

MARY HAMER

Mary Hamer travels widely and has lectured in many countries. Her work has appeared in *The Economist*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. She has contributed to television and radio programmes, such as *In Search of Cleopatra*, *Women's Hour* and *Night Waves*.

Mary began her career teaching at Cambridge University but soon found that research was her real passion. Ever since Rudyard Kipling lit her imagination as a child, Mary had wanted to write about him. Later, she realised that the story of his sister, Trix, was just as compelling.

To explore the impact of their daunting early experience on their lives and work as adults, she set out to research the facts in libraries and archives. But it was visiting the places where they lived, from Mumbai to Cape Town, that brought them closer to her. In Naulakha, the house Kipling built in Vermont, Mary slept in his bedroom and soaked in his own bath. For the intimate story she had to tell, she decided it had to be fiction.

Kipling & Trix is her fifth book and first novel.

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KIPLING
&
TRIX

Mary Hamer



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Most of all I am grateful to my husband, Nick Cumpsty, for his backing.

Note about the book

The story I'm telling in *Kipling & Trix* follows the historical facts very closely. But in bringing it to life, I had to draw on imagination for scenes and conversations and to explore the inner thoughts of my characters. It was because I wanted to make emotional sense of these lives that I chose fiction rather than biography.

This book is for my brothers

Christopher and John

and in memory of Michael, 1947-2011

SONG OF THE WISE CHILDREN

BY RUDYARD KIPLING

*WHEN the darkened Fifties dip to the North,
And frost and the fog divide the air,
And the day is dead at his breaking-forth,
Sirs, it is bitter beneath the Bear!*

*Far to Southward they wheel and glance,
The million molten spears of morn—
The spears of our deliverance
That shine on the house where we were born.*

*Flying-fish about our bows,
Flying sea-fires in our wake:
This is the road to our Father's House,
Whither we go for our souls' sake!*

*We have forfeited our birthright,
We have forsaken all things meet;
We have forgotten the look of light,
We have forgotten the scent of heat.*

*We shall go back by the boltless doors,
To the life unaltered our childhood knew—
To the naked feet on the cool, dark floors,
And the high-celled rooms that the Trade blows through:*

*To the trumpet-flowers and the moon beyond,
And the tree-toad's chorus drowning all—
And the lisp of the split banana-frond
That talked us to sleep when we were small.*

*The wayside magic, the threshold spells,
Shall soon undo what the North has done—
Because of the sights and the sounds and the smells
That ran with our youth in the eye of the sun.*

*And Earth accepting shall ask no vows,
Nor the Sea our love, nor our lover the Sky.
When we return to our Father's House
Only the English shall wonder why!*

The Times January 18th, 1936

MR. RUDYARD
KIPLING

STORY-TELLER AND
POET

AN INTERPRETER OF
EMPIRE

One of the most forcible minds of our time has ceased to work with the death early this morning of Rudyard Kipling.

Whether the mind of Rudyard Kipling was a great mind; whether he could be called a great man; whether he lacked in width of vision what he had in intensity; whether his achievement in self-expression will tend in the future towards the good which he ardently, single-heartedly, desired for the world – all these are questions which it is impossible to consider under the blow of a great loss.

PROLOGUE

Carrie Kipling ran her fingers over the page where she had pasted in her husband's obituary. This was one scrapbook that Rud would never take down from the shelf. She looked up at the row of tall green volumes that housed his newspaper archive, then round at the packed bookcases, the bare plain of the desk. His briefcase appeared absurdly small, like a child's toy, propped against the vacant chair.

Two years on, she was almost used to missing him. But today, as January 18th came round again, she'd had Rud in her thoughts ever since waking. It was the anniversary of their wedding, as well as the day of his death.

They'd lived together forty-four years.

Reading the column from *The Times* once more, she felt a gathering indignation.

'A great mind? A great man?'

'Impossible to tell under the blow of a great loss.'

She let out a scornful laugh.

How could they know anything, these men who only took account of scenes played out on the public stage? The world's honours, even the Nobel Prize, had meant little to Rud. 'What does it matter, what does it all matter?', he used to say.

She shifted in her chair, under the weight of his sadness.

For Rud, children were always the thing. And childhood. If they wanted to ask about minds, surely, childhood was the time when minds were formed? Or deformed. That certainly was the case for Trix. At the thought of her difficult sister-in-law, Carrie sniffed.

She turned back to Rud's obituary.

They were not asking the right questions.

“‘Loss’ is the word that really applies,’ her voice was harsh in the empty room. ‘Why don’t they ask what Rud himself had lost?’

It was only after they lost Josephine that Rud changed.

Remembering, Carrie's breath came short, she flinched, hearing the echo of that high child's voice, gasping through fever.

‘Give my love to Daddy and all.’

And what had it done to Rud to receive that message, to learn those words were all that was left of Jo?

She could do no more than guess. Too frightened of giving way completely, of a weeping that would never end, they'd clung together wordlessly. Later, when John was killed out in France – her eyes closed for a long moment – they'd been able to talk about him. But through all the years after Jo died, she was never mentioned between them.

Such a terrible mistake. Rud must have longed, as she did, to hear Jo's name spoken.

Forty years on, Carrie could look back on those dreadful months of 1899 with a measure of calm. She also thought she could understand more about Rud himself. His whole character seemed to alter that year.

The war in South Africa had come at just the wrong time. She was certain Rud would never have taken up with Mr. Rhodes otherwise, never have been so angry and so blind.

She found herself speaking aloud, her right hand with its swollen knuckles beating the table.

‘If you want to make out what kind of man Rud was, why he acted as he did, try looking at all that he lost.’

Set it out, year by year, as in these scrapbooks, she thought

fiercely. See the pattern.

Begin with his childhood, when he left behind in Bombay a whole world that loved him...

The light was going. She switched on the lamp.

* * *

Ruddy was crooning to himself as he laid out the stones. Two by two he set them down, smooth and dark on the dulled figures of the Turkey carpet in the Bewdley dining room. He liked the freckles on the stones. The game changed. There was a stone with an empty face. Still on his knees, he moved over to the door which he had pushed shut earlier and set that stone down there on its own. His singing grew more urgent. He was standing over the stone now with his hands stretched out, so intent that when the door opened sharply the brass knob landed a punch against his temple, knocking him off balance.

His grandmother let out a scream that was cut off as the domino cracked beneath her black kid boot.

'You naughty, naughty boy. Who said you could come in here? These dominoes aren't toys to throw about on the floor. Come here.'

The strange white woman in the cold apron who was looking after him instead of Ayah came hurrying down the stairs. Grandmother's house had stairs, it was made of boxes stacked up on each other, boxes that were dark inside and smelled cold. In spite of the stiff new jacket that tied up his arms, Ruddy was not safe from the thin airs that blew around every corner.

'It's bedtime anyway, Master Rud,' the apron woman told him. But he was sobbing so hard he didn't hear. Even when his mother finally came to find him, scrubbed and dressed in his nightclothes, tears were still running down his cheeks.

'I can't do anything with him, Mum,' the nurse confessed.

Alice Kipling offered her an appeasing smile before taking a seat on the chair by the gloomy high mahogany bed.

‘Now Ruddy, there, there, whatever’s the matter?’

In his head he saw the baby. Mama liked the baby. She went away and left him in this cold house. She held the baby in her arms.

Her little boy, in his flannel nightshirt: Alice yearned towards the solid little body in its warm wrapping. She would have taken him on her knee but he arched away.

Biting her lip, his mother stroked his hair. She hadn’t thought of this, when the plans were made for her coming home to England for her second confinement. After what she went through with Ruddy, she couldn’t contemplate another long labour without reliable medical attention. It’d seemed such a good idea to leave Ruddy with her mother here in Bewdley.

How much she had still to learn about him, though he was only two. His temper was frightful. He’d been spending too much time with those Indian servants. She’d change all that once they were back in Bombay. It was absurd to say it but, now, face-to-face with him, he seemed almost a stranger.

‘Would you like me to sing to you, darling, while you go to sleep?’ Alice was known for her pretty voice. He nodded at once, apparently relieved, sliding down under the bedclothes and dragging the pillow just so around his shoulders. Did he do this every night, she wondered, as she bent to kiss his forehead? Leaning back with a slight effort – how tired she still was – Alice began softly with one of her favourite pieces:

*‘Twas the last rose of summer, left blooming alone,
All her lovely companions –’*

A howl of rage and dismay interrupted her.

‘Not *Angrezi*, not *Angrezi*,’ the child cried, followed by a burst of sound which she could not follow, though her ear did pick up the rhythms of Hindustani on her son’s voice. The child turned his face away from her to the wall.

Hesitantly, she whispered, ‘Ruddy, please turn round,’ and though the head remained averted, a small hand appeared from under the blankets and reached back towards her.

* * *

Tiny striped squirrels darted across the paths in the gardens of the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy School of Art. From her post close by the back gate of the compound, Ayah was admiring the ships, more than she could count, as they stood out at anchor in the flashing sea.

Now and then she cast an eye over at the perambulator, standing in the shade of the great neem tree. All springs and tall wheels, shining red and green, it was almost a carriage, as Ayah boasted to her sister-in-law who saw nothing of life outside the house. Closed off there behind a muslin screen, her Baba, the baby girl the Sahib said was to be called 'Trick-see', lay sleeping.

'She's such a tricky little baby,' he told them.

Ayah snuffed up the scent of frying spices, *methi*, *zeera*, wafting over from the servants' quarters across the way. It mingled with the smell of earth. The garden was damp from the early watering.

The house itself was still, for Ruddy Baba, so proud that he was four years old now, had been allowed to set off with the Sahib that morning. Each day after breakfast, Kipling Sahib left to walk across to the new government college, where they did not sit to read and write at desks but worked in clay like poor village potters. What could be the gain? There the Sahib would remain all day, making drawings and other playthings, like a child.

But soon, soon Ruddy Baba would be back, holding the hand of his friend, Vaz, the tall gardener. He would come pounding clatter-clatter up the steps towards her on those small pink legs, sailor collar all anyhow, full of his adventures, all 'Listen, Ayah, listen!'

For the moment though, she was free. Fanning herself with the end of her sari, drinking in the breeze coming off the sea, she smiled at Prem, the young bearer, as he came round the corner of the house.

'I knew it would not be long before you found me. It is the tailoring you are wanting, no?' Prem looked abashed but she

laughed at him, patting the floor beside her, 'Sit, sit. Madam Sahib has gone out for the morning.' She handed back the *kurta* she had offered to mend the day before.

Prem squatted beside her. After a few words of thanks, he fell silent. Usually he was eager to share the news he'd picked up around the butchers' stalls. To report what the vegetable-sellers in Crawford Market had the impudence to charge today for chillies.

'Is true what they are telling me in kitchen? Cook is telling me all British children are leaving us, going over the Black Water, when they are small, small?'

Ayah felt herself grow still but she nodded, silently.

'Why are they doing this, Ayah? Why?' In his haste, he forgot to insist on her home name, which he alone in the household knew. 'They are tearing them away from those who take care of them while they are still nestlings, no wings of their own to fly, just helpless, so...' He cupped his hands, as if cradling a warm ball of new life. Ayah nodded for a second time but her throat was tight and she could not speak.

After a few moments she ventured, 'It is the fevers, they say. They fear the fevers. There are too many Babas in their burying-ground.'

Prem turned aside from her to spit in disgust over the wooden rail of the verandah, making a dark star on the red dust of the path.

'A child can die because they are alone, without need of any fever. Do they not know this?'

'That I have never heard talk of.' Ayah braced herself against the doorpost. Looking straight before her she went on: 'It will be so, with Ruddy Baba and with Baby. Also with that other Baba, which is to come.' All the servants knew that Alice was pregnant again, though she had barely admitted it to herself.

'It is that of which we speak, no?'

'Do they not know? Have they no old ones to teach them?' Meeta could not give up so easily.

'No. They do not know. And they will not care for anyone who tells them to do other than their kind. They will do as the other British.' She held the end of her sari before her face, while Prem

stared out over the flower beds towards the bright colours of the perambulator where it lay beneath its muslin shroud.

* * *

Alice Kipling's hands were cold in her husband's, as he sat beside her bed in the stifling room. Although a whitewashed *punkah* was creaking regularly as it rose and fell, the air lay heavy, stagnant.

'I shouldn't have let Ayah touch him. I know I shouldn't. But I was desperate. I hadn't been able to sleep, I was so afraid. I knew that the doctor thought Baby John wasn't strong. I could see it in his face.' As she spoke she drew her hand away to pull again at a lawn wrap thrown about her shoulders.

Lockwood Kipling waited then once more began stroking the cold hands. He made another attempt to break through her refrain.

'Darling girl, he repeated, 'do believe me, no-one is blaming you.'

'Ayah brought him in to me. It can't have been more than an hour or so later. When I looked I thought he was just asleep. If I'd realised he wasn't breathing I might have been in time. I might...'

'Alice, Alice, there was nothing you could have done.' Lockwood's eyes were rimmed with red but he kept his voice steady. 'The doctor warned me from the start that little John might not live.' That was a fact. Doctor Mackintosh had shaken his head over the child, though there was every chance for the mother, if she could be kept calm and quiet. 'There's no question of any fault on your part,' Lockwood went on.

'I was his mother,' the stricken voice continued without pause. 'I should have known - '

'Ayah says -'

'Ayah! What are we doing trying to bring up children in this dreadful country, with only black servants and their filthy ways?'

He flinched at her language. Then his heart turned over. What if she were to refuse to remain here with him in India? Fending off that thought, he paused to gather himself.

'Come, come, dearest. Ruddy's already getting on for five. He

and Trix will be out of Ayah's way and safe back at Home with your mother in Bewdley before they are –'

Oh no. Beating the air with both hands, Alice was sobbing.

'Never. You have no idea. She said terrible things, things about Ruddy. How bad he was. And me. That I wasn't a proper mother.'

Lockwood was silenced. He'd heard nothing of this at the time. She must have been too angry and ashamed to speak of it, even to him. He edged his chair closer.

'I would never let them go to her, after that.' She turned to him, piteous now.

This was no moment to reason with her.

'Dearest one, of course not. I won't have you made unhappy.'

The words were firm enough but his mind was racing. If not her mother, what choices were left to them? There was no question, the matter had to be resolved. It was no good thinking that Ruddy and Trix could go to her sister, Georgie. He was not at all sure that her marriage was going to last: the household at The Grange could well break up. Ned Burne-Jones, always susceptible, had made an absolute fool of himself over Maria Zambaco, the Greek beauty. Tried to run off with her last year and funked it in the end. A shambles.

Georgie'd been heroic in her efforts to keep the family together – but standing by as her husband's mistress visited him in his studio 'to be painted' must have been torture. In her own home, too. *'Just passing by that door, so firmly closed, caused my heart to shrivel,'* she'd written. The affair was supposed to be over but Ned was still seen around town in her company. No, Ned and Georgie were out of the question. There was one other married sister with a child. Stan would have been company for Ruddy. But the health of his mother, Louie Baldwin, wasn't up to it.

Then, even as he bit his lip, his mind cleared. He and Alice weren't the only parents sending their small children back to England and needing to find them a home. There must be people who took children in for a living. He remembered advertisements he'd skipped over, as he scanned the paper for news of travellers

who might have carried embroideries or carvings from beyond the Khyber to sell. Time for a closer look.

'You mustn't worry about this anymore, Alice,' he said. She was lying back now, flushed and breathless.

'I think there may be an alternative but you need to rest.' He reached for the sleeping draught the doctor had left. Alice sipped at it slowly, as though she could barely muster the energy to swallow.

'That's the way, my lovely girl.' Lockwood held the glass to her lips till only a chalky residue remained.

Alice gave a tiny smile in reply. Sitting on by the bed, he waited till her eyes reluctantly closed.

Then he went off to find the most up-to-date copy of *The Times* and that week's *Pioneer*. Between them he'd surely find a lead.

HOW FEAR CAME

1871-1877

‘Rudyard, I’m not going to tell you again. Let go of Trixie’s hand. Come and sit in your own place and eat up your tea.’

He stared back at the strange woman who wanted him to call her ‘Auntie Sarah’ and said he must forget about India.

At the other side of the table, Harry, the big boy who called the woman ‘Mother’, stuck out his tongue.

‘You live in Southsea now and that’s where you’re staying. And you’re lucky to be away from those heathens,’ she kept telling him. He didn’t believe her. Not staying for years and years. Not till he was nine or ten and grown up.

Trix was crying again.

She wasn’t eating that bread and butter either, even though for Trix, Auntie had put sugar on it. He patted Trix’s head, like Ayah did when they hurt themselves. He was big, nearly six, he had to look after Trix. Three was very little.

‘Trix, Trix, don’t cry. Mama and Papa are going to come back. Soon. They’ll come back soon.’

He could feel the strange woman waiting, her eyes on him.

He shook his head.

Losing patience, Sarah Holloway swept round the table and dragged him back to his chair, where he sat, not eating, glaring defiance.

‘Do you know what happens to bad children?’ she asked.

‘No, what?’ In spite of his misery he couldn’t help asking.

‘God sees what they do and he marks them down for punishment. He watches them all the time and when they die he sends them to burn forever in Hell.’

The children were glazed with shock.

‘We have different gods in India,’ he attempted boldness. Then, quavering, ‘Mama wouldn’t let him. Ayah –’

‘It was because you’re so bad and wicked that Mama left you. And anyway your Mama has to do what God tells her.’

Struck silent, he gazed trembling at the new world that she had revealed, while Trix sucked frantically at her thumb.

* * *

‘How does it work?’ Ruddy’s words came out with difficulty. His chin rubbed against the stiff, thick collar of the new jacket when he tried to talk. He pulled again on the old man’s hand.

The broad figure of Sarah Holloway’s husband, Pryse Agar Holloway, turned, responding to the tugging away down on his left. Inclining slightly, he pointed above their heads to the whistling rigging.

‘See those ropes going upwards to the top of the mast, Ruddy? The proper name for them is the shrouds. And the little ropes that look like a ladder, they’re called ratlines – I can’t see those too well myself, can’t make out things as I used to – Well, that’s exactly what the ratlines are used for, so that the sailors can climb up to that platform at the top of the mast.’

Shrouds. Ratlines. Ruddy tasted the words. But he still wasn’t sure – what happened when you got to the top of the shrouds?

How did you get onto the top of the mast? He peered upwards through the foggy air. But he didn't want to disappoint Uncle Pryse.

'Yes,' he said firmly, 'I see.'

'That hand of yours seems a bit cold. We'll have to go home soon.'

There was a moment's silence, a shared hesitation. The winter afternoon darkened.

'I'll tell you what, Ruddy, let's see if you can remember the list of all the ships I sailed in, in the right order. You can sing them out to me as we go along.'

Hand in hand the two trudged off into the gathering dusk, while snatches of a treble chant – 'the Brisk, the Stormrider, the Apart' – flew away into the wind.

* * *

'Lorne Lodge, Havelock Park, Southsea.'

Trix was practising as she stood muffled up in the hall, waiting. That was what you had to tell a policeman if you were lost. Trix did not want to get lost. To be left behind, all forgotten, like that little dog who wandered up and down outside their house. She'd had to hold her hands over her ears to keep out his crying.

Auntie says this house is five years old. I'm going to be five. In the summer.

'Why is it called Southsea?' Trix asked.

Auntie was sticking a long pin into her hat in front of the looking-glass. There was another one sticking out from her mouth.

Trix had to wait till Auntie had taken it out.

'Because it's by the sea, of course, dear.'

'But you have to walk a lot to get there.'

Auntie didn't reply. Once they were out on the street, she closed the metal gate behind them with a clang.

'I don't say it's convenient but it is very select here.'

Slekt? Ruddy would know.

Auntie took Trix out with her every day.

‘Watch where you’re stepping dear. The amount of sand and grit that the builders spill everywhere is just shocking. I wonder they don’t mind the waste. But we don’t want it on our shoes and treading into the house, do we Trixie?’

Trix didn’t like it, seeing the earth all bare and torn up, with nothing growing any more. There were only wide brown puddles. If you slipped into them you would drown.

She stopped looking. She smiled back up at Auntie, clutching tight at her hand.

Most days they turned towards the place where Auntie did her shopping. Trix had to wait outside the butcher’s after the day when she was sick onto the sawdust floor. But she didn’t mind the grocer’s. She enjoyed watching Mr. Taylor’s clean pink fingers as they twisted the sugar up into a blue paper bag with little ears.

On days when Auntie was going to visit her friend, Mrs. Possiter, they went the other way up the road. Just a little way along, enough to count up to twenty going slowly, they came to the place where the men were building the new houses. There were heaps of pebbles and muddy pools and pieces of string pulled tight with little pegs.

‘No, don’t touch, you’ll get all muddy,’ Auntie told her. ‘They’re to mark out the spaces for the new houses, more houses like Lorne Lodge. Though not so exclusive. There’s going to be street after street of them, more’s the pity. It’ll be going on for years.’

In really bad moments, Ruddy tried to make himself brave enough to carry on for years and years, even forever, on his own. He was never sure what he’d find when he woke up in this place. Trix might go away and leave him too. Sometimes he did wonder whether she actually liked crying and making the Woman come. That in a way she didn’t mind getting him into trouble.

Thinking this was so bad it made his head feel queer, so that he had to sing the chant he had invented. Over and over he sang, till his head felt better. There were just names in the chant, Indian

names, the names of the servants who still lived in the house in Bombay. That was the place the people he used to call Mama and Papa had gone back to.

‘Why did they leave us here? Why didn’t they explain?’ he would ask Trix.

‘Auntie said –’

‘No, Trix, that’s not true, what Auntie says. I’m sure. I mean I think –’

Trix kept looking doubtful, even though she would nod in the end and seem to agree.

At night before he went to sleep, Ruddy started going through the list of his old companions one by one, starting with Kamal, the new little kitchen boy, who made faces behind the back of the fat cook. Through Chowkidar standing up tall, wooden *lathi* in his hand to beat off burglars, Mali out in the garden doing the watering, Sais standing at the head of his pony after breakfast, right up to Meeta, the bearer, he would sing, rocking himself. The chant finished in triumph with ‘Ayah, Ayah, Ayah!’

He had to share Harry’s bedroom. One night the horrible boy heard him, even though he was whispering it into the bedclothes.

