

DUSTYPORE.

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**CHRONICLES OF
DUSTYPORE**

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*A TALE OF MODERN ANGLO-INDIAN
SOCIETY*

BY
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ETC.

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TO
R. H. W.

You promised me once that, if ever the 'Chronicles of Dustypore' shaped themselves into being, they might be dedicated to you. While writing them my thoughts have often turned to happy hours passed in your society, and pleasant scenes witnessed beneath your roof. If the story has profited thereby, and Felicia has borrowed whatever charms she may possess from those remembered scenes and hours, forgive me, and let me lay the portrait, with all its imperfections, at your feet.

H. S. C.

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CHRONICLES OF DUSTYPORE.^[1]

CHAPTER I.

THE SANDY TRACTS.

He seems like one whose footsteps halt,
 Tolling in immeasurable sand;
 And o'er a weary, sultry land,
 Far beneath a blazing vault,
 Sown in a wrinkle of the monstrous hill,
 The city sparkles like a grain of salt.

Any one who knows or cares anything about India—that is, say, one Englishman in a hundred thousand—is familiar with the train of events which resulted in the conquest of the Sandy Tracts, the incorporation of that unattractive region in the British Indian Empire, and the establishment of an Agency at Dustypore. The ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine, who neither know nor wish to know, would not be grateful for

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all account of battles fought at places of which they never heard, of victories gained by generals whose fame is already forgotten, or of negotiations which nobody but the negotiators understood at the time, and which a few years have effectually relegated to the oblivion that awaits all that is at once dull, profitless, and unintelligible.

Suffice it to say that the generally admired air of 'Rule Britannia,' which has been performed on so many occasions for the benefit of admiring audiences in different parts of the Indian continent, was once again piped and drummed and cannonaded into the ears of a prostrate population. The resistless 'red line,' historical on a hundred battle-fields, once again stood firm against the onset of despairing fanaticism, and once again in its advance moved forward the boundaries of the conquering race. The solid tramp of British soldiers' feet sounded the death-knell of a rule whose hour of doom had struck, and one more little tyranny—its cup of crime, perfidy, and folly full—was blotted for ever from the page of the world's story. The sun set into a horizon lurid with the dust of a flying rabble, and the victorious cavalry, as it returned, covered with sweat and dirt, from the pursuit, found all the fighting done, an English guard on duty at the city gates, a troop of English artillery drawn up in front of the principal

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mosque, and a couple of English sentinels plodding up and down with all the stolidity of true Britons in front of the Officers' Quarters. The Sandy Tracts were ours.

The next morning at sunrise the British flag was flying on the Fort of Dustypore, and a British General and his staff were busy with maps, orders, and despatches in quarters from which the ladies of a royal seraglio had fled in post-haste the afternoon before. Thenceforward everything went on like clockwork. Before the week was out order, such as had not been dreamed of for many a long year, prevailed in every nook and corner of the captured city.

One morning an elderly gentleman, in plain clothes, attended by two or three uniformed lads and a tiny cavalry escort, rode in, and a roar of cannon from the Fort announced that the 'Agent' had arrived. Then set in the full tide of civil administration. Courts began to sit, pickpockets and brawlers were tried; sanitary regulations were issued; returns were called for, appointments were made. The 'Dustypore Gazette,' in its first issue, announced with the greatest calmness, and in the curt language appropriate to an everyday occurrence, the annexation of the Sandy Tracts; and a gun fired from the Fort every morning, as near as might be to mid-day, announced to the good people of Dustypore that, by

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order of Queen Victoria, it was twelve o'clock, and twelve o'clock in a British cantonment.

