SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN

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A Story of Calcutta

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CHAPTER I.

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Miss Howe pushed the portière aside with a curved hand and gracefully separated fingers; it was a staccato movement, and her body followed it after an instant's poise of hesitation, head thrust a little forward, eyes inquiring, and a tentative smile, although she knew precisely who was there. You would have been aware at once that she was an actress. She entered the room with a little stride, and then crossed it quickly, the train of her morning gown—it cried out of luxury with the cheapest voice—taking folds of great audacity, as she bent her face in its loose mass of hair over Laura Filbert, sitting on the edge of a bamboo sofa, and said —

"You poor thing! Oh, you *poor* thing!"

She took Laura's hand as she spoke, and tried to keep it; but the hand was neutral, and she let it go. "It is a hand," she said to herself, in one of those quick reflections that so often visited her ready-made, "that turns the merely inquiring mind away. Nothing but passion could hold it."

Miss Filbert made the conventional effort to rise, but it came to nothing, or to a mere embarrassed accent of their greeting. Then her voice showed this feeling to be merely superficial, made nothing of it, pushed it to one side.

"I suppose you cannot see the foolishness of your pity," she said. "Oh, Miss Howe, I am happier than you are—much happier." Her bare feet, as she spoke, nestled into the coarse Mirzapore rug on the floor, and her eye lingered approvingly upon an Owari vase three foot high, and thick

with the gilded landscape of Japan which stood near it, in the cheap magnificence of the squalid room.

Hilda smiled. Her smile acquiesced in the world she had found, acquiesced with the gladness of an explorer in Laura Filbert as a feature of it.

"Don't be too sure," she cried; "I am very happy. It is such a pleasure to see you."

Her gaze embraced Miss Filbert as a person and Miss Filbert as a pictorial fact; but that was because she could not help it. Her eyes were really engaged only with the latter Miss Filbert.

"Much happier than you are," Laura repeated, slowly moving her head from side to side, as if to negative contradiction in advance. She smiled too; it was as if she had remembered a former habit, from politeness.

"Of course you are—of course!" Miss Howe acknowledged. The words were mellow and vibrant; her voice seemed to dwell upon them with a kind of rich affection. Her face covered itself with serious sweetness. "I can imagine the beatitudes you feel—by your clothes."

The girl drew her feet under her, and her hand went up to the only semi-conventional item of her attire. It was a brooch that exclaimed in silver letters, "Glory to His Name!" "It is the dress of the Army in this country," she said; "I would not change it for the wardrobe of any queen."

"That's just what I mean." Miss Howe leaned back in her chair with her head among its cushions, and sent her words fluently across the room, straight and level with the glance from between her half-closed eyelids. A fine sensuous appreciation of the indolence it was possible to enjoy in the

East clung about her. "To live on a plane that lifts you up like that—so that you can defy all criticism and all convention, and go about the streets like a mark of exclamation at the selfishness of the world—there must be something very consummate in it or you couldn't go on. At least I couldn't."

"I suppose I do look odd to you." Her voice took a curious soft, uplifted note. "I wear three garments only—the garments of my sisters who plant the young shoots in the rice-fields, and carry bricks for the building of rich men's houses, and gather the dung of the roadways to burn for fuel. If the Army is to conquer India it must march bare-footed and bare-headed all the way. All the way," Laura repeated, with a tremor of musical sadness. Her eyes were fixed in soft appeal upon the other woman's.

"And if the sun beats down upon my uncovered head, I think, 'it struck more fiercely upon Calvary'; and if the way is sharp to my unshod feet, I say, 'At least I have no cross to bear.'" The last words seemed almost a chant, and her voice glided from them into singing——

> "The blessed Saviour died for me,
> On the cross! On the cross!
> He bore my sins at Calvary,
> On the rugged cross!"

She sang softly, her body thrust a little forward in a tender swaying—

> "Behold His hands and feet and side,
> The crown of thorns, the crimson tide.

'Forgive them, Father!' loud he cried,
On the rugged cross!"

"Oh, thank you!" Miss Howe exclaimed. Then she murmured again, "That's just what I mean."