‘Cry baby, cry baby!’ Harry jeered. Harry was twelve, a whole five years older than him.

He wasn’t crying. The stupid boy just couldn’t recognise the sounds, he didn’t know Hindustani. No-one here knew Hindustani, except him and Trix. But at night, in his dreams, he heard it all about him.

But those dreams were fading. The colour seemed to be leaking out of everything that he knew. Ayah’s strong, warm, brown hand pulling him along, when the tall coconut palms along the beach banged together in the wind. Fat red mangoes in Crawford Market. The man with the flute and the green turban who made snakes dance, the day he was four. Marigold petals in the dust near the temple. He made up new games, new magic to bring the colour back, to keep alive the Hindustani voices in his head. They might keep out the ugly Woman and her screech.

Now that he could read, that helped, but it was not enough to stay deep inside books. She kept taking them away, for one thing.

‘You mustn’t strain your eyes,’ she repeated.

He didn’t believe her. She just wanted an excuse. So it frightened him one day to realise that he could no longer see the blackboard at school, even if he sat in the very front row.

She might be right about other things. About God and Hell. That might be true. However was he going to tell?

He shivered when he was going to bed that night, though his head felt hot.

* * *

‘Never mind, ‘Trix’, Ruddy relented, seeing her lip begin to quiver. She nearly always got sad when it was close to bedtime. It was different for him. He was eight and a boy. ‘I’ve got an even better story today. But you have to pay attention.’

So long as ‘Trix was listening he could go on forever, the stories spilling out of him. His words turned into pictures that heaped and piled around them where they sat on the dust-coloured drugget, like the silks that man spread out over the verandah for them to buy. The trouble was, ‘Trix would fall asleep and then it didn’t work. His voice seemed to dry up to just a whisper. That made him frightened. It was ‘Trix listening that he needed, her eyes that went round at the specially exciting bits and the giggles that she pressed back into her mouth with her fists. No-one must overhear them.

That Woman caught them at it one day.

‘What nasty stuff are you filling her head with? ‘Trixie, come away at once.’

And ‘Trix was kept close to Auntie’s side for a long fortnight of mourning.

Alone in the musty basement they’d been given for a playroom, Ruddy valiantly kept up with his own private magic. He piled up the sacred wall, the bastion that kept everything out, and crouched behind it, humming. Yet though at first he was able to summon

the stories in his head and to step inside them, by the end of the first week, those that came to him slithered away and would not let him in. Then he found that sounds made deep in his throat while he rocked himself were better than keeping silence. He could hear something. He could hear himself.

The day Trix was allowed back, she came peeping round the yellow pine door, then ran to throw her arms round him. He did not dare to feel glad. Now he knew what would happen. When there was no-one to listen a trap closed its teeth on him. He was afraid he might die.

'Iyam, Iyam paying attention, Ruddy,' Trix insisted, struggling.

If he wasn't quick she'd be making enough noise to bring That Woman running. He refused to call her Auntie Sarah, not inside his own head, whatever she made him do in front of her. He was sorry for Trix. She was still a baby, not even six yet. But he wished she would be more careful about keeping their secrets. Not telling everything to That Woman.

'Sit up then, and stop sucking your thumb.'

At her look of hurt surprise, he felt a stab of misery.

'Come on now, this is a really special one.'

And he moved, though he had not meant to when he started, to telling the tale of the Djinn who helped the Sultan with the thirteen beautiful daughters. Each more beautiful than the moon – but none more beautiful than Princess Trix, 'who was the best beloved of them all'. Chanting this chorus, eyes sparkling, Trix sat bolt upright till the storyteller's voice softened to a close.

'I do love you, Ruddy,' she breathed into the silence. Her brother reached over and patted the curls out of her eyes as he had seen Ayah do.

'There. You can kiss me if you like before you go to bed.'

But when he felt her arms closing round his neck he went stiff. Turning his head away, he felt the tickle of her kiss against his ear.

Trix could hear the tap of Auntie's heels as she came hastening down the passage. Ruddy was right, she looked like a big black beetle scuttling along. Monday. Soon the horrible boiling smell would start. Auntie would be cross this morning. She always shouted, especially at Janey, on washing-day. It wasn't fair. How could Janey do out the grates if the copper was to be lit first thing? But Janey just winked at Trix and went on with what she was doing. 'Maid of all work? I should say so,' she would joke, in the safety of the scullery, while Trix watched her cleaning the knives with a special powder.

Something had distracted Auntie. The footsteps paused. Was anything wrong? It couldn't be Ruddy, this time, he'd already left. Lucky Ruddy, going out to a proper school. What else could have made her stop? Trix felt quickly for her hair ribbon. No, that was still tied.

She wrinkled her nose as Auntie hurried into the breakfast room and took a chair beside her. That black dress had such a funny smell. But she'd been wrong. Today Auntie was in quite a good mood.

On Mondays, lessons started with yesterday's Collect. Auntie didn't seem to know how easy it was for Ruddy and Trix to learn them. Easy peasy, even though she was so much younger. That stupid Harry didn't want to learn things even though he was more than thirteen and really big now.

'You'll never get anyone to employ you with marks like that,' she'd heard Uncle Pryse tell him in an angry voice.

Trix got to the end of the verses without a single mistake.

She relaxed.

'What a good girl you are, Trixie,' Auntie was smiling.

It was like the sun coming out.

*

'Go on, Trix, try, you can't really have forgotten Bombay,' Ruddy coaxed.

It was late afternoon and they were sprawling outside on the grass in the narrow back garden. Where it touched the bare skin on

their wrists, the juicy green tickled.

‘Wouldn’t you like to be out in the sunshine?’ Uncle Pryse had asked, dragging back the heavy bolt on the back door. ‘I’m a bit tired today, or I’d join you myself,’ he added, shuffling back to his chair.

If Harry had been at home, it wouldn’t have been so quiet and friendly in the garden. But Harry wasn’t expected back before dark.

‘I don’t care if Father wants me to practise my arithmetic before I go out. Fred’s bringing his terrier and we’re going ratting,’ Trix heard him tell Auntie Sarah. She never really tried to make him do what she said.

There was nothing to worry about. Trix knew that Auntie never got back from her Missionary afternoons before five.

‘Think of green, green that’s fuzzy. Green netting stretching in front of you. Close your eyes. You’re in the big red perambulator, inside the net to keep snakes out. Bouncing a bit because of the stones in the path. I’m running along beside you, holding out a flower for you.’

Trix looked uncertain. She could see this picture but she didn’t feel she was inside it.

‘Once I brought you a little green frog but Ayah made me put it back under some big leaves,’ he went on, encouraging.

‘Was she cross?’ She couldn’t remember it at all.

‘Ayah just laughed and said’ – he paused and screwed up his eyes – ‘she said “Ruddy Baba, sweetness, better a kiss for Baby than a frog to eat. And not even cooked.”’

Trix wanted Ruddy to stop. It made him happy, talking about India but she just couldn’t. She didn’t like it, when he spoke of Ayah and Bombay and tried to make her remember too. Like pushing her up against something hard.

‘Come on, Trix. I don’t believe you can’t remember. When I was your age I used to dream about India every night.’

Your age! He was only two years older. Well, two and a half. She turned on him, pink with anger.

‘I have dreams too. I dream about fire.’

* * *

‘Rudyard, give me that book. You’ve had your nose in it ever since you came home. That’s quite enough of that selfish reading for one day. There’s your sweet little sister, longing for you to pay her some attention. It’s time to play with Trix now, until bedtime.’

Sarah Holloway caught a look of fury before he turned away.

She could not take to this Rudyard with his heathen Indian name. If he’d been as mild and biddable as Trixie, they could have had such happy times together, the three of them singing those sweet hymns from Sunday school.

But Rudyard pursed up his lips when it came to singing. When he explained that ‘he couldn’t ’cos the words were just stupid’ she’d had to forbid him all books for a week. The idea, that he, child as he was, could presume to sit in judgement. He did consent to learn the Collect and the chapters that she gave him as punishments but outside the Bible he just would not go.

Trix, on the other hand was good as gold, all that she could ask. Always ready to lift her cheek to a kiss. As good as having a daughter of her own.

‘Trixie is such a sweet little pet, I’m thinking of asking her to call me “Mother”, she observed one evening to her husband. It was May but they really needed the fire, though she grudged the coals.

‘Heavens above, woman. You’ll do no such thing. What do you think the child’s family would make of it? And what about Ruddy? There’s an affectionate little chap and really intelligent.’

The animation in his voice put her out.

‘You never took such interest in Harry, your own son.’

The heavy eyebrows lifted and Pryse Holloway raised his head. ‘That is a dreadful thing to say, Sarah.’

A pause. She began to justify herself. ‘Well, I’m sure everyone notices. Mother and Aunt often say things.’

Pryse Holloway looked drawn. It was clear he had no desire for this conversation. He waited.

‘Harry feels it, you know. More than once he’s said to me that it upsets him. And after he’s been so unselfish, sharing his own room with Rudyard all this time –’

‘Why hasn’t Harry spoken to me directly?’ He didn’t hide his distaste. ‘Sarah, what have you made of him, with your tracts and ministers and pleasure in finding fault –’ His face was dark with blood but he kept on.

She was frightened but excited too, ‘Harry’s a good boy. Just because he loves his mother –’

The gnarled hand came down heavily on the table, though no further word was spoken.

She drew back but soon could not prevent herself.

‘That Rudyard is a little schemer. You can see he’s watching and scheming to get his own way every waking moment. Just look at him. Behind that forehead that you admire so much’ – Pryse had once remarked on the boy’s open brow – ‘there’s wilfulness, there’s wicked pride. It would be sinful to let them go unchecked.’

The old man sagged in his chair. ‘Have it your own way, Sarah. Harry’s an angel. Little Rud’s the other thing. But mark my words,’ – here he looked at her straight, till her gaze wavered and fell – ‘mark my words, if I find Harry tormenting the child again, I shall send Ruddy away.’

‘You can’t. You know we couldn’t manage without the money. Even if Harry brought something in. What are you saying?’ She was struggling for breath.

‘Believe me, I mean it.’

Slowly, leaning on the furniture, her husband got to his feet and left the room.

He wasn’t well, she told herself. None of it meant anything. That his health wasn’t good was quite true. Before the leaves had begun to turn at the end of summer, her husband was dead.

Ruddy was not going to look at Harry this time. Not directly into his face. He was strong, hating Harry and despising him. It didn't matter that Harry was fourteen and he was only nine. It didn't matter. However big he was, Harry was stupid.

If only they didn't have to share this bedroom. Ruddy tried not to think of the nursery in Bombay, where Ayah moved quietly in the warm dark and he could hear Trix as she stirred in her own white cot across the room.

He was Harry's prisoner.

He and Trix had a special name for Harry. They called him The Odious Boy. Ruddy squeezed his stomach right in and the pain went away again. He was not afraid.

The Odious Boy held out the book. Ruddy waited to see if it would be snatched away. After a pause, he reached out and took it into his hands. He stroked the raised patterns on the cover, knowing Harry was waiting. But he wasn't going to say anything this time.

'You don't seem very pleased to have your book back,' Harry mocked.

It was much better to keep quiet. To stay still and pretend that Harry wasn't real. Otherwise that horrible game would start over again, the game Harry had played after he hid the Hero of the Mutiny, the lead soldier that was always placed first in the charge across the floor of their basement playroom. It had arrived with others in a box from a big shop in London. Harry kicked that box, with its shiny label on the lid, whenever he got the chance.

But one long wet Sunday afternoon he went further. The Hero could not be found, though Ruddy turned over every toy in the cupboard and Trix stuck exploring fingers under the edge of the carpets upstairs. Now she was older, she was often quite sensible.

'What if I could find it for you? Want me to look too? Suppose you dropped it in the bedroom?' Harry offered, appearing unexpectedly in the basement.

'Oh Harry, thank you!' Trix looked happy again.

But he was back far too soon.

'You must've left it under your pillow,' he said.

Ruddy flew at him, kicking.

Harry had no difficulty in holding him at arms' length, while he grinned over at Trix.

'He don't really deserve to have it back, after all, eh, Trixie?'

Remembering that day, the hot tears, at last the begging, Ruddy did not speak. Instead he stepped aside, leaving Harry to sit smirking on Rud's own bed. The Odious Boy knew he didn't like him doing that.

Papa had sent him that book. Still stroking the board cover, Ruddy turned towards the chest of drawers against the far wall and sat down on the floor, his back against it. There was enough light there to look at the pictures. He'd wait for Harry to get bored and leave.

He betrayed himself with a gasp that he could not suppress. What he held in his hand was no longer a picture book. It flapped idly open on his knee as he looked up, in question.

Harry was ready.

'Choice, ain't they? Father always used to be on at me to improve my mind. I thought I should give myself something uplifting to look at since I've done with school lessons now.'

Harry went out to work these days.

'We can't afford for you to lose this job, get up this minute,' his mother insisted, shaking him every morning.

Following Harry's gaze, for the first time Ruddy observed the crooked line of torn pages stuck with pins that marched along the wall over Harry's bed.

He knew he was beaten. Uncle Pryse would have been angry. But Uncle Pryse was dead.

This time though, whatever happened, he wasn't going to cry.

*

When they first came to Lorne Lodge it had been easy to fit under the table and more cheerful than the cold playroom down

in the basement.

‘We’re going to have this as our secret place. We’ll call it “The Even Thresholds,”’ Ruddy instructed. ‘Mama used to say. “Children, be careful, don’t run. You’ll trip on that uneven threshold.”’

He said the words again. He could hear his mother’s voice.

He frowned. It’d sometimes used to sound as though she didn’t like Bombay, which couldn’t be right.

But all that was years and years ago. Now they were so much taller, the struts of wood between the legs rather got in the way. Still, once in a while, Ruddy would hold up a fold of the furry table-covering invitingly and Trix would slip, with a giggle, under his arm. Their noses wrinkled at the dust and the heavy smell of food that enfolded them once the door of their tent was let fall but as they settled themselves among the crumbs that Janey had missed, they were smiling at each other.

‘We’re almost too big to fit under here, you know, Ruddy.’ Trix couldn’t find a place to put her legs without kicking him.

‘Don’t *say* that. Trix, it’s our own place that we’ve made. It’s ours.’

Picking up her brother’s agitation, Trix fell silent. After a pause she began again timidly, ‘We can’t stay down here too long anyway this afternoon. Auntie wants to take me out with her at three o’clock. We’re going to visit Mrs. Chippington from the church.’

‘You go then, go now, if you like her so much, her and her horrible friends in their stinky old black dresses. I can tell myself stories. I don’t need you to be here.’

Trix felt her eyes fill with tears. Her chin was wobbling so much it made her mouth twist as if wires were pulling it. ‘Oh Ruddy, don’t be angry with me. She’s not so bad.’

‘Not so bad? I hate her bloody to hell.’

His ferocity entered Trix like a knife. She couldn’t bear it. Shrinking, she whispered, ‘Don’t. Please don’t be angry with me.’

‘I’m not angry with you. Yes I am.’ With a great effort: ‘I want you to stay with me, not go with her.’

Trix was crying soundlessly into the fists she had bunched up against her face. 'I don't know what to do,' she heaved out between her sobs.

'Well, you said we were getting too big for this. Perhaps you're right. I don't think I like it under here any more,' and he was crawling away from her out into the drab light of the dining room.

Ruddy looked slightly ashamed of himself as Trix emerged but he couldn't resist inspecting his sister's face, to see how his rejection had registered. The little girl turned to adjust the fold of chenille, brushing them back into place.

Ruddy's face hardened.

'You'd better go and wash your face if you don't want her noticing and asking questions. But perhaps you'd like a chance to tell tales about me like her disgusting son.'

Trix took the blow in silence.

Ruddy would be cross with her all afternoon. She could always go and help Auntie Sarah though. It was no good fighting her. Trix could see that, why couldn't Ruddy? When they first came to live here, when she was tiny, his hugs made her feel safe. He was older, he knew what to do.

But now she sometimes felt like the older one. She could see that Auntie Sarah would always win. And though Ruddy often talked about Mama and wondered why she had sent them to live with Auntie, there really didn't seem to be any feelings about Mama, or any picture of her, left inside Trix.

Leaving the room, she turned back towards Ruddy hoping to be friends again, but he would not raise his eyes to hers.

That night the fire dream came back again. Trix was sitting at a table. But she seemed to have shrunk. She could barely see over it. There was something soft under her, like a cushion. And there was a fire, a huge fire, right there inside the house.

A fire that stretched out its arms for her.

However much she tried, she couldn't make a sound. Always,

when she tried to get down and run away, in the dream, Auntie stopped her, shouting, 'Be good or I'll give you a kiss and send you to Hell!' Now Trix fought with all her strength, fists pounding.

'Child, child, whatever's the matter?' Auntie was sitting bolt upright, wide awake beside her. 'You're thrashing about enough to wake the dead.'

'I'm going to get burned. Let me go,' Trix gasped.

Auntie Sarah's shadow, hair twisted up in spikes all round the head, reared up on the bedroom wall as the candle she had hastily lit spluttered.

'It's only a dream, Trixie. Go back to sleep.'

Trix shuddered as Auntie reached over to pat her before rolling onto her side.

'There now, settle down, do.'

Trix wanted to keep herself awake but her eyes insisted on closing.

The minute she woke up next morning, Trix could hear the thrush singing out in the pear tree. She wanted to run straight out into the garden and join him. The song kept on all the time she was washing her face and hands and pulling on her clothes.

Auntie called her to stand in front of the looking-glass to have her hair brushed. When she'd finished tying the dark blue ribbon for weekdays Auntie remained, winding Trix's curls into ringlets around her finger while she spoke.

'Always remember, Trixie, that it's the Lord who is made angry by sin and it's only His anger we have to fear. The wicked will have to live in the flames of Hell but so long as you keep on as a good girl, you've nothing to worry about. That's what I've always taught you, right from when you were small, you silly girl.'

Trix smiled politely. If she just smiled and didn't say anything, Auntie might talk about something else.

* * *

Month after month, every week had the same pattern but Trix didn't mind that. She liked knowing that there would be lessons with Auntie Sarah every morning in the dining room. That Auntie's friend, Mrs. Possiter, would visit on Tuesdays and that on certain afternoons Auntie would go out to join other ladies busy at the church. The Missionary Society had so many bazaars, the ladies always seemed to be sewing horrid fussy things, to sell at them.

Time spent with Ruddy was different. Then it was safe to come alive. Trix loved the dark late winter afternoons together in the basement. Once the gas was lit, the room no longer seemed so dull and dingy. It felt almost snug.

She could hardly wait to talk to him. Yet glimpsing the evening star, brilliant and lonely in the darkening sky, she caught her breath.

Flat on his stomach, Ruddy was training two black beetles to climb over the mountain trail he had built. His nose was almost touching them.

'Do look, Ruddy. Out of the window. The star.'

He didn't give any sign that he'd heard.

'What's the matter? Why don't you come and look?'

'No point. You know I won't be able to see it. Stop making a fuss.'

She remembered too late. It wasn't the first time she'd found Ruddy couldn't see what she could. Would he have to wear spectacles when he was grown up, she wondered. For now though, he didn't like talking about it. He just got angry.

Trix waited. She wanted him in a good mood, ready to listen.

'Remember, it's my turn today. Come on, do sit up and listen,' she finally burst out.

He waved a booted foot in her direction.

'You are a beast, Ruddy. I'm telling you something really interesting.'

'No, come on. Sit up. It's my turn, be fair. I heard Auntie's friend telling her this story today, after the Ladies' Meeting at church. About a girl who wanted to get married —'

She broke off as Ruddy rolled over. He sat up and looked at her.

‘Girls aren’t interesting,’ he put out his hand before she could launch herself at him. ‘I don’t mean you, Trix, I mean stories about girls.’

‘It is a good story. I know it is. All right, I won’t tell it to you. But when I’m older, you’ll see. Everyone will read my stories because they’re real and true, not just made up ones like yours.’

But she could tell he didn’t want to have a quarrel.

‘Let’s do “planning the house we’re going to have when we go home to Bombay,”’ he offered.

That winter it was their best game. It didn’t matter any more that she couldn’t remember.

‘My bedroom will have white muslin curtains with flowers and flowers in all the vases, not like those dead twigs in front of the fireplace upstairs, and I’ll have a special room to make my stories up and do my writing in,’ she began.

‘And my study will be at the other end of the house and we’ll meet in the middle to read our stories together. My faithful servant will sleep across my doorway and I’ll have a desk as big, as big as – as the altar in church,’ he finished grinning.

‘Mine will be made of rosewood.’

Trix wasn’t going to be floored.

‘If we’re reading out poems, we shall lie on couches, but for stories we’ll sit in carved armchairs, old carved chairs, like Aunt Georgie’s.’

‘We’ll walk up and down the whole house, talking really loudly.’

‘It will be the biggest most beautiful house in the whole of India.’

‘And Janey will come with us and be in charge of all the other servants but never have to do anything herself.’

*

Every Christmas a man came for Ruddy and took him to London.

‘It’s all very well for the grand Mrs. Burne-Jones to send for Ruddyard. She is your mother’s sister, I suppose. And he’s a boy and older. But I always tell her you’d rather stay here with me. That’s

right, isn't it Trixie?'

Trix nodded dumbly. She didn't want Ruddy to go and leave her. But she knew that she didn't at all want to go to London herself, to stay with a strange aunt and uncle.

This year, though, there was no escape.

'I suppose it's all your idea, Miss Trix. Not good enough for you here in Lorne Lodge. Oh no, you both want to be off with your grand relations in London.'

Trix flinched but her face remained blank. She looked across at Ruddy.

Auntie followed her gaze.

'I see, it's you we have to thank, Master Kipling, for upsetting us all. You've been putting ideas into your aunt's head, with your letters.'

Ruddy could only stare.

'I've had a letter from Mrs. Burne-Jones myself.' She shook the stiff criss-crossed sheet at them. 'Not that I don't expect one, at Christmas, to thank me for all I do for you.'

Both children remained silent and alert.

'She's sending her man to collect Rudyard for his Christmas visit again. But she wants Trix too this time. *If necessary I will come myself for Trix,*' that's what she says. No thought of what it means to anyone else. You won't enjoy being away from home, Trixie, but she doesn't think of that.'