The new addition to Her Majesty's possessions resembled the Miltonic hell in one particular at any rate—in being a region of fierce extremes. On winter mornings a biting wind, fresh from its icy home in the distant snow-clad range, cut one to the core; and people clustered, with chattering teeth and blue fingers, round blazing hearths, where great logs worthy of an English Christmas tempered the cruel atmosphere to a genial glow. When the 'Rains' came it poured a little deluge. During the eight months of summer the state of things resembled that prevailing in the interior of a well-constructed and well-supplied Arnott's stove. Then it was that the Sandy Tracts were seen in the complete development of their resources and in the fullest glory. Vast plains, a dead level but for an occasional clump of palms or the dome of some despoiled and crumbling tomb, stretched away on every side, and ended in a hazy quivering horizon that spoke of infinite heat. Over these ranged herds of cattle and goats, browsing on no one could see what, or bewildered buffaloes would lie, panting and contented, in some muddy pool, with little but horns, eyes, and nostrils exposed above the surface. Little ill-begotten stunted plants worked hard to live and grow and to weather

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the roaring fierce winds. The crows sat gasping, open-beaked, as if protesting against having been born into so sulphurous an existence. Here and there a well, with its huge lumbering wheel and patient bullocks, went creaking and groaning night and day, as if earth grudged the tiny rivulet, coming so toilsomely from her dry breast, and gave it up with sighs of pain. The sky was cloudless, pitiless, brazen. The sun rose into it without a single fleck of vapour to mitigate its fierceness, and pierced, like a red-hot sword, the rash mortal who dared, unprotected, to meet its ray. All day it shone and glistened and blazed, until the very earth seemed to crack with heat, and the mere thought of it was pain. 'Ægypt,' to use the poet's phrase, 'ached in the sun's eye.' The natives tied their heads up in bags, covered their mouths, and carried their clothes between the sun and themselves. Europeans entrenched themselves behind barriers of moistened grass, lay outstretched under monster fans and consoled themselves with what cool drinks their means allowed, and with the conviction, which seemed to spring perennial in each sufferer's breast, that the present was by far the hottest summer ever known.

Dew there was none. You stepped from your door in the morning into a bed of sand, which no amount of watering could reduce to the proper

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solidity of a garden-path. As you came in at night you shook off the dust that had gathered on you in your evening stroll. Miles away the galloping horseman might be tracked by the little cloud that he stirred up as he went. The weary cattle trudged homeward from their day's work in a sand-storm of their own manufacture. There was sand in the air one breathed, in the food one tried to eat, in the water that pretended to assuage one's thirst: sand in heaven and sand on earth—and a great deal of sand in the heads of many of the officials.

This getting of sand into the head, and getting it in in a degree compatible neither with health, comfort, or efficiency, was a recognised malady in the Sandy Tracts. It cost the Government a great deal of money and the services of many a useful brain. Officers, when they felt themselves becoming unendurably sandy and their ideas proportionately confused, used to take furlough, and go home and try to get washed clear again at Malvern or Wiesbaden: and there was a famous physician in Mayfair, renowned for his skill in ridding the heads of those poor gentlemen of the unwelcome deposit, who made a reputation and a fortune by, so to speak, dredging them.

There was one official head, however, at Dustypore in which no particle of sand was to be found,

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and that was Mr. Strutt's. It was for this reason, probably, amongst others, that he was made Chief Secretary to the Salt Board, a post which, at the time when this history commences, was one of the most important, responsible, and lucrative in the entire service. For the Salt Board, as will hereafter be seen, was an institution whose dignity and powers had grown and grown until they almost overtopped those of the Agency itself. If the Salt Board was the embodiment of what was dignified and powerful in Dustypore, Mr. Strutt had concentrated in his own person the functions and attributes of the Board. He was prompt, indefatigable, self-satisfied, and, what his superiors valued him for especially, lucky.

A long career had taught him and the world that those who attacked him came off second-best. His answers were unanswerable, his reports effective, his explanations convincing. His nervous hand it was that depicted the early triumphs of the Dustypore Administration and in sonorous periods set forth the glories of the British rule—the roads, the canals, the hospitals and schools—the suppression of crime, the decreased mortality, the general passion of the inhabitants for female education. His figures

were constantly quoted by people who wished to talk about India to English audiences, and his very name was a pillar of strength to the champions of the English rule. Even his enemies were constrained

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to admit that he possessed the art of 'putting it' to a degree of fearful and wonderful perfection.

The maxim, 'like master like man,' was as far as possible from being verified in the case of Mr. Strutt and his superiors. Of these Mr. Fotheringham, the Chairman, was lymphatic in temperament, inordinately vain, and the victim of an inveterate habit of enunciating platitudes. Cockshaw, who came next, was off-hand, superficial, and positive, with the positiveness of a man who hates deliberation and despises every form of uncertainty. Blunt, the third member, was a non-civilian, and had been brought out from England on account of his practical acquaintance with salt-mines, and of his having been a secretary in the Board of Trade. He was business-like, straightforward, and unconciliating; generally thought differently from his colleagues, and had the roughest possible manner of saying what he thought.