A blankness came over the girl's face as a light cloud will cross the moon. She regarded Hilda from behind it with penetrant anxiety. "Did you really enjoy that hymn?" she asked.

"Indeed I did."

"Then, dear Miss Howe, I think you cannot be very far from the kingdom."

"I? Oh, I have my part in a kingdom." Her voice caressed the idea. "And the curious thing is that we are all aristocrats who belong to it. Not the vulgar kind, you understand—but no, you don't understand. You'll have to take my word for it." Miss Howe's eyes sought a red hibiscus flower that looked in at the window half drowned in sunlight, and the smile in them deepened. The flower admitted so naïvely that it had no business to be there.

"Is it the Kingdom of God and His righteousness?" Laura Filbert's clear glance was disturbed by a ray of curiosity, but the inflexible quality of her tone more than counterbalanced this.

"There's nothing about it in the Bible, if that's what you mean. And yet I think the men who wrote 'The time of the singing of birds has come,' and 'I will lift mine eyes unto the hills,' must have belonged to it." She paused, with an odd look of discomfiture. "But one shouldn't talk about things like that—it takes the bloom off. Don't you feel that way about your privileges now and then? Don't they look rather

dusty and battered to you after a day's exposure in Bow Bazaar?"

There came a light crunch of wheels on the red kunker drive outside and a switch past the bunch of sword ferns that grew beside the door. The muffled crescendo of steps on the stair and the sound of an inquiry penetrated from beyond the portière, and without further preliminary Duff Lindsay came into the room.

"Do I interrupt a rehearsal?" he asked; but there was nothing in the way he walked across the room to Hilda Howe to suggest that the idea abashed him. For her part, she rose and made one short step to meet him, and then received him, as it were, with both hands and all her heart.

"How ridiculous you are!" she cried. "Of course not. And let me tell you it is very nice of you to come this very first day, when one was dying to be welcomed. Miss Filbert came too, and we have been talking about our respective walks in life. Let me introduce you. Miss Filbert—Captain Filbert, of the Salvation Army—Mr. Duff Lindsay of Calcutta."

She watched with interest the gravity with which they bowed, and differentiated it; his the simple formality of his class, Laura's a repressed hostility to such an epitome of the world as he looked, although any Bond street tailor would have impeached his waistcoat, and one shabby glove had manifestly never been on. Yet Miss Filbert's first words seemed to show a slight unbending. "Won't you sit there?" she said, indicating the sofa corner she had been occupying. "You get the glare from the window where you are." It was virtually a command, delivered with a complete air of dignity and authority; and Lindsay, in some confusion, found

himself obeying. "Oh, thank you, thank you," he said. "One doesn't really mind in the least. Do you—do you object to it? Shall I close the shutters?"

"If you do," said Miss Howe delightedly, "we shall not be able to see."

"Neither we should," he assented; "the others are closed already. Very badly built, these Calcutta houses, aren't they? Have you been long in India, Miss—Captain Filbert?"

"I served a year up-country and then fell ill and had to go home on furlough. The native food didn't suit me. I am stationed in Calcutta now, but I have only just come."

"Pleasant time of the year to arrive," Mr. Lindsay remarked.

"Yes; but we are not particular about that. We love all the times and the seasons, since every one brings its appointed opportunity. Last year, in Mugridabad, there were more souls saved in June than in any other month."

"Really?" asked Mr. Lindsay; but he was not looking at her with those speculations. The light had come back upon her face.

"I will say good-bye now," said Captain Filbert. "I have a meeting at half-past five. Shall we have a word of prayer before I go?"

She plainly looked for immediate acquiescence; but Miss Howe said, "Another time, dear."

"Oh, why not?" exclaimed Duff Lindsay. Hilda put the semblance of a rebuke into her glance at him, and said, "Certainly not."

"Oh," Captain Filbert cried, "don't think you can escape that way! I will pray for you long and late to-night, and ask

my lieutenant to do so too. Don't harden your heart, Miss Howe—the Lord is waiting to be compassionate."

