well centred in politics."

Lady Audrey returned the letter to her mother.

"I think he's the kindest man living, mother, and he does more real good than is generally known. I was told the other day that, hearing of a poor widow being turned out of her little farm as she was too poor to pay the rent, he bought the place and sent the deeds to her as a present, and no one knew who did it for ever so long."

"I suppose you will accept his offer, Kit?"

"Of course I shall! I'll write him a note of thanks at once."

"Yes, write the letter. Audrey and I are driving and we can leave it."

As soon as breakfast was over Lady Remenham sat down at her writing table and concocted a reply that she hoped would please her generous friend, and in due course Lord Remenham and his daughter set out in the smart spider phaeton with its magnificent high-stepping horse, and drove at once to Longford's beautiful house in Park Lane.

It happened that at the very moment at which they pulled up, Stephen Longford came out of the door. When he saw who his callers were he crossed over to them and invited them to enter.

"But you are just going out, my dear fellow," replied Lord Remenham.

"I was only going to stroll quietly down to the Carlton Club for a little exercise. It will give me the very greatest possible pleasure if you will come in. Perhaps Lady Audrey would like to see my pictures."

"I should indeed! But it is a shame to come and worry you so early in the morning."

"My dear Lady Audrey, I've always been an early riser, and I call 11.30 in the morning a late hour."

He then assisted her to alight. Lord Remenham handed the reins to his groom, and they all went into the house.

Longford read the letter which was given to him, put it into his pocket, and then proceeded to show them all the wonders of his

house, with its perfect collection of bijouterie, pictures, weapons, prints, and china, all of which he had brought together himself to ornament the delightful home that he had built.

It was a comparatively small residence for Park Lane, but it was perfect in every detail, designed by the leading architect of the day, in accordance with Longford's own wishes and requirements. He decorated and furnished it with perfect taste and discrimination, each piece being selected with the utmost care and judgment, and the whole formed a collection which was the envy of all who saw it.

But there was no arrogance of manner in the way in which he showed his treasures. It was just that of a man who loves the things that he possesses for their beauty and interest alone, and not for the money that was expended on their purchase. It gave him infinite pleasure to seek out the specimens that he wanted and to secure them for his collection.

The next hour was spent very pleasantly in wandering through the beautiful rooms, until at last his guests took their departure.

On parting Lord Remenham asked him whether he would not waive all ceremony and come and dine with them *en famille* and spend a quiet and uneventful evening.

"Thanks very much ; nothing would give me greater pleasure. The fact is, I have been tied to my work in the House so long now that I have become more or less of a slave,

To-night, however, I shall take a holiday and cast all political cares and worries aside for the moment. It will do me worlds of good. But, Lady Audrey, if I promise to come, will you promise to make Lady Remenham say nothing on the subject of my subscription to her bazaar fund? She has thanked me once, and this is quite enough. Good-bye."

"*Au revoir.* We shall see you to-night at eight."

Longford watched them drive away, and thought he had never looked upon such a handsome pair. Then he returned to the house and went straight to his own private sanctum, where he spent most of his time. Here he had his own favourite belongings and his books. It was a most beautiful room, and the windows looked out upon a courtyard with a lovely old Italian marble fountain in the centre and paved walks between exquisitely kept little lawns, and walls covered with creepers on two sides, while the high wrought-iron railing divided the garden from the road.

The room itself was panelled in dark wood inlaid with exquisite designs in marquetry, the outcome of years of labour by the hands of the most accomplished inlayers of the world.

The furniture was entirely Sheraton, and consisted of superb book-cases, tables and chairs; a magnificent Turkey carpet covered the floor, and the pictures, which were few in number, consisted of the most beautiful old coloured prints in their original frames,

the joy and pride of Longford's heart and the envy of every collector who saw them.

After he had closed the door he walked over to the table, and, taking a cigarette, lit it and seated himself in his writing chair. For a few minutes he sat in mute abstraction, blowing the blue smoke slowly through his lips.

"Yes," he said aloud. "If only it could be. If only it could be."

Then he rose from his seat and rang the bell.

"Ask Mr. Lurgan if he will kindly come to me for a few minutes, Jackson. I'm not sure whether he is in his room or not, but go and see."

The servant bowed and went out.

The ten years that had passed since he left India had made little difference in his appearance, except, perhaps, that his hair had become grey at the temples. But he was still the handsome well-built man that he was when he closed the book of the Centipede, came to England, and took the name of Longford.

The past ten years, if they had made but little difference in his looks, had made a vast difference in his life. From the very first moment that he had landed from the P. and O. boat at Plymouth to the present time, Fortune had smiled upon him. He at once set himself to work out the scheme of his life. Possessed of unlimited wealth and a stubborn and determined personality, he soon found

himself a Member of Parliament, and before many years had passed his name was on the lips of the greater part of the community. His vast knowledge and experience of the East made him an authority on all Eastern subjects, and when he rose to address the House he always found himself with an appreciative and interested audience. Lady Remenham's father said that Longford was the coming man, and that before long his word would count for much.

He never gave himself a moment's respite, but worked continually. Yet, with all his labours, he had a kindly thought for the poor and troubled. To relieve some distress or other he was continuously stretching out the hand of charity. For himself, save as a means to an end, money was of little value. It is true it was useful to aid his ambition, and to that end he had dedicated the first part of his life, which had been given up to securing the necessary wealth in an extremely discreditable, highly dangerous, but very picturesque manner. It was essential that he should become rich and powerful, and he therefore took his life in his hands and set Fortune to aid him in his endeavours, and she showered success upon him.

Things outwardly were going most brilliantly. Already he was nearly at the top of the ladder of Fame at a comparatively early age.

He intended to end as Prime Minister

of England, and having once made up his mind he never turned back.

It might with reason be asked, was he not frightened that someone who had known him as the Centipede would recognise and denounce him? The thought scarcely ever entered his mind. The Maharajah of Gavalcore had seen him, but he kept himself well acquainted with that Prince's downfall, and did not fear him. The only others that knew him without his disguise were Mir Ali, Ram Lal, Gunga Dass, and perhaps four other natives, but he had paid them so well and taken so much care to hide his identity that he did not fear anything from them. The only person he feared, perhaps, was Blanche Gillespie. She certainly did give him some food for anxiety at first, but after ten years he felt more secure. He had caused enquiries to be made as to her movements, but she seemed to have disappeared entirely from India, and no clue could be obtained as to her whereabouts, and for the last six years he had given up thinking about her. But, nevertheless, he remembered her threat, and he knew that she would try to be even with him, if she still existed. Blanche was not the sort of woman to allow herself to be cast aside without taking reprisals, so he told himself that he must always be prepared to find her scheming to be even with him. He knew her nature only too well. All the years they had been acquainted, he had studied and

watched her. Her strong will appealed to him, and he knew it would always carry her successfully through any enterprise upon which she embarked. Her brain was quick and her reasoning decisive, and moreover she possessed a very persevering sense of determination. But he had humiliated her; this she would never forgive, and without doubt would lose no opportunity of punishing him. To Lurgan she was a continual source of dread; even ten years after they had parted he feared her. His acutely nervous mind was always imagining danger, and the source of it—Blanche.

The ten years had dealt very differently with him. Age had crept upon him very quickly, chiefly owing to the strain of watching and waiting so continuously for the fall of the sword of Damocles that he thought was suspended by such a thin hair over their heads.

His devotion to Stephen Longford was just as great as ever. He still regarded him with the same feelings of affection and admiration, but he was terrified by the rate at which his friend mounted the ladder of Fame.

One day he broached the subject to him, earnestly entreating the utmost caution. His reckless courting of publicity was to Lurgan's mind a very terrible menace to their safety. Could they not go away, live somewhere less publicly, and give up this life?—somewhere where it would be impossible that they could be recognised? The words were hardly out of his mouth before Longford turned on him.

“ Lurgan, I know you too well to put you down as an arrant coward. You have stuck to me too long to be that. But, if any other man had spoken the words to me that you have done, I should at once have set him down as a frightened cur. If you are afraid, for Heaven’s sake, man, go away and leave me. Can it be possible that you should hope that after toiling and struggling for so many weary years to gain the position that I have gained and intend to gain, I should be such a wanton fool as to retire just because of the fear of recognition ? Look, man, at what I risked for years ! Penal servitude, disgrace, and the most horrible death, everything physical that men do fear. What for ? Why, to gain money enough to enable me to realise my aspirations. How can you possibly expect me to give up in a moment all the lifelong desires that my brain has formulated and that are now bearing the fruit of success ? And what for ? To hide my head because I ought to be ashamed, I suppose ! I tell you once and for all that I do not regret one action that I have done, and never shall. You may think it an extraordinary thing for me to say, seeing the way I have acquired my wealth, but there are hundreds of men living now—millionaires—who have gained their millions in ways not one whit better than mine. But perhaps you wish me to go away and exist in what men are pleased to call luxury on the proceeds of my—of my

deeds. I'm a man, at least ; I may be a blackguard and a scoundrel, and everything that's bad, but I'm no coward. Do me the honour to remember that ! ”

“ Stephen, don't speak like that ! You know what I think—— ”

“ I don't know what you think, Gregory. I only know that you ask me to go away and spend my money in hiding away from my enemies. Bah ! The very idea is contemptible. No ; if ever the time should come that I am discovered, it will find me ready, with squared shoulders and set nerves. I shall not ask for any mercy and shall expect to receive none. I shall die game, as I have always lived game.”

“ Forgive me, Stephen ; I can see that I have offended you.”

“ Gregory, my dear friend, I forgive you because I fear your nature is weak, and I shall therefore have to be strong for both of us. But I tell you once and for all, money, luxury, possessions are nothing to me except as a means to an end. If I felt I could work out my ambition in a garret or by the roadside I would do it on a crust of bread to eat and a cup of water to drink, with as much satisfaction as I now get out of the finest dinner and the best brands of champagne. But in this world, to succeed, one must be powerful, and there is little or no power that is unaccompanied by money. However, don't let us discuss the question further. Only

remember, if you would please me, that regret at having done certain actions and fear of their consequences is a subject that is intolerable to me."

Thus the conversation ended, but Lurgan never forgot it. Every word that had passed was branded into his brain. To the day of his death he remembered the tone of utter scorn in which Bainford addressed the words to him, and he took the greatest care never again to let his conversation dwell for a second upon any subject that could possibly suggest opposition to Bainford's schemes.

When he entered the room in response to the message sent him, he was surprised to see his friend standing with his hands behind his back, gazing out of the window in abstraction. It was a very unusual position to find him in—generally he was busily writing or reading.

When he heard Lurgan come in and close the door he turned and came towards him.

"The Remenhams have been here and have only just left. I dine with them to-night. Gregory, I intend to marry!"

"What!" Gregory started back in amazement.

"I intend to marry!" he repeated.

Lurgan tried to collect himself; the sudden shock of the words that he heard had almost paralysed his power of speech. He stammered a few unintelligible sentences, then relapsed into silence.

"I am not surprised that you are amazed at my somewhat remarkable decision, but I have long been considering the question. Lady Audrey Frobisher will make me a good wife, and, moreover, will aid my ambitions."

"Is—is it all arranged, Stephen? Am I to congratulate you?"

Bainford took another cigarette and lit it.

"No, I have not even spoken to her, but such is my conceit that I look upon the matter as settled."

A faint smile hovered on the thin lips of Lurgan. Perhaps it was suggested to his mind that there were two sides to the question. However, he said nothing.

"The grand-daughter of the Prime Minister of England will certainly be a strong support for the future."

"Stephen, there is a certain disparity of age between you. I don't mean it offensively, but you are quite old enough to be her father."

"Therefore old enough to protect and guard her with the experience of years."

"Will Lord Remenham consent?"

"I most certainly intend that he shall," was the reply.

"It's not for me, Stephen, to question the wisdom or folly of this proposition; I only hope and trust that you are weighing in your mind what a marriage of this nature means. Remember the spectre of the past that continually grins over your shoulder."

"I remember everything."

"The marriage you speak of may be an advantageous one from a political point of view. I do not question that. But, supposing you should happen to find yourself really loving your wife, will it make you happy having the knowledge of days gone by to mar the picture?"

"They are days gone by. I look only to the future."

"Is it absolutely necessary that you should marry?"

"I consider it so, and I'm going through with it."

"Very well; I can say no more, except that having set your mind on marriage, I am glad that you have made such a good choice."

Then the conversation drifted into other channels, for Lurgan did not care to continue the discussion further, as most likely he might have been tempted to say more than he should. When he got back to the privacy of his own sitting-room and turned the matter over in his mind, he could not feel anything but dismay at the prospect that opened to his far-seeing mind. It made the position doubly dangerous; for the marriage ceremony alone would bring Longford's name more than ever prominently before the public, and every illustrated paper in the kingdom would probably have a portrait of the bride and bridegroom in its pages; and besides that, every English-speaking nation

in the world would hear of the betrothal of the lovely heiress to the rising statesman. The very thought of it terrified him, and the audacity of the man amazed him. However, he knew he could do no good by argument. Things must take their course for good or ill. All he could do was to await events, and act judiciously when trouble pended.

That evening Longford dressed himself with scrupulous care, and drove to Grosvenor Place determined to please. Without being unduly conceited he knew his powers, and set himself to use them to the utmost advantage. He was received by the family with the greatest kindness and hospitality, and thoroughly enjoyed the pleasant little dinner party. The conversation turned on every conceivable subject, and he talked with great charm and interest. He related many exciting incidents in his eventful career in all parts of the world. He did not try to force his stories in any way, but told them simply and without gloss or exaggeration, and it was plain that he made a marked impression. As for young Lord Netley, he was mute with admiration, and almost determined to give up his commission in the Guards to set off round the world in search of similar adventures.

He pleased Lord Remenham because of the truly sporting instinct that was evident in every word that he uttered. He delighted the Countess because he related his stories

so well and with such humour. Lady Audrey was wrapt in silent delight and boundless wonder at this man's eventful career. It fired her imagination to such a degree that she felt herself trembling with suppressed excitement and a sense of awe that she had never known in all her life.

So delightful was the conversation that they sat for a long time over their dessert, until Lady Remenham, glancing at the clock, was amazed to see the lateness of the hour, and rose with the remark—

“ Now, Vernon, don't be long ; we cannot afford to lose a moment of Mr. Longford's time, so please be quick,” and she passed out of the room.

It was not long before the men went to the drawing-room, when Longford called upon Lady Audrey to play to him, as he was devoted to music, and she thereupon sat down at the piano and played a nocturne of Chopin, greatly to his delight. As she rose he asked her whether she had ever heard any Eastern music, and he took her place at the piano and began to sing in a most delightfully sympathetic voice to his own accompaniment, and to the boundless delight of his audience, some verses in Hindostani of such a pathetic nature that his listeners sat spellbound.

CHAPTER II.

WEAVING THE WEB.

WHEN Longford said good-bye to his host, who accompanied him to the door, he expressed his thanks for the hospitality that they all had shown him, but Lord Remenham would not have this. Longford, he said, had given them such a treat that the debt was theirs, and he only hoped that it would be increased.

As he walked across the pavement to his brougham Longford took out his cigar-case and stopped for a moment to strike a match, while the light from an electric lamp shone full upon his face. At that moment, although he knew nothing of it, Nemesis was at his side.

He was quite elated with his success at Grosvenor Place ; just as much as if he had made a telling speech in the House of Commons. He had little doubt as to the impression that he had made upon everyone, but more especially upon Lady Audrey, and he fully determined to follow up this advantage to the utmost. He could not help letting his mind dwell upon the beautiful girl as he had

seen her at dinner, listening with intense eagerness to every word as he recounted his adventures. If he could but induce her to marry him he saw the way open to the highest flights of his ambition ; but he little knew what the future had in store for him, on account of this self-same marriage so eagerly desired ; if he had, perchance he would not have been so anxious.

As he crossed to his carriage and lit the cigar another brougham passed, and its solitary occupant—a woman—suddenly caught sight of the tall figure standing under the lamp. Had he been looking that way he would have seen a white face and a pair of dark eyes gazing in astonishment at him. Directly the carriage passed she rose and requested the coachman to draw up on the near side until the other had gone by ; then he was to follow and not lose sight of it at any cost.

The man did as he was told and pulled up a little further on. The woman lifted up the little cushion that covered the small window in the back of the carriage, and kept her eyes fixed intently upon Longford's brougham. Suddenly she saw the footman close the door and swing himself up on to the seat next the coachman, and the splendid pair of horses sprang forward.

No sooner had Longford passed, than her carriage started. Up Grosvenor Place and over Piccadilly they went ; then turned into Park Lane. All the time the woman was watching the carriage in front as if she

expected every moment to see Longford open the door and jump out into the roadway. All at once the footman raised his hand as a signal that they were about to cross over, and the carriage was pulled up outside Longford's house. In another moment Longford alighted from the brougham and passed into the house, and the door closed behind him.

The whole thing was only an ordinary, trifling, everyday incident, but to the woman seated in her brougham it was most momentous, and she watched every detail with the keenest interest. When the door had closed, she gave her coachman instructions to drive to the hotel where she was staying, and as she leant back on the cushions she whispered to herself :

" At last, Stephen Bainford—at last ! I knew the time would come sooner or later. I could not be deceived, even after ten years."

When she was alone in the privacy of her own room, Blanche tried to analyse her feelings now that she had run across the one man in the world she desired to find after years of patient waiting and searching, telling herself always that her hour of triumph would eventually arrive.

The ten preceding years had been very kind to Blanche. She was now in the zenith of her beauty, and everywhere she went was admired and sought after. A beautiful widow with plenty of money can generally manage to obtain what the world calls " a good time " ; and Blanche succeeded in getting as much out of life as possible. But, although she en-

deavoured to enjoy existence, she never allowed herself to forget for one moment the dominating motive of her life. Spending the time in travelling about from one city and one country to another, she acquired a store of general knowledge, but continually kept a watchful eye open for any clue that might lead her to discover the whereabouts of the Centipede. At last, after ten years, she began to despair of ever being in a position to punish him for what she considered the great wrong done to her, when suddenly, quite by accident, she found herself face to face with him in London, where she had hardly been for more than a week at a time.

What memories this sudden meeting brought back to her. All the doings, schemes, and dangers of years gone by crowded once more to her brain, and she seemed to see herself in the old ruined city of Chittarre, and the Centipede giving her his last instructions ere she departed on some difficult mission that he was entrusting to her skill and cleverness.

She remembered the delight that the successful issue of an undertaking gave her, and the satisfaction that she felt when she received praise and thanks from the Master ; and also the feelings of terror that used to come over her as she lay awake at night while the Centipede was away on some dangerous enterprise ; and how she fancied all sorts of horrible things were happening to him. For in these matters one false step would have meant disaster or death.

They were exciting days ; yet, withal, she looked back upon them with genuine regret. She remembered only too well the time when she first began to realise that she loved the man. How eagerly she watched and waited for him, and what delight was experienced in his company ! It was when she fully understood the dominating power and wonderful strength of character he possessed that she knew he was more to her than a mere comrade. That calculating, far-seeing brain of his appealed intensely to her, while his invariable courteous and kindly treatment made her feel that it was impossible to live without him.

Then came the crushing, humiliating blow when she declared her love, and, again, the bitter feeling that all the great services rendered to him were of no account and of no further use, and that therefore she could shift for herself ; and last, but not least, the refusal to allow her to leave the palace or the city. All these details turned the woman's love to hate, and the very thought of them added fuel to the flame of her resentment against him.

But now Fate had brought them together at last. For every moment's humiliation that he had caused her to suffer, she would make him pay a hundredfold.

To-morrow, yes, to-morrow, she would set about it. The lust of hate was upon her, and nothing entered her mind but the desire to be completely revenged.

For hours she lay awake ; but at last she fell

asleep and dreamed that she was back in Chittarre and the Centipede was standing before her as at their last meeting, while she stood pointing her pistol at his head, fully intending to kill him ; when, suddenly, she awoke to find the sun streaming into her window and the day of the beginning of vengeance at hand.

To stimulate her revenge, she recalled once more the events that had occurred after the Centipede left her at Chittarre.

When she had come to herself after the action of the drug had subsided, she had felt extremely weak and not a little hungry, and she had therefore summoned Mir Ali.

From him she learnt that she had fallen insensible directly after she had shot at the Centipede, and had lain in a state of coma, as it were, for two days.

"I wish to know," she said, "what has occurred to me while I have been ill. The last thing that I remember was that I spoke with the Master."

But Mir Ali was extremely cautious as to his reply, and asked that the Mem-sahib would remain quiet while he went to fetch her some food ; and on his return with a well-stocked tray he answered her question as she ate.

"The Mem-sahib spoke truly," said the imperturbable servant. "On a sudden a faintness overcame her, so that she fell at the feet of the Master. For two days there came not a sign of return to consciousness. The Master himself tried to bring the Mem-sahib round, but not

being able to wait, he bade thy servant do all that was well for the Mem-sahib and to guide her from the city across the desert."

"Then the Master hath gone away from Chittarre for ever?"

"Yes, for ever."

"Where to?"

"Thy servant hath no knowledge."

"Who went with him?"

"The Sahib Lurgan."

"Ah!" The little word was said with so much intensity of feeling that it conveyed only too well the depth of the anger that possessed her mind.

Well remembering that when she was about to fire at the Centipede they were in the chamber occupied by Featherstone, she was now surprised to find herself in the one that she usually slept in when at the palace. She knew that it was of little use to endeavour to gain any further information from Mir Ali, for she was aware how carefully the man had been trained in his duties, and especially that of discretion in answering questions. However, she desired him to inform her what had become of Featherstone, and was told that he had been very ill, but was now a trifle better. As Mir Ali was obviously not inclined to be communicative, she dismissed him, and lay down upon the bed to obtain some sleep. After a while, she awoke and felt that a walk in the air would do her good, and she therefore proceeded to make her way to the terrace with the intention

of descending the steps and walking in the market square.

As she passed through the audience-chamber she noticed that Mir Ali and Ram Lal were busily engaged in packing all the ornaments and rugs preparatory to their removal. The whole place was dismantled, and the floor and tables littered with the dried grass that the men were using in their work.

The unusual sight gave her a foreboding that the end of all things, so far as her connection with Chittarre was concerned, was at hand. She was deeply affected, for the place was very dear to her ; so many happy hours had she spent within its ancient walls that she looked upon it as home, and it was with genuine regret that she watched the removal of all the beautiful articles from the cabinets and walls.

As she passed through the room, she spoke to Mir Ali.

" Oh ! Mir Ali, is not this a sad occupation for you ? "

" The Mem-sahib speaks truly. It is grief and sadness indeed to us. But it is not given to thy servants to question the commands of the Master, only to obey. But, Mem-sahib, thy servant would earnestly beseech that thou goest no further than the terrace."

" Why not, Mir Ali ? There is no danger."

" There is the danger that it is against the Master's command. We, thy servants, were to see that the Mem-sahib doth on no account

leave the palace for six days from the day that the Master departed."

"I don't understand what you mean. Do you tell me that I am to be kept a prisoner here in this palace, and to be prevented from even walking in the city?"

"Even so, Mem-sahib; it is the command of the Master."

"Then I will defy you to prevent me. I shall do exactly as it pleases me."

