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Distant Thunder

Written by T. D. Griggs

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DISTANT THUNDER



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PART ONE

Bangalore, May 1893



She was singing. He could not see her, but somewhere in the dark and scented garden, his mother was singing.

The boy slipped in through the oleander bushes from the road and stopped among the flower beds to listen, struck by the beauty of her voice. He had heard nothing like it before. In church she cut a demure figure and trilled the hymns at a pitch painful in its purity, but tonight her voice was not pure, and nothing about it was demure. Nor was the song any kind of a hymn. He could hear sorrow in it, and yearning, and other passions he could not identify.

He stole forward across the moonlit lawn and through the bed of canna lilies under the veranda rail. A moth thrummed in the warm air close to his face. Her voice rose again and dipped, lifted once more. Now he could tell where she was, out by the stone tank at the side of the house where the servants drew their water. At last, from the corner of the veranda, he glimpsed her. She was all alone, swinging gently on the garden seat, her head thrown back and her long auburn hair loose across her shoulders. At her feet the moon rode like a silver plate among the lilies of the tank.

She stopped. He had made no sound, for he had learned to move like a cat, but just the same she turned her head and looked directly at him.

'Don't stand there like a startled faun, Frank. It doesn't suit you.' She patted the seat beside her. 'Come.'

He did not move. The moonlight had caught in her hair and her gown and transformed her into something from elfland. He was almost afraid of her.

She patted the seat again. 'Come along. It's all right, Father won't be home tonight. He sent word.' She rocked her head, mocking him. 'And no, I won't betray you.'

He crossed the dark lawn and climbed up onto the seat. She put her arm around his shoulders and he breathed in the warmth of her body.

'Did you think I didn't know about your little nocturnal adventures? You were with those native boys, I suppose. Javed, that Tamil boy from Cantonment Bazaar? And that silly braggart Ashok? You see, I am not so foolish as you imagine.'

'I never thought you foolish.'

‘Well, I thank you for that. But I did not have to be so very clever either, to discover your secret. One need only keep one’s eyes open and listen to the servants when they chatter. It is quite amusing when they don’t know I have any Kanarese.’

Frank said nothing. He hadn’t known it either.

‘Not that I understand much. Not like you, Frank. I know you’re as fluent as a bazaar urchin. But even I understand enough to have found you out.’

‘You truly won’t tell Papa?’

‘Don’t be silly. I’d come with you if I could. The bazaar at night! The temple ruins! The river! How wonderful it all must be when you’re fourteen years old.’ She paused. ‘When you’re any age.’

‘It’s dangerous,’ he said stoutly. ‘You wouldn’t like it. It’s dirty and there are thieves and wild animals where we go.’

‘Really?’ She squeezed his shoulders playfully. ‘I shouldn’t mind if I had you to protect me.’

‘I will always protect you.’

‘Is that what you want? To be my protector?’ She laughed. ‘You’d set yourself a task there.’

He looked down, embarrassed by her teasing, and she squeezed his shoulders again.

‘You’re a silly thing, Frank. But very well. You can be my knight in shining armour.’ She made big eyes. ‘Will you vow, sir knight, to take my part against all the world, to uphold my honour against all comers, and to avenge all wrongs against me?’

He raised his eyes to hers. ‘Yes.’

She watched him in the darkness for a moment longer, her smile fading. Then she tilted her head back to look at the moon, where it hung like a lamp in the mango tree. Among the dry leaves something rustled, a long trickling sound: a python, probably, hunting mice. A frog fell like a dropped stone into the water of the tank, fragmenting the moon’s image. Frank watched as the silver disc gradually re-formed itself and the water grew smooth once more. When she spoke again her voice was hardly more than a murmur.

‘There was a time when I loved adventure, just like you,’ she said. ‘Can you credit that? You’d understand if you knew where I grew up. Huddersfield, a mean dark town in the north of England. And then one day your father came to give a magic-lantern talk at our church. I was just seventeen, and he was five-and-thirty. He wasn’t rich but he had travelled and he seemed to know about everything. He was due to go back to India in a matter of weeks, to become a commercial agent in Peshawar. Can you imagine how that sounded to

me, Frank, who had never been further afield than Halifax? Peshawar! The Khyber Pass, the gateway to Kandahar and Kabul! The magic of it!