The two were silent, and Laura walked toward the door. Just where the sun slanted into the room and made leaf-patterns on the floor, she turned and stood for an instant in the full tide of it; and it set all the loose tendrils of her pale yellow hair in a little flame, and gave the folds of the flesh-coloured SARI that fell over her shoulder the texture of draperies so often depicted as celestial. The sun sought into her face, revealing nothing but great purity of line and a clear pallor, except where below the wide, light-blue eyes two ethereal shadows brushed themselves. Under the intentness of their gaze she made as if she would pass out without speaking; and the tender curves of her limbs, as she wavered, could not have been matched out of mediæval stained glass. But her courage, or her conviction, came back to her at the door, and she raised her hand and pointed at Hilda.

"She's got a soul worth saving."

Then the portière fell behind her, and nothing was said in the room until the pad of her bare feet had ceased upon the stair.

"She came out in the *Bengal* with us," Hilda told him—this is not a special instance of it, but she could always gratify Duff Lindsay in advance—"and she was desperately seedy, poor girl. I looked after her a little, but it was mistaken kindness, for now she's got me on her mind. And as the two hundred and eighty million benighted souls of India are her continual concern, I seem a superfluity. To

think of being the two hundred and eighty-first millionth oppresses one."

Lindsay listened with a look of accustomed happiness.

"You weren't at that end of the ship!" he demanded.

"Of course I was—we all were. And some of us, little Miss Stace, for instance—thankful enough at the prospect of cold meat and sardines for tea every night for a whole month. And after Suez ices for dinner on Sundays. It was luxury."

Lindsay was pulling an aggrieved moustache. "I don't call it fair or friendly," he said, "when you know how easily it could have been arranged. Your own sense of the fitness of things should have told you that the second-class saloon was no place for you. For *you*!"

Plainly she did not intend to argue the point. She poised her chin in her hand and looked away over his head, and he could not help seeing, as he had seen before, that her eyes were beautiful. But this had been so long acknowledged between them that she could hardly have been conscious that she was insisting on it afresh. Then, by the time he might have thought her launched upon a different meditation, her mind swept back to his protest, like a whimsical bird.

"I didn't want to extract anything from the mercantile community of Calcutta in advance," she said. "It would be most unbusinesslike. Stanhope has been equal to bringing us out; but I quite see myself, as leading lady, taking round the hat before the end of the season. Then I think," she said with defiance, "that I shall avoid you."

"And pray why?"

"Because you would put too much in. According to your last letters you are getting beastly rich. You would take all the tragedy out of the situation, and my experience would vanish in your cheque."

"I don't know why my feelings should always be cuffed out of the way of your experiences," Lindsay said. She retorted, "Oh, yes, you do;" and they regarded each other through an instant's silence with visible good fellowship.

"A reasonably strong company this time?" Lindsay asked.

"Thank you. 'Company' is gratifying. For a month we have been a 'troupe'—in the first-class end. Fairish. Bad to middling. Fifteen of us, and when we are not doing Hamlet and Ophelia we can please with the latest thing in rainbow chiffon done on mirrors with a thousand candle-power. Bradley and I will have to do most of the serious work. But I have improved—oh, a lot. You wouldn't know my Lady Whippleton."

It was a fervid announcement, but it carried an implication which appeared to prevent Lindsay's kindling.

"Then Bradley is here too?" he remarked.

"Oh, yes," she said; and an instinct sheathed itself in her face. "But it is much better than it was, really. He is hardly ever troublesome now. He understands. And he teaches me a great deal more than I can tell you. You know," she asserted, with the effect of taking an independent view, "as an artist he has my unqualified respect."

"You have a fine disregard for the fact that artists are men when they are not women;" Duff said. "I don't believe their behaviour is a bit more affected by their artistry than it would be by a knowledge of the higher mathematics."

She turned indignant eyes on him. "Fancy *your* saying that! Fancy your having the impertinence to offer me so absurd a sophistry! At what Calcutta dinner-table did you pick it up?" she said derisively. "Well, it shows that one can't trust one's best friend loose among the conventions!"

He had decided that it would be a trifle edged to say that such matters were not often discussed at Calcutta dinner-tables, when she added, with apparent inconsistency and real dejection, "It *is* a hideous bore."