With that, she stepped out on the terrace, her decided intention being of asserting her authority; but she had, unfortunately for her, to deal with two men whose loyalty and devotion to their master knew no bounds, and who would gladly have laid down their lives for him; therefore, having been commanded to prevent this woman leaving the palace, they were going to carry out his orders at the risk of any displeasure or violence on the part of Blanche.

Before she had time to gain the first step she found one man on each side of her.

"Mem-sahib, we would implore consideration of our warning. We have no desire to use our strength against you; but it is your servants' firm intention to prevent our master's commands being disobeyed."

Blanche turned on the man like a tigress. She possessed the courage of a strong man and knew nothing of fear. She had faced difficulties of a like nature on more than one occasion, but the insult which she considered she was being subjected to was more than she could bear.

"Mir Ali, I warn you ; I will have no interference with my liberty. Stand aside."

"Your servants have no wish to harm you in any way, Mem-sahib, or to prevent you doing anything, other than this. But we must obey our master. That is all."

"Well, I absolutely refuse. I am going to leave the palace and the city at once, and I defy either of you to prevent me."

With that she drew from her dress the small revolver she always carried, then took two or three steps down the staircase.

In a moment the men were upon her, and she instantly levelled the pistol at Mir Ali and pulled the trigger, only to find that the cartridges had been extracted. Then she realised at once that she was entirely in their power. Without further argument, they seized her in their strong arms and bore her furious and fighting to her room, where they proceeded to lock her in.

Like a mad woman she raved about the room and struck with her clenched fists against the ebony panels, and shrieked out threats of revenge ; but it was as nothing to the two servants. All they desired was to carry out the duties that they had been set to perform, and went calmly back to their work of packing, just as if nothing whatever had occurred. Hour after hour they toiled on, until at last Ram Lal went away to prepare the evening meal for Blanche ; and when it was ready the men both went with it, in case she should do any harm.

But Blanche had tired herself out, and now saw that discretion was the better part of valour ; so she set herself the task of trying to conciliate Mir Ali, saying that she did not intend he should be put to any more trouble on her account. The man said nothing in reply, only placed the tray on the table and departed, after again locking the door, leaving Blanche to her own thoughts, which were none of the pleasantest ; for, by this time, she was beginning to be anxious as to what were the Centipede's real intentions towards her, and whether he meant that she should be kept there permanently as a prisoner. But she would soon prove that she was quite capable of getting away, even though she was only a woman.

The window of her room opened on to what remained of a balcony, with four marble columns that once supported a domed roof, of which, however, only a portion now existed. This balcony overhung a plateau of rock some fifteen to twenty feet below ; and Blanche made up her mind that she would reach this plateau with the aid of a rope-ladder contrived out of the sheets and blankets from the bed. No sooner had she decided what to do than she set to work, but she found it a more difficult task than she anticipated, for it took her the whole of one day to tear the sheets into strips and tie them together strongly enough to bear her weight. The next day was spent in knotting on the rung-lengths, and by the evening of the second day her task was

accomplished. When she thought it safe, she went out on to the balcony and dropped the ladder over to see if it was of sufficient length to reach the plateau ; and, having found that it was, she hid it away, so that when darkness came on she could make it fast to one of the four pillars in readiness for the descent.

It was her intention at the first sign of day to make her exit from the palace, and get away before Mir Ali and Ram Lal should miss her. When they came to her room with the lamp and her evening meal they found her seated in a chair with a book upon her knee.

Before Mir Ali left the room he looked carefully around, but made no remark as he once more turned the key in the lock.

She only ate a portion of the food that was brought to her, as she felt that it was necessary to carry some of it with her, so that she might not lose strength during the long journey through the jungle and over the desert, which had to be performed on foot.

She slept fitfully in her chair for a few hours, and then waited patiently for the sound of the wind that heralds the sudden rush of dawn.

All at once she heard it coming across the jungle ; and, stepping out on the balcony, she watched the glorious sight as day broke like a flash of lightning, and the grim old city turned suddenly from darkest purple to green and gold.

Now was the time to take her departure. She carefully tested the tying of the rope-ladder around the column, and returned to the room

to fetch the parcel of food that she had put up ; then she climbed on to the balustrade, and began to descend with the utmost caution. It was an extremely difficult undertaking, and one that necessitated a very considerable amount of pluck and determination ; for the ladder swayed about in the most alarming manner, and she never knew for a moment whether it would bear her weight. She did not dare to look down, or she felt she would most certainly fall and probably break her neck. She shut her eyes and hoped for the best. At last she felt she had descended almost to the plateau, and she therefore steeled her nerves sufficiently to look down, and noticed that she was by this time only about six feet from the ground. This urged her to further efforts, and in a very few minutes she was able to place her feet on the firm ground.

But she had no sooner done so than she felt herself suddenly seized and a pocket handkerchief placed over her nose and mouth, and she remembered nothing more until she came to her senses with a racking headache and a terrible feeling of nausea and weakness.

On gazing around, she discovered to her great astonishment that she was in bed in a strange room. Everything she saw was entirely English, and she knew that it was a bungalow. Seated at her bedside, busily occupied in some needlework, was an elderly lady, with a pleasant, kindly face and iron-grey hair. Blanche fixed her eyes upon her

and the lady rose to her feet as she noticed that her patient had recovered consciousness.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Have I been ill?"

"Yes, my dear," answered the lady. "Very ill. Your native servants brought you here this morning. This is my husband's bungalow; he is the English doctor of Jodphur. They told us you had been ill for about two days, and that becoming frightened because you did not recover, they brought you here in a doolhy. But, my dear, I'm not going to allow you to talk. You must try and rest quietly. I will go and prepare something for you to eat, then you must try and get some sleep."

"Thank you very much for your kindness—but I do feel sorry that you have been put to so much trouble."

"My dear, we are only too pleased to be of service. It is lucky that your bearers brought you here, as my husband has been rather concerned as to the reason of your unconscious state; but he will be pleased to hear that you have come round again. You will very soon get quite well. Now rest quietly until I return."

With that the speaker left the room; and Blanche set herself to think out what it all meant. How did she get here? The whole affair was most mysterious, and the more she thought of it the more extraordinary it seemed. She remembered perfectly well climbing down the ladder, and being seized by someone when

she reached the ground ; but after that her mind was a total blank.

Could it be possible that Mir Ali and Ram Lal had drugged and brought her all the way through the jungle and over the desert to Jodphur, and set her down at the doctor's bungalow with the intention of getting rid of her ? As she thought it out, the more certain did she become that this was the case. Anyway, she had one thing to be thankful for, and that was that she still lived, and was out of the city and the clutches of Mir Ali. Now, the first thing she must do was to get well and make her way back to Calcutta with all possible speed.

But the question arose—how was she to act ? It would seem so peculiar having no clothes or trunks or anything necessary for her use, save some money and her return ticket to Calcutta, which she had taken in case she missed Featherstone when she followed him up. Anyway, when her hostess returned, she would ask for her trunks, and express surprise when she was informed that she had none.

At that moment the stranger entered with a tray of food, which she set before Blanche, who was quite prepared to do justice to it. Afterwards she told her kind hostess how much better she felt ; then asked what had become of her luggage.

“ It is most surprising. Your servants said they would go back to the railway-station and fetch your boxes ; this was quite six hours ago, and they have not returned.”

"That really is most annoying. I don't know what I shall do."

"Well, you must not worry. Very likely they will come before long. Now try to go to sleep again ; then you will wake up to-morrow quite well. I will leave you for the present."

Soon after the door was closed, Blanche fell asleep, and awoke in the morning feeling perfectly well. As she dressed, she worked out in her mind a plausible little story to account for her being ill. She would say that she was going to join a friend at Lahore and would have to seek her luggage at the station. Both the doctor and his wife treated her with the utmost kindness ; and when she left an hour or two later she thanked them with all her heart for the goodness they had shown her. When she found herself alone, she made for the station and took the first train that would put her on her way to Calcutta, where in due course she arrived, hot, tired, and travel-stained. She drove straight to her rooms and went to bed, thankful enough to find herself safe at home.

About a fortnight later she met Featherstone driving. He was looking a perfect wreck. She stopped him and asked where he had been hiding himself of late. He replied that he had been away on business, but unfortunately had been taken ill with fever, and was obliged to return without accomplishing the object he had set out to achieve.

She longed to ask him how he got away from Chittarre, and whether Mir Ali had treated

him in the same manner as he had treated her. She tried to question him discreetly, but could get nothing out of him.

When she arrived at her home in Calcutta she found a letter awaiting her, which stated that a sum of money had been invested in India Stock in her name that would produce a good income, and that the dividends would be paid to her account at her bank as they fell due.

At first she felt she could not touch the money, as she well knew the source whence it came ; but she soon saw that it would be very foolish to be squeamish over the matter, and made up her mind to make her life as pleasant as possible with its aid, all the while keeping one end in view, namely, the finding of the Centipede.

Soon after this she began to travel about from one country to another, until she became a confirmed globe-trotter. First she went to Australia and stayed for months in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Melbourne, keeping her eyes and ears open for any sign of the man she so desired to meet with.

After remaining a year in Australia, she visited America, Japan, and China ; then returned to Europe, where she spent her time in moving from one place to another, wintering in Paris, Monte Carlo, and San Remo, and making Trouville and Dieppe her headquarters in the summer, with an occasional month in Switzerland.

Her visits to London were few and far between. Occasionally, she would make her way

there and spend a fortnight at the Grand or the Carlton, in the spring ; but something seemed to tell her that she would never meet the Centipede there, but rather on the Continent.

Of course, she read the English papers very carefully, and the name of Longford must have often come before her ; but she never realised that there was any connection between the politician and her enemy. She never thought that he would have the audacity to live in England, much less to climb the ladder of fame in that country. Anyway, it was not until after ten years that she had suddenly run against him ; at once she would begin to find out something about him, and to weave her net around him, that she might punish him as he deserved.

She summoned her maid early, and sent her to secure some reference-books ; and over her tea proceeded to see what these works had to say about the owner of the house which she had seen Longford enter the night before, and which she remembered to be No. 28, Park Lane. First, she turned up Park Lane in the Court Guide, and ran her finger down the page until she came to No. 28, and then to her amazement found Stephen Longford, M.P. She at once turned up Longford in another work, and found that he was a well-known politician and was unmarried. His town residence was 28, Park Lane, and his country seat Feversham Place, Berkshire.

Armed with this information, Blanche set herself to devise her plan. There was no hurry ;

she knew what the consequences were likely to be if he discovered anything of her scheme ; therefore, it behoved her to act with the utmost caution, to calculate every move. After due consideration, she decided that it would be best to take a furnished house. After a considerable search, she found a little house suitable for her purposes in Queen Street, Mayfair, and entered into an agreement to take it for at least one year.

Then she set about obtaining good servants, and by the end of the following week she took possession, and the vendetta commenced in good earnest.

She made herself thoroughly acquainted with every detail of Longford's political career, and even obtained tickets for the Ladies' Gallery in the House when he was likely to speak. In the mornings she would betake herself to the Park, and watch his house from a seat, and on many occasions she saw both Longford and Lurgan enter and leave the place.

She read the papers diligently day by day, and kept records of all that she discovered—the houses he had dined at, the " At Homes " he attended, and the thousand and one trifling incidents in the life of a man whose name is continually before the public. She was anxious to find out who were his friends and the people he visited most, and of late she had discovered that he was very often at Grosvenor Place. There was no dinner party, dance, or reception there but his name was certain to

be among the guests. She made very cautious enquiries as to Lord Remenham and his family, and when she learnt that there was a very beautiful daughter, she began to appreciate the meaning of the growing intimacy between Longford and the family at Grosvenor Place.

Once or twice she saw him driving in the Park with the Lady Audrey and her mother, and she could not help seeing what this meant. The very thought that he was probably in love with this beautiful young girl intensified her bitter feelings; but whereas her anger hitherto had been that of a scorned woman, it was becoming that of a jealous woman—a far more blind and implacable hate. The first time she realised what it meant she betook herself to her home and became a prey to deep despondency. She knew well enough that with all her intensity of feeling she still loved Longford, and that if he would only come to her and ask for forgiveness all would be well. But she knew in her heart of hearts that it never could be. The Centipede's nature never altered—the Book was closed.

A fortnight passed and the season was at its height. One day she opened the *Morning Post* and glanced down its columns, and suddenly her heart seemed to stop, for she read—

“A marriage has been arranged between Mr. Stephen Longford, M.P., and Lady Audrey Villiers-Frobisher, only daughter of Lord Remenham. We understand that the wedding will take place at the end of July.”

CHAPTER III.

THE MARRIAGE TAKES PLACE.

No sooner did the news of Lady Audrey's engagement to Longford become public property than they were inundated with letters of congratulation both from persons known and unknown to them.

The news came as a great surprise ; the world of fashion wondered how such a charmingly beautiful girl could possibly give her hand to a man obviously old enough to be her father, especially as it had for so long been expecting to hear of her engagement to some youthful peer or peer's son. In fact, it was with quite a shock that the announcement was received. Not that Stephen Longford was considered otherwise than a good catch—indeed, he was rich, clever, and a rising public man, but the world had expected a different alliance for Lord Remenham's daughter, and was a little disappointed.

However, Lord and Lady Remenham were extremely pleased, although a younger Longford might have been preferable, but

they knew that their daughter would be married to a man capable of proving a kind and devoted husband, and one who might be trusted to protect and care for his wife. Lady Remenham's father was delighted at the engagement, for he looked upon Longford as his particular protégé, and he did not forget to show to all and sundry his satisfaction at the match.

As for Lady Audrey, her devotion knew no bounds. The days of the engagement were halcyon ones indeed for both of them. Stephen allowed himself to relax his Parliamentary duties very considerably, and devoted every spare moment to his fiancée. Arrangements were made that the wedding should take place at the end of July, it being now the middle of May. Yet time was short, and there was a great deal to be done. The Countess and her daughter found their hours well occupied.

Stephen Longford was quite content. He was now enjoying the one really peaceful and happy period of his existence. Possessed of everything that is supposed to make people happy, he felt that in a very few weeks he would be in a position to plant his feet firmly on the higher rungs of the Ladder of Ambition with every chance of reaching the top in safety. He was in love, too, a fact which surprised him not a little, for he always told himself that, though he liked the society of women, yet there was not one born who could

affect him in the way that he so often saw other men affected.

But it was true that he now found himself lonely, and always anxious to be in Audrey's society. She charmed and delighted him. Her frank open nature, so sincere and kindly in its innocent enjoyment of trifles that are generally ignored or laughed at by the majority of women, appealed to him with the greatest force. She was so utterly unlike others he was in the habit of meeting that his heart opened to her, and he thanked the kindly fate that had chosen such a partner for his future.

Whenever she had time he took her about with him, and together they searched for interesting and curious things to add to the collection at Park Lane, and he found pleasure in watching her as she made her purchases. Yes, Stephen Longford was in love; he knew it and wondered.

One beautiful morning towards the end of May, he called at Grosvenor Place for the purpose of taking Lady Audrey and her mother in his car to see Feversham Place, which would be his wife's future country home. It pleased him to notice the delight of Lady Audrey when the car was stopped on the summit of a high hill and they could look down over the woods, catching a glimpse of the lovely old Jacobean house nestling in its wealth of trees and gardens in the centre of the beautiful undulating Park, studded with

superb elms, beeches, and oaks, whose antiquity was demonstrated by the immense girth of their trunks. Fine herds of fallow-deer browsed contentedly on the green sward and amongst the young bracken, while the warm shadows chased one another across the distant woods and hills, clothed from base to summit in tenderest green.

Almost at their feet lay the picturesque old village, at the end of which could be seen the lodge and the avenue of magnificent limes that reached for over half a mile from the gates. Through the Park meandered a broad stream that eventually widened into an ornamental water, at whose edge it was possible to distinguish lovely old walled gardens.

It was a most beautiful picture of a delightful English home ; far removed from the dust, noise, and bustle of great cities, the toilings, strivings, and strugglings of money-makers and schemers, away from the grim poverty and the garish fierce light of modern fashions and amusements, just resting, calmly and peacefully as it had rested for hundreds of changing years, embowered in its wealth of verdant green—a lasting relic of bygone ages.

Lady Audrey's pleasure was spontaneous and genuine. As he related the history of the place from the date of its building, with all its adversities and stress of time and circumstance, she listened with rapt attention, every word sinking deeply into her heart. She had

the greatest affection for the country, and with such a home for her own, saw visions of happiness and halcyon days opening out before her.

To Longford this girl's pure pleasure in the beauties and joys of life was a thing of great wonder. He was so accustomed to almost every phase in the changeful mood of existence that it needed violence of action, great danger, or intense emotion to impress excitement and novelty upon his satiated mind, and the meeting with such a sweet, unaffected, and loyal nature as Audrey's touched the finer chords of his character.

After they had gazed for a few minutes with interest and admiration upon the beautiful and peaceful scene, he started the car once more, and, in a very short space they were passing through the village and had entered the handsome wrought-iron gates, passed the pretty half-timbered lodge standing in its little garden of spring flowers and shrubs, and were bowling along the broad, well-kept carriage drive under the branching arches of the limes dressed all in their luxuriance of tender luscious green. As the car raced along, the browsing deer lifted their heads to gaze in amazement at the strange machine that flew so quickly by, then trotted off to a safe distance and turned once more to watch them.

Over a broad stone bridge that spanned the little river they careered, then passed a splendid pair of moss-covered stone gate

pillars and into another beautiful drive, flanked on each side with quaintly-cut yew hedges, when a sudden turn brought them opposite the house.

No more charming picture could be imagined than that presented by the wonderful old place, with its tall brick chimneys, long moss-covered roofs, quaintly-designed, leaded windows, and deep, broad, low doors, the whole standing out against a splendid group of rugged elms that formed a fitting background to the picturesque creeper-clad old house, one of the most perfect specimens of Jacobean architecture in England. All around the building was a broad stone-flagged terrace with steps leading down to most exquisitely kept lawns, upon which magnificent cedars spread their graceful branches over the sward with beautiful effect and luxuriance. A lichen-covered sun-dial stood upon a mound surrounded by clipped box-hedges, while on every side were beds filled with flowers of every possible species, and neatly-kept gravel paths branching away to distant parts of the garden.

Beyond glistened the waters of the lake, and in the distance, across the Park, rose the wooded hills, over which the shadows passed in patches of purple and gold.

Longford escorted them into the house, where they were received by the butler and housekeeper, to whom Audrey endeared herself at once by her sweet and unassuming kindness.

The interior of the Place was quite as delightful as the exterior. The furniture and general appointments were all Jacobean of the most perfect type. Every chair, table, and cabinet was unique of its kind. Infinite care had been taken to make the whole collection correspond with the house, and the result left nothing to be desired.

After luncheon Longford showed them over the house and took them to the rooms once occupied by James I., with the great four-post bedsteads, tapestried walls, and arched fireplaces. They explored every nook and corner, and even went into the huge stone-flagged kitchen with its black oak roof supported by pillars.

After visiting the stables, they walked over the Park to the home farm. Here they inspected the fine herd of Jerseys, of which Longford was extremely proud. Once more they returned to the house and took tea in the most charming of octagon rooms upstairs, having a delightful view across the gardens and lake, with the hills beyond. This room Longford promised should be Audrey's own boudoir, and she was at once to set about making any alterations that she liked.

At last it was time to set off, and the party very reluctantly entered the car and bade farewell to the delights of Feversham Place for a time. That night the Countess told her husband what a really perfect place Longford owned. No one had ever heard him speak

of his possessions before, and they both congratulated themselves again on the excellent match that their daughter was making.

The weeks went by very quickly for Lady Audrey and Longford, but not so for Blanche. She was quite overcome by the news of Stephen's engagement, and for some days had been unable to do anything ; but at last it began to dawn on her that it was time a move was made in the scheme that she was to work out.

Being a very attractive and accomplished woman, she soon found herself moving in a good set in London. Her one aim and object was to get an introduction to young Lord Netley, of whom she had learnt everything she desired to know, and she contrived that before many weeks had passed she was on very friendly terms with a young subaltern named Courtenay, who was in the same battalion of the Grenadier Guards as Lord Netley, and who, in fact, was his great chum. She met him at a mutual friend's house at dinner and often afterwards, but she was quite clever enough to make no mention of Netley whatever.

One day she sent out invitations for a small dinner party at her little house in Queen Street, to take place the following week.

On the day before the event she wrote a nice little note to Courtenay, telling him that she was in a really terrible fix. She had invited four men and four women, but one of

her men had disappointed her at the last moment. Would he think it awfully rude of her if she asked him to bring a nice man with him, as she did not know anyone that she cared to invite?

By return there came a letter from Courtenay saying that he was always glad to help her, and that his chum Lord Netley would be only too pleased to fill the breach. Blanche was delighted at the success of her manœuvre.

For ten years she had gone by the name of Mrs. Baxter, and since her arrival in Queen Street her dinner parties were beginning to be well known, for she had an excellent cook and was herself an extremely good hostess.

She tore up Courtenay's note and smiled to herself as she realised that she had netted the first strand of the web that she fully hoped was to entangle Longford in its meshes.

The next day she set herself to prepare for the evening's entertainment, and determined that this little dinner should prove to be the best that she had ever given.

At last the hour arrived when it became necessary for her to dress, and in due course she stood waiting in her pretty little drawing-room, arrayed in a costume of black, a triumph of Worth's art, with a small diamond tiara on her waving black hair and a dainty diamond necklace encircling her beautiful white neck. Blanche was confident in her beauty as well as her wits, and felt pretty sure that she would

have this young Netley at her feet before many weeks were gone, and then——

A knock at the door, and in a few minutes she found herself talking to her guests and listening anxiously for the arrival of Courtenay and his friend. They were the last to arrive, and as Lord Netley was introduced to her she gave him her hand and told him how pleased she was to see him, and made him feel thoroughly at home.

Dinner was at once announced, and Lord Netley took in his hostess, who set to work to make herself extremely agreeable. In a very few minutes the young fellow was congratulating himself that he had accepted the invitation. The dinner was a perfect success, and everyone enjoyed themselves thoroughly. After coffee had been served, hansom's were requisitioned, and the party betook themselves to the "Gaiety," Lord Netley accompanying Blanche and sitting next to her at the theatre.

When the play was over they drove to the "Savoy" to supper. Lord Netley was flattered and pleased by the kindness of his charming hostess, and found time to tell Courtenay that he thought her perfectly delightful. Under the influence of the gaiety of the party and the general success of her entertainment, Blanche looked wonderfully handsome, and by the end of supper young Netley, who ate little but kept his glass replenished, had sworn eternal friendship.

At last the party broke up, and he and

Courtenay drove her back to Queen Street. As she said good-bye at the door he softly pressed her hand and asked that he might be allowed to call, to which she replied she would be pleased to see him whenever he liked to come.

Later, as her maid brushed her beautiful black hair, she thought over the evening, and was well pleased with the result. It now needed only very careful management on her part to make Lady Audrey's brother in love with her and become her slave ; after that— Anyway, the affair had made a good start.

Three days later, Courtenay and Lord Netley came to tea, and proposed that Blanche should dine with them at the Carlton that night and go to the theatre. Needless to say she accepted.

