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BURMESE DAYS

GEORGE ORWELL

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Burmese Days by George Orwell.

First published in 1934.

This ebook edition was created and published by Global Grey on the 11th November 2021.

The artwork used for the cover is '*A Military Station in India*'
painted by Robert Smith.

This book can be found on the site here:

globalgreyebooks.com/burmese-days-ebook.html

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O western wind, when wilt thou blow, that the small rain down can rain? It was the first of June, the day of the general meeting, and there had not been a drop of rain yet. As Flory came up the Club path the sun of afternoon, slanting beneath his hat-brim, was still savage enough to scorch his neck uncomfortably. The mali staggered along the path, his breast-muscles slippery with sweat, carrying two kerosene-tins of water on a yoke. He dumped them down, slopping a little water over his lank brown feet, and salaamed to Flory.

'Well, mali, is the rain coming?'

The man gestured vaguely towards the west. 'The hills have captured it, sahib.'

Kyauktada was ringed almost round by hills, and these caught the earlier showers, so that sometimes no rain fell till almost the end of June. The earth of the flower-beds, hoed into large untidy lumps, looked grey and hard as concrete. Flory went into the lounge and found Westfield loafing by the veranda, looking out over the river, for the chicks had been rolled up. At the foot of the veranda a chokra lay on his back in the sun, pulling the punkah rope with his heel and shading his face with a broad strip of banana leaf.

'Hullo, Flory! You've got thin as a rake.'

'So've you.'

'H'm, yes. Bloody weather. No appetite except for booze. Christ, won't I be glad when I hear the frogs start croaking. Let's have a spot before the others come. Butler!'

'Do you know who's coming to the meeting?' Flory said, when the butler had brought whisky and tepid soda.

'Whole crowd, I believe. Lackersteen got back from camp three days ago. By God, that man's been having the time of his life away from his missus! My inspector was telling me about the goings-on at his camp. Tarts by the score. Must have imported 'em specially from Kyauktada. He'll catch it all right when the old woman sees his Club bill. Eleven bottles of whisky sent out to his camp in a fortnight.'

'Is young Verrall coming?'

'No, he's only a temporary member. Not that he'd trouble to come anyway, young tick. Maxwell won't be here either. Can't leave camp just yet, he says. He sent word Ellis was to speak for him if there's any voting to be done. Don't suppose there'll be anything to vote about, though eh?' he added, looking at Flory obliquely, for both of them remembered their previous quarrel on this subject.

'I suppose it lies with Macgregor.'

'What I mean is, Macgregor'll have dropped that bloody rot about electing a native member, eh? Not the moment for it just now. After the rebellion and all that.'

'What about the rebellion, by the way?' said Flory. He did not want to start wrangling about the doctor's election yet. There was going to be trouble and to spare in a few minutes. 'Any more news—are they going to have another try, do you think?'

'No. All over, I'm afraid. They caved in like the funks they are. The whole district's as quiet as a bloody girls' school. Most disappointing.'

Flory's heart missed a beat. He had heard Elizabeth's voice in the next room. Mr Macgregor came in at this moment, Ellis and Mr Lackersteen following. This made up the full quota, for the women members of the Club had no votes. Mr Macgregor was already dressed in a silk suit, and was carrying the Club account books under his arm. He managed to bring a sub-official air even into such petty business as a Club meeting.

'As we seem to be all here,' he said after the usual greetings, 'shall we—ah—proceed with our labours?'

'Lead on, Macduff,' said Westfield, sitting down.

'Call the butler, someone, for Christ's sake,' said Mr Lackersteen. 'I daren't let my missus hear me calling him.'

'Before we apply ourselves to the agenda,' said Mr Macgregor when he had refused a drink and the others had taken one, 'I expect you will want me to run through the accounts for the half-year?'

They did not want it particularly, but Mr Macgregor, who enjoyed this kind of thing, ran through the accounts with great thoroughness. Flory's thoughts were wandering. There was going to be such a row in a moment—oh, such a devil of a row! They would be furious when they found that he was proposing the doctor after all. And Elizabeth was in the next room. God send she didn't hear the noise of the row when it came. It would make her despise him all the more to see the others baiting him. Would he see her this evening? Would she speak to him? He gazed across the quarter-mile of gleaming river. By the far bank a knot of men, one of them wearing a green gaungbaung, were waiting beside a sampan. In the channel, by the nearer bank, a huge, clumsy Indian barge struggled with desperate slowness against the racing current. At each stroke the ten rowers, Dravidian starvelings, ran forward and plunged their long primitive oars, with heart-shaped blades, into the water. They braced their meagre bodies, then tugged, writhed, strained backwards like agonized creatures of black rubber, and the ponderous hull crept onwards a yard or two. Then the rowers sprang forward, panting, to plunge their oars again before the current should check her.

'And now,' said Mr Macgregor more gravely, 'we come to the main point of the agenda. That, of course, is this—ah—distasteful question, which I am afraid must be faced, of electing a native member to this Club. When we discussed the matter before—'

'What the hell!'

It was Ellis who had interrupted. He was so excited that he had sprung to his feet.

'What the hell! Surely we aren't starting *that* over again? Talk about electing a damned nigger so this Club, after everything that's happened! Good God, I thought even Flory had dropped it by this time!'

'Our friend Ellis appears surprised. The matter has been discussed before, I believe.'

'I should think it damned well was discussed before! And we all said what we thought of it. By God—'

'If our friend Ellis will sit down for a few moments—' said Mr Macgregor tolerantly.

Ellis threw himself into his chair again, exclaiming, 'Bloody rubbish!' Beyond the river Flory could see the group of Burmans embarking. They were lifting a long, awkward-shaped bundle into the sampan. Mr Macgregor had produced a letter from his file of papers.

'Perhaps I had better explain how this question arose in the first place. The Commissioner tells me that a circular has been sent round by the Government, suggesting that in those Clubs where there are no native members, one at least shall be co-opted; that is, admitted automatically. The circular says—ah yes! here it is: "It is mistaken policy to offer social affronts to native officials of high standing." I may say that I disagree most emphatically. No doubt we all do. We who have to do the actual work of government see things very differently from these—ah—Paget M.P.s who interfere with us from above. The Commissioner quite agrees with me. However—'

'But it's all bloody rot!' broke in Ellis. 'What's it got to do with the Commissioner or anyone else? Surely we can do as we like in our own bloody Club? They've no right to dictate to us when we're off duty.'

'Quite,' said Westfield.

'You anticipate me. I told the Commissioner that I should have to put the matter before the other members. And the course he suggests is this. If the idea finds any support in the Club, he thinks it would be better if we co-opted our native member. On the other hand, if the entire Club is against it, it can be dropped. That is, if opinion is quite unanimous.'

'Well, it damned well is unanimous,' said Ellis.

'D'you mean,' said Westfield, 'that it depends on ourselves whether we have 'em in here or no?'

'I fancy we can take it as meaning that.'

'Well, then, let's say we're against it to a man.'

'And say it bloody firmly, by God. We want to put our foot down on this idea once and for all.'

'Hear, hear!' said Mr Lackersteen gruffly. 'Keep the black swabs out of it. Esprit de corps and all that.'

Mr Lackersteen could always be relied upon for sound sentiments in a case like this. In his heart he did not care and never had cared a damn for the British Raj, and he was as happy drinking with an Oriental as with a white man; but he was always ready with a loud 'Hear, hear!' when anyone suggested the bamboo for disrespectful servants or boiling oil for Nationalists. He prided himself that though he might booze a bit and all that, dammit, he *was* loyal. It was his form of respectability. Mr Macgregor was secretly rather relieved by the general agreement. If any Oriental member were co-opted, that member would have to be Dr Veraswami, and he had had the deepest distrust of the doctor ever since Nga Shwe O's suspicious escape from the jail.

'Then I take it that you are all agreed?' he said. 'If so, I will inform the Commissioner. Otherwise, we must begin discussing the candidate for election.'

Flory stood up. He had got to say his say. His heart seemed to have risen into his throat and to be choking him. From what Mr Macgregor had said, it was clear that it was in his power to secure the doctor's election by speaking the word. But oh, what a bore, what a nuisance it was! What an infernal uproar there would be! How he wished he had never given the doctor that promise! No matter, he had given it, and he could not break it. So short a time ago he would have broken it, en bon pukka sahib, how easily! But not now. He had got to see this thing through. He turned himself sidelong so that his birthmark was away from the others. Already he could feel his voice going flat and guilty.

'Our friend Flory has something to suggest?'

'Yes. I propose Dr Veraswami as a member of this Club.'

There was such a yell of dismay from three of the others that Mr Macgregor had to rap sharply on the table and remind them that the ladies were in the next room. Ellis took not the smallest notice. He had sprung to his feet again, and the skin round his nose had gone quite grey. He and Flory remained facing one another, as though on the point of blows.

'Now, you damned swab, will you take that back?'

'No, I will not.'

'You oily swine! You nigger's Nancy Boy! You crawling, sneaking,—bloody bastard!'

'Order!' exclaimed Mr Macgregor.

'But look at him, look at him!' cried Ellis almost tearfully. 'Letting us all down for the sake of a pot-bellied nigger! After all we've said to him! When we've only got to hang together and we can keep the stink of garlic out of this Club for ever. My God, wouldn't it make you spew your guts up to see anyone behaving like such a—?'

'Take it back, Flory, old man!' said Westfield. 'Don't be a bloody fool!'

'Downright Bolshevism, dammit!' said Mr Lackersteen.

'Do you think I care what you say? What business is it of yours? It's for Macgregor to decide.'

'Then do you—ah—adhere to your decision?' said Mr Macgregor gloomily.

'Yes.'

Mr Macgregor sighed. 'A pity! Well, in that case I suppose I have no choice—'

'No, no, no!' cried Ellis, dancing about in his rage. 'Don't give in to him! Put it to the vote. And if that son of a bitch doesn't put in a black ball like the rest of us, we'll first turf him out of the Club himself, and then—well! Butler!'

'Sahib!' said the butler, appearing.

'Bring the ballot box and the balls. Now clear out!' he added roughly when the butler had obeyed.

The air had gone very stagnant; for some reason the punkah had stopped working. Mr Macgregor stood up with a disapproving but judicial mien, taking the two drawers of black and white balls out of the ballot box.

'We must proceed in order. Mr Flory proposes Dr Veraswami, the Civil Surgeon, as a member of this Club. Mistaken, in my opinion, greatly mistaken; however—! Before putting the matter to the vote—'

'Oh, why make a song and dance about it?' said Ellis. 'Here's my contribution! And another for Maxwell.' He plumped two black balls into the box. Then one of his sudden spasms of rage seized him, and he took the drawer of white balls and pitched them across the floor. They went flying in all directions. 'There! Now pick one up if you want to use it!'

'You damned fool! What good do you think that does?'

'Sahib!'

They all started and looked round. The chokra was goggling at them over the veranda rail, having climbed up from below. With one skinny arm he clung to the rail and with the other gesticulated towards the river.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

'What's up?' said Westfield.

They all moved for the window. The sampan that Flory had seen across the river was lying under the bank at the foot of the lawn, one of the men clinging to a bush to steady it. The Burman in the green gaungbaung was climbing out.

'That's one of Maxwell's Forest Rangers!' said Ellis in quite a different voice. 'By God! something's happened!'

The Forest Ranger saw Mr Macgregor, shikoe in a hurried, preoccupied way and turned back to the sampan. Four other men, peasants, climbed out after him, and with difficulty lifted ashore the strange bundle that Flory had seen in the distance. It was six feet long, swathed in cloths, like a mummy. Something happened in everybody's entrails. The Forest Ranger glanced at the veranda, saw that there was no way up, and led the peasants round the path to the front of the Club. They had hoisted the bundle on to their shoulders as funeral bearers hoist a coffin. The butler had flitted into the lounge again, and even his face was pale after its fashion—that is, grey.

