

Snake and Sword

A Novel

Percival Christopher Wren

DEDICATED
TO
MY WIFE
ALICE LUCILLE WREN

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EPILOGUE.

PART I.
THE WELDING OF A SOUL.

CHAPTER I.

THE SNAKE AND THE SOUL.

When Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne, V.C., D.S.O., of the Queen's Own (118th) Bombay Lancers, pinned his Victoria Cross to the bosom of his dying wife's night-dress, in token of his recognition that she was the braver of the twain, he was not himself.

He was beside himself with grief.

Afterwards he adjured the sole witness of this impulsive and emotional act, Major John Decies, never to mention his "damned theatrical folly" to any living soul, and to excuse him on the score of an ancient sword-cut on the head and two bad sun-strokes.

For the one thing in heaven above, on the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth, that Colonel de Warrenne feared, was breach of good form and stereotyped convention.

And the one thing he loved was the dying woman.

This last statement applies also to Major John Decies, of the Indian Medical Service, Civil Surgeon of Bimariabad, and may even be expanded, for the one thing he ever *had* loved was the dying woman....

Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne did the deed that won him his Victoria Cross, in the open, in the hot sunlight and in hot blood, sword in hand and with hot blood on the sword-hand—fighting for his life.

His wife did the deed that moved him to transfer the Cross to her, in darkness, in cold blood, in loneliness, sickness and silence—fighting for the life of her unborn child against an unseen foe.

Colonel de Warrenne's type of brave deed has been performed thousands of times and wherever brave men have fought.

His wife's deed of endurance, presence of mind, self-control and cool courage is rarer, if not unique.

To appreciate this fully, it must be known that she had a horror of snakes, so terrible as to amount to an obsession, a mental deformity, due, doubtless, to the fact that her father (Colonel Mortimer Seymour Stukeley) died of snake-bite before her mother's eyes, a few hours before she herself was born.

Bearing this in mind, judge of the conduct that led Colonel de Warrenne, distraught, to award her his Cross "For Valour".

One oppressive June evening, Lenore de Warrenne returned from church (where she had, as usual, prayed fervently that her soon-expected first-born might be a daughter), and entered her dressing-room. Here her Ayah divested her of hat, dress, and boots, and helped her into the more easeful tea-gown and satin slippers.

"Bootlair wanting ishweets for dinner-table from go-down,^u please, Mem-Sahib," observed Ayah, the change of garb accomplished.

"The butler wants sweets, does he? Give me my keys, then," replied Mrs. de Warrenne, and, rising with a sigh, she left the dressing-room and proceeded, *via* the dining-room (where she procured some small silver bowls, sweet-dishes, and trays), to the go-down or store-room, situate at the back of the bungalow and adjoining the "dispense-khana"—the room in which assemble the

materials and ministrants of meals from the extra-mural “bowachikhana” or kitchen. Unlocking the door of the go-down, Mrs. de Warrenne entered the small shelf-encircled room, and, stepping on to a low stool proceeded to fill the sweet-trays from divers jars, tins and boxes, with guava-cheese, crystallized ginger, *kulwa*, preserved mango and certain of the more sophisticated sweetmeats of the West.

It was after sunset and the *hamal* had not yet lit the lamps, so that this pantry, a dark room at mid-day, was far from light at that time. But for the fact that she knew exactly where everything was, and could put her hand on what she wanted, she would not have entered without a light.

For some minutes the unfortunate lady stood on the stool.

Having completed her task she stepped down backwards and, as her foot touched the ground, she knew *that she had trodden upon a snake*.

Even as she stood poised, one foot on the ground, the other on the stool, both hands gripping the high shelf, she felt the reptile whipping, writhing, jerking, lashing, flogging at her ankle and instep, coiling round her leg.... And in the fraction of a second the thought flashed through her mind: “If its head is under my foot, or too close to my foot for its fangs to reach me, I am safe while I remain as I am. If its head is free I am doomed—and matters cannot be any the worse for my keeping as I am.”

And she kept as she was, with one foot on the stool, out of reach, and one foot on the snake.

And screamed?

No, called quietly and coolly for the butler, remembering that she had sent Nurse Beaton out, that her husband was at polo, that there were none but native servants in the house, and that if she raised an alarm they would take it, and with single heart consider each the safety of Number One.

“Boy!” she called calmly, though the room swam round her and a deadly faintness began to paralyse her limbs and loosen her hold upon the shelf—“Boy! Come here.”

Antonio Ferdinand Xavier D’Souza, Goanese butler, heard and came.