From the servants' quarters behind one of the neighbouring bungalows a dog barked, and then set up a long hopeless howling until someone cursed at it and it fell silent again.

'So I found my adventure, Frank, in so far as a woman can find it. But I had not reckoned that there is also a journey of the spirit. And your father . . .' She seemed about to add something more, but then stopped herself. 'Your father is a good man. He has given me the journey I longed for, and unswerving loyalty, and he has given me you and Gifford. It is ungrateful in the extreme to ask for more.' Her voice caught.

He looked up at her. 'Do you ask for more, Mama?'

She gazed at him. Her eyes were bright and there was something like fear in them now. He touched her wrist, anxious to break the spell of that look, and she stared down at his hand.

'Frank,' she said, in a small and desperate voice. 'I'm just thirty-three years of age.'

2

Far ahead through the stormy night, Frank caught his first glimpse of the fires of Troy. Timbers groaned as the beaked prow plunged into luminous foam but when the ship lurched up once more towards the star-crowded sky he could see the pinpoint campfires of the Greeks encircling the city.

'Francis?'

Frank looked up quickly. 'Accusative plural, Father.'

'I shall not catch you out so easily, I see,' Mr Gray said. 'But I fear your thoughts were on the wine-dark sea once again, rather than on Greek grammar.'

Across the room, Frank's mother clicked her tongue. She was seated by the doors which stood open to the blue Indian night, fanning herself against the heat. That tiny click of irritation echoed in the room like the cocking of a revolver.

Frank kept his eyes on his book and hoped his mother would say nothing. His parents' tense little spats depressed him. Worse, they seemed always to be triggered by some niggling remark of his mother's. That made him angry with her and he hated himself when he was angry with her. Until just a few months ago, when they had moved south, she

had always been his warmest friend, full of laughter and mischief. He stole a glance at her now. She sat in the wicker armchair by the open door to the veranda with her head thrown back and her auburn hair cascading almost to the floor. From time to time she would lift the mass of hair away from her damp neck and sigh at the heat. A few nights before in the scented garden she had not looked so very different, and this evening she was every bit as lovely. But the magic of that earlier scene had fled from her.

Mr Gray closed his tattered copy of Homer. 'I believe that's enough for this evening, Francis.'

'Oh, please,' his wife said, 'don't stop on my account.'

'My dear, we are evidently disturbing you.'

She turned sharply in her chair. 'Well, good Lord, Lewis. Latin? Greek? Poetry? *Tennyson*, for God's sake? Life's tedious enough without *Tennyson*. Do we all have to go through this ghastly routine every night?'

Mr Gray folded his hands quietly over the book. Frank kept very still. He felt hurt and confused: he liked the lessons his father gave; he was good at Latin and Greek and he especially enjoyed Tennyson – 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' was his favourite. He wondered if he was being disloyal to his mother by taking pleasure in these things and asked himself if in some obscure way these recurrent tensions were his fault.

'Francis,' his father said, 'you may leave the room.'

But it was Mrs Gray who got to her feet. 'No. Go on with your stupid studies if they amuse you. I'm glad somebody can find some entertainment in this place.' She swept out of the room and banged the door behind her.

Frank stared down at his hands, unsure where to look. Across the table he could hear his father putting books away in his leather case, and doing so with exaggerated care. Frank was sorry for him. He sensed that Mr Gray was out of his depth with these increasingly volatile scenes. He wanted to say something reassuring, but could not imagine how to begin.

Mr Gray ran out of small tasks to perform, and sat motionless on the other side of the table. The silence between them grew awkward. Frank decided then that he would slip away tonight. He rarely risked it unless his father was away from the house, but tonight he would go, and get away from this bewildering atmosphere of hostility.

A beetle the size of a walnut came blundering in through a gap in the screen and droned around the room until it collided with the dresser and clattered to the floor, its legs indignantly groping the air. Frank

wondered if he dare go to the rescue of the struggling insect, and was grateful when his father did so, getting up and brushing the beetle into an empty water glass. Mr Gray walked over to the screen door and released the creature into the dark garden, then returned to the table.

‘Your mother has been a little . . . unwell of late,’ he said.

‘Mama is ill?’