'Aunt Georgie is the kindest person in the world,' Ruddy shouted, interrupting her. 'Trix will love her and love staying at The Grange.'

'That's enough from you, Rudyard. No-one asked for your opinion.'

Ruddy seemed to fold into himself. His fists were clenched as he turned and made for the door. In a moment they could hear his boots clattering up the stairs.

Down in the breakfast room Trix was sidling towards Auntie.

'I won't have to be away for very long, will I?' she asked.

'There now, that's considerate. Not like some. You'll miss me,

won't you, darling?'

Shivering, Trix replied, 'Yes Auntie. Auntie, do I have to go?'

Auntie looked pleased, though she repeated mournfully, 'It's not for us to argue with the likes of Mrs. Burne-Jones.'

Trix couldn't help noticing that Auntie told all her friends about 'my letter from Mrs. Burne-Jones in London,' but in a pleased voice, as though it had made her happy. Not angry at all.

She pushed that away and with it the thought of Christmas.

In early December, under the wing of Aunt Georgie's outside man, the children took the train for London. They were going to stay at Aunt Georgie's until after Ruddy's birthday on December 30th.

Trix did wish that she was going to be ten like Ruddy.

He had told her about the big bell-pull.

'Feeling it in my hand's the first sign. I'm back at The Grange, with Aunt Georgie and Uncle Ned. I've got there. Everything's going to be happy for days and days.'

'You can pull it, Trix, because it's your first time,' he offered, as they climbed down from the hansom onto North End Road, where they stood stamping their cold feet as their bags were passed down and the driver was paid.

Trix hadn't expected The Grange to be so big.

She would have trailed behind Ruddy but he took her hand and dragged her towards the tall front door where light gleamed behind the curved glass at the top.

Up the stone steps and though he wasn't really much bigger, he was putting his arms round her to heave so that she could reach the iron handle. Even through her woolly winter gloves it was cold.

'You go ahead, Master Rud, you're getting to be a real strong 'un', old John applauded.

The peal was still sounding when the wide panelled door flew open and a tiny dark-haired lady, not much taller than Ruddy, stood in the doorway holding out her arms.

'My darlings, how lovely! Ruddy, dearest, and this must be Trix. How like your mother you are, darling.'

Aunt Georgie smelled of lilacs. Trix was kissed, she melted into the warm arching space of the hall and stood silent as unfamiliar hands unwrapped her scarf and deftly unbuttoned her overcoat. She hoped Aunt Georgie wouldn't notice it was too short.

Her nose began to tickle.

'What's that, Ruddy?' she whispered.

'The tree, silly.'

And there in the drawing room stood a fir tree, high as a house. Little silver bells and golden chains hung on it, glittering and tinkling in the draught every time the door was opened. 'Soup and chicken sandwiches first, don't you think my dears? Why don't you sit here by the fire and have a picnic?'

Trix felt her throat close and she shuddered. Auntie Sarah used a whole sheep's head when she was making soup. Trix had seen one lying bloody and empty-eyed on the draining board, waiting to go in the big saucepan. She'd never been able to swallow the greasy grey porridge it turned into. Ruddy called it 'dead dog in a puddle'. But when she looked across at him now in appeal, to her surprise she saw that he was beaming.

Then the tray was placed on a small inlaid table in front of her.

Was this clear golden liquid called soup too? She sipped. Perhaps Ruddy was right and she was going to like being here.

Before they went to bed, Uncle Ned, who was so tall he could reach all the red candles standing out on the branches, lit them and they sat in the fluttering light while Aunt Georgie read to them out of the Arabian Nights.

They were to sleep in the old night nursery.

'You know where it is Ruddy. Go on, lead the way,' Aunt Georgie said.

But when Trix entered the wide low room at the top of the house, she saw there were four beds tucked up under bright patterned coverlets, not two. Aunt Georgie noticed how surprised Trix was.

'I thought you and your cousins would probably all like to sleep in the same room,' she explained. 'If I just put Ruddy in with Phil

and you, Trix, in with Margaret, everyone would feel they were missing something. This way no-one's left out.'

Trix quivered, not sure whether it would have been worse to have to share with this unknown Margaret or to be apart from Ruddy.

But Aunt Georgie was still speaking.

'Margaret and Phil will be home tomorrow. But I thought Trix's first evening with us should be a quiet one.'

'Margaret and Phil? Oh hooray!' Ruddy was bouncing on a field of scarlet and gold.

Aunt Georgie left a night-light burning on the table between them when she went downstairs.

'D'you like it, Trix? It is just like I said, isn't it?'

'Mmm,' Trix murmured, closing her eyes. It was all too strange. But she couldn't say so, couldn't say she wanted to go home.

Instead, she lay listening to Ruddy's slow breathing, his little snorts. It seemed to remind her of something she almost knew, something that was happy. She wished they could always share a room.

Her new cousins seemed very noisy. Speaking both at once as they tumbled into the drawing room the next day, they flung themselves on Ruddy but did not cast a glance her way.

'Children, children, aren't you going to make cousin Trix welcome too?' Aunt Georgie asked. 'Come on now, Margaret.'

Close to panic, Trix realised that she didn't know how girls talked to each other. Margaret was chattering at her nineteen to the dozen, as Auntie would say. Auntie Sarah wouldn't like Margaret at all. Full of herself, that's how Auntie Sarah would put it.

'What's your favourite instrument? And do you like skating?' Margaret rattled off without a pause.

She didn't wait for Trix to reply but shot off more questions. Worst of all, Ruddy seemed to like all that gabble and to like Margaret too. He was spluttering in excitement, talking just as fast,

changing into a different Ruddy as she watched.

But Ruddy was really the only boy she knew. You couldn't count Harry. How was she ever going to know what to say to big cousin Phil, who looked so grown-up in that striped waistcoat?

Trix regarded the three of them in silence, observing but feeling invisible, as though she was stuck behind a screen.

The Grange itself was unlike any other house Trix had ever seen. 'Except it does remind me of the illustrations in my best storybooks,' she decided. It was the high arches and the pillars, the feeling you were looking through rooms and rooms without coming to an end. Dark shining doors swung silently open at her touch. It was like the house in *Beauty and the Beast*. And perhaps a house could have too much space. There were days when she felt that her feet might not hold her to the floor and she would float helpless, weightless, up to the high wide ceilings.

There were flowers and leaves everywhere and not just in vases. This was something to do with Uncle Ned and his work.

'He designed it all,' Ruddy told her, with a grand gesture that took in the patterned paper covering every wall and the carpet that she'd been gazing at in wonder. 'At least his friend, that fat one we call Uncle Topsy, has a company called Morris and Co. that makes beautiful things.'

Trix looked at him sceptically.

'Uncle Ned does make designs as well as paintings,' he added defensively. 'Up in the studio, I've seen designs for stained glass.'

Trix shrugged and went back to studying the carpet. Such bright colours, pink, blue, green, all at once together and at the same time so – so carefully arranged. Like the curling, complicated willow leaves on the walls, they made her think of summer in a garden far away.

But here she was, in Fulham, with all these people she didn't know. Uncle Ned was so dreadfully unlike anyone she'd ever met. Apart from the Reverend Mr. Sharpe at church, all Auntie Sarah's friends were ladies. There were the men who stood behind counters

and served Auntie in the shops, too. But Uncle Ned wasn't at all like them.

The first time Trix heard Uncle Ned shout 'It's no good the light's gone,' as he burst into the drawing room, she shrank back. Trix looked quickly at Aunt Georgie. She was still smiling, but she did sound rather sharp when she spoke at first.

'Ned, you're frightening Trix. Do calm down.' She turned towards Trix. 'Uncle Ned's come down from his studio because he's had to stop painting for the day,' she explained. 'In order to paint he needs daylight. At this time of year he has to stop before he really wants to.'

It was a surprise, hearing Uncle Ned scolded, like a child, but after that she was less shy of him.

He sat down with them all and began drawing.

Trix had never seen an artist making something before. She had been deep in *The Frog Prince*, her new storybook, sent from India with Mama's name in it. Trix had been dreaming over the picture of the Princess amazed to find the hopeful little frog at her door, but she laid it down. From across the room she watched the feathery beard bobbing and jerking as Uncle Ned turned first to look, then to draw.

'Would he mind if I crept behind him?' she wondered. It was his hand with the pencil, moving so surely over the paper, that she wanted to see.

No-one seemed to notice when she left her chair. Sliding behind the big Knole sofa, she side-stepped a low table piled with books and papers and came up behind him.

'Hello, little bird,' he murmured without pausing, 'if you want to watch, fetch that stool and you'll be more comfortable.'

After that, she sat herself down close to Uncle Ned whenever he came in to draw.

The day he took them up into his studio was the best. New smells, clean and sharp, that she'd picked up a whiff of downstairs, hit her as soon as the door ahead was opened. Like the smell of that gum on the pine tree in Auntie Sarah's garden. She almost

tripped, she was in such a hurry to see inside.

It was after tea, so Trix knew it was dark outside, but the spread of shining black glass at the end of the high room took her by surprise. No curtains. In the drawing room they'd just left, heavy folds of velvet were pulled close. But of course, when he was painting, during the day, Uncle Ned didn't want to lose a scrap of light. Pieces of cloth, much bigger than any blanket, hung along the far wall. They seemed to be pictures of ladies and knights, made out of sewing or embroidery. Trix had just learned cross-stitch. She could see that these pictures must have taken somebody months and months, sewing all day.

While she stood taking in the place where Uncle Ned came to work, the others had rushed over to a long scarred table, littered with pieces of string, torn wrappings, brushes, cups and glasses that needed washing and tubes of what must be paint.

Uncle Ned noticed Trix staring at all the mess.

'No-one's allowed to clear up in here, not even your Aunt,' he told her.

Margaret and the boys were already fingering the tubes of paint, choosing the ones they hoped they'd be allowed to use. Trix shook her head when Uncle Ned held out a brush invitingly. She was more interested in looking. It was the large paintings, stacked against the walls that attracted her. Some appeared finished, others were just faint outlines, like the idea for a new game. There were so many of them. So many beautiful ladies – such blues, such golds. Sinking to the floor, she sat back on her heels, so she could gaze more closely.

'More exciting than those pencil sketches you've seen me make, eh?' Uncle Ned's voice came from across the room. 'Is it the colours?' he asked.

Trix scrambled up, with a nod. 'But it's the stories in the paintings, too. They're all stories. This one here, it's the Sleeping Beauty isn't it? You can see all those girls asleep too, lying round her, they must be her maids. And the roses and briars, they're growing in through the window and all over the furniture.'

Uncle Ned seemed pleased. He was laughing.

‘Quite right. Not everyone observes so closely, Trix, you’d be surprised. Come and look, I’ve got something over here to show you,’ he beckoned.

‘My friend Mr. William de Morgan makes these tiles,’ he said, lifting heavy shining squares one by one out of a stout wooden case. ‘What about these for colour? He’s been experimenting and wants to know what I think. What shall we tell him, little bird?’

Trix found her voice as she traced the different patterns, smooth and cold under her finger.

‘This one’s the best, Uncle Ned,’ she decided. ‘There’s something too smudgy about the one in green.’

Trix never knew how solemnly Ned Burne-Jones relayed her views to William de Morgan, when they sat taking tea in the drawing room later that week. The children were clustered on the sofa around Aunt Georgie, who was reading aloud.

‘Don’t look straight at the child, you’ll embarrass her. She’s the one over there leaning against Ruddy. I tell you, Will, she has the beginnings of an eye. It’s a thousand pities we can’t keep her here and bring her on.’

‘A thousand pities indeed,’ repeated de Morgan rather grimly, eyeing his friend. It was widely known that Ned had never really given up his devotion to Maria Zambaco, despite developing other romantic attachments along the way. Georgie’s nerves probably couldn’t bear the strain of two more children.

Apparently oblivious, Ned met his gaze.

‘Yes. Life must be more stimulating for them here, of course. But it would be quite wrong to disturb the Southsea arrangement.’

He paused to squint at his drawing pad, holding it out at arms’ length.

‘The two of them seem very happy and settled with Mrs. Holloway – she obviously feeds them well – look at him, Rud’s really quite plump – and Georgie says you never hear a word from them against her.’

* * *

Watching Margaret and Phil as they leaned close to Aunt Georgie while she read to them in the evenings made her uncomfortable. She shouldn't be here, she didn't belong. Even when Aunt Georgie put an arm round her, Trix couldn't feel at ease. She was used to Auntie, at home in Southsea, she belonged there, not with these people. She longed for some time alone with Ruddy. But he seemed to like rampaging around with the cousins more than talking to her.

Trix was counting the days till she and Rud could go home. When at last the holiday was over and it was time for John to take them back to the train her eyes were bright.

'Ruddy never says much about Southsea. Dear child, he shuts up like a clam, in fact, if you ask him. It's no easier to tell with Trix. I wish she wasn't quite so withdrawn. But you can see she really does care for that woman, she's so happy to be going back,' reflected Aunt Georgie, as the wheels of the departing hansom kicked up spray from the slush.

* * *

Summer was coming, when very quietly, one Wednesday morning, Trix got off the bed she shared with Auntie Sarah. She didn't put her shoes back on, even though Auntie had gone out. Ruddy was at school. Down in the scullery Janey was banging about.

She hadn't really got a headache. But it was the only way to get Auntie to leave her behind.

'You won't be alone,' Auntie said. 'There's Janey in the house.'

Trix knew that Auntie didn't want to miss the Ladies' Sewing Circle at the church. That's why Wednesday was the day to do it.

She crept to the door. Out on the landing the lino was cold to her stockinged feet and more slippery than she'd expected.

Going down the stairs she clutched the shiny ridges of the banisters. Falling would make such a noise.

At last she reached the door of the breakfast room and leaned against it, trying to breathe more quietly, as she took the chill metal of the knob between her hands. Twisting slowly and steadily she eased the lock till it clicked, quietly as a cricket.

The canary was looking straight at her from its cage hung by the window. It seemed to be expecting her. She knew what to do. Every morning after breakfast she watched as Auntie reached up opened the neat little door and held a finger inside the cage.

'Who's a pretty little thing then?' Auntie would coo, travelling over to the table, the bird perched on her outstretched hand.

'Ugh,' Ruddy said when they were alone, 'to see the horrid mangy thing pecking at the crumbs and bits on the tablecloth. It's revolting.'

Trix shuddered too. But it wasn't Jacky's fault. Jacky hadn't asked to live in Lorne Lodge. She had to drag across a chair to stand on to reach his cage. It was heavier than she'd expected and kept catching on the carpet but she managed. Climbing on the furniture and stepping on the upholstery, both absolutely forbidden, Trix knew she could win. Auntie would never know.

Once she was level with it she could see that the bird was frightened. It wasn't used to her coming so close. She hadn't thought of that. The fluffy yellow creature shrank back on its perch.

'Who's a pretty little thing?' she asked softly. If she sounded like Auntie it might make him feel safe.

Jacky only quivered.

Hearing a step on the stairs from the basement, Trix paused. But Janey passed on along the hall and up to the top of the house.

There was no time to lose. The cage bucked and swung as she grabbed but her hand was tight around the frantic feathery ball.

'Don't fight me,' she whispered. 'Jacky, you're going to be free.'

The most difficult part came now, when she had to get down from the chair with him in her hand. She never thought the wings would be so strong as they tried to beat.

She could just reach the metal catch on the window with her free hand. It was dreadfully stiff. Tugging had no effect. Her fingers felt

bruised. She couldn't do it.

She did want to set Jacky free. But she was starting to hate the frenzied thing that she held so tightly.

She'd have to put it back.

Trix took a deep breath.

She would shut him up again, so she could use both hands to work the catch. If she let go he'd just fly and perch on the looking-glass over the fireplace. She'd never be able to catch him or let him out. Auntie would find Jacky there when she came home or Janey would. That would be almost as bad. He'd never escape.

It wasn't easy climbing back up again with only one hand free but she did it.

The cage hung steady, the door open. She was reaching up, her hand inside still firmly clasped around the demented wings, when she leaned too far.

The cage swung away.

Her grip tightened, she lurched forward, grabbing wildly, as the chair toppled with her, and banged her head as she came crashing down among the chair legs.

'I'm sorry, Jacky, oh Jacky, I didn't mean to,' she wept over the crushed yellow handful, sticky in her palm.

'There's no keeping this from the missis,' Janey warned. 'But we can give him a bit of a funeral under the holly. I'll dig it up with the coal shovel.'

She splashed Trix's face with cold water afterwards.

But she forgot to sweep up the little trail of coal dust in the hall. The moment Auntie got through the front door she asked what had happened.

Trix sobbed again as she faltered out her story.

'I know you wouldn't have meant any harm, Trixie, *you're* not full of spite, unlike that brother of yours.' Auntie's kindness took her by surprise.

‘It’s my duty. You can’t be allowed to continue in falsehood, Rudyard.’

‘But I’m not. I didn’t mean –’ the boy faltered.

‘The plain truth is that you threw that book away. That beautiful book of prayers and stories from Scripture that I sent to school with you. Making sure Mr. Vickery knew you came from a good home.’

‘Truly I didn’t. I didn’t throw it away.’

‘But you’ve already told me that you did. “I put it down on the wall when I was pulling up my stockings.” That’s what you said.’

‘But I only forgot it, I was going to –’

‘And then you left it there. You left it, hoping that I wouldn’t find out. But the Lord has his ways.’

‘I didn’t think –’

‘Oh yes, Mrs. Possiter saw it all, living opposite, and she rescued it for me. I’ve had that book since I was a girl. As soon as you came into the house I saw you hadn’t got it with you. All those years I’ve treasured it and then you have to – and when I asked you where it was – as soon as I ask you, you say, “It’s up in my bedroom”.’

‘I only forgot. I thought –’

‘I’ll give you forgot, I’ll give you thought, you little liar. It’s not as if it was the first time. What about that school report that disappeared? The one you “never had”? You threw that away, you’ve admitted it.’

Rud hung his head.

‘But if it hadn’t been for Harry – he’s got a head on his shoulders, *he* wouldn’t let you get away with it – I’d never have got to the bottom of that business. But I’m going to teach you to love the truth, like Harry. Now I want you to take this Holy Bible, in your hands and swear in the hearing of the Lord that from now on you will only tell the truth –’

He pushed it away.

‘I do love the truth. But you don’t. You’re always saying how good and clever Harry is.’

A gleam of satisfied outrage lit her face.

‘Right. You’re going to wear the name of “liar” on your back till

you've learned the meaning of truthfulness. And respect.'

At least she was not going to hit him, again, with that cane that made him crouch and hide himself, like a dog. His head seemed to be watching all by itself as she bustled about, dragging drawers open, looking for the scissors, then going rooting in the cupboard. When she turned round she was holding a piece of white card. Even when she had found the dusty bottle of ink and was inscribing a large square of card with the word 'LIAR', he could not believe it was real. That the next morning he would have to go through the streets with the placard pinned to the back of his coat.

He set off white-faced, his shoulders hunched, waiting for the jeers of errand boys and old ladies' clucking disapproval. Yet he had only gone a few yards when a sobbing Trix burst out into the street after him and tore the placard from his back. She took up her stand, small hands held up curved before her, frail claws raised against all comers.

The following day, Ruddy fainted when he got out of bed. After that, he wasn't sure any more where he was. The sounds from outside his bedroom made him uneasy. They came and went. Sometimes he seemed to know what they meant while at others he registered with a start that he had been making up a dream, making it up out of the noises which were near at hand but which he could not quite make sense of.

Harry's bed seemed to have gone. Perhaps the men in his dream were real. Maybe they took it away.

At times the doctor came.

He was sure of that because on each occasion the same procedure was followed. There was none of the exhausting unpredictable extravagance of his dreams.

The old man would come in through the door, opening it wide, unlike That Woman, who slipped through the merest crack. The doctor would put down his bag near the foot of the bed. Then the doctor would bend over him. Once his face was quite close, Rud

could make out the features clearly: the brilliant eyes behind thick spectacles, the wiry grizzled eyebrows.

‘Feeling a little better today, hey?’ But the touch of the hand that rested on his forehead was gentle, the grip that took hold of his wrist, feeling for the pulse, made him feel safe.

The visits repeated themselves. He did not know how often. Then, one afternoon, when he had been allowed to sit up – and very dazed and uncertain it made him feel, his head so far above the ground – instead of going away, the doctor drew up a chair and sat down.

‘Young fellow,’ he said, ‘you’re doing famously. I think I shall be able to leave you in the care of Mrs. Holloway in another week.’

The doctor was not altogether surprised by the effect of his words, or by the sobs and agitated gestures. In his experience, children did not start hallucinating unless they had a high fever or had been under intolerable stress. The child’s temperature had never been sufficient to account for the derangement in which the doctor had found him.

On the other hand, the Holloway woman gave him pause for thought. She had almost seemed to be expecting him to attack her. He was hardly through the front door the first day before she was telling him what good care she took of the children and how much they meant to her. A rather wan little girl, whom he had not seen again, had been clinging to the slick black folds of the woman’s skirt.

‘Tell the doctor, Trixie, tell him how you love me.’

‘Not just now,’ and he had escaped to his patient. It was a grim sort of house but clean, very clean though it was so bare. The liver-coloured tiles in the hall gleamed, the brass doorknobs were icy to the touch but they glittered. Biblical texts worked painstakingly in wool hung over every doorway. The boy had been slow to make progress; a finely wrought constitution, everything told on it, the doctor feared.

He laid a soothing hand on the child’s arm and the sobs began to die down.

‘Is there something you would like to tell me?’ he asked quietly. The child merely stared, then shook his head. ‘Are you afraid of something?’

A long pause.

‘Please. I can’t read.’

‘You can’t read? You mean you’re in trouble at school?’ With a child anything was possible. But no. With painful slowness came the admission:

‘I don’t seem to be able, to be able to see things properly. They’re there and then they’re not there.’

The old man sat back, surveying him thoughtfully. Spectacles alone, he thought, would not put this problem to rest.

* * *

Georgie had persuaded Trix to come back the following year for another Christmas with her cousins. Now the festivities were almost at an end, however, Georgie was relieved. The big drawing room of the house in Fulham presented a dispiriting sight. In broad daylight the after-Christmas wreck was painfully evident.