'Butler!' said Mr Macgregor sharply.

'Sir!'

'Go quickly and shut the door of the card-room. Keep it shut. Don't let the memsahibs see.'

'Yes, sir!'

The Burmans, with their burden, came heavily down the passage. As they entered the leading man staggered and almost fell; he had trodden on one of the white balls that were scattered about the floor. The Burmans knelt down, lowered their burden to the floor and stood over it with a strange reverent air, slightly bowing, their hands together in a shiko. Westfield had fallen on his knees, and he pulled back the cloth.

'Christ! Just look at him!' he said, but without much surprise. 'Just look at the poor little b—!'

Mr Lackersteen had retreated to the other end of the room, with a bleating noise. From the moment when the bundle was lifted ashore they had all known what it contained. It was the body of Maxwell, cut almost to pieces with dahs by two relatives of the man whom he had shot.

Chapter 22

Maxwell's death had caused a profound shock in Kyauktada. It would cause a shock throughout the whole of Burma, and the case—'the Kyauktada case, do you remember?'—would still be talked of years after the wretched youth's name was forgotten. But in a purely personal way no one was much distressed. Maxwell had been almost a nonentity—just a 'good fellow' like any other of the ten thousand *ex colore* good fellows of Burma—and with no close friends. No one among the Europeans genuinely mourned for him. But that is not to say that they were not angry. On the contrary, for the moment they were almost mad with rage. For the unforgivable had happened—*a white man* had been killed. When that happens, a sort of shudder runs through the English of the East. Eight hundred people, possibly, are murdered every year in Burma; they matter nothing; but the murder of *a white man* is a monstrosity, a sacrilege. Poor Maxwell would be avenged, that was certain. But only a servant or two, and the Forest Ranger who had brought in his body and who had been fond of him, shed any tears for his death.

On the other hand, no one was actually pleased, except U Po Kyin.

'This is a positive gift from heaven!' he told Ma Kin. 'I could not have arranged it better myself. The one thing I needed to make them take my rebellion seriously was a little bloodshed. And here it is! I tell you, Ma Kin, every day I grow more certain that some higher power is working on my behalf.'

'Ko Po Kyin, truly you are without shame! I do not know how you dare to say such things. Do you not shudder to have murder upon your soul?'

'What! I? Murder upon my soul? What are you talking about? I have never killed so much as a chicken in my life.'

'But you are profiting by this poor boy's death.'

'Profiting by it! Of course I am profiting by it! And why not, indeed? Am I to blame if somebody else choose to commit murder? The fisherman catches fish, and he is damned for it. But are we damned for eating the fish? Certainly not. Why *not* eat the fish, once it is dead? You should study the Scriptures more carefully, my dear Kin Kin.'

The funeral took place next morning, before breakfast. All the Europeans were present, except Verrall, who was careering about the maidan quite as usual, almost opposite the cemetery. Mr Macgregor read the burial service. The little group of Englishmen stood round the grave, their tops in their hands, sweating into the dark suits that they had dug out from the bottom of their boxes. The harsh morning light beat without mercy upon their faces, yellower than ever against the ugly, shabby clothes. Every face except Elizabeth's looked lined and old. Dr Veraswami and half a dozen other Orientals were present, but they kept themselves decently in the background. There were sixteen gravestones in the little cemetery; assistants of timber firms, officials, soldiers killed in forgotten skirmishes.

'Sacred to the memory of John Henry Spagnall, late of the Indian Imperial Police, who was cut down by cholera while in the unremitting exercise of etc., etc., etc.'

Flory remembered Spagnall dimly. He had died very suddenly in camp after his second go of delirium tremens. In a corner there were some graves of Eurasians, with wooden crosses. The

creeping jasmine, with tiny orange-hearted flowers, had overgrown everything. Among the jasmine, large rat-holes led down into the graves.

Mr Macgregor concluded the burial service in a ripe, reverent voice, and led the way out of the cemetery, holding his grey topi—the Eastern equivalent of a top hat—against his stomach. Flory lingered by the gate, hoping that Elizabeth would speak to him, but she passed him without a glance. Everyone had shunned him this morning. He was in disgrace; the murder had made his disloyalty of last night seem somehow horrible. Ellis had caught Westfield by the arm, and they halted at the grave-side, taking out their cigarette-cases. Flory could hear their slangy voices coming across the open grave.

'My God, Westfield, my God, when I think of that poor little b—— lying down there—oh, my God, how my blood does boil! I couldn't sleep all night, I was so furious.'

'Pretty bloody, I grant. Never mind, promise you a couple of chaps shall swing for it. Two corpses against their one—best we can do.'

'Two! It ought to be fifty! We've got to raise heaven and hell to get these fellows hanged. Have you got their names yet?'

'Yes, rather!! Whole blooming district knows who did it. We always do know who's done it in these cases. Getting the bloody villagers to talk—that's the only trouble.'

'Well, for God's sake get them to talk this time. Never mind the bloody law. Whack it out of them. Torture them—anything. If you want to bribe any witnesses, I'm good for a couple of hundred chips.'

Westfield sighed. 'Can't do that sort of thing, I'm afraid. Wish we could. My chaps'd know how to put the screw on a witness if you gave 'em the word. Tie 'em down on an ant-hill. Red peppers. But that won't do nowadays. Got to keep our own bloody silly laws. But never mind, those fellows'll swing all right. We've got all the evidence we want.'

'Good! And when you've arrested them, if you aren't sure of getting a conviction, shoot them, jolly well shoot them! Fake up an escape or something. Anything sooner than let those b——s go free.'

'They won't go free, don't you fear. We'll get 'em. Get *somebody*, anyhow. Much better hang wrong fellow than no fellow,' he added, unconsciously quoting.

'That's the stuff! I'll never sleep easy again till I've seen them swinging,' said Ellis as they moved away from the grave. 'Christ! Let's get out of this sun! I'm about perishing with thirst.'

Everyone was perishing, more or less, but it seemed hardly decent to go down to the Club for drinks immediately after the funeral. The Europeans scattered for their houses, while four sweepers with mamooties flung the grey, cement-like earth back into the grave, and shaped it into a rough mound.

After breakfast, Ellis was walking down to his office, cane in hand. It was blinding hot. Ellis had bathed and changed back into shirt and shorts, but wearing a thick suit even for an hour had brought on his prickly heat abominably. Westfield had gone out already, in his motor launch, with an inspector and half a dozen men, to arrest the murderers. He had ordered Verrall to accompany him—not that Verrall was needed, but, as Westfield said, it would do the young swab good to have a spot of work.

Ellis wriggled his shoulders—his prickly heat was almost beyond bearing. The rage was stewing in his body like a bitter juice. He had brooded all night over what had happened. They had killed a white man, killed *a white man*, the bloody sods, the sneaking, cowardly

hounds! Oh, the swine, the swine, how they ought to be made to suffer for it! Why did we make these cursed kid-glove laws? Why did we take everything lying down? Just suppose this had happened in a German colony, before the War! The good old Germans! They knew how to treat the niggers. Reprisals! Rhinoceros hide whips! Raid their villages, kill their cattle, burn their crops, decimate them, blow them from the guns.

Ellis gazed into the horrible cascades of light that poured through the gaps in the trees. His greenish eyes were large and mournful. A mild, middle-aged Burman came by, balancing a huge bamboo, which he shifted from one shoulder to the other with a grunt as he passed Ellis. Ellis's grip tightened on his stick. If that swine, now, would only attack you! Or even insult you—anything, so that you had the right to smash him! If only these gutless curs would ever show fight in any conceivable way! Instead of just sneaking past you, keeping within the law so that you never had a chance to get back at them. Ah, for a real rebellion—martial law proclaimed and no quarter given! Lovely, sanguinary images moved through his mind. Shrieking mounds of natives, soldiers slaughtering them. Shoot them, ride them down, horses' hooves trample their guts out, whips cut their faces in slices!

Five High School boys came down the road abreast. Ellis saw them coming, a row of yellow, malicious faces—epicene faces, horribly smooth and young, grinning at him with deliberate insolence. It was in their minds to bait him, as a white man. Probably they had heard of the murder, and—being Nationalists, like all schoolboys—regarded it as a victory. They grinned full in Ellis's face as they passed him. They were trying openly to provoke him, and they knew that the law was on their side. Ellis felt his breast swell. The look of their faces, jeering at him like a row of yellow images, was maddening. He stopped short.

'Here! What are you laughing at, you young ticks?'

The boys turned.

'I said what the bloody hell are you laughing at?'

One of the boys answered, insolently—but perhaps his bad English made him seem more insolent than he intended.

'Not your business.'

There was about a second during which Ellis did not know what he was doing. In that second he had hit out with all his strength, and the cane landed, crack! right across the boy's eyes. The boy recoiled with a shriek, and in the same instant the other four had thrown themselves upon Ellis. But he was too strong for them. He flung them aside and sprang back, lashing out with his stick so furiously that none of them dared come near.

'Keep your distance, you ——s! Keep off, or by God I'll smash another of you!' Though they were four to one he was so formidable that they surged back in fright. The boy who was hurt had fallen on his knees with his arms across his face, and was screaming 'I am blinded! I am blinded!' Suddenly the other four turned and darted for a pile of laterite, used for road-mending, which was twenty yards away. One of Ellis's clerks had appeared on the veranda of the office and was leaping up and down in agitation.

'Come up, sir come up at once. They will murder you!'

Ellis disdained to run, but he moved for the veranda steps. A lump of laterite came sailing through the air and shattered itself against a pillar, whereat the clerk scooted indoors. But Ellis turned on the veranda to face the boys, who were below, each carrying an armful of laterite. He was cackling with delight.

'You damned, dirty little niggers!' he shouted down at them. 'You got a surprise that time, didn't you? Come up on this veranda and fight me, all four of you! You daren't. Four to one and you daren't face me! Do you call yourselves men? You sneaking, mangy little rats!'

He broke into Burmese, calling them the incestuous children of pigs. All the while they were pelting him with lumps of laterite, but their arms were feeble and they threw ineptly. He dodged the stones, and as each one missed him he cackled in triumph. Presently there was a sound of shouts up the road, for the noise had been heard at the police station, and some constables were emerging to see what was the matter. The boys took fright and bolted, leaving Ellis a complete victor.

Ellis had heartily enjoyed the affray, but he was furiously angry as soon as it was over. He wrote a violent note to Mr Macgregor, telling him that he had been wantonly assaulted and demanding vengeance. Two clerks who had witnessed the scene, and a chaprassi, were sent along to Mr Macgregor's office to corroborate the story. They lied in perfect unison. 'The boys had attacked Mr Ellis without any provocation whatever, he had defended himself,' etc., etc. Ellis, to do him justice, probably believed this to be a truthful version of the story. Mr Macgregor was somewhat disturbed, and ordered the police to find the four schoolboys and interrogate them. The boys, however, had been expecting something of the kind, and were lying very low; the police searched the bazaar all day without finding them. In the evening the wounded boy was taken to a Burmese doctor, who, by applying some poisonous concoction of crushed leaves to his left eye, succeeded in blinding him.