Such a trio had sometimes, as may well be imagined, no little trouble in preserving toward the outer world the aspect of serene, benevolent, and consistent infallibility, the maintenance of which Fotheringham regarded as the first of duties, Cockshaw did not in the least mind a row, so long as he was not kept too long at office for the purpose of making it. Blunt would have stayed at office till midnight, arguing doggedly, sooner than abandon

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his point. Happily Fotheringham had a great sense of propriety, concealed the dissensions of his colleagues from the public eye, and preserved the Board's dignity from ignominious collapse.

Under Strutt came a hierarchy of less important subordinates, who

paved the long descent, so to speak, from the official altitudes in which the Salt Board had its being to the vulgar public who consumed the salt. Chief of these was Vernon, with whom the reader will speedily become better acquainted. Under him, again, came Mr. Whisp, the Assistant-Secretary, a young gentleman whose task it was to draw up minutes of the Board's proceedings, to draft its circulars and to collect the statistics out of which Strutt concocted his reports. He had thus, it will be seen, an opportunity of acquiring much useful information and a highly ornamental style, and Whisp was generally regarded in the service as a rising man.

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CHAPTER II.

MAUD.

Nature said, 'A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown:
This child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A lady of my own.'

When Vernon was appointed Under-Secretary to the Salt Board, he no doubt imagined that it was in connection with that august body that he would be known to fame and (as Strutt would grandiloquently have put it) leave his mark on his epoch. He was destined, however, as the reader of these pages will presently perceive, to become remarkable on the less unusual ground of relationship to an extremely pretty girl. His cousin Maud, of whom years before, in a rash moment of benevolence, he had consented to become guardian and trustee, had been suddenly thrown upon his hands. She was no longer a remote anxiety which could be

disposed of by cheques, letters to governesses, and instructions to solicitors, but an immediate, living reality,

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with a highly effective pair of eyes, good looks—as to which women might cavil, but every man would be a firm believer—the manner of an eager child, and a joyousness which Vernon was obliged to admit was at once deliciously infectious to the world at large, and a very agreeable alternative to the state of mind produced by Indian summers, salt statistics, letters polished by Whisp or commonplaces enunciated by Fotheringham. With the timidity of indolence he shuddered to think of the social entanglements and disturbances which so new an element in his household was calculated to produce.

Maud, on the other hand, had come out to India with a very low opinion of herself and of her claims upon the good-will of society. At Miss Goodenough's establishment for young ladies, where her education had been completed, her shortcomings had been impressed upon her in a manner wholesome, perhaps, and necessary, but decidedly depressing. She had been haunted by the awful consciousness that she was a 'Tomboy.' Her general demeanour, her mode of expressing herself, her ignorance of many things with which no one ought to be unfamiliar, had been the object of the most unflattering comment. The elder Miss Goodenough—between whom and Maud there existed a real though somewhat fitful attachment—used to have

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her into a solemn little chamber and administer the most awful lectures on her sins of commission and omission, and the disgrace and suffering which they would justly entail. These interviews were generally tearful and tender; for Miss Goodenough, to whom Maud had been consigned as a child on her first arrival from India, loved her with a sort of rapture which made itself felt amid all the vehement fault-finding which Maud's delinquencies necessitated.

Maud had always regarded the old lady in something of a maternal light, and never could be brought to abandon the familiar abbreviation of 'Goody,' by which she had been allowed, as a child, to address her instructress. She accepted her instructress's sentences accordingly with unquestioning faith and submission. The two used to weep together over Maud's shortcomings. She looked upon Miss Goodenough as a friend whose heart it was her unlucky fate to lacerate. Miss Goodenough regarded Maud as a creature whose alarming impulses and irregularities justified the darkest forebodings as to her future, and succeeded in infecting her pupil with some of her own apprehensions. Some judgment must, so both agreed, sooner or later overtake one whose shoulders seemed guided by a hidden law to unequal altitudes, whose toes defied every endeavour to keep them pointed in the conventional direction, and whose impetuous

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behaviour was constantly producing a scandal of more or less gravity.

