

The Warden of the Marches

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“SINJĀJ KĪLIN SAHĪB BAHADAR RIDES TO-NIGHT”

THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMING OF QUEEN MAB.

“THEN the mail’s in, Georgie?”

“Yes, Dick; it came in about half-an-hour after you started. Here are your letters.”

Major North threw himself luxuriously into a long cane chair, and held out his hand for the bundle of envelopes and papers which his wife gave him. “Anything from Mab?” he asked.

“Just a little scrap. Dick, I am getting dreadfully worried about her—her letters have been so strange for such a long time, and now the writing is so queer. She always seems as if she hadn’t a moment to spare, and yet she really has nothing particular to do now. Do you know, I am beginning to be afraid that the strain of your uncle’s illness, and the shock of his death, have been too much for her. I am sure she oughtn’t to be living all alone in that big house. I asked Cecil Egerton to look after her, and I hoped to hear from her to-day, but there is no letter. Aren’t you getting anxious yourself?” Major North, deep in his correspondence, grunted assent. “What do you think we had better do? Dick!—why, Dick!”

The letters went flying as Dick sprang up from his chair. His wife was staring incredulously at a young lady in a grey riding-habit who was cantering up the rough track, called by courtesy a drive, leading to the house from the gateway of the compound. Catching sight of the two figures on the verandah the new-comer pulled up her horse suddenly, flung the bridle to the magnificent elderly

servant who ran out from the hall-door to meet her, and slipping from her saddle, mounted the steps with a run.

“Oh, Dick! oh, Georgie! oh, my dear people, it is so good to see you again! Don’t tear me in pieces between you.” Her brother and his wife, dumb with astonishment, were both kissing her at once. “It is my real self, you know, and not my astral body. Now do say you are surprised to see me on the Khemistan frontier when you imagined I was in London! Don’t rob me of the gratification I have come so far to enjoy.”

“Surprise is no word for it. We are utterly amazed, completely flabbergasted,” said Dick slowly. His sister heaved a satisfied sigh.

“Thanks, Dick; I’m so glad. I did want to surprise you.”

“But, Mab, are you really only just off your journey?” cried Georgia. “You must have a bath and a rest before you talk any more.”

“I come untold thousands of miles to see my only remaining relatives, and they don’t think me fit to speak to until I have had a bath and a rest!” cried Mabel. “No, Georgie, we only did a very short stage to-day, so that we might arrive clean and comfortable. You don’t think Mr Burgrave would omit anything that would enable him to make a more dignified entrance into Alibad?”

“You don’t mean to say that you came up with the Commissioner?” cried Dick and Georgia together.

“Rather!” A glance passed between husband and wife, and Mabel caught it. “Now, why this thusness? I had a chaperon, I assure you. I’ll tell you all about it. And the Commissioner has been most kind—and patronising.”

“Probably,” said Dick dryly. “And was it Burgrave who escorted you to the gate here?”

“Oh no; it was that nice boy who went to Kubbet-ul-Haj with you eight years ago.”

“Boy!” cried Georgia. “My dear Mab, Fitz Anstruther is one of the most rising young civilians in the province.”

“And he said,” went on Mabel, unheeding, “that he would look in again after dinner. Well, Georgie, he is three years younger than I am, at any rate. Now, Dick, don’t be rude and say that that wouldn’t make him so very young after all. I know I’m in the sere and yellow leaf. The fact was borne in upon me when I heard an angry woman on the voyage informing her cabin-mates that I was ‘no chicken.’”

“What!” cried Dick. “Then the celebrated smile has been doing its deadly work as usual? How many scalps this time, Mab?”

