
Heat and Dust

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Shortly after Olivia went away with the Nawab, Beth Crawford returned from Simla. This was in September, 1923. Beth had to go down to Bombay to meet the boat on which her sister Tessie was arriving. Tessie was coming out to spend the cold season with the Crawfords. They had arranged all sorts of visits and expeditions for her, but she stayed mostly in Satipur because of Douglas. They went riding together and played croquet and tennis and she did her best to be good company for him. Not that he had much free time, for he kept himself as busy as ever in the district. He worked like a Trojan and never ceased to be calm and controlled, so that he was very much esteemed both by his colleagues and by the Indians. He was upright and just. Tessie stayed through that cold season, and through the next one as well, and then she sailed for home. A year later Douglas had his home leave and they met again in England. By the time his divorce came through, they were ready to get married. She went out to join him in India and, like her sister Beth, she led a full and happy life there. In course of time she became my grandmother - but of course by then everyone was back in England.

I don't remember Douglas at all - he died when I was three - but I remember Grandmother Tessie and Great-Aunt Beth very well. They were cheerful women with a sensible and modern outlook on life: but nevertheless, so my parents told me, for years they could not be induced to talk about Olivia. They shied away from her memory as from something dark and terrible. My parents' generation did not share these feelings - on the contrary, they were eager to learn all they could about Grandfather's first wife who had eloped with an Indian prince. But it was not until they were old and widowed that the two ladies began at last to speak about the forbidden topic.

By that time they had also met Harry again. They had kept up with him by means of Xmas cards, and it was only after Douglas' death that Harry came to call on them. They spoke about Olivia. Harry also told them about Olivia's sister, Marcia, whom he had met shortly after his return from India. He had continued to see her over the years till she had died (drunk herself to death, he said). She left him all Olivia's letters and he showed them to the old ladies. That was how I first came to see these letters which I have now brought with me to India.

Fortunately, during my first few months here, I kept a journal so I have some record of my early impressions. If I were to try and recollect them now, I might not be able to do so. They are no longer the same because I myself am no longer the same. India always changes people, and I have been no exception. But this is not my story, it is Olivia's as far as I can follow it.

These are the first entries in my journal:

2 February. Arrival in Bombay today. Not what I had imagined at all. Of course I had always thought of arrival by ship, had forgotten how different it would be by plane. All those memoirs and letters I've read, all those prints I've seen. I really must forget about them. Everything is different now. I must get some sleep.

Woke up in the middle of the night. Groped for my watch which I had put on top of my suitcase under the bed: it wasn't there. Oh no! Not already! A voice from the next bed:

"Here it is, my dear, and just be more careful in future please." Half an hour after midnight. I've slept about four hours. Of course I'm still on English time so it would be now about seven in the evening. I'm wide awake and sit up in bed. I'm in the women's dormitory of the S.M. (Society of Missionaries) hostel. There are seven string beds, four one side three the other. They're all occupied and everyone appears to be asleep. But outside the city is still awake and restless. There is even music somewhere. The street lamps light up the curtainless windows of the dormitory from outside, filling the room with a ghostly reflection in which the sleepers on their beds look like washed-up bodies.

But my neighbour - the guardian of my watch - is awake and wanting to talk:

"You've probably just arrived, that's why you're so careless. Never mind, you'll learn soon enough, everyone does You have to be very careful with your food in the beginning: boiled water only, and whatever you do no food from these street stalls. Afterwards you get immune. I can eat anything now if I want to. Not that I'd want to - I hate their food, I wouldn't touch it for anything. You can eat here in the S.M., that's quite all right. Miss Tietz looks after the kitchen herself and they make nice boiled 'Stews, sometimes a roast, and custard. I always stay here when I come to Bombay. I've known Miss Tietz for twenty years. She's Swiss, she came out with the Christian Sisterhood but these last ten years she's been looking after the S.M. They're lucky to have her."

It may be due to the ghostly light that she looks like a ghost; and she's wearing a white night-gown that encases her from head to foot. She has tied her hair in one drooping plait. She is paper-white, vaporous - yes, a ghost. She tells me she has been in India for thirty years, and if God wants her to die here, that is what she will do. On the other hand, if He wants to bring her home first, she will do that. It is His will, and for thirty years she has lived only in His will. When she says that, her voice is not a bit ghost-like but strong and ringing as one who has been steadfast in her duty.

"We have our own little chapel out in Kafarabad. It's a growing town - because of the textile mills - but not growing in virtue, that I can tell you. Thirty years ago I might have said there is hope: but today - none. Wherever you look, it's the same story. More wages means more selfishness, more country liquor, more cinema. The women

used to wear plain simple cotton dhotis but now they all want to be shiny from the outside. We won't speak about the inside. But why expect anything from these poor people when our own are going the way they are. You've seen that place opposite? Just take a look .”

I go to the window and look down into the street. It's bright as day down there, not only with the white street lights but each stall and barrow is lit up with a flare of naphtha. There are crowds of people; some are sleeping - it's so warm that all they have to do is stretch out, no bedding necessary. There are a number of crippled children (one boy propelling himself on his legless rump) and probably by day they beg but now they are off duty and seem to be light-hearted, even gay. People are buying from the hawkers and standing there eating, while others are looking in the gutters to find what has been thrown away.

She directs me to the other window. From here I get a view of A. 's Hotel. I had been warned about that place before I came. I had been told that, however bleak and dreary I might find the S.M. Hostel, on no account should I book myself into A.'s.

"Can you see?" she called from her bed.

I saw. Here too it was absolutely bright, with street and shop lamps. The sidewalk outside A.'s was crowded - not with Indians but with Europeans. They looked a derelict lot.

She said" Eight, nine of them to a room, and some of them don't even have the money for that, they just sleep on the street. They beg from each other and steal from each other. Some 'of them are very young, mere children - there may be hope for them, God willing they'll go home again before it's too late. But others there are, women and men, they've been here for years and every year they get worse. You see the state they're in. They're all sick, some of them dying. Who are they, where do they come from? One day I saw a terrible sight. He can't have been more than thirty, perhaps a German or Scandinavian - he was very fair and tall. His clothes were in tatters and you could see his white skin through them. He had long hair, all tangled and matted; there was a monkey sitting by him and the monkey was delousing him. Yes the monkey was taking the "lice out of the man's hair. I looked in that man's face - in his eyes - and I tell you I saw a soul in hell. Oh but I've seen some terrible sights in India. I've lived through a Hindu-Muslim riot, and a smallpox epidemic, and several famines, and I think I may rightly say I've seen everything that you can see on this earth. And through it all I've learned this one thing: you can't live in India without Christ Jesus. If He's not with you every single moment of the day and night and you praying to Him with all your might and main – if that's not there, then you become like that poor young man with the monkey taking lice out of his hair. Because you see, dear, nothing human means anything here. Not a thing," she said, with the contempt of any Hindu or Buddhist for all this world might have to offer.