The Europeans met at the Club as usual that evening, except for Westfield and Verrall, who had not yet returned. Everyone was in a bad mood. Coming on top of the murder, the unprovoked attack on Ellis (for that was the accepted description of it) had scared them as well as angered them. Mrs Lackersteen was twittering to the tune of 'We shall all be murdered in our beds'. Mr Macgregor, to reassure her, told her in cases of riot the European ladies were always locked inside the jail until everything was over; but she did not seem much comforted. Ellis was offensive to Flory, and Elizabeth cut him almost dead. He had come down to the Club in the insane hope of making up their quarrel, and her demeanour made him so miserable that for the greater part of the evening he skulked in the library. It was not till eight o'clock when everyone had swallowed a number of drinks, that the atmosphere grew a little more friendly, and Ellis said:

'What about sending a couple of chokras up to our houses and getting our dinners sent down here? We might as well have a few rubbers of bridge. Better than mooning about at home.'

Mrs Lackersteen, who was in dread of going home, jumped at the suggestion. The Europeans occasionally dined at the Club when they wanted to stay late. Two of the chokras were sent for, and on being told what was wanted of them, immediately burst into tears. It appeared that if they went up the hill they were certain of encountering Maxwell's ghost. The mali was sent instead. As the man set out Flory noticed that it was again the night of the full moon—four weeks to a day since that evening, now unutterably remote, when he had kissed Elizabeth under the frangipani tree.

They had just sat down at the bridge table, and Mrs Lackersteen had just revoked out of pure nervousness, when there was a heavy thump on the roof. Everyone started and look up.

'A coco-nut falling!' said Mr Macgregor.

'There aren't any coco-nut trees here,' said Ellis.

The next moment a number of things happened all together. There was another and much louder bang, one of the petrol lamps broke from its hook and crashed to the ground, narrowly

missing Mr Lackersteen, who jumped aside with a yelp, Mrs Lackersteen began screaming, and the butler rushed into the room, bareheaded, his face the colour of bad coffee.

'Sir, sir! Bad men come! Going to murder us all, sir!'

'What? Bad men? What do you mean?'

'Sir, all the villagers are outside! Big stick and dah in their hands, and all dancing about! Going to cut master's throat, sir!'

Mrs Lackersteen threw herself backwards in her chair. She was setting up such a din of screams as to drown the butler's voice.

'Oh, be quiet!' said Ellis sharply, turning on her. 'Listen, all of you! Listen to that!'

There was a deep, murmurous, dangerous sound outside, like the humming of an angry giant. Mr Macgregor, who had stood up, stiffened as he heard it, and settled his spectacles pugnaciously on his nose.

'This is some kind of disturbance! Butler, pick that lamp up. Miss Lackersteen, look to your aunt. See if she is hurt. The rest of you come with me!'

They all made for the front door, which someone, presumably the butler, had closed. A fusillade of small pebbles was rattling against it like hail. Mr Lackersteen wavered at the sound and retreated behind the others.

'I say, dammit, bolt that bloody door, someone!' he said.

'No, no!' said Mr Macgregor. 'We must go outside. It's fatal not to face them!'

He opened the door and presented himself boldly at the top of the steps. There were about twenty Burmans on the path, with dahs or sticks in their hands. Outside the fence, stretching up the road in either direction and far out on to the maidan, was an enormous crowd of people. It was like a sea of people, two thousand at the least, black and white in the moon, with here and there a curved dah glittering. Ellis had coolly placed himself beside Mr Macgregor, with his hands in his pockets. Mr Lackersteen had disappeared.

Mr Macgregor raised his hand for silence. 'What is the meaning of this?' he shouted sternly.

There were yells, and some lumps of laterite the size of cricket balls came sailing from the road, but fortunately hit no one. One of the men on the path turned and waved his arms to the others, shouting that they were not to begin throwing yet. Then he stepped forward to address the Europeans. He was a strong debonair fellow of about thirty, with down-curving moustaches, wearing a singlet, with his longyi kilted to the knee.

'What is the meaning of this?' Mr Macgregor repeated.

The man spoke up with a cheerful grin, and not very insolently.

'We have no quarrel with you, min gyi. We have come for the timber merchant, Ellis.' (He pronounced it Ellit.) 'The boy whom he struck this morning has gone blind. You must send Ellit out to us here, so that we can punish him. The rest of you will not be hurt.'

'Just remember that fellow's face,' said Ellis over his shoulder to Flory. 'We'll get him seven years for this afterwards.'

Mr Macgregor had turned temporarily quite purple. His rage was so great that it almost choked him. For several moments he could not speak, and when he did so it was in English.

'Whom do you think you are speaking to? In twenty years I have never heard such insolence! Go away this instant, or I shall call out the Military Police!'

'You'd better be quick, min gyi. We know that there is no justice for us in your courts, so we must punish Ellit ourselves. Send him out to us here. Otherwise, all of you will weep for it.'

Mr Macgregor made a furious motion with his fist, as though hammering in a nail, 'Go away, son of a dog!' he cried, using his first oath in many years.

There was a thunderous roar from the road, and such a shower of stones, that everyone was hit, including the Burmans on the path. One stone took Mr Macgregor full in the face, almost knocking him down. The Europeans bolted hastily inside and barred the door. Mr Macgregor's spectacles were smashed and his nose streaming blood. They got back to the lounge to find Mrs Lackersteen looping about in one of the long chairs like a hysterical snake, Mr Lackersteen standing irresolutely in the middle of the room, holding an empty bottle, the butler on his knees in the corner, crossing himself (he was a Roman Catholic), the chokras crying, and only Elizabeth calm, though she was very pale.

'What's happened?' she exclaimed.

'We're in the soup, that's what's happened!' said Ellis angrily, feeling at the back of his neck where a stone had hit him. 'The Burmans are all round, shying rocks. But keep calm! They haven't the guts to break the doors in.'

'Call out the police at once!' said Mr Macgregor indistinctly, for he was stanching his nose with his handkerchief.

'Can't!' said Ellis. 'I was looking round while you were talking to them. They've cut us off, rot their damned souls! No one could possibly get to the police lines. Veraswami's compound is full of men.'

'Then we must wait. We can trust them to turn out of their own accord. Calm yourself, my dear Mrs Lackersteen, *please* calm yourself! The danger is very small.'

It did not sound small. There were no gaps in the noise now, and the Burmans seemed to be pouring into the compounds by hundreds. The din swelled suddenly to such a volume that no one could make himself heard except by shouting. All the windows in the lounge had been shut, and some perforated zinc shutters within, which were sometimes used for keeping out insects, pulled to and bolted. There was a series of crashes as the windows were broken, and then a ceaseless thudding of stones from all sides, that shook the thin wooden walls and seemed likely to split them. Ellis opened a shutter and flung a bottle viciously among the crowd, but a dozen stones came hurtling in and he had to close the shutter hurriedly. The Burmans seemed to have no plan beyond flinging stones, yelling and hammering at the walls, but the mere volume of noise was unnerving. The Europeans were half dazed by it at first. None of them thought to blame Ellis, the sole cause of this affair; their common peril seemed, indeed, to draw them closer together for the while. Mr Macgregor, half-blind without his spectacles, stood distractedly in the middle of the room, yielding his right hand to Mrs Lackersteen, who was caressing it, while a weeping chokra clung to his left leg. Mr Lackersteen had vanished again. Ellis was stamping furiously up and down, shaking his fist in the direction of the police lines.

'Where are the police, the f—— cowardly sods?' he yelled, heedless of the women. 'Why don't they turn out? My God, we won't get another chance like this in a hundred years! If we'd only ten rifles here, how we could slosh these b——s!'

'They'll be here presently!' Mr Macgregor shouted back. 'It will take them some minutes to penetrate that crowd.'

'But why don't they use their rifles, the miserable sons of bitches? They could slaughter them in bloody heaps if they'd only open fire. Oh, God, to think of missing a chance like this!'

A lump of rock burst one of the zinc shutters. Another followed through the hole it had made, stove in a 'Bonzo' picture, bounced off, cut Elizabeth's elbow, and finally landed on the table. There was a roar of triumph from outside, and then a succession of tremendous thumps on the roof. Some children had climbed into the trees and were having the time of their lives sliding down the roof on their bottoms. Mrs Lackersteen outdid all previous efforts with a shriek that rose easily above the din outside.

'Choke that bloody hag, somebody!' cried Ellis. 'Anyone'd think a pig was being killed. We've got to do something. Flory, Macgregor, come here! Think of a way out of this mess, someone!'

Elizabeth had suddenly lost her nerve and begun crying. The blow from the stone had hurt her. To Flory's astonishment, he found her clinging tightly to his arm. Even in that moment it made his heart turn over. He had been watching the scene almost with detachment—dazed by the noise, indeed, but not much frightened. He always found it difficult to believe Orientals could be really dangerous. Only when he felt Elizabeth's hand on his arm did he grasp the seriousness of the situation.

'Oh, Mr Flory, please, please think of something! You can, you can! Anything sooner than let those dreadful men get in here!'

'If only one of us could get to the police lines!' groaned Mr Macgregor. 'A British officer to lead them! At the worst I must try and go myself.'

'Don't be a fool! Only get your throat cut!' yelled Ellis. 'I'll go if they really look like breaking in. But, oh, to be killed by swine like that! How furious it'd make me! And to think we could murder the whole bloody crowd if only we could get the police here!'

'Couldn't someone get along the river bank?' Flory shouted despairingly.

'Hopeless! Hundreds of them prowling up and down. We're cut off—Burmans on three sides and the river on the other!'

'The river!'

One of those startling ideas that are overlooked simply because they are so obvious had sprung into Flory's mind.

'The river! Of course! We can get to the police lines as easy as winking. Don't you see?'

'How?'

'Why, down the river—in the water! Swim!'

'Oh, good man!' cried Ellis, and smacked Flory on the shoulder. Elizabeth squeezed his arm and actually danced a step or two in glee. 'I'll go if you like!' Ellis shouted, but Flory shook his head. He had already begun slipping his shoes off. There was obviously no time to be lost. The Burmans had behaved like fools hitherto, but there was no saying what might happen if they succeeded in breaking in. The butler, who had got over his first fright, prepared to open the window that gave on the lawn, and glanced obliquely out. There were barely a score of Burmans on the lawn. They had left the back of the Club unguarded, supposing that the river cut off retreat.

'Rush down the lawn like hell!' Ellis shouted in Flory's ear. 'They'll scatter all right when they see you.'

'Order the police to open fire at once!' shouted Mr Macgregor from the other side. 'You have my authority.'

'And tell them to aim low! No firing over their heads. Shoot to kill. In the guts for choice!'

Flory leapt down from the veranda, hurting his feet on the hard earth, and was at the river bank in six paces. As Ellis had said, the Burmans recoiled for a moment when they saw him leaping down. A few stones followed him, but no one pursued—they thought, no doubt, that he was only attempting to escape, and in the clear moonlight they could see that it was not Ellis. In another moment he had pushed his way through the bushes and was in the water.

He sank deep down, and the horrible river ooze received him, sucking him knee-deep so that it was several seconds before he could free himself. When he came to the surface a tepid froth, like the froth on stout, was lapping round his lips, and some spongy thing had floated into his throat and was choking him. It was a sprig of water hyacinth. He managed to spit it out, and found that the swift current had floated him twenty yards already. Burmans were rushing rather aimlessly up and down the bank, yelling. With his eye at the level of the water, Flory could not see the crowd besieging the Club; but he could hear their deep, devilish roaring, which sounded even louder than it had sounded on shore. By the time he was opposite the Military Police lines the bank seemed almost bare of men. He managed to struggle out of the current and flounder through the mud, which sucked off his left sock. A little way down the bank two old men were sitting beside a fence, sharpening fence-posts, as though there had not been a riot within a hundred miles of them. Flory crawled ashore, clambered over the fence and ran heavily across the moonwhite parade-ground, his wet trousers sagging. As far as he could tell in the noise, the lines were quite empty. In some stalls over to the right Verrall's horses were plunging about in a panic. Flory ran out on to the road, and saw what had happened.