Very soon they became on the most friendly terms ; before many weeks had passed Lord Netley was at Queen Street every day, and it was plain to see that he was devoted to her. Days up the river alone with her only made matters worse, until the little affair began to be the talk of the regiment, and at last it was whispered abroad that there was no doubt Lord Netley would marry Mrs. Baxter.

In the meantime July was passing away, and the wedding day of Lady Audrey was very near at hand. The ceremony, which was to take place at St. Margaret's, Westminster, attracted unusual attention. All the

world of fashion was invited, and the society papers were full of the event. Presents poured in ; royalty wrote autograph letters and sent handsome gifts. The trousseau was a thing of beauty, and the twelve bridesmaids were all excitement over their dresses. Milliners, furriers, jewellers, dress-makers, were continually at Grosvenor Place, until Lord Remenham could stand it no longer, and betook himself to Cowes for a week's quiet yachting, promising to return a few days before the ceremony, to see that all was in order.

Meanwhile, Blanche saw Lord Netley every day, and he, in the innocence of his heart, related to her all the doings at Grosvenor Place and kept on extolling Longford to her, which served no better purpose than to increase her longing for revenge. She determined that she would be present to see the wedding at all costs, and therefore asked Lord Netley to get her a card of admission to the church, as all he had told her had been of such great interest that she felt she must see the ceremony. Of course he promised that a card should be sent to her, but she made him undertake that he would not speak to her during the service.

At last the day arrived, and a crowd waited in Parliament Square all the morning, while the police had their work cut out to keep the people in order.

Longford, immaculately dressed and looking

as handsome, calm, and collected as ever, arrived early at the church with his best man, Lurgan, and they stopped for a few minutes chatting with friends.

Nearly all the members of the House of Commons known to him were there, for he was extremely popular on both sides of the House, and one and all had a kindly word for him and the best of wishes.

The church was packed from chancel to door with a beautifully-dressed and deeply interested crowd, while Blanche sat trembling with suppressed excitement in a seat whence she could see the whole of the ceremony.

As she watched the tall figure that stood so calmly waiting for Lady Audrey, there was a sudden stir of excitement, and it was whispered that the bride was coming.

First came the choir, then Lord Remenham with Lady Audrey on his arm, slightly pale but looking most beautiful in her exquisite dress. The eyes of Blanche fixed like those of a snake upon the delicate, aristocratic face.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

The words burnt like coals of fire into Blanche's very soul. Suddenly something seemed to snap in her brain, and with a low cry she fell forward on to the back of the seat before her. Lurgan, who happened to look round, caught sight of the face that he had so long dreaded to see, and all the blood in his body seemed to rush to his brain as he did so.

Raised by a few willing hands, Blanche was conveyed to the door, and, recovering herself in a few minutes, left the church and was driven back to her house.

So the wedding passed off satisfactorily to everyone concerned except Blanche and Lurgan. The latter suffered the most, for the sudden glimpse he had caught of the woman he so much dreaded left him in a state of the greatest mental depression. He had always feared her, and now something warned him that her presence at Longford's wedding boded no good to their security.

But Lurgan did not wish to disturb Longford just at this time. He would keep the affair in his own heart for the present, but he must watch and wait events, for there would be no peace while this woman was near them. However, there was no use regretting what had been done, so he saw them depart on their honeymoon without making any mention of the matter to his friend.

It was an unhappy day for him. It meant the severance of their daily intercourse. It meant another life to be considered, and it meant, more than all, a pure, loving, and gentle soul to be guarded from the grief and sorrow that seemed almost inevitable. Lurgan resigned himself to the change because he knew the Master had set his heart upon it, and, moreover, because during the engagement he had seen a good deal of Lady Audrey, and had learned to recognise the great beauty

and sweetness of her character, and it was torment to him when he thought that some day perchance she would have to learn the bitterest of truths concerning the man to whom she had given her heart, and who realised, for her, all that was best and worthiest in life.

Longford and his bride went on their steam yacht to pass their honeymoon in Norway, and afterwards to cruise around the British Isles.

Lurgan stayed in London for a day or two after the wedding, then departed to Feversham Place, where he set himself to continue his literary work.

In August, Blanche left London for Trouville for a month, and before many days had passed Lord Netley obtained leave, and followed her. Unfortunately for them, one of the Countess's great friends happened to be staying in the same place, and, with no unfriendly intention, chronicled the event in a letter to a mutual acquaintance, giving an account of Netley's devotion to a pretty woman, who was evidently a person of curious habits, staying alone without any chaperon. In due course this news reached the ears of Lady Remenham, who was not a little concerned. She was staying in Scotland at the time, and, as was her wont, flew to correspondence, inditing a long letter to Lady Audrey, who was cruising off the coast of Cornwall.

The young bride was naturally very much concerned on receiving the letter, for, well knowing her brother's impressionable and almost weak disposition, she was frightened lest he should be inveigled into a scandal by this woman.

She showed her mother's letter to her husband, who was much annoyed that she should have been troubled by the news, and promised that he would see Netley himself and enquire into the matter when he got back to town, and if possible, induce him to see wisdom and break with the lady.

This quite consoled her. She was perfectly satisfied to put her arm through that of her husband and rely on his strength of will and judgment to save her brother from trouble. In due course it became necessary to leave the yacht, and they then made Feversham Place their headquarters for the shooting, and Stephen sent an invitation to Netley, who managed to get a week's leave to help shoot the birds on his brother-in-law's estate.

The young Guardsman found himself, on a delightful September morning, seated in a Great Western train *en route* for Feversham, a small wayside station.

In due course the train pulled up at Feversham station, and he alighted with his baggage to find Lady Audrey waiting for him in a smart little dog-cart and with half a dozen dogs eagerly looking for their departure. The brother and sister were

delighted to see one another again, and after the former had seen his luggage stowed away in the spring cart that followed, he took his place beside his sister and they started off with great barkings from their canine escort.

They bowled along at a splendid pace until they reached the village, when they turned in at the gates and passed along the avenue.

Lord Netley was loud in his admiration of the beauties of the Place.

"By Jove, Audrey!" he said, "I had no idea you had such a stunning place."

"Wait a little until you have seen it all, then you can tell me what you think of it."

Longford was out, and did not appear until lunch, when he greeted his brother-in-law warmly.

The remainder of the day was occupied by the brother and sister in wandering round the estate.

But Lord Netley was not at ease. There was something weighing on his mind, some trouble that Longford knew was worrying him very much, but he was too wise a man to say anything until a favourable opportunity occurred.

It happened that on the third morning Longford noticed that Netley received a letter which seemed to agitate him extremely. Directly after breakfast he went out on to the terrace and began pacing up and down in thought, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

Longford watched him from the window for some time, then passed out with a cigarette between his lips and stood looking over the garden, and as his brother-in-law came towards him he spoke.

"Well, Netley, what's the trouble? You look as if you wished you'd never been born."

"Oh, thanks, there's nothing wrong with me."

"Ah! but, my dear chap, I know there is. Come into my study and have a chat."

He thereupon led the way into his own particular room. Here he pushed over a large easy chair and produced a box of cigars.

"Now then, out with it; what's the matter? I am your brother, and have a right to help you."

"Thanks very much," replied the young man rather haughtily, "I am not going to bother you with my troubles."

"Then you have troubles? I was afraid so. Now let me assist you to get out of them. I am a man of the world, you know. I've been through a good deal, and, God knows, if I'd had a real friend I might have been saved a vast amount of sorrow. You know I shall respect anything you tell me. For my wife's sake as well as yours, what is it? Money?"

"Partly. But there—what's the use of saying anything about it? I've no right to ask you to help me, I got into the mess myself, and I shall have to get out of it myself."

" Bosh ! How much ? "

" More than I can ever hope to pay."

" Very likely. But how much is it ? "

" Over three thousand pounds. I know you think me a young fool, Longford, and I know I deserve to be kicked out of the service, and probably shall be."

" My dear boy, don't talk nonsense ! You are no greater fool than hundreds of other young fellows. This thing will teach you a lesson that will last you a lifetime. I've been through it all. The purchase of experience is always a costly job. It's the man who profits by it that is to be admired. Now you owe three thousand pounds. To whom ? You need not tell me if you don't wish to, but I am to be trusted. I'm going to settle your debts for you, and you will give me half your income in repayment. Afterwards you will honour yourself more than you have ever done before. Now, Netley, make a clean breast of it, and to-morrow will see you a happy man."

" Longford, you're too good to me. I'm utterly miserable, and I know well enough what a fool I've been. I'll remember this for the rest of my life."

" I know you will. Now let me hear who it is to whom you owe all this money."

Netley produced a notebook and a letter, informing him that Herbert De Vere Estcourt, whose real name was Simeon Davis, of 14, Burlington Court, W., hereby gave

Lord Netley notice that it was his intention to issue a writ for £2,000 capital and £800 interest unless the amount was repaid within the space of one week.

"Well, that one is easily settled. Now what about the remainder?"

"That hurts me worse than any. It's a loan from a friend."

"That's bad. £1,000, eh? What's his name?"

"I hardly dare tell you, Longford."

"Come, don't hide anything from me. I wish to help you."

"It's a woman."

"Oh!"

"Yes, one of the best in the world. I'm awfully fond of her, and God knows I wouldn't hurt a hair of her head. That's what makes me so miserable."

"And her name?"

"Mrs. Baxter."

"Where does she live? My solicitors will repay her in your name."

"27, Queen Street, Mayfair," answered the young man with crimson face. "But, Longford, she's a really good sort, and has helped me out of this mess as much as she could. I'd do anything for her."

"Even marry her?"

"Yes," answered the boy without hesitation.

"Now look here, my boy, if I help you in this matter I want you to promise me one thing, and I know that when you have given

your promise you will faithfully keep it, and that is, that you will not write to this lady or see her for one month from this date without my consent. I don't know her ; she may be all that is desirable, but my knowledge of the world has taught me the value of caution. Will you promise me ? ”

“ I'm bound to, Longford, although it is greatly against my happiness.”

Longford crossed over to the chair where the young fellow sat and placed his hand kindly upon his shoulder.

“ Netley, old boy, I have a great affection for you, greater than you think ; you are a good fellow, and you will be guided by me. Don't marry until you find someone in your own set—someone that you can take to your people with pride. God knows, enough pain and suffering are caused by ill-assorted marriages ; they make the lives of men and women Hell, and nothing else. Now don't you think anything more of this affair. You've given me your promise, and I know that you will keep it. To-morrow I settle your debts as I said. Now go and see your sister.”

Netley took Longford's hand and thanked him with all his heart, and then passed out on to the terrace.

Longford wrote out a telegram and rang for a servant to take it.

The next morning he left by an early train before the others were up, reached his

solicitors' office at ten, and instructed them to settle with the money-lender.

After that he drove to his bankers, and cashed his draft for two thousand pounds, and thence he took a cab to 27, Queen Street, Mayfair.

As he descended from the hansom and rang the bell, he felt most unaccountably nervous. A smart maid opened the door and ushered him up into the drawing-room.

"Mrs. Baxter will be down in a minute."

Standing on the hearthrug, he looked about him at the evidences of excellent taste on every hand, and he noticed a panel portrait of Netley in full uniform standing on a small table in a prominent position.

There were numerous photos of the young man on the mantelpiece, and he took up one and was gazing at it, when he heard the door open, which was hidden behind some curtains, and the sound of the frou-frou of silk skirts caught his ear. Now he was to see what sort of woman Netley affected.

The next moment he found himself face to face with Blanche Gillespie.

CHAPTER IV.

BLANCHE PLAYS HER TRUMP CARD.

To Longford this meeting with Blanche was a severe shock, and one for which he was quite unprepared. It was only by the greatest effort that he was able to retain any appearance of composure. Of all the remarkable episodes in his varied career this was, perhaps, the most extraordinary. It hardly seemed credible that these two could meet in such a manner after the lapse of ten years.

For a moment or two he was quite non-plussed, until his old power of control in the hour of danger asserted itself, and he gradually recovered his self-possession. But not so Blanche. This sudden coming face to face with the one man in the world that she desired to see, for the moment prostrated her to an alarming extent. She trembled in every limb, and was forced to walk to the window to endeavour to compose herself. Her heart was beating like a sledge-hammer, and she hardly knew what she was doing, or which way to look. Although she had

been hoping and praying for so long that she might meet this man again, yet the moment she did so, all her carefully-prepared speeches, all her pre-arranged threats and recriminations, all her appeals and rebukes were forgotten, and she stood before him like a nervous girl, with her vaunted self-control nowhere.

The blood rushed to her brain as she thought of it, for she knew well enough that she was forced into a position which placed her greatly at a disadvantage.

Longford at once saw the state of affairs, and took every advantage of it ; but it needed the utmost diplomacy, for up to the moment of meeting he had absolutely no knowledge concerning the woman with whom young Lord Netley had entangled himself. It never entered into his mind that it could be Blanche. He had put the whole episode down as a boyish infatuation for some adventuress ; but here was a far greater danger, and one that, as he immediately realised, carried with it the gravest possibilities. Could it be possible that it was only a coincidence, this friendship between the two ? No ! It was hardly likely to be that. For Blanche must have known that Lord Netley was his brother-in-law, and that fact alone pointed to a well-laid plot, which at all costs he must sift to the bottom. But there was little doubt that this meeting was the cause of the greatest concern and surprise to Blanche, and he therefore meant to take all the advantage of it that he could.

His alert brain at once saw that the only thing to be done was to rush at the fence and trust to luck to put him over in safety ; but it was essential that he should appear to be aware of everything she was doing.

The fact that she was standing with her back to him gazing out into the street, made it easier for him to start.

"Blanche," he said, after a moment or two, "I can well understand that you are greatly surprised at this sudden meeting, after so many years."

"I am indeed," she replied, her voice trembling with emotion. "What does it all mean ? Why are you here ? Isn't it sufficient that you deserted me—left me to the tender mercies of your cowardly servants ? I thought you had forgotten my existence long since, because — because you had done with me."

"I never said that I had done with you. That was your statement, not mine. You must do me the justice to remember that I was most anxious we should part the best of friends ; but you would not have it so, and took the law into your own hands. If your shooting had been steadier at our last meeting, my dear Blanche, this one would not have taken place, and I should be lying in the tombs of the Kings of Chittarre."

"Don't, don't remind me of it. It's the one horror of my life."

"My dear friend, I'm not here to remind you

of the past, but to speak to you of the future—your future and mine.”

“What do you mean? Explain yourself! Surely—surely——”

“I wish to tell you what I do mean. Come and sit down.”

Blanche did as she was told. The old feeling of obedience to the man's dominating will-power was upon her. But she did not intend to yield to him. She would be strong; she would resist. Now or never she must prove that she was a match for him.

She sat down upon a settee while he brought a chair and sat opposite to her, fastening his eyes upon her like a snake. Very slowly and calmly he began to speak in low tones, without once raising the pitch of his voice. All the time he seemed to be gazing into her very brain. She well knew that he was endeavouring to regain his old influence over her, and therefore made every effort of will to prevent him.

“You asked me why I am here. I will tell you at once without beating about the bush. It is necessary, for your safety and for mine too, that you should give up young Netley.”

“Give up whom?” she replied weakly.

“Lord Netley, my brother-in-law. Don't pretend that you don't know whom I mean. The young man whose portrait stands on that table. I am perfectly well aware of all that has been going on since your arrival in London. I know, too, that you have lent him money,

which will be at once repaid to you. I acknowledge the kindness that prompted the action, but I cannot permit my relatives to be under obligations to anyone."

"So I am to give up Lord Netley, am I—lest your newly-found relatives should view with disfavour any connection with a worthless adventuress, such as Blanche Gillespie, *alias* Baxter! It is distasteful to your refined feelings, and—and might perhaps compromise you. Well, you are right, it *will* compromise you, only in a vastly different manner from that you expect."

"I intend you shall give him up."

"If I refuse—what then?"

"Well, in that case I shall have to compel you. That's the long and short of it. When I make up my mind on a subject, I am accustomed to have my will obeyed. You should know my nature better than anyone else."

"Oh! I know your nature well enough; I'm not likely to forget it. I am also aware of a person now known as Longford, whose career in India, as the Centipede, will make interesting reading to the authorities at Scotland Yard. All your grand friends in society and the House of Commons will be pleased at their connection with the notorious criminal! You think you can come here and easily frighten me into subjection, but your threats are nothing now. Your influence, so far as I am concerned, is dead. Stephen Bainford, remember that!"

"Still, I have you in my power."

"You had, you had ; but have no longer. You will soon find that I am the person to dictate terms."

"Forgive me for smiling, Blanche, but really the idea of your dictating terms to me is so ludicrous that I cannot help it."

"It may be ludicrous, but I tell you, now, at once, that if you thwart my scheme I will make you pay very dearly for it, and you will regret your interference for the remainder of your existence. I care nothing for you now, and we have but little in common."

"You will perhaps excuse my differing from you, but we two have everything in common ; in fact, to put it bluntly, we must sink or swim together, whether we like it or not. If you give me away, you denounce yourself. In short, what it comes to is this : If we value our safety, we must arrange to work together. Our tactics must be changed now. Hitherto, we worked for gain ; now we must work for security."

"I tell you, I do not intend to have anything to do with you. Henceforth, our ways are entirely separate. If there is any trouble coming for us, we must each face it alone. As for my being terrified by you, the idea is absurd, and I am afraid you have hardly yet realised the sort of woman with whom you have to deal. I no longer fear you for an instant. Don't think you can come here with any hope of success in that direction. It is

my turn now. I can see plainly enough that you have induced Lord Netley to speak of his acquaintance with me; therefore it will interest you to know that he has promised to marry me within six months; but doubtless you are quite aware of that. As your presence here is obviously to try to prevent my having anything further to do with him, I warn you that if by the end of six months I am not married to Lord Netley, a detailed account of the previous career of Stephen Longford, M.P., will be placed in the hands of the police. I have learned to love Netley, and I will marry him despite you and your friends. And I have also taken good precaution to ensure my safety in the event of your trying to do me an injury. If I do not turn up or write to my bankers for the period of one month, they will forward the letter to the same destination—so you know what you will have to expect.”

Longford never moved a muscle during the whole time that she was speaking. He still kept his eyes fixed intently upon hers. But he knew that he had lost his power over her; yet he felt that he must bring her to obedience either by fear or by coaxing, and he could see that neither course would succeed at the moment.

“These are bold words, Blanche.”

“Yes; they may be so; and, more than that, I intend to back them with bold deeds.”

“And in this manner you will compel me?”

"Yes, and I don't think your aristocratic connections will be over-pleased when they know the facts against you."

"And pray, who would believe you? The word of an adventuress against mine would have little weight. I'm pretty secure."

"Do you think I'm such a fool as to be unprepared for every emergency? Remember, I was your pupil, and, I think you will admit, an apt one. There are hundreds of ways by which I can prove my statements up to the hilt."

"I can still take care you never do so. Besides, I don't fear the result. Remember, as I said before, in injuring me you injure yourself as well. You are with me in the matter."

"Do you think I care one straw what happens to me then? If I cannot marry Netley, I can at least find satisfaction in bringing you to your knees, and you can rest assured I shall. As for my own personal security, that is nothing to me, provided I can punish you."

"You have developed an amiable disposition during the last ten years, Blanche."

"Any bitterness of disposition in me has been caused simply and solely by the treatment that I was subjected to at your hands. Things would have been vastly different if you had been wise enough to take me with you when you left India. I am not ugly, and I don't flatter myself when I say that I have brains and I know how to use them, and I

contend that my ambition is equal to your own. If I marry Netley, don't think I shall disgrace you or contaminate your wife."

"Have the goodness to leave her name out of the discussion. I will not permit her pure nature to be mentioned by a woman of your stamp."

"Ah! That is how you would speak of me, you coward! Who was it that made me the degraded, lawless adventuress that I have been? One not fit to breathe the same air as that guileless little fool you have married, simply and solely because she can advance you in the world. Why, you, Stephen Bainford, traitor, forger, blackmailer, thief—yes, common low thief, and perhaps murderer! Why, the very wealth that you exist on is not earned honestly—no, not one penny of it. You speak of my contaminating your wife! Why, every mouthful of food that she eats is bought with blood-money; every luxury that she possesses belongs to one of your plundered victims! How will she feel when she knows who you really are and how you acquired your wealth? Do you think that she will still look up to and worship you? No! She'll hate you and despise you as you deserve, and God grant that she'll join her curses to mine and see that they come home to you! Stephen Bainford, I mean what I say; as surely as you thwart me, so surely will I punish you. That is my final word."

With that, she rang the bell, and when the servant arrived, ordered a cab to be called.

Stephen took up his hat to depart, but before he left the room he quietly turned to her and said—

“Is it to be war between us, then, Blanche? Reflect well. You know I’m not the sort of man to be threatened with impunity.”

“It remains for you to decide which it is to be.”

“So be it,” he answered, as he left the room, and she heard him drive off in the hansom.

Then she went to her bedroom and gave way to a paroxysm of weeping.

Longford drove to Park Lane and went straight to his study, which he had ordered should at all times be in readiness for him, whether he was in London or in the country.

Throwing himself into his favourite easy chair, and lighting the inevitable cigarette, he began to think out the position of affairs. There was no doubt whatever that Blanche fully intended to carry out every threat that she uttered unless he agreed to Netley’s marriage with her; and how was he to do that? Even if he aided and abetted the marriage, Lord Remenham would step in and object, without a doubt. The game would most certainly be at an end if Blanche once gave him away. The thing that had to be decided at once was, what to do about Blanche. Perhaps he had better consult with Lurgan. He therefore rang up the telephone exchange, and ordered that he should be put on to

Feversham. In due course, his trunk call was answered, and he found himself talking to Lurgan and arranging that he should come to town by the next train, first informing Lady Audrey that political news of importance might prevent her husband from getting down that night, but that he would be with her early on the following morning.

Before the allotted time had elapsed, Lurgan told him that the Prime Minister had been down unexpectedly to lunch with Lady Audrey and greatly regretted that he had not seen Longford ; but he was so delighted with his grand-daughter's place that he hoped to be asked to see it again at an early date.

All the afternoon Longford stayed in his study thinking and thinking, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He took his luncheon on a tray at a side table, and anxiously awaited his friend, who arrived just before seven o'clock.

He curbed his desire to discuss the matter until after they had dined and had returned to the study ; but at last he opened the subject.

" I daresay, Lurgan, you wonder what on earth I have brought you up to town for so unceremoniously ; but, the fact is, events have occurred that necessitate immediate action. Don't look so startled ; we're not going to be arrested."

Poor Lurgan had gone white as death. He knew instinctively that something was wrong, but he had learnt that it was always wise to wait for Longford to open the discussion of business.

" Well, put me out of my misery. What is it ? "

" I will begin at the beginning, Gregory ; bear with me patiently. My young brother-in-law, Lord Netley, has become entangled in an affair with a lady. My wife appeals to me to free him from her clutches. I promise to do what I can. I question Netley, and find him owing £3,000, most of it to a money-lender, the remainder to the lady in question. This morning I instructed my solicitors to settle with the money-lender, and I myself went to interview the ' Mrs. Baxter ' at her house in Queen Street, Mayfair ; for I was in hopes that I might add another £1,000 to the debt and buy him out. Imagine my surprise when her drawing-room door opened and in walked——"

" Blanche ! "

" Good Heavens, man, how do you know ? "

" I thought I saw her at your wedding, but I was not absolutely certain ; so I said nothing about it, because I did not wish to worry you at the time. What happened ? "

" What happened ? Why, we had a scene, and, by Jove, I'm bound to confess, Blanche appears to have the best of us."

