

CHAPTER XVII

INDIA

On his road to the house to pack his portmanteau Godfrey went a little way round to arrange with a blacksmith, generally known as Tom, who jobbed out a pony-trap, to drive him to the station to catch the 7.15 train. The blacksmith remarked that they would have to hurry, and set to work to put the pony in, while Godfrey ran on to the Abbey House and hurriedly collected his clothes. He got them packed and down into the hall just as the trap arrived.

As he was entering it the servant put a letter into his hand which she said had come for him by the afternoon post. He thrust it into his pocket unlooked at, and off they went at the pony's best pace.

"You are going away oncommon quick, Master Godfrey. Coming back to these parts soon?" queried the blacksmith.

"No, not for a long while, Tom."

"I think there must have been lightning with that rain," went on Tom, after a pause, "although I heard no thunder. Else how ever did that marble angel over poor Lady Jane's grave come down with such a smash?"

Godfrey glanced at him, but Tom remained imperturbable and went on:

"They du say it wor a wunnerful smash, what broke off both the wings and nearly flattered out some as stood by. Rum thing, Master Godfrey, that the lightning should have picked out the grave of so good a lady to hit; ondiscriminating thing, lightning is."

"Stop talking humbug, Tom. Were you there?" asked Godfrey.

"Well, not exactly there, Master Godfrey, but I and one or two others was nigh, having heard voices louder than the common, just looking over the churchyard wall, to tell truth."

"Oh!" ejaculated Godfrey, and Tom continued in a reflective voice.

"My! they were two beuties, what you gave that old fat devil of a squire. If he'd been a bull instead of only roaring like one, they'd have brought him down, to say nothing of parson and the angel."

"I couldn't help it, Tom. I was mad."

"And no wonder, after being crumped on the nut with a tight umbrella. Why, I'd have done the same myself, baronite or no baronite. Oh! there's no need to explain; I knows everything about it, and so does every babe in the village by now, not to mention the old women. Master Godfrey, you take my advice, the next time you go a-courtin' shut the door behind you, which I always made a point o' doing when I was young.

Being passing that way, I seed parson peeping in, and knowing you was there, guessed why. Truth is I came to warn you after he'd gone up to the Hall, but seein' how you was engaged, thought it a pity to interrupt, though now I wish I had."

Godfrey groaned; there was nothing to say.

"Well, all the soot's in the cooking-pot now, so to speak," proceeded Tom blandly, "and we're downright sad about it, we are, for as my missus was saying, you'd make a pretty pair. But, Lord, Master Godfrey, don't you take it too much to heart, for she's an upright young lady, she is, and steadfast. Or if she ain't, there's plenty of others; also one day follows another, as the saying goes, and the worst of old varmint's don't live for ever. But parson, he beats me, and you his son, so they tell, though I never could think it myself. If he ain't the meanest ferret I ever clapped eyes on, may the old mare fall down and break my neck. Well, he'll hear about it, I can promise him, especially if he meets my missus what's got a tongue in her head, and is a chapel woman into the bargain. Lord! there comes the train. Don't you fear, we'll catch her. Hold tight, Master Godfrey, and be ready to jump out. No, no, there ain't nothing to pay. I'll stick it on to parson's fare next time I've druve him. Good-bye, Master Godfrey, and God bless you, if only for that there right and left which warmed my heart to see, and mind ye," he shouted after him, "there's more young women in the world than ye meets in an afternoon's walk, and one nail drives another out, as being a smith by trade I knows well."

Godfrey bundled into an empty carriage with his portmanteau and his coat, and covered his face with his hands that he might see no more of that accursed station whence he seemed always to be departing in trouble. So everything had been overheard and seen, and doubtless the story would travel far and wide. Poor Isobel!

As a matter of fact it did, but it was not Isobel who suffered, since public sympathy was strong on the side of her and of her lover. The indignation of the neighbourhood concentrated itself upon the square and the parson, especially the latter. Indeed the village showed its sympathy with the victims and its wrath with the oppressors, by going on strike. Few beaters turned up at Sir John's next shooting party, and on the following Sunday Mr. Knight preached to empty benches, a vacuum that continued from week to week. The end of it was he became so unpopular and his strained relations with Sir John grew so notorious that the bishop, who like everyone else knew the whole story, gently suggested to him that a change of livings would be to his advantage; also to that of the church in Monk's Acre and its neighbourhood.

So Mr. Knight departed to another parish in a remote part of the diocese which, having been inundated by the sea, was almost devoid of inhabitants, and saw the Abbey and Hawk's Hall no more.