She was sitting up in her bed. For all she was so thin and white, she did look tough, toughened-up. A ghost with backbone. I looked down again at the figures sprawled under the white street lights outside A.'s Hotel. It seemed to me that she was right: they did look like souls in hell.

16 February. Satipur. I have been very lucky and have already found a room here. I like it very much. It is large, airy, and empty. There is a window at which I sit and look down into the bazaar. My room is on top of a cloth-shop and I have to climb up a flight of dark stairs to get to it. It has been sub-let to me by a government officer called Inder Lal who lives with his wife and mother and three children in some poky rooms crammed at the back of a yard leading from the shop. The shop belongs to someone else and so does the yard. Everything is divided and sub-divided, and I'm one of the sub-divisions. But I feel very spacious and private up here; except that I share the bathroom facilities down in the yard, and the little sweeper girl who is attached to them.

I think my landlord, Inder Lal, is disappointed with the way I live in my room. He keeps looking round for furniture but there isn't any. I sit on the floor and at night I spread my sleeping-bag out on it. The only piece of furniture I have so far acquired is a very tiny desk the height of a foot-stool on which I have laid out my papers (this journal, my Hindi grammar and vocabulary, Olivia's letters). It is the sort of desk at which the shopkeepers do their accounts. Inder Lal looks at my bare walls. Probably he was hoping for pictures and photographs - but I feel no need for anything like that when all I have to do is look out of the window at the bazaar below. I certainly wouldn't want to be distracted from that scene. Hence no curtains either.

Inder Lal is far too polite to voice his disappointment. All he said was "It is not very comfortable for you," and quickly lowered his eyes as if afraid of embarrassing me. He did the same when I first arrived with my luggage. I had not hired a coolie but had hoisted my trunk and bedding on to my shoulders and carried them up myself. Then too - after an involuntary cry of shock - he had lowered his eyes as if afraid of embarrassing me.

It would have been easier for him if I had been like Olivia.

She was everything I'm not. The first thing she did on moving into their house (the Assistant Collector's) was smother it in rugs, pictures, flowers. She wrote to Marcia:

"We're beginning to look slightly civilised." And again, later: "Mrs. Crawford (Collector's wife - the *Burra Memsahib*) came to inspect me today in my nest. I don't think she thinks much of me or the nest but she's ever so tactful! She told me she knows how difficult the first year always is and that if there is any little thing she could possibly do to ease things for me, well I must just consider her to be always *there*. I

said thank you (demurely). Actually, her being there is the only difficult thing - otherwise everything is just *too perfect!* If only I could have told her that. "

I have already seen the house in which Douglas and Olivia lived. In fact, there has been a very lucky coincidence -- it turns out that the office where Inder Lal works is right in what used to be the British residential area (known as the Civil Lines). Inder Lal's own department, Disposal and Supplies, is in what was the Collector's house (Mr. Crawford's, in 1923). Douglas and Olivia's bungalow now houses the Water Board, the municipal Health Department, and a sub-post office. Both these houses have, like everything else, been divided and sub-divided into many parts to fulfil many functions. Only the Medical Superintendent's house has been kept intact and is supposed to be a travellers' rest-house.

20 February. This morning I dropped in on the two ladies of the Inder Lal family - his wife, Ritu, and his mother. I don't know whether I caught them at a moment of unusual confusion or whether this is the way they always live but the place was certainly very untidy. Of course the rooms are poky and the children still at the messy stage. Ritu swiftly cleared some clothes and toys off a bench. I would have preferred to sit on the floor as they did, but I realised that now I had to submit to all the social rules they thought fit to apply to my case. The mother-in-law, in a practised hiss aside, gave an order to the daughter-in-law which I guessed to be for my refreshment. Ritu darted out of the room as if glad to be released, leaving me and the mother-in-law to make what we could of each other. We smiled, I tried out my Hindi (with scant success -I must work harder at it!), we made hopeful gestures, and got nowhere. All the time she was studying me. She has a shrewd, appraising glance - and I can imagine how she must have gone around looking over girls as possible wives for her son before finally deciding on Ritu. Quite instinctively, she was adding up *my* points as well, and alas I could guess what her sum came to.

I have already got used to being appraised in this way in India. Everyone does it everywhere - in the streets, on buses and trains: they are quite open about it, women as well as men, nor do they make any attempt to conceal their amusement if that is what one happens to arouse in them. I suppose we must look strange to them, and what must also be strange is the way we are living among them - no longer apart, but eating their food and often wearing Indian clothes because they are cooler and cheaper.

Getting myself a set of Indian clothes was one of the first things I did after settling down in Satipur. I went to the cloth-stall downstairs and then next door where there is a little tailor sitting on a piece of sacking with his machine. He measured me right there and then in his open shop in full view of the street, but with such care to keep hi, distance that his measures were too approximate for any kind of fitting. As a result

my clothes are very loose indeed but they serve their purpose and I'm glad to have them. I now wear a pair of baggy trousers tied with a string at the waist such as the Punjabi peasant women wear, and their kind of knee-length shirt. I also have a pair of Indian sandals which I can shuffle off and leave on thresholds like everyone else. (They are men's sandals because the women's sizes don't fit me). Although I'm now dressed like an Indian woman, the children are still running after me; but I don't mind too much as I'm sure they will soon get used to me.

There is one word that is often called after me: *hijra*. Unfortunately I know what it means. I knew before I came to India, from a letter of Olivia's. *She* had learned it from the Nawab who had told her that Mrs. Crawford looked like a *hijra* (Great-Aunt Beth was, like me, tall and flat-chested). Of course Olivia also didn't know what it meant, and when she asked; the Nawab shouted with laughter. But instead of explaining he told her "I will show you," and then he clapped his hands and gave an order and after some time a troupe of *hijras* was brought and the Nawab made them sing and dance for Olivia in their traditional style.

I have also seen them sing and dance. It was when I was walking back with Inder Lal from seeing his office. We were quite near home when I heard a noise of drums from a side-street. Inder Lal said it was nothing worth looking at - "a very common thing," he said - but I was curious so he reluctantly accompanied me. We went through a succession of alleys winding off from each other and then we entered an arched doorway and went down a passage which opened up into an inner courtyard. Here there was the troupe of *hijras* eunuchs - doing their turn. One played a drum, others sang and clapped their hands and made some dancing motions. There was a cluster of spectators enjoying the performance. The *hijras* were built like men with big hands and flat chests and long jaws, but they were dressed as women in saris and tinsel jewellery. The way they danced was also in parody of a woman's gestures, and I suppose that was what amused people so much. But I thought their faces were sad, and even when they smirked and made suggestive gestures to what I guessed to be suggestive words (everyone laughed and Inder Lal wanted me to come away), all the time their expression remained the worried workaday one of men who are wondering how much they are going to be paid for the job.

