

The Handsomest Man in India.

The camp lay scattered broadcast across the face of the hill. Over it all, together with the unspeakable loneliness of the place, was an Indian sun, now setting redly behind a clump of flowering bamboos.

"That's the deuce of it," remarked one of two kharki-clad men who were walking towards a bell tent pitched under a couple of dusty tamarind trees—which tent was their mess.

"That's the deuce of it, old chap. When those blessed bamboos start flowering it always means something unpleasant, according to the natives. It's plague this time, they say."

"Yes, poor devils!" the other answered. "They have it down there now on the plains—Heaven alone knows where it will end. Suppose it can't reach us up here, otherwise they would not have ordered us to stay."

"Confounded nuisance!" replied the first speaker. "Such a God-forsaken hole for a handful of Englishmen to grind out their existence in. Wonder if they'll send us any one to replace the poor chaps who have died, or if they'll just leave us here and forget all about us?"

His companion smiled gravely. They were the only two remaining officers of what had shortly before been a fairly large punitive expedition.

It was a curious turn of affairs, indeed, which had brought them thus together, face to face every day of their lonely life in that strange hill encampment. Before they left their cantonment with the expedition they had been sworn enemies, eating out their hearts with a hatred which almost amused the on-lookers.

Of course a girl was at the bottom of it all—a small creature with bright eyes and an aggravating little mouth; a girl who was so young that she saw no harm in making men love her for fun.

If only she had been a trifle older. People did not seem inclined to let her off on the score of her youthfulness; especially the men she trifled with. They swore to themselves about her heartlessness, and when next you heard of them they were mostly in command of small expeditions against rebellious natives.

Maybe the two lonely men spoken of here had smarted more than the others, and the case with them was a curious one. Mary Barrow had allowed them both to make ardent love to her, and quietly sent them about their business when they asked her to marry them.

She had seemed to take such a delight in their war-to-the-knife attitude towards each other. It puzzled many people, the two men themselves included; but Mary withstood them all and gave no sign.

They went off with the punitive expedition without a word of farewell to her. But one of them noticed something as they marched past her father's bungalow—Mary hiding behind a hedge of lentenna, watching their departure. He saw two big tears in the eyes he so dearly loved, and decided that they must be for his rival, even though she had refused him.

He looked up at his rival now as they sat together outside their mess-tent, while the Indian evening played softly around them.

"George!" he thought. "What a strikingly handsome Johnny he is! What a face! What a physique! Why, I'm a stunted pigmy beside him, and so are most other men. Yet little Mary refused him. I wonder she dared, for women are mostly afraid of physically big chaps like Heatherleigh. And all the time I believe she loves him. Strange!—yet I think she must do, else why those tears? I could swear they were there in her eyes; I'd swear to it against everything."

"Say, old chap," he ventured aloud, "you're singularly quiet, aren't you? Nothing to talk about, eh?"

"Nothing beyond our chances of being left up here till we rot," Heatherleigh answered moodily. "Daresay we'll get the plague in the end, and that will finish us all off nicely. We can bury each other till the last man pegs out."

Dr. Powell shivered. "Maybe it won't come," he said steadily. "We have plenty of time to wait and see."

After a brief allience Heatherleigh spoke out sharply, a curious expression of feeling crossing his handsome features.

"Powell," he said, "I wonder what has become of the little woman we both loved so blindly? Suppose she's 'hipped' many another Johnny since we left, eh? Jove! How I should like to see her again and give her a little lesson. I feel convinced that she has a heart somewhere. If fate ever sends me across her path again I'll find her heart and break it for her. It will save other chaps from being hurt as she hurt you and I."

Powell only grunted. He would have given his life to save the little woman even a finger-ache.

"I fancy she must have had some reason for playing with us both," he said, eventually. "Heatherleigh, my belief is that, in spite of everything, she secretly loves you."

Heatherleigh laughed nastily. "Wish to heaven she did!" he exclaimed. "Then I could give her her lesson."

Powell's face was newly marked with small-pox, and it made his plain countenance almost hideous. Heatherleigh had been down with the terrible disease first, and Powell watched him day and night to prevent his good looks being spoiled for Mary. The doctor himself had not come off so well, Heatherleigh being ignorant on matters which stretched beyond the parade-ground and the orderly-room. Nevertheless, he did his utmost for the sick man, and if Powell did come off with some ugly scars—well, he came off with his life as well, and the two men, so totally unlike, became friends.

Their eyes looked away to the distant horizon, which skirted a desolate strip of scorched-up plain. It was the only view upon which their sight ever gazed, and the handful of white men under them gazed eternally at it too. They had no other recreation.

They never quite remembered afterwards how it happened; but Powell and Heatherleigh, as they still watched, fancied that some curious moving spots suddenly appeared on the horizon line.

They both started to their feet, paled a little, then sat down. They laughed stridently.

"Couldn't be anybody coming, could it?" Heatherleigh said in a thick kind of whisper.