‘That tree’s no longer a joy to the eye,’ she said aloud. ‘But I don’t have to tell you that, Marjorie,’ she added to the housemaid, in her brown morning uniform, who was on her knees brushing up the dropped pine needles. ‘Do be careful, I can see broken glass. Some of those baubles fell off when the children were racketing about last night during the party. Master Ruddy’s party always signals the end of Christmas and just as well. There’s always damage.’

They were all growing up fast: Ruddy turned eleven and her own Margaret ten. It didn’t seem possible. Even shy little Trix must be eight. Georgie’d left her fast asleep, hoping a day in bed would get rid of Trix’s cold. She felt glad that Phil was young for sixteen and still needed her.

The holidays were almost over. Phil would be going back to Marlborough next week. Ruddy and Trix were leaving this Friday. The tree could come down later that day. She must get back to her

correspondence. It was the greater part of a year since her mother had died but letters of condolence were still trickling in and must be acknowledged.

Georgie was busy writing, at the little walnut *escritoire*, when Phil and Margaret found her. They'd rushed in straight from the garden leaving muddy footprints on her favourite Persian rug. She gave a sigh of exasperation.

Even before they began to speak she could see that they were disturbed. Margaret was clutching her brother's hand.

'Mother, it's Ruddy. He's being awfully strange. I think you ought to come,' Margaret stammered.

'I thought you were all such friends, darlings. Do you mean you've had a quarrel?'

'No Mater, honestly. Nothing like that,' Phil replied. 'He keeps saying all these strange things. But it's not us he's talking to. He just stares. And he won't answer. When we ask what the matter is, he just keeps jabbering.'

'I don't like it, Mother. Make him stop,' Margaret burst out with a sob.

Georgie was already on her feet.

'Margaret, darling, why don't you go down to the kitchen and ask Cook if you may have some milk and a biscuit. Tell her I'd like you to stay with her till I come back.'

The warm cave below stairs was a haven for all the children.

'Now, Phil. You'd better take me to see Ruddy.'

He was already a good head taller than herself but she put her arm round his shoulders anyway. The cold air from outside still clung to the wool of his jacket.

'I'm sure it's just a silly game and he didn't mean to upset you.'

She caught up a heavy shawl from a hook as they passed out by the door into the garden.

The sun was making a dazzle on the melting frost. Georgie shielded her eyes. Looking right down, beyond the lawns and flower beds, near the orchard, she made out a stocky figure in movement.

Ruddy appeared to be brandishing a fallen branch. The gardener kept a pile of dead wood at the end of the garden, ready for his bonfires.

She crunched over the stiff grass, aware that Phil, nervous as ever, was dropping behind.

‘Ruddy my dear, is something the matter?’ Her voice faltered.

Ruddy wasn’t looking at her.

He hadn’t heard.

‘I know you’re dead, you’re only a ghost,’ he panted, thrashing out at an ancient apple tree.

Georgie drew in her breath. With a single look she sent Phil heading back inside.

‘Treat this like sleepwalking,’ she decided, moving slowly towards her nephew. Standing behind him she laid both hands firmly on his shoulders.

Ruddy continued with his flailing.

Then he appeared to register her presence.

Pausing, he stood irresolute.

Long moments passed before the branch fell from his hand. He slumped and might have fallen if she hadn’t moved to clasp him against her, arms meeting round his solid chest. The sudden weight made her gasp.

‘Ruddy, dearest,’ she managed to speak steadily, ‘It’s all right. Aunt Georgie’s here. It’s all right. We’re going back now into the house where it’s warm.’

‘When you’re ready, darling, you can tell me all about it,’ Georgie said some time later.

‘But first try to eat some of this toast.’

Ruddy was stretched on the *chaise longue* in her bedroom, under an afghan blanket. He had slept for a while.

‘I thought the tree was Grandma,’ he said slowly.

‘I mean I *had* to hit it. I was making sure.’

By the end of the day Ruddy was fit enough to join his cousins for a quiet game of Happy Families. They viewed him with cautious interest but he seemed to have returned to his normal self.

Once the children had trooped upstairs for the night, however, Georgie turned to her husband. 'Do put down that pencil, Ned and pay attention. I'm concerned about Ruddy.'

Reluctantly the sketchbook was set aside.

'I can't begin to understand it,' she finished after describing the scene in the garden.

'Thinking the tree was your mother's ghost? Bashing it? Quite extraordinary. What could Ruddy possibly have against his grandmother? She always struck me as harmless enough, poor old thing, if a bit preachy.'

Georgie chose to ignore the tone of disrespect.

She considered.

'I don't think Ruddy ever had much to do with Mother. Of course she was critical of his behaviour when he was really tiny. Remember, they came, back from India when Trix was born, but that's all. She was fond of him in her own way.'

'I remember now,' she added thoughtfully. 'Mother did visit the children at Southsea, soon after they first arrived. Ruddy must have been six at the time. She and Ruddy spent a morning together. She always said how much she loved that morning, teaching him hymns and reading to him out of the Bible, some of her favourite —'

'I don't suppose he loved it, though, do you?' Ned interrupted.

Georgie, who secretly shared this scepticism, was too deep in thought to respond. After a pause 'I think we'd better keep Ruddy here a while longer, till he's had a chance to settle down. There's something terribly wrong, I'm sure, though I can't put my finger on it.'

'Better get his eyes tested if he can't tell a tree from a ghost,' Ned offered, picking up his pencil.

'I can certainly arrange that. But first I'm going to sit down and write to his mother. Alice should know about this.'

WE BE OF ONE BLOOD,
YE AND I

1877-1891

Georgie wasn't the only one who wrote to alert her. An elderly friend was prosaically concerned about Ruddy's poor sight. Both had their effect: Alice swept the children up and away from Southsea in scarcely more than a day.

Such absurd clothes solemn little Trix was wearing – was that a bustle? – and Ruddy flinched when she first went to kiss him. But he didn't resist for long. She'd known it wouldn't be difficult to win him round.

Her heart did misgive her when she first saw them. They were such waifs.

Better to look forward.

They were quite different already. Thank God, it hadn't been her choice to leave them so long in that place. How could she have guessed it would turn out badly? When the news had come

through two years ago that ‘Mr. John Lockwood Kipling was appointed Principal of the Mayo School of Art and Curator of the Lahore Museum’, at first she’d felt only relief. A higher salary was the least of it. Jack was much too good for his ancillary place at the School of Art in Bombay. Their whole standing out here would be transformed. But it did come at a price.

‘It means no Ruddy and Trix for me this year and I’ve waited so long,’ she had written to Georgie at the time.

‘I can hardly bear it. But we’ll be leaving Bombay and it will be up to me to oversee the move and establish a new home. If I left it to Jack we’d be camping on the Maidan.’

‘It is a wonderful promotion but I do dread the Lahore climate, hundreds of miles from the coast. Bombay at least had the sea breezes. And Lahore’s little more than a frontier town, still given over to the natives (Jack makes me use that word but plenty of people call them niggers). There’ll be nothing in Lahore to compare with the Sassoon Library, or the Asiatic Society of Bombay. Jack may be in raptures about their mosques and monuments but I for one rejoice that our people all live quite separately, well outside the city walls.’

At long last, here, now, she was back in England. Able to hold her children warm in her arms, not just brood over photographs, trying to read their faces. Instead of letters, living voices. Eager as she was to remove them from Lorne Lodge she’d been careful to remain diplomatic. You never knew.

‘We all need some good English country air, Mrs. Holloway.’

She had to insist before Ruddy would turn round to wave good bye.

The three of them were going to spend the whole summer together at Mr. Emplins’ farm on the edge of Epping Forest.

*

Now Ruddy stood before her unabashed, dripping muddy water and pondweed onto the tiles that Mrs. Emplins had carefully strewn with sand only that morning.

‘I do believe you are the naughtiest children that ever —’ Alice

began but she could not go on for laughing.

‘Trix’s hat blew off and I was rescuing it from the duck pond,’ Ruddy explained with a holy look.

‘Ooh, Ruddy, you know you tried to make it sail back to me on the water. It wasn’t a rescue at all!’ Trix gave him a shove. She used to keep that straw hat with its cornflowers round the brim in a place where she could see it from her bed at night.

Alice only laughed the longer.

‘Never mind, Trix, you shall have a new one. We’ll choose it together on Thursday. Mr. Emplins will let us ride with him when he takes the cart into market.’

Day by day, the children were compiling their observations, assessing their mother, though they did not speak even to each other of all they learned. Wordlessly they appreciated the way Mama didn’t make them go to their bedroom or put a stop to their games of battledore out on the rough grass of the shorn meadow. Every evening, right on into the time Mama called ‘the gloaming’, when you could hardly see the shuttlecock, they all played.

‘I do like to see her – don’t you, Trix? – Mama with her skirts caught up and all her pretty hair coming down,’ Rud murmured across their little whitewashed bedroom just before he fell asleep.

But even as she whispered, ‘Yes, I like it too, Ruddy. And all the games,’ Trix wished Ruddy hadn’t said that. He never used to like anyone but herself.

Summer was long past and winter approaching, when they left the farm for London and rented rooms on the Brompton Road. Their father, Lockwood, was to join them there after Christmas.

When she first saw Papa, Trix was disappointed. She hadn’t expected him to be fat. And he wasn’t very tall. She didn’t know what to say to him at first, just tried to look polite and interested. Then she realised that he was rather like Uncle Ned. Even when Mama was trying to have a conversation with him, he kept on

making drawings.

He seemed to understand that Trix liked watching him as he sketched.

‘Would you like me to draw the garden you and Ruddy used to play in?’ he asked.

‘There was a well in that garden you know, Trix, and a water-wheel. Two big white bullocks walked round and round to turn the wheel and bring the water up. They had to wear blindfolds, to stop them getting dizzy. See, like this.’

His pencil flickered across the page. Trix edged closer.

Papa didn’t look at her but went on speaking.

‘Here’s the place where Ayah used to stand your perambulator, in the shade of a big tree. And now, this is what Ayah used to look like –’

‘There were red flowers. They were roses.’

It was her own voice speaking but it startled her. It was so loud.

Papa looked up. He took out a clean handkerchief and stood there holding it. He didn’t seem to know what to do. ‘Don’t cry, my pet. There’s nothing to cry about. It was sad leaving it all but that’s over,’ he said at last.

She didn’t know that she was crying. But the gasping wouldn’t stop.

Her chest was still heaving when Papa stroked her wet cheek. ‘We can’t go back to that garden. But in a few years you’ll come out to us in India again, to Lahore this time, and then you shall have a pony all of your very own to ride.’

*

‘Trix, lovey, would you like to make a drawing yourself?’ Papa asked, one afternoon Trix accepted the stalk of charcoal gingerly. She wanted to make something beautiful for Papa, wanted it so much that she could scarcely breathe. The black stick was cool in her hand as she drew it across the paper. But the picture in her head, the bird with its beak open, singing in the tree, wouldn’t come out.

The marks she made on the big white sheet were dark and ragged. Not beautiful at all. The more she tried to make them look like a bird, the more of a scrawl it grew. She threw the charcoal down with a sob then looked across at Papa, scared.

‘It’s all right, Trix. We all get cross when we can’t do things first go’.

He ruffled her hair and picked up the gritty bits of charcoal.

But one day Papa went back to India. He didn’t even wait to have one Christmas with them.

‘I was only here on special leave,’ he explained.

Anyway, Papa liked Ruddy best.

‘What d’you say to coming with me to Paris, young man?’ she’d heard him ask. ‘There’s a rather grand show I have to prepare for the Paris Exhibition. That’s the only reason I could get away on leave.’

Papa had not come back just to see them, after all. Trix waited but he didn’t invite her to go to Paris or to see his grand exhibition. They could all have gone together. He didn’t think of that. He just took Ruddy.

‘The Pater had his work cut out, in charge of all the exhibits from India, so he gave me money to buy my own lunch. He let me go exploring all day by myself,’ Ruddy boasted on his return.

Sometimes she hated Ruddy.

July was chill and wet, not at all like last summer. Mama took Ruddy out to the shops almost every day, leaving Trix behind in their lodgings. The landlady put her head round the door, occasionally, to make sure Trix wasn’t playing with matches and sometimes she gave her a piece of cake, but she was still lonely.

‘These aren’t pleasure trips, you know, Trix,’ Mama told her. ‘Ruddy’s new school has sent me a simply endless list of things Ruddy’s going to need. *Four* pairs of flannel pyjamas if you please.’

Pyjamas? Ruddy was going to sleep at his new school, not at home? Slowly it came over Trix. They were going to be separated.

It wasn't really news to her but only now did she begin to feel what that meant.

'Of course you can't possibly go to the same school as Ruddy, Trix, darling,' Mama said. 'Don't be silly. They only take boys at the United Services College. Cousin Margaret loves Notting Hill High School and so will you.'

At first Trix thought that if she could just explain, Mama would find a way for her to stay with Ruddy. She'd understand. But when she tried again, the next day, Mama became angry. She replaced her sewing on the table, among the pile of shirts and underclothing still waiting for name-tapes. She turned.

'I hope you're not going to be tiresome about this, Trix. It's all settled. Ruddy is going off to school in Devon and you're going to live in Warwick Gardens with Miss Craik and her sister. You'll be starting at the High School in September.'

'Staying with Miss Craik?' Trix faltered.

'And her sister. That's right. And of course there's Miss Winnard too. Until you're old enough to come out to us in Lahore, your home will be with them in Warwick Gardens. And while I remember, darling, they've very kindly agreed to have you to stay with them next month. Ruddy will be going to the Baldwins, to stay with Cousin Stan. There are visits I have to make while I'm here at Home.'

'But I don't really know Miss Craik and – and the others.'

Her breath was coming quickly. Before she had time to lose heart, Trix spoke up.

'Please, Mama, can't I go back to Auntie? I could stay with her. I know she'd have me.'

Mama stared. 'You really want to go back to that –' she broke off.

'Let me, Mama. Please. I do know Auntie Sarah and I don't know those other people.'

Mama continued to look doubtful but she resumed her sewing.

At last, 'Very well, Trix. I'll write to Mrs. Holloway and enquire.'

'Just as well I did hold my peace,' Trix heard her add under her breath.

* * *

His first term at the United Services College almost over, Ruddy was slouching down the lane towards the village of Appledore with Nicholson the other new boy. It was Wednesday, their free afternoon. Some fellows, the really keen ones, got up games of footer but most, like himself, preferred to leave the school premises far behind. There were still rules. They had to wear their striped caps and school jackets but otherwise they were free, so long as they were back for prep at five.

A night of rain had left the lanes glistening and the air was sharp with the smell of hawthorn.

‘D’you think they make us wear our caps so the villagers can sneak on us?’ he asked Nicholson, the other new boy, as they tramped along. Between them they had scraped up one- and- sixpence and were planning to buy chocolate in the musty little shop on their way.

Nicholson paused, with a look of surprise. Without removing the grass stem he was chewing, ‘Dunno...’ he mumbled. ‘Never thought about it, Giggers.’

That’s what they were calling him here. ‘Giggers’, meaning ‘giglamps’, for the spectacles. He rather liked it. Poor Nicholson still didn’t have a nickname. Ruddy pushed the glasses further up his nose. That was better, the earpieces stopped digging in. He went back to explaining about rabbits. Although it was broad daylight the creatures were skipping about in every field they’d passed.

‘So you see,’ he resumed, ‘they get transfixed. It’s fear. They’re so exposed and the light blinds them so they can’t find where the shadow is. That’s where they’d rush off to hide, normally, in the shadows.’

Nicholson seemed quite impressed. He waited, boot poised above the large pebble he had been kicking along the path. ‘But Giggers, have you seen this, actually seen it yourself? It’s not just out of a book?’

‘I tell you, it’s true. I went out in the woods one night with the

boy from the farm. We were looking for badgers. We borrowed the big kerosene lantern from the milking shed.'

He felt the excitement of it all over again. 'We never did see any badgers, though we found the sett all right. We ended up going for the rabbits: it's no end of fun to watch. Their eyes fix and they can't move, once you trap them with the light.'

Nicholson was smiling but he didn't seem very sure. He tried a sideways punt and the pebble shot away into the new growth of stinging nettles lining the track. After poking around after it with a stick, he gave up and returned.

'Do your people live on a farm? I thought that they were out in India,' he asked.

'Oh, the farm was just somewhere we were putting up last summer when the Mater came home to see my sister and me. The Pater used to be stationed in Bombay. That's where I was born, but now he's Director of the Museum in Lahore.'

Nicholson nodded, walking faster, now he'd given up on the pebble. 'Mine's up in Burmah. I didn't know you had a sister. I suppose you had to come back to live with your grandparents before you were old enough for the Coll.'

Ruddy let his face go blank, just as he had learned to do faced with Harry. His hands dug deep into his trouser pockets but came away again empty before he spoke.

'Not exactly. We were living with a poisonous woman in Southsea. That was why the Mater came back.'

Nicholson looked surprised. 'But why did she —' he checked himself. Ruddy could see him remembering that other chaps didn't always like to talk about their families. Beginning again, 'I suppose she came back as soon as you told her it was no go.'

Ruddy turned up his face considerably towards the pale April sky.

'I think, actually, it might have been a friend of theirs, an old chap from Bengal. He came to visit Trix and me one day at Southsea when I was seedy and they kept asking me what I could see. That's when I got these,' he flicked a hand up at his spectacles.

'I think he told the Mater to come. Or it could have been my aunt, I suppose.' Seeing the confusion on his friend's face, he added quickly, 'I hadn't said anything, you see. I thought – I don't know – I think I believed she thought it was ... that it was good for us. That she had chosen the woman deliberately.'

Nicholson nodded, looking wise. All the fellows here had fathers in the service. They knew that orders came through and you moved to your new posting. You didn't ask questions.

Ruddy didn't want to have to say any more.

'What about your people, Nicholson? Do you have a sister?' he asked.

'Two, worse luck. Always fussing.'

Ruddy stopped still and gazed at his new friend, with a frown.

'Girls are a bit strange. My sister says she wants to go back to Southsea to live with that foul woman in the holidays, once the Mater has gone back to Lahore.'

Nicholson struggled and gave up.

'But you said she was poisonous. My father's right. Women are a mystery.'

*

It was halfway through Christmas term at the Notting Hill High School. The smell of potpourri and beeswax that rose to meet Trix as she went through the door of 26, Warwick Gardens had become familiar over the past twelve months. Miss Craik had let her help to lay out the rose petals from the garden to dry and gave her the orris root to mix in later, when it was time to make the year's supply last June. Now the afternoons were turning dark early and the gutters Trix walked by on her way home were choked with sodden leaves.

Edna, the maid who had opened the door for her, smiled before turning back down to the basement. Trix stepped gingerly across the polished floor, trying to stop her shoes from squeaking. All three ladies meant to be kind. They just didn't know how difficult it was to live with people who were so quiet and polite all the time.

She did her best to slip through the house without leaving a trace of herself. That way she couldn't offend anyone without knowing. The ladies were all much too kind to hurt her feelings by saying anything. It meant she was never quite sure if she was doing the right things. With relief, she reached her bedroom unnoticed.

It was quite different at school, where the rules were clear. She was still surprised that the lessons were so interesting. As she began to spread her homework books out on the desk in her bedroom, Trix felt the return of a pleasant excitement. She was getting some of the highest marks in the class.

'I can see you're going to be a writer like Miss Craik and her sister,' her English teacher had said.

'Not like them!' Trix had only just held back from exclaiming. The ladies were so mild in their views it left her feeling stifled. Tonight, instead of kindness what she needed was to be on her own. She needed to think. And not to be interrupted.

Leaving her bedroom and the pile of homework half-unpacked – one of the ladies might look in to see if she needed any help with it – she slipped along the landing and let herself into the linen cupboard. The size of a small room, she'd discovered it during her first days there on her own. It was lined with shelves piled high with sheets and towels, blankets and counterpanes, all arranged in orderly folds, almost like a shop. That first time she'd crept in and curled up in a nest of blankets for comfort but today she remained on her feet, her back against the door.

She needed to understand just what exactly she was feeling. Something didn't quite make sense.

When Mama first told them they were going to spend all summer together in the country they had both been so happy.

'No lessons,' she and Ruddy capered.

'No housekeeping for me,' put in Mama, 'and no beastly Indian servants.'

Ruddy's face fell. Mama must have seen it too.

'Best of all, I'll have my favourite company in the whole world, my own darling, clever children,' she went on quickly.

Trix frowned, remembering.

Her darlings? Her favourite company?

But Mama had gone away again. Trix didn't want to think what that meant. Far away, first to visit other people, then back to India. To a place Trix only knew the name of: Lahore.

'I have to look after poor Papa,' she said.

That was such a weak excuse. Trix couldn't make it come out right. She felt as though she were sinking, wondering about Mama and struggling.

The chime of a handbell. The signal for Trix to join the ladies in the drawing room for tea. As she passed through the hall she glanced at the little table under the clock, where the post was left divided up into piles. Oh good, one for her today. From Auntie. Wanting to know when the end of term was and when she'd be arriving for the holidays. Would it be more rude to make herself late for tea by reading it here, at the foot of the stairs, or to read the letter in the drawing room, instead of paying attention? Sighing, she pocketed it. After tea would have to do.

'Now dear, you won't mind, there's a young lady going to be staying when you arrive. Her name's Miss Garrard and she's very well-connected. The Garrards, you know, the Crown Jewellers. I've put her in Harry's old room.'

Trix threw down the letter. She rather thought she did mind. She wanted everything to be the same as before. Apart from Harry. She didn't mind at all if he wasn't there. But just herself and Auntie. She didn't need another girl, especially one old enough to be called a young lady. There were enough senior girls at school giving themselves airs.

* * *

Fourteen now, and Ruddy was beginning to feel himself a man. Usually, travelling on his own like this, he'd have been light-hearted. But today he was taking the train for Portsmouth. Going back to Southsea. Even bagging a corner seat didn't lift his mood.

He swallowed. The jolting had never made him feel sick like

this before. There was sweat on his forehead and that wasn't just the heat.

The used, dusty smell of the upholstery offended him. He leaned away from the padded backrest. Finding the window at his side resisted, he got to his feet and tugged. It gave abruptly with a jerk that made him stagger.