Lindsay saw his point admitted, and even in the way she brushed it aside he felt that she was generous. Yet something in him—perhaps the primitive hunting instinct, perhaps a more sophisticated Scotch impulse to explore the very roots of every matter, tempted him to say, "He gives up a good deal, doesn't he, for his present gratification?"

"He gives up everything! That is the disgusting part of it. Leander Morris offered him—but why should I tell you? It's humiliating enough in the very back of one's mind."

"He is a clever fellow, no doubt."

"Not too clever to act with me! Oh, we go beautifully—we melt, we run together. He has given me some essential things, and now I can give them back to him. I begin to think that is what keeps him now. It must be awfully satisfying to generate artistic life in—in anybody, and watch it grow."

"Doubtless," said Lindsay, with his eyes on the carpet; and her eyebrows twitched together, but she said nothing. Although she knew his very moderate power of analysis, he seemed to look, with his eyes on the carpet, straight into the subject, to perceive it with a cynical clearness, and as Hilda watched him a little hardness came about her mouth.

"Well," he said, visibly detaching himself from the matter, "it's a satisfaction to have you back. I have been doing nothing, literally, since you went away, but making money and playing tennis. Existence, as I look back upon it, is connoted by a varying margin of profit and a vast sward."

She looked at him with eyes in which sympathy stood remotely, considering the advisability of returning. "It's a pity you can't act," she said; "then you could come away and let it all go."

Lindsay smiled at her across the gulf he saw fixed. "How simple life is to you!" he said. "But any way, I couldn't act."

"Oh, no, you couldn't, you couldn't! You are too intensely absorbent, you are too rigidly individual. The flame in you would never consent, even for an instant, to be the flame in anybody else—any of those people who, for the purpose of the stage, are called imaginary. Never!"

It seemed a punishment, but all Lindsay said was: "I wish you would go on. You can't think how gratifying it is—after the tennis."

"If I went on I have an idea that I might be disagreeable."

"Oh, then stop. We can't quarrel yet—I've hardly seen you. Are you comfortable here? Would you like some French novels?"

"Yes, thank you. Yes, please!" She grew before him into a light and conventional person, apparently on her guard against freedom of speech. He moved a blind and ineffectual hand about to find the spring she had detached herself from, and after failing for a quarter of an hour he got up to go.

"I shan't bother you again before Saturday," he said. "I know what a week it will be at the theatre. Remember you are to give the man his orders about the brougham. I can get on perfectly with the cart. Good-bye! Calcutta is waiting for you."

"Calcutta is never impatient," said Miss Howe. "It is waiting with yawns and much whiskey and soda." She gave him a stately inclination with her hand, and he overcame the temptation to lay his own on his heart in a burlesque of it. At the door he remembered something, and turned. He stood looking back precisely where Laura Filbert had stood, but the sun was gone. "You might tell me more about your friend of the altruistic army," he said.

"You saw, you heard, you know."

"But——"

"Oh," cried she, disregardingly, "you can discover her for yourself, at the Army Headquarters in Bentinck street—you man!"

Lindsay closed the door behind him without replying, and half-way down the stairs her voice appealed to him over the bannisters.

"You might as well forget that. I didn't particularly mean it."

"I know you didn't," he returned. "You woman! But you yourself—you're not going to play with your heavenly visitant?"

Hilda leaned upon the bannisters, her arms dropping over from the elbows. "I suppose I may look at her," she said; and her smile glowed down upon him.

"Do you think it really rewards attention—the type, I mean?"

"How you will talk of types! Didn't you see that she was unique? You may come back, if you like, for a quarter of an hour, and we will discuss her."

Lindsay looked at his watch. "I would come back for a quarter of an hour to discuss anything or nothing," he replied, "but there isn't time. I am dining with the Archdeacon. I must go to church."

"Why not be original and dine with the Archdeacon without going to church? Why not say on arrival: 'My dear Archdeacon, your sermon and your mutton the same evening—*c'est trop*! I cannot so impose upon your generosity. I have come for the mutton!'"