"No, of course it could't!" Powell snapped almost crossly.

They had grown so weary and sick of the longing to see a fresh face.

They watched for half an hour, and then it was nearly dark. By the end of that half-hour they knew that some one was indeed coming.

Across the desolate plain could distinctly be seen a creamy white Arab horse, bearing on his back the form of a woman in a white drill

riding habit. Just behind her, also on Arabs, were two men in kharki.

Powell and Heatherleigh had not spoken a word. Their surprise chained their tongues, and if their heart-beats were faster neither guessed.

Someone was coming at last, and because the utter dreariness of their recent life had attacked their nerves, they were afraid to show themselves to each other. They remained absolutely mute; it was the safest plan, they decided.

Just as the last streaks of day went out of the Indian sky, the figures became easily distinguishable.

Heatherleigh clutched Powell's arm and held it as though in a vice. His breathing was hot and laboured; his eyes straining and expressionless with the stare in them.

"Great Heavens!" he managed to finally cry out. "It's little Mary Barrow! And here of all places on God's earth!"

To say the least of it, Mary was just a bit of a nuisance in the camp. True, she never seemed to stir outside her tent; but she was always peeping out, and the men felt forced to pay more or less attention to their personal appearance, which was a troublesome matter on a short allowance of kharki.

The party had been travelling in a different direction altogether, but were driven back by the rapidly advancing plague, and eventually found themselves under the jurisdiction of Powell and Heatherleigh.

Had the two men—Mary's father and a friend—put in an appearance alone, the others would have been crazed with gladness. But a girl as well! How thundering awkward! And that the girl should turn out to be little Mary Barrow! Heatherleigh had been almost praying for a chance to be revenged on her; yet now that she was here in answer to his prayer, he could not seem to advance matters one single bit.

Mary kept her tent and Powell kept his.

"Father," Mary said to Colonel Barrow one morning. "I thought you told me that Dr. Powell was in this camp."

"Yes, my dear, so he is."

"Humph! Then it is his back I see sometimes. Father, what's the matter with his face?"

"Marked with small-pox, my dear."

"Badly?"

"Yes, badly."

Mary did not mention it again till evening.

"How did he get small-pox, father?" she asked.

"Looking after Heatherleigh."

"Captain Heatherleigh isn't marked?"

"No, Powell knew how to prevent that."

"Indeed!"

Next evening, just as the Indian sun sank redly behind the flowering bamboos, Mary Barrow and Dr. Powell met face to face at the back of the mess-tent. It was their first meeting, and Mary had designed it.

She started when she really saw him; she had no idea he was as bad as that.

"Awful, isn't it?" he said, grimly, reading her thought in her eyes. "Time will efface the marks a lot, you

know. And if it doesn't—well, what matter? A chap may as well be pitted with small-pox as die of plague or liver. See those flowering bamboos, Miss Barrow—the natives declare that it is a sign the plague will come and remain a very long while. Quaintly superstitious, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

"Such a strange meeting! He wished heartily that she would not stare at him so."

"Never was a good looking Johnny, was I, Miss Barrow?" he burst out, jauntily.

"You are very rude to talk like that," she answered. "I hear you were terribly anxious to save Captain Heatherleigh from being marked—why so?"

"No special reason. Only I thought as you were fond of him, you might like his beauty preserved intact. Anyway, I know most women would."

He had no right, surely, to talk to her in that way. Yet maybe, she thought, she had brought it on herself.

"Yes," she said, quite calmly and decidedly. "Women think an awful lot of good looks."

He took her at her word, which made his suffering worse than ever.

Captain Heatherleigh saw them standing there together as he walked towards the mess tent.

"Heavens!" he thought. "Is she at her old game again? And up here? Can't she leave the poor old chap alone? She refused him once—surely that ought to be enough for any girl."

Mary took to holding little receptions in her father's tent after that, and in spite of their feelings towards her, her levees greatly relieved the monotony for the men. Her little face grew daily smaller and whiter. Only Powell saw the change, and wondered what was the matter with her.

Heatherleigh was making fast and furious love to her, and this time did not mean it.

"Don't, old chap," Powell often said to him. "Leave the little woman alone. Don't hurt her. She was terribly young when we proposed to her. I fancy she is learning wisdom for herself now without any lessons from you."

Heatherleigh smiled. If he could break her heart he would do it, he said, and feel quite justified.

So, while that little human drama was working itself out among the small white population on the hillside, the natives they had but recently driven back were brightening up their dabs and old rides.

A fresh party arrived at the camp, driven there also by fear of the plague. With them were two white women, and after that Mary Barrow did not seem to take things so seriously.

Powell held aloof from her altogether. He just sat still and waited to see the result of Heatherleigh's lesson.

One morning early she startled them all by bringing a newly-brightened and sharpened dab into camp. That day there was work to be done—the pitching of tents in a close little mass and the making of mud fortifications round them. The plague might or might not come; but it seemed a dead

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