‘No, not ill.’ Mr Gray frowned, reconsidering his words. In the light of the oil lamp he suddenly looked elderly. ‘No, that’s not quite right. She is disappointed, Francis, to tell you the truth.’

His father was not given to confidences, and Frank did not want him to go on, but he seemed resolved to do so.

‘She has not quite settled in Bangalore. She finds the city . . . oppressive.’ Mr Gray cleared his throat. ‘I wish you to understand this, Francis, so that you don’t . . . think badly of her during this rather difficult time.’

Frank decided to risk the question that had been hovering at the back of his mind since he had heard his mother singing in the night-time garden.

‘Does she want to return to England, Father?’

Mr Gray stared at him, caught off guard by the acuteness of the question.

‘We did consider it, Francis. But my promotion, you see. One must take these opportunities in life.’

England? Frank had never been to England. He had seen pictures of cathedrals under grey skies, sluggish rivers with willows on the banks, stone castles and thatched cottages. He had heard a lot about drizzle and cold. But he knew too that England was the seat of raw power, and that its northern magic was every bit as potent as India’s heat and mystery. He even knew that, somehow, one depended on the other. But to go there? To live? The thought was alien and terrifying, and yet his sense of adventure was stirred, and he felt a flicker of regret that so daring a scheme seemed to have died so meekly.

‘Everything will be well, Francis,’ Mr Gray said in a gentler voice, and in what was for him a gesture of some intimacy, he touched Frank’s shoulder. ‘You’ll see.’

3

The locomotive’s brakes shrieked like a fanfare of pagan trumpets, and in an instant steam and thunder filled the cavern of Bangalore City Station. With a final explosive exhalation the engine halted before

them. Further down the train doors flew open and the wagons were engulfed in a flood of porters, food sellers, and third-class passengers climbing onto the carriage roofs with their bundles and sacks. Families clamoured to meet relatives and passengers threw down crates of live chickens, rolled sleeping mats, sacks of vegetables.

Gifford tugged at his father's hands and strained towards the locomotive.

'Steady on, old lad.' Mr Gray made a play of holding his straw hat on his head and let Gifford tow him along. 'Steady on, there.'

Gifford would be forgiven any excess of enthusiasm today, for it was his tenth birthday. As usual he'd shown no interest in party games with the neighbours' children nor ices on the bungalow lawn. All Gifford wanted – all he ever wanted – was to see the great engines, to be close to the massive intricacy of bolts, wheels, couplings. Gifford's fascination with how things worked was legendary. Items of household equipment had to be kept safe from him, or he would dismantle them to see how they functioned. The portable ice chest in the kitchen had fallen victim to his researches, and the aerated gas siphon. The ormolu mantel clock, a favourite of Mr Gray's, had run slow since Gifford had taken it apart while no one was watching him.

Mechanical mysteries didn't move Frank as they did his younger brother; but just the same he was happy to be at Bangalore City today. It lifted his spirit to see the Mysore State Railway locomotives thumping in from Tumku or the local trains from Cantonment Station just across the city. He liked to see the long distance cars of the South Indian Railway pulling in from as far away as Madras or Pondicherry on the other side of the subcontinent. He loved the romance of it, their liveries of royal blue, emerald and scarlet blazing in the sun. Their very names stirred him: Deccan Queen, Iron Duke, Southern Star.

His father had last brought him to the railway only two weeks ago. Then their visit had not been to the thronged passenger platforms but to the Dearborn & Company warehouse beside the dusty acres of marshalling yards nearly a mile away, where teams of sweating native labourers toiled among the freight cars. Here the brickwork was coal blackened and the stubby shunting engines far from magnificent. Nevertheless, Frank had loved the bustle of the place. He liked to eavesdrop on the labourers' bawdy chatter in the language of Karnataka, which his mother called Kanarese in the European fashion, but which he knew as Kannada. He liked to see the shunting engines chuff and clank as they nudged the wagons into order, making up the freight trains which would carry British manufactures up country, and haul Indian produce – raw cotton, rice, and tea – down to the distant ports.

He liked it because he could sense that it was here, amid the steam and the sweat, that the pulse of the Empire beat.