The man with gold braid round his cuffs, who was seated across the carriage, looked up.

'Good for you, old chap,' he said kindly. 'Sound move.'

If it was up to him he'd never set eyes on That Woman again as long as he lived. She was death itself. Poison. How could Trix keep going back like this, every holiday?

Usually he managed to overlap with her for a few days in Warwick Gardens but this time, summer term at the Coll. had ended too late for that.

He could scarcely believe he'd agreed to make this visit. But he needed to see her. Just being with her calmed him down. And she was the one person he could trust to say something about his poems that was worth listening to, not just 'Ruddy, how clever'. She had an ear.

They were jolting over the points outside Guildford.

'This is horrible.'

He'd been on the verge of speaking aloud. He clamped his lips together. He hadn't realised he'd feel like this.

Think of The Study and the fellows. Remember boiling that bottle of red ink over the burner Beresford rigged up. Stoppering it had been his own idea. A fountain of blood. That'd been no end of a scheme. Worth all the scrubbing afterwards.

Stopping for Haslemere.

He revved at his imagination. Remember those fellows and their voices.

'Go to it, Giggers. We haven't a bean, it's time for you to write another set of sweet verses for the *Penzance Mail*.'

Five bob a poem, ten if it was over a dozen lines. Money for jam.

He couldn't see through his spectacles properly. Wiping them

didn't seem to help.

He shut up his battered copy of *Uncle Remus*.

A shiver. Oh no, surely he wasn't actually going to vomit? A hand flew to cover his mouth. As the qualm passed he became aware again of the satisfying bristliness of his upper lip.

Trix'd be surprised to see his moustache. It really stood out now. He was the only man in the lower forms who unarguably needed to shave. Other fellows might be head and shoulders taller for all he cared. Now it didn't matter so much, either, that he was such a funk at games.

He stroked the moustache, appreciatively. What a head start it'd given him with the fisher-girls! He had been loitering with Nicholson behind the beach shacks, eyeing a knot of girls, who seemed determined not to look in their direction. Then that pretty dark one left her friends and came straight over to him, to him not Nicholson. His body surged at the memory. Her friends were good too. Lips, then tongues, those girls had plenty to teach. His hands no longer trembled as they slid inside an opened bodice.

Havant. Soon be there. Getting off at Fratton.

Fratton, one stop before Portsmouth, the nearest station to Havelock Park and the House of Desolation. Beresford, with his naval connections, had laughed when he solemnly explained to the Study, 'I don't actually go as far as Portsmouth. I usually get off at Fratton.'

The others just looked baffled, lost to understand his joke. He'd waited, relishing the moment. He was adding to the common store of significant information.

'Getting off at Fratton, it's what those matelots say for pulling out in time.'

By afternoon every boy in the school was sniggering at the name of Fratton.

Trix, soon. That'd better make it all worthwhile. At times he'd found something flat in the tone of her letters from Southsea. But this last one struck a note of excitement.

'You can't imagine, Ruddy, I've got a new friend here, her name's Flo, and she's an art student. A painter, awfully clever. It's made such a difference. She's older than us, sixteen. Auntie's so impressed, quite cowed, poor thing, but that's something you'll be pleased to hear, I know.'

In spite of all his misgivings he felt a stir of curiosity as he got down from the train, overnight bag in hand.

It was a surprise to find his sister waiting for him on the platform. Surely they didn't let little girls of twelve out on their own? And then he understood, as Trix gestured, blushing, towards a young woman standing over by the ticket office and keeping discreetly to the background. Flo. Her chaperone.

Astonishing, Trix had gone absolutely puce.

At first he took in only the brilliant cobalt blue of the other girl's long coat. She wasn't looking at them. A greyhound, elegantly stepping at the end of a scarlet leash, had absorbed her attention. As they watched, she fell to her knees, smoothing back its ears with little cries of admiration and pleasure. The owner, a portly man in tweeds, quite as gratified as his dog, was moving off by the time Ruddy and Trix came up to her.

The words of introduction passed over his head unheard as he stared into the exquisite oval of Flo Garrard's face. The line of that cheek. Grey eyes fringed with heavy dark lashes gazed steadily back. He blinked.

She was speaking. Something about being pleased. About Trix's brother. His poetry.

The languid drawl of her voice made his spine tingle.

He stuttered as he took the hand she held out, direct as another boy. It was cool and smooth. He didn't want to let go.

Trix was babbling away.

'It's just like you, Flo, to fall in love with that dog. She's mad about animals, aren't you Flo? Wait till you see Flo's pet goat, Ruddy. It's so funny. His name's Jeremiah. Auntie thinks it's a disgrace, the name of a prophet. Doesn't she, Flo?'

His sister was trotting along clinging to the new girl's arm with

an adoring look. It disturbed him for a moment. Was this one of those 'pashes' that she said the girls at her school went in for? She did look stupid.

Then he too became absorbed in gazing at Flo.

The delightful turmoil carried him through the worst of arriving at Lorne Lodge and having to speak to 'That Woman'. She was even uglier than he remembered. And he was going to have to sleep on that horsehair sofa.

'You don't mind, do you Ruddyard? Miss Garrard's occupying your old room. It's ever so kind of her, she shares it with your sister.'

It gave him shivers to think of Flo sleeping there, where he used to sleep, perhaps in that same bed.

At once he felt shame. That rare, that exquisite creature, how could he? Keep those impulses for the Appledore fisher-girls.

He turned back to the conversation. The Woman was almost grovelling. Exchanging looks with Trix he understood. The glance she threw at Flo told him everything. It was Flo's presence that commanded this unlooked for courtesy.

'The old brute's terrified I'll leave. My people pay her more than she's used to, so I make sure to have things my way,' Flo explained simply, once they sat down to supper alone.

'There's never any question of her eating with us.'

What a woman! Ruddy was dazzled.

After supper, which was almost edible, compared with food at the Coll, they escaped.

'I think we'll make for the sea, don't you, little Kiplings? Tell me, when does a Kipling become a full Kip?' Flo teased.

Trix giggled but Ruddy wasn't sure whether to smile. Was she making fun of him? She was very tall for a girl. He tried not to show that he was struggling to keep up, she walked so fast on her long legs.

Next to Flo, Trix looked such a child, in that cap with a bow over her eye. Flo herself was wearing a loose dress of seagreen silk,

belted at the waist with plaited thongs, under her blue coat. It was just the sort of thing Aunt Georgie would choose. No stupid frills. And such colours, like one of Uncle Ned's paintings. You could tell Flo was an artist.

Small waves were lapping quietly in the distance as they settled themselves in a line on the sea wall, one on either side of Flo. She was a good sport. Other girls who looked younger than her were titupping along the pavement or sitting with their feet together on the municipal benches, looking respectable. Not Flo. She'd swung herself up onto the wall without hesitation.

Trix was chattering. Ruddy sat staring out to sea, wondering what he could say to sound interesting, when he sensed Flo fumbling in her coat pocket. He turned to see her select a white cylinder from a slim silver case.

'I say, you don't smoke do you? I didn't know that girls smoked.' To his horror his voice was squeaky with surprise. He hadn't sounded like that for more than a year.

Trix looked up, 'They're called cigarettes. Flo buys them when she goes to Paris,' she explained, infuriatingly smug, replacing her head on Flo's shoulder.

What a baby she was.

'Of course I know what they're called, you infant. Don't forget I've been to Paris myself.'

Now Flo would think he was just a squabbling kid.

'Why did you choose to come here to Portsmouth to learn painting?' he asked.

That should get some conversation going.

Flo laughed but she didn't look happy. 'That's a long story', she replied 'and rather a gloomy one. Don't be taken in by my name. They're not terribly proud of my father at the crown jewellers. Let's just say Portsmouth was cheap enough to appeal to those who hold the purse strings. And it's a step on my way. I'm going to live in Paris and paint, one day.'

He was rapt. In this woman he picked up a conviction to match his own. He'd begun keeping a careful record of his poems in

proper leather-bound notebooks marked 'Private'. Turning out verses for the local papers to earn a bob or two at need certainly wasn't the limit of his ambitions.

He stared with renewed admiration at the strings of carved wooden beads hung round the creamy neck. So much for the crown jewellers! Flo, like him, was having no truck with all that.

Next morning he woke up thinking about her. Not just a stunning girl but another artist. There must be a way to get to know her properly. To spend time together, without having to bother about his little sister.

He'd write to Flo just as soon as he was back in Warwick Gardens. Send some of his work too. Once he got back to his notebook with the fair copies, he'd make a choice and ask for her views.

That should get things started.

Drafting, then redrafting, his first letter absorbed his attention all through the journey back to London.

* * *

Over the next two years, in galleries and parks, in tearooms, when they could, Ruddy and Flo joined each other to talk about art and to argue. Flo shocked him with her 'Sorry, he may be your uncle, but Burne-Jones and his work are just old hat.' He wouldn't have taken it from anyone else.

Ruddy, now sixteen, was strolling through Kensington Gardens, the spring sunshine warm enough to make him loosen his scarf. Away from the clatter of the streets and the stink of horse piss, he could pick up a hint of newly cut grass. At his side Flo was laughing at the small dogs – excited to be out in the bright day – who yapped and lunged at the end of their leads.

Thank heavens Trix wasn't here too, mooning over Flo. That was one good thing about her passion for going back to Lorne Lodge. Today he had the clear field that he needed.

He must get on with it. Another week and Flo would have left

for good. The pressure of his need to speak, to have things clear between Flo and himself, made the air seem thin. He gasped and she turned to him in alarm.

She really did care. He took courage.

Before he could summon himself, however, Flo began.

‘I can’t believe that another week and I’ll be in Paris. You’ve been a brick, Ruddy,’ she went on, ‘without you I don’t know what I’d have done.’

Hope blazed in him at this rare concession. Flo usually avoided anything that verged on the personal.

‘Only another artist could understand. My wretched trustees! I thought they’d never stop. “How can you need more classes when you’ve just had a year at the Slade?” It was you made me step up the pressure on them. There’s iron in you, Ruddy, when it comes to art.’

He glowed. She was stunning in that long mauve smock, her dark hair held back from the pallor of her face by an amber clip. Even the leather art satchel she was carrying added to that air of distinction.

‘It’s ripping, being able to send you my work, Flo.’

He was edging towards it, almost on the brink. They hadn’t been able to meet anything like as often as he’d wanted but he’d been sending her poems almost every week. Meeting Flo, falling in love with her – such a flood. Of course, he’d been writing tons of poetry anyway but she’d brought out something special. And fear. That wasn’t so good. The fear that she’d go away and he’d lose her – that he was losing her. He’d put a stop to that now.

‘Other people are such idiots,’ she smiled. ‘One simply has to have other artists to talk to. Who else could one possibly live with?’

She was making it easy for him. She guessed. His heart bounded.

‘I feel that too. You’re the one person who understands. And you’re so beautiful. I want to be always near you.’

There, it was out. She was smiling, her eyes half-shut, veiled.

‘You are the most alive person I know, Ruddy. You keep me going. Most people are half dead.’

‘I want to keep you going always.’

She smiled but did not reply.

They came to a stop before an empty bench. Before taking his place at her side, he looked enquiringly at her. Reverently he took her hand. The sensation sent thrills right up his arm. A distraction. This was spiritual, a meeting of minds.

‘Do keep writing your poems – though I don’t know why you dwell on all that hopeless love and failure. Pre-Raphaelite stuff. It’s today’s experiences we need to examine. I’m holding you to your resolve. Poetry or death!’

‘Or life, I suppose,’ he spoke a little wildly, dizzy with encouragement. No need to feel hopeless, she was telling him.

He still hadn’t given her the poem. His own lines rang in his ears, pleading to be spoken:

*Let thy soul’s perfect music interpret its harmonies –
The passion that is in a line, and whence that passion had rise,
For my heart is laid bare to thy heart, and my soul in thy hands’ hold lies.’*

Better though to let her read them first. Quietly, on her own.

‘For life, I mean. Flo, I’ve written a poem for you. Just for you, that is. I –’

She broke in, ‘Ruddy, we think alike. I’ve got something to show you too. The sketches are just here in my bag. Is that your poem? Let me take it so I can read it later, with proper attention. I’m thrilled,’ she added, undoing the straps on her satchel, ‘I’ve heard about the most extraordinary painting Edouard Manet’s been working on, someone’s taking me to his studio to see it next week. It shows a bar, with mirrors –’ She slid his envelope into the pocket behind her pastel crayons.

He’d done it. His formal proposal was in her hands. And hadn’t she as good as accepted?

It was late afternoon towards the end of the summer term. Rud leaned back in the wide Windsor armchair that stood across from the desk in the Head's library and removed his spectacles. He wiped them with great deliberation then returned, dismay mounting, to scanning his father's letter. He hadn't realised where it was all leading, when that man from Lahore – what was his name, Wheeler? – had summoned him to London and jawed away at him for half an hour. He'd imagined that it was just the Mater with her fussing, wanting to know how he was. Now he felt as though he'd been tricked.

He'd been pleased enough to get an exeat to go off on his own to meet the man. You feel stifled, always in the same company. It could be pretty average good fun all together in Number Five Study but he liked being on his own too. *Had* to be on his own. Best of all, like this, in the Head's library.

'If you're going to write, Rud, you'd better see as much of what's been done in that line as you can,' the Head had declared. And he certainly was going to write, couldn't stop himself, he'd already filled four notebooks with his poems. All fair-copied. Work done off his own bat. No need, really, for Flo to urge him to keep writing.

He'd gone over and over the memory of that walk in Kensington Gardens, when he'd told her of his feelings. Just remembering her smiles lifted him with rapture. She hadn't needed to say anything. The understanding between them was perfect. It was on a different plane from that stuff with those fisher-girls.

But now, he could scarcely take it in, this letter the Pater had sent to the Head, his old friend Cormell Price.

'As you know, there was never any question of the Varsity: the funds wouldn't stand it. So his mother and I are mightily relieved that Wheeler thinks he can make use of Rud on the CMG. He needs a European assistant and the boy made a good enough impression – as well he might, with all the care you've taken of him, Crom.'

Without a by-your-leave, they had obtained a position for him out in Lahore and now they were instructing him to leave England?

Leave Flo? It was out of the question. The letter had been handed to him with a broad smile, as though he should be overjoyed! A journalist, forsooth! Assistant editor on the *Civil and Military Gazette* or whatever the God-forsaken rag was called. They'd deceived him. He'd no notion of going out to India. His life was here in Europe, writing. With other artists, at Flo's side in Paris.

I had not spoken of this to you earlier but it seems I must. I consider myself an engaged man and am not at liberty to leave the country,' he wrote to his parents.

His father's prompt reply filled him with chagrin.

My dear boy, I don't believe you realise how fortunate you are, to have a position offered you at sixteen-and-a-half with no experience or qualifications. A position, moreover, that by and by will carry a very decent screw, considering your age and the fact that you'll be living at home without any expenses.'

The Head appeared to concur. His passage on the *Brindisi* had already been secured and he was to sail from Tilbury on 20th September, bound for Bombay. He was helpless

* * *

1883, a year on, and his sister was embarking on the same journey. Trix and her new friend Maud Marshall, both fifteen but wishing to appear older, were only a few days into the long voyage. Yet already they'd agreed to meet every morning straight after breakfast, to work on their poems and stories.

'I can't believe my luck, you're the first girl I've met who's thought of doing anything serious. A tinkle on the piano and a few pastels were enough for the rest of them,' Maud exulted.

'How awful for you. At least one of my old friends, Flo Garrard, is a very serious painter. It's a bit sad for me, actually. She's gone off to Paris. I haven't a scrap of talent for painting myself, though.'

Trix was careful not to say anything about Uncle Ned. When she heard Mama drop his name into conversation with new people they met on board, it made her uncomfortable.

'I do sing a bit,' Maud confessed, 'drawing room songs, for after

dinner you know. Stuff to please Colonel Sahib, I mean Father. Nothing up-to-date, perish the thought, he'd hate it. And I'm not at all sure Mother likes it that I want to write.'

Trix laughed. How different peoples' lives were.

'In my family everyone writes,' she replied. 'Mama even does the "Notes from Simla" for the paper on top of all her poetry and Papa's always sending off learned articles. Even my brother Ruddy, who's not much older than I am, works on a newspaper.'

'Goodness, which one? And how dashing, a brother who writes.'

'It's the Punjab paper, the *CMG*,' Trix took pride in being able to sound like an old India hand. 'But don't get the wrong idea. Ruddy writes simply reams of poetry, but it's nothing to do with his job. That seems to be more about reading. Digging out facts from all the local papers for his editor to write about. Then proofing most of the pages before they go to press.'

Maud seemed taken aback. 'I don't believe I'd know where to begin with proof-reading and all that. I've only thought about the imagining part.'

They found a quiet corner of the deck and drew their long chairs together.

'It's funny, I simply love writing stories though I hated lessons, didn't you?' Maud asked, settling herself.

Trix laughed and nodded companionably. She wasn't going to intimidate Maud further by revealing that the Headmistress had wanted her to stay on at school.

'Trix would make an excellent candidate for the new women's colleges in Cambridge,' Miss Morant Jones had written to Mama. *'The expense would of course be much less than for a son,'* she'd added discreetly.

It was exciting to think she might have the brains for it. But Cambridge would have meant waiting even longer without seeing Ruddy. Mama hadn't pushed her.

'I'd rather not have my pretty, clever daughter turned into one of those fearsome bluestockings. No man wants a girl who thinks she knows more than he does,' Mama had concluded.

'It's your turn to begin, Maud.'

‘Oh dear, I can’t lie back like this when we’re working,’ Maud wriggled and sat up.

‘We could sit side saddle,’ Trix offered, swivelling her legs round till her feet touched the deck. ‘Like this?’

Maud’s high pitched laugh was lost in the open air.

‘Trix Kipling, it’s perfectly clear *you’ve* never sat a horse.’

Pink in the face, Trix sprang to her feet.

‘If you’re going to just play about, Maud –’

‘I didn’t mean anything by it, Trix. Don’t be cross. You forget that the one thing I really learned, out in India, was how to ride. I’m longing to get back to all that – almost as much as I’m longing to be a writer. And you already know so much about writing. Come on, do. I’m depending on you to show me.’

The invitation, the opportunity, were too much for her. Trix returned to her seat and prepared to listen.

Taking a small notebook from the pocket of her serge skirt, Maud began to read aloud. When she reached the close of her short story, where romantic love and daughterly defiance were heroically entwined, the voice of Trix was decisive.

‘You know, I do think this new draft is an improvement. Making the girl say right out what she feels. And that whole scene with her mother is really daring. Much more convincing, too.’

Maud was flushed and grateful. ‘I don’t know how you do it, Trix, but you seem to hear exactly where a piece is going wrong.’

It was the turn of Trix to look gratified, before she reached for her own notebook.

‘It’s another parody,’ she explained. ‘I can’t resist doing them. I’m making a collection of all the ones I’ve finished, to surprise my brother.’

Trix could see her friend growing anxious, so she added ‘It’s a poet I know you’ve read, Maud. I’ll give you a clue. The title is ‘Jane Smith’.

*I journeyed on a winter’s day
Across the lonely wold;*

*No bird did sing upon the spray
And it was very cold.'*

Trix began with a straight face but by the third verse her composure was giving way.

*'A little girl ran by the side
And she was pinched and thin
"Oh please sir do give me a ride
I'm fetching mother's gin."*

'Wordsworth, Wordsworth,' Maud applauded in triumph. 'Do go on. His real poems bore me to tears, but this is such fun!'

* * *

All four Kiplings, 'the family square' that felt complete again, were now reunited in Lahore. Alice and Lockwood had chosen to live on the Mozung Road, in the quarter built by the British. Situated between the Upper and the Lower Mall their home stood well outside the ancient walls of Lahore. It was a handsome Punjab bungalow, with a verandah on all sides, opening through pointed arches supported on double columns. Inside, the rooms opened out from each other, separated only by curtains as often as doors.

Trix hesitated, standing out in the passageway, wondering whether Ruddy was busy but he'd picked up her rapid footfall.

'No need to hang about, Infant, I'm at liberty. Take a pew.' She slipped through the fall of printed cotton at the entrance to his workroom, the words tumbling out.

'I'm so excited, Ruddy. You know Mama's decided I'm too young for the fleshpots of Simla and we're to spend the Hot Weather at Dalhousie? Well, I've just had a letter back from Maud and she's going to be there at the same time. It will make such a difference.'

'I suppose that means you'll sit and giggle together and there'll

be no getting a sensible word out of you,' he growled.

'You don't understand, Maud's really serious about her writing.'

Rud didn't look convinced but she wasn't going to argue.

Glancing from the wide solid table to the shelves put up by the local carpenter, following her brother's design, Trix broke out, 'You are so lucky, having a study. I know it doesn't feel like a separate room,' she added, 'just a bit of the hall Mama's curtained off for you, but it's still a proper place for you to work.'

'You can come in here as much as you like when I'm at the office. Just don't touch anything or move the papers.' Rud was quick with his offer.

Trix laughed. The surface of the table was covered layers deep in loose sheets.

'I hope you number your pages,' she observed.

'Away with that housekeeping eye, O Maiden, and let's get down to it,' with her he still revelled in all the flourishes of the storyteller. 'Now I've got you here I intend we should pull together and that we should both enjoy the advantages of my position. That's one thing your friend Maud can't offer you: if we use the office printshop it won't cost us a penny to publish our book of verse. Your parodies and mine together – all we need to do now is agree on the order.'

Trix's smile was gone.

'Oh Ruddy, I don't think Mama's going to let me.'

'What?' He looked black.

'I mean, I can put in some of my poems. But the really good ones, the ones that made you laugh, Mama thinks are not suitable. I must think of my reputation.'

'Your reputation? How are you going to get a reputation if you can't publish your best work?'

'I don't think she has that kind of reputation in mind. It's men. "Men don't like girls who are too critical," that's what she says.'

'That's rich, coming from the Mater. As sharp a tongue as was ever heard throughout all Hind.'

Trix could tell that this was a phrase picked up from the vernacular. She saw his temper was rising. But she could break the

spell, with her talent for mimicry.