The whole body of policemen, military and civil, about a hundred and fifty men in all, had attacked the crowd from the rear, armed only with sticks. They had been utterly engulfed. The crowd was so dense that it was like an enormous swarm of bees seething and rotating. Everywhere one could see policemen wedged helplessly among the hordes of Burmans, struggling furiously but uselessly, and too cramped even to use their sticks. Whole knots of men were tangled Laocoon-like in the folds of unrolled pagris. There was a terrific bellowing of oaths in three or four languages, clouds of dust, and a suffocating stench of sweat and marigolds—but no one seemed to have been seriously hurt. Probably the Burmans had not used their daks for fear of provoking rifle-fire. Flory pushed his way into the crowd and was immediately swallowed up like the others. A sea of bodies closed in upon him and flung him from side to side, bumping his ribs and choking him with their animal heat. He struggled onwards with an almost dreamlike feeling, so absurd and unreal was the situation. The whole riot had been ludicrous from the start, and what was most ludicrous of all was that the Burmans, who might have killed him, did not know what to do with him now he was among them. Some yelled insults in his face, some jostled him and stamped on his feet, some even tried to make way for him, as a white man. He was not certain whether he was fighting for his life, or merely pushing his way through the crowd. For quite a long time he was jammed, helpless, with his arms pinned against his sides, then he found himself wrestling with a stumpy Burman much stronger than himself, then a dozen men rolled against him like a wave and drove him deeper into the heart of the crowd. Suddenly he felt an agonizing pain in his right big toe—someone in boots had trodden on it. It was the Military Police subahdar, a Rajput, very fat, moustachioed, with his pagri gone. He was grasping a Burman by the throat and trying to hammer his face, while the sweat rolled off his bare, bald crown. Flory threw

his arm round the subahdar's neck and managed to tear him away from his adversary and shout in his ear. His Urdu deserted him, and he bellowed in Burmese:

'Why did you not open fire?'

For a long time he could not hear the man's answer. Then he caught it:

'Hukm ne aya'—'I have had no order!'

'Idiot!'

At this moment another bunch of men drove against them, and for a minute or two they were pinned and quite unable to move. Flory realized that the subahdar had a whistle in his pocket and was trying to get at it. Finally he got it loose and blew piercing blasts, but there was no hope of rallying any men until they could get into a clear space. It was a fearful labour to struggle out of the crowd—it was like wading neck-deep through a viscous sea. At times the exhaustion of Flory's limbs was so complete that he stood passive, letting the crowd hold him and even drive him backwards. At last, more from the natural eddying of the crowd than by his own effort, he found himself flung out into the open. The subahdar had also emerged, ten or fifteen sepoy, and a Burmese Inspector of Police. Most of the sepoy collapsed on their haunches almost falling with fatigue, and limping, their feet having been trampled on.

'Come on, get up! Run like hell for the lines! Get some rifles and a clip of ammunition each.'

He was too overcome even to speak in Burmese, but the men understood him and lopped heavily towards the police lines. Flory followed them, to get away from the crowd before they turned on him again. When he reached the gate the sepoy were returning with their rifles and already preparing to fire.

'The sahib will give the order!' the subahdar panted.

'Here you!' cried Flory to the Inspector. 'Can you speak Hindustani?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then tell them to fire high, right over the people's heads. And above all, to fire all together. Make them understand that.'

The fat Inspector, whose Hindustani was even worse than Flory's, explained what was wanted, chiefly by leaping up and down and gesticulating. The sepoy raised their rifles, there was a roar, and a rolling echo from the hillside. For a moment Flory thought that his order had been disregarded, for almost the entire section of the crowd nearest them had fallen like a swath of hay. However, they had only flung themselves down in panic. The sepoy fired a second volley, but it was not needed. The crowd had immediately begun to surge outwards from the Club like a river changing its course. They came pouring down the road, saw the armed men barring their way, and tried to recoil, whereupon there was a fresh battle between those in front and those behind; finally the whole crowd bulged outwards and began to roll slowly up the maidan. Flory and the sepoy moved slowly towards the Club on the heels of the retreating crowd. The policemen who had been engulfed were straggling back by ones and twos. Their pagris were gone and their puttees trailing yards behind them, but they had no damage worse than bruises. The Civil Policemen were dragging a very few prisoners among them. When they reached the Club compound the Burmans were still pouring out, an endless line of young men leaping gracefully through a gap in the hedge like a procession of gazelles. It seemed to Flory that it was getting very dark. A small white-clad figure extricated itself from the last of the crowd and tumbled limply into Flory's arms. It was Dr Veraswami, with his tie torn off but his spectacles miraculously unbroken.

'Doctor!'

'Ach, my friend! Ach, how I am exhausted!'

'What are you doing here? Were you right in the middle of that crowd?'

'I was trying to restrain them, my friend. It was hopeless until you came. But there is at least one man who bears the mark of this, I think!'

He held out a small fist for Flory to see the damaged knuckles. But it was certainly quite dark now. At the same moment Flory heard a nasal voice behind him.

'Well, Mr Flory, so it's all over already! A mere flash in the pan as usual. You and I together were a little too much for them—ha, ha!'

It was U Po Kyin. He came towards them with a martial air, carrying a huge stick, and with a revolver thrust into his belt. His dress was a studious negligee—singlet and Shan trousers—to give the impression that he had rushed out of his house post-haste. He had been lying low until the danger should be over, and was now hurrying forth to grab a share of any credit that might be going.

'A smart piece of work, sir!' he said enthusiastically. 'Look how they are flying up the hillside! We have routed them most satisfactory.'

'*We!*' panted the doctor indignantly.

'Ah, my dear doctor! I did not perceive that you were there. It is possible that *you* also have been in the fighting? *You*—risking your most valuable life! Who would have believed such a thing?'

'You've taken your time getting here yourself!' said Flory angrily.

'Well, well sir, it is enough that we have dispersed them. Although,' he added with a touch of satisfaction, for he had noticed Flory's tone, 'they are going in the direction of the European houses, you will observe. I fancy that it will occur to them to do a little plundering on their way.'

One had to admire the man's impudence. He tucked his great stick under his arm and strolled beside Flory in an almost patronizing manner, while the doctor dropped behind, abashed in spite of himself. At the Club gate all three men halted. It was now extraordinarily dark, and the moon had vanished. Low overhead, just visible, black clouds were streaming eastward like a pack of hounds. A wind, almost cold, blew down the hillside and swept a cloud of dust and fine water-vapour before it. There was a sudden intensely rich scent of damp. The wind quickened, the trees rustled, then began beating themselves furiously together, the big frangipani tree by the tennis court flinging out a nebula of dimly seen blossom. All three men turned and hurried for shelter, the Orientals to their houses, Flory to the Club. It had begun raining.

Chapter 23

Next day the town was quieter than a cathedral city on Monday morning. It is usually the case after a riot. Except for the handful of prisoners, everyone who could possibly have been concerned in the attack on the Club had a watertight alibi. The Club garden looked as though a herd of bison had stampeded across it, but the houses had not been plundered, and there were no new casualties among the Europeans, except that after everything was over Mr Lackersteen had been found very drunk under the billiard-table, where he had retired with a bottle of whisky. Westfield and Verrall came back early in the morning, bringing Maxwell's murderers under arrest; or at any rate, bringing two people who would presently be hanged for Maxwell's murder. Westfield, when he heard the news of the riot, was gloomy but resigned. *Again* it happened—a veritable riot, and he not there to quell it! It seemed fated that he should never kill a man. Depressing, depressing. Verrall's only comment was that it had been 'damned lip' on the part of Flory (a civilian) to give orders to the Military Police.

Meanwhile, it was raining almost without cease. As soon as he woke up and heard the rain hammering on the roof Flory dressed and hurried out, Flo following. Out of sight of the houses he took off his clothes and let the rain sluice down on his bare body. To his surprise, he found that he was covered with bruises from last night; but the rain had washed away every trace of his prickly heat within three minutes. It is wonderful, the healing power of rainwater. Flory walked down to Dr Veraswami's house, with his shoes squelching and periodical jets of water flowing down his neck from the brim of his Terai hat. The sky was leaden, and innumerable whirling storms chased one another across the maidan like squadrons of cavalry. Burmans passed, under vast wooden hats in spite of which their bodies streamed water like the bronze gods in the fountains. A network of rivulets was already washing the stones of the road bare. The doctor had just got home when Flory arrived, and was shaking a wet umbrella over the veranda rail. He hailed Flory excitedly.

'Come up, Mr Flory, come up at once! You are just apropos. I was on the point of opening a bottle of Old Tommy Gin. Come up and let me drink to your health, ass the saviour of Kyauktada!'

They had a long talk together. The doctor was in a triumphant mood. It appeared that what had happened last night had righted his troubles almost miraculously. U Po Kyin's schemes were undone. The doctor was no longer at his mercy—in fact, it was the other way about. The doctor explained to Flory:

'You see, my friend, this riot—or rather, your most noble behaviour in it—wass quite outside U Po Kyin's programme. He had started the *so-called* rebellion and had the glory of crushing it, and he calculated that any further outbreak would simply mean more glory still. I am told that when he heard of Mr Maxwell's death, hiss joy was positively'—the doctor nipped his thumb and forefinger together—'what iss the word I want?'

'Obscene?'

'Ah yes. Obscene. It iss said that actually he attempted to dance—can you imagine such a disgusting spectacle?—and exclaimed, "Now at least they will take my rebellion seriously!" Such iss his regard for human life. But now hiss triumph iss at an end. The riot hass tripped up in mid-career.'

'How?'

'Because, do you not see, the honours of the riot are not his, but yours! And I am known to be your friend. I stand, so to speak, in the reflection of your glory. Are you not the hero of the hour? Did not your European friends receive you with open arms when you returned to the Club last night?'

'They did, I must admit. It was quite a new experience for me. Mrs Lackersteen was all over me. "*Dear Mr Flory*", she calls me now. And she's got her knife properly in Ellis. She hasn't forgotten that he called her a bloody hag and told her to stop squealing like a pig.'

'Ah, Mr Ellis is sometimes over-emphatic in his expressions. I have noticed it.'

'The only fly in the ointment is that I told the police to fire over the crowd's heads instead of straight at them. It seems that's against all the Government regulations. Ellis was a little vexed about it. "Why didn't you plug some of the b——s when you had the chance?" he said. I pointed out that it would have meant hitting the police who were in the middle of the crowd; but as he said, they were only niggers anyway. However, all my sins are forgiven me. And Macgregor quoted something in Latin—Horace, I believe.'

It was half an hour later when Flory walked along to the Club. He had promised to see Mr Macgregor and settle the business of the doctor's election. But there would be no difficulty about it now. The others would eat out of his hand until the absurd riot was forgotten; he could have gone into the Club and made a speech in favour of Lenin, and they would have put up with it. The lovely rain streamed down, drenching him from head to foot, and filling his nostrils with the scent of earth, forgotten during the bitter months of drought. He walked up the wrecked garden, where the mali, bending down with the rain splashing on his bare back, was trowelling holes for zinnias. Nearly all the flowers had been trampled out of existence. Elizabeth was there, on the side veranda, almost as though she were waiting for him. He took off his hat, spilling a pool of water from the brim, and went round to join her.

'Good morning!' he said, raising his voice because of the rain that beat noisily on the low roof.

