

The Colonel's Indiscretion.

By TRISTRAM CRUTCHLEY.

TO all my world, the ostracised world of cosmopolitans who fish their living from the under-currents of European politics, I am known as Marcel Holt, but it is not my name. For all I know, the Foreign Bureau of each Power I have served has me docketed and pigeonholed and my identity concealed under a number, but there are only a very few who know that I once held His Britannic Majesty's commission. Why I do not hold it now is a point that is not directly connected with my story and consequently useless to dwell upon. To be exact, there are only three who can connect my present with my past. I wish there were none. One of these is Nicholas Serge, a prominent member of the Secret Service of Russia, and the names of the other two you will learn in the course of my narrative.

Some three years after I had left the British Army, but before my wings were strong enough to carry me away from India, a country teeming with painful associations, I was standing one summer's evening in the railway station at Rawalpindi. I had been making observations for Nicholas Serge and was on my way to report them to him at Lahore, where he carried on his agency in the character of the keeper of a drinking house. I was not alone on the platform, for the train was almost due and quite a little crowd of travellers lounged about in the almost intolerable heat. A couple of British officers joined the throng, and with an aversion that had become an instinct I walked away. From the distance, however, I found myself watching them, and as I did so three "Tommies" in soiled khaki passed them, one of them more soiled than the others. Two of the men saluted but the third did not. I bent forward to ascertain the reason. His head was bent in shame and he was handcuffed—a deserter. I felt a cold shiver running down my back, for I am not devoid of sympathy; why should I be? Just then a native, old and decrepit, passed and brushed against me, muttering a prayer for alms.

"Let me see your face," I said, in the dialect.

Slowly, and with apparent pain, the bent form straightened and a distorted face looked piteously into mine. I smiled into it bitterly.

"Sometimes the beggar has it in his power to give," I said. The Hindu was no other than Nicholas Serge himself, the man I called my master.

"In this case he only pays for what he gets," he replied. He had dropped the native whine and spoke now in excellent English, but he still kept in the same piteous, decrepit attitude.

"I have got what you wanted," I said in a low tone, "so I have earned the promised reward. But why was it necessary to come here? Why not wait for me in Lahore?"

"Why not fit in my plans with your desires?" he snarled angrily, yet without in the least changing his attitude, "since you ask me why, it is because they did not fit in with the convenience of His Imperial Majesty, our master."

A slight emphasis on the last two words brought the blood to my face. Ever since I had told Nicholas Serge that he was the only man in the world who could make me change colour, he had taken a constant delight in exercising his power. But the severity of his manner on this occasion was unusual. I could only account for it by supposing that in penetrating his disguise I had wounded his pride.

"I have papers for you," I said coldly.

"That is good!" he replied, "but do not give them to me here. Were the place crowded with your officers it would not matter, for there is not a grain of intelligence amongst them, but there are civilians, any one of whom may possibly have eyes to see." My smile told him I was proof against the intended sting, for he went on quickly—

"Fish in your pockets and give me a coin to get rid of me, then follow me slowly out of the town by the road towards Fatehjang."

"But the train! Are we then not going to leave here to-night?"

"Perhaps! but it will be in the opposite direction. Do as I told you!"

I took a coin from my pocket and gave it to him with a gesture of impatience. He salaamed low and feebly, at the same time saying—

“Follow me almost at once. Every moment is of importance, or I would not have come to meet you here. Do not be afraid of the soldiers. They will not bite you. Their regiment has only just arrived from England.”

He shambled off while I bit my lips till the blood came at the cruelty of his taunt. Had he but given me the money that he owed me on behalf of his Government, I think I should have shaken off the fetters and flown, there and then. But I was penniless, a fact that Nicholas Serge very well knew, so I did as he commanded.

Giving him a five minutes' start, I sauntered listlessly out of the station and onwards in the direction he had indicated. A quarter of a mile out of the town I overtook him.

“Here is my report,” I said, taking some sheets of thin paper from an inner pocket, “now tell me what further you require.”

The walk had apparently softened his temper, for he looked at me quizzically, yet with eyes that seemed to go through and through me.

“You never regret the past?” he demanded abruptly.

“Be satisfied that I shall never seek to retrieve it,” I replied angrily, “yet has this anything to do with the present?”

“Everything,” said he, “now perhaps you understand why I tried you when we met. I had not seen you for a month, and I wanted to ascertain the state of your mind.”