" What do you mean ? Please explain, Stephen—you know that it's torture unspeakable to me. For mercy's sake let me know all."

" Very well, only keep cool. We have to decide what is best to be done. I told her that it was necessary that she should give up

Netley, and, not unnaturally, being a woman of spirit, she refuses. I should have done the same thing. Then she put an ultimatum to me, that unless Netley marries her as he promised in six months' time, certain papers will be put in the hands of the police. A little awkward, isn't it ? ”

Lurgan considered for a few minutes, then replied—

“ At the first blush it does look so ; but there's only one thing for it—let the young man marry her.”

“ That's all very well, but, you see, Lord Remenham will object. The boy is solely dependent upon his father for everything beyond his pay. Besides that, do you mean to tell me that Blanche, clever, astute Blanche, is working out this scheme just for the sake of marrying a boy of a Guardsman ? No, my dear fellow, there's something more behind it all. I can plainly see, once married into my immediate circle, she'd play the devil with us.”

“ Good Heavens, I never thought of that ! Well, then, there's only one alternative, and that is—she must travel abroad for the sake of her health.”

“ Eh ! ”

“ She must be spirited away.”

“ A very pretty idea, but quite unworkable, for the very good reason that she has taken precautions to guard against this event. You see, Gregory, we brought her up in our own school ; my dear boy, we taught her all the

tricks we have been at so much trouble to learn ourselves. There is a sealed letter reposing in her bank manager's possession containing a detailed record of my past offences, and addressed in a lady's handwriting to the Chief Commissioner of Police, Scotland Yard, which is to be forwarded if the lady does not call, or write, within a period of one month. Now, then, I ask you, of what use would it be to dispense with her presence in London ? ”

“ Awkward, very, very awkward. Supposing she falls ill for a month, and cannot write or go out ? ”

“ Well, it looks as if *we* go out in that case.”

“ This must be circumvented at all costs.”

“ Yes, but how ? ”

“ You must find out where she banks and where the letter is—that should not be an impossibility through the servants. Then we must get hold of one of her signed cheques and some of her writing paper, after which we can write a letter to the bank manager in her name, authorising him to hand the sealed package to bearer ; to make it look all right, we'll deposit a jewel case with him for safety while she is away. What do you say ? ”

“ Yes, that sounds feasible. A telegram to her to meet Netley at Newhaven with luggage to make a bolt of it will do. Then I will arrange for a yacht, and we can get her aboard ; after that the affair will be plain sailing.”

Then they set themselves to work out a carefully-laid scheme to secure Blanche's

letter, and also to put themselves in a position of safety with regard to her.

The next day Longford returned to Feversham Place with the money-lender's receipt in his pocket, which he showed to Lord Netley, greatly to that young gentleman's relief; and he also acquainted him that arrangements were being made for the payment of his debt to Mrs. Baxter, but in the meantime he must keep his promise not to see or communicate with that lady.

The days went quickly by, and Longford was called to town on political business almost every day, which business consisted in disguising himself and getting into the good graces of Mrs. Baxter's maid, who was in no way averse from the attentions of the handsome agent for sewing-machines, who at first importuned her to buy his goods, then asked her out to the theatre and to supper, and from whom he learnt all he desired to know as to where Mrs. Baxter kept her account, and how she was often sent to cash cheques. One wet evening he met her going to the post, and offered to put the letters into the box for her, and after they had strolled about for a bit in the rain, she returned to the house, while he took a cab to Park Lane with Blanche's letters in his pocket.

Having divested himself of his disguise, he proceeded to examine the envelopes. There were six in all. One was addressed to a large firm of milliners, and another to the manager of the London and Birmingham Bank,

Piccadilly. Both of these he carefully steamed, and having re-gummed the corners of the envelopes, set them aside to dry.

The envelope to the firm of milliners contained a cheque, while the other was a letter, informing the bank manager that she was still in London, and would thank them to keep the sealed packet that he had of hers ; but if he received no visit or written authority from her for a month from that date, he was to break the seal on the outer envelope and deliver to the address upon the inner one.

These two papers being extremely important, he took photographs of them, and being satisfied with the results put the letters and cheques into their right envelopes, sealed them up once more, and posted them himself.

The next day he saw the maid again, and induced her to obtain him half a dozen sheets of her mistress's paper, with envelopes to match, on the plea that he wanted to have some printed like it.

Once again at Park Lane, he sat down and wrote a letter in Blanche's writing, authorising the manager to hand the sealed packet in his possession to the bearer, and signed it in exact imitation of the signature in the cheque photograph, then inscribed the envelope. When the whole thing was ready, it was locked away to be used when required, with the addition of the date.

In the meantime Lady Audrey had been busy. Her grandfather, the Prime Minister,

had let her into a great secret. A very high official in the Indian Government was retiring, and he had been looking round for someone to appoint to the post; and it had been decided that it should be offered to Longford, owing to his great knowledge of the country and general fitness to occupy the important position.

Lady Audrey's delight knew no bounds. She wanted it to come as a great surprise to Stephen, and she therefore asked her grandfather to let her have the official letter of appointment on the day before Longford's birthday, which occurred within three days, so that she might be the proud deliverer of the message at a supper party which she intended giving at Park Lane. As the clock struck twelve-thirty, it would be in his hands as a birthday present. Her grandfather humoured her in this matter, and promised that it should be done, provided he was allowed to be present.

Next day she asked Longford if she might give the supper party on the 10th October at Park Lane to one or two friends and relatives, as it would be his birthday after twelve on that date. He laughingly consented, although he informed her that he had long since given up all interest in birthdays, and then he thought no more of it until she reminded him the same morning that the supper was to take place.

That night there was a large party at the theatre, the members of which afterwards returned to Park Lane, and at a quarter to twelve some twenty friends sat down to

supper. Among the guests were the Prime Minister, Lord and Lady Remenham, and several Ministers, who were in the secret ; Lady Audrey, looking exquisite and very excited, took the head of the table, while the butler kept guard over an official-looking envelope that he was to deliver to her on a signal.

At a quarter past twelve the Prime Minister rose and made a happy little speech, cordially congratulating Longford on his birthday, and amid great applause proposing his health.

At five minutes to the half-hour, Lady Audrey rose, and silence was called. Trembling with nervousness, she began to speak, but soon warmed to her subject under the encouragement of her guests. As the clock chimed she took the package from the butler's hand and went round to Longford's side, and putting her arms round his neck, kissed him before everyone; then gave him the package and returned to her seat.

He was about to rise to reply, when cries of, "Open it, open it," were heard on all sides.

Longford thereupon passed a knife through the envelope, and with shaking fingers drew forth an official note, informing him of his high Indian appointment.

Every eye in the room was fixed upon him, but he saw nothing of them; a mist seemed to hang before his vision, through which he appeared only to see Chittarre and a dim figure strangely like himself beckoning him to come to the ruined palace. India, the one place in the whole world that he should avoid like the plague.

Suddenly Lurgan's whisper sounded in his ear.

"Pull yourself together, Stephen; be brave, old man."

Suddenly, there came over him a feeling of triumph. With a mighty effort he pulled himself together. Pale as death, with set teeth, he rose to speak.

In a voice now firm and calm, he began—

"It is with the greatest difficulty that I am able to calm myself sufficiently after the intense surprise of the last few minutes to rise and thank you for your kindly wishes and for the extremely gracious way in which you have conveyed to me the news of the high honour that His Majesty has done me. Indeed, the whole thing has come like a thunder-clap upon me, with the more force because I am in no way conscious of having performed any special service that would warrant such reward; and I earnestly hope that you will forgive the few feeble words that are intended to convey my sincere gratitude; but the surprise has quite unnerved me. All I can say is, that I shall well and truly endeavour to carry out the duties of the position that is to be entrusted to my care. It gives me more pleasure than I can express to think that the news of this great honour has been placed in my hands by those of my dear wife, and accompanied by the evident good wishes of so many of my best friends. Once more, I truly thank you."

CHAPTER V.

THE CENTIPEDE PREPARES FOR INDIA.

AT length, the supper party having come to an end, Longford and Lady Audrey saw the last guest depart and returned once more to the dining-room. Here he took her in his arms and very tenderly gazed into the beautiful face with its exquisitely moulded features and sweet brown eyes fringed with long dark lashes, eyes that looked into his own with such intensity of love and unbounded devotion that he thanked God she was his and his alone.

"My darling," he said, "how can I ever thank you? It was the proudest moment of my life, and one that is imprinted on my memory for the rest of my existence. I know the dear hands that brought me this honour will help me through all difficulties. Audrey, my beloved, whatever befalls us, through evil and through good, this night must be remembered. That I value the great honour granted to my undeserving self is certain, but I value ten thousand times more

the love of the devoted little wife who has brought it all to me, and who loves me so dearly. It has indeed been a birthday present."

"Oh Stephen, I am so proud that I was the messenger that brought it to you, but the honour is your right. You will be worthy of it always, always, because there is no one that deserves it so much."

The strong frame against which she was nestling trembled. But with a mighty effort Longford controlled himself so that he should not wince at the words she spoke. How little he deserved them his own conscience knew. Yes, all the world would be watching. There would be the friends, and with them the enemies—enemies who would be only too delighted to fix upon even the smallest clue that they could find to drag him down from his pedestal and dash him to pieces at their feet. The very suggestion of it unnerved him, for he realised what a disaster of this kind would mean to this loving child, whose every thought was for him and him alone, and who looked up to and honoured him with such devoted admiration. At last he said—

"Now, my darling, it is very late and quite time that you were in bed. I want to speak a few words to Lurgan before I turn in. Good-night, beloved, good-night. I shall not be long."

With that he tenderly kissed her again and watched the graceful figure leave the

room and ascend the great oak staircase ; then for a few moments he stood with folded arms, gazing fixedly into the dying embers of the fire. At last he rang the bell and told the footman who answered it to request Mr. Lurgan to come to him for a few minutes.

At last the door opened and Lurgan entered. As the two men met in the centre of the room their hands joined in one strong grip.

" It's magnificent, Stephen, most amazing ! I heartily and sincerely congratulate you. 'Tis a wonderful step in your career. Are you satisfied ? "

" Yes, but India ! Anywhere but India. That is the one place of all others we should avoid. I have so many enemies there, only waiting the chance to pay off old scores. I could have wished it anywhere but India."

" My dear friend, the position you are to occupy should prove in itself an absolute safeguard. In any event, Stephen, eleven years make an immensity of difference in a man."

" In everything else but memory."

" Even memory can be dulled by Time's exacting hand. There are few you really need fear. The worst are Blanche and Gavalcore ; the latter must be reckoned with. He was the last, and I think the most vindictive. He will be the one you must keep your eye upon, more than any other."

" Now what do you think is the best thing

to be done with regard to Blanche? Of course I shall take young Netley out with me, so that I can have him under my wing at all times."

"How long will it be before you have to start for India?"

"The Prime Minister told me just now that he wishes me to leave England not later than the first week in January."

"So soon! Ah! Then that gives us just three months."

"Yes, only three months, and every moment of the time will be spent at high pressure."

"Now, I tell you what I propose to do about Blanche. I shall expect you to leave her entirely in my hands to deal with, and in six months' time, or before, I shall join you in India. I intend going to see her this afternoon to open the ball. I know you can trust me. But I shall require money, and a good deal of it, as I must not leave her until everything is secure, even if I have to go round the world after her."

"You shall have three thousand pounds to go on with. Spare no expense. You can have what more you may need."

"Thanks. I shall also want the letter you wrote to the bank manager. It may be necessary, so let me have it."

"Very well, but it will need some strategy. Blanche is no fool."

"No one is aware of that better than I am.

Now let us go to bed. Later on we'll arrange everything. Good-night ! ”

“ Good-night ! ”

Then the two parted and went to their rooms. Longford to fall asleep at once, and Lurgan to pace up and down his room for hours, thinking very deeply, sleepless and anxious. He fully realised what the future meant for Longford. Every man, woman, and child in India would know his features ; surely amongst these there would be someone, besides Blanche and the Maharajah of Gavalcore, who might be in a position to recognise him. He only hoped and prayed that it was not so. The Centipede's disguises were perfect, and he ran no unnecessary risks. They had been marvellously successful up to the present, and he only trusted that it might continue. But Blanche troubled him, and he intended to deal with her in a firm and strong manner. At last he threw himself on the bed in sheer exhaustion and fell into a troubled sleep.

Later, when the family rose and breakfasted, they one and all congratulated themselves on the brilliant success of the last night's entertainment. The mid-day papers published the news, and the surprise was general. By the evening Longford was overwhelmed with letters of congratulation from every side. All the morning he was busy with Lurgan settling the thousand and one matters that had to be done before arrange-

ments could be made to start the purchase of the outfit necessary for their residence in India. .

Lady Audrey was all excitement over the preparations for the journey to India, but Longford did not forget the fact that in taking up his new position he was removing her from all home associations and her own people. Perhaps it might be for five or ten years, or even more, but he remembered with the greatest pleasure that it meant her devotion to his cause and to his ambition.

For the remainder of their stay in England she spent the greater part of her time in London, only returning to Feversham Place for the week-ends. Then, too, she was so pleased that she was to have her brother with her in India, and when Longford told her that Netley had accepted the post her delight knew no bounds.

Every day Stephen attended at the India Office in deep consultation with the authorities and was very soon making himself thoroughly acquainted with the various duties of his post. One and all were loud in praise of his firm grip of the subject, his business knowledge, instinct, and earnest views. It was quite evident that the right man had been chosen for the important office to which he had been called.

From the first it could be seen that he knew India perfectly ; every caste and creed was intimately known to him, and the fact

that he was familiar with the different native languages added very much to the Government's appreciation of his merits.

It was decided that he should go out with as much despatch as possible. All concerned were expecting a very pleasant and enjoyable voyage that should prove a rest and delight after the arduous labours of preparing for the journey.

In the meantime Longford wrote a letter to Mir Ali telling him that he, the Master, had need of his services, and also those of Ram Lal ; therefore, if they were so inclined, he begged they would attend at Government House, Calcutta, on the date upon which he arrived, to act as his special body servants. In due course the letter reached them, and found Mir Ali and Ram Lal still active and living in comfort upon his bounty, and great was their delight at the prospect of once again serving the Master.

As the days flew by Park Lane became a pandemonium. Dressmakers, jewellers, tailors, milliners, and innumerable other tradesmen continually besieged the house, intent upon the completion of their own special orders, and Stephen's spare time was taken up in seeing that all details were carried out to his satisfaction. Everything was progressing just as well as he could wish, with the regularity and certainty of clockwork.

At last all was prepared, and it only needed one week to the date of sailing. Now it was

time to bid farewell to their friends, therefore each night during the week they were either dining out or giving dinners themselves.

At length the day of departure arrived. Without any untoward experience the party reached Marseilles and joined the boat, where Longford was welcomed by his wife, who had come on from London with the others.

On the afternoon that followed Lady Audrey's supper party, Lurgan betook himself in a cab to Queen Street, Mayfair. Arrived at the pretty little house, he enquired whether Mrs. Baxter was at home, and hearing that she was in he ascended to the drawing-room, where he had but a few minutes to wait before Blanche made her appearance.

She received him very kindly, for she had nothing against him. He had always been very good to her, and the anger that she felt was only against Longford.

After he had looked at her carefully for a moment or two he said that he thought Time had dealt very graciously with her, and she smilingly accepted the compliment.

Then he continued :

"I only wish I was in a position to say the same for myself, but the wearing and strenuous life we lead has added to my weight of years, and I feel that old age creeps over me apace. But I must not complain. I have lived my life, and should be content to sit in the sun and remember."

"Tell me, Gregory, why are you here ?

It is quite evident to me that you have seen Stephen, who has told you something of our recent interview, and has sent you here to me now. Is that so?"

"Yes," he answered, as he took the cup of tea that she handed to him. "In a sense it is. He told me all that passed at the interview, and that you declared that unless young Lord Netley was allowed to marry you within six months from now, you would at once have a sealed packet placed in the hands of the Chief Commissioner of Police, which packet contains details of the career of a man known to the world as the Centipede, but who is in reality, Stephen Longford. Such being the case I have come to see you, so that we two may have a quiet chat over the matter and discuss it with an open mind."

"Excuse me, Gregory, there is nothing to discuss. Stephen knows my ultimatum, and unless he complies with it I shall be compelled to do as I say, and place the matter in the hands of the police."

"Forgive my speaking bluntly, but how would you prove such an accusation? Stephen is great and you are unknown."

"My dear Gregory, do you think that I am at all likely to bring a charge against a man of Stephen's character unless I had the amplest means of proving it? Rest assured that I have more than sufficient evidence to expose him as the criminal that he is."

"And do you think that Stephen is such a fool as not to take all precautions against such a possibility? You know as well as I do he's too clever for that."

"All this points to something you wish to say to me."

"True, it does. I don't know whether you have read your paper to-day. If you have you will be aware that Stephen has been appointed to a high office in the Indian Government."

"Gregory, you're joking with me. It's not true!"

"Send out for a newspaper and see for yourself. You will find every evening paper full of it."

She rang the bell and despatched the servant for a newspaper, and as she awaited its arrival she eagerly enquired all the details. He sat and wondered at this extraordinary woman. Here she was, professing to hate Stephen with all the strength of her nature, and yet she was betraying her deep interest in the news of his advancement! It seemed almost as if she was quite proud of his success.

When the servant brought the paper she eagerly devoured the news, while Lurgan sat on the sofa and watched her.

"You seem almost as pleased as we are, Blanche?"

"It is a great thing to marry into the family of such a distinguished statesman. My position will be quite secure after that."

"Good heavens! One would think that you were going to follow Longford to India and live in the bosom of his family."

"Perhaps I may yet. I intend to be very near to Stephen always. Don't forget that I warned you if I was slighted I should pay Stephen back in his own coin, and I most certainly shall do so. Now this news of his advancement makes things easier for me. I can see my way to punish him in a fashion that will leave little to be desired. Now you can tell Stephen that when he arrives in India he will find me there with exactly the same ultimatum hanging over his head, only the scandal will be far greater when it becomes known to all India that this distinguished servant of the Empire is in reality that notorious criminal, the Centipede."

"Well, and what about the sealed packet? I'm frightened of that sealed packet. What will you do as to that? If you don't turn up or write for one month, you told Stephen, it was to be handed over to the authorities. You might be taken ill, and not be able to write or call at your bank for a month. Then we should be ruined, even if Stephen aids you, as he intends, with this marriage."

"Then the best thing he can do is to let the marriage take place at once, so that the package may be destroyed. Once I am married to Lord Netley I shall not be desirous of having a criminal for a brother-in-law."

Lurgan bit his lip with annoyance. But

at the same time he could not help realising the cleverness of this woman. It was absolutely useless to think of abduction, for her disappearance would but hasten the end. No ! what he had to do was to get her away somewhere ; and on the day that she started go to the bank in disguise, hand in the letter, and obtain the package. Then Blanche, still thinking she was safe, could be abducted without fear. Anyway, she must be watched day and night, and no movement must be missed.

" Now, Blanche, is there no hope of your forgiveness and your aid in our future work ? Stephen has asked me to come and appeal to you. He will most certainly assist you in your marriage with Lord Netley, but of course the difficulty there is with Lord Remenham, for his son is entirely dependent on him.

" Gregory, I tell you plainly that when I am married I will forgive, and not till then. Stephen treated me abominably. I hold him in the hollow of my hand now, and I will crush him unless what I have planned comes to a successful issue."

" I'm very sorry you take this view of the matter, as I sincerely hoped that I might perhaps induce you to forgive Stephen."

" It is useless asking it. I was cast aside as being of no further use, and I warned him."

" Yes, and you tried to bring his career to a sudden end. However, Blanche, deal

mercifully with him now. Think what you will do for the innocent in ruining him. His young wife, absolutely ignorant of the ways of the world, devoted to him, living only for him. If he is degraded, then she will be so too."

"And why not? She is in the position I should be occupying. Heaven knows I would have made him a good and faithful wife, and helped him far more than this inexperienced child. No, I will admit no sympathy with her; she must thank Stephen for what happens. The remedy lies in his hands, and his alone."

"I cannot help thinking you are harsh and cruel, and I also think these sentiments are totally foreign to your nature."

"My decision is unalterable."

"Then there's nothing for it but to say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Gregory. Tell Stephen that I am immovable."

Gregory left the house. He knew well enough the stern strength of Blanche's character, and that she meant exactly what she said.

Then he drove back to Park Lane and told Stephen all that had occurred during the interview, and asked for the letter to the bank manager and also for another letter to be written as if to a well-known firm of solicitors in Blanche's name, requesting them to obtain the package from the bank as she

was leaving England, and to deal with it as she had instructed them.

Having received both these letters, he locked them away in his safe, and proceeded to have Blanche carefully watched by a firm of private detectives, to whom he gave his instructions disguised as an American visitor to London. On the third day after the watching commenced they reported that the lady had gone down to the P. and O. Office and booked a passage to India on a boat sailing the week following.

Lurgan was greatly surprised at this, and at once started off to the shipping office to know whether there were any berths remaining unoccupied on the boat, and hearing that there was one, he asked to see the list of passengers and found Blanche among the number. He therefore booked a passage in the name of Scott, and went back to Park Lane to make all arrangements for his departure. The days went quickly by until at last it came to the morning of the sailing of the P. and O. boat. Assuming a disguise in which he presented the appearance of a respectable family solicitor, he approached Blanche's house, and saw that a four-wheeled cab was at the door with luggage upon it ; at the same moment Blanche appeared and entered the vehicle. He immediately called a hansom, and told the man to follow the four-wheeler and on no account to lose sight of it. Eventually they reached Fenchurch Street, and Blanche

alighted and made her way to the special train conveying passengers to the P. and O. boats. He saw her take her place in a carriage and waited until the train started ; then he took another cab and drove away immediately to the London and Birmingham Bank, Piccadilly, and sent in a card to the manager bearing the name of a well-known firm of solicitors. He was soon ushered into the manager's office. When he presented his letter and showed that of instruction, a clerk was called and told to fetch the package. It was an exciting moment, for he expected every minute to see the clerk return with a policeman, but instead he appeared with the sealed letter and it was handed to him, whereupon he signed the book as a receipt and took his departure, after thanking the manager.

When he found himself once more in the hansom he breathed again. It was good to feel that this danger was removed from their path. Now he could act as he thought best with regard to Blanche, and they need no longer fear the police or any other authority in connection with this package. But he never knew what a close thing it had been, for only two days before Blanche had written to the bank manager telling him she was leaving England for some months, and that she would be glad if he could kindly arrange to act on any written instructions from her with reference to the sealed packet of which they were taking charge.

Hastening to Park Lane, Lurgan informed Stephen what had happened, and how he had managed to secure the package, and then despatched a servant with his luggage to Victoria, and having disguised himself again as an elderly, bearded man, he caught the express for Dover after saying good-bye to Stephen and promising to keep a careful watch over Blanche's movements, taking care that she did nothing that could harm them. In due course he joined the P. and O. boat at Marseilles, and without any untoward occurrence reached Calcutta.