'Good morning! *Isn't* it coming down? Simply *pelting!*'

'Oh, this isn't real rain. You wait till July. The whole Bay of Bengal is going to pour itself on us, by instalments.'

It seemed that they must never meet without talking of the weather. Nevertheless, her face said something very different from the banal words. Her demeanour had changed utterly since last night. He took courage.

'How is the place where that stone hit you?'

She held her arm out to him and let him take it. Her air was gentle, even submissive. He realized that his exploit of last night had made him almost a hero in her eyes. She could not know how small the danger had really been, and she forgave him everything, even Ma Hla May, because he had shown courage at the right moment. It was the buffalo and the leopard over again. His heart thumped in his breast. He slipped his hand down her arm and clasped her fingers in his own.

'Elizabeth—'

'Someone will see us!' she said, and she withdrew her hand, but not angrily.

'Elizabeth, I've something I want to say to you. Do you remember a letter I wrote you from the jungle, after our—some weeks ago?'

'Yes.'

'You remember what I said in it?'

'Yes. I'm sorry I didn't answer it. Only—'

'I couldn't expect you to answer it, then. But I just wanted to remind you of what I said.'

In the letter, of course, he had only said, and feebly enough, that he loved her—would always love her, no matter what happened. They were standing face to face, very close together. On an impulse—and it was so swiftly done that afterwards he had difficulty in believing that it had ever happened—he took her in his arms and drew her towards him. For a moment she yielded and let him lift up her face and kiss her; then suddenly she recoiled and shook her head. Perhaps she was frightened that someone would see them, perhaps it was only because his moustache was so wet from the rain. Without saying anything more she broke from him and hurried away into the Club. There was a look of distress or compunction in her face; but she did not seem angry.

He followed her more slowly into the Club, and ran into Mr Macgregor, who was in a very good humour. As soon as he saw Flory he boomed genially, 'Aha! The conquering hero comes!' and then, in a more serious vein, offered him fresh congratulations. Flory improved the occasion by saying a few words on behalf of the doctor. He painted quite a lively picture of the doctor's heroism in the riot. 'He was right in the middle of the crowd, fighting like a tiger,' etc., etc. It was not too much exaggerated—for the doctor had certainly risked his life. Mr Macgregor was impressed, and so were the others when they heard of it. At all times the testimony of one European can do an Oriental more good than that of a thousand of his fellow countrymen; and at this moment Flory's opinion carried weight. Practically, the doctor's good name was restored. His election to the Club could be taken as assured.

However, it was not finally agreed upon yet, because Flory was returning to camp. He set out the same evening, marching by night, and he did not see Elizabeth again before leaving. It was quite safe to travel in the jungle now, for the futile rebellion was obviously finished. There is seldom any talk of rebellion after the rains have started—the Burmans are too busy ploughing, and in any case the waterlogged fields are impassable for large bodies of men. Flory was to return to Kyauktada in ten days, when the padre's six-weekly visit fell due. The truth was that he did not care to be in Kyauktada while both Elizabeth and Verrall were there. And yet, it was strange, but all the bitterness—all the obscene, crawling envy that had tormented him before—was gone now that he knew she had forgiven him. It was only Verrall who stood between them now. And even the thought of her in Verrall's arms could hardly move him, because he knew that at the worst the affair must have an end. Verrall, it was quite certain, would never marry Elizabeth; young men of Verrall's stamp do not marry penniless girls met casually at obscure Indian stations. He was only amusing himself with Elizabeth. Presently he would desert her, and she would return to him—to Flory. It was enough—it was far better than he had hoped. There is a humility about genuine love that is rather horrible in some ways.

U Po Kyin was furiously angry. The miserable riot had taken him unawares, so far as anything ever took him unawares, and it was like a handful of grit thrown into the machinery of his plans. The business of disgracing the doctor had got to be begun all over again. Begun it was, sure enough, with such a spate of anonymous letters that Hla Pe had to absent himself from office for two whole days—it was bronchitis this time—to get them written. The doctor was accused of every crime from pederasty to stealing Government postage stamps. The prison warder who had let Nga Shwe O escape had now come up for trial. He was triumphantly acquitted, U Po Kyin having spent as much as two hundred rupees in bribing the

witnesses. More letters showered up on Mr Macgregor, proving in detail that Dr Veraswami, the real author of the escape, had tried to shift the blame on to a helpless subordinate. Nevertheless, the results were disappointing. The confidential letter which Mr Macgregor wrote to the Commissioner, reporting on the riot, was steamed open, and its tone was so alarming—Mr Macgregor had spoken of the doctor as 'behaving most creditably' on the night of the riot—that U Po Kyin called a council of war.

'The time has come for a vigorous move,' he said to the others—they were in conclave on the front veranda, before breakfast. Ma Kin was there, and Ba Sein and Hla Pe—the latter a bright-faced, promising boy of eighteen, with the manner of one who will certainly succeed in life.

'We are hammering against a brick wall,' U Po Kyin continued; 'and that wall is Flory. Who could have foreseen that that miserable coward would stand by his friend? However, there it is. So long as Veraswami has his backing, we are helpless.'

'I have been talking to the Club butler, sir,' said Ba Sein. 'He tells me that Mr Ellis and Mr Westfield still do not want the doctor to be elected to the Club. Do you not think they will quarrel with Flory again as soon as this business of the riot is forgotten?'

'Of course they will quarrel, they always quarrel. But in the meantime the harm is done. Just suppose that man *were* elected! I believe I should die of rage if it happened. No, there is only one move left. We must strike at Flory himself!'

'At Flory, sir! But he is a white man!'

'What do I care? I have ruined white men before now. Once let Flory be disgraced, and there is an end of the doctor. And he shall be disgraced! I will shame him so that he will never dare show his face in that Club again!'

'But, sir! A white man! What are we to accuse him of? Who would believe anything against a white man?'

'You have no strategy, Ko Ba Sein. One does not *accuse* a white man; one has got to catch him in the act. Public disgrace, in flagrante delicto. I shall know how to set about it. Now be silent while I think.'

There was a pause. U Po Kyin stood gazing out into the rain with his small hands clasped behind him and resting on the natural plateau of his posterior. The other three watched him from the end of the veranda, almost frightened by this talk of attacking a white man, and waiting for some masterstroke to cope with a situation that was beyond them. It was a little like the familiar picture (is it Meissonier's?) of Napoleon at Moscow, poring over his maps while his marshals wait in silence, with their cocked hats in their hands. But of course U Po Kyin was more equal to the situation than Napoleon. His plan was ready within two minutes. When he turned round his vast face was suffused with excessive joy. The doctor had been mistaken when he described U Po Kyin as attempting to dance; U Po Kyin's figure was not designed for dancing; but, had it been so designed, he would have danced at this moment. He beckoned to Ba Sein and whispered in his ear for a few seconds.

'That is the correct move, I think?' he concluded.

A broad, unwilling, incredulous grin stole slowly across Ba Sein's face.

'Fifty rupees ought to cover all the expenses,' added U Po Kyin, beaming.

The plan was unfolded in detail. And when the others had taken it in, all of them, even Ba Sein, who seldom laughed, even Ma Kin, who disapproved from the bottom of her soul, burst into irrepressible peals of laughter. The plan was really too good to be resisted. It was genius.

All the while it was raining, raining. The day after Flory went back to camp it rained for thirty-eight hours at a stretch, sometimes slowing to the pace of English rain, sometimes pouring down in such cataracts that one thought the whole ocean must by now have been sucked up into the clouds. The rattling on the roof became maddening after a few hours. In the intervals between the rain the sun glared as fiercely as ever, the mud began to crack and steam, and patches of prickly heat sprang out all over one's body. Hordes of flying beetles had emerged from their cocoons as soon as the rain started; there was a plague of loathly creatures known as stink-bugs, which invaded the houses in incredible numbers, littered themselves over the dining-table and made one's food uneatable. Verrall and Elizabeth still went out riding in the evenings, when the rain was not too fierce. To Verrall, all climates were alike, but he did not like to see his ponies plastered with mud. Nearly a week went by. Nothing was changed between them—they were neither less nor more intimate than they had been before. The proposal of marriage, still confidently expected, was still unuttered. Then an alarming thing happened. The news filtered to the Club, through Mr Macgregor, that Verrall was leaving Kyauktada; the Military Police were to be kept at Kyauktada, but another officer was coming in Verrall's place, no one was certain when. Elizabeth was in horrible suspense. Surely, if he was going away, he must say something definite soon? She could not question him—dared not even ask him whether he was really going; she could only wait for him to speak. He said nothing. Then one evening, without warning, he failed to turn up at the Club. And two whole days passed during which Elizabeth did not see him at all.

It was dreadful, but there was nothing that could be done. Verrall and Elizabeth had been inseparable for weeks, and yet in a way they were almost strangers. He had kept himself so aloof from them all—had never even seen the inside of the Lackersteens' house. They did not know him well enough to seek him out at the dakbungalow, or write to him; nor did he reappear at morning parade on the maidan. There was nothing to do except wait until he chose to present himself again. And when he did, would he ask her to marry him? Surely, surely he must! Both Elizabeth and her aunt (but neither of them had even spoken of it openly) held it as an article of faith that he must ask her. Elizabeth looked forward to their next meeting with a hope that was almost painful. Please God it would be a week at least before he went! If she rode with him four times more, or three times—even if it were only twice, all might yet be well. Please God he would come back to her soon! It was unthinkable that when he came, it would only be to say good-bye! The two women went down to the Club each evening and sat there until quite late, listening for Verrall's footsteps outside while seeming not to listen; but he never appeared. Ellis, who understood the situation perfectly, watched Elizabeth with spiteful amusement. What made it worst of all was that Mr Lackersteen was now pestering Elizabeth unceasingly. He had become quite reckless. Almost under the eyes of the servants he would waylay her, catch hold of her and begin pinching and fondling her in the most revolting way. Her sole defence was to threaten that she would tell her aunt; happily he was too stupid to realize that she would never dare do it.

On the third morning Elizabeth and her aunt arrived at the Club just in time to escape a violent storm of rain. They had been sitting in the lounge for a few minutes when they heard the sound of someone stamping the water off his shoes in the passage. Each woman's heart stirred, for this might be Verrall. Then a young man entered the lounge, unbuttoning a long raincoat as he came. He was a stout, rollicking, chuckle-headed youth of about twenty-five, with fat fresh cheeks, butter-coloured hair, no forehead, and, as it turned out afterwards, a deafening laugh.

Mrs Lackersteen made some inarticulate sound—it was jerked out of her by her disappointment. The youth, however, hailed them with immediate bonhomie, being one of those who are on terms of slangy intimacy with everyone from the moment of meeting them.

'Hullo, hullo!' he said 'Enter the fairy prince! Hope I don't sort of intrude and all that? Not shoving in on any family gatherings or anything?'

'Not at all!' said Mrs Lackersteen in surprise.

'What I mean to say—thought I'd just pop in at the Club and have a glance round, don't you know. Just to get acclimatized to the local brand of whisky. I only got here last night.'

'Are you *stationed* here?' said Mrs Lackersteen, mystified—for they had not been expecting any newcomers.

'Yes, rather. Pleasure's mine, entirely.'

'But we hadn't heard...Oh, of course! I suppose you're from the Forest Department? In place of poor Mr Maxwell?'

'What? Forest Department? No fear! I'm the new Military Police bloke, you know.'

'The—what?'

'New Military Police bloke. Taking over from dear ole Verrall. The dear ole chap got orders to go back to his regiment. Going off in a fearful hurry. And a nice mess he's left everything in for yours truly, too.'