I felt myself turning pale with misgiving.

“Go on,” I said, “what is it you want me to do?”

“Let us begin at the beginning,” he replied, “and as the character I have assumed is inconvenient for walking, suppose we sit down by the roadside.” We did so, and both lit cigarettes. Then for a moment there was silence while Nicholas Serge marshalled his facts, and when he spoke, his voice and manner had lost their biting irony.

“Some little time ago,” said he, “a certain officer, holding the rank of Colonel in the British Army, wrote a book on the defences of India, making use of information that was not only highly confidential, but of a

strategical importance to his country's enemies that cannot possibly be over-estimated.”

I looked up quickly. Doubtless my eyes expressed amazement just as plainly as my lips framed a question.

“It sounds incredible,” he continued, “but it is absolutely ludicrously true. Let there be no mistake about the Colonel's motives! Nothing was farther from his thoughts than treachery to his country—not that *we* should judge him harshly if it had been otherwise—he compiled the book solely for private circulation and for the information of officers who were all personally and deeply concerned in the subject. The work was of course privately printed in a strictly limited edition, all nicely bound in red morocco emblazoned with the gallant officer's coat-of-arms in proper heraldic colours. I understand it was a work of art.”

“Go on!” I urged, as he paused; “I am interested.”

“Well, the books, of which there are only fifty in number, were distributed as confidential documents to the various points of the compass, and, of course, in a very few days the matter reached the ears of the Government. The Downing Street and Calcutta cable was extremely busy for a few hours, and the gallant Colonel suddenly found himself under arrest. Not until his liberty was curtailed and his papers were seized did he appreciate the enormity of his folly, and then the full realisation of his position drove him frantic, just at the one moment of his life when the clearness of his brain might have been of service to his country. He could account for forty of the volumes, but not for the other ten. His superiors worried and badgered him nearly out of his senses, and then gave it up. Every copy they could trace was instantly recalled, and three of the last ten were found by means of letters of acknowledgment which reached the Colonel's house. It was at this stage that the matter reached our ears, although, of course, it had been kept as far as possible a profound secret, the whole of the Intelligence Department being employed to bring the incident to a satisfactory conclusion.”

“And you want me to find one of the remaining seven,” I interrupted.

“Listen, it is easier than that; I have traced one copy to a destination of which the authorities have no inkling. It will be

your duty to obtain it."

"How did you manage this?"

"By getting at the Colonel's correspondence before it reached his house. It involved an infinity of trouble and only half-a-dozen letters could be obtained. But we were lucky. One of them was a little note the Government would have given pounds for. I have it here."

He took a soiled piece of paper from his garment and handed it to me. It was dated from Fort Attock.



"Fish in your pockets and give me a coin to get rid of me," said the beggar, "then follow me slowly out of the town by the road towards Fatehjang."

"Dear Colonel,"—it ran—

"Many thanks for the book just received. I suppose you are satisfied with the necessity and discretion of publishing such a work? I will read it as soon as I have time, and let you know what I think of it.

Sincerely yours,
Frank Calcraft."

The letter dropped at my feet, and I felt myself turn as pale as death. Serge gripped my arm.

"It can't be done," I cried before he had time to speak; "I am not the man for this."

"On the contrary, you are the man, the only man," he said sternly flashing his penetrating gaze into my eyes. "Listen! I do not mean to allow this to slip through my fingers. Not a moment must be lost. That letter is already three days old."

"But Calcraft," I expostulated hoarsely, "he is of my own regiment."

"You have no regiment," he reminded me, with just sufficient contempt for his purpose.

I flew into a rage.

"And it is this very man, Captain Frank Calcraft, who is responsible for the fact. It was he who caused my ruin."

"And does not your intelligence suggest to you that I am offering you an opportunity of resenting it," said Serge cynically; then, as I passed my hand across my throbbing head, he added coolly, "he is a Major now, with every prospect of further advancement."

I ground my teeth.

"I thought you would be obliged to me for the chance."

"What chance?" I cried, leaping to my feet; "tell me exactly what you mean, my brain is not quite clear."

Nicholas Serge bent forward and laid his hand almost caressingly upon my arm.

"Obtain the book and say he sold it to you."

I laughed wildly.

"Surely you forget my reputation; what weight does my word carry in the British Army to-day?"

"Fool! Only bring me the book, and I will see to the rest for you."