On that day they called in to the office above the warehouse, where Frank was introduced to the awesome Mr Furneaux, down from the company's city centre headquarters. Frank hadn't taken to Mr Furneaux, an austere man of fifty who wore a long dark coat despite the heat. Frank had recognised the need to be respectful to his father's new chief, but he didn't really see why his father should have a chief; he'd never had one in Peshawar. Mr Furneaux had insisted on putting a company driver and gig at their disposal, but this was not courtesy. It would never do, Mr Furneaux had said disapprovingly, for his deputy manager to be seen on foot. Frank was glad when he and his father could escape Mr Furneaux's gloomy office into the glaring heat of the day, and he guessed his father was as relieved as he was.

Mr Gray had shown him round the huge warehouses, cathedral spaces piled with sacks and smelling of spice and tea and hot dust. Then the repair shops where teams of workers laboured in a feverish clamour on trucks and locomotives and tenders, hammering, bolting, welding. They had spent an idle few minutes watching a new steam crane swinging merchandise off the flatcars.

'Do you know what's in those crates, Francis?' Mr Gray had asked. He stepped forward and thumped each crate in turn, an unusually extravagant gesture for him. 'Engine parts. Finished textiles. Jigs and tools. Everything from cutlery to canned fish. Yes! But more even than that. There's industry in these crates, Francis. There's prosperity. There's the future – our future.'

He was rarely so demonstrative, and it came to Frank that his father was an important man at last, and that being the son of an important man was not unpleasant. His father's promotion – late though it was – had dramatically raised the family's status, and now this huge and sprawling city was exploding Frank's own horizons. He sometimes missed the wildness of the north, but he could sense all around him a greater world opening.

Someone jostled him and Frank came back to the present. On the platform Gifford was still dragging Mr Gray towards the Bangalore Mail, a scarlet dragon crouching before him in wreaths of its own steam. A tall Sikh engineer in a blue turban was checking the locomotive's wheels as they approached, tapping each steel spoke with a hammer so that the metal sang. Steam escaped from the black recesses beneath the engine and engulfed the Sikh but he went about his work with the solemnity of a priest conducting a rite. Gifford broke free and ran so that the engineer had to drop his hammer and his dignity to

catch him before he reached the wheels. The Sikh lifted the boy easily onto his hip.

‘You like our engine, young sahib?’

‘Yes! Yes!’

‘We are also excessively fond of her. We call her the Maharani. Do you see the nameplate? She is an F Class o-6-o tank engine—’

‘I know. Built by Dübs & Co. of Glasgow.’

‘Correct!’ The Sikh laughed in delight. ‘A fine locomotive, and soon we will be building them here in India.’

Mr Gray came hurrying up. ‘Gifford, let the gentleman get on with his business.’

But the engineer was enjoying his new role as guardian of the shrine. ‘Perhaps the young sahib would like to blow the whistle?’

Mr Gray contrived to look awed. ‘Is such a thing permitted?’

‘Assuredly. I myself shall speak to the driver.’

‘Gifford will be your friend for life.’

The engineer rocked his head. ‘If only all friendship were as easy to win, sahib.’ Gifford was already squirming in the Sikh’s grip, straining towards the cab and the promised whistle. Laughing, the man carried him up onto the footplate. He spoke to a stout and sweating white man in braces and smut-blackened shirt. The man listened to the Sikh’s explanation, glanced at Mr Gray through the steam and touched his cap. In a moment Gifford was borne high into the dim inner recesses of the cab, and Frank could see him pointing at gauges and dials and firing his endless questions at the two men.

Distracted, Frank did not at once notice that a tall young man had moved up to stand beside his father.

‘Gray, is it?’

Frank looked up at the newcomer and saw his father do the same. The man was very tanned and wore a slouch hat with a leopard-skin band and a dusty khaki bush jacket. Behind him Frank glimpsed the porter who carried his luggage, a battered leather Gladstone bag, two hunting rifles in canvas cases, bandoliers of ammunition glinting like doubloons in the sun.

‘I’m right, aren’t I? You’re Gray, the new Dearborns chap? I should have smoked you out long since.’ The young man thrust out one lean brown hand. ‘I’m Stokes. Assistant Collector. Sorry about the casual rig. Just got in from up-country.’