“Mem-Sahib?” quoth he, at the door of the go-down.

“Bring a lamp quickly,” said Lenore de Warrenne in a level voice.

The worthy Antonio, fat, spectacled, bald and wheezy, hurried away and peremptorily bade the *hamal*^[2], son of a jungle-pig, to light and bring a lamp quickly.

The *hamal*, respectfully pointing out to the Bootlair Sahib that the daylight was yet strong and lusty enough to shame and smother any lamp, complied with deliberation and care, polishing the chimney, trimming the wick, pouring in oil and generally making a satisfactory and commendable job of it.

Lenore de Warrenne, sick, faint, sinking, waited ... waited ... waited ... gripping the shelf and fighting against her overmastering weakness for the life of the unborn child that, even in that awful moment, she prayed might be a daughter.

After many cruelly long centuries, and as she swayed to fall, the good Antonio entered with the lamp. Her will triumphed over her falling body.

“Boy, I am standing on a snake!” said she coolly. “Put the lamp—”

But Antonio did not stay to “put” the lamp; incontinent he dropped it on the floor and fled yelling “Sap! Sap!” and that the Mem-Sahib was bitten, dying, dead—certainly dead; dead for hours.

And the brave soul in the little room waited ... waited ... waited ... gripping the shelf, and thinking of the coming daughter, and wondering whether she must die by snake-bite or fire—unborn—with her unhappy mother. For the fallen lamp had burst, the oil had caught fire, and the fire gave no light by which she could see what was beneath her foot—head, body, or tail of the lashing, squirming snake—as the flame flickered, rose and fell, burnt blue, swayed, roared in the draught of the door—did anything but give a light by which she could see as she bent over awkwardly, still gripping the shelf, one foot on the stool, further prevented from seeing by her loose draperies.

Soon she realized that in any case she could not see her foot without changing her position—a thing she would *not* do while there was hope—and strength to hold on. For hope there was, inasmuch as *she had not yet felt the stroke of the reptile's fangs*.

Again she reasoned calmly, though strength was ebbing fast; she must remain as she was till death by fire or suffocation was the alternative to flight—flight which was synonymous with death, for, as her other foot came down and she stepped off the snake, in that instant it would strike—if it had not struck already.

Meantime—to call steadily and coolly again.

This time she called to the *hamal*, a Bhil, engaged out of compassion, and likely, as a son of the jungle's sons, to be of more courage than the stall-fed butler in presence of dangerous beast or reptile.

“*Hamal*: I want you,” she called coolly.

“Mem-Sahib?” came the reply from the lamp-room near by, and the man approached.

“That stupid butler has dropped a lamp and run away. Bring a pail of water quickly and call to the *malli* to bring a pail of earth as you get it. Hasten!—and there is baksheesh,” said Mrs. de Warrenne quietly in the vernacular.

Tap and pail were by the door of the back verandah. In a minute the *hamal* entered and flung a pail of water on the burning pool of oil, reducing the mass of blue lambent flames considerably.

“Now *hamal*,” said the fainting woman, the more immediate danger confronted, “bring another lamp very quickly and put it on the shelf. Quick! don't stop to fill or to clean it.”

Was the pricking, shooting pain the repeated stabbing of the snake's fangs or was it “pins and needles”? Was this deadly faintness death indeed, or was it only weakness?

In what seemed but a few more years the man reappeared carrying a lighted lamp, the which he placed upon a shelf.

“Listen,” said Mrs. de Warrenne, “and have no fear, brave Bhil. I have *caught* a snake. Get a knife quickly and cut off its head while I hold it.”

The man glancing up, appeared to suppose that his mistress held the snake on the shelf, hurried away, and rushed back with the cook's big kitchen-knife gripped dagger-wise in his right hand.

“Do you see the snake?” she managed to whisper. “Under my foot! Quick! It is moving ... moving ... moving *out*.”

With a wild Bhil cry the man flung himself down upon his hereditary dread foe and slashed with the knife.

Mrs. de Warrenne heard it scratch along the floor, grate on a nail, and crush through the snake.

“Aré!! Dead, Mem-Sahib!! Dead!! See, I have cut off its head! Aré!!!! Wah!! The brave mistress!——”

As she collapsed, Mrs. de Warrenne saw the twitching body of a large cobra with its head severed close to its neck. Its head had just protruded from under her foot and she had saved the unborn life for which she had fought so bravely by just keeping still.... She had won her brief decoration with the Cross by—keeping still. (Her husband had won his permanent right to it by extreme activity.) ... Had she moved she would have been struck instantly, for the reptile was, by her, uninjured, merely nipped between instep and floor.