"I will trust you," I cried, trying to grip his hand.

But he drew away from me, and I found myself praying that my rage might last long enough to carry me through the job. I never felt less sure of myself. If I were to meet Calcraft face to face I felt that I should be done for.

"That's right," said Serge with a note of triumph in his voice; "I thought you had *some* spirit left. And now that the preliminaries are settled, please listen to my instructions. In an hour we shall start for Attock, where Major Calcraft is stationed in charge of a half battalion. There you will leave the train while I proceed to Peshawar to await your coming. You know the place thoroughly, and you must make your own plan of action; but—be quick. In a day or two he may have read the book and written to the Colonel as he promised. The letter will fall into the hands of the authorities, and they will wire to him at once. Then you will have no revenge, my friend, and no money. Do you perfectly understand?"

"Perfectly," I replied.

And then, for the time being, we parted.

I left the train at Attock, and saw Nicholas Serge's eyes peering at me as I passed his carriage window. But for the danger of our being seen together and suspected I think he would have preached to me of revenge until he drove me almost mad.

I shook myself as I left the station and followed gloomily the road round the fort that I had once trodden with very much lighter steps. Why had this mood come over me in the moment of action? It was not the first thing of the sort I had done, although, perhaps, the greatest, so it could scarcely be remorse. I felt compelled to judge myself unflinchingly. It was fear—rank, craven fear that I might come face to face with Calcraft and hear his lips pronounce my name—the name I had not heard for years. There was a woman, too, in those days, Vera Clarges—I felt I must speak her name aloud, just once—Vera, the girl who had promised to be my wife.

I passed the night in a native hut high up on the hills and in the morning commenced my inquiries. I was lucky beyond belief. Calcraft had been called away the previous day to visit a distant post. He

would not be back till to-morrow, a fact that boded well for my success and gave me infinite relief. Quickly I changed my half-formed plans. Instead of committing a commonplace act of burglary I would go boldly to the house and present myself to the housekeeper as an Intelligence Officer from Calcutta. I remembered her well, but was satisfied she would not remember me. She was old three years ago, and, besides, I had made considerable changes in my appearance since then. So, with my back to the fort and the closely-guarded bridge, I walked towards Calcraft's bungalow in the heat of the afternoon, when everything and everybody was at rest.

Using once again a well-remembered path, I approached the house from the back and was astonished to hear the sound of a woman's laugh, languid and silvery. I stopped dead just by the window from which it came and peeped in through a leafy screen baked brown by the rays of the sun.

It was only a glimpse I caught, but it told me enough. The unexpected had happened. Calcraft was married and had a son. The woman's face was strange to me, but the sight made me angry, why I can scarcely tell. I retreated again to think. The wife would be quicker-witted than the housekeeper, and it would, perhaps, be wise to change the character of my deception.

Evening came and with it the bustle of life recommenced. Once again I approached Calcraft's house, this time by the ordinary way and openly, as though I were paying a friendly call. The plan I had decided upon was simplicity itself, yet it depended so much upon circumstances that, in the mere telling, it sounds bald. It was an early hour for visiting, so I felt pretty sure that I should not be ushered straight in upon the mistress of the house. My plan was nothing more nor less than to utilise for my purpose the interval between my admission and Mrs. Calcraft's appearance, and then to justify my call and get away as soon as possible.

I was met at the door by a trim English maid who told me, in answer to my inquiry, that Major Calcraft was away but that her mistress would doubtless see me. Following closely upon the girl's heels I found myself in the little panelled corridor that led to Calcraft's library. The idea of seeing the room again sent a sort of thrill through me.

Many were the whisky-and-sodas I had drunk in it and many the cigars we had smoked together. But when the door was opened and I found myself inside, everything was changed. What a fool I was not to think of this before. It was the largest room in the place and Mrs. Calcraft had naturally turned it into a drawing room. My eye, trained to feverish quickness, told me at once there was not a book within it.

I could have grabbed the book and made a dash for liberty, but instead I dropped from the chair and staggered backwards clutching at my heart. The woman stood looking at me and her face slowly grew set and white. Then in a dry, death-like whisper, I heard my name, the name I dreaded to hear.

In reply I stammered hers.

"Vera," I said, "you are, you are——"



I dropped from the chair and staggered backwards clutching at my heart. The woman stood looking at me, and her face slowly grew set and white.