24 February. Today being Sunday, Inder Lal kindly offered to take me to Khatm to show me the Nawab's palace. I felt bad about taking him away from his family on his one day off, but neither he nor they seemed to think anything of it. I wonder his wife does not get tired of being shut up in her two small rooms all day and every day, with her mother-in-law and three small children. I never see her go out anywhere except sometimes - accompanied by her mother-in-law - to buy vegetables in the bazaar.

I have not yet travelled on a bus in India that has not been packed to bursting-point,

with people inside and luggage on top; and they are always so old that they shake up every bone in the human body and every screw in their own. If the buses are always the same, so is the landscape through which they travel. Once a town is left behind, there is nothing till the next one except flat land, broiling sky, distances and dust. Especially dust: the sides of the bus are open with only bars across them so that the hot winds blow in freely, bearing desert sands to choke up ears and nostrils and set one's teeth on edge with grit.

The town of Khatm turned out to be a wretched little place. Of course Satipur isn't all that grand either, but it does give a sense of having been allowed to grow according to its own needs. But Khatm just huddles in the shadow of the Nawab's palace. It seems to have been built only to serve the Palace, and now that there is no one left in there, doesn't know what to do with itself. The streets are dense, run-down, and dirty. There are many, many beggars.

Protected by high pearl-grey walls, the Palace is set in spacious grounds with many tall trees. There are fountains and water channels, garden pavilions, and a little private mosque with a golden dome. Inder Lal and I sat down under a tree while the watchman went off to find the keys. I asked Inder Lal about the Nawab's family but he doesn't know much more than I do. After the Nawab's death in 1953, his nephew Karim, who was still an infant at the time, inherited the Palace. But he never lived there. In fact, he lives in London where I met him just before coming out here (I will write about that later). The family are still negotiating with the Government of India for a sale, but so far, over all these years, no price has been agreed upon. There are no other bidders: who would want a place like this nowadays - and in Khatm?

Inder Lal was not keen to discuss the Nawab. Yes, he had heard about him and his dissolute bad life; also vague rumours about the old scandal. But who cares about that now? All those people are dead, and even if any of them should still be left alive somewhere, there is no one to be interested in their doings. Inder Lal was much more interested to tell me about his own troubles which are many. When the man arrived with the keys, we walked around the Palace and now I saw all the halls and rooms and galleries I have thought about so much and tried to imagine to myself. But the place is empty now, it is just a marble shell. The furnishing has been sold off in European auction rooms, and all that is left, here and there like shipwrecks floating in the marble halls, are some broken Victorian sofas and the old cloth fans - *pull-punkabs* - hanging dustily from the ceiling.

Inder Lal walked close behind me and told me about the goings-on in his office. There is a lot of intrigue and jealousy. Inder Lal would like not to get involved - all he asks is to be allowed to carry out his duties - but this is impossible, people will not let him alone, one is forced to take sides. As a matter of fact, there is a lot of jealousy and intrigue against him too as the head of his department is favourably disposed towards

him. This is very galling to Inder Lal's fellow officers who would do anything - such is their nature - to pull him down.

We stood on an upper gallery overlooking the main drawing room. The watchman explained that here the ladies of the household used to sit concealed behind curtains to peer down at the social entertainment below. One curtain was still left hanging there - a rich brocade, stiff with dust and age. I touched it to admire the material, but it was like touching something dead and mouldering. Inder Lal - who was just telling me about the head of his department whose mind is unfortunately being poisoned by interested parties - also touched the curtain. He commented: "Ah, where has it all gone?" - a sentiment which was at once echoed by the watchman. But then both of them decided that I had seen enough. When we got out into the garden again - as green and shady as the Palace was white and cool- the watchman began rather urgently to speak to Inder Lal. I asked about the Nawab's private mosque, but Inder Lal informed me that this would not be interesting and that instead the watchman would now show me the little Hindu shrine he had fixed up for his own worship.

I don't know what this place had been originally - perhaps a store-room? It was really no more than a hole in the wall and one had to stoop to get through the opening. Several other people crowded in with us. The watchman switched on an electric light bulb and revealed the shrine. The principal god - he was in his monkey aspect, as Hanuman - was kept in a glass case; there were two other gods with him, each in a separate glass case. All were made of plaster-of-paris and dressed in bits of silk and pearl necklaces. The watchman looked at me expectantly so of course I had to say how nice it was and also donate five rupees. I was anxious to get out as it was stifling in there with no ventilation and all these people crowded in. Inder Lal was making his obeisances to the three smiling gods. He had his eyes shut and his lips moved devoutly. I was given some bits of rock sugar and a few flower petals which I did not of course like to throwaway so that I was still clutching them on the bus back to Satipur. When I thought Inder Lal was not looking, I respectfully tipped them out the side of the bus, but they have left the palm of my hand sticky and with a lingering smell of sweetness and decay that is still there as I write.

1923

Olivia first met the Nawab at a dinner party he gave in his palace at Khatm. She had by that time been in Satipur for several months and was already beginning to get bored. Usually the only people she and Douglas saw were the Crawfords (the Collector and his wife), the Saunders (the Medical Superintendent), and Major and Mrs. Minnies. That was in the evenings and on Sundays. The rest of the time Olivia was alone in her big house with all the doors and windows shut to keep out the heat and dust. She read, and played the piano, but the days were long, very long. Douglas

was of course extremely busy with his work in the district.

The day of the Nawab's dinner party, Douglas and Olivia drove over to Khatm with the Crawfords in the latter's car. The Saunders had also been invited but could not go because of Mrs. Saunders' ill health. It was a drive of about 15 miles, and Douglas and the Crawfords, who had all of them been entertained by the Nawab before, were being stoic about the uncomfortable journey as well as about the entertainment that lay ahead of them. But Olivia was excited. She was in a travelling costume - a cream linen suit - and her evening dress and satin shoes and jewel case were packed in her overnight bag. She was glad to think that soon she would be wearing them and people would see her.

Like many Indian rulers, the Nawab was fond of entertaining Europeans. He was at a disadvantage in not having much to entertain them with, for his state had neither interesting ruins nor was it hunting country. All it had was dry soil and impoverished villages. But his palace, which had been built in the 1820s, was rather grand. Olivia's eyes lit up as she was led into the dining room and saw beneath the chandeliers the long, long table laid with a Sevres dinner service, silver, crystal, flowers, candelabras, pomegranates, pineapples, and little golden bowls of crystallised fruits. She felt she had, at last in India, come to the right place.