Having realized this, Lenore de Warrenne fainted and then passed from fit to fit, and her child—a boy—was born that night. Hundreds of times during the next few days the same terrible cry rang from the sick-room through the hushed bungalow: “It is under my foot! It is moving ... moving ... moving ... *out*!”

“If I had to make a prophecy concerning this young fella,” observed the broken-hearted Major John Decies, I.M.S., Civil

Surgeon of Bimariabad, as he watched old Nurse Beaton performing the baby's elaborate ablutions and toilet, "I should say that he will *not* grow up fond of snakes—not if there is anything in the 'pre-natal influence' theory."

PART II.
THE SEARING OF A SOUL.

CHAPTER II.

THE SWORD AND THE SNAKE.

Colonel Matthew Devon De Warrenne, commanding the Queen's Own (118th) Bombay Lancers, was in good time, in his best review-order uniform, and in a terrible state of mind.

He strode from end to end of the long verandah of his bungalow with clank of steel, creak of leather, and groan of travailing soul. As the top of his scarlet, blue and gold turban touched the lamp that hung a good seven feet above his spurred heels he swore viciously.

Almost for the first time in his hard-lived, selfish life he had been thwarted, flouted, cruelly and evilly entreated, and the worst of it was that his enemy was—not a man whom he could take by the throat, but—Fate.

Fate had dealt him a cruel blow, and he felt as he would have done had he, impotent, seen one steal the great charger that champed and pawed there at the door, and replace it by a potter's donkey. Nay, worse—for he had *loved* Lenore, his wife, and Fate had stolen her away and replaced her by a squealing brat.

Within a year of his marriage his wife was dead and buried, and his son alive and—howling. He could hear him (curse him!).

The Colonel glanced at his watch, producing it from some mysterious recess beneath his belted golden sash and within his pale blue tunic.

Not yet time to ride to the regimental parade-ground and lead his famous corps to its place on the brigade parade-ground for the New Year Review and march-past.

As he held the watch at the length of its chain and stared, half-comprehending, his hand—the hand of the finest swordsman in the Indian Army—shook.

Lenore gone: a puling, yelping whelp in her place.... A tall, severe-looking elderly woman entered the verandah by a distant door and approached the savage, miserable soldier. Nurse Beaton.

“*Will* you give your son a name, Sir?” she said, and it was evident in voice and manner that the question had been asked before and had received an unsatisfactory, if not unprintable; reply. Every line of feature and form seemed to express indignant resentment. She had nursed and foster-mothered the child’s mother, and—unlike the man—had found the baby the chiefest consolation of her cruel grief, and already loved it not only for its idolized mother’s sake, but with the devotion of a childless child-lover.

“The christening is fixed for to-day, Sir, as I have kept reminding you, Sir,” she added.

She had never liked the Colonel—nor considered him “good enough” for her tender, dainty darling, “nearly three times her age and no better than he ought to be”.

“Name?” snarled Colonel Matthew Devon de Warrenne. “Name the little beast? Call him what you like, and then drown him.” The tight-lipped face of the elderly nurse flushed angrily, but before she could make the indignant reply that her hurt and scandalized look presaged, the Colonel added:—

“No, look here, call him *Damocles*, and done with it. The Sword hangs over him too, I suppose, and he’ll die by it, as all his ancestors have done. Yes—”

“It’s not a nice name, Sir, to my thinking,” interrupted the woman, “not for an only name—and for an only child. Let it be a second or third name, Sir, if you want to give him such an outlandish one.”

She fingered her new black dress nervously with twitching hands and the tight lips trembled.

“He’s to be named *Damocles* and nothing else,” replied the Master, and, as she turned away with a look of positive hate, he added sardonically:—

“And then you can call him ‘*Dam*’ for short, you know, Nurse.”

Nurse Beaton bridled, clenched her hands, and stiffened visibly. Had the man been her social equal or any other than her master, her pent-up wrath and indignation would have broken forth in a torrent of scathing abuse.

“Never would I call the poor motherless lamb *Dam*, Sir,” she answered with restraint.

“Then call him *Dummy!* Good morning, Nurse,” snapped the Colonel.

As she turned to go, with a bitter sigh, she asked in the hopeless tone of one who knows the waste of words:—

“You will not repent—I mean relent—and come to the christening of your only son this afternoon, Sir?”

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