Thus was Captain Laura Filbert superseded, as doubtless often before, by an orthodox consideration. Duff Lindsay drove away in his cart; and still, for an appreciable number of seconds, Miss Howe stood leaning over the bannisters, her eyes fixed full of speculation on the place where he had stood. She was thinking of a scene—a dinner with an Archdeacon—and of the permanent satisfaction to be got from it; and she renounced almost with a palpable sigh the idea of the Archdeacon's asking her.

CHAPTER II.

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"Oh, her gift!" said Alicia Livingstone. "It is the lowest, isn't it—in the scale of human endowment? Mimicry."

Miss Livingstone handed her brother his tea as she spoke, but turned her eyes and her delicate chin toward Duff Lindsay with the protest. Lindsay's cup was at his lips, and his eyebrows went up over it as if they would answer before his voice was set at liberty.

"Mimicry isn't a fair word," he said. "The mimic doesn't interpret. He's a mere thief of expression. You can always see him behind his stolen mask. The actress takes a different rank. This one does, anyway."

"You're mixing her up with the apes and the monkeys," remarked Surgeon-Major Livingstone.

"Mere imitators!" cried Mrs. Barberry.

Alicia did not allow the argument to pursue her. She smiled upon their energy, and, so to speak, disappeared. It was one of her little ways, and since it left seeming conquerors on her track nobody quarrelled with it.

"I've met them in London," she said. "Oh, I remember one hot little North Kensington flat full of them, and their cigarettes—and they were always disappointing. There seemed to be, somehow, no basis—nothing to go upon."

She looked from one to the other of her party with a graceful, deprecating movement of her head, a head which people were unanimous in calling more than merely pretty and more than ordinarily refined. That was the cursory verdict, the superficial thing to see and say; it will do to go

on with. From the way Lindsay looked at her as she spoke, he might have been suspected of other discoveries, possible only to the somewhat privileged in this blind world, where intimacy must lend a lens to find out anything at all.

"You found that they had no selves," he said, and the manner of his words was encouraging and provocative. His proposition was obscured to him for the instant by his desire to obtain the very last of her comment, and it might be seen that this was habitual with him. "But Miss Hilda Howe has one."

"Is she a lady?" asked Mrs. Barberry.

"I don't know. She's an individual. I prefer to rest my claim for her on that."

"Your claim to what?" trembled upon Miss Livingstone's lips, but she closed them instead and turned her head again to listen to Mrs. Barberry. The turns of Alicia's head had a way of punctuating the conversations in which she was interested, imparting elegance and relief.

"I saw her in *A Woman of Honour*, last cold weather," Mrs. Barberry said; "I took a dinner-party of five girls and five subalterns from the Fort, and I said, 'Never again!' Fortunately the girls were just out, and not one of them understood, but those poor boys didn't know where to look! And no more did I. So disgustingly real."

Alicia's eyes veiled themselves to rest on a ring on her finger, and a little smile, which was inconsistent with the veiling, hovered about her lips.

"I was in England last year," she said; "I—I saw *A Woman of Honour* in London. What could possibly be done with it by

an Australian scratch company in a Calcutta theatre! Imagination halts."

"Miss Howe did something with it," observed Mr. Lindsay. "That and one or two other things carried one through last cold weather. One supported even the gaieties of Christmas week with fortitude, conscious that there was something to fall back upon. I remember I went to the State ball, and cheerfully."

"That's saying a good deal, isn't it?" commented Dr. Livingstone, vaguely aware of an ironical intention. "By Jove, yes."

"Hamilton Bradley is good, too, isn't he?" Mrs. Barberry said. "Such a magnificent head. I adore him in Shakespeare."

"He knows the conventions, and uses them with security," Lindsay replied, looking at Alicia; and she, with a little courageous air, demanded: "Is the story true?"

"The story of their relations? I suppose there are fifty. One of them is."

Mrs. Barberry frowned at Lindsay in a manner which was itself a reminiscence of amateur theatricals. "Their relations!" she murmured to Dr. Livingstone. "What awful things to talk about."

"The story I mean," Alicia explained, "is to the effect that Mr. Bradley, who is married, but unimportantly, made a heavy bet, when he met this girl, that he would subdue her absolutely through her passion for her art—I mean, of course, her affections——"

"My dear girl, we know what you mean," cried Mrs. Barberry, entering a protest, as it were, on behalf of the

gentlemen.