Only the guests were not right. Besides the party from Satipur, there was another English couple, Major and Mrs. Minnies, who lived near Khatm; and one plump, balding Englishman called Harry something who was a house guest of the Nawab's. Major and Mrs. Minnies were very much like the Crawfords. Major Minnies was the political agent appointed to advise the Nawab and the rulers of some adjacent small states on matters of policy. He had been in India for over twenty years and knew all there was to know about it; so did his wife. And of course so did the Crawfords. Their experience went back several generations, for they were all members of families who had served in one or other of the Indian services since before the Mutiny. Olivia had met other such old India hands and was already very much bored by them and their interminable anecdotes about things that had happened in Kabul or Multan. She kept asking herself how it was possible to lead such exciting lives - administering whole provinces, fighting border battles, advising rulers - and at the same time to remain so dull. She looked around the table - at Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Minnies in their dowdy frocks more suitable to the English watering places to which they would one day retire than to this royal dining table; Major Minnies and Mr. Crawford, puffy and florid, with voices that droned on and on confident of being listened to though everything they were saying was, Olivia thought, as boring as themselves. Only Douglas was different. She stole a look at him: yes, *he* was right. As always, he was sitting up very straight; his nose was straight, so was his high forehead; his evening jacket fitted impeccably. He was noble and fair.

Olivia was not the only one admiring Douglas. The Nawab's house guest, the Englishman called Harry someone who was sitting next to her, whispered to her: "I *like* your husband,," "Oh do you?" Olivia said. "So do I." Harry picked up his napkin from his knees and giggled into it. He whispered from behind it: "Quite a change from our *other* friends," and his eyes swept over the Crawfords and the Minnies and when they came back to Olivia he rolled them in distress. She knew it was disloyal, but she could hardly help smiling in reply. It was nice to have someone feel the same way as herself; she hadn't so far met anyone in India who did. Not even, she sometimes could not help feeling, her Douglas. She looked at him again where he sat listening to Major Minnies with attention and genuine respect.

The Nawab, at the head of his table, also appeared to be listening to his guest with attention and respect. In fact, he was leaning forward in his eagerness not to miss a word. When Major Minnies' story turned amusing - he was telling them about a devilish clever Hindu moneylender in Patna who had attempted to outwit the Major many, many years ago when the latter was still green behind the ears - the Nawab, to mark his appreciation of the Major's humour, threw himself far back in his chair and rapped the table; he only interrupted his laughter in order to invite his other guests to join him in it. But Olivia felt he was putting it on: she was almost sure of it. She saw that, while he seemed to be entirely engrossed in listening to the Major, he was really very alert to what was going on around his table. Always the first to see an empty glass or plate, he would give a swift order: usually with a glance, though sometimes he rapped out, sotto-voce, some Urdu word of command. At the same time he took in each one of his guests, and it seemed to Olivia that he had already come to his own conclusions with regard to them all. She would have loved to know what those conclusions were but suspected that he would take good care to dissemble them. Unless of course she got to know him really well. His eyes often rested on her, and she let him study her while pretending not to notice. She liked it - as she had liked the way he had looked at her when she had first come in. His eyes had lit up - he checked himself immediately, but she had seen it and realised that here at last was one person in India to be interested in her the way she was used to.

After this party, Olivia felt better about being alone in the house all day; She knew the Nawab would come and call on her, and every day she dressed herself in one of her cool, pastel muslins and waited. Douglas always got up at crack of dawn - very quietly, for fear of waking her - to ride out on inspection before the sun got too hot. After that he went to the court-house and to his office and was usually too rushed to come home again till late in the evening and then always with files (how hard they worked their district officers!). By the time Olivia woke up, the servants had cleaned the house and let down all the blinds and shutters. The entire day was her own. In London she had loved having hours and hours to herself - she had always thought of herself as a very introspective person. But here she was beginning to dread these lonely days

locked up with the servants who padded around on naked feet and respectfully waited for her to want something.

The Nawab came four days after the party. She was playing Chopin and when she heard his car she went on playing with redoubled dash. The servant announced him and when he entered she turned on her piano stool and opened her wide eyes wider: "Why Nawab Sahib, what a lovely surprise." She got up to greet him, holding out both hands to him in welcome ..

He had come with a whole party (she was to learn later that he was usually attended). It included the Englishman, Harry, and then there were various young men from the Palace. They all made themselves at home in Olivia's drawing room, draping themselves in graceful attitudes over her sofas and rugs. Harry declared himself charmed with her room - he loved her black and white prints, her Japanese screen, her yellow chairs and lampshades. He flopped into an armchair and, panting like a man in exhaustion, pretended he had crossed a desert and had at last reached an oasis. The Nawab also seemed to enjoy being there. They stayed all day.

It passed in a flash. Afterwards Olivia could not recall what they had talked about - Harry seemed to have done most of the talking and she and the Nawab had laughed at the amusing things he said. The other young men, who knew little English, could not take much part in the conversation but they made themselves useful mixing drinks the way the Nawab liked them. He had made up a special concoction, consisting of gin, vodka, and cherry brandy, which he also invited Olivia to taste (it was too strong for her). He had brought his own vodka because he said people never seemed to have it. He had taken possession of one of the sofas and sat right in the middle of it with both arms extended along the back and his long legs stretched out as far as they would go. He looked very much at ease, and entirely the master of the scene - which of course he was. He invited Olivia not only to drink his concoction but also to make herself quite comfortable on the sofa facing his and to enjoy Harry's humour and whatever other entertainment the day might bring forth.

That evening Douglas found Olivia not as usual half in tears with boredom and fatigue but so excited that for a moment he feared she had a fever. He put his hand on her brow: he had seen a lot of Indian fevers. She laughed at him. When she told him about her visitor, he had his doubts - but seeing how gay she was, how glad, he decided it was all right. She was lonely, and it was decent of the Nawab to have called on her.

A few days later another invitation from the Palace arrived for them both. There was a charming note with it, to say that if they would do him the honour and happiness of accepting, the Nawab would of course be sending a car for them. Douglas was puzzled: he said the Crawfords would as usual be taking them in their car. "Oh good heavens, darling," Olivia said impatiently, "you don't think *they've* been asked, do you."

Douglas stared in amazement: whenever he was amazed like that, his eyes popped a bit and he stuttered.