“My dear child, it’s no use thinking you can write just anything you fancy, like Ruddy. Your case is completely different.” That’s what she said. “Yes, we can publish our little volumes easily enough out here. But it’s like shopping in the bazaar. Cheap. As women we have to learn to be our own first editors. You see, you’ll be judged on it. I couldn’t bear you to spoil your own chances.”

He was laughing long before she’d finished. But they both knew that this was one of the occasions when resistance was barred. Any argument on their part would provoke scenes of a kind not to be endured. Their father, too, had learned, and that early in his marriage, that when she was crossed Alice was without compunction. She would wear her opponents to rags.

‘*Nil desperandum*, Trix,’ her brother said at last. ‘You’re sixteen, for heaven’s sake. She doesn’t begin to realise you have a mind of your own now. When I came out here at sixteen, I found she’d taken some of the poems I’d sent her in letters and had them published. No thought of asking me. “Schoolboy Lyrics” indeed: “Mother’s Epic Cheek” would have been more like it.’

‘Was that the time of the great Three-Day-Sulk that Father makes jokes about?’

‘I prefer, O Maiden, to reserve my dignity; Let us call it the Period of Superb Withdrawal.’

‘Come along,’ his arm swept a space on his desk. ‘Sit here beside me. We’ll find a way to arrange the mortal remains to make a decent showing. Plus, we must think of a really good title. I confess, for the moment I’m stumped.’

‘Do you think “Echoes” would be any good? I was wondering. You know, the after-effects of hearing, when the sense seems to change ...’ her voice was beginning to trail uncertainly but seeing her brother’s look of pleasure, Trix sat straight again.

‘I had an idea too about which of yours should lead,’ she said, reaching for the worn brown envelope marked ‘Trix and Self.’

‘Feeling abominably seedy,’ Rud wrote and laid the pen down by his diary. It was now his third year in Lahore at the *Civil and Military Gazette*. The clatter of machinery seemed to have got inside his head so that his thoughts jerked and rattled to the rhythm of the presses. Usually he could absorb their throbbing and ignore it but not today. In the gloom that opened beyond his tiny office, lean, turbaned figures moved languidly among the swing of the machines. When would he be free to go home? Not for an age: there was still a full set of proofs to be gone through and he wouldn’t be getting them just yet, not for at least another hour. Across the way he could see Stephen Wheeler, his Chief, sitting in his office, head on hand, reading intently.

It was a week now since he’d presented himself at the hospital for tests. What was he going to do if the results showed he was infected? Tarleton Young had been soothing and as a Medical Officer of experience the man ought to know. Not every chap in the army picked up disease, only one in three, he reminded himself. At least that’s what they claimed, the men he bought beer for in the Infantry barracks over at Mian Mir. He learned a lot from them. He looked up at the moon-faced clock high on the end wall. He might just catch Young before he set out on his afternoon tour of inspection.

‘O Ram Dass,’ he called to his friend the foreman, ‘keep these donkeys at their work unceasingly till my return.’ It was an old joke between them all, with its half-veiled reference to an obscene folk-tale: voices rose in appreciative laughter even as the foreman replied that the word of the *Chota Sahib* would be obeyed. *Kipling minor*: it had almost ceased to irk him. Here in India you were known as the son of your father.

The presses were thrashing away at an outside order: no good letting the men slack off or the job would be delayed. Printing the *CMG* took priority and had to begin on time but they couldn’t afford to be late with the outside work. The *Civil and Military Gazette* might be India’s most influential newspaper after the *Allahabad Pioneer* but it could never pay its way on sales alone. Putting the

diary back in the drawer, he took his coat from where it hung on the broken hook by the door and picked up his hat, the solar topee that gave him the air of a walking mushroom. The light hammered at him as he left the building.

Jeyes Fluid, 'the sweet and wholesome fragrance of British India', he observed in passing, teased his nostrils once he entered the hospital quarters. At least, thanks to his job as a journalist, he was unquestioned in his comings and goings. Behind the Medical Officer's desk, Tarleton Young looked steadily at young Rud Kipling.

'There's no question, you're taking your life in your hands if you go on these forays alone, Rud.'

Another new name. A man's one. About time, he wasn't a kid. Out here, only his family persisted in calling him Ruddy.

'Look, Young, I didn't come here to be preached at.'

'I'm not preaching. I'm trying to keep you alive: a little dose of clap would be nothing compared to the knife-wounds I've seen on men who thought they knew what they were doing and got mixed up in bazaar affairs. It's knives out there before you know it.'

'I'm not "mixed up" in anything, as you put it. I think I love her.'

'Just as you think she gave you the clap?'

'It might not have been Almitra.'

'Good God, man, do you know what you're doing? A girl brought up to that trade by her own mother – you know nothing about her.'

Rud got to his feet.

'Anyway, you think that I'm probably in the clear – I'm much obliged to you.'

'Till the next time, Rud. I'll see you this evening perhaps at the Club?' But the door had already closed behind Tarleton Young's patient.

Rud was almost glad to have spoken out about Almitra. He would have liked to open his heart to someone more congenial than Young, but where to turn? He was determined never again to let the Mater see into his soul, even if he'd thought she were

up to hearing that her son wanted to marry his fourteen-year-old Parsee mistress. He blushed to remember how recently he too had despised all non-Europeans. Still, a man could learn.

He felt more torn in the case of his father. He was fairly sure that the Pater wouldn't turn a hair at the fact of the mistress. Yet he knew that he did not want to risk opening his life to his father's scrutiny. He was afraid it would begin to look different, to make him feel bad, once he saw his own life through his father's eyes. For a moment he felt utter rage merely imagining that calm gaze.

Reminding himself that it wanted only two nights till Thursday, when he would see Almitra, hold her in his arms again, he reined in his imagination and turned his steps towards the offices of the CMG. Later, he might drive over to Mian Mir. He would not, he absolutely must not allow himself to dwell during office hours on the touch of that slim body, in its folds of rustling rose-scented silk.

It was still hard for him to believe his luck: the old woman had followed him after an unsatisfactory evening session with one of the Eurasian girls who hung about the Shalimar Gardens. When she'd laid her hand on his shoulder, his first impulse had been to shake it off. But all that her hoarse whisper had boasted of her daughter, Almitra, had proved true, and more besides. Almitra was indeed beautiful. She threw all white women into the shade. What he hadn't expected was her tenderness, her sympathy.

All that Flo had once seemed to promise. Had Flo really meant to get rid of him? '*We must forget each other,*' she'd written when he went away. Her image still haunted him, at night on the edge of sleep. At times he still cherished hope.

Hope against hope. But he was not going to invite that black mood.

How trustfully Almitra had taken his hand, at her mother's bidding. 'And are you white inside, under all those clothes, Sahib?' she had murmured when he pressed her to talk with him. He had laughed aloud, pulling his shirt right open, till his smooth chest was exposed to her exploring hands.

There was a whisper of freshness in the air on Thursday night,

when he slipped through the great archway that marked the entrance to the bazaar. It must have come from the river, Rud thought, breathing with pleasure air that was all of a sudden grassy and sharp. Determined to preserve his secret, he never left the club early on these Thursday evenings, though it played havoc with his nerves to sit listening apparently placidly to the dull men round him exchanging their familiar platitudes. As he held to the shadows beneath the high uneven walls, there were few to mark him even in the old city.

Once inside the bazaar he went warily, eyes on the ground to keep his feet from the heaps of nameless refuse casually piled by carved doorways, navigating chiefly by his nose. Just past the *serai*, where the reek of camels was unmistakable, a trail of scented smoke beckoned to him. Any other night he might have tried to follow where it led, to a hidden temple, perhaps. Or maybe to a party of men sitting smoking round an upstairs room, their eyes brimming with tears as the words of the Persian Hafiz were sung.

His heart was drumming in his chest, his breath came hard as he drew near to the alley which led to the old Jain pillar by the last turning. Ahead lay the ancient door daubed with blue and jagged with rot at the base. The squat negro sat by it as usual, sharpening his long knife. Taking command of himself, Rud greeted him pleasantly, using the vernacular. Almitra had taught him more in a couple of months than a year of private tutoring from a *munshi*. He slipped through into the courtyard, hearing behind him the scrape of the door as the guard dragged it back into place.

But where was she? On many occasions that sound had been the cue for soft cries of excitement, as Almitra ran out from the lighted room across the dark courtyard, calling his name. Instead, tonight the lit doorway was empty, though shadows were moving inside. Still unsuspecting, he was in the room in two strides, only to find it empty apart from the old mother. At the sight of him, she scuttled off and he could hear her voice raised in argument, though he could not follow the exact words, before Almitra stepped into view.

With half his mind he'd noted the demurely covered head but he was still taken aback by the formality of her greeting. His arm went round her, releasing a waft of fragrance from the violet folds of her shawl, as he asked, 'Heart of my heart, why so many strange happenings?'

She disengaged herself sinuously, and before he could protest, Almitra began what was evidently a prepared speech. She was going to be married. They had been very happy together but now it must come to an end.

He simply could not take the words in. Yet at the same time, something deep within him understood what he was hearing only too clearly, loosening streams that poured down his cheeks almost impersonally, as if from melting snows.

Almitra's voice changed. 'Ruddi, *chota*, sweet one. Be wise. Yes, of course, I love you very, very much. But it is time for me to marry. No, no, no'— she put his promises aside with a gesture of both hands —'my mother is never allowing. My uncle has found me very good husband, very rich merchant in Peshawur. I am lucky, lucky girl.'

She was dry-eyed, he could see that, and positively agog with excitement, immune to his protests, not listening to a word he'd said. Meanwhile, gasping for air, his whole body registered the shock. Even so, a sceptical voice inside his head was already raised in question. If the merchant did indeed exist, what lies had he been told? Rud caught his breath and spat, full in her face. Her eyes were blank as she reached and mechanically wiped her scarf across her cheek, retreating as she did so, while her mother hurried forward into the room. Before the mother's voice could be raised to call for help, Rud was gone. Afterwards he could not remember how he got out into the harsh moonlight.

The devil of it was that he did still love her, even while his mouth was acrid with hate. The games they had invented together, in that low-lit room, haunted by the scent of jasmine. Once Almitra had tried to get him to copy her as she danced, head angled, bells

tinkling at her narrow ankles. Children again, they were abandoned to laughter, yet when he was with Almitra, laughter soon gave way to a passion that yielded in turn to a lingering tenderness.

Never again would he lie, his head in her lap, as she crooned the old songs from her grandmother's village.

He feared for her, for what they would make of her.

Sleeplessness was nothing new to him. He spent the rest of the night seated at the small table in his bedroom in his parents' home. 'Bikaner House' as friends named it, comparing it with the barren wilds of Rajasthan. It seemed as though hours passed while he remained staring, staring out over the bleak expanse of garden. For fear of snakes it was stripped as bare of growth as the desert sands.

Towards morning he struck his clenched fist once more against his aching forehead only to find that, beyond his choosing, his body was taking up a beat, a beat that was familiar, though he couldn't place it at once. Then he knew. It was a line from the *Arabian Nights*, from a love-song:

'If my feet fail me, O heart of my heart, am I to blame, being blinded by the glimpse of your beauty?'

He let himself chant the words aloud, soothing himself with each repetition. Imperceptibly, though, he found his drumming fingers shift their rhythm, as if to find an answering voice:

'Come back to me, beloved or I die,'

he sang under his breath.

'By Jove,' he said slowly, after a while, digging around in his pockets to find his usual pen. 'There is a story here and I'm going to find it.' His guts contracted as what he knew, what he had known, came back to him in force.

'A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race, and breed. Let the White go to the White and the Black to the Black. Then, whatever trouble falls is in the ordinary course of things – neither sudden, alien, nor unexpected.'

This is the story of a man who wilfully stepped beyond the safe limits of decent everyday society, and paid for it heavily.

*He knew too much in the first instance; and he saw too much in the second.
He took too deep an interest in native life; but he will never do so again.
Deep away in the heart of the city...'*

* * *

Another year, another blistering Hot Weather and Rud was sent up to Simla to recuperate. Everything always seemed much more straightforward, once he left the frying pan of the plains and got up into the hills. For one thing, Trix awaited him there. Ever since Trix had come out to India to join them he'd been feeling happier. Why, he scarcely ever thought about Flo now.

He couldn't help being a little anxious, however, about Trix. She was so evidently delightful. He'd already been obliged to see off more than one lovesick swain.

'It's much too soon for you to think of marrying, you know, Trix. We should all remain together as long as we can.'

They were taking a walk together round Jakko hill, waving and smiling as others trotted by on horseback but unwilling to be interrupted.

'You underestimate Mama,' she replied, pausing to brush a small caterpillar from his jacket. 'And romances of the peerage tempt me daily, you know, Ruddy.'

She was laughing as she said it but would she succumb?

He turned to face her.

'It's true, then, what I hear about attentions from Clandeboye? I can see the Mater would find that hard to resist, an offer from the son of the Viceroy.'

'I've resisted Arch Clandeboye for myself, thank you. He doesn't really appeal and I don't see myself in a tiara. But there've been consequences.'

She looked back at him teasing, waiting for him to ask.

'Wretched girl, go on.'

She waited till they had settled themselves on a small wooden bench, placed to offer a view over the town.

‘It might come as a surprise, but his mother, Lady Dufferin’s very put out.

‘If my splendid Arch is not good enough for Miss Kipling, I altogether give her up. I simply can’t understand what he sees in the girl.’”

Trix took off Lady Dufferin to a T. He was rocking with laughter.

‘That’s what she told Mrs. Hetheringham. And so it’s all round Simla. But that’s not the end of it. She decided they must protect her darling Arch. The Viceroy was instructed to tell Mama I should be sent home.’

‘No!’ his voice was louder than he meant. A passing rider pulled at the reins as his mount tried to shy, whinnying.

‘I told you not to underestimate Mama. She thinks Simla’s my best chance of finding a husband. She wasn’t going to be so easily cowed.’

They exchanged wry smiles.

‘Mama was rather splendid. This is what she said: “Perhaps it is Lord Clandeboye who would profit from a change of scene?”’

He enjoyed that. One up to the Mater.

Shifting his weight on the bench, however, he was distracted. He wriggled. Was he sitting on something sticky? Once on his feet he brushed furiously at his trousers.

‘It’s only resin from the pines, it will come off,’ Trix soothed him.

‘I do wish the Mater’d give you more time –’ he wanted to slow it down, all this talk of Trix and husbands.

‘I know, Ruddy I know, but what else am I to do out here? Afternoon calls and tennis at the club aren’t enough for me. I did take those classes in nursing but I’m not made of the right stuff for that. At least a home of my own to run would make me feel as if I had a position in the world. Some authority. Wasn’t a child.’

He came to a halt, heart pounding, blocking the path.

‘But what about writing? You’re not thinking of giving that up? Giving up on me?’

Immediately he felt foolish. He blew his nose.

‘Never. How could you even think that? But unless I’m to live as Mama’s daughter under her roof –’

And under her sway. He allowed the words to remain unspoken.

Rud had never relished the thought of Trix having suitors. But now that she seemed to be making a choice among them, favouring one, as the season wore on, he was positively alarmed. Her judgment was so poor. He’d have expected better of eighteen.

‘I cannot conceive of the attraction of Jack Fleming. The man is tedious beyond words, my Infant. What appears to you like silent strength is mere bone – solid bone filling up the cavities of the skull, where other mortals like ourselves keep our brains. He may share a name with the Pater but that’s all they have in common.’

Trix looked up from her magazine, taken by surprise. A wet afternoon and they’d been sitting reading, more or less in comfort, though the fire in their little sitting room was smoking.

‘I am not your infant, Rud. Would you prefer it if I accepted Archie Clandeboye after all? Became daughter-in-law to the Viceroy? Archie’s still asking me. Scarcely a week goes by.’

This was new. She never used to take a sharp tone with him.

‘You know very well I’ve no wish to see you married to Clandeboye or any other knuckle-headed grandee,’ he snapped. ‘And let’s keep snobbery out of this. We can leave that to the Mater.’

The smoke was making him cough. He leaned across the writing table to open a window.

Trix was tight lipped.

‘You have no idea what it’s like. All these men. All *wanting* something.’

Palms upraised, she seemed trying to push the air away.

‘Every word you utter convinces me more deeply. You’re simply not ready for marriage. You can’t make a proper choice if you really have no idea what these fellows want from you.’

He waited but there was no response, no blush. Her face remained blank. He tried again.

‘It’s not just poetry and roses, you know. My dear girl, why do you think people here in Simla are calling you the Ice Maiden?’

That was new to her, he’d not intended the shock. White-faced, all too evidently pierced to the heart, she turned and walked out of the room.

Next week he would be going back down to the plains. Sitting up in bed, sipping the tea his mother had carried in with her own hands, Rud looked across at her and smiled.

‘That’s better, my dear. You looked like a ghost when you first arrived,’ Alice surveyed her son critically. ‘You can’t afford to let your health get broken down, Ruddy. This country’s treacherous. I don’t like to think of you exposed to all manner of horrors. Appalling sights. I still don’t believe it was necessary for you to visit that school where the roof fell in, before they’d removed the bodies.’

‘Really, Mater, you don’t need to warn me about the dangers. I’ve lost too many friends at what I’ve come to see as the regulation age of twenty-two.’

‘Well then, take heed. I know you’re very attached to Kadir Baksh but I wonder if perhaps you should get an older servant, one with more sense of responsibility. If any of them have. You don’t look as though you’re properly cared for.’

He stared, the cup still in his raised hand. She’d done it again. It was hopeless, she never could see what was in front of her.

‘Whatever faults you find with my appearance, Mother of mine, they can’t be laid at the door of Kadir Baksh. Don’t you remember? I told you that he nursed me through that terrible attack in the Hot Weather of ’84, when those of us still in Lahore were all going down with typhoid. I was rolling on the ground in agony –’

Cared for, indeed! He thought with gratitude of the calm morning wakenings, the low voice of his servant murmuring, ‘It is finished Kipling Sahib, the shaving is completed and the *chota hazri* awaits.’ Beside him, as he opened his eyes at that soft invitation,

the tray of tea would be standing ready to his hand. Over by the *almirah* Baksh would already be storing away the long cut throat razor, scrupulously rinsed and dried, in its travelling case.

‘That tumbler of hot milk laced with opium stopped the typhoid in its tracks. And it wasn’t the only time Baksh has stood between me and death.’

He meant to impress her but his mother merely looked quizzical. She’d better hear the whole story.

‘Very well, Mater, listen to this. A native ruler in Patiala tried to bribe me, to get the *CMG* to come out in his favour. I thought it would be poetic to send the cash back by the hand of a sweeper – show what I thought of him and his offer.’

She’d picked up the teaspoon and was turning it in her hands. He couldn’t read her face. Was she paying attention? He pressed on.

‘It was pretty foolhardy, I can see that now. Though it did have style. When he realised what I’d done, Baksh was appalled. Protecting me from revenge was his first thought. “Kipling, Sahib, eat only food I have tasted first, from this day.” And he made me stick to that.’

‘Ruddy, that does sound awfully like one of your stories for the *CMG*.’

Winded, he fell silent.

His mother went on. ‘As for letting Kadir Baksh dose you – and with opium! You were lucky to escape with your life, in my opinion. I simply cannot credit that you allowed it. Really, dearest, what *shall* we do with you? Writing about this place is one thing but sinking into it –’ Her head tilted, she smiled charmingly but there was steel in her voice.

‘Well, you may take comfort from the knowledge that I’m not resigned to making my life out here as you have. I’m beginning to think of London.’ His own words took him by surprise. It was nothing less than shock that he saw blanking his mother’s face. ‘Too bad,’ he thought. ‘She’s asked for it.’

Alice did not allow the pause to lengthen.

‘Don’t let your head get swollen, will you, Ruddy? People may

find your new little *Departmental Ditties* awfully amusing with its skit on officials and their documents. But are you sure you could write for an audience somewhat less parochial?’

‘My proprietor seems to think so. He wants me down in Allahabad before many moons have passed, working on the *Pi*.’ But she already knew that there had been talk of promoting him to the staff of the senior paper, the *Pioneer*. She was gone. His rejoinder fell upon empty air.

* * *

Yet another Hot Weather blasting the Punjab, with the thermometer still at 100 well after midnight all week. Leaning over his desk, for it was cooler than sitting, with a grunt of relief Rud finished proofing the advertisements for saddles and lamp oil. The waiting figure wiped his hands against his grimy *dhoti* before accepting them and carrying them away.

No longer concentrating on work, Rud was aware once more of his own mood. He didn’t like what he’d overheard.

‘The boy’s pocket money.’ So that’s what his father thought of his employment – and of what it paid him. Rud set his teeth, remembering the weary hours he’d spent the previous day in grinding out digests of official reports for the paper. The Pater had no conception of how a day with the indigo crops and the prospects for jute followed up by the *Novoe Vremya* used a man up. He’d show them. That night he ate his dinner at the Club.

‘But you know, Ruddy, we’re not invited anywhere this evening. We could all dine together,’ his mother had objected. At the time he had made no reply, letting them think what they would but in the afternoon he relented and sent a chit home.

At the Club, the usual crowd caught each other’s eyes as they rose from the table, coffee – ‘filthy stuff’ – left untouched. Forbes came clattering down the steps outside with Davis and Harrison to where Rud was waiting.

The drivers attending in their *tikka gharries* grinned at them:

‘Old City, Sahib?’

‘Double quick, *juldee jao*, jump to it,’ Forbes took the lead once they had passed through the Lohari Gate. Tonight, he said, he was going to show them something different. But first they would smoke a pipe. There was still a novelty to Forbes in the opium houses. Shouldering aside the reeking curtain at the inner door, Rud felt its folds drag unpleasantly against his jacket. It was early in the night for the place but the figures stretched upon the slatted bunks looked as though they had not moved for hours. Maybe not for days. On his first visit the Chinaman who kept the house had pointed to more than one sunken-eyed figure that no longer left its mat but had a little food brought in now and then. Rud and his friends were not going down that road – too fly by half – but a pipe of the Chinaman’s finest would give a fillip to the evening’s adventures.

Inhaling deeply, as he lay stretched out on the frayed and blotchy cushions Rud felt his soul expand and open. From all the lives in the ancient city that lay about him, tremors played against his nerves. The steps of the young men were slowed when they left, their eyes brighter, as they half stumbled into the street.