I gave a false name to the servant and glanced around as the door closed. In the corner was the curtained entrance to another room that had once been devoted to cards. Quickly I brushed aside the flimsy veil of beads and gauze and entered. Yes! it was as I hoped. Here, into the smaller apartment, Calcraft had moved his books.

There, high up on the top shelf, I saw a book bound in flaming red. I dashed upon a chair to reach it but just as my hand was outstretched to seize it and convey it to my pocket I heard a sound almost like a sob at the entrance and a woman stood before me.

"I am Major Calcraft's wife. *What* are you?"

The sound of her voice brought me reeling back to my senses.

"You married him!" I cried, "after what he had done to me!"

And then I laughed.

I have no doubt my laugh was wild, for she looked frightened, then her face flushed with anger.

"What are *you*?" she repeated.

It was strange that the form of her question did not astonish me. It only seemed that she knew.

"I am the man you swore you loved," I said, "ruined by the man you call your husband."

"It is a lie, you know it is a lie. No one knows but I the suffering it caused him to give evidence against you. But if he had saved you he would have been as bad as you, a traitor like yourself."

"Yet you married him!" I repeated. It was the only thought my brain would entertain.

"Did you not know it?" She let the curtain fall behind her and took a step towards me. The change gave me a little confidence.

"The woman with the child this afternoon!" I muttered.

"My English nurse! The boy was my son."

Her proud defiance at the mention of her child fanned my torpid wits to anger.

"I suppose you have grown to hate me now?"

"Not even that. Three years ago, when you were convicted as something worse than a traitor, you passed completely out of my life. You ceased to be real. I despised your memory, that was all. And now, when I see you here, I think I pity you."

"Your pity is unnecessary," I answered hotly.

"What, then, is your purpose here under an assumed name? What are you?"

Before I could think I had thrown my story at her defiantly. What did it matter?

"I am a spy," I cried, "that is what you would call me. I am here to avenge my disgrace."

The girl who had loved me turned pale and looked at me horrified.

"I knew! I knew! You were on the chair! It is the book!" she gasped.

"Yes, the book!" I answered, pointing at it like a fool. At the moment I did not care what I said or did so long as I could keep myself from grovelling at her feet.

The sound of my voice seemed to calm her. Vera Clarges was a woman in a thousand, but I do not think that I ever knew her as she really was.

"You overrate its importance. It is indiscreet, my husband says, but valueless."

"Then give it me, let me take it away," I answered eagerly, "you do not understand; it means bread to me, no matter what its value. Give it me!"

She turned her head away and I saw her shudder.

"I cannot do that, my husband would kill me." She seemed weakening; some feeling of pity for me, I thought, had touched her. How little I knew her! How much I had forgotten!

"Why should he mind if it is valueless?" I said suspiciously; "come, give it me or must I take it by force?"

"No, no!" she cried almost entreatingly, addressing me by name, "do nothing rash, or you will lose your freedom, perhaps your life."

"And you would care, Vera?"

"I should be sorry," she answered, biting her lip. But the expression of her face was a puzzle to me.

"Listen!" she continued with averted eyes and almost in a whisper. "If it means so much to you——"

"Ah! You will help me for the sake of the past," I cried.

The woman was dead to me, but I began to see success.

"I cannot give it you," she said; "but to-night, when it is dark, this window will be open."

I drew back.

"Your idea is too obvious," I said.

It did me good to detect someone else acting a lie.

"You do not understand my husband," she continued in the same tone; "he would find out who you really were and suspect me. Then my life would be a long, continuous misery. But this evening I shall read it openly, and send the nurse to put it back upon the shelf before I retire for the night. Afterwards I will come in and open the window."

She spoke breathlessly, and there seemed to be a world of pity in her eyes. When a man has loved it is easy to believe, but I could afford to run no risks.

"I must have it now!" I said.

Instead of standing in my way she turned swiftly to a table and sounded a gong. A curse rose to my lips, but even now her presence seemed a sacred thing, and the curse remained unuttered.

I heard steps approaching.

"Go now!" she whispered anxiously, pointing to the window that opened on to the garden; "I will keep my word."

She almost pushed me out; then I saw her reel and fall in a faint. I turned back

to complete my purpose, but suddenly the room seemed full of servants, and I fled.