The Military Policeman was a crass youth, but even he noticed that Elizabeth's face turned suddenly sickly. She found herself quite unable to speak. It was several seconds before Mrs Lackersteen managed to exclaim:

'Mr Verrall—going? Surely he isn't going away *yet*?'

'Going? He's gone!'

'*Gone*?'

'Well, what I mean to say—train's due to start in about half an hour. He'll be along at the station now. I sent a fatigue party to look after him. Got to get his ponies aboard and all that.'

There were probably further explanations, but neither Elizabeth nor her aunt heard a word of them. In any case, without even a good-bye to the Military Policeman, they were out on the front steps within fifteen seconds. Mrs Lackersteen called sharply for the butler.

'Butler! Send my rickshaw round to the front at once! To the station, *jaldi*!' she added as the rickshaw-man appeared, and, having settled herself in the rickshaw, poked him in the back with the ferrule of her umbrella to start him.

Elizabeth had put on her raincoat and Mrs Lackersteen was cowering in the rickshaw behind her umbrella, but neither was much use against the rain. It came driving towards them in such sheets that Elizabeth's frock was soaked before they had reached the gate, and the rickshaw almost overturned in the wind. The rickshaw-wallah put his head down and struggled into it, groaning. Elizabeth was in agony. It was a mistake, *surely* it was a mistake. He had written to her and the letter had gone astray. That was it, that *must* be it! It could not be that he had meant to leave her without even saying good-bye! And if it were so—no, not even then would she give up hope! When he saw her on the platform, for the last time, he could not be so brutal as to forsake her! As they neared the station she fell behind the rickshaw and pinched her cheeks to bring the blood into them. A squad of Military Police sepoy's shuffled hurriedly by, their thin uniforms sodden into rags, pushing a handcart among them. Those

would be Verrall's fatigue party. Thank God, there was a quarter of an hour yet. The train was not due to leave for another quarter of an hour. Thank God, at least, for this last chance of seeing him!

They arrived on the platform just in time to see the train draw out of the station and gather speed with a series of deafening snorts. The stationmaster, a little round, black man, was standing on the line looking ruefully after the train, and holding his waterproof-covered topi on to his head with one hand, while with the other he fended off two clamorous Indians who were bobbing at him and trying to thrust something upon his attention. Mrs Lackersteen leaned out of the rickshaw and called agitatedly through the rain.

'Stationmaster!'

'Madam!'

'What train is that?'

'That is the Mandalay train, madam.'

'The Mandalay train! It can't be!'

'But I assure you, madam! It is precisely the Mandalay train.' He came towards them, removing his topi.

'But Mr Verrall—the Police officer? Surely he's not on it?'

'Yes, madam, he have departed.' He waved his hand towards the train, now receding rapidly in a cloud of rain and steam.

'But the train wasn't due to start yet!'

'No, madam. Not due to start for another ten minutes.'

'Then why has it gone?'

The stationmaster waved his topi apologetically from side to side. His dark, squabby face looked quite distressed.

'I know, madam, I know! *Most* unprecedented! But the young Military Police officer have positively *commanded* me to start the train! He declare that all is ready and he do not wish to be kept waiting. I point out the irregularity. He say he do not care about irregularity. I expostulate. He insist. And in short—'

He made another gesture. It meant that Verrall was the kind of man who would have his way, even when it came to starting a train ten minutes early. There was a pause. The two Indians, imagining that they saw their chance, suddenly rushed forward, wailing, and offered some grubby notebooks for Mrs Lackersteen's inspection.

'What *do* these men want?' cried Mrs Lackersteen distractedly.

'They are grass-wallahs, madam. They say that Lieutenant Verrall have departed owing them large sums of money. One for hay, the other for corn. Of mine it is no affair.'

There was a hoot from the distant train. It rolled round the bend, like a black-behinded caterpillar that looks over its shoulder as it goes, and vanished. The stationmaster's wet white trousers flapped forlornly about his legs. Whether Verrall had started the train early to escape Elizabeth, or to escape the grass-wallahs, was an interesting question that was never cleared up.

They made their way back along the road, and then struggled up the hill in such a wind that sometimes they were driven several paces backwards. When they gained the veranda they

were quite out of breath. The servants took their streaming raincoats, and Elizabeth shook some of the water from her hair. Mrs Lackersteen broke her silence for the first time since they had left the station:

'Well! Of all the unmannerly—of the simply *abominable*...!'

Elizabeth looked pale and sickly, in spite of the rain and wind that had beaten into her face. But she would betray nothing.

'I think he might have waited to say good-bye to us,' she said coldly.

'Take my word for it, dear, you are thoroughly well rid of him!...As I said from the start, a most *odious* young man!'

Some time later, when they were sitting down to breakfast, having bathed and got into dry clothes, and feeling better, she remarked:

'Let me see, what day is this?'

'Saturday, Aunt.'

'Ah, Saturday. Then the dear padre will be arriving this evening. How many shall we be for the service tomorrow? Why, I think we shall *all* be here! How very nice! Mr Flory will be here too. I think he said he was coming back from the jungle tomorrow.' She added almost lovingly, '*dear* Mr Flory!'

Chapter 24

It was nearly six o'clock in the evening, and the absurd bell in the six-foot tin steeple of the church went clank-clank, clank-clank! as old Mattu pulled the rope within. The rays of the setting sun, refracted by distant rainstorms, flooded the maidan with a beautiful, lurid light. It had been raining earlier in the day, and would rain again. The Christian community of Kyauktada, fifteen in number, were gathering at the church door for the evening service.

Flory was already there, and Mr Macgregor, grey topi and all, and Mr Francis and Mr Samuel, frisking about in freshly laundered drill suits—for the six-weekly church service was the great social event of their lives. The padre, a tall man with grey hair and a refined, discoloured face, wearing pince-nez, was standing on the church steps in his cassock and surplice, which he had put on in Mr Macgregor's house. He was smiling in an amiable but rather helpless way at four pink-cheeked Karen Christians who had come to make their bows to him; for he did not speak a word of their language nor they of his. There was one other Oriental Christian, a mournful, dark Indian of uncertain race, who stood humbly in the background. He was always present at the church services, but no one knew who he was or why he was a Christian. Doubtless he had been captured and baptized in infancy by the missionaries, for Indians who are converted when adults almost invariably lapse.

Flory could see Elizabeth coming down the hill, dressed in lilac-colour, with her aunt and uncle. He had seen her that morning at the Club—they had had just a minute alone together before the others came in. He had only asked her one question.

'Has Verrall gone—for good?'

'Yes.'

There had been no need to say any more. He had simply taken her by the arms and drawn her towards him. She came willingly, even gladly—there in the clear daylight, merciless to his disfigured face. For a moment she had clung to him almost like a child. It was a though he had saved her or protected her from something. He raised her face to kiss her, and found with surprise that she was crying. There had been no time to talk then, not even to say, 'Will you marry me?' No matter, after the service there would be time enough. Perhaps at his next visit, only six weeks hence, the padre would marry them.

Ellis and Westfield and the new Military Policeman were approaching from the Club, where they had been having a couple of quick ones to last them through the service. The Forest Officer who had been sent to take Maxwell's place, a sallow, tall man, completely bald except for two whisker-like tufts in front of his ears, was following them. Flory had not time to say more than 'Good evening' to Elizabeth when she arrived. Mattu, seeing that everyone was present, stopped ringing the bell, and the clergyman led the way inside, followed by Mr Macgregor, with his topi against his stomach, and the Lackersteens and the native Christians. Ellis pinched Flory's elbow and whispered boozily in his ear:

'Come on, line up. Time for the snivel-parade. Quick march!'

He and the Military Policeman went in behind the others, arm-in-arm, with a dancing step—the policeman, till they got inside, wagging his fat behind in imitation of a pwe-dancer. Flory sat down in the same pew as these two, opposite Elizabeth, on her right. It was the first time that he had ever risked sitting with his birthmark towards her. 'Shut your eyes and count

twenty-five', whispered Ellis as they sat down, drawing a snigger from the policeman. Mrs Lackersteen had already taken her place at the harmonium, which was no bigger than a writing-desk. Mattu stationed himself by the door and began to pull the punkah—it was so arranged that it only flapped over the front pews, where the Europeans sat. Flo came nosing up the aisle, found Flory's pew and settled down underneath it. The service began.

Flory was only attending intermittently. He was dimly aware of standing and kneeling and muttering 'Amen' to interminable prayers, and of Ellis nudging him and whispering blasphemies behind his hymn book. But he was too happy to collect his thoughts. Hell was yielding up Eurydice. The yellow light flooded in through the open door, gilding the broad back of Mr Macgregor's silk coat like cloth-of-gold. Elizabeth, across the narrow aisle, was so close to Flory that he could hear every rustle of her dress and feel, as it seemed to him, the warmth of her body; yet he would not look at her even once, lest the others should notice it. The harmonium quavered bronchitically as Mrs Lackersteen struggled to pump sufficient air into it with the sole pedal that worked. The singing was a queer, ragged noise—an earnest booming from Mr Macgregor, a kind of shamefaced muttering from the other Europeans, and from the back a loud, wordless lowing, for the Karen Christians knew the tunes of the hymns but not the words.

They were kneeling down again. 'More bloody knee-drill,' Ellis whispered. The air darkened, and there was a light patter of rain on the roof; the trees outside rustled, and a cloud of yellow leaves whirled past the window. Flory watched them through the chinks of his fingers. Twenty years ago, on winter Sundays in his pew in the parish church at home, he used to watch the yellow leaves, as at this moment, drifting and fluttering against leaden skies. Was it not possible, now, to begin over again as though those grimy years had never touched him? Through his fingers he glanced sidelong at Elizabeth, kneeling with her head bent and her face hidden in her youthful, mottled hands. When they were married, when they were married! What fun they would have together in this alien yet kindly land! He saw Elizabeth in his camp, greeting him as he came home tired from work and Ko S'la hurried from the tent with a bottle of beer; he saw her walking in the forest with him, watching the hornbills in the peepul trees and picking nameless flowers, and in the marshy grazing-grounds, tramping through the cold-weather mist after snipe and teal. He saw his home as she would remake it. He saw his drawing-room, sluttish and bachelor-like no longer, with new furniture from Rangoon, and a bowl of pink balsams like rosebuds on the table, and books and water-colours and a black piano. Above all the piano! His mind lingered upon the piano—symbol, perhaps because he was unmusical, of civilized and settled life. He was delivered for ever from the sub-life of the past decade—the debaucheries, the lies, the pain of exile and solitude, the dealings with whores and moneylenders and pukka sahibs.

The clergyman stepped to the small wooden lectern that also served as a pulpit, slipped the band from a roll of sermon paper, coughed, and announced a text. 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.'

'Cut it short, for Christ's sake,' murmured Ellis.

Flory did not notice how many minutes passed. The words of the sermon flowed peacefully through his head, an indistinct burbling sound, almost unheard. When they were married, he was still thinking, when they were married—

Hullo! What was happening?

The clergyman had stopped short in the middle of a word. He had taken off his pince-nez and was shaking them with a distressed air at someone in the doorway. There was a fearful, raucous scream.

'Pike-san pay-like! Pike-san pay-like!'

Everyone jumped in their seats and turned round. It was Ma Hla May. As they turned she stepped inside the church and shoved old Mattu violently aside. She shook her fist at Flory.

'Pike-san pay-like! Pike-san pay-like! Yes, *that's* the one I mean—Flory, Flory! (She pronounced it Porley.) That one sitting in front there, with the black hair! Turn round and face me, you coward! Where is the money you promised me?'