Later, when it was clear that the Crawfords had really not been invited, he was uneasy. He said he didn't think he and Olivia could accept. But she insisted, she was determined. She said she wasn't having such a grand time here - "believe me, darling" - that she felt inclined to miss the chance of a little entertainment when it came her way. Douglas bit his lip; he knew she was right but it was a dilemma for him. He couldn't see how they could possibly go, he tried to explain to her; but she wouldn't hear him. They argued about it to and fro. She even woke up early in the morning so as to go on arguing. She walked with him to the front of the house where his syce stood holding his horse. "Oh Douglas, *Please* " she said, looking up at him in the saddle. He could not answer her because he could not promise her anything. Yet he longed to do so. He watched her turn back into the house; she was in her kimono and looked frail and unhappy. "I'm a brute," he thought to himself all day. But also that day he sent a note to the Nawab, regretfully declining the invitation.

* * * *

28 February. One of the old British bungalows in the Civil Lines has not been converted, like the others, into municipal offices but into a travellers' rest-house. An ancient watchman has been hired to keep it clean and open it up for travellers. But he is not keen on these duties and prefers to be left to himself to spend his time in his own way. When a traveller presents himself, the watchman asks for the official permit; if this is not produced, he considers his responsibilities at an end and shuffles back into the hut where he lives rather snugly.

Yesterday I came across an odd trio outside the travellers' bungalow. The watchman having refused to open the doors, they had had to spread themselves and their belongings out on the verandah. They were a young man and his girl, both English, and another youth who was also English - he spoke in a flat Midlands accent - but wouldn't admit to it. He said he had laid aside all personal characteristics. He had also laid aside his clothes and was dressed in nothing but an orange robe like an Indian ascetic; he had shaved his head completely, leaving only the Hindu tuft on top. But although he had renounced the world, he was as disgruntled as the other two about the watchman who wouldn't let them in. The girl was particularly indignant - not only about this watchman but about all the other people all over India. She said they were all dirty and dishonest. She had a very pretty, open, English face but when she said that it became mean and clenched, and I realised that the longer she stayed in India the more her face would become like that.

"Why did you come?" I asked her.

"To find peace." She laughed grimly: "But all I found was dysentery."

Her young man said "That's all anyone ever finds here." Then they both launched into a recital of their misadventures. They had been robbed of their watches in a house of devotion in Amritsar; cheated by a man they had met on the train to Kashmir who had promised them a cheap house-boat and had disappeared with their advance; also in Kashmir the girl had developed dysentery which was probably amoebic; they got cheated again in Delhi where a tout, promising them a very favourable rate of exchange for their money, disappeared with it by the back door of the coffee house where they had met him; in Fatehpur Sikri the girl had been molested by a party of Sikh youths; the young man's pocket was picked on the train to Goa; in Goa he had got into a fight with a mad Dane armed with a razor, and had also been laid up with something that may have been jaundice (there was an epidemic); the girl had contracted ringworm.

At this point the watchman came out of his hut where he seemed to have been cooking himself a tasty meal. He said it was forbidden to stay on the verandah. The young Englishman gave a menacing laugh and said "Try and get us out then." Though somewhat worn with sickness, he was a big young man, so the watchman stood sunk in thought. After a while he said it would cost them five rupees to camp on the verandah, including drinking water from the well. The Englishman pointed to the locked doors and said "Open". The watchman retreated to get on with his cooking and perhaps ponder his next step.

The young man told me that he and his girl friend had become very interested in the Hindu religion after attending a lecture by a visiting swami in London. It had been on Universal Love. The swami, in a soft caressing voice very suitable to the subject, told them that Universal Love was an ocean of sweetness that lapped around all humanity and enfolded them in tides of honey. He had melting eyes and a smile of joy. The atmosphere was also very beautiful, with jasmine, incense, and banana leaves; the swami's discourse was accompanied by two of his disciples one of whom softly played a flute while the other, even more softly, beat two tiny cymbals together. All the disciples were ranged around the swami on the platform. They were mostly Europeans and wore saffron robes and had very pure expressions on their faces as if cleansed of all sin and desire. Afterwards they had sung hymns in Hindi which were also about the flowing ocean of love. The young man and his girl had come away from this meeting with such exalted feelings that they could not speak for a long time; but when they could, they agreed that, in order to find the spiritual enrichment they desired, they must set off for India without delay.

The ascetic said he too had come for a spiritual purpose.

In his case, the original attraction had come through the Hindu scriptures, and when he arrived in India, he had not been disappointed. It seemed to him that the spirit of

these scriptures was still manifest in the great temples of the South. For months he had lived there, like an Indian pilgrim, purifying himself and often so rapt in contemplation that the world around him had faded away completely. He too developed dysentery and ringworm but was not bothered by them because of living on such a high plane; similarly, he was not bothered by the disappearance of his few possessions from the temple compound where he lived. He found a guru to give him initiation and to strip him of all personal characteristics and the rest of his possessions including his name. He was given a new Indian name, Chidananda (his two companions called him Chid). From now on he was to have nothing except his beads and the begging bowl in which he had to collect his daily food from charitable people. In practice, however, he found this did not work too well, and he had often to write home for money to be sent by telegraphic order. On the instruction of his guru, he had set off on a pilgrimage right across India with the holy cave of Amarnath as his ultimate goal. He had already been wandering for many months. His chief affliction was people running after and jeering at him; the children were especially troublesome and often threw stones and other missiles. He found it impossible to live simply under trees as instructed by his guru but had to seek shelter at night in cheap hotel rooms where he had to bargain quite hard in order to be quoted a reasonable price.

The watchman returned, holding up three fingers to signify that the charge for staying on the verandah had now been reduced to three rupees. The Englishman again pointed at the locked doors. But negotiations had begun, and now it was not long before the watchman fetched his keys. Actually, it turned out to be more pleasant on the verandah. It was musty and dark inside the bungalow; the place smelled dead. In fact, we did find a dead squirrel on the floor of what must have been a dining room (there was still a sideboard with mirrors and a portrait of George V inset). It was a gloomy, brooding house and could never have been anything else. From the back verandah there was a view of the Christian graveyard: and I saw rearing above all the other graves the marble angel that the Saunders had ordered from Italy as a monument over their baby's grave. Suddenly it struck me that this dark house must have been the one in which Dr. Saunders, the Medical Superintendent, had lived. I had not realised that Mrs. Saunders had been able to look out at her baby's grave right from her own back verandah.

Of course at that time the marble angel had been new and intact - shining white with wings outspread and holding a marble baby in its arms. Now it is a headless, wingless torso with a baby that has lost its nose and one foot. All the graves are in very bad condition - weed-choked, and stripped of whatever marble and railings could be removed. It is strange how, once graves are broken and overgrown in this way, then the people in them are truly dead. The Indian Christian graves at the front of the cemetery, which are still kept up by relatives, seem by contrast strangely alive, contemporary.