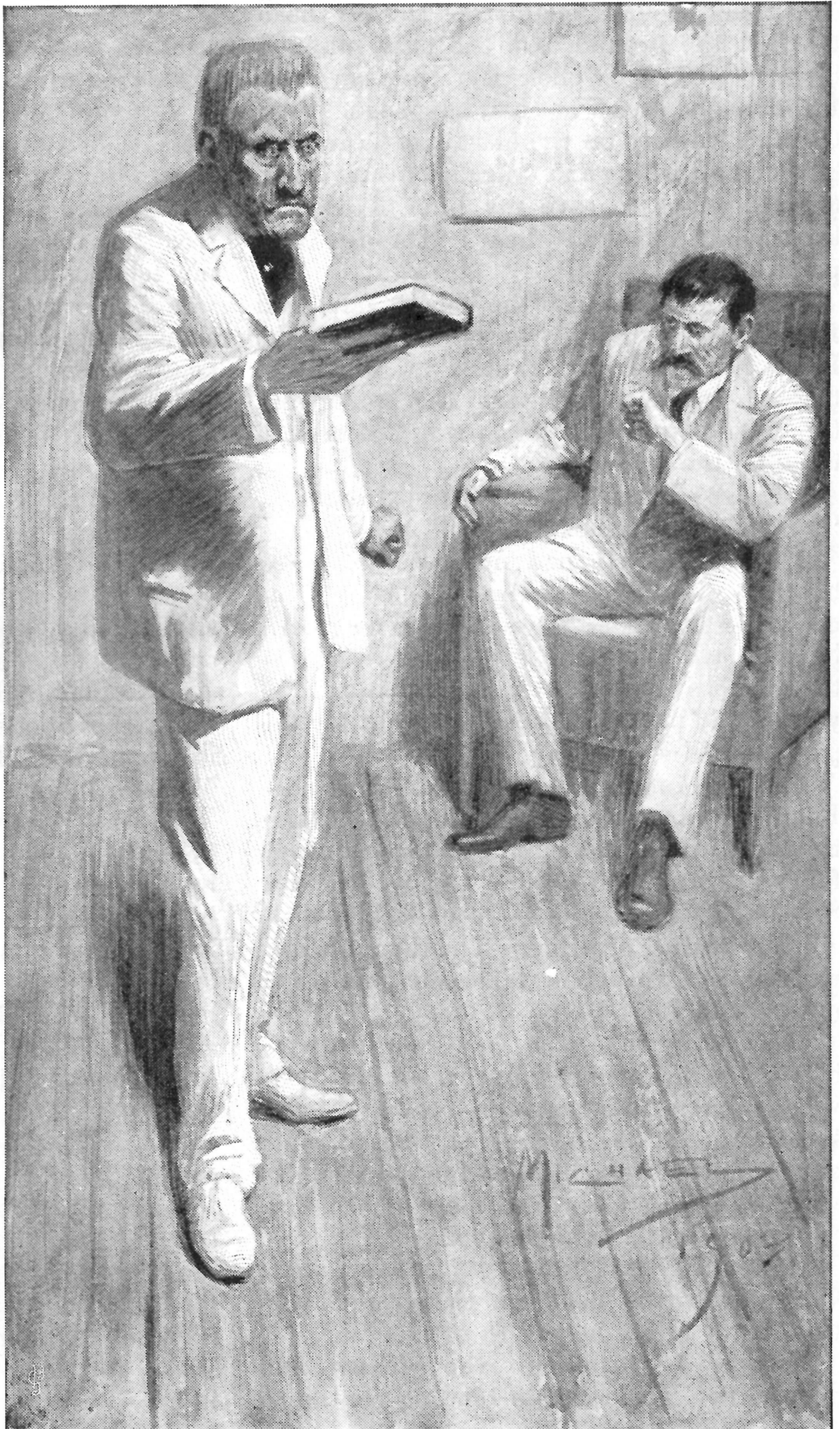
How I cursed my vacillation and my weakness as I waited for the night! I had seen the thing that was necessary to me, almost held it within my grasp, and then had let it escape me by my hesitation. Yet how could I help it with her eyes upon me, the eyes I had prayed that I might never see again?