"And precisely the reverse happened."

"One imagines it was something like that," Lindsay said.

"Oh, did she know about the bet?" cried Mrs. Barberry.

"That's as you like to believe. I fancy she knew about the man," Lindsay contributed again.

"Tables turned, eh? Dare say it served him right," remarked Dr. Livingstone. "If you really want to come to the laboratory, Mrs. Barberry, we ought to be off."

"He is going to show me a bacillus," Mrs. Barberry announced with enthusiasm. "Plague, or cholera, or something really bad. He caught it two days ago, and put it in jelly for me—wasn't it dear of him? Good-bye, you nice thing,"—Mrs. Barberry addressed Alicia—"Good-bye, Mr. Lindsay. Fancy a live bacillus from Hong Kong! I should like it better if it came from fascinating Japan, but still—good-bye."

With the lady's departure an air of wontedness seemed to repossess the room and the two people who were left. Things fell into their places, one could observe relative beauty, on the walls and on the floor, in Alicia's hair and in her skirt. Little meanings attached themselves—to oval portraits of ladies, evidently ancestral, whose muslin sleeves were tied with blue ribbon, to Byzantine-looking Persian paintings, to odd brass bowls and faint-coloured embroideries. The air became full of agreeable exhalations, traceable to inanimate objects, or to a rose in a vase of common country glass; and if one turned to Alicia, one could almost observe the process by which they were absorbed in her and given forth again with a delicacy more vague. Lindsay sometimes thought of the bee and flowers and

honey, but always abandoned the simile as a trifle gross and material. Certainly, as she sat there in her grace and slenderness and pale clear tints—there was an effect of early morning about her that made the full tide of other women's sunlight vulgar—anyone would have been fastidious in the choice of a figure to present her in. With suspicion of haughtiness she was drawn for the traditional marchioness; but she lifted her eyes and you saw that she appealed instead. There was an art in the doing of her hair, a dainty elaboration that spoke of the most approved conventions beneath, yet it was impossible to mistake the freedom of spirit that lay in the lines of her blouse. Even her gracefulness ran now and then into a downrightness of movement which suggested the assertion of a primitive sincerity in a personal world of many effects. Into her making of tea, for example, she put nothing more sophisticated than sugar, and she ordered more bread and butter in the worst possible Hindustani without a thought except that the bread and butter should be brought. Lindsay liked to think that with him she was particularly simple and direct, that he was of those who freed her from the pretty consciousness, the elegant restraint that other people fixed upon her. It must be admitted that this conviction had reason in establishing itself, and it is perhaps not surprising that, in the security of it, he failed to notice occasions when it would not have held, of which this was plainly one. Alicia reflected, with her cheek against the Afghan wolf-skins on the back of the chair. It was characteristic of her eyes that one could usually see things being turned over in them. She would sometimes keep people waiting while she thought.

She thought perceptibly about Hilda Howe, slanting her absent gaze between sheltering eyelids to the floor. Presently she re-arranged the rose in its green glass vase and said: "Then it's impossible not to be interested."

"I thought you would find it so."

Alicia was further occupied in bestowing small fragments of cress sandwich upon a terrier. "Fancy your being so sure," she said, "that you could present her entertainingly!" She looked past him toward the soft light that came in at the draped window, and he was not aware that her regard held him fast by the way.

"Anyone could," he said cheerfully; "she presents herself. One is only the humblest possible medium. And the most passive."

Alicia's eyes still rested upon the light from the window. It silhouetted a rare fern from Assam, it certainly rewarded them.

"I like to hear you talk about her. Tell me some more."

"Haven't I exhausted metaphor in describing her?"

"Yes," said Miss Livingstone, with conviction; "but I'm not a bit satisfied. A few simple facts sometimes—sometimes are better. Wasn't it a little difficult to make her acquaintance?"

"Not in the very least. I saw her in *A Woman of Honour* and was charmed. Charmed in a new way. Next day I discovered her address—it's obscure—and sent up my card for permission to tell her so. I explained to her that one would have hesitated at home, but here one was protected by *dustur*.[1] And she received me warmly. She gave me to understand that she was not overwhelmed with tribute of

that kind from Calcutta. The truthful ring of it was pathetic, poor dear."