During the voyage he kept a watchful eye on Blanche, and although her place at table was not far from his, she never recognised who her fellow-passenger was, and only looked upon him as a harmless old fellow travelling for the first time to the East.

Arrived in Calcutta, Blanche took up her residence at a good house, and Lurgan having seen her enter and her luggage follow, betook himself to a public bath, where he restored himself to his original character and made his way, as Longford's private secretary, to his rooms at Government House.

He then sent for Mir Ali and Ram Lal, and told them off to watch Blanche's every movement and to report to him each day, for by this time he was very busy preparing for the arrival of Longford.

It happened that about three days before Stephen was expected to arrive, Lurgan was

busily engaged with his correspondence when a messenger came with a note from Blanche, asking him if he could spare a few minutes to go to see her on an important matter.

Lurgan was somewhat astonished at the request, but, needless to say, he at once started, and soon found himself in Blanche's private room awaiting her entrance.

When at last she came in, Gregory rose and went forward to meet her with outstretched hand, but Blanche stood before him and ignored his sign of friendship.

"Why, Blanche," he said without appearing to notice anything. "What brings you here? I was indeed surprised to get your note. In India, of all places! I never thought that you would return here: won't you shake hands?"

"No, I will not! I have discovered that both you and Stephen are traitors, and I have sent for you to warn you that it is now war to the knife!"

"Indeed! You amaze me. I don't understand what you are talking about."

"Then I will tell you. I received a letter this morning forwarded from London and addressed to me. It was from Lord Netley, stating that he released me from my engagement to him, and that it would be better for both of us, perhaps, if the matter was brought to an end, as circumstances had arisen which compelled him to leave the country, and begging me to keep the little presents he had

given me as a memento of the happy hours spent with me. Bah ! Do you think I can't see through this ? Of course the letter was suggested by Stephen ! It's his doing and no one else's ; therefore I intend to act at once, and in such a manner as will make my revenge complete."

" All I can say is, that your news absolutely astounds me, for when I left England Longford told me himself that he was going to do all that lay in his power to assist your marriage to Netley."

" Well, he does not do so. In fact, he puts obstacles in the way, so you can tell him from me when he arrives that he will be denounced publicly, and through my instrumentality. After that he can kill me if he likes ; I shall have been amply revenged, and shall require no more."

" We can afford to laugh at your threats, my dear Blanche. You have not a shadow of proof to substantiate your story. Any fool can trump up a charge against the greatest man. No one has ever set eyes on the Centipede undisguised. We shall defy you to do anything."

" The marks of his crime are upon him, and nothing can save him. He is branded like Cain ! "

CHAPTER VI.

LURGAN DEALS WITH THE MAHARAJAH.

LURGAN was lost in deep thought as he walked back to Government House after his visit to Blanche. It was swelteringly hot for such exercise in the middle of the day, but so preoccupied was he in thinking out what Blanche had just told him that he strode along with his green umbrella held right back, not shading himself in the least, but allowing the merciless sun to beat furiously down upon him.

“What on earth did she mean by Stephen being ‘branded like Cain?’” he kept on muttering to himself as he spun his umbrella round and round by the handle. Surely the words were intended to convey some hidden meaning, one that she thought he would grasp immediately. But, think as earnestly as he might, he could make nothing of it.

At last he reached his own private room at Government House and threw himself into a long cane chair, lit a cigarette, and tried to reason things out. It was obvious that

Blanche had received a letter from Lord Netley breaking off the engagement, but he doubted very much if Stephen had any hand in the matter. Most likely the young fellow had seen the folly of the alliance he was contemplating, and had taken this step to bring matters to an end before it was too late. But there would be no convincing Blanche that they had nothing to do with it, for she had firmly made up her mind that they had, and was determined to be revenged ; therefore, unless they could circumvent her, the denunciation of Stephen as soon as he arrived was a matter of certainty.

The breaking off of the engagement was a satisfactory conclusion so far as young Netley was concerned, but for them it was little short of a disaster.

He smoked many cigarettes over the question, but could not arrive at the meaning of Blanche's words—"branded like Cain."

Suddenly it struck him that she meant the teeth marks on Stephen's arm, where the infuriated Maharajah had bitten him during the struggle in the Palace of Mhurrapuir eleven years ago. Yes, that was the case, undoubtedly. It must be so. Yet, how could Blanche possibly know anything about this—for Stephen left Chittarre within a few hours of his return to the ruined city, and had only seen Blanche once since during the whole of the eleven years ? Someone must have told her. But he was at a loss to understand who it could

be. No one in the world, save himself and the Centipede, had any knowledge of it. Except—except the Maharajah. Ah! Suddenly, the clue to the whole thing dawned upon him. She was in league with the Maharajah, and had either already told him who Stephen really was or only waited the opportunity of doing so. He felt certain that at the first opportunity the Maharajah would denounce his enemy before everyone, and proclaim the truth that he was none other than the notorious Centipede. The very thought of it almost paralysed him.

He remembered now that Blanche was discovered listening at the door by the Centipede when he came back with the jewels on that eventful morning in Chittarre. His memory went back in a flash to the scene and every detail. He remembered how he had remarked to Stephen that he looked very ill, and how the latter had answered by pulling up his sleeve and showing the cruel marks of the Maharajah's teeth.

Blanche must have overheard them. Then, too, she must have been listening when the Centipede told him what happened at the Maharajah's Palace. And she had kept the story sealed up in her heart all these years. Therefore, this knowledge meant ruin to them. Her scheme must be defeated at all costs, or it would be good-bye to their hopes and ambitions, and only the most humiliating disgrace would result. Everything must be put aside by him until he

had secured the Maharajah and got rid of Blanche. But how could it be done? It was absolutely incumbent upon him to save his friend, and that immediately; so he set himself to work out a scheme of such audacity that he felt he must succeed, but it nearly turned his brain in the doing. It was extremely hazardous, he knew, but he must carry it out whatever happened to himself. All he desired was to save Stephen, the only man in the world whose friendship he valued, and to help whom constituted his one aim in life. If he were killed, what would it matter? Had it not been for Stephen, who saved him from himself years and years before, he would have been lying dead in a pauper's grave long since; besides that, it meant, if he were successful, peace and prosperity for them during the rest of their lives, and no more anxieties or terrors. Yes, he must do it and take the risk. Stephen would arrive in two days, but he would say nothing until he had succeeded; then he would come and tell him that they were free from the machinations of their enemies for ever.

When his plans were all completed, and he had carefully thought out every detail, he sent for Mir Ali with the intention of obtaining his assistance in the matter.

In obedience to the summons the servant presented himself before Lurgan.

"I have sent for you, Mir Ali, so that I may have a very earnest talk with you, knowing

well your devotion to the Master is even as great as my own. Is that not so ? ”

“ Even so, Sahib. Thy servant would lay down his life for the Master.”

“ Now, Mir Ali, take note of the words that I am about to speak. I do not fear to place the greatest trust in you. Such trust few men give even to their own brother. The Master is in grave danger. You will remember that when we left Chittarre he had just returned from Mhurrapuir, where certain dealings had taken place with the Maharajah of Gavalcore, who ever since has sworn to take the Master's life should he be successful in effecting his capture. For the last eleven years we have succeeded in avoiding him. Now, by some means, he is aware that the man he is so desirous of meeting is returning to India. Therefore, I am about to journey to Mhurrapuir to induce the Maharajah to come with me to Chittarre, and once there—well, he will not be able to do any harm. I remember that years ago you told me of a few leaves that may be gathered in the city.”

“ True, Huzoor. They who drink of liquid distilled therefrom sleep the long sleep and trouble no more. Thy servant knoweth it well.”

“ It may be so, Mir Ali ; but perhaps other means will suffice. I shall require you to go to the city and make all preparations. We shall take horses from Jodphur across the desert, and it will be necessary that you do as you were wont upon the approach of strangers, while I

see that the Maharajah does not escape. Here is a letter of instructions that you must take, for it contains a list of things required to aid me in my scheme. I shall start to-night, and if all is well and the Maharajah will accompany me, I shall send a telegram to you saying, 'Come'; but, if not, I will telegraph, 'Useless.' In the former case, start at once for Jodphur, and get to the city as quickly as you are able. I shall delay our arrival until the third night after the telegram has been sent to you. Is all plain?"

"All is plain, Sahib, and thy servant will see that thy commands are carried out."

"But, Mir Ali, say nothing of this to the Master should he see you before you set out; for I desire that he be not worried by anything at this time."

After Mir Ali had departed, Lurgan went to his room and made preparation for his start. He wrote a note to Stephen telling him he was sorry not to be able to be there to welcome him, but urgent business required his presence elsewhere.

That night he went to the station, took his ticket, and set off *en route* for Mhurrapuir, which he reached the next morning and made his way to the Palace. Here he requested an interview with the Maharajah.

He waited patiently in the ante-chamber for nearly two hours; but this did not worry him at all, for he was quite determined not to leave without seeing the Maharajah, if he stayed there until midnight. The Centipede had often

told him of the beauties of the Palace, but the sights that met his gaze hardly impressed him. The building in itself was beautiful enough, but the dirt and neglect of the interior struck him with great force ; but what was the most extraordinary of all were the strange figures that seemed to come from every dark corner and gaze at the sahib, who sat so patiently on the marble slab. At last, a servant came towards him, and he was escorted up the staircase and into a room where he saw a tall man standing near a table, on which was a magnum of champagne and a brandy bottle, while broken glasses strewed the floor. As he walked towards him, the Maharajah looked him over with bloodshot eyes, in which the madness of drink was very evident.

“ Who are you that dare to trouble my peace ? ” he asked, in good English, but with a huskiness born of strong liquor.

“ My name is Lurgan, your Highness. I’m here to see you on a matter of the utmost urgency.”

“ By the souls of my fathers, am I a Prince or a dog, that I am to be baited by every English pig that chooses to force himself into my presence ? Do you know ’twas but a week ago that I set my apes upon a man who came here to worry me ? ”

“ I’m not here to worry you, but to help you, and I’ve travelled many hundreds of miles to do so, too. You and I hate the same man, the Centipede.”

" Ah ! " ejaculated the half-drunken Rajah, with a start. " Souls of my forefathers, would that I could put my hand on him. The walls of my Palace will echo to shrieks such as were never yet heard the day I get him here. I would give half my kingdom to take him."

" You can do it for nothing, and I will help you ; for I hate him myself even more than you. Together we can take him without anyone else being the wiser, and, O Maharajah, our vengeance will be complete."

" How know you that I was anxious to find the man ? "

" It has been known to me for many years. I worked with him until he played me false, and ever since that I have been burning to be even with him. How do I know ? I will tell you. Many years ago he returned from this city with certain jewels, of which he had robbed you. Is that not so ? "

" It is, it is—go on."

" Well, I know where those jewels are hidden even now. For the last eleven years they have remained in the same place. Do you want to get them again into your treasure chest ? "

" Next after his death, I want them."

" Well, I, and I alone, can take you to the spot ; but we must start at once, for he knows that I am the only man in the world who has the secret. Now, I'm here to lead you to that spot, where you can find every stone safe and sound ; but my reward must be agreed between us now, before anything is commenced."

"Name it ; it shall be yours."

"His disgrace and death."

"How can this be done ?"

"I will tell you. I left England before him, because I knew that he intended to come to India, so that he might take away these jewels. I arrived last week ; he is expected to-morrow, and will at once make his way to the place where they are hidden. We must therefore start within the next few hours, so that we get there before him, and when he comes to the place we may take him."

"All this is very well ; but how am I to know that you speak truly ? Give me proof that he is the man I seek."

"He has marks of teeth on his forearm. They were done during a fight with you in this very Palace eleven years ago."

"That is so, and I would have killed him."

"I do not deceive you, Maharajah ; we will journey together without escort so that none may know what we do ; and I will take you to the secret hiding-place of the Centipede, where for years he worked all his schemes—the place that the Government of India are so anxious to find. Then you can go to them and tell all you know, and your reward will be great."

"But what is this that I am informed by a woman who has been here ? That my enemy is coming to the Viceroy's Palace itself, and that I must go to the Levée to denounce him before all men ?"

"Oh ! Rajah, cannot you see the trap that is

being laid to take you by this clever man ? The woman is his accomplice. They know very well that if you came and made the accusation against him, the Government would laugh at the idea and at once put you away as a madman ; therefore, she has been sent to make you believe this story, so that they may be rid of the only one they think can do them harm. Besides that, you have no proof to go on. If you visit his hiding-place, you will find enough to hang him a thousand times."

" True, and I do not want him punished by anyone but myself ; as I said, I would give half my kingdom to get him here to this Palace. If all is true that you say, and I am able to set my hand upon him, I will give you anything you ask. Let me but get him here, and I will make him regret the day he was rash enough to rob the Maharajah of Gavalcore. I will trust you. Come back to the Palace in two hours' time, and I shall be ready to start. If you play me false, your blood be upon your own head."

" I shall not play you false. In less than three days you will see the home of the Centipede and learn his secret. After that, you can be revenged. It will be necessary for us to travel the first part of our journey by train. Will your Highness, therefore, see that we are driven to the railway ? "

The Rajah having arranged this, Lurgan left the Palace and sent off his telegram to Mir Ali, consisting of the single word " Come," which in due course reached its destination.

Mir Ali promised that he would not mention the matter to Stephen, but he did not promise that he would not do so to Ram Lal ; and he therefore told his fellow-servant the whole of the facts, and requested him to repeat them to Stephen when he asked where Mir Ali was, so that he should not think he was neglecting his duty, for he felt that it was incumbent upon them that Stephen should know, as it affected him as well as Lurgan.

But he at once started off with all the things that Lurgan had ordered, which included two cases of champagne and two of brandy, besides food stores. In due course, after considerable travelling, he reached Jodhpur, where he bought a bullock cart and bullocks and started for the city over the desert and through the jungle.

In due course, Lurgan set off with the Maharajah in a barouche for the railway, where they took tickets for Jodhpur. By the time their journey was at an end Lurgan had quite convinced his companion that he was about to square accounts with the Centipede ; and as he had brought with him a supply of the Rajah's favourite beverage, he kept the topic continually before him and plied him constantly with strong waters.

Arrived at Jodhpur, Lurgan took care that the Maharajah was well entertained, and the next day horses were purchased, and they started to make their way over the desert. After six hours' riding the effect of the

champagne and brandy began to wear off, and it was obvious that the Maharajah was beginning to suffer very greatly from nerves, for he continually glanced from side to side as if he were expecting someone to jump upon him. The unwonted exercise did not improve matters, for his Highness had not ridden so far as this for many years, his time being chiefly taken up in riotous living.

Lurgan, however, would not allow him to turn back or to stop, but kept going ahead.

Soon the light began to fade, and Lurgan knew that the sun had gone down, and in a very short time it would be dark. In eleven years the jungle had made tremendous growth, and he wondered if he would be able to find the entrance to the secret passage, when suddenly the great city wall loomed up in the semi-darkness, and he could see by the blaze that was known to him on several of the tree stems that they were going in the right direction.

At last he came near enough to the masonry to notice that the entrance was almost covered by a thick curtain of creeper ; but he could just distinguish the wheel marks on the ground made by Mir Ali's bullock cart.

Then he looked round at the Maharajah, and he could see that he was in the direst state of terror.

Lurgan said nothing, only seized the horse's bridle and forced his own horse through the curtain of creeper before him, and he knew that he was in the passage. The agony of

mind of the man behind him was truly awful. Lurgan could see the dim light of departing day at the end of the passage, and he therefore forced the horses to increase their pace. Just as they were emerging from the tunnel there came from behind them a piercing shriek, followed by a long, wailing moan. The horses both suddenly reared and plunged in abject terror, and then began to tremble like aspen leaves. Suddenly, another shriek was heard from the tunnel, followed by the same, low, wailing moan, when both horses, tired out as they were after their long journey, bolted off. The Maharajah, Lurgan could see, was scared to death, while his eyes almost started out of his head ; but, being naturally an expert horseman, he instinctively sat his horse well and endeavoured to pull it in. Lurgan called to him to be careful of the great masses of fallen masonry, but he might as well have called to the wind. Horse and rider simply flew over the ground. All the time there echoed about the place a mocking laugh most diabolical in its malignity. Lurgan tried to follow the Maharajah, but could do little more than keep him in sight. Suddenly, he saw the horse swerve aside and pitch his rider some two or three yards from him, and then make off at a gallop.

Lurgan hastened to the spot where his companion had fallen, and kneeling down to ascertain his condition, found that there were no bones broken, and that the Maharajah was only stunned. He cried out to Mir Ali, and

heard him call back in response. At length, the servant appeared on the scene, and together they carried the Maharajah up the steps to the palace, where they laid him on a bed of dry grass, and Mir Ali went to get Lurgan some food, for he was nearly starving. When he was gone, Lurgan looked round at the place that had been their home for so many years, and it affected him very deeply as he noticed the decay and ruin that had taken place. A large portion of the roof of the audience-chamber had fallen in, and at one end of the splendid room there was an aperture big enough to drive a coach through. There still remained one or two large pieces of furniture that had been left there, being too big to remove, but these were covered with dust and dirt and were cracked and warped beyond repair. The ante-rooms were in about the same state as they were when they left, but a large portion of the fretted balcony had fallen out and lay broken and shattered on the terrace below.

Large bats had taken possession of the place, and flapped about, frightened at the light of the lamp that stood on an upturned case.

It was an infinitely pathetic sight to Lurgan as he sat on a box and waited for Mir Ali to return with the food. His memory went back to the time when he lived here in peace and security. The old city was truly a monument of their past. Every stone and crevice of it was so well known to him, that to see it decaying and broken cut him to the heart. But it

was useless to regret ; there was the future to look to—Stephen's future, and the future of his wife. It was his mission in life to save them, and, once having put his hand to the plough, he must never turn back. Then he rose from the box on which he was seated, and, taking up the lamp, crossed over to the rough bed on which the figure of the Maharajah lay. Here, in this grim, dead palace, the man was entirely at his mercy. He could kill him as he lay with the greatest of ease, or he could carry him to the edge of the terrace and lift him on to the marble rail and push him over, so that he would drop on to the rocks below.

But he could not do this thing in cold blood. No, he would let the man work out his own end. It would come soon enough. He would not stain his hands with the blood of such a brute. Yes, he would have that much mercy, though he knew well that there would be little or no mercy extended to Stephen if his enemy could only get him to Mhurrapuir. Soon Mir Ali came in with the food, and he handed the brandy flask to the servant, telling him to try and restore the insensible Rajah. The man forced the flask between the prostrate man's teeth, and before long he opened his eyes and was sitting up.

Dazed and stunned, it was some time before he could bring himself to his normal condition, and his surprise was very great when he saw a native servant."

"Where am I?" he asked, as he gazed around him

"You are in the palace that was once the hiding-place of the Centipede."

"Ah!" and he looked around at the curious pieces of furniture and the strange collection of *débris* on every side.

"My servant, Mir Ali, will prepare you some food if you will remain quiet. Your horse bolted with you and put you down."

"I remember. There were fearful screams. They haunt me even now. Give me, I pray you, something to drink, for I thirst."

Lurgan opened a case of champagne and took out a bottle, and very soon the Maharajah was himself again, and when Mir Ali brought the food he was able to partake of a little.

Later that night they went to sleep on their heaps of dried grass, and Lurgan fervently thanked the Fates that he had been so far successful.

The next morning the Maharajah insisted on having champagne and brandy for breakfast, and continued to drink for the rest of the day. By nightfall that evening he was in a hopeless state.

Lurgan succeeded in getting him out on to the terrace, and tried to interest him in the beautiful view that by this time was illumined with silver moonlight. Then Mir Ali went to a small room at the back of the audience-chamber where there were a number of pipes with mouth-pieces leading to different parts of the city, and where an electric bell was fixed to give warning that strangers had crossed

the threshold of the tunnel at the entrance. Mir Ali had freshly charged the batteries, and as the wires had been carried in steel casing the instrument was still in working order, despite the number of years that it had been idle.

Mir Ali, knowing that the Rajah was on the terrace, selected one of the mouthpieces and proceeded to blow into it with a rising and falling breath. This produced the most appalling shriek, ending in a moaning wail, which appeared to come from somewhere at the bottom of the steps, and was followed by a burst of even more diabolical laughter. These sounds were too much for the Maharajah in his present condition. With bloodless lips and scared face, his great black eyes staring horribly, he listened for a minute, then dashed into the lamp-lit room and threw himself into a corner, crouching down as if he expected to be beaten with a whip. Lurgan followed him into the room. It was not a pleasant sight. Still the shrieks and laughter went on ringing through the absolutely still city, sometimes near at hand and sometimes far away, until the Maharajah's agony of mind was terrible to witness. Like a child he cried to Lurgan to come and protect him from these great grey apes that were continually snapping and snarling at him from every side. He must get away from the place, because it was haunted by thousands and thousands of devils. Lurgan to ease his mind promised that he would go and drive them away,

and went off to Mir Ali, and bade him only make the sounds about once an hour, for they were getting on his nerves as well.

That night was a terrible one for both of them ; neither had a wink of sleep, for the Rajah was continually crying out that a grey ape with red eyes was sitting on his chest and trying to strangle him. Then he would lie quite still until suddenly there broke upon the calm night air another shriek, ending in a low moan that echoed through the dead city and then died away among the trees.

These nerve-destroying sounds occurred at intervals all night, until Lurgan was only too glad to see the dawn breaking.

All the next day the Maharajah drank continually, refusing to take any food, and Lurgan knew what that meant ; it needed only a little more to upset his reason. Strange to say, the liquor of which he drank so copiously appeared to have little or no effect upon him ; the more he consumed, the quieter and more subdued he became ; but it was quite evident that under this quiet lurked the devil of insanity. Before long he would burst into a fit of ungovernable rage. The expression in his eyes was that of a wild beast who cowers into a corner continually watching his keeper, only requiring the man to be off his guard for one moment, and the beast will spring upon him and tear him to pieces.

The day wore on, and Lurgan used all his influence to induce the Maharajah to come out on to the terrace, where he endeavoured to interest

him in conversation ; but without any success, for all the time he sat listening intently, as if he expected every minute to hear the terrible shrieks break out once again. But Lurgan had taken pity on him, and told Mir Ali not to harrow his nerves any further for the present.

Lurgan called his attention to the wonderful sky, for the sun was sinking in a glorious bed of purple, gold, and amethyst, while the jungle lay dark and mysterious below.

But the Rajah was not for sunsets. He was sullen and morose, and refused to take the slightest notice of anything that was said to him. Suddenly he sprang from the box on which he had been sitting and began to stride quickly up and down, wringing his hands as he did so. Lurgan had seen the symptoms before, and instantly rose to his feet to call Mir Ali, when the Rajah heard him and in a moment turned upon him. The look upon the man's face was that of a mad wolf. All semblance to a human being had departed, and in its place was a creature without soul or reason, a terrible raving maniac.

As the two faced one another, Lurgan at once realised that he was himself in the tightest place of his life, and one from which he must think himself extremely lucky if he escaped unhurt.