Mabel smiled gently. It might be perfectly true, as other women were never tired of saying, that she had no claim to be called beautiful. The most that could be said of her was that she was nice-looking, and the effect of that (it was often added spitefully) was spoilt by the singular and most unpleasing combination of fair hair with dark brown eyes. But when the ladies had said their say, Mabel knew that she had but to smile to bring every man in the neighbourhood to her feet. There was a peculiar fascination about her smile which made a slave of the man upon whom it shone. It called forth all that was best in him, roused all the chivalry of his nature, and compelled him to devote himself to Mabel’s service. Various irate London cabmen, an elderly guard on the Caledonian Railway, and the magistrate who found himself obliged to fine

Mabel for allowing her fox-terrier to go about unmuzzled, were among the victims. The magistrate was currently reported to have apologised privately for doing his duty, and to have been abjectly desirous of paying the fine out of his own pocket if Mabel would have allowed it. It was commonly understood that General North, Mabel's late guardian, had found his life a burden to him owing to the multitude of her suitors, and that he would scarcely allow her to go out alone lest any unwary stranger, thanked with a smile for some slight service, should be impelled to propose to her on the spot.

"Well, Mab," said Dick again, as his sister did not answer, "the voyage was the usual triumphal progress, I suppose? Any casualties?"

"No duels or suicides, Dick. The days of chivalry are gone, you know. But every one was very nice. I don't count the officers—it's their business to make themselves pleasant—but the captain took me into his cabin and showed me the pictures of Mrs Captain and the little Captains, and I was told he didn't do that for everybody. The ladies were not quite as friendly as—well, as I should have liked them to be. They talked me over a good deal, too. Once they asked a rather nice boy why he and all the rest thought such a lot of me. He couldn't think of anything to say but that I was 'so awfully feminine, don't you know?' When he thought of it afterwards he was rather pleased with himself, and came and told me. It wasn't bad, was it?"

"Oh, Mab!" said Georgia reproachfully.

"But, Georgie, you wouldn't have me unfeminine, would you?"

“Ha, ha!” laughed Dick. “Well, Mab, as you have got here safely, I suppose your friends were as helpful as your friends generally are?”

“They were perfectly delightful. When we got to Bombay they helped me about my luggage, and told me the right hotel, and where to get an ayah and a servant, and how to go to Bab-us-Sahel. To crown all, they found me the chaperon I told you about—who turned out to be the elderly lady who had disapproved of me most frankly of all on the voyage. Her name is Hardy, and she was coming to join her husband here. She is devoted to you, Georgie.”

“Dear old Mrs Hardy? I should think she was. It’s mutual.”

“Well, tastes differ. She is quite certain that I shall come to a bad end. We didn’t speak very much on the way to Bab-us-Sahel, and when we got there I was horrified to find what a journey we had still before us. I knew the railway hadn’t got to you yet, but I thought it would only mean perhaps a day in a palanquin, with tigers and interesting things like that jumping out of the jungle every few minutes, and brave rescuers turning up in the very nick of time to save one. I never imagined there would be days and days of riding through a desert, with no jungle and no tigers at all. Happily we fell in with Mr Burgrave when we left the railway, and as he was coming here he invited us to travel with his party in royal state, which we did. Mrs Hardy quarrelled with him most days on some pretext or other for your sakes, which I didn’t think nice of her when she was enjoying his hospitality. She seemed to be convinced that everything he did was bound to bring the province to destruction.” Again Dick and Georgia exchanged glances. “Dick, what is wrong between you and Mr Burgrave? I insist on knowing.”

“It’s unusual to find two men absolutely agreed on questions of policy,” said Dick shortly.

“Well, just at present he has a grudge against you on my account. He considers you guilty of culpable negligence in leaving such a delicate and valuable piece of goods to find its way to Alibad unassisted. I tried to point out that the blame was entirely due to the wicked wilfulness of the piece of goods in question, but he still thinks you sadly callous.”

“We haven’t heard yet what has brought her Majesty Queen Mab to Alibad at all.”