"That was in—"

"In February."

"In February we were at Nice," Alicia said, musingly. Then she took up her divining-rod again. "One can imagine that she was grateful. People of that kind—how snobbish I sound, but you know what I mean—are rather stranded in Calcutta, aren't they? They haven't any world here;" and with the quick glance which deprecated her timid clevernesses, she added, "The arts conspire to be absent."

"Ah, don't misunderstand. If there was any gratitude it was all mine. But we met as kindred, if I may vaunt myself so much. A mere theory of life will go a long way, you know, toward establishing a claim of that sort. And, at all events, she is good enough to treat me as if she admitted it."

"What is her theory of life?" Alicia demanded, quickly. "I should be glad of a new one."

Lindsay's communicativeness seemed to contract a little, as at the touch of a finger light but cold.

"I don't think she has ever told me," he said. "No, I am sure she has not." His reflection was, "It is her garment—and how could it fit another woman?"

"But you have divined it—she has let you do that! You can give me your impression."

He recognised her bright courage in venturing upon impalpabilities, but not without a shade of embarrassment.

"Perhaps. But having perceived to pass on—it doesn't follow that one can. I don't seem able to lay my hand upon the signs and symbols."

The faintest look of disappointment, the slightest cloud of submission, appeared upon Miss Livingstone's face.

"Oh, I know!" she said. "You are making me feel dreadfully out of it, but I know. It surrounds her like a kind of atmosphere, an intellectual atmosphere. Though I confess that is the part I don't understand in connection with an actress."

There was a sudden indifference in this last sentence. Alicia lay back upon her wolf-skins like a long-stemmed flower cast down among them, and looked away from the subject at the teacups. Duff picked up his hat. He had the subtlest intimations with women.

"It's an intoxicating atmosphere," he said. "My continual wonder is that I'm not in love with her. A fellow in a novel, now, in my situation, would be embroiled with half his female relations by this time, and taking his third refusal with a haggard eye."

Alicia still contemplated the teacups, but with intentness. She lifted her head to look at them; one might have imagined a beauty suddenly revealed.

"Why aren't you?" she said. "I wonder, too."

"I should like it enormously," he laughed. "I've lain awake at nights trying to find out why it isn't so. Perhaps you'll be able to tell me. I think it must be because she's such a confoundedly good fellow."

Alicia turned her face toward him sweetly, and the soft grey fur made a shadow on the whiteness of her throat. Her buffeting was over; she was full of an impulse to stand again in the sun.

"Oh, you mustn't depend on me," she said. "But why are you going? Don't go. Stay and have another cup of tea."

CHAPTER III.

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The fact that Stephen Arnold and Duff Lindsay had spent the same terms at New College, and now found themselves again together in the social poverty of the Indian capital, would not necessarily explain their walking in company through the early dusk of a December evening in Bentinck street. It seems desirable to supply a reason why any one should be walking there, to begin with, any one, at all events, not a Chinaman or a coolie, a dealer in second-hand furniture or an able-bodied seaman luxuriously fingering wages in both trouser pockets, and describing an erratic line of doubtful temper toward the nearest glass of country spirits. Or, to be quite comprehensive, a draggled person with a Bulgarian, a Levantine or a Japanese smile, who no longer possessed a carriage, to whom the able-bodied seamen represented the whole port. The cramped, twisting thoroughfare was full of people like this; they overflowed from the single narrow border of pavement to the left and walked indifferently upon the road among the straw-scatterings and the dung-droppings; and when the tramcar swept through and past with prodigious whistlings and ringings, they swerved as little as possible aside, for three parts of the tide of them were neither white nor black, but many shades of brown, written down in the census as "of mixed blood" and wearing still, through the degenerating centuries, an eyebrow, a nostril of the first Englishmen who came to conjugal ties of Hindustan. The place sent up to the stars a vast noise of argument and anger and laughter, of