‘What now?’ All turned expectantly to Forbes.

‘I’m going to show you something that even our friend Kipling here hasn’t ferreted out yet. We’re going to a new whorehouse tonight, gentlemen.’

A let down: he’d imagined magicians, sorcery. He didn’t need Forbes to find him women. Disappointed, Rud gave his attention to the cloud streaked brilliance of the night sky, and to the domes and minarets of the far Mosque of Wazir Khan that reared themselves in silhouette against it.

In fact, he was already acquainted, if only slightly, with the *mohalla* they found themselves in, having marked it as he wandered through one midnight weeks before. There were lamps on the ground in the courtyard they entered and men sitting about smoking, the coals in the hubble-bubble pulsing bright.

‘Are you ready for this, you fellows?’ Forbes demanded as a tall woman stepped forward, ushering them inside. Blinking, his eyes watering in the smoky lamplight, Rud was still able to observe that she was thickly made up and that her bones were too heavy for a woman. He would have turned full face to make sure but he picked up a sudden rigidity in his companions. Following their arrested gaze his own fell on half a dozen painted boys, slim as reeds, doe-eyed, reclining on bolsters of peacock silk.

‘Ohhh...’ the newcomers stood foolish with surprise; all but Forbes, who looked pleased with himself. One of the children, he could not have been more than ten, tripped forward coquettishly with downcast eyes, to welcome them.

‘We have friends for all of you sirs, many friends,’ he offered. ‘You have only to choose among us. We are many here tonight.’ There was a pause. The men didn’t look at each other. Forbes was first to move, beckoning a dark-skinned youth who ran up and flung a graceful arm around his neck. They left the room together. Rud took off his spectacles, wiped them and put them back. He was not in doubt of what he wanted. No room for uncertainty there. But at the same time everything that he’d ever learned told him to hold back. To his relief, he saw that Harrison was swaying and looking distinctly the worse for wear.

‘Shall I take you into the air, old man?’ he offered. Holding the other’s head as Harrison vomited against a wall of crumbling damp-rotted brick, Rud experienced only gratitude for his escape.

* * *

The season for moving up to Simla had come round again. His fifth. And last, if he had anything to do with it.

The Mater was not so sure.

‘Ruddy darling, all in good time,’ she responded when he announced that he planned to leave India in the New Year.

‘The moment’s come to try my luck in London,’ he insisted but she shook her head at him, smiling.

Though he'd been longing for the scent of pines and the whispering freshness of the hills, Rud was already beginning to feel trapped. With the Viceroy and the Administration in residence, came all the petty rivalries of a court. A British community seven hundred strong, ten times the size of the one in Lahore, should have offered more variety. Yet its feverish tone, its liaisons, its gossip, its all too legible adulteries and romances had become deadly predictable from year to year.

And now all that falseness had infected Trix. Constant scenes of stagey emotion over Fleming. Rud couldn't abide them.

'Hasn't that fellow gone yet?' he growled, from the narrow hall.

In common with most of the cottages available for rent in Simla, the walls were woefully thin but Rud was not troubling to lower his voice.

But Trix was beyond embarrassment. Stifling her sobs, 'Really Jack, I do mean it this time. It's too soon. I mean, I want –'

Jack Fleming did not let go of her hand but stood so close, she could see every hair in his moustache. He was so much taller than her, she shrank back.

'I cannot understand you, Trix. I thought we'd got this settled once and for all. Plenty of girls get married at twenty.'

'I've tried and tried to make you see, Jack. I just feel I – that we should –'

He didn't wait.

'If you didn't mean to stick by me, why the dickens did you call me back? We've been going through the same scenes for months now but I thought this time you knew your own mind. I call it damned unfair.'

She saw that he coloured under the bronze.

'I beg your pardon,' he apologised, without changing his resentful tone. 'But Trix, I thought we were so happy. Only yesterday you were reading Mrs. Browning's sonnets to me out in the pinewoods. Now you're behaving like a regular hill-station jilt – off with one romance, on with the next.'

'How dare you, Jack, how dare you?' All at once her voice

cleared. 'Please go and don't try any more to make me change my mind.'

Fearing that he might attempt to put an arm round her, Trix stepped out of his reach and held the door open.

Baffled, Captain Fleming strode from the room, almost forgetting to pick up his hat from the rickety table by the front door.

Within a day or two Rud was reporting to Lockwood.

'As we feared, Pater. Trix spent the entire afternoon out in the woods with me, weeping. Says she can't bear it, now she's sent Jack away. Good riddance, I told her, but she won't hear a word against him.'

Lockwood Kipling's usual calm failed him.

'I'm at my wits' end with her; we all are. The whole circus will now start up again. Whatever's the matter with the girl?'

That afternoon Trix made an attempt to explain herself. Standing beside her father under the porch, watching the drips from the eaves and waiting for the shower to stop, she broke out.

'You've no idea of the strength of his will. I sometimes feel like a prisoner when I'm with him. Then I know I have to escape.'

Lockwood had never heard anything like this. As a daughter, Trix delighted him, she was so lovely and so quick. But she'd none of her mother's unyielding confidence. He'd done his best to encourage her, though who could guess what she needed? He had such limited experience of young women.

This last time she'd sent Fleming packing Lockwood had really thought Trix meant it. She'd looked positively relieved. Now he spoke with all his tact.

'Jack seems to make you so unhappy, dearest, I'm sure it's best if you've decided to break with him for good.'

The face she turned to him was haunted.

'I do wish I could. But it's not so easy. Jack's determined to marry me.'

'Not against your will, surely?' he was aghast.

'It's so hard to be sure what I really want. You see, however

angry, however sure of myself I am when I tell him to go, it doesn't last. For a day or two I feel quite exultant, then those terrible feelings come back. It's already started.'

Trix looked away and began to stab the tip of her umbrella into the moist earth beyond the tiles of the porch.

'What feelings?'

He really didn't want to have to deal with this but neither did he want to cut her off.

Trix went on poking and stabbing with the umbrella.

'Darling Trix, hadn't you better explain?'

She dug harder, as though trying to get at something that was buried.

At last she raised her head and looked squarely at him.

'It's, it's Hell,' she stammered.

He tried not to show that her use of strong language shocked him. A good thing Alice wasn't there to hear.

'It's this simply dreadful feeling I get when I send him away. I know I've been wicked and that I'm going to be punished. I get so frightened. I'll be left with nothing and no-one. Then all I want is to go home to Southsea but I can't.'

It broke his heart to hear the misery in her voice. But her actual words left him baffled. Home to Southsea? Left with nothing and no-one? She sounded more like a three-year-old who'd got lost. But perhaps this was just a sign of hysteria? Unmarried girls did seem to get over-excited. He must do his best to steady her. Strengthen her resolve.

'Going to be punished? My dear girl, whatever makes you think that? You've a right, a duty, to make your choice of who to make your life with, you're not a child.'

She looked sternly back at him.

'Aren't I Papa? Sometimes I feel that I shall never be properly grown up.'

'Nonsense, darling. You've worked yourself into a state of nerves over Jack, that's all.'

Her eyes dropped and she bit her lower lip, uncertainly. Before

she could speak again, he took her arm.

‘Come along now, it’s clearing’.

She didn’t seem to hear.

She made him wait while she finished smoothing over the place where her prodding had disturbed the earth.

* * *

Rud had few regrets on leaving the family home to take up his new position at the *Pioneer*. He scented a new freedom. In moving to Allahabad, six hundred miles to the south, he exchanged the cramped alleys of old Lahore for a place of open spaces: after the 1857 uprising the British had set fire to the native quarters then rebuilt the whole city on modern lines. When Rud arrived, its Muir College had just been incorporated as Allahabad University. The Professor of Physical Science, Alec Hill, and his wife, Edmonia, known as Ted, soon invited him into their own home, as a paying guest.

‘Won’t you have any breakfast at all?’ Ted Hill was trying to keep her temper. She was almost beginning to wonder whether she and her husband Alec had been wise to invite Ruddy Kipling to share their home. It had served him for a while to live under his employer’s roof when he moved down to work on the *Pioneer* but that arrangement couldn’t go on forever.

Up to the present the arrangement had seemed most satisfactory.

‘Really Rud, that’s not very flattering.’

He was taken aback. ‘Flattering?’

She gave up. He was standing by the sideboard, drumming his fingers while the lid of the coffee-pot jumped erratically in response. Following the direction of his gaze, where he stared unseeing at the wall, she noted that the damp marks which had appeared during the last monsoon seemed to be spreading.

‘Do you know where you’re planning to ride? Shall I tell the kitchen you’ll be —’

A snarl, there was no other word for it, interrupted her.

‘I don’t know, I tell you. I don’t know.’

She heard him clattering down the steps of the bungalow, calling the while, peremptorily, for his horse.

‘Splendid,’ she thought to herself. ‘Spread misery through the household.’ Her own morning ride would be shortened by the time she would have to spend in conversation with Govind the *sais*, restoring his self-esteem after what promised to be a bruising encounter with her house guest. It was true that the cook, Amal – she did prefer to use their given names – didn’t strictly need to be given numbers. Rud knew that as well as she did. The awareness of having been seen through heightened her sense of frustration, lacing it with shame.

Nevertheless, Ted knew that she was doing her best. She had observed that it was not uncommon among the British here in Allahabad for a husband to speak to a wife in such a manner. No American woman would have tolerated it. By any account, though, this was truly extraordinary behaviour on the part of a guest. And Ruddy could be so thoughtful. It was the sweetness in him, as much as the cleverness which had moved them to offer their invitation.

He had touched them. She and Alec had agreed that Rud deserved something better than those miserable flimsy structures that passed for bachelors’ quarters at the Club. He could come as their paying guest. The money wouldn’t be unwelcome: Alec’s stipend was modest. They’d all lived companionably together for weeks now and there was no question but his company and his conversation made them feel alive again, after the suffocating social observances of the other Britishers.

‘I’m going to get you honorary American citizenship; you’re way too adventurous for a Brit,’ she’d teased.

That evening they were all sitting together after a rather silent dinner. Evenings had been like this all week. Coming home after work, Alec had picked up the atmosphere as soon as he entered the house, wordlessly raising his eyebrows, to show he guessed the source of trouble and being careful to say little. They felt like

parents at times, though Rud wasn't really much younger than they were.

With a jerk he began to apologise.

'I know I'm behaving abominably.'

Fearing that her husband was about to dismiss the matter, Ted spoke first.

'That's so. Is it something you're writing?'

A look of startled gratitude from Rud warmed her.

'I thought it must be something serious. Fever never brings out the beast in you like this.'

He laughed, shamefaced. Alec threw his wife a look. He got to his feet.

'I've not completed the report on my tour of the Satpuras and it's due in very shortly. Forgive me.'

She waited for Alec's retreating footsteps to patter away into silence. Give Rud time.

'Would you feel like reading it to me, what you're working on?'

He so often did but today might easily be different. She braced herself yet there was no rebuff. Instead, Rud sprang up, to return within a few minutes, an untidy sheaf of papers in hand. He took a seat closer to the lamp. Looking up at her before he began, he appeared unusually shy.

'It's about two children, called Punch and Judy. I haven't finished it yet. This is only a draft.'

As she listened, there unfolded a story of two small children who found themselves abandoned among strangers in a foreign land. Cruelty followed, from a woman who spoke of God and from Harry, her well-instructed son. The little boy, who had been lord of an Indian household, now learned what it was to be beaten.

"But I'm not an animal," he had stammered, shocked. But that was not the end of it: Harry entered and stood afar off, eyeing Punch, a dishevelled heap in the corner of the room, with disgust.

"You're a liar – a young liar," said Harry, with great unction, "and you're to have tea down here because you're not fit to speak to us. And you're not to speak to Judy again till Mother gives you leave. You'll corrupt her. You're only

fit to associate with the servants. Mother says so.”

Having reduced Punch to a second agony of tears, Harry departed upstairs with the news that Punch was still rebellious.’

The sweat stood out on the young man’s forehead as he read.

‘Of course it’s me, it’s about me. And Trix,’ he added, as he laid the last sheet down on top of the others.

Ted knew she needed to be careful. Leave Rud to himself and the story was going to be just a hymn of hate. He would be left horribly exposed, for it was obvious that his plan would be to publish it in *The Week’s News*. Why not? He was editor, no-one would challenge his decision. She’d always thought he had a bit too much freedom there. Readers would back away, they’d dismiss him and his story, say he was crazy. It could break him.

She had known, vaguely, that he’d not been happy when he was small and sent to England for his education but she’d never imagined this. What a terrible race the English were, what they put their children through! She knew he was waiting, without looking at her, for her response.

‘My dear,’ she began very quietly, ‘I think you are a miracle.’ He relaxed. He had not withdrawn. She could go on.

‘This is an astonishing piece. But I was wondering, your people as you call them, won’t they –’

He looked not a bit embarrassed by the implied question but genuinely surprised.

‘They know what happened to me as a child; it’s not new to them. Those arrangements were made by them.’

‘Well, yes,’ she conceded, objecting silently, ‘But can they possibly have faced the bitterness of the adult?’ Speaking aloud again, ‘Your sister, what does she think about it all now?’

‘We don’t speak of it. We never have.’

‘What, never? Not to each other?’

‘Well, in the first year or two, when we were small we used to. We tried to work out why they’d done it, gone away. Left us in Hell. Afterwards, when she came back, we were just so glad to see

our mother. Later on, I think we might have been afraid. I don't know. To be honest, until now I haven't wanted to face it and I imagine Trix has felt the same.'

'So the two of you didn't come right out and tell your parents what a dreadful mistake they'd made, the lasting impact –'

Looking affronted, he got to his feet and began to fiddle with his spectacles. He held them up to the light, then took out a crumpled handkerchief.

'Lasting? I consider we've made a good recovery. At least I have. Trix does seem to be at sea where men are concerned, that I admit.'

'I didn't mean to suggest there was anything exactly wrong with you, Rud.' Her own heart was thumping. Did she dare go on? 'I was just wondering, you must have been confused. How on earth could you be sure about anything? What to believe? Who to trust?'

She waited. Rud seemed sullen but he didn't explode.

'I mean – you might have been afraid to tackle your parents in case they took Mrs. Holloway's part –'

He was folding his arms.

'You're so desperately angry –'

The sense of being blocked brought her to a halt. Rud was taking it all as an attack on him, closing down before her eyes.

'What could we say? Face-to-face, it would have been too much.'

It was not clear to her who he'd wanted to spare, whose collapse, whose violence he had been anticipating. This business of parents and children, the relations between them, was just too complicated for her. It only confirmed the general principle she'd always suspected. She rather hoped she would get away without children of her own.

It was certainly not her job to protect his family. She must do what she could, though, to protect Rud from himself.

'There's only one suggestion I want to make. I think it might help the story as a whole if you could maybe heighten the contrasts. A word or two in there suggested to me that you rather liked the woman's husband. Tell me about him.'

To her carefully concealed delight, Rud sat forward, the tension

melting from his face and began to talk.

Before he slept that night Rud had drafted the paragraphs which brought back to life the old man who had held his hand and taught him about the sea.

Rud lost no time in getting his new story into print.

In the Wonder House, as the Lahore Museum was known to the sellers of watermelon and *paan* who took advantage of the shade by the gate, Lockwood Kipling walked to and fro between the blandly smiling heads of stone. Ever since they had come under his care, these sculptures, part Greek part Buddhist, had drawn him to them.

‘Ravishing, ravishing,’ he murmured under his breath, running a hand along curves that lay chill and faintly gritty under his touch. He wanted to understand the people who had made these things. But he would have to get the day’s letters out of the way before he could get back to his reading. That was the worst of being director, the endless official projects and the correspondence. Well, that was the price he paid. It gave him the authority to advance the ancient skills of Indian artists. To win them respect.

‘Sahib, Sahib, Kipling Sahib –’ He whirled round in alarm at the familiar voice of the *khitmutgar*, who should have been at home in the Mozung Road harassing the sweepers at that hour. Sandals flapping, a scuffle of white drapery and even before he got up to his employer Ali Beg was panting out, ‘Memsahib say home now, now this minute, Memsahib say *now*.’

To his relief he found Alice not incapacitated but pacing the drawing room, irritably swerving as she was impeded by the crowded furniture.

‘It’s her own fault,’ he found himself thinking irrelevantly, ‘that’s how she likes a room. Tables everywhere. Fuss.’ He saw she couldn’t contain herself. She would never expose herself to public gaze in that state, though, even to walk on the verandah. Till he saw how angry she was, he had been terrified that it was

the children. That Trix had been thrown from her horse or that Ruddy had fallen ill again. The boy's health was always going to be a concern. While as for Trix, he shuddered to recall what she'd put them all through over the past year, with her engagement to that dreary fellow, Fleming. On, off, on again.

'It's not Trix?' Anything was possible.

Alice ignored his question. 'Have you seen this week's *News*? The Christmas number, I mean?' The newspaper was brandished at him like a weapon.

His first thought was of some undeserved promotion, an acquaintance who had been advanced beyond what she considered his due. But of course not, she surely wouldn't interrupt his morning for that.

'Read it, just read it. I've never been so mortified. I cannot believe that Rud would do this to us. That boy has changed dreadfully over the past year —'

With raised eyebrows, Lockwood took the paper and pushed up his spectacles for a closer look.

'*Baa Baa Black Sheep*? Is that the piece you mean?' As he scanned the first paragraphs, a weight of dread closed down on him. Looking up, 'I think I'd better sit down to concentrate on this. No, not now, no *chai*,' he dismissed the hovering, pleurably agitated servant.

He forced himself to keep on reading, though as he went on he could hear what seemed the groaning of another man. When it was done he let the paper drop and covered his face.

'Well?' Alice was biting the twin thumbs of her clasped hands. 'Well, Jack, well?'

He slowly raised his head.

'Alice, don't press me. This is almost too much to bear.'

'Don't I know it. Can you imagine, the whole of India will have read this by tomorrow morning. Held up to them by my own son. And how are we to keep it from Trix? Oh, it could ruin her prospects!'

He waved at her impatiently. 'You shock me. Try to think more

clearly. In the first place, do you think this will be news to 'Trix? She was *with* Ruddy in Southsea, she's *in* the story herself. See, Judy, the little girl.'

'I'm sure it's all exaggerated beyond recognition, like everything Ruddy writes.'

'I can only pray God that's indeed the case.' Without noticing, he'd fallen back on the language of that Methodist upbringing he had so adamantly rejected. 'If we have been responsible, even through ignorance, for putting them through anything approaching this, I can never again look my children in the eye.'

'You mean you'll tackle Ruddy?'

There was a lengthy silence.

'No, I'll not do that. Nor will you, Alice.' His raised hand preempted a rush of response. 'We are not going to speak of this with Ruddy, not going to discuss it with 'Trix. We are going to go on as a family, as before.' He saw that this exertion of authority had succeeded. He would have his way. Alice was subdued. Though she fidgeted under his gaze, she would abide by his decision.

That evening, however, he found he could not prevent himself. When 'Trix bent over to kiss him, as she entered all fresh in her white muslin before dinner, Jack Fleming's pearls at her throat, Lockwood covered the hand she had laid on his shoulder with his own.

'Trix, lovey, this new story of Ruddy's, about those two little children, it's all made up, isn't it?' he pleaded.

'Oh Papa,' she faltered, 'Papa, I don't —'

Alice joined in. 'Come along, daughter of mine. You know what Ruddy's imagination is. Why are you hesitating?'

Transfixed, 'Trix turned her head from one parent to the other but she made no sound.

At the sight of the single tear which began to glide down his daughter's cheek, Lockwood Kipling rose to put himself between the two women. 'Darling girl, really there's no need for this. No-one is angry with you. Just, that story makes us terribly distressed.

We'll say no more about it, at present.'

'You must be able to understand that at least,' Alice had softened her tone. 'I find it impossible to make sense of Ruddy's behaviour. He's setting out to hurt us, he must be, to ruin things for us out here, now he's set on leaving India.'

A hiccupping sob burst from Trix.

Now the moment she had been dreading was here, Trix found herself as though struck dumb. Ruddy'd warned her there would be a scene when they read his story but she'd never imagined this.

Darling Papa, how could she deny him comfort?

But why, why did they want to go on so, pressing her to deny how wretchedly unhappy she and Ruddy had been?

She felt a bolt of anger.

Could she really be certain, though, that life in Southsea had truly been as full of cruelty as Ruddy swore?

But if he was right, why did the thought of Auntie make her feel peaceful and safe?

None of it made sense and it was all her parents' doing. It was a shock to find she could hate them.

'Ruddy could've been here, within reach, for another year,' Alice insisted, as they waited for Trix to return from bathing her face. 'If only he hadn't written that silly poem accusing poor Sir Frederick Roberts of giving jobs to his friends. So naïve. What does he expect of a Commander-in-Chief? After that his employers had to make sure Ruddy left sooner rather than later. Couldn't he see that it was one thing to attack public policy on drains and quite another to turn on the top people?'

Lockwood chose not to challenge this. Surely Alice remembered Ruddy telling them months ago that he'd be leaving in the New Year.

'I still think that we should allow him to take the consequences of his own actions, Alice. There's nothing we can do about this latest poem about the Viceroy, for instance.'

‘Oh, don’t worry, Jack, darling I’ve seen to that. I couldn’t rest, once it had been intimated to us how very deeply the Viceroy had been offended. It took me the whole morning to write it but I sent off a letter of apology to Lord Dufferin last week.’

‘But you had done nothing, Alice, it was Ruddy’s work.’

‘I wrote on his behalf, of course. As his mother.’

She was fidgeting with her cuffs: always a sign she had something to hide.

‘It’s not that simple. It might have been my fault. I’m not sure.’

His eyes widened. He waited.

‘You see, Lord Dufferin had told me things. In confidence. About his plan of publishing a book of his mother’s poems. I may have mentioned it to Ruddy, I don’t know.’

Lockwood recalled that Rud had written something about Dufferin’s mother and her poems. The tone was perfectly respectful. He was baffled.

‘Lord Dufferin accused Rud of invading his privacy.’

Her mouth was trembling.

‘This is a bit of a storm in a teacup, dearest,’ he said, putting his arms round her. ‘Try to forget about it.’