Dead silence ensued for about a minute, while Lurgan endeavoured to fix his eyes upon those of the madman, but without success. The sun threw a superb golden glow over

everything, even touching the figure before him. There was not a sound to be heard ; everything was as still and quiet as could be ; when, suddenly, there rang out the shrill note of the electric bell, that warned them of the approach of strangers through the tunnel.

The sound so astonished Lurgan that for one moment he was taken off his guard ; and, before he could utter a cry, the Maharajah was upon him and had seized him in his arms with a grip like steel wire. He could feel the madman's hot breath upon his cheek and the deep beating of his heart as he strained him against his chest. Before he knew what was happening, he felt himself lifted bodily and carried along to the end of the terrace, where, he knew, the balustrading was broken away, and there was a drop of over seventy feet sheer down the rock side on to a marble tank beneath.

Mir Ali came running out to tell Lurgan that the bell had sounded ; when he saw the two struggling at the end of the terrace he could do nothing ; he was almost paralysed. They were locked in a deadly embrace right at the edge of the stonework. To and fro they fought, with dilating eyes and panting with exertion. Like madmen they wrestled, Lurgan endeavouring to save himself from being thrown down, the Maharajah bent on his opponent's destruction.

Suddenly they tottered for one brief moment, then with a terrible cry fell together on to the marble tank below.

CHAPTER VII.

LURGAN PAYS THE PENALTY.

WITHIN forty-eight hours of Lurgan's departure for Mhurrapuir, the P. & O. boat conveying Longford and his wife took up her moorings in Bombay Harbour. By eight o'clock in the morning the party had been landed in the launches of the Director of Indian Marine, so that all ceremony might be finished before the heat became too oppressive.

In due course, Calcutta was reached, but it was not until the evening of the ensuing day that Longford was able to send for Ram Lal to know how it happened that Mir Ali had not come to take the service that he had accepted. He received his faithful old servant with the greatest kindness, and Ram Lal was visibly affected by the meeting. However, he soon pulled himself together and repeated all that had been told him by his fellow-servant. How Lurgan had gone to Mhurrapuir, and had sent a telegram to Mir Ali commanding him to set out for Chittarre ; what Mir Ali had taken with him ; and, indeed, every detail that he

remembered. When Stephen heard all this, he was very much concerned ; for Ram Lal had explained exactly what was Gregory's plan of campaign, and he knew well enough that the Maharajah was far too dangerous an enemy to allow Lurgan to get out of such an adventure unscathed.

He at once grasped the motive of the whole thing, that Lurgan desired to keep the Maharajah a prisoner in the city ; but he doubted if his friend really understood the ferocity and cunning of the man he was dealing with. It was a foolhardy scheme, and one that he felt would end disastrously for all concerned, unless he was able to step in and prevent trouble. Therefore, he must start at once for Chittarre, and Ram Lal should come with him. It might perhaps be necessary to explain his absence by saying that he was going away on a visit to an old friend, and would return in the course of a few days.

So he gave instructions to Ram Lal, and in a few hours they caught the train for Jodphur, where they arrived after a long journey. All the time that he sat in the railway carriage he was fuming at the slow speed at which they were travelling. Every minute seemed an age. He knew that it behoved him to get to his destination with all speed. Even now he might be too late. By the time that the train drew up at Jodphur, he was in a state of nervousness such as he had never known before.

He at once hired two good horses, and Ram

Lal purchased some food, so that they could make their journey in comparative comfort, and in less than an hour after leaving the rail, they were in the saddle and had started upon their ride across the desert.

Hour after hour they rode on, only stopping once or twice to rest their horses and to give them a small feed, taking something to eat themselves, but directly this was finished they mounted and got away once more. All the while Stephen was silent and miserable ; while Ram Lal rode over the familiar ground with many a glance at Longford's worried and anxious face. Somehow, it appeared to him that his master had changed. His iron nerve was not what it used to be. There were signs of distress in the features he knew so well and had studied so closely.

If it had been possible for him to look into his master's brain, he would have noted there a sense of deep regret that certain actions, for which he alone was responsible, had brought this great danger to his only friend—regret that he had acted as he had in refusing to take Lurgan's advice not to enter into the scheme against the Maharajah. Had he done so, they would never have found themselves in this position ; and, moreover, the trouble with Blanche would not have occurred.

Heavens ! If Lurgan were dead before he could get to Chittarre, he would never forgive himself, for his death would be upon his hands. No, they must push on, faster, faster. He

seemed as if he could almost hear his old enemy's infuriated roar of rage when he discovered that he had been tricked by Gregory. That fact would mean certain death. The thought was too horrible.

Soon, seeing the jungle before him, he pushed on with renewed vigour, and before long they were threading their way through the trees. After three hours' more riding, they found themselves at the entrance to the tunnel. Thrusting aside the hanging tendrils of the creeper that curtained the arch, Longford forced his horse into the darkness, followed by Ram Lal, and as he came out at the other end he could see that the last glow of the setting sun was upon everything, lighting up the gnarled stems of the great trees and the twisted tendrils of the creepers that were smothering the remains of the houses with their snake-like coils, throwing up the rugged mounds of masonry that once had been proud temples, but now were nothing more than masses of *débris*, shapeless and moss-covered, into high relief.

On he galloped, heedless of the scattered boulders that threatened their path. His horse was a good beast, and, despite the fact that it had done such a long journey already, showed wonderful cleverness in avoiding the dangers of the way. All Stephen wanted now was to get to the palace, that he might leap from his saddle and dash up the steps to find his friend sitting there safe and sound. How

eagerly he scanned the terrace, which was being brought nearer and nearer to his view every second by the energies of his good horse.

"On, on!" he cried, as he called upon the willing beast for yet one more effort. At last he reached the steps and threw himself from the saddle, leaving the animal standing with pumping sides and flaked in foam from shoulder to hoof.

Suddenly, as his foot touched the first step, he heard a cry, and looking up caught sight of two figures fighting and struggling on the edge of the terrace above, just where a portion of the balustrading had been broken away. Spellbound, rooted to the spot, he watched the struggling pair. Only too well he realised that the Maharajah was trying to throw Lurgan over on to the marble tank beneath. The moment was awful: helpless, and unable to move, he could do nothing but stand with dilating eyes, watching in an agony of suspense the grim fight for life that was taking place, while he was powerless to help.

Here and there they fought, first near the edge, then a little way from it. But the Maharajah was Herculean compared to Lurgan, and the struggle seemed terribly one-sided. He saw that Gregory had his opponent by the throat. Round and round they staggered. So still was everything that Stephen could distinctly hear the short, hard breathing of the two men as they swung one way and another in their efforts to secure the advantage.

But he knew well enough that it could not last long ; one false step, or sudden weakness on the part of either, and the struggle would be over for ever.

Suddenly, to his horror he saw them both give one lurch, and with a terrible cry, that rang in his ears for many a long day after, they fell sheer over the edge, locked in one another's arms.

First, they fell on to a low dense shrub that grew out of a crevice in the rock, then they fell onward to the edge of the marble tank below, which they struck with a dull thud.

Stephen covered his face with his hands to shut out the horrible sight, while Ram Lal stood quaking with fear, his face drawn and distorted with the terror of the episode.

For the space of a few seconds Stephen stood perfectly dazed, until with an effort he recovered his self-possession and made his way with all speed to the scene of the tragedy, after first telling Ram Lal to secure the horses and then to follow him. But, as he clambered over the mounds of scattered masonry heaped on all sides, he told himself that it was absolutely hopeless to expect to find either of them alive. Descending into the empty tank in the fast fading light, he at once discovered the bodies of the two men locked in a deadly embrace.

The Rajah had fallen underneath Lurgan, and was quite dead ; but Gregory's heart was still faintly beating, although it was easy to

see that his back had been broken, and that he had received other terrible injuries.

When Ram Lal arrived, he was at once despatched to find Mir Ali and bring back some brandy, together with a lantern (for the darkness had suddenly come on), and, if possible, a rough stretcher. In the meantime Stephen unloosened the hold of the Maharajah, and made his poor friend as comfortable as he could under the circumstances.

All the time his heart was almost breaking when he realised the terrible outcome of his actions. Looking down at the prostrate form lying there hovering between life and death, his conscience smote him that he should have brought him to this. It was for his sake that Lurgan had come here—to aid him in freeing his life from the fury of his enemies ; and it was all over now except the sorrow and the regret ; and that would never be over. Now he was to pay the penalty of his misdeeds.

In a short while Mir Ali and Ram Lal returned, bringing with them a rough litter on which grass had been spread. None of them spoke. With the utmost tenderness, they lifted the injured man on to the improvised stretcher, and carried him up the steep side of the tank, then very slowly and carefully up the steps to the audience-chamber, where they laid him on a bed of grass.

Then Stephen gave him brandy, and at last was rewarded by seeing the dying man open his eyes.

Very softly and slowly he spoke, and Stephen knelt down so that he might catch the words as they came from his lips.

"Oh, Stephen! Why did you come here?"

"Because I found out what you were doing, and I came on at once to help you."

"He attacked me on the terrace, went mad, and tried to throw me over. But is he dead?"

"Yes."

Then he'll never denounce you now, old man." And a smile of infinite sweetness swept like a ray of sunlight over the agony-stricken features.

"No, he'll never denounce me now. But, Gregory, dear old Gregory, it's too awful to see you lying here, while I'm helpless to do anything for you. It breaks my heart."

"Don't grieve for me, Stephen. It's the way I always hoped I should end it—doing something to help you. Now I can die easily, because the danger is over, so far as he is concerned, and because you've come to be with me. It's good to die like this. Give me your hand. It's so dark."

Stephen took the thin, stone-cold hand in both of his strong ones, and tried to chafe some warmth into it, while Gregory lay quite still for some minutes with closed eyes.

Suddenly he opened them again, and said in the feeblest of tones—"It's good, Stephen, to die in the dear old city—the 'Sanctuary of

Refuge,' as we have so often called it. It's home again, isn't it, although it is going to rapid decay, our old home, yours and mine ? "

" Yes, Gregory, it is."

Another pause.

" Stephen, there are two things I want you to promise me before I go."

" What are they, old man ? "

" First, that you will bury me in the Tombs of the Kings. It won't be sacrilege, because, you see, I lived so long in their palace, and I can then sleep my long sleep in regal state. Will you promise me that ? "

" I promise."

" And the other thing I want you to promise is, that you will forgive Blanche. You see, she hoped so much. She loved you, Stephen, just as much as I did ; and, God knows, she must have suffered very bitterly, for she has had to live without you."

" Gregory, I bear no ill will to Blanche, and for your sake as well as my own I will try to make it up to her in some way."

" Thank you, dear old Stephen. I know you will keep your promise. Now I can die quite easy in my mind, and when I'm buried Chittarre will be my lasting monument. Something has told me for years that I should die here, and it's good to die here, very good ; but, Stephen, it's dark, and oh, so cold. Mir Ali, Mir Ali, see that the horses are sent to the desert edge. Surely, the Master will return this night. I know no rest while he is away.

Say nothing of this, Mir Ali. It is to save him, to save”

Then the brave grey head fell back, the jaw dropped, a quiver passed through the maimed and broken frame, and the soul passed away to eternity. Gregory Lurgan had found peace at last. No more would he know anxiety or terror, no more would he experience sleepless nights of mental torture, walking perpetually up and down, up and down, thinking and scheming until the dawn came, and with it fitful slumber born of exhaustion. No one ever knew what the man suffered during those long vigils. A bad sleeper at best, he dreaded each night as it came, for it meant unceasing horror and strain, that racked his system and left him utterly dejected. Now all this was over, and he had fallen into his long sleep, to wake again only at the Judgment Day.

To Stephen, the shock of his friend's death was a blow that fairly stunned him. All the light of life seemed suddenly to be extinguished, and he cried aloud to the dead man to speak to him as he knelt there with the thin, cold hand still in his, peering earnestly into the ashen face. But no, the gentle low voice was hushed for ever, and he would never hear it again—never again.

At last Stephen rose from his knees and took a seat upon a box, then gazed intently at the dead man, upon whose features there rested a look of the most intense peace and calm.

As he sat there he thought to himself that all joy in life was over. What did it matter now that he had risen to the height of his ambition and gained wealth and honours, while the man who had helped him to it lay cold and still in death, practically killed by his hand? Up to this time he had scarcely realised how much he loved Gregory and what it was to lose him. Yes; all was over. Their years of pleasant intercourse and devoted friendship were at an end, and the second book of the Centipede was finished. Now nothing remained but to carry out Lurgan's wishes and bury him in the Kings' Tombs, then depart from Chittarre for ever, to live out his destiny alone, with only the memory of his faithful friend to guide him. For the remainder of his life he would remember Chittarre as the grave of Gregory Lurgan, resting peacefully in the grim, dark caves, side by side with the ashes of kings and princes.

Then he rose to his feet and gazed about him, at the decay and general destruction that was taking place on every side in his once royal apartment. With a sigh he passed out on to the terrace, leaving Mir Ali and Ram Lal staring first vaguely at the body and then at the Master, leaning grim and silent over the stone balustrading.

The moon would be up very soon; even now its rim was peeping over the horizon. Inch by inch it rose, until, in its full glory, shining as bright and clear as noonday, it flooded the

dead city with its silver light, and crept slowly into the audience-chamber, as if it were anxious to see what it was that lay there so still and cold.

Then Stephen turned. The last sad duty had to be performed ; so, calling to the servants to bring the litter, he made his way with them down the steps and over the rough heaps of masonry, until they found the body of the Maharajah, which they lifted on to the litter and carried with the greatest difficulty up the narrow and winding path leading to the entrance of the Tombs. Here they laid him on the ground, and, returning to the audience-chamber, carried the body of Lurgan to the entrance.

Stephen had brought two lanterns with him, and they at once made their way into the dark and silent caves.

It was the weirdest sight imaginable. The light of the lanterns lit up the great carved pillars hewn out of the solid rock, and touched the roof, while far away to the right and left immense spaces of inky blackness predominated. Huge bats and birds that had taken up their quarters there flew about with much flapping of wings and uncanny noise, disturbed by the strange light and the figures invading their sanctuary.

At each side of the main cavern, smaller caves branched off under beautifully carved arches ; these were the tombs, each containing a sarcophagus carved out of the solid rock, in

which reposed the ashes of some former king of Chittarre. The whole place possessed that strange earth-smell peculiar to great caverns.

Stephen knew every nook and corner of them, having explored them many and many a time in his antiquarian researches, and was therefore able to lead the way at once to a small cave that branched off to the right, where he remembered there were two tombs of stone that for some reason had never been occupied. To reach these, it was necessary to pass down a long, narrow passage that sloped very steeply, and then turn sharply to the right. The air in this passage was intensely cold, and by the time that the tomb was reached, Stephen realised that his teeth were chattering in his head.

Going straight to the first sarcophagus, he told the servants to push back the heavy stone that covered it, and on looking in he found it, as he expected, quite empty. Then he desired them to return with him to the entrance, and bring one of the bodies in the litter ; and in a short space the Maharajah was lying in his tomb ; and once more they returned to fetch the body of Lurgan. On reaching the cave, he was placed in the other empty tomb ; and Stephen, silently committing the bodies to the earth, ordered that the stone should be pushed over the top. So all that was mortal of Gregory Lurgan was laid to its long rest.

At last, all being completed, he gave the men one of the lanterns and sent them back

to the palace, while he stayed in the tombs for a short time. The place somehow suited his mood. Depressed and sad as he was, the solemnity of the great caverns soothed him. The inky blackness of everything outside the lantern light made the scene doubly impressive, while the absolute stillness and silence could almost be felt.

Standing in the middle of the cave, holding the lantern well above him, he could see the extreme beauty of the carving in the cave and the grandeur of its proportion. It was difficult to say at what time in the history of the dead city these most wonderful caverns had been hewn out of the solid rock, but there was little doubt that they were quite unique, and made a fitting burial place for Gregory Lurgan.

With the lantern in his left hand, he was examining a slender column that supported a low portion of the roof, when, suddenly, there rang through the great echoing caverns a shriek that turned his blood to water. Again and once again it rang out; then all was silence, save for the flapping of the wings of the birds disturbed by the extraordinary sound.

With this sudden and piercing shriek ringing in his ears, Stephen, in his surprise, swung round instinctively on his guard, but so quickly that the force of the swing knocked the candle out of the small socket in the lantern, and before he could open the little door to restore it to its place, the flame went out, and he was left in total darkness.

The bravest man in the world might be excused for feeling disquieted in such circumstances ; and as he stood there in the darkness that weighed upon him like a pall, the hair on his head seemed as if it were bristling on end, and a feeling of intense chill passed down his spine.

Who could have uttered such a shriek ? It was most certainly a woman, and this made it doubly mysterious ; and now his light had gone out, and he had no means of rekindling it.

He knew well enough what a really awkward position he was in, for daylight never entered into these caves, and it would prove an extremely difficult task to get out of the place without a light on account of the many winding passages and side caverns, not to mention the hundreds of pillars that barred the way. Moreover, he knew the reason of the extreme coldness of the air in the passage leading to this cavern ; for a little further on it branched into two paths, and one of them, he was not quite certain which, was barred by a fissure some ten feet in width and hundreds of feet deep, that meant certain death to anyone who did not keep a careful look out ahead.

In exploring the place, he had discovered that right at the bottom of the fissure ran a subterranean river ; for, on getting near the edge, one could distinctly hear the rush of the water over rocks a great distance below. Remembering all this, it behoved him to be

very careful in the direction that he took, for any mistake would mean disaster. But it was imperative that he should get out of the caves at once.

Having made up his mind on this point, he proceeded to feel his way along the wall of the cavern, until with considerable difficulty he managed to locate the entrance ; then, turning sharply to the left and keeping his hand upon the rocks at the side, stretching out as far as possible, and stepping with the utmost care, he slowly groped his way along.

It was nervous work, for all the while the cold air coming from the fissure blew upon his face, and the tension on his brain made him fancy that he could hear the sound of rushing water somewhere.

As he moved cautiously along, it seemed to him that he was going down-hill, and he quite expected at any moment to be hurled a hundred feet into the bowels of the earth.

At each step, he placed his foot out to see that he was still about to tread on solid rock, while the ice-cold air chilled him to the very marrow. Then it occurred to him that he might make safer and better progress if he lay down at full length, and still touching the rocky wall with his left hand, reach as far as he could with his right. In this manner he went some distance, until with a start he found to his horror that he was absolutely at the mouth of the fissure, and could trace the edge of the precipice with his numbed fingers. As he

lay there he could distinctly hear the rush and roar of water tearing over jagged rocks a great distance below, and he turned quite sick at the thought of how near destruction he had been. Only one or two steps more, and nothing could have saved him. But now he was safe ; the worst part was over, and all he had to do was to retrace his steps on the other side of the passage until he could find the corner that led to safety.

Rising to his feet and still touching the wall, he retreated some ten paces ; then spreading out his arms he soon touched the other side with his right hand. Turning about, he felt his way along until he was able to locate the corner, and knew by the change in the temperature that he was in the right direction for the main cavern. But the narrow escape, added to the trouble that he had recently been through, quite unnerved him, for he was shaking like a man with the palsy.

Now he had to find his way into the main cavern ; and this should not prove difficult, as, the passage he was in being very narrow, he could very easily touch each wall, and when these walls ceased, he knew that he would be somewhere near the main cave.

All this turned out as he expected ; and he then turned directly to his right, and groped his way along just like a blind man, earnestly hoping that he would soon touch one of the great carved pillars with his right hand, so that he might know that he was in the main

cavern, and moving in the direction of the entrance.

On he went, very slowly and cautiously, with both arms extended, every moment expecting to touch something that might be a guide as to his exact position ; but, not meeting anything, he assumed that he was walking in the middle of the cave, and should ere long see some little glimmer of light. By this time he was thoroughly worn out, for he had already done an exceptionally hard day's work in getting to Chittarre, and the events occurring since had combined to bring him to a state of absolute exhaustion, both mental and physical. Yet there was nothing for it but to keep on trying to find the way out. At all costs, he must keep his heart up, although he felt anything but elated. The prospect of being shut up in these dreary caves, hopelessly wandering from one place to another in the grim blackness, was enough to send any man mad. The silence was terribly oppressive. Slowly as he walked, his footsteps echoed through the caverns, and made matters worse. Suddenly, he was brought to a standstill by striking his face and body against some hard substance, and on examination he felt that it was a carved pillar, and, moreover, on his left hand side, proving conclusively that he was in one of the side caves, having taken a wrong direction. This was indeed heartbreaking, just as he was expecting to find himself making for the entrance. It would never do to go on like this.

He might perhaps wander about in this maze of blackness until he fell down and died from sheer exhaustion, without ever seeing the light of day, for the caves extended a great distance into the hillside. All the time he was straining his ears as if expecting to hear someone call, when suddenly a cold shudder passed through him, for he distinctly heard a low moan quite close at hand, as if someone was in great agony. Again he strained his ears to listen, while he trembled like a leaf; but nothing further disturbed the silence save the squeak of the bats in the roof and the soft, silk-like rustle of their wings.

Then he seemed to lose his head and rushed wildly here and there, striking himself against pillars and arches, until at last his foot touched something lying on the ground, and he fell over it with a thud. Trying to raise himself, he put out his hand and touched a human face, cold as ice. With a yell, he jumped to his feet and ran a few yards; then his brain gave way, and he fell senseless upon his face.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEPHEN ATTAINS HIGH HONOUR.

MIR ALI and his fellow-servant returned with all speed to the palace immediately after Stephen had dismissed them, and only too glad were they to get away from the grim blackness of the gruesome caves, haunted as they imagined them to be by the ghosts of the long-buried dead.

Arrived at their quarters they set about preparing food, for Ram Lal was well-nigh exhausted by his recent exertions, added to the wearisome railway journey and the still longer and more trying ride across the desert and through the jungle.

To their minds it seemed a most extraordinary thing that Stephen should desire to remain in the silence of those caverns with the dust of dead kings alone for company. But the ways of the Sahib were always strange and unaccountable, and it was not for them to enquire the reason of his actions, but only to obey, without question, any order that he gave.

As they proceeded to make their meal, Mir Ali related to his fellow-servant all that had occurred to him since he came to the city—how Lurgan had arrived, bringing with him the Maharajah; the latter's terror when he heard the shrieks that echoed through the ruins; then later the ringing of the bell that told of the entrance of strangers into the tunnel, and of his proceeding to the terrace to warn Lurgan, only to find the Rajah struggling with Gregory. Standing there, helpless and horror-struck, without being able to assist in any way, he had seen them both disappear over the edge and fall with a terrible cry on to the tank below.

So terrified had he been by the episode that he had rushed back to the palace and thrown himself on the floor, covering his face with his hands to shut out the memory of the horrible sight which recurred continually to his mind. Even now he seemed as if he could hear Lurgan's shriek of agony as he fell. It was only on the arrival of Ram Lal with the message from Stephen that he was able to regain his self-possession.

Gregory Lurgan's death affected these two faithful servants very greatly, for both were sincerely and deeply attached to him—almost as much as they were to Stephen—and to witness his tragic and terrible end had filled them both with unspeakable horror.