'Dearest child,' Miss Goodenough would say, with an air of profound commiseration, 'if you could see how you look, with one shoulder up to your ears and the other near to what should be your waist!'

This taunt particularly grieved Maud, for she felt bitterly that her form was unromantically plump, and not at all of the refined tenuity of several of her companions.

'My shoulders!' she would exclaim, with the tears in her eyes; 'I wish they were both at Jericho. I am sure I am made wrong, dearest Goody, indeed I am.'

'Then, my dear,' Miss Goodenough would say, not encouragingly, 'we should try all the more to remedy natural defects; at any rate, you might know your Bible. Now, dear Maud, your ignorance is, you know, simply shocking.'

'Yes I know,' said Maud, 'but I can't help it. Those horrid kings of Israel and Judah! They made Israel to sin, they make me to sin, indeed they do. Jehoshaphat, Jehoiakim, Jonadab, Jehu—all wicked—all beginning with J—how can any one remember them?'

'Then, my dear,' her inexorable monitress would reply, 'you can never know what every well-educated

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young lady, what every mere school-child, is acquainted with. How can you be fit to go into the world?'

'I wish,' said Maud, passionately, in despair at the difficulties of existence, 'that when the tribes got lost they had taken their histories with them, and lost them too. Darling Goody, let me learn texts, hymns, all the Sermon on the Mount, as much poetry as you please, only not those dreadful Chronicles!' Maud used on these occasions to throw her arms round Goody's neck in an outbreak of affectionate repentance, in a way that the elder lady, who was absurdly impressionable, found it difficult to resist.

But Miss Goodenough's kindness made Maud's conscience all the less at ease. Calmness, self-restraint, composure, a well-stocked mind, and sensible judgment were, Miss Goodenough told her, the great excellencies of character to be aimed at. Maud looked into herself, and felt, with agonies of self-reproach, that in every particular she fell miserably short; that she was the very reverse of calm; the least thing roused her into passion, or sent her spinning from the summit of serene high spirits to the lowest depths of despair; as for self-restraint, Maud felt she was just as capable of it as of flying to the moon.

From time to time she made violent efforts to

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be diligent, and set to work with sudden zeal upon books which her instructress assured her were most interesting and improving. These attempts, for the most part, collapsed in grievous failure.

Improvement, Maud felt ruefully, there might be, though unbeknown to herself; interest, she was certain, there was none. On the other hand, a chance novel, which had somehow or other passed scatheless through the rigid blockade which Miss Goodenough established around her young ladies, had filled her with a sort of ecstasy of excitement; and no amount of poetry—no such amount, at any rate, as came within the narrow limits of her mistress's literary horizon—seemed capable of fatiguing or even of satisfying her. Displaying the most complete inaptitude for every other form of diligence, she was ready enough to learn any amount that any one liked to give her. She even signalised her zeal by the spasmodic transcription of her favourite passages into a precious volume marked with a solemn 'Private,' protected from profane eyes by a golden padlock and destined by its proprietress to be the depository of all her intellectual treasures.

Miss Goodenough, however, though admitting perforce the merits of the great masters of English song, regarded the claims of poetry as generally subordinate to those of history, geography, arithmetic, [16]

and various other branches of useful and ornamental learning, and treated Maud's passion for Sir Walter Scott as but another alarming symptom of an excitable disposition and ill-regulated mind.

A crisis came at last. It happened at church, where Miss Goodenough's young ladies used to sit just under the gallery, while the boys of 'The Crescent House Academy' performed their devotions overhead. One fatal Sunday in February, just as the Service was over, and the two Misses Goodenough had already turned their backs to lead the way out, and the young ladies were preparing to follow, a little missive came fluttering down and fell almost into Maud's hands; at any rate, she slipped it into her Prayer-book; and all would have gone well but for that horrid Mademoiselle de Vert, who, turning sharply round, detected the occurrence, and the moment Maud was outside the church

demanded her Prayer-book.

Maud turned fiery red in an instant, and surrendered her book.

'And the note,' said Mademoiselle de Vert.