In searching his pockets for matches, Godfrey found the letter which had been given to him as he left the Abbey. He knew the writing on the envelope at once, and was minded not to open it, for this and the foreign stamp told him that it came from Madame Riennes. Still curiosity, or a desire to take his mind off the miseries by which it was beset, prevailed, and he did open the envelope and read. It ran thus:

"Ah! my little friend, my godson in the speerit, Godfrey

"I daresay you thought that poor old Madame was dead, gone to join the Celestials, because you have not heard from her for so long a while. Not a bit, my little Godfrey, though perhaps I should not call you little, since my crystal shows me that you have grown taller even than you were in the old days at Lucerne, and much broader, quite a good-made man and nice to look at. Well, my Godfrey, I hear things about you sometimes, for the most part from the speerit called Eleanor who, I warn you, has a great bone to pick with you. Because, you see, people do not change so much as you think when they get to the other side. So a woman remains a woman, and being a woman she stays jealous, and does not like it when her affinity turns the back on her, as you have done on Eleanor. Therefore she will give you a bad trick if she can, just as a woman would upon the earth. Also I hear of you sometimes from Miss Ogilvy or, rather, her speerit, for she is as fond of you as ever, so fond that I think you must have mixed up together in a

previous life, because otherwise there is nothing to account for it. She tries to protect you from Eleanor the indignant, with whom she has, I gather, much row.

"Now for my message, which come to me from all these speerits. I hear you have done very well in what they call examinations, and have before you a shining future. But do not think that you will be happy, my Godfrey, for you will not get that girl you want for a long, long while, and then only for the shortest of time, just enough to kiss and say, 'Oh! my pretty, how nice you are!' And then au revoir to the world of speerits. Meanwhile, being a little fool, you will go empty and hungry, since you are not one of those who hate the woman, which, after all, is the best thing in life for the man while he is young, like, so the spirits tell me, does your dear papa. And oh! how plenty this woman fruit hang on every tree, so why not pluck and eat before the time come, when you cannot, because if you still have appetite those nice plums turn your stomach? So you have a bad time before you, my Godfrey, waiting for the big fat plum far away which you cannot see or touch and much less taste, while the other nice plums fall into different hands, or wither--wither, waiting to be eaten.

"At end, when you get your big, fat plum, just as you set your teeth in it, oh! something blow it out of your mouth, I know not what, the speerits will not say, perhaps because they do not know, for they have not prescience of all things. But of this be sure,

my Godfrey, when that happen, that it is your own fault, for had you trusted to your godmamma Riennes it never would have chanced, since she would have shown you how to get your plum and eat it to the stone and then throw away the stone and get other plums and be happy--happy and full instead of empty. Well, so it is, and as I must I tell you. There is but one hope for you, unless you would go sorrowful. To come back to your godmamma, who will teach you how to walk and be happy--happy and get all you want. Also, since she is now poor, you would do well to send her a little money to this address in Italy, since that old humbug of a Pasteur, whom she cannot harm because of the influences round him, still prevents her from returning to Switzerland, where she has friends. Now that big plum, it is very nice and you desire it much. Come to your godmamma and she will show you how to get it off the tree quickly. Yes, within one year. Or do not come and it will hang there for many winters and shrivel as plums do, and at last one bite and it will be gone. And then, my godson, then, my dear Godfrey--well, perhaps I will tell you the rest another time. You poor silly boy, who will not understand that the more you get the more you will always have.

"Your Godmamma, "Who love you still although you treat her so badly,
"The Countess of Riennes.

"(Ah! you did not know I had that title, did you, but in the speerit world I have others which are much higher.)"

Godfrey thrust this precious epistle back into his pocket with a feeling of physical and mental sickness. How did this horrible woman know so much about him and his affairs, and why did she prophesy such dreadful things? Further, if her knowledge was so accurate, although veiled in her foreign metaphor, why should not her prophecies be accurate also? And if they were, why should he be called upon to suffer so many things?

He could find no answer to these questions, but afterwards he sent her letter to the Pasteur, who in due course returned it with some upright and manly comments both upon the epistle itself and the story of his troubles, which Godfrey had detailed to him. Amongst much else he wrote in French:

"You suffer and cannot understand why, my dear boy. Nor do I, but it is truth that all who are worth anything are called upon to suffer, to what end we do not know. Nothing of value is gained except by suffering. Why, again we do not know. This wretched woman is right in a way when she refers all solutions to another world, only her other world is one that is bad, and her solutions are very base. Be sure that there are other and better ones that we shall learn in due time, when this little sun has set for us. For it will rise elsewhere, Godfrey, in a brighter sky. Meanwhile, do not be frightened by her threats, for even if they should all be true, to those evils which she prophesies there is,

be sure, another interpretation. As I think one of your poets has said, we add our figures until they come even. So go your way and keep as upright as you can, and have no fear since God is over all, not the devil."