‘Mr Stokes. Of course.’ Frank’s father took the offered hand and squared his shoulders a little.

Mr Stokes looked down at Frank and pulled a doleful face. His hazel eyes were alive with humour. ‘You see how it is, young feller? Chaps

like me are supposed to be here supporting your Papa's efforts, doing our bit, earning our keep, but we're so infernally lazy that we spend all our time hunting and take weeks even to introduce ourselves.'

He rested one hand on Frank's shoulder and turned his searchlight attention back to Mr Gray. Frank could tell that his father was flattered that Mr Stokes had recognised him. Frank felt flattered too, by the sheer fact of this man's attention, by the broad hand still resting on his shoulder. There was something both generous and imperious about young Mr Stokes, with his fine moustache and his big laughing voice, like some dashing medieval monarch jesting with his men-at-arms.

'Somebody said you were ten years up at Peshawar,' Stokes was saying. 'Could it really be that long?'

'Over twelve, in point of fact.'

'No! Twelve years! Still, they tell me the cricket's pretty good up there.'

'Yes,' Mr Gray agreed, 'and the jackal hunts.'

Frank could not decide if they were joking. His father was extremely bad at cricket and avoided it whenever he could. The Peshawar jackal hunts were the worst form of adolescent mounted mayhem and Mr Gray would never have dreamed of taking part. The two men seemed to be using some sort of recognition code to establish whether they were actually on the same side.

It seemed that they were, for suddenly Mr Stokes's laughter boomed out. 'All I can say is, Gray, you commercial chaps are worth your money! You'll be a breath of fresh air here, you and your fine young family. And, good heavens, we need it. You wouldn't believe the stuffiness! I won't be able to get you into the Bangalore Club just yet, I'm embarrassed to say. The usual nonsense about box wallahs.'

Frank glanced quickly at his father. Mr Gray hated to be called a box wallah, the derisory term for anyone in commerce: it referred to the native traders who went from house to house selling cloth or fake antiques from tin trunks strapped to their bicycles. But Mr Stokes voiced the phrase in such a way that it ridiculed only the people who used it.

'Fellows in commerce aren't good enough for the membership committee, apparently,' he said. 'As if commerce isn't what it's all about. One tries to change things, but progress here can be pretty glacial, despite the climate. Need to shift a few of the Old Guard out of the way. Meanwhile, we new boys need to stick together.'

'To be honest, Stokes, I'm not much of a club man.'

'Quite. Dreadful bore most of the time. However there is a rather good Saturday Club, and that is fun. Tennis, curry mornings, billiards,

decent library. Best of all, a good bar. I'm a member myself, and I'd be happy to propose you.'

'That's kind of you.'

'Not a bit of it. The ladies always enjoy the Saturday Club, which is another advantage.' Stokes paused, dropped his voice a little. 'Moving's always worse for the memsahibs, I think. Takes a bit of adjustment.' He leaned forward and clapped Mr Gray companionably on the arm. 'You and Mrs Gray must come and join Patricia and me for a couple of pegs and a bite to eat. She'd love to see you both. Starved for civilised company, with only me to talk to.' Stokes made a fist, a gesture of solidarity. 'Stick together. That's the ticket.'

He ruffled Frank's hair and then he was gone, raising one hand over his shoulder in farewell, his straight back cruising through the throng, a foot above everyone else. Mr Gray stood watching him go, and Frank saw on his father's lined face an expression of profound relief, as if a burden had been lifted.

They both started as the locomotive's whistle blew with a shattering scream. Through the iron window of the cab Frank could see Gifford shrieking with silent delight against the din and tugging again and again on the valve release.

4

The servants had already cleared away the remains of dinner, and his mother had left to read Gifford a bedtime story. Frank was on the point of asking to be excused from the table, and, expecting his ritual request to be granted as it always was, he had started to rise.

'So, Francis, what did you think of our Mr Stokes?'

Frank sat down again.

'I liked him, Father.'

'I liked him, too.' Mr Gray sat back in his dining chair and, as if casually, drew an envelope from his jacket pocket. He placed it on the table beside his cheese plate and rested his hand on it. 'In point of fact, I asked a few questions about our Mr Stokes. It seems he is quite a celebrity in Bangalore.'