'What note?' said Maud. But alas! her telltale cheeks rendered the question useless, and made all evasion impossible. Maud was speedily driven to open resistance.

'No, thank you,' she said, with an air that told

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Mademoiselle de Vert that further attempts at coercion would be labour thrown away; 'it was not intended for you; it was a valentine.'

After this appalling disclosure there was, of course, when they got home, an explanation to be had with Miss Goodenough, who professed herself, and probably really was, terrified at so new a phase of human depravity.

Maud was presently in floods of tears, and was obliged to confess that she and the offending culprit had on more than one occasion let each other's eyes meet, had in fact exchanged looks, and even smiles; so that, perhaps, she was the real occasion for this unhallowed act of temerity.

'Forgive me, forgive me!' she cried; 'it was nothing wrong; it was only a heart with an arrow and a Cupid!'

'A Cupid!' cried Miss Goodenough, in horror at each new revelation, 'and some writing too, I suppose?'

'Yes,' said Maud, whose pleasure in the valentine was rapidly surmounting the disgrace into which it had got her; 'really pretty verses. Here it is!' And thereupon she produced the offending billet, and proceeded to read with effusion:—

I would thou wert a summer rose,
And I a bird to hover o'er thee;

And from the dawn to evening's close
To warble only, 'I adore thee!'

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'Stop!' cried Miss Goodenough, with great decision, and white with indignation; 'do you know what you are reading? Do you know that that vulgar rubbish is the sort of odious impertinence that shop-boys send to their sweethearts, but which it is an insult to let a lady even see, and which, transmitted in a church, is little less than sacrilege?'

So saying, Miss Goodenough took the offending letter and consigned it to the flames, and poor Maud stood ruefully by, watching the conflagration of the silver Cupid, mourning over Miss Goodenough's hard-heartedness, and consoling herself with the reflection that at any rate she remembered the verses.

'I must write to your aunt Felicia to remove you. What an example for other girls!'

'Well,' said Maud resignedly, and blushing in anticipation at the thought of such an exposure; 'do not, at any rate, tell her about the valentine. Dear Goody, did you never have one sent to you when you were my age?'

Miss Goodenough quite declined to gratify this audacious inquiry, and made up her mind that it was high time for Maud to be under more masterful guidance than her own. The result was that in the following November Maud was a passenger on the P. & O. steamship 'Cockatrice,' from Southampton

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to Calcutta, where her cousin Vernon was to meet her and escort her to her new home in Dustypore.

She had been, it must be acknowledged, to a certain degree reassured by the experience of her voyage. She found that the kings of Israel and Judah did not occupy a prominent place in general conversation; that a precise acquaintance with the queens

of England was not expected of her; and that nobody resented the impetuosity of her movements or her want of self-restraint. On the contrary, several of her fellow-voyagers had evinced the liveliest sympathy and interest in her, and had devoted themselves successfully to keeping her amused. Maud, in fact, had gone down to her cabin on more occasions than one during the voyage and shed some tears at the approaching separation from friends, whom even those few weeks of chance companionship had carried close to her heart. It had been in truth a happy time. The captain, to whose special care she was committed, had watched over her with a more than paternal interest. The doctor insisted on her having champagne. The purser set all his occult influences at work to increase her comfort. The stewards conspired to spoil her. Maud felt that nothing she could do would at all adequately express her feelings to all these good people who had ministered to her wants and tried, with so much

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success, to please her. There are people, no doubt, to whom a voyage to India is the height of boredom; but there are other happier natures to whom it presents a continuous series of excitements, interests, and joys. Maud, at any rate, enjoyed it with a sort of rapture, and trembled to think how faintly Miss Goodenough's admonitions even now began to fall upon her conscience's ear.

Then there had been some very charming fellow-passengers on board, with whom she had formed the warmest friendship. There was a certain Mr. Mowbray, for instance—a comely, curly-headed, beardless boy, on his way to join his regiment—whom she found extremely interesting, and who lost no time in becoming confidential. It was very pleasant to sit on deck through long lazy mornings and play *bésique* with Mr. Mowbray; and pleasant too, when the day was done, to sit with him in the moonlight and watch the Southern Cross slowly wheeling up and the waves all ablaze with phosphoric splendour, and to talk about home and Mr.

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