Thus preached the Pasteur, and what he said gave Godfrey the greatest comfort. Still, being young, he made one mistake. He did send Madame Riennes some money, partly out of pity--ten pounds in a postal order without any covering letter, a folly that did not tend to a cessation of her epistolatory efforts.

On reaching town Godfrey went straight to Hampstead. There to his surprise he found all prepared for his reception.

"I was expecting you, my dear," said Mrs. Parsons, "and even have a little bit extra in the house in case you should come."

"Why, when I told you I had gone home for a month?" asked Godfrey.

"Why? For the same reason as I know that oil and vinegar won't abide mixed in the same bottle. I was sure enough that being a man grown, you and your father could never get on together in one house. But perhaps there is something else in it too," she added doubtfully.

Then Godfrey told her that there was something else, and indeed all about the business.

"Well, there you are, and there's nothing to be said, or at least so much that it comes to the same thing," remarked Mrs. Parsons, in a reflective tone, when he had finished his story. "But what I want to know," she went on, "is why these kind of things happen. You two--I mean you and Miss Isobel--are just fitted to each other, appointed together by Nature, so to speak, and fond as a couple of doves upon a perch. So why shouldn't you take each other and have done? What is there to come between a young man and a young woman such as you are?"

"I don't know," groaned Godfrey.

"No, nor don't I; and yet something does come between. What's the meaning of it all? Why do things always go cussed in this 'ere world? Is there a devil about what manages it, or is it just chance? Why shouldn't people have what they want and when it's wanted, instead of being forced to wait until perhaps it isn't, or can't be enjoyed, or often enough to lose it altogether? You can't answer, and nor can't I; only at times I do think, notwithstanding all my Christian teachings and hundreds and hundreds of your father's sermons, that the devil, he's top-dog here. And as for that there foreign woman whose letter you've read to me, she's his housemaid. Not but what I'm sure it will all come right at last," she added, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"I hope so," replied Godfrey, without conviction, and went to bed.

Presently he descended from his room again, bearing a pill-box in which was enclosed a certain ring that years before he had bought at Lucerne, a ring set with two hearts of turquoise.

"I promised not to write," he said, "but you might address this to her. She'll know what it is, for I told her about it."

"Yes," said Mrs. Parsons, "the young lady shall have that box of pills. Being upset, it may do her good."

In due course Isobel did have it; also the box came back addressed to Mrs. Parsons. In it was another ring, a simple band of ancient gold--as a matter of fact, it was Roman, a betrothal ring of two thousand years ago. Round it was a scrap of paper on which was written:

"This was dug up in a grave. My great-grandmother gave it to my great-grandfather when they became engaged about a hundred years ago, and he wore it all his life, as in a bygone age someone else had done. Now the great-granddaughter gives it to another. Let him wear it all his life, whatever happens to her, or to him. Then let it go to the grave again, perhaps to be worn by others far centuries hence."

Godfrey understood and set it on the third finger of his left hand, where it remained night and day, and year by year.

So that matter ended, and afterwards came silence and darkness which endured for ten years or more. From his father he heard nothing, nor on his part did he ever write to him again. Indeed the first news concerning him which reached Godfrey was that of his death which happened some seven years later, apparently after a brief illness. Even of this he would not have learned, since no one took the trouble to put it in any paper that he saw, had it not chanced that the Rev. Mr. Knight died intestate, and that therefore his small belongings descended to Godfrey as his natural heir. With them were a number of papers, among which in the after days Godfrey found the very letter that Isobel wrote to him which his father "posted" in his desk.

For his son there was no word, a circumstance that showed the implacability of this man's character. Notwithstanding his continual profession of the highest Christian principles he could never forget or forgive, and this although it was he who was in fault. For what wrong had Godfrey done to him in loving a woman whom he did not chance to like? So he died silent, bearing his resentment to the grave. And yet some odd sense of justice prevented him from robbing Godfrey of his little inheritance, something under two thousand pounds, that came on a policy of insurance and certain savings, a sum which in after years when money was plentiful with him Godfrey appointed to the repair and beautifying of the Abbey Church at Monk's Acre.