Frank could hear the distant murmur of his mother's voice drifting from the bedroom. Outside, beyond the opal rectangle of the French doors, zithering cicadas were fading in the deepening blue evening. It was time for his lesson, but it seemed that Mr Gray was in no hurry to fetch the leather bag in which he kept his books.

'The Heaven Born,' his father said, and his eyes twinkled. 'That's

what they call the Indian Civil Service. They get a good deal of stick, but there's barely one thousand of them to run a continent of four hundred millions. Most of them are only young chaps like Stokes. Pretty impressive, I think you'd agree.'

Frank was embarrassed that his father had so clearly read his fascination. But it was true enough. He had not been able to get Mr Stokes out of his mind all day. He had even caught himself practising the young man's urgent but loose-limbed stride, and the louche way he wore his jacket so that it fell open across his body.

Mr Gray said, 'I'll tell you what I learned about that young gentleman, shall I, Francis? He took a First in Classics from Balliol. He's already had a number of postings in various places way out in the mofussil. In Bengal he apparently hunted down a gang of dacoits and personally shot their leader dead. They say he speaks three native languages fluently, and has explored parts of the mountain country near the border with Bhutan where they'd never seen a white man.' He gave Frank a solemn look. 'That was in his spare time, presumably.'

Despite the irony, Frank could believe all this and more of Mr Stokes. But he could not understand why his father was painting this picture for him. Perhaps he was being teased. Perhaps Mr Gray, in his measured way, was about to demonstrate that Frank's new idol had feet of clay. Frank hoped not.

'I can tell you something else about him, too,' Mr Gray went on. 'By the time he's forty our Mr Stokes will be Collector somewhere, or perhaps he'll be recruited into the Indian Political Service and become British Resident in one of the princely states. He'll be a big man, with the authority of a king. Power over life and death, the last word in law. Think of that, Francis: to bring education, public works, railways, trade, justice, to thousands of poor people. Millions. Don't you agree that would be a goal worth striving for?'

'Yes, Father,' Frank said, cautiously.

'It could be your goal, too.'

Frank stared at him.

'I don't like to blow my own trumpet,' Mr Gray said, 'but I think I have done tolerably well, given my lack of a proper education. I should like to see how far you could go if you had some.' He got up and crossed to the sideboard and, unusually at this time of the evening, poured himself a whisky. He filled up the glass with soda, brought the drink back to the table and sat down again. 'My family did not support me, Francis. They were quite humble people and felt that I had ideas above my station in life.' He gave Frank an oddly twisted smile. 'But they were right. I did seek something more from life. Not just for myself, do

you see? For my children. For you and for Gifford. And now that we are on a rather firmer financial footing at last . . .’

Mr Gray picked up the letter beside his plate and tapped the stiff paper against his thumbnail. Frank saw that the envelope had already been opened, and that it bore a British stamp with the Queen’s head and a wavy postmark over it.

Mr Gray spoke in something of a rush. ‘Francis, I have arranged a place for you as a boarder at Napier College. Napier is a private academy in Warwickshire. In England.’

Frank said, ‘We’re going to England?’

‘No. You will go alone. Dearborn & Company has no position for me in England. And without a position, I cannot afford . . .’ He sounded suddenly testy, and took a sip of his whisky as if to put a stop to that line of talk. ‘You will start at Napier in September.’

Frank was too stunned to work out exactly how long that was. All he could think of was that his birthday was in September. Was it three or four months away? That seemed suddenly very soon.

‘Naturally, this will be strange for you at first. And your mother and I . . . will miss you very much.’ Mr Gray lifted his whisky to his lips again, this time so abruptly that he spilled a few drops. He set the glass down again and made some play with his handkerchief, wiping up the spilled drops, before continuing in a curiously high voice. ‘With your natural gifts, Francis, and such an education, there is nothing to which you may not aspire. Nothing. And it would make me proud indeed to see how far . . .’

Mr Gray turned away and stared into the corner of the room.

Frank said, ‘Did Mr Stokes attend Napier College, Father?’

Mr Gray gave a little grunt of laughter and looked back at him, his eyes shining. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know where Mr Stokes attended school, Francis. But if you wished for a hero, that young man is perhaps the very type of Englishman you might choose to emulate.’