1923

Olivia had always been strongly affected by graveyards.

In England too she had liked to wander through them, reading the inscriptions and even sitting on a grave stone under a weeping willow and letting her imagination roam. The graveyard at Satipur was especially evocative .. Although Satipur had always been a small station for the British, quite a few of them had died there over the years; and bodies were also brought in from other districts with no Christian cemetery of their own. Most of the graves were of infants and children, but there were also several dating from the Mutiny when a gallant band of British officers had died defending their women and children. The newest grave was that of the Saunders' baby, and the Italian angel was the newest, brightest monument.

The first time Olivia saw this baby's grave, it had a powerful effect on her. That evening Douglas found her lying face down across their bed; she had not allowed the servants to come in and open the shutters, so the room was all closed in and stifling and Olivia herself bathed in tears and perspiration.

"Oh Douglas," she said, "what if we have a baby?"; and then she cried: " Yes and what if it should die! "

It took him a long time to soothe her. He had to forget his files for that one evening and devote himself entirely to her. He said everything he could think of. He told her that nowadays babies did not die so often. He himself had been born in India, and his mother had had two other children here and all of them had thrived. It was true, in the old days a lot of children did die - his great-grandmother had lost five of her nine children; but that had been a long time ago.

"What about Mrs. Saunders' baby?"

"That could have happened anywhere, darling. She had complications - or something-"

"I'll have complications. I'll die. The baby and I both." When he tried to protest, she insisted: "No, if we stay here, we'll die. I know it. You'll see." When she saw the expression on his face, she made an effort to pull herself together. She even tried to smile. She put up her hand to stroke his cheek:

"But you want to stay."

He said eagerly "It's just that it's all new to you. It's easy for the rest of us because we all know what to expect. But you don't, my poor darling." He kissed her as she lay there resting against his chest. "You know, I'd been talking about this very thing with Beth Crawford. (No, darling, you mustn't think that way about Beth, she's a good

sort). She knew before you came how difficult it would be for you. And you know what she said *after* you came? She said she was sure that someone as sensitive and intelligent as you are - you see she does appreciate you, darling - that you would surely be ... all right here. That you - well, this is what *she* said - that you'd come to feel about India the way we all do. Olivia? Are you asleep, darling?"

She wasn't really but she liked lying against his chest, both of them shrouded within their white mosquito net. The moon had risen from behind the peach tree and its light came pouring in through the open windows. When Douglas thought she was asleep, he hugged her tighter and could hardly stifle a small cry - as if it were too much happiness for him to have her there in his arms, flooded and shining in Indian moonlight.

Next day Olivia went to visit Mrs. Saunders. She took flowers, fruit, and a heart full of tender pity for her. But although Olivia's feelings towards Mrs. Saunders had changed, Mrs. Saunders herself had not. She was still the same unattractive woman lying in bed in a bleak, gloomy house. Olivia, always susceptible to atmosphere, had to struggle against a feeling of distaste. She did so hate a slovenly house, and Mrs. Saunders' house was very slovenly; so were her servants. No one bothered to put Olivia's pretty Rowers in a vase - perhaps there was no vase? There wasn't much of anything, just a few pieces of ugly furniture 'and even those were dusty.

Olivia sat by Mrs. Saunders' bedside and listened to her tell about her illness which was something to do with her womb. It had never got right after the baby's death - this was the only mention of the baby's death, for the rest it was all about the bad after-effects on Mrs. Saunders' health. While she talked, Olivia had the unworthy thought that the Saunders really were not - were not - well, no one ever said this outright but they were just not the sort of people usually found in the Indian services. Olivia was by no means a snob but she *was* aesthetic and the details Mrs. Saunders gave about her illness were not; also Mrs. Saunders' accent - how could one help noticing with her droning on and on? - was not that of a too highly educated person

I'm base, *base*, Olivia scolded herself - but at that moment she had a shock for Mrs. Saunders gave a loud shout: turning round, Olivia saw that one of the slovenly servants had come in, wearing slovenly shoes. It was these latter that had upset his mistress - and of course it was a mark of disrespect for a servant to enter a room with shoes on, Douglas would never have allowed it to happen in their house. But Olivia was amazed and frightened by the strength of Mrs. Saunders' reaction. She had sat up in bed and was shouting like a madwoman. 'She called the servant a dirty name too. The servant was frightened and ran away. Mrs. Saunders Sank her head down on her pillow in exhaustion, but her outburst was not over yet. She seemed to feel the need to express or perhaps justify herself; she may have been ashamed of the dirty word

that had escaped her. She said that these servants really were devils and that they could drive anyone crazy; that it was not stupidity on their part - on the contrary, they were clever enough when it suited their purposes - but it was all done deliberately to torment their masters. She gave examples of their thieving, drinking, and other bad habits. She told Olivia about the filth in which they lived inside their quarters - but of course what could one expect, everything was like that, everywhere the same - the whole town, the lanes and bazaars, and had Olivia ever looked inside one of their heathen temples? Mrs. Saunders groaned and she covered her face with her hands and then Olivia saw that tears came oozing through her fingers and her chest inside her nightgown was heaving with heavy sobs. She brought out "I've asked him - over and over - I've said: Willie, let's *go*."

Olivia stroked Mrs. Saunders' pillow and now her tears were flowing too, in pity for someone so unhappy.

What a relief, after that, to be with bright, brisk Beth Crawford! She had come to invite Olivia to accompany her to Khatm, to pay a call on the Nawab's mother. Olivia loved visiting the Palace again, even though this time they were ushered straight into the ladies' quarters. These were also very elegant, though more in Indian style with floor-level divans covered in rich textures, and little mirrors in enamelled frames. Three good European chairs had been arranged in the centre: these were for Mrs. Crawford and Olivia, and for the Begum herself. There were some other, mostly elderly ladies and they reclined on the divans spread on the floor. The younger ladies floated around in diaphanous silks and served sherbet and other refreshments from a succession of trays carried in by servants.

Olivia could do nothing but sit perched up on her chair.

Conversation was impossible since she did not know a word of the language. The Begum did try to speak a few words of English to her - only at once to laugh at herself for pronouncing them so badly. She was a woman in her fifties who would have been handsome except for a large wart on her cheek. She was chain-smoking cigarettes out of a holder. She had a very relaxed manner and made no secret of the fact that sitting on a chair was uncomfortable for her. She kept shifting around, tucking now one leg under her and now the other. Olivia, who loved lounging, would also have preferred to recline on the floor but probably it would not have been etiquette.