Strangely enough, although from his childhood they had been always estranged, Godfrey felt this conduct of his father very much indeed. It seemed dreadful to him that he should vanish thus into the darkness, taking his wrath with him; and often he wondered if it still animated him there. Also he wondered what could be the possible purpose of it all, and indeed why his father was so fashioned that he could grow venomous over such a matter. To all of which questions no answer came, although one suggested itself to him--namely, that he was the victim of some hereditary taint, and therefore not in fact to blame.

In the case of Isobel the darkness was equally dense, for both of them kept their word, and with the single exception of the episode of the exchange of rings, neither attempted to communicate with the other directly or indirectly. From Mrs. Parsons he heard that Hawk's Hall was shut up, and that Sir John and his daughter lived mostly in London or at a place that the former had bought in Scotland. Once indeed Mrs. Parsons did write, or got someone else to write, to him that she had seen Isobel drive past her in the street, and that she looked well, though rather "stern and quiet-like."

That was all the news Godfrey had of Isobel during those ten years, since she was not a person who advertised her movements in the papers, although for her sake he became a great student of society gossip. Also he read with care all announcements of engagements and marriages in *The Times*, and the deaths, too, for the matter of that, but happily quite without result. Indeed in view of her declaration he ought to

have been, and, in fact, was, ashamed of his research; but then, who could be quite sure of anything in this world?

Sir John, he knew, was living, because from time to time he saw his name in lists of subscriptions of a sort that appear under royal patronage and are largely advertised.

So between these two swung a veil of darkness, although, had he but known it, this was not nearly so impenetrable to Isobel as to himself. Somehow--possibly Arthur Thorburn had friends with whom he corresponded in England who knew Isobel--she acquired information as to every detail of his career. Indeed when he came to learn everything he was absolutely amazed at the particulars with which she was acquainted, whereof there were certain that he would have preferred to have kept to himself. But she had them all, with dates and surrounding circumstances and the rest; thousands of miles of ocean had been no bar to her searching gaze.

For his part he was not without consolations, since, strangely enough, he never felt as if she were lost to him, or indeed far away; it was always as though she were in the next room, or at any rate in the next street. There are individuals of sensitive mind, and he was one of them, who know well enough when such a total loss has occurred. It has been well said that the dead are never really dead to us until they are forgotten, and the same applies to the living. While they remember us, they are never so very far away, and what is more we, or some of us,

are quite aware if they have ceased to remember, for then the door is shut and the doorway built up and our hearts tell us that this has been done.

In Godfrey's case with Isobel, not only did the doorway remained unfilled--the door itself was always ajar. Although seas divided them and over these no whisper came, yet he felt her thought leaping to him across the world. Especially did this happen at night when he laid himself down to sleep, perhaps because then his mind was most receptive, and since their hours of going to rest must have been different, he being in India and she in England, she could scarcely have been reflecting on him as he fondly believed, at the moment when she, too, entered into the world called sleep.

Therefore, either it was all imagination or he caught her waking thoughts, or perhaps those that haunted her upon this border land were delayed until his subtler being could interpret them. Who knows? At least, unless something had happened to disturb him, those nights were rare when as he was shutting his eyes, Godfrey did not seem to be sensible of Isobel's presence. At any rate, he knew that she had not forgotten; he knew that somewhere in the vast world she was ever thinking of him with more intensity than she thought of any other man or thing. And during all those lonely years this knowledge or belief was his greatest comfort.

Not that Godfrey's life in India was in any way unhappy. On the

contrary it was a full and active life. He worked hard at his profession and succeeded in it to a limited extent, and he had his friends, especially his great friend Arthur Thorburn, who always clung to him. He had his flirtations also; being a man of susceptibility who was popular with women, how could they be avoided? For above all things Godfrey was a man, not a hermit or a saint or an æsthete, but just a man with more gifts of a sort than have some others. He lived the life of the rest, he hunted, he shot tigers, doing those things that the Anglo-Indian officer does, but all the same he studied. Whether it were of his trade of soldiering, or of the natives, or of Eastern thought and law, he was always learning something, till at last he knew a great deal, often he wondered to what end.

And yet, with all his friends and acquaintances, in a way he remained a very lonely man, as those who are a little out of the ordinary often do. In the common groove we rub against the other marbles running down it, but once we leap over its edge, then where are we? We cannot wander off into space because of the attraction of the earth that is so near to us, and yet we are alone in the air until with a bump we meet our native ground. Therefore for the most of us the groove is much better. And yet some who leave it have been carried elsewhere, if only for a little while, like St. Paul into the third heaven.