5

Moonlight fell in strips through the blinds and across the cone of Gifford’s net-shrouded bed on the other side of the room. A rat scampered in the rafters above. Frank glimpsed it flitting like a shadow and in a second heard the tiny twitter of its young in the nest which he had found at the back of the wardrobe. He knew the rat, though he had not given it a name, and tonight he had left a fragment of biscuit for it on his bedside table. He waited a moment and the rat materialised there

as if by magic, six inches from his face, and sat watching him with jet eyes while it ate, holding the biscuit between pale forepaws.

Frank wondered if they had rats in Napier College. From what he had heard, it didn't seem likely that such unorthodoxy would be tolerated there. In all probability Napier's own peculiarities would be nothing like as entertaining as half-tame rats. Frank had read about English schools with their discipline, their chill dormitories and rough blankets. He wasn't sure all of this was true, but in any case he wasn't worried by the prospect of physical hardship. In fact he relished it. He enjoyed the heady sensation that he had been selected for an elite, like some Spartan youth marked out as a future champion. If his training were rigorous, that was only as it should be, and he sensed he was equal to it.

In his mind's eye Frank saw athletic Mr Stokes again, easy and powerful in his dusty bush jacket, his rifles in their canvas sheaths and his ammunition winking in the sun. The Heaven Born. To wield authority, stern but righteous, from a vast cool office in Government House. Or to sit at the side of some venal native maharajah, and to champion British justice for the poor and the downtrodden. And, when duty permitted, to hunt and explore, to travel and learn, to sit down with holy men and speak to them in their own tongue, and to listen gravely to their counsels.

Yes, surely, this was his path.

Outside in the bushes he heard a night bird hoot. The rat, sensing Frank's sudden alertness, was gone in a blink. Frank rolled his head on his pillow and listened. The hoot came again. He had not expected Javed to come tonight, but what better night? He knew he would not sleep, and this news was too big to keep to himself.

He slid out from beneath the mosquito net and pulled on his clothes, stepped softly to the door and out into the corridor. The boards were warm against his bare feet.

A rattan screen separated the passage from the dining room. He realised that, despite the hour, his parents were still up, talking. Frank could see the gleam of light through the screen and caught the murmur of their voices. He could tell they were seated at the card table near the screened double doors; if he was careful they would never hear him. He placed his weight with exquisite care, keeping to the edge of the passage where the boards did not creak, and in a moment he was abreast of the doorway into the box room. Three short steps through that room to the window, and he would be over the veranda rail and away into the night. He shifted onto the balls of his feet, his toes gripping the wood.

‘Why must you go?’ his mother burst out.

It froze Frank where he stood, as if the question had been shouted at him.

‘Why can’t you stay with me, Lewis, the one time I ask it?’

Frank dropped his heels and moved a step closer to the rattan screen.

‘Shall I explain it again, Marjorie?’ his father said, and for once did not trouble to disguise his annoyance. ‘The night train arrives in two hours. Half the cargo will be pilfered if I’m not there.’

‘Let Barrett do it. What’s the point of you being deputy manager—’

‘Barrett has been taken ill. How many more times? Good Lord.’

‘He’s taken drink, you mean.’

‘The man is ill, Marjorie.’

‘And am I not ill?’

‘Marjorie, you are as healthy as a young woman reasonably could be. Perhaps too healthy.’

At this, for some reason Frank did not understand, his mother began to sob openly. At the hopeless sound of it a wave of protectiveness washed through him. Had there been some secret hurt hidden in his father’s words? He could not tell. Certainly he had never heard his father speak so sharply to her. He wondered suddenly if they always wrangled like this when he was not present.

He moved stealthily forward until he could see them, segmented by the chinks in the rattan. As he had guessed they were at the card table, his mother seated but his father on his feet, his case in his hand. An oil lamp stood on the green baize between them and, despite the screen, a swarm of insects swooped around the light. His father’s whole attitude was one of a man at the end of his patience, his lips thinned and hard lines around his eyes and mouth. Frank’s mother sat with her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. Her hair had come undone and spilled over the graceful curve of her neck.

‘Marjorie,’ Mr Gray chided. ‘The servants. The children.’

She blindly fumbled for a handkerchief but didn’t lift her face.

Mr Gray sighed wearily, and stepped to the door.