He didn’t care to imagine the pleading, the humiliation that his wife had put herself through. And to what end? Ruddy was twenty-three, he’d books out and selling well all over India, even being reviewed at Home. He was going to make his career in London. The Viceroy’s favour was nothing to him. Was Alice under the impression that she was protecting their own place in this tight little world?

Dinner was subdued that night and quickly over. Neither of the women ate much and Lockwood was soon left alone with his pipe. As he drew away on it, however, he could not find satisfaction or peace of mind. The problem Ruddy posed to him could not be dismissed. The boy – he must stop calling him that – couldn’t seem to resist attacking those who wished him well.

He’d been so full of joy, seemed to feel so honoured, that day in Simla when Fred Roberts asked him what mattered to the men

in barracks. Then, almost the very next week, Ruddy published that really quite scurrilous attack on Roberts. Lockwood was not confident in his own mind that he knew how to account for his son's behaviour. Terms like 'integrity' or 'the duty of a journalist' did not quite seem to fit the case.

Six weeks later Rud himself showed up in Lahore without warning. He fairly burst into his parents' home, slinging his old tweed overcoat down before the bearer could take it from him. 'Revered elders, pray show yourselves to an unbeliever'—his cry had carried to Alice as she stood out on the verandah behind the house, cutting her to the heart. It was a farewell that he had come to take; his evident joy smote her. But he would only be with them for a few days. She had been sipping from a cup of tea and gazing out at the hesitant blades of fresher green here and there in the dusty garden as she waited for Trix to return from her morning ride: now, taking a firmer grip, she sang out to him in her most musical voice.

'Darling boy, at the back of the house: come and kiss your old mother.'

There had been so little notice. Of course, she'd known he planned to leave India — he'd put it to her brutally enough. But not yet. Between one mail and the next, it seemed to her, the plan had been fixed. It was true that Mrs. Hill, in whose house he had been living, had been desperately ill since before Christmas: four weeks or more really quite raving with malaria and heaven knew what else, according to Ruddy's letters, which had shown an almost excessive degree of distress. But the idea that Mrs. Hill should undertake a long voyage as a means of recovery quite so soon appeared strange. However, the Hills seemed perfectly set on it.

'We're all to travel together,' Rud repeated, eyes shining, over a late breakfast. 'We'll be taking the long route, Burmah, Japan and then across America; Ted wants to show me her country.' Eyes still fixed on his mother, he continued more gently: 'It's no good. I do have to go, you know. I can't stay here. If I'm going to do anything

with my writing I need to leave India.'

Alice thought bleakly of how she had humbled herself in apologising to the Viceroy – '*no-one regrets his offences more keenly than do his parents...*' she had assured Lord Dufferin. And still that had not sufficed to keep Ruddy with her.

Her son did not appear to notice her silence. 'I have to take my chance – and now I've got them to bring out my stories in the new *Railway Library Series* I want to catch the tide –'

'In the affairs of men?' But the fizz had gone out of what had been a favourite game, capping quotations. 'My boy, my dear, dear boy, I can't bear to see you go,' broke from her. Mother and son sat staring, horrified, at each other.

Back in her own bedroom, swathed in the becoming folds of her morning wrapper, Alice Kipling gazed across at herself in the blotched looking-glass and saw that she was old. This was not what she had wanted. Rud, with his absurd moustache and his station slang, was her boy, her own.

This pretence that he was a man and living a life he had chosen was tolerable so long as he was at least living under her roof. When they had all been together, the four of them in Lahore, they had all been happy. She pushed away the memory of her son's black moods and Trix's awkwardness. Letting Rud go off to work on the *Pioneer*, in Allahabad so far away to the south had been a mistake. She'd always sensed it.

Alice had her own opinion of Edmonia Hill – an American, a woman who let herself be addressed as Ted, a woman who had never fitted in. It had been a bitter day for Alice when Rud had accepted the Hills' invitation to take up lodgings in their house. But she must make an effort. There was nothing for it but to make this Mrs. Hill into her friend too.

When the SS *Madura* set sail for Rangoon on 9th March, in Rud's pocket as he stood waving from the deck lay a charming note addressed to Edmonia Hill by his mother.

* * *

Another three months and Trix too was about to leave home.

Her twenty-first birthday and her wedding day.

'You've beaten me by a length,' Maud teased in her letter. Maud was going to have to wait a whole year before she could marry that nice man she was engaged to, Tom Driver. But she did sound happy. *'Of course you know better, my dear, but he thinks every word I write glitters with genius.'*

Now the day had come, if she'd allowed herself, Trix would have wondered whether she was sure about Jack after all. But the giddy triumph of winning through, of forcing, yes, forcing Mama's agreement had been so intoxicating it had carried her aloft until today. Once Mama was on her side, she had known Papa would not be able to hold out for long. Remembering that made her uncomfortable, almost guilty. She'd never liked the way he couldn't stand up to her. Surely Papa would come to appreciate Jack, in time. Not everyone was at their best in general company.

She didn't even want to think about Ruddy, not today. He had been so harsh.

Ruddy simply didn't understand. She and Jack had proved that they belonged together: the misery she'd suffered during their engagement surely made that obvious. Every time that they'd quarrelled and she'd sent him away she'd been utterly wretched. That first autumn when she broke off the engagement and they were apart for months and months it had reduced her to despair. What did it matter if Ruddy threw up his hands when she finally called Jack back to her?

But now, where was Ruddy on her wedding day? Across the world in San Francisco, travelling with friends. Time for him too to make a new life, he'd claimed, a life among other writers. Her wedding had already been fixed for June but he hadn't put off his departure.

These sad feelings were not ones to be entertaining today. Think of the future. An end to being edited by Mama. No more playing second fiddle. She danced a few steps, pointing the toes of the little scarlet slippers brought down from beyond the Frontier;

she'd pounced on them when she saw them in the bazaar. Of course she was going to be a good wife, manage the servants and all that – why, she'd already started collecting recipes and hints to copy into a commonplace book. She'd gone through Mama's, copying down all the dishes that she might have to teach her Indian cook, from beef stew to junket and rice pudding.

But it was the thought of a different kind of writing, writing that would be her own that made her thrill. She was going to escape from that horrid sense of being stifled.

As mistress in her own house, with Jack, who though undeniably rather silent was utterly devoted to her, she would be free.

Flies buzzed among the flower vases, loud in her ears as the gasping of the organ, when Trix paused on her father's arm. She felt sweat trickle at the back of her neck and wherever it could find a path beneath her tight bodice. Could her nose have gone shiny already? At least Mama had gone over it with *papier poudré* for her.

Kicking aside the folds of silk, where the toe of her white shoe had caught, Trix looked squarely past the congregation, with its fans and mopping handkerchiefs, to the altar.

How well Jack looked in his dress uniform.

So tall and straight with his best man, that fellow-officer, Joe Johnson, beside him.

Of course Papa and Ruddy couldn't help being short. But from now on she was going to belong with these splendid men. The Daughter of the Regiment – Ruddy would laugh at that.

As she hung there, her father's hand came round to cover her own.

With renewed courage, Trix stepped forward.

After this she and Jack would never be separated again.

September, and the June heat in which Trix had stepped up the aisle had eased. Who could have predicted that she'd be back in

Lahore within such a short space?

There was so much to get used to and none of it foreseen. She'd not expected it, the pushing and grunting. Mama made it sound as though a key turned in a lock. But nothing had seemed smooth or familiar about this being a wife.

And how strange to be back living at home in the Mozung Road.

'You'd better go to your parents while I'm off on this Burmah posting,' Jack had decided. She couldn't have imagined staying on alone in Calcutta.

Tonight there was that dinner party at the Osbornes'. She would have to play the part of a bride. Smile charmingly, accept her new precedence with a becoming grace, not let them see – at the very thought of the performance demanded of her she felt exhaustion. If she'd not made a great effort, she feared she might have felt rage.

It was disconcerting but Jack seemed to offer almost more of a barrier to the writing than Mama had. Living at home, Trix had quietly determined to keep her drafts to herself, all wrapped in a favourite scarf of coral silk. Not that she wasn't delighted too by the tucked lawns and the smooth folds of cashmere but these, she murmured fiercely, these were her real trousseau...

Heart racing, for Jack she unwrapped her treasure and put all her writing into his hands. When days passed without a word from him, she braced herself to ask.

'Oh, was I expected to read them? Pixie, you know you've married a soldier, not a damned bookworm.' The phrase 'like your own people' hung unspoken.

When she sobbed in confusion he went on, meaning to be kind, 'I know we used to read poetry to each other. That foolishness has no place when a couple takes on the duties of married life.'

He went further: 'I'm sure there'll be some other wife on the station to share your scribbling. I think I remember Fortescue's wife with an album people used to write in.'

* * *

When Jack wrote from Burmah to say he'd been taken ill there, at first Trix didn't understand what a piece of luck that was for her. Not that she liked to think of it in that way. Jack had been ordered Home Leave. It meant she would be with Ruddy once more.

By the time they reached London she was keyed up, longing to talk about her writing. The novel was close to being finished, she needed Ruddy and his advice. She was allowing herself to realise just how much she'd missed his company.

But his looks, when she ran him to earth in his lodgings in Villiers Street off the Strand, the puffy eyes and the pallor that even his dark skin couldn't hide put all that out of her mind.

'Don't stare at me like that, Trix. I'm just a bit out of sorts,' he insisted.

'Why don't you come back tomorrow, when I've finished this piece?'

She left him hunched over the battered Pembroke table, his papers cascading from the sofa with its trail of torn braid. It didn't look as if the room had been swept for some time.

Was this what success as a writer meant? On arriving in London, Ruddy appeared to be instantly famous, in demand everywhere, according to the newspapers. *The Times* had just compared him to Maupassant. Alongside her pleasure in Ruddy's success Trix sensed something else, feelings she didn't care to look at. He deserved it, she told herself firmly. All that hard work.

As the days passed and she saw a little more of him, her resentment was displaced by anxiety. He was so driven, he worked till he was exhausted and nerve-racked. Trix felt only alarm.

As for his incoherent involvements! Now she viewed them with increased dismay. No sooner out of India but he'd been looking for a wife. Before he even reached London, he'd engaged himself to the sister of that nice Mrs. Hill, Caroline Taylor, a girl he'd only known for a fortnight. Another month or two and that was all off again, which was no great wonder. Next thing, he was back in love with that girl she once knew, Flo Garrard, the one he'd fancied

himself engaged to when he was a schoolboy. He even seemed to be planning a trip to Paris in pursuit of Flo.

Why, if it had been a young woman exhibiting such frantic emotions, such a desperate need to attach themselves, she'd have been written off as an hysteric.

Thank goodness their parents would soon be with them in London. It was no good talking to Jack about any of this. But she doubted whether they'd see those love affairs in terms of something profoundly amiss, as symptoms or signs of something deeper, as she did. They'd prefer to focus on the headaches, which everyone liked to believe were brought on by overwork and eye strain.

Jack was spending his mornings at the Royal Geographical Society, so she was free, that is, she was obliged to make her own plans until after lunch. She'd arranged that they should meet the de Morgans at the South Kensington Museum later on. It had been kind of Jack to agree. She hoped he would at least try to make a show of interest.

Meanwhile, shopping or art? She was moved by a desire for guilty pleasures. A compromise: Liberty's – that was almost as good as spending time in a gallery. As she stepped out of the hotel, still struggling with the fastening of her glove, out of the corner of her eye she noticed a rather seedy figure, lurking against the railings, who appeared to be trying to attract her attention. She kept her gaze turned away. It was painful to find so much want here at Home.

'Trix,' the urgent whisper clutched at her.

'Ruddy!' Her own voice was harsh with shock.

He was hatless, unshaven, a button dangling loose from the familiar overcoat.

'What's happened?' She took a step towards him. 'Are you ill? What are you doing here?'

Only yesterday she'd left him, in low spirits, true enough, but not looking like a tramp.

He said nothing.

‘Why didn’t you come into the hotel and ask for me?’ Could this just be a dream? It felt horribly strange but also true at the same time.

At last, ‘I like being outside.’

That was all she could get out of him.

‘I don’t know,’ he repeated. ‘I don’t know.’

Trix gathered herself. He wouldn’t come back into the hotel with her. He shook his head when she suggested a cab to take them to his rooms near Charing Cross. Very well, they would walk. Perhaps they could find him some coffee at the station. Meanwhile she would try to take this in and decide what to do.

‘I like walking,’ he offered, as they made their way down from Bloomsbury to find the Charing Cross Road. ‘That’s what I was doing. Couldn’t sleep, so I walked.’

He was like one coming out of a trance, she thought, disturbed.

‘All night? Was that really a good idea, Ruddy?’ she asked gently, taking his arm.

She glanced at him as they went along, monitoring his progress.

As if in response to her attention, he passed his hand wearily over his face and looked up startled.

‘I don’t seem to have shaved.’

A good sign? She simply couldn’t tell.

As they came in sight of St. Martin in the Fields a watery sun broke through.

Trix had seen enough of Ruddy’s grim lodgings to prefer the station tearoom. With a pang she noticed that he had to use both hands to keep his cup from spilling.

‘I couldn’t sleep. Just couldn’t. Too many stories. But not the right ones. I wanted something else in my head, or nothing at all. So I walked. I walked and walked. Down east, along the river, you know. I’ve done it before.’

‘But isn’t that dangerous? Is that where —’ she threw a look at his overcoat, where it lay tossed over a chair and about to lose that button. Now she saw that the collar was ripped too.

‘It was a gang of lascars. I was listening and they thought I had it in for them in some way so they went for me.’

‘Asian seamen? You were looking for opium?’ He’d told her he ranked it with tobacco and getting the dose wrong might explain everything. ‘Surely there are easier ways –’

‘Not at all.’ He was impatient now. ‘I wanted to hear their language. Other tongues. Hindustani perhaps, I thought there might be a chance –’ his voice broke. Recovering, ‘I’d gone east, back to the spice warehouses again. Did you ever smell anything like it, in London, Trix? The air round those warehouses, it’s the bazaar. That’s when I came across those lascars.’

‘Dear Ruddy, you do take the most frightful chances. We’ll go down there together and you can show me, but in the daytime. Come on, let’s get you home.’

He consented to lie down on the shabby couch in his sitting room, while Trix, armed with the landlady’s sewing basket, took a chair beside him, where she sat at work, mending the damaged coat.

She had time now to realise how angry she was. With herself, for giving up her plans for the morning. With Ruddy, for being so helpless. When was he going to grow up?

After another week, in which she sat with him every morning while he worked, he was looking better.

‘Sleeping, actually sleeping, too, Trix, I promise you.’

Every day he sounded steadier in himself. It appeared that her company alone had done the trick. This left Trix anxious, tempted to believe that she was indispensable to him but also alarmed. Would he fall back into a state of disturbance once he found himself without loving support? That frantic writing of his, all in isolation, seemed to bring it on.

But now Rud was himself again, she could venture to ask about her own difficulties with writing. It was becoming so much less fun than it used to be. And yet it seemed impossible to give it up.

‘Not writing makes me feel – oh I don’t know, as if I’m

suspended. Not living. Dead inside. Or maybe brought to a halt.'

'No-one knows that better than I.' His face was sombre.

Reaching out, Trix stroked his hand. Turning his own hand palm upwards, Rud clasped her surprisingly cold fingers in his own.

'Look here, you know, have you managed to get anything at all finished?'

Needing no further encouragement, she offered to bring her work round to Villiers Street later that day. They would meet to talk it over the following afternoon, while Jack was having his teeth seen to.

'You know, Infant, I shall have to stop calling you by that name if you show such command of language.'

She couldn't speak for pleasure and relief.

'That image from the mind of the girl who has got engaged against her better judgment: "*It appeared to May that she was entering a dungeon worn by the steps of those who had passed before.*" It's very strong. I've never been a girl but I've often thanked my stars that I didn't have to make that choice – find a man I could at least bear and who could keep me, so I could get away from home.'

'I haven't shown it to Mama.'

'I think that's wise. Let's wait till we have the publishing sorted out. Maybe wait till it's actually in print and we can put the book into her hands. Unless I'm very much mistaken, it would be just the thing for the Indian Railway Library. Set in Simla, intrigues among the wives and daughters –'

'You don't think it's too like what you've already published in the *Railway Series*? I don't mean as good,' she added, her face crimson.

'Heavens, no. People out there have an endless appetite for seeing their lives in print. Anyway, you've written a whole knitted-up novel – all right, a short one – not just collections of sketches, like me. Let me send this to my fellows when it's complete. You do have another copy, I hope? Always keep a second copy.'

Her technique wasn't what you could call finished, of course. If she'd asked him, he'd have got rid of that note of apology which occasionally crept into the narrator's voice. But she hadn't asked him. She was intent on keeping the work her own. You couldn't fault her for truthfulness, he had to admit. Such a level tone too, most of the time, as though everyone else could see all that she saw, all that secret inner life of feeling. Before he pushed the thought away, he wondered whether his own sparkling effects didn't sometimes verge on the meretricious.

He did ask himself what people would make of this story of a sensitive literary girl bound to a silent man blessed with all the imagination of a turnip. If only Trix had stuck to her guns when she kept sending Fleming away. But it seemed to reduce her to despair. Perhaps she simply couldn't bear hurting the fellow? Then the whole performance would start over again. Try as he would, and God knew he had done his best to listen to Trix, Rud could make neither head nor tail of her behaviour.

They could be confident at all accounts that Fleming himself wouldn't dream of reading any novel, even one that was written by his own wife. He'd never met a man with so little interest in books. But for those who knew Trix, would it not be read in terms of her own marriage? She might have depicted the heroine as struggling to be fair to her husband – but what about the fact that the novel killed him off at the end? That told a different story, one that was more troubling. And Trix had barely been married a year.

There was no question; they had better find a pseudonym. 'Beatrice', 'Beatrice Grange' sounded reassuringly composed. He savoured the dangerous sport of disguising Trix under the name of Beatrice; people had often imagined that Beatrice was her given name. Curious, though, he admitted, the fact that nobody ever used the name to which Trix had a legal right, Alice. It was the name she shared with her mother.

The Mother, two days back in London, was stitching steadily, very upright in the hotel chair. She appeared to hold herself away from

its worn plush. Rud suspected that this rigour of deportment was only going to increase. She would be averse to taking on any appearance of age.

‘So you see, Ruddy, why I’m asking. If you could make use of your connections on her behalf, it would mean a great deal to your sister. Poor love, she’s had so many disappointments.’

He put up his hand to stop her. Any confidences concerning her life must come from Trix herself.

‘You can’t doubt that I’d move heaven and earth for Trix –’

‘But here she is,’ Alice interrupted, with a tight smile.

‘Dearest girl, we were just talking about you and your writing. Ruddy’s so anxious to see it, aren’t you, my son?’

Conscious of her brother’s suppressed irritation, Trix hesitated, blinking. Clearly, their mother had no idea that the two of them had been forging ahead without waiting for her.

Trix was relieved that Ruddy was staying on an even keel, though he suffered badly from headaches.

‘My eyes aren’t quite right, either,’ he finally admitted.

As she’d anticipated, their parents readily agreed with the doctors. This was clearly a case of overwork. After all she’d seen, Trix couldn’t help suspecting that something more was amiss, but she was sworn to silence and Ruddy was sent off to Italy for a holiday.

Not long after his return December brought news of other visitors from India.

‘It really is quite too bad of you, Ruddy.’

‘Do leave the boy alone, Alice.’

‘Not so much of the *boy*, if you please, Pater.’

Startled, Lockwood gazed more keenly into the face of his son. Evidently Ruddy was still on a very short fuse. That trip – the doctors had been so sure it would set his nerves to rights – appeared to have banished the worst of Rud’s symptoms but he was still a good deal strung up.

Alice was continuing, unabashed. ‘Poor Mrs. Hill, losing her

husband like that to typhoid, such a terrible shock. Her whole life to make over again. Packing up and leaving India – though some would call that a blessing in disguise. I cannot understand, Rud, why you're not planning to spend time with her when she passes through London on the way back to America. Don't you think you owe her some attention? I say nothing of Miss Taylor. You do know her sister's travelling with her?'

Lockwood spoke. 'Have a little imagination, my dear. There are reasons why Ruddy and Miss Taylor might prefer not to meet.'

That at any rate was safe to be mentioned. A brief engagement, hastily terminated, was sufficient to account for any disinclination for further encounters. He guessed, though, that that was not the whole story. Lockwood had never dared to share his speculations concerning his son's feelings for this Mrs. Edmonia Hill. He had half expected Rud to set off at once for India when the news of Professor Hill's death had reached them. But no. Instead of greeting the opportunity to be at the widow's side, of perhaps declaring himself after a decent interval, Ruddy had reacted to the news that she was free with a kind of nervous prostration. In his father's view, Ruddy had taken doctors' orders as a licence to flee. Italy was just a convenient bolt-hole.

'I really don't know what you mean, Pater.' His son's voice had an edge. 'I am on terms of the most perfect civility with both Miss Taylor and her sister.'

'Hadn't you better do the civil thing then, Ruddy? At least offer your services to them.' Alice had not given up.

'Services? They're experienced travellers, not helpless females adrift in the great world, you know.'

Alice threw up her hands. Her always competitive spirit was roused.

'Well, I at least shall make every effort to meet them. *I* can't forget how good Mrs. Hill has been to both my children. Not just to you, Rud, and that over months, I may say. She was kindness itself when Trix was passing through Allahabad earlier this year.'

Rud appeared relieved to have his own debt compared with that

of Trix. 'Very well, where did her note say they were putting up? The Metropole? I suppose I could call on them one afternoon. And now I must leave you: I'm lunching at the Savile, with Gosse.

'Just so long as he doesn't see too much of that dreadful pushy little American girl, Carrie whatnot.' Her son was scarcely out of the room before Alice spoke.

'Balestier, Carrie Balestier,' Lockwood corrected. 'I thought she was a rather decent little thing myself.' Even as he appeared to be paying attention to his wife's plans for the rest of the day, Lockwood's mind was taken up with his son. He wished he could be more confident that the boy knew what he was doing. Ruddy liked to speak grandly, man to man, of his intention of 'marrying' but there was no evidence that he was equipped to choose a wife.

And in a matter of months they'd have to leave him alone in London once they returned to Lahore and Trix went back to Calcutta.