“No, that’s another story. (Don’t you admire my local colour?) Here followeth the confession of Mabel Louisa North. I had a great idea, Georgie, a splendid idea, when uncle died and I was left alone. I thought I would become a Medical, so as to come out in time and help you. I knew you would jeer, Dick, and try to dissuade me, so I decided not to say a word until I was fairly embarked on my triumphal career. I was going to take the London Matric. in January, and when I was entered at the School of Medicine I meant to burst out into sudden blaze and wire you the astonishing news. But the whole thing missed fire horribly. You may laugh, Georgie, for I dare say you have kept your mind supple, like that old man who said he was always learning; but you don’t know how frightfully difficult it is to bring your mighty intellect down again to lessons when you haven’t done any for years and years. Would you believe it?—I broke down under the stress of the preparation—for the *Matric.*, mind—and my eyes gave out. No, it is nothing really bad”—as Georgia uttered a horrified exclamation—“Sir William Thornycroft pledged himself that they

would soon be all right again if I gave up work and took to frivolling.”

“But if there’s nothing the matter with them, I can’t think why he didn’t tell you to rest for a month or so, and let you go on again with glasses,” said Georgia.

Mabel looked a little ashamed.

“Well, the fact is, I made rather a baby of myself. I couldn’t wear glasses, Georgie—think what a guy I should look! And you can’t imagine how disappointed I was. I knew that the loss of a month’s work would mean that I should fail, and I was feeling very miserable altogether, after weeks of awful headaches, and my eyes hurt so, and—and—I wailed a little. Sir William was most sweet, and asked me all about it; and then he said that he really didn’t think the Medical was what I was best fitted for, and he advised me to travel for a little while and forget all about it.”

“And not give up to medicine what was meant for mankind,” murmured Dick softly.

“And she comes out here, where we have an eye-destroying glare all the year round, and dust-storms two or three times a week, to cure her eyes!” cried Georgia.

“My beloved Georgiana, I came here that you might minister to a mind diseased. When once the thought had flashed upon me, I simply couldn’t stay in England. I just flew round to the shops and bought whatever they showed me, and started as soon as I could settle matters at home and take my passage. I went on writing to you up to the very last minute. I shouldn’t wonder if the letter I

posted on my way to the docks travelled in the steamer with me. Is that it there? Well, have I explained matters?"

"It was an awful risk, Mab," said Dick in an elder-brotherly tone. "We might have been both ill, or out in the district, or touring in Nalapur, or anything."

"But you weren't, you see, so it's all right. I had an inspiration that you'd be in your own house for Christmas. What time is dinner? Lend me a warm tea-gown, Georgie. How cold it gets here when the sun sets, and yet we were nearly roasted this morning! My belongings were to follow in a bullock-cart or two, but I haven't heard them arrive. Oh, it is sweet to see you two again, and looking so thoroughly happy and fit, too."

She bestowed a kiss on the top of Dick's head, remarking as she did so that he was getting disgracefully bald, and rushed away to lavish a series of hugs on Georgia in the privacy of her own room. Her toilet did not take long when she was left alone, and she threw over her head the white shawl Georgia had left with her, and stepped out on the verandah. There was only a faint gleam of moonlight, and a sense of the vastness and dreariness of the desert around crept over her as she tried to distinguish in the blackness the lights of the Alibad cantonments, through which she had passed in the afternoon. The wind was chill, and gathering her wrap more closely round her, she turned to find her way back to the drawing-room. As she did so, the sound of a horse's footsteps struck upon her ear. Some one was riding past the house at no great distance, riding at a smart pace, which caused a clatter of accoutrements and an occasional sharp metallic ring when the horse's hoofs came in contact with a rock.

“How horrid it must be riding in the dark!” said Mabel to herself. “Dick,” she cried, meeting her brother in the hall, “are you expecting any one to dinner? Some one is coming here on horseback.”

“Oh no, it’s no one for us,” he answered shortly.

“But where can he be going, then? I thought this was the last English house on the frontier? It’s a soldier, I’m sure, for I heard his sword knocking against the stirrup, or whatever it is that makes the clinkety-clanking noise.”

“I can’t tell you who it is, for I don’t know, but the natives will tell you, if you are particularly anxious to hear. They say it’s General Keeling.”

“Georgia’s father? But he’s dead!”

“Exactly.”

“But do you mean that it’s his ghost?”