She was shrieking like a maniac. The people gaped at her, too astounded to move or speak. Her face was grey with powder, her greasy hair was tumbling down, her longyi was ragged at the bottom. She looked like a screaming hag of the bazaar. Flory's bowels seemed to have turned to ice. Oh God, God! Must they know—must Elizabeth know—that *that* was the woman who had been his mistress? But there was not a hope, not the vestige of a hope, of any mistake. She had screamed his name over and over again. Flo, hearing the familiar voice, wriggled from under the pew, walked down the aisle and wagged her tail at Ma Hla May. The wretched woman was yelling out a detailed account of what Flory had done to her.

'Look at me, you white men, and you women, too, look at me! Look how he has ruined me! Look at these rags I am wearing! And he is sitting there, the liar, the coward, pretending not to see me! He would let me starve at his gate like a pariah dog. Ah, but I will shame you! Turn round and look at me! Look at this body that you have kissed a thousand times—look—look—'

She began actually to tear her clothes open—the last insult of a base-born Burmese woman. The harmonium squeaked as Mrs Lackersteen made a convulsive movement. People had at last found their wits and began to stir. The clergyman, who had been bleating ineffectually, recovered his voice, 'Take that woman outside!' he said sharply.

Flory's face was ghastly. After the first moment he had turned his head away from the door and set his teeth in a desperate effort to look unconcerned. But it was useless, quite useless. His face was as yellow as bone, and the sweat glistened on his forehead. Francis and Samuel, doing perhaps the first useful deed of their lives, suddenly sprang from their pew, grabbed Ma Hla May by the arms and hauled her outside, still screaming.

It seemed very silent in the church when they had finally dragged her out of hearing. The scene had been so violent, so squalid, that everyone was upset by it. Even Ellis looked disgusted. Flory could neither speak nor stir. He sat staring fixedly at the altar, his face rigid and so bloodless that the birth-mark seemed to glow upon it like a streak of blue paint. Elizabeth glanced across the aisle at him, and her revulsion made her almost physically sick. She had not understood a word of what Ma Hla May was saying, but the meaning of the scene was perfectly clear. The thought that he had been the lover of that grey-faced, maniacal creature made her shudder in her bones. But worse than that, worse than anything, was his ugliness at this moment. His face appalled her, it was so ghastly, rigid and old. It was like a skull. Only the birthmark seemed alive in it. She hated him now for his birthmark. She had never known till this moment how dishonouring, how unforgivable a thing it was.

Like the crocodile, U Po Kyin had struck at the weakest spot. For, needless to say, this scene was U Po Kyin's doing. He had seen his chance, as usual, and tutored Ma Hla May for her part with considerable care. The clergyman brought his sermon to an end almost at once. As soon as it was over Flory hurried outside, not looking at any of the others. It was getting dark, thank God. At fifty yards from the church he halted, and watched the others making in couples for the Club. It seemed to him that they were hurrying. Ah, they would, of course! There would be something to talk about at the Club tonight! Flo rolled belly-upwards against his ankles, asking for a game. 'Get out, you bloody brute!' he said, and kicked her. Elizabeth

had stopped at the church door. Mr Macgregor, happy chance, seemed to be introducing her to the clergyman. In a moment the two men went on in the direction of Mr Macgregor's house, where the clergyman was to stay for the night, and Elizabeth followed the others, thirty yards behind them. Flory ran after her and caught up with her almost at the Club gate.

'Elizabeth!'

She looked round, saw him, turned white, and would have hurried on without a word. But his anxiety was too great, and he caught her by the wrist.

'Elizabeth! I must—I've got to speak to you!'

'Let me go, will you!'

They began to struggle, and then stopped abruptly. Two of the Karens who had come out of the church were standing fifty yards away, gazing at them through the half-darkness with deep interest. Flory began again in a lower tone:

'Elizabeth, I know I've no right to stop you like this. But I must speak to you, I must! Please hear what I've got to say. Please don't run away from me!'

'What are you doing? Why are you holding on to my arm? Let me go this instant!'

'I'll let you go—there, look! But do listen to me, please! Answer me this one thing. After what's happened, can you ever forgive me?'

'Forgive you? What do you mean, *forgive* you?'

'I know I'm disgraced. It was the vilest thing to happen! Only, in a sense it wasn't my fault. You'll see that when you're calmer. Do you think—not now, it was too bad, but later—do you think you can forget it?'

'I really don't know what you're talking about. Forget it? What has it got to do with *me*? I thought it was very disgusting, but it's not *my* business. I can't think why you're questioning me like this at all.'

He almost despaired at that. Her tone and even her words were the very ones she had used in that earlier quarrel of theirs. It was the same move over again. Instead of hearing him out she was going to evade him and put him off—snub him by pretending that he had no claim upon her.

'Elizabeth! Please answer me. Please be fair to me! It's serious this time. I don't expect you to take me back all at once. You couldn't, when I'm publicly disgraced like this. But, after all, you virtually promised to marry me—'

'What! Promised to marry you? *When* did I promise to marry you?'

'Not in words, I know. But it was understood between us.'

'Nothing of the kind was understood between us! I think you are behaving in the most horrible way. I'm going along to the Club at once. Good evening!'

'Elizabeth! Elizabeth! Listen. It's not fair to condemn me unheard. You knew before what I'd done, and you knew that I'd lived a different life since I met you. What happened this evening was only an accident. That wretched woman, who, I admit, was once my—well—'

'I won't listen, I won't listen to such things! I'm going!'

He caught her by the wrists again, and this time held her. The Karens had disappeared, fortunately.

'No, no, you shall hear me! I'd rather offend you to the heart than have this uncertainty. It's gone on week after week, month after month, and I've never once been able to speak straight out to you. You don't seem to know or care how much you make me suffer. But this time you've got to answer me.'

She struggled in his grip, and she was surprisingly strong. Her face was more bitterly angry than he had ever seen or imagined it. She hated him so that she would have struck him if her hands were free.

'Let me go! Oh, you beast, you beast, let me go!'

'My God, my God, that we should fight like this! But what else can I do? I can't let you go without even hearing me. Elizabeth, you *must* listen to me!'

'I will not! I will not discuss it! What right have you to question me? Let me go!'

'Forgive me, forgive me! This one question. Will you—not now, but later, when this vile business is forgotten—will you marry me?'

'No, never, never!'

'Don't say it like that! Don't make it final. Say no for the present if you like—but in a month, a year, five years—'

'Haven't I said no? Why must you keep on and on?'

'Elizabeth, listen to me. I've tried again and again to tell you what you mean to me—oh, it's so useless talking about it! But do try and understand. Haven't I told you something of the life we live here? The sort of horrible death-in-life! The decay, the loneliness, the self-pity? Try and realize what it means, and that you're the sole person on earth who could save me from it.'

'Will you let me go? Why do you have to make this dreadful scene?'

'Does it mean nothing to you when I say that I love you? I don't believe you've ever realized what it is that I want from you. If you like, I'd marry you and promise never even touch you with my finger. I wouldn't mind even that, so long as you were with me. But I can't go on with my life alone, always alone. Can't you bring yourself ever to forgive me?'

'Never, never! I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth. I'd as soon marry the—the sweeper!'

She had begun crying now. He saw that she meant what she said. The tears came into his own eyes. He said again:

'For the last time. Remember that it's something to have one person in the world who loves you. Remember that though you'll find men who are richer, and younger, and better in every way than I, you'll never find one who cares for you so much. And though I'm not rich, at least I could make you a home. There's a way of living—civilized, decent—'

'Haven't we said enough?' she said more calmly. 'Will you let me go before somebody comes?'

He relaxed his grip on her wrists. He had lost her, that was certain. Like a hallucination, painfully clear, he saw again their home as he had imagined it; he saw their garden, and Elizabeth feeding Nero and the pigeons on the drive by the sulphur-yellow phloxes that grew as high as her shoulder; and the drawing-room, with the water-colours on the walls, and the balsams in the china bowl mirrored by the table, and the book-shelves, and the black piano. The impossible, mythical piano—symbol of everything that that futile accident had wrecked!

'You should have a piano,' he said despairingly.

'I don't play the piano.'

He let her go. It was no use continuing. She was no sooner free of him than she took to her heels and actually ran into the Club garden, so hateful was his presence to her. Among the trees she stopped to take off her spectacles and remove the signs of tears from her face. Oh, the beast, the beast! He had hurt her wrists abominably. Oh, what an unspeakable beast he was! When she thought of his face as it had looked in church, yellow and glistening with the hideous birthmark upon it, she could have wished him dead. It was not what he had done that horrified her. He might have committed a thousand abominations and she could have forgiven him. But not after that shameful, squalid scene, and the devilish ugliness of his disfigured face in that moment. It was, finally, the birthmark that had damned him.

Her aunt would be furious when she heard that she had refused Flory. And there was her uncle and his leg-pinching—between the two of them, life here would become impossible. Perhaps she would have to go Home unmarried after all. Black beetles! No matter. Anything—spinsterhood, drudgery, anything—sooner than the alternative. Never, never, would she yield to a man who had been so disgraced! Death sooner, far sooner. If there had been mercenary thoughts in her mind an hour ago, she had forgotten them. She did not even remember that Verrall had jilted her and that to have married Flory would have saved her face. She knew only that he was dishonoured and less than a man, and that she hated him as she would have hated a leper or a lunatic. The instinct was deeper than reason or even self-interest, and she could no more have disobeyed it than she could have stopped breathing.

Flory, as he turned up the hill, did not run, but he walked as fast as he could. What he had to do must be done quickly. It was getting very dark. The wretched Flo, who even now had not grasped that anything serious was the matter, trotted close to his heels, whimpering in a self-pitying manner to reproach him for the kick he had given her. As he came up the path a wind blew through the plaintain trees, rattling the tattered leaves and bringing a scent of damp. It was going to rain again. Ko S'la had laid the dinner-table and was removing some flying beetles that had committed suicide against the petrol-lamp. Evidently he had not heard about the scene in church yet.

'The holy one's dinner is ready. Will the holy one dine now?'

'No, not yet. Give me that lamp.'

He took the lamp, went into the bedroom and shut the door, The stale scent of dust and cigarette-smoke met him, and in the white, unsteady glare of the lamp he could see the mildewed books and the lizards on the wall. So he was back again to this—to the old, secret life—after everything, back where he had been before.

Was it not possible to endure it! He had endured it before. There were palliatives—books, his garden, drink, work, whoring, shooting, conversations with the doctor.

No, it was not endurable any longer. Since Elizabeth's coming the power to suffer and above all to hope, which he had thought dead in him, had sprung to new life. The half-comfortable lethargy in which he had lived was broken. And if he suffered now, there was far worse to come. In a little while someone else would marry her. How he could picture it—the moment when he heard the news!—'Did you hear the Lackersteen kid's got off at last? Poor old So-and-so—booked for the altar, God help him,' etc., etc. And the casual question—'Oh, really? When is it to be?'—stiffening one's face, pretending to be uninterested. And then her wedding day approaching, her bridal night—ah, not that! Obscene, obscene. Keep your eyes fixed on

that. Obscene. He dragged his tin uniform-case from under the bed, took out his automatic pistol, slid a clip of cartridges into the magazine, and pulled one into the breech.

Ko S'la was remembered in his will. There remained Flo. He laid his pistol on the table and went outside. Flo was playing with Ba Shin, Ko S'la's youngest son, under the lee of the cookhouse, where the servants had left the remains of a woodfire. She was dancing round him with her small teeth bared, pretending to bite him, while the tiny boy, his belly red in the glow of the embers, smacked weakly at her, laughing, and yet half frightened.

'Flo! Come here, Flo!'