the rattling of hoofs and wheels; but the babel was ordered in its exaggeration, the red turban of a policeman here and there denoted little more than a unit in the crowd. There were gas-lamps, and they sent a ripple of light like a sword-thrust along the gutter beside the banquette, where a pariah dog nosed a dead rat and was silhouetted. They picked out, too, the occasional pair of Corinthian columns, built into the squalid stucco sheer with the road that made history for Bentinck street, and explained that whatever might be the present colour of the little squat houses and the tall lean ones that loafed together into the fog round the first bend, they were once agreeably pink and yellow, with the magenta cornice, the blue capital, that fancy dictated. There, where the way narrowed with an out-jutting balcony high up, and the fog thickened and the lights grew vague, the multitude of heads passed into the blur beyond with an effect of mystery, pictorial, remote; but where Arnold and Lindsay walked the squalor was warm, human, practical. A torch flamed this way and that stuck in the wall over the head of a squatting bundle and his tray of three-cornered leaf-parcels of betel, and an oiled rag in a tin pot sent up an unsteady little flame, blue and yellow, beside a sweetmeat seller's basket, and showed his heap of cakes that they were well-browned and full of butter. From the "Cape of Good Cheer," where many bottles glistened in rows inside, came a braying upon the conch, and a flame of burnt brandy danced along the bar to the honour and propitiation of Lakshmi, that the able-bodied seaman might be thirsty when he came, for the "Cape of Good Cheer" did not owe its prosperity, as its name might suggest, to any Providence of

Christian theology. But most of the brightness abode in the Chinamen's shoe-shops, where many lamps shone on the hammering and the stitching. There were endless shoe-shops, and they all belonged to Powson or Singson or Samson, while one signboard bore the broad impertinence, "Macpherson." The proprietors stood in the door, the smell came out in the street—that smell of Chinese personality steeped in fried oil and fresh leather that out-fans even the south wind in Bentinck street. They were responsible but not anxious, the proprietors; they buried their fat hands in their wide sleeves and looked up and down, stolid and smiling. They stood in their alien petticoat trousers for the commercial stability of the locality, and the rows of patent-leather slippers that glistened behind them testified to it further. Everything else shifted and drifted, with a perpetual change of complexion, a perpetual worsening of clothes. Only Powson bore a permanent yoke of prosperity. It lay round his thick brown neck with the low clean line of his blue cotton smock, and he carried it without offensive consciousness, looking up and down by no means in search of customers, rather in the exercise of the opaque, inscrutable philosophy tied up in his queue.

Lindsay liked Bentinck street as an occasional relapse from the scenic standards of pillared and verandahed Calcutta, and made personal business with his Chinaman for the sake of the racial impression thrown into the transaction. Arnold, in his cassock, waited in the doorway with his arms crossed behind him, and his thin face thrust as far as it would go into the air outside. It is possible that some intelligence might have seen in this priest a caricature

of his profession, a figure to be copied for the curate of burlesque, so accurately did he reproduce the common signs of the ascetic school. His face would have been womanish in its plainness but for the gravity that had grown upon it, only occasionally dispersed by a smile of scholarliness and sweetness which had the effect of being permitted, conceded. He had the long thin nose which looked as if, for preference, it would be for ever thrust among the pages of the Fathers; and anyone might observe the width of his mouth without perhaps detecting the patience and decision of the upper lip. The indignity of spectacles he did not yet wear, but it hovered over him; it was indispensable to his personality in the long run. In figure he was indifferently tall and thin and stooping, made to pass unobservedly along a pavement, or with the directness of humble but important business among crowds. At Oxford he had interested some of his friends and worried others by wistful inclinations toward the shelter of that Mother Church which bids her children be at rest and leave to her the responsibility. Lindsay, with his robust sense of a right to exist on the old unmuddled fighting terms, to be a sane and decent animal, under civilised moral governance a miserable sinner, was among those who observed his waverings without prejudice, or anything but an affectionate solicitude that whichever way Arnold went he should find the satisfactions he sought. The conviction that settled the matter was accidental, the work of a moment, a free instinct and a thing made with hands—the dead Shelley where the sea threw him and the sculptor fixed him, under his memorial dome in the gardens of University College. Here