Tired out by his exertions, Ram Lal fell asleep while Mir Ali awaited the return of

Stephen. Hour after hour went by and no sound was heard save the deep breathing of the sleeper and the occasional howl of some wild beast in the jungle. The moon riding majestically in the cloudless sky shone brilliantly, rendering everything for miles as clear as at noonday. But still no sign of the Master. At last Mir Ali, too, fell asleep, and was only awakened by finding the sun streaming into the apartment. Hastily rising, he awoke Ram Lal, and together they made their way to the audience-chamber, expecting to find Stephen asleep on his bed of dried grass, but greatly to their astonishment there was nothing to be seen of him. Then they searched the palace high and low, without discovering any trace whatever of their master.

At last, going once again to the audience-chamber, they consulted together as to what was best to be done. It was quite certain that Stephen had not returned to the palace, and there was little doubt in their minds that he was still in the caverns. What could he be doing there so long? Surely something must have happened, and it behooved them to go at once to search for him.

Having come to this conclusion, they took their lanterns, and Mir Ali having filled a flask of brandy in case of necessity, they proceeded again to face the grim blackness of the Tombs of the Kings.

Arrived at the mouth of the cavern they lit up their candles, and were soon

walking in the intense blackness. Proceeding very cautiously, they moved along holding their lanterns well above them so that the light should penetrate as far as possible. With the utmost care they searched every passage and side cave until at length they approached the far end of the main cavern, when suddenly Ram Lal, clutching his companion by the arm, pointed to something black lying upon the ground about two yards from a carved pillar. Quickly approaching, they discovered it to be the body of Stephen, prone upon his face, while within a few feet, to their intense amazement, lay the figure of a woman.

Holding a lantern over the face, they both started back in astonishment, for it proved to be none other than Blanche.

What could it all mean? Why were these two here, and in this state? At first they imagined both were dead, but to their intense relief discovered them to be only unconscious.

As quick as thought Mir Ali produced the brandy and, having raised the prostrate figure of his master, placed the flask between his lips and poured some of the spirit down his throat; and before very long, to the man's great joy, Stephen opened his eyes.

For a few moments he lay quite still, hardly able to realise where he was or what had happened to him. Then at last memory returned to him. He recalled how he had knocked the candle of his lantern out when

he swung round after hearing the shriek, and how he had wandered aimlessly about in the darkness until he fell over something lying upon the ground, and in raising himself discovered it to be a human form. After that he remembered no more.

"How long have I been here, Mir Ali?" he asked.

"Many hours, Huzoor."

"I remember, we buried the Sahib Lurgan at moonrise. Is that not so?"

"Even so, Sahib."

"My lantern went out soon after you had gone, then I lost my way," and as he spoke he raised himself on his elbow, and, gazing round, saw Ram Lal endeavouring to revive Blanche. "Who is that? Tell me, Mir Ali."

"Sahib, it is the Mem-sahib Blanche."

"Blanche! Dead?"

"No, Huzoor. She is without sense."

"Ah! Then her presence here accounts for the shriek I heard. But how did she get here? Have you seen her here at all before?"

"No, Huzoor. She must have followed us in when we came with the dead."

"Come, let us get out of this—I've had enough of it."

Endeavouring to raise himself, he found he was too weak to do so, and it was therefore necessary for him to lean upon the two servants for support, while they led him to the entrance. Great was his astonishment when he came out into the open air to find the sun shining

in all its brilliancy, proving that he had been in the caves for the whole night. Sitting down on a rock quite close to the entrance, he bade the men return to fetch Blanche, and in due course they appeared with the inanimate figure of the woman.

The little party then made their way to the palace, where Blanche was laid on a bed of grass, and Stephen waited patiently while Ram Lal prepared him some food, for he was perfectly ravenous, having had nothing to eat since they rested half-way across the desert.

At last the meal was brought, and having satisfied the cravings of hunger he threw himself on to a bed of hay and sank into a profound and refreshing sleep.

The next thing that he remembered was being roused from his slumbers by Mir Ali shaking him by the shoulder.

"Sahib, the warning bell had just sounded ! There are strangers in the city ! What wouldst thou have thy servants do ? "

" Strangers in the city, Mir Ali ! What do you mean ? "

" Huzoor, the bell hath rung not three minutes since. Someone hath entered."

Springing from his couch Stephen shook the grass from his clothing, all the time perfectly calm and collected ; then walking towards the terrace he looked over the Market Square. As he did so Blanche, with an effort, rose from the bed of grass on which she had been sleeping and tottered over towards him.

Her face was deadly white and her cheeks drawn and sunken, while her eyes, unnaturally brilliant, had great black rings round them, proclaiming only too surely the terrors of mental torture that she had gone through ; and, to make her appearance worse, her magnificent black hair had fallen and was hanging over her shoulders in disordered coils, adding to the extraordinary pallor of her cheeks.

" Stephen ! " she cried, as she clutched hold of a great piece of furniture to prevent herself falling, " I heard what Mir Ali said to you. It is Featherstone with his police that has come. God forgive me ! I am the traitor who betrayed you ! Kill me now, as I stand here before you, for I deserve no mercy."

Placing her hands to her head in an agony of despair, she would have fallen with a crash on the floor had not Stephen sprung forward and caught her in his arms.

" Blanche ! " he cried, " tell me all—now, as quickly as possible ! We've no time to lose if it's Featherstone—speak ! "

" Stephen, I'm the wickedest and most wretched woman in the world. My blind passion got the better of me, and—and I sent an anonymous letter to Featherstone telling him of the secret entrance to the city, and that you would probably join Lurgan here, for I knew that Gregory had gone to Mhurrapuir, as I was acting with the Maharajah in a scheme to denounce you, and it

was only when I discovered that the Rajah had been spirited away that I sent to Featherstone in my rage and lust for revenge. So I followed you on here, as I was determined you should not escape. Imagine my horror when I sat crouched in the shadow of the terrace and heard poor Gregory's last words to you. Then I realised that at any moment Featherstone might arrive with his men, for I knew his intention was to journey here to surround the palace to take you by surprise. Oh ! how I hate myself for what I have done."

" Well ? "

" But, God knows, my regrets were too late. I tried to summon up courage to tell you. I saw you enter the Tombs with the men carrying the bodies, but I dared not do it. I went in also and hid. You stayed in that gruesome place alone. As I crouched by a pillar Mir Ali and Ram Lal passed me, but I waited for you. Then in the horrible darkness I became so terrified that I shrieked for help. Then I fainted from sheer terror, and knew no more until I found myself listening to what Mir Ali said just now."

Then Stephen came close up to her, and in a voice as hard and cold as steel said—

" Blanche, there is one thing I want to know. Is Featherstone aware that the Centipede and Stephen Longford are one and the same person ? "

" No, I only sent him the information that news had been given me of the arrival of the

Centipede in India, and that he would be in Chittarre in three days' time, and this is the third."

Stephen's face cleared, and a pleased smile broke over it.

"That is well! So we can all get away. Now, Mir Ali, put as much food together as you possibly can, to carry with us. You, Ram Lal, see that fresh candles are set in the lanterns, and take a good supply with you and plenty of matches, and bring an axe; we shall need it. Quick! It won't be long before they get here. Ah! I see three men coming this way—one is Featherstone, not altered a bit. I wonder if he knows he had been here before. Not this time, my friend."

The last few words were said as he stepped back into the room after gazing over the terrace.

"Mir Ali, just blow down one of the tubes and let us see what effect it has upon our friends."

Mir Ali did as he was told, and there rang out over the city a terrible shriek followed by a burst of diabolical laughter. Instantly he saw the three men stop and look about them in amazement, then consult together.

Turning to Blanche, Stephen laughingly said:

"They think I'm murdering you, so we had better get off. I'm afraid we shall have to carry you for a little while, until you are strong enough to walk."

"No, Stephen, leave me here to die. I don't deserve any mercy. I am a traitor, and must be left to my fate."

"Nonsense, my dear girl—I'm not going to do anything of the sort. You and I are just as good friends as ever we were—I bear you not one particle of ill-feeling. I don't blame you a bit for what you did. If you like, you can show your true devotion by helping me in this tight place. You remember it used to be your pride."

"Then you forgive me, Stephen?"

"Of course I do; there could be no other side to the question. I'm going to cheat these people after all."

"But they will guard the entrance. No one can escape without meeting them."

"I can promise you this much, that when Featherstone gets in here he will find the birds flown and the nest warm. Leave it to me. Come, Mir Ali, give me a hand."

With that the men approached the remains of the throne at the far end of the Chamber, and lifting the top step and the sculptured peacock in one piece, disclosed a narrow flight of steps. After lighting the lanterns they all descended, and the marble was carefully replaced by their united efforts. Then Stephen led the way, and the two servants followed after assisting Blanche.

Down a steep flight of steps they went, then along a flat passage hewn out of the solid rock. Having traversed this for about a

hundred yards, they began to descend more steps for a considerable distance, then suddenly came to a couple of narrow passages. Taking the right-hand one they passed along it, over a slimy, moss-grown stone floor, with walls reeking wet and a stone roof dripping with water. On one side were cells, that Stephen told them had in ancient times been used for the imprisonment and torture of criminals ; then up steps again and through another passage until they arrived at what had once been a wooden door ; this opened into a cave, on one side of which great trunks and branches of jungle trees had woven a network of green. Blowing out the candles in the lanterns for fear any one watching outside should see them, they crossed over the cave and entered a narrow pathway with perpendicular rocky walls towering up perhaps thirty feet on each side, with the blue sky overhead. At the end of this natural passage the way was barred by the thick tendrils of the trees, which Mir Ali proceeded to cut through to allow the party to pass. Great blocks of masonry on every hand, bound and fettered by the jungle, proved to be the city wall, and here the growth was almost impenetrable, but by dint of very hard work they managed to squeeze their way through until they were about three hundreds yards to the right, when they struck the path so well known to them.

Leaving Ram Lal to take care of Blanche, Stephen and Mir Ali returned very stealthily

to the tunnel approach so that they might ascertain whether there were any horses left outside, and what men were guarding the entrance.

As they drew near enough to be certain, they discovered five horses—three tied to one tree and two to another, guarded by two men, one walking up and down and the other quietly sleeping.

Whispering to Mir Ali to bear away to the right and get near the sleeping man in case of his awaking and giving the alarm, Longford crept round to the edge of the wall, holding the little bottle that he always carried ; then, screening himself among the tendrils of the creeper that hung down like a vast curtain over the masonry, waited until the sentry turned to walk back, then sprang upon him with as little noise as possible, and in less than two minutes the man was insensible. Then, turning his attention to the sleeper, he placed him in the same state of temporary unconsciousness.

At his bidding Mir Ali untied the horses, and Stephen mounted one and led the other, while Mir Ali did the same with the remaining three, and soon they came to the spot where Ram Lal was resting with Blanche. Then it only remained to contrive an arrangement to enable Blanche to ride when they set off through the jungle, and thence across the desert.

Ill as Blanche was, she made brave efforts

to keep going with the others, for she knew the importance of getting as far away from Chittarre as possible, since there was no telling whether some of the men with Featherstone had not ridden their horses into the city, and would thus be in a position to follow them. However, in due course the little party reached the edge of the jungle, and, after another hour's ride over the sand, dismounted to give the horses a rest, for they began to show signs of distress, having done the very fatiguing journey to the city before. In the meantime food was produced, and Blanche having partaken of a good meal felt better able to resume the ride. Once again they started, and although Blanche kept going with great pluck, yet every mile told upon her, and at last Stephen saw her swaying backwards and forwards on her saddle in imminent danger of falling. So there was nothing for it but to stop once more for a rest, and when she felt better they resumed their journey just as darkness came on, which added very considerably to their difficulties. But all they could do was to plod patiently on, until at last they were rewarded by seeing the lights of Jodphur twinkling in the distance, and their drooping spirits revived at the sight.

It did not take them long to reach the outskirts of the city, where they dismounted and turned the horses loose, while Blanche re-arranged her dress and hair as well as she could in the circumstances, and they entered

the main street. Then Mir Ali was sent to find an ekka, in which Stephen and his companion took their seats, and the servants made their way to the station to reserve a compartment in the first train that started for Agra.

As he passed a suitable shop, Stephen purchased shawls and wraps for Blanche, so that she might travel as an invalid without causing remark, and on arriving at the station, they found their lucky star to be in the ascendant, for a train was due to start within the next half-hour.

Stephen led Blanche to the carriage reserved for them and made her as comfortable as possible, and then went to obtain food and papers to while away the time.

At length the train started, and with a sigh of relief Stephen settled himself down for the journey, while Blanche, tired out with her exertions, soon sank into a quiet sleep.

As he sat smoking in his corner Stephen puzzled his brain as to the best means of telling Blanche when she awoke that it would be as well for both of them that he should leave her at Agra, it being extremely probable that someone would recognise him, and in that case the position would be anything but pleasant for either of them.

Difficult as the subject was, he knew that it had to be broached, and he must therefore steel himself to face the unpleasant task.

At last she opened her eyes, and after he

had enquired if she felt better for her rest, he turned the conversation with the greatest delicacy to their present position.

She at once saw that he wished to say something of importance to her, and implored him to speak freely.

This was a great relief to his mind, and he then told her that he considered it would be prudent for them to part at Agra and each take their own way, to which she had no alternative but to agree, although he could plainly see that she felt the humiliation.

He was genuinely sorry at her distress, and told her that he hoped she would come and stay with them and make a friend of his wife, so that the old feeling of good fellowship might be renewed.

She bit her lip with annoyance when she heard this suggestion, but overcame the feeling of jealousy that rose in her heart.

"Stephen," she replied with a choking sensation in her throat, "you must forgive me, but I cannot. I thank you for the kindly feeling that prompts the invitation, but at present I cannot. I dare not trust myself. Someday perhaps, when I have been schooled to see things in a calm and dispassionate light, I may do so. Now, forgive me for saying so, it would only be agony to me to be near you. Believe me, it is better that we part. I feel it is. You have your work to do and I—well, it does not matter much what happens to me, and it is useless to

discuss it. For old times' sake I shall take a pride in your success and watch everything that you do. Believe me, I shall guard your secret always for Gregory Lurgan's sake as well as your own."

Stephen could not answer; he felt that she was right. It was best that things should be as she said.

When Agra was reached and the train was waiting in the station he stood at the carriage door and wished her good-bye. It was then that she felt the full force of the parting, and knew well enough that all was over between them, but she would be brave for the sake of the past, and she would never let him know what this parting meant to her. An unutterable sadness possessed her, and as the train moved away and she lost sight of him she fell back on the seat in an agony of grief.

Stephen watched the lights of the train as it steamed away, bearing the woman whom he had so lately feared more than anyone in the world, though Fate had decreed that she should befriend him almost against her will, and that her enmity should be turned to friendship in the face of her scheme to ruin him.

Poor Blanche; he could not but pity her, especially as he knew that her trouble was upon his account; but it was decreed that things should take this course, and there was no setting them aside. Gregory's death and

the events of the last few hours had wrought a great change in him, and all he desired was peace.

With a sigh he turned away and made his way to the hotel where he knew he could find a bed, and the next morning he resumed his journey.

In due course Stephen reached Calcutta and was warmly welcomed by his wife, who had become anxious at not hearing from him. It being the morning of a levée, there was a great deal to be done before the hour of the ceremony, and it seemed that scarcely a moment had passed before his servant came to tell him that it was time to dress for the event of the day.

When Stephen found himself standing among an almost endless procession of men arrayed in all the variety of uniform and dress imaginable, he saw many faces that were familiar to him under different circumstances, and wondered what some of them would have said had they been aware that they were in the company of the Centipede, against whom every man's hand was once turned.

At length the tedious ceremonial came to an end with the passing of a number of native officers.

Before he left the Chamber the General in command informed Stephen that the next day but one was fixed for a Durbar at which three native princes were to be received by the Viceroy, the last of whom would be the

Maharajah of Gavalcore. The name came to him with something of a shock, for he had almost forgotten that the Rajah was dead, but he let no sign of surprise escape him. Yet all that night he tossed restlessly on his bed without closing his eyes, while his memory kept on bringing back the horrible scene of Lurgan and the Maharajah struggling on the terrace edge.

During the afternoon of the second day the Marble Hall was prepared for the coming of the great Rajah, His Highness of Jolphuir, whose rank entitled him to many honours beside those of twenty-one guns, and crimson cloth to walk upon, and a guard of honour at the door, not to mention the splendid scarlet-clad native Lancers that stood between each pillar lining the hall.

Wondrously-clad servants carrying maces and peacocks' feathers in gold settings, and more with yaks' tails, made the scene one of remarkable beauty and colour.

In due time his Highness the Maharajah was announced. Superbly arrayed in dead green and gold, sparkling with wondrous jewels, he made a striking and interesting picture.

The turn of the second Rajah then followed, which was quite similar, with the exception of the salute, this being of only seventeen guns, and the Viceroy waited at the foot of the dais to receive his guest, after which there was conversation and presenting of gold pieces,

then betel-nut and attar of roses, and then the departure.

After this there was a long pause. A high official made some whispered communication to the Viceroy, and a rumour went round the assembly that a hitch had occurred, and that the Maharajah of Gavalcore was not present. Almost immediately the Viceroy rose from his throne, descended the dais, and retired.

As Stephen walked to his private apartments he thought to himself that it would take the cleverest man in India all his time to find out where his Highness the Maharajah of Gavalcore reposed.

After he had changed his uniform for a lounge suit he went to his private room, where he found many letters awaiting him, and among them one in the very familiar handwriting of Blanche.

Perhaps the tension of recent events had made him nervous, but his hand trembled as he tore open the envelope, and it was a moment or two before he could command any degree of calmness. Then he read—

“My dear Friend,—It is difficult to bring myself to pen this letter to you, for I feel that there remains nothing now but to bid you farewell for ever. The sad end of our mutual friend has opened my eyes to the fact that my life, up to the present, has been practically wasted. I have, therefore, determined to change all that and to set about doing some good in the world and helping

my less fortunate fellow-creatures, and to that end I am leaving India to-day for ever, making my way to the leper islands off the coast of Queensland, where I intend to live—and die.

“That God will bless and give you all happiness is the wish of

“Your lonely but devoted friend, BLANCHE.”

Stephen read and re-read this letter. Could it be possible that it was really so, that this woman was going away to end her days on that horrible island where the things he had himself seen were enough to send one mad with horror? As he sat there he felt that it was he and he alone who had sent Blanche to what could be nothing but a living death.

Almost dazed by the thought he scarcely heard a knock at the door. Looking up, he found himself face to face with Featherstone.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Longford. I hope I don’t disturb you.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Featherstone. I was, I fear, half asleep. Sit down and take a cigar.”

Featherstone did so, and Stephen put the letter in his pocket.

“Well, is there any news of the missing Rajah?”

“There is no news, Mr. Longford, and in my opinion there never will be.”

“Indeed, why? What do you mean?”

“I mean that there was a deadly feud between the Maharajah of Gavalcore and a

man notorious many years ago in India called the Centipede, who robbed him of his jewels. The Maharajah left his Palace only a few days ago in company with a tall man, and has never been seen since. He is dead ! ”

“ Dead ! ”

“ Yes, dead. I traced them to a buried city in the jungle.”

“ Yes ? ”

“ Here I found evidence of a fight, which, judging from the number of empty champagne and brandy bottles in the ruined palace, had taken place after an orgie.”

“ Indeed ! You amaze me. Anything further ? ”

“ The most extraordinary thing about the whole affair is that this city was the place of refuge of the Centipede years ago. I have only discovered it lately, and yet—yet it seems as if in my dreams I have been there before. It was all so familiar to me ! ”

“ Well, tell me, did you discover anything else ? This story fascinates me.”

“ No, I discovered nothing except a piece of the clothing of the Maharajah on a branch of a tree, and certain blood stains on a marble tank.”

“ But what makes you think this is the work of this Centipede you speak of ? ”

“ Because it was his home, and for some reason or other he lured the Maharajah there to kill him. Perhaps he knew too much ! ”

“ Very likely. Very likely.”

"It is curious, but five minutes before we entered the palace there was a terrible shriek and a diabolical laugh just like that of a madman, but when we entered there was not a living creature to be seen, although there was a fire burning and remains of food."

"Yes?"

"And when we returned to the entrance to the city, we found our guards drugged and our horses gone."

"Who had taken them?"

"Who, indeed!"

"What did you do?"

"We luckily found a bullock waggon and two bullocks, or we should have had to walk back to Jodphur."

"We must search high and low to take this man."

"He will never be taken."

"Why not?"

"Because he's too clever, Mr. Longford."

"Upon my word I believe you are right, Mr. Featherstone," said Stephen with a smile, "but perhaps, after this, we shall hear no more of the Centipede."

"Perhaps."

THE END.

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THE DAILY GRAPHIC says :—" Mr. Oppenheim almost persuades us into the belief that he has really been able to break down the wall of secrecy which always surrounds the construction of a Cabinet, and has decided to make an exposure on the lines of a well-known American writer. He also touches upon the evils of gambling in Society circles in a manner which should be applauded by Father Vaughan, and, in addition, treats us to a romance which is full of originality and interest from first to last."

MR. WINGRAVE, MILLIONAIRE.

THE BRITISH WEEKLY says :—" Like good wine, Mr. Oppenheim's novels need no bush. They attract by their own charm, and are unrivalled in popularity. No one will read this present story without relishing the rapid succession of thrilling scenes through which his characters move. There is a freshness and unconventionality about the story that lends it unusual attractiveness."

A MAKER OF HISTORY.

THE STANDARD says :—" Those who read ' A Maker of History ' will revel in the plot, and will enjoy all those numerous deft touches of actuality that have gone to make the story genuinely interesting and exciting."

THE MASTER MUMMER.

THE DUNDEE ADVERTISER says :—" ' The Master Mummer ' is a remarkable novel, such as only E. Phillips Oppenheim can write. No other author could make the wildly extravagant not only natural, as make-believe goes, but actually moving. It is a beautiful story that is here set within a story."

THE BETRAYAL.

THE DUNDEE ADVERTISER says :—" Mr. Oppenheim's skill has never been displayed to better advantage than here. . . . He has excelled himself, and to assert this is to declare the novel superior to nine out of ten of its contemporaries."

ANNA, THE ADVENTRESS.

THE GLOBE says :—" The story is ingeniously imagined and cleverly wrought out. Mr. Oppenheim has the gift of invention, and keeps his readers on the tenter-hooks of suspense."

THE DAILY NEWS says :—" Mr. Oppenheim keeps his readers on the alert from cover to cover and the story is a fascinating medley of romance and mystery."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM—continued.

THE YELLOW CRAYON.

THE DAILY EXPRESS says :—" Mr. Oppenheim has a vivid imagination and much sympathy, fine powers of narrative, and can suggest a life history in a sentence. As a painter of the rough life of mining camps, of any strong and striking scenes where animal passions enter, he is as good as Henry Kingsley, with whom, indeed, in many respects, he has strong points of resemblance."

A PRINCE OF SINNERS.

VANITY FAIR says :—" A vivid and powerful story. Mr. Oppenheim knows the world and he can tell a tale, and the unusual nature of the setting in which his leading characters live and work out their love story, gives this book distinction among the novels of the season."

THE TRAITORS.