Mrs. Crawford sat bolt upright on her chair, her stockinged knees pressed together and her hands in white gloves folded on the handbag in her lap. She was the dominant figure in the room on whom the success of the visit depended. And she did not shirk her responsibility. She spoke Urdu (the language of the Palace) if not well at any rate with confidence, and was prepared to give the ladies whatever conversation she thought they might like to hear. Evidently she had come prepared with a variety of

topics, for she passed easily from one to the other as interest appeared to wax or wane. The Begum on her chair and the ladies on the floor appeared pleased, and often they laughed out loud and clapped their hands together. Everyone played their part well- the Palace ladies as well as Mrs. Crawford - and gave evidence of having frequently played it before. Only Olivia, the newcomer, could not participate; in any case, her attention was quite a lot on the door, wondering whether the Nawab was going to come in and join them. But this did not happen. At exactly the right moment Mrs. Crawford got up whereat the ladies exclaimed to the right pitch of disappointment; after some protests, they gracefully gave in and accompanied their guests the correct distance to the door. Olivia whispered "Do we have to call on the Nawab too?" but Mrs. Crawford said firmly "That will not be necessary at all." She strode ahead with the step of one who has fulfilled a duty well, while Olivia, trailing behind her, looked right and left - probably to admire the Nawab's flowers which were indeed splendid.

After this visit, they drove to the Minnies' house just outside Khatm. Mrs. Minnies was sitting at her easel but jumped up at once to greet them. She dismissed her model a patient old peasant - and taking off her artist's smock, tossed it aside with a girlish gesture. Mrs. Crawford too, now that she was with her friend, became rather girlish. She comically rolled her eyes up as she recounted where they had been, and Mrs. Minnies said "Oh you *are* good, Beth." "It wasn't too bad," Mrs. Crawford said brightly, and she turned to Olivia: "was it?" not wanting her to feel left out.

But Olivia did feel left out-just as much as she had done in the Palace. Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Minnies were such good friends. They had both been in India for years and were cheerful and undaunted. Probably they would have preferred to put their feet up and have a cosy chat of their own, but instead they devoted their attention to Olivia. They had a lot of good advice to give her - about putting up her *kehas tattti* screens for the hot weather, and how to instruct the *ayah* to wash her crêpe-de-chine blouses (which must under no circumstances be given to the *dhobi*). Olivia tried to be interested but she wasn't, and at the first possible opportunity she asked a question of her own. She said "Isn't the Nawab married?"

This brought a pause. The two other ladies did not exchange glances and Olivia felt they didn't have to because of being united in thought. Finally Mrs. Crawford replied "Yes he is but his wife doesn't live with him." She spoke in a direct way, like one who doesn't want to gloss over anything. "She is not very well," she added, "mentally."

"Oh Beth guess what!" Mrs. Minnies suddenly exclaimed. "I've heard from Simla, and Honeysuckle Cottage *is* available again this year, isn't that splendid ... Doe's Olivia have Simla plans?"

Mrs. Crawford answered for her: "Douglas has been asking about our arrangements."

"Well there's always a corner for her at Honeysuckle Cottage. Especially now that it looks as if Arthur may not be able-

"Mary-no! "

" We're still hoping but I'm afraid it doesn't look too good.

But *I'm* certainly going' she said. "I've never really done the view from Prospect Hill and this year I simply must. Whatever the Nawab might be up to."

"The Nawab?" Olivia asked.

After a pause Mrs. Minnies told Mrs. Crawford "There have been new developments. It now looks as if he really is involved."

"With the dacoits? Mary, how *awful*. And just at this time. "

"Can't be helped," said Mrs. Minnies with practised cheerfulness. "I suppose we're used to it by now. Or ought to be. Three years ago it was the same. Our Friend always seems to choose this particular time, when Arthur's leave is due. It's become quite a habit with him."

Olivia asked "What happened three years ago?"

After a silence Mrs. Crawford replied - not willingly but as if conceding Olivia's right to know: "That's when there was all the fuss over his marriage breaking up." She sighed; obviously the subject was distasteful to her. "Mary really knows more about it than I do."

"Not that much more," Mrs. Minnies said. "It's always difficult to know what *is* going on ... " She too was reluctant to say more, but she too seemed to feel that Olivia had a right to information: "Poor Arthur got rather involved, along with Colonel Morris who is his opposite number at Cabobpur, the state belonging to Sandy's family. Sandy is the Nawab's wife. She's always called that though her real name is Zahira."

"If it hadn't been for Arthur and Colonel Morris," Mrs. Crawford said, "the situation could have turned into something quite ugly. The Cabobpurs were absolutely furious with the Nawab. "

"But why?" Olivia asked. "I mean - it couldn't have been his fault - if she was - mentally not well ... "

After another pause Mrs. Crawford said "As Mary says, it's always difficult to know *what's* going on. And there was also some question of return of dowry - it was all very tiresome Olivia, " she said, "you *will* be joining us in Simla, won't you?"

Olivia fidgeted a little; she played with the slim bracelet on her slim arm. "Douglas and I've been talking about it. "

"Yes and he does so hope you will. " Mrs. Crawford looked at Olivia, and there was

something about her look - straight and steady-that was reminiscent of Douglas.

"I wouldn't like to leave him," Olivia said. "Four *months* - it seems an eternity." She added shyly, again fidgeting with her bracelet, "We haven't been-together so very long." She was going to say "married" but "together" sounded better.

The other two exchanged glances; they laughed. Mrs. Crawford said "We must seem like a couple of tough old hens to you."

"Yes but even this tough old hen," Mrs. Minnies said, "will feel rather seedy if Arthur can't make it-"

"Why can't he?" Olivia asked.

"We need you, Olivia," Mrs. Crawford said. "Life would be deadly in Simla without you."

"Oh rather," Mrs. Minnies took up the joke. "Who will follow *us* down the Mall? Who will call on *us* at Honeysuckle Cottage?"

"Only the other tough old hens."

They went off into school-prefect laughter. Olivia understood that actually they would be happier without her, doing matronly things and being comfortable with each other. but they were speaking for *her* sake.

She asked "Is. Mrs. Saunders going?"

"No. Joan doesn't come to Simla. Though it would do her so much good to get out of that *house* .. You too, Olivia," Mrs. Crawford added and gave her another Douglas kind of look.

"But why can't Major Minnies go? If it's his leave-" They seemed not to have heard. They began to discuss their Simla plans again - principally, which servants to take with them and which to leave behind to look after the poor old Sahibs who had to stay and sweat it out in the plains.