‘Lewis?’ She groped out a hand to him and her voice was strangled. ‘Lewis!’

Mr Gray took his linen jacket from the chair and slid open the screen. ‘If we must, Marjorie, we can talk about this further in the morning, though in all conscience I believe we have said all there is to say.’ He turned and went down the steps of the veranda with his back very straight, the screen door banging behind him.

Frank watched his mother as she sat at the table, her handkerchief crushed in her right hand. Her pale face shone with tears and sweat in

the hot night but she sat like a statue, staring with despair in her eyes at the door through which her husband had passed.

For a long moment Frank stood undecided. He wanted to escape and he resented her for holding him back with her messy emotions. The box room door stood open beside him, and in a second he could be gone, and no one any the wiser. He pivoted silently towards the open window and the jasmine scented night. But then he remembered how he had found her singing to the moon, and he pushed aside the rattan screen and walked across the room to his mother.

She looked up, startled, and then turned her face quickly away and fussed with her handkerchief. 'Frank, go back to bed.'

'Why are you crying?'

'It doesn't matter. Go to bed.'

'I'll stay with you.' He pulled up the chair opposite her and sat down stiffly. 'Father couldn't. So I will.'

'I don't want you to.'

'We could play cards.'

'No. Please. Go to bed.'

'Are you angry with me?'

'No, Frank. No.' She started to cry again. 'Not with you.'

'With Father, then? Has Father done something wrong?'

She put her head in her hands. 'Oh, God, Frank. Not your father either. Your papa's too good a man by half. If he's done anything wrong it's only because he's too good. Too gentle. If he'd stood up for himself more, maybe he might have had a post in England and we could all have gone back together.'

Her voice collapsed into incoherence and for a few moments she sobbed helplessly. Frank stretched out one hand and touched her shoulder. The material of her dress was hot. She threw back her hair and lifted her streaked face to him.

'Dear Frank. You really are my protector.' She rested her hand over his; her skin was warm and moist.

'I promised,' he said.

'And you don't break your promises, do you?'

'No.'

'No, of course you don't.' She took a deep breath and sat up a little. 'Who was calling earlier? The owl that wasn't an owl?'

'Javed.' He knew there was no point in lying to her.

'Go with him then. I won't tell.'

'He'll be gone by now.'

'Then go after him.' She squeezed his hand. 'Go on. You can catch him.'

'I won't leave you.'

She gave him a mock imperious look. 'You promised to obey my every command.'

Frank wasn't sure he had promised any such thing, but he found that he could not contradict her. She leaned close to him, urgently.

'Frank, Frank. The best you can do for me tonight is to leave me. I have been . . . foolish, you see. And I need a little time alone to put right my own mistakes.'

'What mistakes?'

'You wouldn't understand.' She dropped his hand and patted it smartly. 'Now go. That's my command, Sir Knight. Do as I bid thee.' She gave him a lopsided smile.

He got reluctantly to his feet.

At the screen he stopped and looked back. She was sitting in the lamplight, her face pale and her hair disordered. She was, Frank thought, more beautiful than anyone he had ever seen. He let himself out through the screen door and ran into the velvet night, down the garden path and away into the black street.

He ran through the shadows of the jacaranda trees until he left the last of the bungalows behind him, and ran on through twisting alleys and backstreets towards the outskirts of the old city. As he ran he breathed the smells of orange blossom and jasmine and rotting refuse and the dank savour of the coming monsoon. And in his mind he saw his mother's face, pale as stone, glistening in the lamplight, with despair in her eyes.

6

Frank crouched beside Javed in the ruins of the old temple to Vishnu, squatting on his haunches native style, catching his breath. The fallen columns, their intricate and erotic carvings lit blue in the moonlight, lay half-smothered by scrub on the slope which led up to the railway embankment. Above them the struts of the water tower stood against the sky.

From here the vastness of the native town lay spread out below like an upturned jewel box, the small lights of stalls, workshops, and cooking fires mirroring the starred sky. Not a mile below them glittered Cantonment Station, and further to the west City Station where Frank, with his important father and with Gifford, had been a visitor just a day or two ago. North of the railway he could just see the lights of the British cavalry lines and of the infantry barracks, trembling in neat grids.