THE ATHENÆUM says :—" Its interest begins on the first page and ends on the last. The plot is ingenious and well managed, the movement of the story is admirably swift and smooth, and the characters are exceedingly vivacious. The reader's excitement is kept on the stretch to the very end."

A MILLIONAIRE OF YESTERDAY.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" The story abounds in dramatic situations, and there is more than one note of pathos which at once captures our sympathies. We cannot but welcome with enthusiasm a really well-told story like 'A Millionaire of Yesterday.'"

THE SURVIVOR.

THE NOTTINGHAM GUARDIAN says :—" We must give a conspicuous place on its merits to this excellent story. It is only necessary to read a page or two in order to become deeply interested. A story marked by brilliant and terse narration, vivid touches of characterization, and a plot that is consistent and yet fruitful in surprises."

THE GREAT AWAKENING.

THE YORKSHIRE POST says :—" A wierd and fascinating story, which, for real beauty and originality, ranks far above the ordinary novel."

AS A MAN LIVES.

THE SKETCH says :—" The interest of the book, always keen and absorbing, is due to some extent to a puzzle so admirably planned as to defy the penetration of the most experienced novel reader."

A DAUGHTER OF THE MARIONIS.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" Mr. Oppenheim's stories always display much melodramatic power and considerable originality and ingenuity of construction. These and other qualities of the successful writer of romance are manifest in 'A Daughter of the Marionis.' Full of passion, action, strongly contrasted scenery, motives, and situations."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM—continued.

MR. BERNARD BROWN.

THE ABERDEEN DAILY JOURNAL says :— The story is rich in sensational incident and dramatic situations. It is seldom, indeed, that we meet with a novel of such power and fascination."

THE MAN AND HIS KINGDOM.

THE FREEMAN'S JOURNAL says :—" It is high praise to say that in this novel the author has surpassed his previous thrilling and delightful story, 'The Mysterious Mr. Sabin.' Yet that high praise is eminently deserved. The story is worthy of Merriman at his very best. It is a genuine treat for the ravenous and often disappointed novel reader."

THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE.

THE WORLD says :—" If engrossing interest, changing episode, deep insight into human character, and bright diction are the *sine qua non* of a successful novel, then this book cannot but bound at once into popular favour. It is so full withal of so many dramatic incidents, thoroughly exciting and realistic. There is not one dull page from beginning to end."

A MONK OF CRUTA.

THE BOOKMAN says :—" Intensely dramatic. The book is an achievement at which the author may well be gratified."

MYSTERIOUS MR. SABIN.

THE LITERARY WORLD says :—" As a story of interest, with a deep-laid and exciting plot, this of the 'Mysterious Mr. Sabin' can hardly be surpassed."

L. G. MOBERLY

THAT PREPOSTEROUS WILL.

THE DAILY GRAPHIC says :—" We could wish that every novel were as pleasant, unsophisticated and readable as this one."

THE GLOBE says :—" Molly is a bright, clever, affectionate damsel ; and the author has succeeded in making her as fascinating to the reader as to her hero, Alan Dayrell."

HOPE, MY WIFE.

THE GENTLEWOMAN says :—" Miss Moberly shows the same nice skill in sketching character in 'Hope, my Wife' as in her earlier novel, 'That Preposterous Will.' She interests us so much in her heroine, and in her hero, that we follow the two with pleasure through adventures of the most improbable order."

DIANA.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" So cleverly handled as to keep its interest always lively and stimulating ; and the book cannot fail to be enjoyed."

JUSTUS MILES FORMAN

JOURNEYS END.

THE COURT JOURNAL says :—" Surprisingly fresh, abounding in touches of observation and sentiment, while the characters are drawn with exceptional skill, the 'red-haired young woman' being a haunting figure."

MONSIGNY.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" The novel is admirable, the idea is very cleverly worked out, and is of an interesting character. The book is worthy of much praise."

THE GARDEN OF LIES.

THE DAILY NEWS says :—" This novel is far in advance of anything that Mr. Forman has hitherto accomplished. 'The Garden of Lies' belongs to that class of story which touches the heart from the first. It contains scenes which are alive with real passion, passages that will stir the blood of the coldest, and whole chapters charged with a magic and a charm. It is a real romance, full of vigour and a clean, healthy life."

TOMMY CARTERET.

THE DAILY CHRONICLE says :—" This is a fine book, thoroughly fine from start to finish. We willingly place our full store of compliments on Mr. Forman's splendid and successful book."

BUCHANAN'S WIFE.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" 'Buchanan's Wife' may be regarded as another success for an already successful author. It contains all the elements to attract, and is written in such a graceful manner that the reader is held delighted and enthralled to the end."

A MODERN ULYSSES.

PEOPLE'S SATURDAY JOURNAL says :—" Full of exciting incidents handled in a bright, crisp style."

GEORGE FREDERICK TURNER

FROST AND FRIENDSHIP.

THE PALL MALL GAZETTE says :—" A tale one reads without effort and rises from with brightened wits. It is good and original. King Karl, with the steel hand in a velvet glove; Miss Anchester, an enigma of love and duty; and the hero himself, a typical Englishman, are personages who make a sharp impression of reality."

THE CONVERSION OF CLAUD.

THE DAILY GRAPHIC says :—" A well-written book, the characters are natural and amusing."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

WHEN I WAS CZAR.

THE FREEMAN'S JOURNAL says :—" A very brilliant work, every page in it displays the dramatic talent of the author and his capacity for writing smart dialogue."

BY SNARE OF LOVE.

THE OUTLOOK says :—" As a writer of political intrigue, Mr. Marchmont has scarcely a rival to-day, and his latest novel worthily upholds his reputation."

THE QUEEN'S ADVOCATE.

THE LIVERPOOL COURIER says :—" Mr. Marchmont has not been able to resist the temptation to write a romance around the tragic end of the Obrenovitch dynasty, and his narrative skill is at his best in this tale. One has sometimes wondered in reading this author's works when his invention will give out. But his resource seems inexhaustible, and his spirits never flag."

A COURIER OF FORTUNE.

THE DUNDEE COURIER says :—" The author has succeeded in producing a most thrilling and romantic tale of France, which has the advantage of being exciting and fascinating without being too improbable. An additional feature of the book is the amount of wit that runs throughout the story."

BY WIT OF WOMAN.

THE LEICESTER POST says :—" The novel rivets the deep interest of the reader, and holds it spellbound to the end. Mr. Marchmont, accordingly, must be complimented on making a very welcome and notable addition to the library of fiction."

IN THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" A well-sustained and thrilling narrative."

THE DAILY EXPRESS says :—" It is sure to have a great success."

GEORGE HORTON

A FAIR INSURGENT.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" Mr. George Horton has given us a most thrilling romance which, both in invention and workmanship, should take high rank among books of adventure. The author has the power of exciting real interest in the puppets of his capital book, and the art of telling an exciting story thoroughly well."

PRINCESS ROMANOVA.

THE DUNDEE ADVERTISER says :—" A stirring tale of the Far East full of adventures, narrated in an impressive style."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

FRED M. WHITE

THE CRIMSON BLIND.

THE SHEFFIELD TELEGRAPH says :—" 'The Crimson Blind' is one of the most ingeniously conceived 'detective' stories we have come across for a long time. Each chapter holds some new and separate excitement. The pace is kept with such vigour that the reader arrives breathless at the last page. It is the sort of story that one feels compelled to read at a sitting."

THE CARDINAL MOTH.

THE BRITISH WEEKLY says :—" A brilliant orchid story, full of imaginative power. This is a masterpiece of construction, convincing amid its unlikeliness, one of the best novels of the season."

THE CORNER HOUSE.

THE WESTERN MORNING NEWS says :—" The book is crammed with sensation and mystery, situation piled on situation until one is almost bewildered. The secret of The Corner House is kept until the closing chapters, and it is impossible to lay the book aside until the secret is discovered. It is an excellent romance which will be eagerly read."

THE WEIGHT OF THE CROWN.

THE DUBLIN DAILY EXPRESS says :—" Mr. F. M. White is one of the princes of fiction. A stirring tale full of the spice of adventure, breathless in interest, skilful in narrative. . . . Who could refrain from reading such a story ?"

THE SLAVE OF SILENCE.

'THE SHEFFIELD TELEGRAPH says :—" Attention is arrested at the outset, and so adroitly is the mystery handled that readers will not skip a single page."

ARCHIBALD EYRE

THE TRIFLER.

THE DAILY EXPRESS says :—" A most cleverly contrived farcical comedy, full of really fresh incidents, and a dialogue that is genuinely amusing; there is not a character who is not always welcome and full of entertainment."

THE CUSTODIAN.

THE MORNING POST says :—" An exceptionally clever and entertaining novel; the reader is compelled to finish the book when he has once taken it up. . . . It is impossible to resist its attractions."

THE GIRL IN WAITING.

THE DAILY MAIL says :—" This is quite a delightful book. The note is struck ingeniously and hilariously on the doorstep. It is a most enjoyable comedy, which must be read to be appreciated. We can cordially recommend it."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

HEADON HILL

A RACE WITH RUIN.

THE MORNING ADVERTISER says :—" A book by Headon Hill may always be relied on to provide good reading with plenty of incident. In 'A Race with Ruin' he fully maintains his reputation. A good, stirring story with an admirable and well-worked-out plot."

MILLIONS OF MISCHIEF.

THE STAGE says :—" Not even the late Guy Boothby imagined anything more magnificently preposterous than the motive of Mr. Headon Hill's 'Millions of Mischief.'"

THE AVENGERS.

THE TRIBUNE says :—" Mr. Hill's new book, 'The Avengers' has not a dull line, and one's pulse is kept on the jig all the time. He deserves the highest admiration for the consistent way in which he has avoided the slightest suspicion of probability."

UNMASKED AT LAST.

THE SHEFFIELD TELEGRAPH says :—" The story is in the author's most approved style, one of those alluringly audacious plots that Headon Hill revels in."

SIR Wm. MAGNAY, BART.

THE RED CHANCELLOR.

LLOYD'S NEWS says :—" A story full of action with its characters strongly drawn. Adventures and hairbreadth escapes abound ; the style is refreshingly crisp, and the book altogether is one that can be most heartily recommended."

THE MAN OF THE HOUR.

THE PALL MALL GAZETTE says :—" Of sterling merit. The plot of the book is as well contrived as in any tale of the kind we have read."

COUNT ZARKA.

THE WORLD says :—" Clever and entertaining. The narrative is brisk ; it affords us glimpses of forest scenery which we like, and one remarkable departure from beaten tracks, a woman's duel in earnest. This feat of arms forms the subject of an illustration in his best manner by Maurice Greiffenhagen."

FAUCONBERG.

THE FIELD says :—" The book has a grip, and should be a success. The ultimate fate of Fauconberg is always in doubt from the beginning to the unexpected ending."

THE MASTER SPIRIT.

THE COURT JOURNAL says :—" A capital story. The intensely interesting situation is developed with much ingenuity and power. . . . A really fascinating novel."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

GUY BOOTHBY

THE RACE OF LIFE.

THE ENGLISH REVIEW says :—" Ahead even of Mr. Cutcliffe Hyne and Sir Conan Doyle, Mr. Boothby may be said to have topped popularity's pole."

FOR LOVE OF HER.

THE COURT JOURNAL says :—" The many admirers of Mr. Guy Boothby will welcome another volume from his pen, and will not be disappointed in their expectations. The book shows vivid imagination and dramatic power. Moreover, sketches of Australian life, from one who knows his subject, are always welcome."

A CRIME OF THE UNDER SEAS.

THE SPEAKER says :—" Is quite the equal in art, observation, and dramatic intensity to any of Mr. Guy Boothby's numerous other romances, and is in every respect most typical of his powers."

A BID FOR FREEDOM.

THE SHEFFIELD TELEGRAPH says :—" As fascinating as any of its forerunners, and is as finely handled. 'A Bid for Freedom' discloses a powerfully written romance, which bristles with thrilling passages, exciting adventures, and hairbreadth escapes."

A TWO-FOLD INHERITANCE.

PUNCH says :—" Just the very book that a hard-working man should read for genuine relaxation. This novel is strongly recommended by the justly appreciating 'Baron de Bookworms.'"

THE GLASGOW HERALD says :—" Contains all the elements that have made Mr. Boothby's works popular the world over, and it will be read with zest by thousands of his admirers."

CONNIE BURT.

THE BIRMINGHAM GAZETTE says :—" One of the best stories we have seen of Mr. Boothby's."

THE GLASGOW HERALD says :—" Contains many stirring scenes of life in the Bush, and some really clever and attractive sketches of Australian character."

THE KIDNAPPED PRESIDENT.

PUBLIC OPINION says :—" Brighter, crisper, and more entertaining than any of its predecessors from the same pen."

MY STRANGEST CASE.

THE YORKSHIRE POST says :—" No work of Mr. Boothby's seems to us to have approached in skill his new story. It is worked out with real ingenuity, and written with so much skill that the reader's attention is from first to last riveted on the narrative."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

GUY BOOTHBY—*continued.*

FAREWELL, NIKOLA.

THE DUNDEE ADVERTISER says :—" Guy Boothby's famous creation of Dr. Nikola has become familiar to every reader of fiction."

MY INDIAN QUEEN.

THE SUNDAY SPECIAL says :—" ' My Indian Queen ' shows Mr. Boothby at his best. A vivid story of adventure and daring, bearing all the characteristics of careful workmanship."

LONG LIVE THE KING.

THE ABERDEEN FREE PRESS says :—" It is marvellous that Mr. Boothby's novels should all be so uniformly good. The story is written in Mr. Boothby's best style, and is full of interest from start to finish."

A PRINCE OF SWINDLERS.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" Of absorbing interest. The exploits are described in an enthralling vein."

A MAKER OF NATIONS.

THE SPECTATOR says :—" ' A Maker of Nations ' enables us to understand Mr. Boothby's vogue. It has no lack of movement or incident."

THE RED RAT'S DAUGHTER.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" Mr. Guy Boothby's name on the title-page of a novel carries with it the assurance of a good story to follow. This sprightly imaginative writer's latest romance is a clever and fascinating narrative."

LOVE MADE MANIFEST.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH says :—" A powerful and impressive romance. One of those tales of exciting adventure in the confection of which Mr. Boothby is not excelled by any novelist of the day."

PHAROS THE EGYPTIAN.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" This powerful novel is weird, wonderful, and soul-thrilling. There never was in this world so strange and wonderful a love story, and Mr. Boothby's admirers will probably agree that the most marvellous fiction he has ever produced is ' Pharos the Egyptian.' "

ACROSS THE WORLD FOR A WIFE.

THE BRITISH WEEKLY says :—" This stirring tale ranks next to ' Dr. Nikola ' in the list of Mr. Boothby's novels. It is an excellent piece of workmanship, and we can heartily recommend it."

A SAILOR'S BRIDE.

THE MANCHESTER COURIER says :—" Few authors can depict action as brilliantly and resourcefully as the creator of ' Dr. Nikola.' "

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

GUY BOOTHBY—continued.

THE LUST OF HATE.

THE DAILY GRAPHIC says :—" Mr. Boothby gives place to no one in what might be called dramatic interest, so whoever wants dramatic interest let him read 'The Lust of Hate.'"

THE FASCINATION OF THE KING.

THE BRISTOL MERCURY says :—" Unquestionably the best work we have yet seen from the pen of Mr. Guy Boothby. . . . 'The Fascination of the King' is one of the books of the season."

DR. NIKOLA.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" One hairbreadth escape succeeds another with rapidity that scarce leaves the reader breathing space. . . . The interest of their experience is sufficient to stay criticism, and carry him through a story ingeniously invented and skilfully told."

THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL.

THE YORKSHIRE POST says :—" A more exciting romance no man could reasonably ask for."

A BID FOR FORTUNE.

THE MANCHESTER COURIER says :—" It is impossible to give any idea of the *verve* and brightness with which the story is told. Mr. Boothby may be congratulated on having produced about the most original novel of the year."

IN STRANGE COMPANY.

THE WORLD says :—" A capital novel. It has the quality of life and stir, and will carry the reader with curiosity unabated to the end."

THE MARRIAGE OF ESTHER.

THE MANCHESTER GUARDIAN says :—" A story full of action, life, and dramatic interest. There is a vigour and a power of illusion about it that raises it quite above the level of the ordinary novel of adventure."

BUSHIGRAMS.

THE MANCHESTER GUARDIAN says :—" Intensely interesting. Forces from us, by its powerful artistic realism, those choky sensations which it should be the aim of the human writer to elicit, whether in comedy or tragedy."

SHEILAH McLEOD.

MR. W. L. ALDEN in THE NEW YORK TIMES, says :—" Mr. Boothby can crowd more adventure into a square foot of canvas than any other novelist."

DR. NIKOLA'S EXPERIMENT.

Illustrated by SIDNEY COWELL

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

JOSEPH HOCKING

ROGER TREWINION.

T. P.'S WEEKLY says :—" It is a foregone conclusion that Mr. Hocking will always have a good story to tell. ' Roger Trewinion ' can stand forth with the best, a strong love interest, plenty of adventure, an atmosphere of superstition, and Cornwall as the scene. And the scenes of lawfulness, the curse of hatred between two brothers, the greed of a selfish mother, and the steadfastness of a sweetheart withdrawn from a grave, all serve to lead, in a series of graphically and finely written scenes, to the conclusion that ' there's no curse can stand against love.' "

THE COMING OF THE KING.

THE GLASGOW HERALD says :—" Mr. Hocking's latest romance exhibits no diminution of ability, and is marked by insight and dramatic power. His imagination is fertile, and his skill in the arrangement of incident far above the average, and there is an air of reality in all his writing which is peculiarly charming. The author steadily but surely engages our attention, and we pass from episode to episode with a deepening sense of the reality of the tale. This is art of no common order."

ESAU.

THE OUTLOOK says :—" Remarkable for the dramatic power with which the scenes are drawn and the intense human interest which Mr. Hocking has woven about his characters. ' Esau ' is sure to be one of the novels of the season."

THE BRITISH WEEKLY says :—" A brilliant, exciting narrative by a writer who has never penned a dull page."

GREATER LOVE.

THE NEWCASTLE CHRONICLE says :—" Though of a totally different character from ' Lest We Forget,' Mr. Hocking's latest story is entitled to take rank along with that fine romance. The story arrests the attention from the first chapters, and soon becomes highly dramatic."

LEST WE FORGET.

PUBLIC OPINION says :—" His story is quite as good as any we have read of the Stanley Weyman's school, and presents an excellent picture of the exciting times of Gardiner and Bonner."

AND SHALL TRELAWNEY DIE ?

THE BRITISH WEEKLY says :—" We can strongly recommend both stories as healthy and hearty tales, sensational but not incredible."

THE WEEKLY SUN says :—" An engaging and fascinating romance. The reader puts the story down with a sigh, and wishes there were more of these breezy Cornish uplands, for Mr. Joseph Hocking's easy style of narrative does not soon tire."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

JOSEPH HOCKING—continued.

JABEZ EASTERBROOK.

THE ROCK says :—" Real strength is shown in the sketches, of which that of Brother Bowman is most prominent. In its way it is delightful."

THE RECORD says :—" A book that can be read with interest and with profit. A clever tale, cleverly told."

THE WEAPONS OF MYSTERY.

" Weapons of Mystery " is a singularly powerful story of occult influences and of their exertion for evil purposes. Like all Mr. Hocking's novels, " Weapons of Mystery " has an underlying religious and moral purpose, but merely as a story, and quite apart from the purpose which was in the mind of the author, the tale has a curious fascination for the reader. The cleverly conceived plot, and the strange experience of the hero and heroine make " Weapons of Mystery " a story which it is not easy to put down when once commenced.

ZILLAH : A ROMANCE.

THE SPECTATOR says :—" The drawing of some of the characters indicates the possession by Mr. Hocking of a considerable gift of humour. The contents of his book indicate that he takes a genuine interest in the deeper problems of the day."

THE MONK OF MAR-SABA.

THE STAR says :—" Great power and thrilling interest. . . . The scenery of the Holy Land has rarely been so vividly described as in this charming book of Mr. Hocking's."

THE MANCHESTER GUARDIAN says :—" The author has turned his visit to Palestine to good account. . . . His descriptions of the wild scenery of different parts of the Holy Land are both vigorous and graphic, and the stories themselves are interesting."

THE PURPLE ROBE.

THE QUEEN says :—" Mr. Hocking's most interesting romance. It is exceedingly clever, and excites the reader's interest and brings out the powerful nature of the clever young minister. This most engrossing book challenges comparison with the brilliance of Lothair. Mr. Hocking has one main fact always before him in writing his books—to interest his readers ; and he certainly succeeds admirably in doing so."

THE SCARLET WOMAN.

THE METHODIST RECORDER says :—" This is Mr. Hocking's strongest and best book. We advise every one to read it. The plot is simple, compact and strenuous ; the writing powerful. It brings out sharply the real character of the typical Jesuit, his training, motives, limitations, aims."

WARD, LOCK & CO.'S POPULAR FICTION

JOSEPH HOCKING—*continued.*

ALL MEN ARE LIARS.

THE CHRISTIAN WORLD says :—" This is a notable book. Thoughtful people will be fascinated by its actuality, its fearlessness, and the insight it gives into the influence of modern thought and literature upon the minds and morals of our most promising manhood."

THE STANDARD says :—" A striking book. . . . It is strong and earnest and vigorous ; it shows knowledge of the lower class, and impatience and contempt of shams of all sorts."

ISHMAEL PENGELLY : AN OUTCAST.

THE RECORD says :—" As a story this book is a splendid piece of writing ; every detail is interesting, and the situations it creates are novel and striking."

THE ATHENÆUM says :—" The book is to be recommended for the dramatic effectiveness of some of the scenes. The wild, half-mad woman is always picturesque wherever she appears, and the rare self-repression of her son is admirably done."

THE STORY OF ANDREW FAIRFAX.

THE MANCHESTER EXAMINER says :—" Rustic scenes and characters are drawn with free, broad touches, without Mr. Buchanan's artificiality, and, if we may venture to say it, with more realism than Mr. Hardy's country pictures."

THE LIVERPOOL MERCURY says :—" Beautifully told. There are few books better adapted to widen the mind and discipline the judgment than this noble story."

THE BIRTHRIGHT.

THE SPECTATOR says :—" This volume proves beyond all doubt that Mr. Hocking has mastered the art of the historical romancist. ' The Birthright ' is, in its way, quite as well constructed, as well written, and as full of incident as any story that has come from the pen of Mr. Conan Doyle or Mr. Stanley Weyman."

MISTRESS NANCY MOLESWORTH.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" ' Mistress Nancy Molesworth ' is as charming a story of the kind as could be wished, and it excels in literary workmanship as well as in imaginative vigour and daring invention. . . . It would hardly be possible to tell a story of its kind better, or to leave the reader better pleased at the end."

FIELDS OF FAIR RENOWN.

THE SCOTSMAN says :—" Mr. Joseph Hocking's ' Fields of Fair Renown ' is a novel with a purpose, and the theme is worked out with a good deal of force and effective power. . . . it is both interesting and powerful."

THE DUNDEE ADVERTISER says :—" Mr. Hocking has produced a work which his readers of all classes will appreciate. . . . There are exhibited some of the most beautiful aspects of disposition."