Olivia got the information she wanted from another source. One dull morning - she was even giving up the piano - she had a visitor. It was Harry, and he came in one of the Nawab's cars driven by the Nawab's chauffeur. He said he simply had to come and refresh himself at the Oasis (which is what he called her house). And she, seeing him, felt that *he* though plump and unattractive - was an oasis for her. He spent the day, and in the course of it talked of many things that she wanted to hear about.

About the Nawab's wife he said: "Poor Sandy. Poor thing. It was too much for her. *He* was too much for her. "

"Who?" Olivia poured him another drink - they were having a sweet sherry.

Harry shot her a look, then lowered his eyes: "He's a very strong person. Very manly and strong. When he wants something, nothing must stand in his way. Never; ever. He's been the Nawab since he was fifteen (his father died suddenly of a stroke). So he's always ruled, you see; always been the ruler." He sighed, in a mixture of admiration and pain.

"The Cabobpur family didn't want her to marry him," he said. "They're much bigger royals of course - he doesn't really count in those circles: not much of a title, and by their standards he isn't even rich. "

"He seems rich," Olivia said.

"I met him in London first," Harry said. "They were all at Claridges - he'd brought everyone with him - everyone he liked, that is, and all the servants he needed like Shafi who mixes his drinks. And the Cabobpurs were there too - on the floor below: they'd brought all *their* people - but after a week they went away to Paris because of Sandy getting too fond. As if one could run away from someone like him. The next day he was in Paris too. He said to me 'You come along, Harry.' He liked me, you see."

"And you went?"

Harry shut his eyes: "I told you: one does not say no to such a person ... By the way, Olivia, Mrs. Rivers ... I may call you Olivia? I do feel we're friends. One feels that with people, don't you think? If they're one's type? ... Olivia, he wants to give a party."

There was a pause. Olivia poured more sherry.

"He most particularly wants you to come. Of course there '11 be a car."

"Douglas is dreadfully busy."

"He wants you both to come. He wants it most awfully..."

It's strange, isn't it: you'd think someone like him would have a million friends. But he doesn't."

"*You're* there."

Olivia had already asked Douglas what Harry's position was in the Nawab's palace. Was it anything official, like secretary? Douglas had not been very forthcoming, and when she had insisted, he had said "There are always hangers-on around those people."

Harry became confidential - he seemed glad to be able to speak freely to someone: "I do want to do everything I can to make him - happier. Goodness knows I try. Not only because I like him very much but because he's been fantastically kind to me. You can have no idea of his generosity, Olivia. He wants his friends to have everything. Everything he can give them. It's his nature. If you don't want to take, he's terribly

hurt. But how can one take so much? It makes one feel ... After all, I'm here because I *like* him, not for any other reason. But all he knows is giving. Giving things." His face and voice were full of pain.

"But that means he likes you."

"Who knows? With him you can't tell. One moment you think: Yes he cares - but next moment you might as well be some ... object. I've been with him three years now. Three years, can you imagine, at Khatm. I haven't even seen the Taj Mahal. We keep getting ready to go to oh all sorts of places - but at the last moment something always comes up. Usually it's the Begum who doesn't want us to go ... Do you know, sometimes I feel that the only person he really cares for on this earth is the Begum. He hates to be away from her. Naturally, his mother ... I haven't seen *my* mother for three years. I'm worried about her because she hasn't been keeping too well. She's on her own, you see, in a little flat in South Ken. Of course she wants me to come home. But whenever I mention it, all he does is send her some marvellous present. Once she wrote to him - she thanked him but said "The best present you could send me would be my Harry home again. ' He was really touched. "

"But he didn't let you go?"

Harry gave her a sideways look. He was silent - he even bit in his lips. Then he said "I hope I didn't give you the impression that I'm complaining." His tone was prim, offended.

It was by now late in the afternoon and the day was turning stale. She had given him luncheon of which he had eaten very little; apparently he suffered with his digestion. Now it was very hot and close in the room, but it was still too early to open the blinds. The sherry was warm and sticky and so was the smell of the flowers with which she had filled her vases (Olivia could not live without flowers). Now she wanted Harry to go. She wanted the day to be over and that it would be night with a cool breeze blowing and Douglas sitting at his desk rather stern and serious over his interminable files.

Douglas spoke Hindustani very fluently. He had to because he was constantly dealing with Indians and was responsible for settling a great variety of local problems. All his work was of course carried out in his office, or in the courts, or out on site, so Olivia never came in contact with it; but from time to time - usually on festive occasions - some of the local rich men would come to pay their respects. They would sit on the verandah with their offerings to the Sahib which were baskets of fruits and trays of sweetmeats and pistachio nuts. The rich men all seemed to look the same: they were all fat, and wore spotless loose white muslin clothes, and shone with oil and jewellery. When Douglas went out to greet them, they simpered and joined their hands together and seemed so overcome with the honour he was doing them that they could barely

stammer out their appreciation of it.

Olivia listened to them talking out there. Douglas' voice, firm and manly, rose above the rest. When he spoke, the others confined themselves to murmurs of agreement. He must have made some jokes because every now and again they all laughed in polite unison. Sometimes he seemed to speak rather more sternly, and then the murmurs became very low and submissive till he made another joke whereupon they dissolved in relieved laughter. It was almost as if Douglas were playing a musical instrument of which he had entirely mastered the stops. He also knew the exact moment to start on the finale and there was a shuffle of feet and a last rather louder chorus of gratitude which came out so sincere, so overflowing from a fullness of heart, that some of the voices broke with emotion.

When Douglas came back in, he was smiling. He always seemed to enjoy these encounters. He said "What a pack of rogues they are," and shook his head in benign amusement.

Olivia was sitting at her sampler .. She had lately taken up embroidery and was making, as her first effort, a floral tapestry cover for a footstool. Douglas sat down in his chair opposite her; he said "As if I didn't know what they're all up to."

"What?" Olivia asked.

"Their usual tricks. They're full of them. They think they're frightfully cunning but really they're like children." He smiled and knocked out his pipe on the English brass fender.

"Oh really, darling," Olivia protested.

"Sorry, darling." He thought she meant the pipe - he had made a mess with the ash, he was a recent and inexpert smoker - but she didn't. She said "They look like very grown-up men to me."

He laughed: "Don't they? It's very misleading. But once you know them - and they know that you know - well, you can have a good time with them. Just as long as you're not fooled. It's rather fun really."

He looked at her golden head bent gracefully from her white neck: he loved to have her sitting there like that opposite him, sewing. She was wearing something soft and beige. He was vague about women's clothes and only knew what he liked and he liked this. "Is that new?" he asked.

"Oh goodness, darling, you've seen it hundreds of times Why were they laughing? What did you say?"

"I just told them, in a roundabout way, that they were a pack of rogues."

"And they like being told that?"

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