She heard him and came obediently, and then stopped short at the bedroom door. She seemed to have grasped now that there was something wrong. She backed a little and stood looking timorously up at him, unwilling to enter the bedroom.

'Come in here!'

She wagged her tail, but did not move.

'Come on, Flo! Good old Flo! Come on!'

Flo was suddenly stricken with terror. She whined, her tail went down, and she shrank back. 'Come here, blast you!' he cried, and he took her by the collar and flung her into the room, shutting the door behind her. He went to the table for the pistol.

'No come here! Do as you're told!'

She crouched down and whined for forgiveness. It hurt him to hear it. 'Come on, old girl! Dear old Flo! Master wouldn't hurt you. Come here!' She crawled very slowly towards his feet, flat on her belly, whining, her head down as though afraid to look at him. When she was a yard away he fired, blowing her skull to fragments.

Her shattered brain looked like red velvet. Was that what he would look like? The heart, then, not the head. He could hear the servants running out of their quarters and shouting—they must have heard the sound of the shot. He hurriedly tore open his coat and pressed the muzzle of the pistol against his shirt. A tiny lizard, translucent like a creature of gelatine, was stalking a white moth along the edge of the table. Flory pulled the trigger with his thumb.

As Ko S'la burst into the room, for a moment he saw nothing but the dead body of the dog. Then he saw his master's feet, heels upwards, projecting from beyond the bed. He yelled to the others to keep the children out of the room, and all of them surged back from the doorway with screams. Ko S'la fell on his knees behind Flory's body, at the same moment as Ba Pe came running through the veranda.

'Has he shot himself?'

'I think so. Turn him over on his back. Ah, look at that! Run for the Indian doctor! Run for your life!'

There was a neat hole, no bigger than that made by a pencil passing through a sheet of blotting-paper, in Flory's shirt. He was obviously quite dead. With great difficulty Ko S'la managed to drag him on to the bed, for the other servants refused to touch the body. It was only twenty minutes before the doctor arrived. He had heard only a vague report that Flory was hurt, and had bicycled up the hill at top speed through a storm of rain. He threw his bicycle down in the flower-bed and hurried in through the veranda. He was out of breath, and could not see through his spectacles. He took them off, peering myopically at the bed. 'What iss it, my friend?' he said anxiously. 'Where are you hurt?' Then, coming closer, he saw what was on the bed, and uttered a harsh sound.

'Ach, what is this? What has happened to him?'

The doctor fell on his knees, tore Flory's shirt open and put his ear to his chest. An expression of agony came into his face, and he seized the dead man by the shoulders and shook him as though mere violence could bring him to life. One arm fell limply over the edge of the bed. The doctor lifted it back again, and then, with the dead hand between his own, suddenly burst into tears. Ko S'la was standing at the foot of the bed, his brown face full of lines. The doctor stood up, and then losing control of himself for a moment, leaned against the bedpost and wept noisily and grotesquely his back turned on Ko S'la. His fat shoulders were quivering. Presently he recovered himself and turned round again.

'How did this happen?'

'We heard two shots. He did it himself, that is certain. I do not know why.'

'How did you know that he did it on purpose? How do you know that it was not an accident?'

For answer, Ko S'la pointed silently to Flo's corpse. The doctor thought for a moment, and then, with gentle, practised hands, swathed the dead man in the sheet and knotted it at foot and head. With death, the birthmark had faded immediately, so that it was no more than a faint grey stain.

'Bury the dog at once. I will tell Mr Macgregor that this happened accidentally while he was cleaning his revolver. Be sure that you bury the dog. Your master was my friend. It shall not be written on his tombstone that he committed suicide.'

Chapter 25

It was lucky that the padre should have been at Kyauktada, for he was able, before catching the train on the following evening, to read the burial service in due form and even to deliver a short address on the virtues of the dead man. All Englishmen are virtuous when they are dead. 'Accidental death' was the official verdict (Dr Veraswami had proved with all his medico-legal skill that the circumstances pointed to accident) and it was duly inscribed upon the tombstone. Not that anyone believed it, of course. Flory's real epitaph was the remark, very occasionally uttered—for an Englishman who dies in Burma is so soon forgotten—'Flory? Oh yes, he was a dark chap, with a birthmark. He shot himself in Kyauktada in 1926. Over a girl, people said. Bloody fool.' Probably no one, except Elizabeth, was much surprised at what had happened. There is a rather large number of suicides among the Europeans in Burma, and they occasion very little surprise.

Flory's death had several results. The first and most important of them was that Dr Veraswami was ruined, even as he had foreseen. The glory of being a white man's friend—the one thing that had saved him before—had vanished. Flory's standing with the other Europeans had never been good, it is true; but he was after all a white man, and his friendship conferred a certain prestige. Once he was dead, the doctor's ruin was assured. U Po Kyin waited the necessary time, and then struck again, harder than ever. It was barely three months before he had fixed it in the head of every European in Kyauktada that the doctor was an unmitigated scoundrel. No public accusation was ever made against him—U Po Kyin was most careful of that. Even Ellis would have been puzzled to say just what scoundrelism the doctor had been guilty of; but still, it was agreed that he was a scoundrel. By degrees, the general suspicion of him crystallized in a single Burmese phrase—'shok de'. Veraswami, it was said, was quite a clever little chap in his way—quite a good doctor for a native—but he was *thoroughly* shok de. Shok de means, approximately, untrustworthy, and when a 'native' official comes to be known as shok de, there is an end of him.

The dreaded nod and wink passed somewhere in high places, and the doctor was reverted to the rank of Assistant Surgeon and transferred to Mandalay General Hospital. He is still there, and is likely to remain. Mandalay is rather a disagreeable town—it is dusty and intolerably hot, and it is said to have five main products all beginning with P, namely, pagodas, pariahs, pigs, priests and prostitutes—and the routine-work of the hospital is a dreary business. The doctor lives just outside the hospital grounds in a little bake-house of a bungalow with a corrugated iron fence round its tiny compound, and in the evenings he runs a private clinic to supplement his reduced pay. He has joined a second-rate club frequented by Indian pleaders. Its chief glory is a single European member—a Glasgow electrician named Macdougall, sacked from the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company for drunkenness, and now making a precarious living out of a garage. Macdougall is a dull lout, only interested in whisky and magnetos. The doctor, who will never believe that a white man can be a fool, tries almost every night to engage him in what he still calls 'cultured conversation'; but the results are very unsatisfying.

Ko S'la inherited four hundred rupees under Flory's will, and with his family he set up a tea-shop in the bazaar. But the shop failed, as it was bound to do with the two women fighting in it at all hours, and Ko S'la and Ba Pe were obliged to go back to service. Ko S'la was an accomplished servant. Besides the useful arts of pimping, dealing with money-lenders, carrying master to bed when drunk and making pick-me-ups known as prairie oysters on the

following morning, he could sew, darn, refill cartridges, attend to a horse, press a suit, and decorate a dinner-table with wonderful, intricate patterns of chopped leaves and dyed rice-grains. He was worth fifty rupees a month. But he and Ba Pe had fallen into lazy ways in Flory's service, and, they were sacked from one job after another. They had a bad year of poverty, and little Ba Shin developed a cough, and finally coughed himself to death one stifling hot-weather night. Ko S'la is now a second boy to a Rangoon rice-broker with a neurotic wife who makes unending kit-kit, and Ba Pe is pani-wallah in the same house at sixteen rupees a month. Ma Hla May is in a brothel in Mandalay. Her good looks are all but gone, and her clients pay her only four annas and sometimes kick her and beat her. Perhaps more bitterly than any of the others, she regrets the good time when Flory was alive, and when she had not the wisdom to put aside any of the money she extracted from him.

U Po Kyin realized all his dreams except one. After the doctor's disgrace, it was inevitable that U Po Kyin should be elected to the Club, and elected he was, in spite of bitter protests from Ellis. In the end the other Europeans came to be rather glad that they had elected him, for he was a bearable addition to the Club. He did not come too often, was ingratiating in his manner, stood drinks freely, and developed almost at once into a brilliant bridge-player. A few months later he was transferred from Kyauktada and promoted. For a whole year, before his retirement, he officiated as Deputy Commissioner, and during that year alone he made twenty thousand rupees in bribes. A month after his retirement he was summoned to a durbar in Rangoon, to receive the decoration that had been awarded to him by the Indian Government.

It was an impressive scene, that durbar. On the platform, hung with flags and flowers, sat the Governor, frock-coated, upon a species of throne, with a bevy of aides-de-camp and secretaries behind him. All round the hall, like glittering waxworks, stood the tall, bearded sowars of the Governor's bodyguard, with pennoned lances in their hands. Outside, a band was blaring at intervals. The gallery was gay with the white ingyis and pink scarves of Burmese ladies, and in the body of the hall a hundred men or more were waiting to receive their decorations. There were Burmese officials in blazing Mandalay pasos, and Indians in cloth-of-gold pagris, and British officers in full-dress uniform with clanking sword-scabbards, and old thugyis with their grey hair knotted behind their heads and silver-hilted dahs slung from their shoulders. In a high, clear voice a secretary was reading out the list of awards, which varied from the C.I.E. to certificates of honour in embossed silver cases. Presently U Po Kyin's turn came and the secretary read from his scroll:

'To U Po Kyin, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, retired, for long and loyal service and especially for his timely aid in crushing a most dangerous rebellion in Kyauktada district'—and so on and so on.

Then two henchmen, placed there for the purpose hoisted U Po Kyin upright, and he waddled to the platform, bowed as low as his belly would permit, and was duly decorated and felicitated, while Ma Kin and other supporters clapped wildly and fluttered their scarves from the gallery.

U Po Kyin had done all that mortal man could do. It was time now to be making ready for the next world—in short, to begin building pagodas. But unfortunately, this was the very point at which his plans went wrong. Only three days after the Governor's durbar, before so much as a brick of those atoning pagodas had been laid, U Po Kyin was stricken with apoplexy and died without speaking again. There is no armour against fate. Ma Kin was heartbroken at the disaster. Even if she had built the pagodas herself, it would have availed U Po Kyin nothing; no merit can be acquired save by one's own act. She suffers greatly to think of U Po Kyin where he must be now—wandering in God knows what dreadful subterranean hell of fire,

and darkness, and serpents, and genii. Or even if he has escaped the worst, his other fear has been realized, and he has returned to the earth in the shape of a rat or a frog. Perhaps at this very moment a snake is devouring him.

As to Elizabeth, things fell out better than she had expected. After Flory's death Mrs Lackersteen, dropping all pretences for once, said openly that there were no men in this dreadful place and the only hope was to go and stay several months in Rangoon or Maymyo. But she could not very well send Elizabeth to Rangoon or Maymyo alone, and to go with her practically meant condemning Mr Lackersteen to death from delirium tremens. Months passed, and the rains reached their climax, and Elizabeth had just made up her mind that she must go home after all, penniless and unmarried, when—Mr Macgregor proposed to her. He had had it in his mind for a long time; indeed, he had only been waiting for a decent interval to elapse after Flory's death.

Elizabeth accepted him gladly. He was rather old, perhaps, but a Deputy Commissioner is not to be despised—certainly he was a far better match than Flory. They are very happy. Mr Macgregor was always a good-hearted man, but he has grown more human and likeable since his marriage. His voice booms less, and he has given up his morning exercises. Elizabeth has grown mature surprisingly quickly, and a certain hardness of manner that always belonged to her has become accentuated. Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese. She has an exhaustive knowledge of the Civil List, gives charming little dinner-parties and knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their places—in short, she fills with complete success the position for which Nature had designed her from the first, that of a burra memsahib.

THE END

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