I approached the house directly I saw the disappearance of the lights. With trembling fingers I tried the window. She had spoken truth—it was unfastened. But was it a trap? No; she was too much of a woman for that. The chair was still where I had left it, ready to jump upon, and in a second I had reached for the book and held it to the moonlight. It was the wrong one! In my hurry to put it back I dropped it, and it fell upon the floor with a noise like a thunderclap. Was it the echo of it, or did I hear a muffled noise outside? Doubtless it was fancy. Anyhow I grabbed again with a throbbing at my throat and head that almost dazed me. The bright moonlight shone upon the cover of the book I held. It was red, like blood, and I could discern the title and the author's coat-of-arms, just as Nicholas Serge had said. She had not been false to me then. As I thought of her I almost realised what I had thrown away.

But just as I leapt from the chair I heard a sound through the thin partition that changed the current of my thoughts—the unmistakable click of a service revolver. I dashed for the open window with my prize in my pocket, but

at the same moment the figure of a man stood in the little patch of light.

"What's all this?" cried a voice. I recognised it. Frank Calcraft was confronting me. I might have killed him where he stood. I had all the desire to do so, but the fear of him took hold of me, the fear that he would know me. So I dashed him aside in my flying



Suddenly his manner changed, and from his lips fell a torrent of vituperation that appalled me.

leap for liberty, and fled across the garden. Beyond was a strip of open, shining white in the moonlight, so I crouched in the bushes and waited, prepared, if necessary, to creep round the house and away by the little path I had used in the afternoon.

I heard Calcraft shout for his revolver. It seemed that he knew my hiding place, for I saw him stand in the porch only a dozen yards away and point his weapon in my direction. I crouched lower till my head touched the ground, but the only sound I heard was another click and then an oath. I understood then what had happened. Vera Calcraft, eagerly on the alert, had heard her husband returning and unloaded his revolver, thinking thus to save my life. That was the sound I had heard through the partition.

Calcrafft rushed into the house again, and I took the opportunity to crawl away. As I passed the little window at the back through which I had seen the nurse and the child I heard his laugh ring out from a room on the other side.

"Bravo! little woman," I heard him cry, "well that was plucky of you."

I laughed. He had not yet discovered his loss. Cautiously I drew the book from my pocket. There it was, safe enough, its binding warped by the heat, but unmistakably the object of my mission. I wrapped it in a cloth I had brought for the purpose and stole away.

Footsore and worn out I at length reached Peshawar in company with a band of native hawkers, with whom I fell in on the morning following my achievement. I found Nicholas Serge and handed him my packet, but without any feeling of pride. The thoughts and recollections that had filled my mind will not bear telling.

The little man, who had now divested himself of his disguise, uncovered the book with every manifestation of pleasure. But suddenly, as he opened it, his manner changed, and from his lips fell a torrent of vituperation that appalled me.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"Look and see!"

He flung the book on the ground, and then burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

Eagerly I picked up the volume and opened it. The tell-tale binding contained

a copy of the "Pickwick Papers." Thrice accursed idiot that I was, the woman had fooled me after all.

There were tears in my eyes as I raised them to Nicholas Serge. But I could not bear the look on his face, and I buried my face in my hands.

Presently he touched me on the shoulder, and I looked up to find that once again this wonderful man had changed.

"Cheer up!" he said, "and prepare for another journey."

I shook my head.

"Come," he said commandingly, "the Pass is open to-day. I am going to take you to St. Petersburg!"

Petersburg! Russia! Europe! Away from this country that I hated! I leapt to my feet for the idea put new life into my weary bones. Once there, nothing on earth should entice me south of the Himalayas again so long as I lived.

I cared not a fig at the time for Nicholas Serge or his plan, but I owe it to my readers to define it, or rather to describe its successful accomplishment.

Not many days later the British Ambassador to Russia called on the Foreign Minister by appointment. He found him sitting idly tapping with his fingers a sun-warped volume bound in red. The Ambassador had received many and urgent despatches about that book. He recognised it from the description, and took the Minister's hint.

It was "Pickwick" re-bound by Vera Calcraft (though I swear she was not moved by any sense of humour when she did it), but this the Ambassador never knew, and he reported to Downing Street that a copy of the Colonel's "Indiscretion" was in the hands of the Russian Government. And although Major Calcraft doubtless told his story, the search for the missing volumes was stopped, and a million was spent in strategic alterations that put the information out of date.

Long afterwards a collector discovered a copy of the book in a second-hand bookseller's shop off the Strand. He bought it for sixpence, and wrote to the *Times* on the criminal negligence of the authorities.

As for me—but nobody is interested in me.