“Don’t talk so loud. I don’t want Georgia worried just now, and she may not have noticed the sound. The natives say that whenever there is going to be trouble on the frontier St George Keeling gallops from point to point to see that things are all right, just as he would have done in his lifetime.”

“Oh, but they don’t believe it really?”

“You shall see. Ismail Bakhsh!” The old *chaprasi* who had met Mabel at the door came forward, gorgeous in his scarlet coat and gold badge, and saluted. “Tell the Miss Sahib who it is she hears, out beyond the far corner of the compound.”

The old man drew himself up and saluted again. "Sinjāj Kīlin Sahib Bahadar rides to-night, Miss Sahib."

"Oh, how dreadful!" said Mabel, turning to her brother with a blanched face. Ismail Bakhsh understood her words.

"Nay, Miss Sahib, it is well, rather. When the day comes that there is trouble on the border, and Kīlin Sahib does not ride, then the reign of the Sarkar will be ended in Khemistan, and it may be in all Hindustan also."

"That will do, Ismail Bakhsh," said Dick, when he had interpreted the old man's words. "Come into the drawing-room, Mab."

"But, Dick, it can't be true? Isn't some one playing a trick?"

"We have never been able to bring it home to any one if it is a trick. Anstruther and I have watched in vain, and most of the fellows from the cantonments have had a try too. We heard just what you hear, but we could never see anything."

"Dick, I think you are most awfully brave." Mabel shuddered as she pictured Dick and his friend approaching the sound, locating it exactly, perhaps—oh, horror!—hearing it pass between them, while still there was nothing to be seen. "Does it—he—ever come any nearer? How fearful if he should ride up to the door!"

"Why, Mab, you don't mean to say you believe in it?" Dick looked at her curiously. "It's quite true that the sound is heard when there's going to be trouble, for I have noticed it time after time; but I have a very simple theory to account for that. When the tribes living beyond this stretch of desert intend to make themselves disagreeable, they send mounted messengers to one another. The desert air carries sound well, and I'm not prepared to say that these

rocks here may not have some peculiar property which makes them carry sound well too, but at any rate we hear, as if it was quite close, what is actually happening miles and miles away.”

“Oh, do you really think so?” Mabel was much cheered. “But then, why should Georgia be frightened if she heard it?”

“Because of the trouble it foreshadows, which is a sad and sober reality, not on account of the supernatural story the natives have taken it into their heads to get up.”

Georgia’s entrance and the announcement of dinner banished the disquieting topic, and Mabel’s creepy sensations vanished speedily under the influence of the light and warmth and brightness encompassing the meal, so eminently Western and ordinary in its appointments save for the presence of the noiseless Hindu servants. Old times and scenes were discussed by the three, and family jokes recalled with infinite zest, in momentary entire forgetfulness of the turbulent frontier and the haunted desert outside. Shortly after a move had been made into the drawing-room, however, the flow of reminiscences was interrupted by the entrance of Dick’s subordinate, the handsome young civilian who had escorted Mabel to her brother’s door. He walked in unannounced, as one very much at home.

“With Dr Tighe’s compliments to the rival practitioner,” he said, handing a copy of the *Lancet* to Georgia. “I shall pass the Doctor’s quarters going home, Mrs North, so I can leave your *British Medical* for him if you have done with it.”

“I will put it out for you,” said Georgia. “You have seen Miss North already, I think?”

“Yes, indeed. It was this afternoon that I had the astonishment and delight of learning that the Kumpsioner Sahib had atoned for all his sins against this frontier.”

“What, does Burgrave climb down?” cried Dick.

“Not a bit of it, Major. He’s on the war-path, and seeing red. But he has escorted Miss North safely here.”

“Oh, is Mr Burgrave anxious for war?” asked Mabel. “I suppose that’s the trouble which is coming on the frontier, then?” She stopped suddenly, with a guilty glance at Georgia.

“Never mind, Mab; I heard it,” said her sister-in-law quietly.

“I should think so!” cried Fitzgerald Anstruther. “The old joker—beg your pardon, Mrs North—the old ch—General—was riding like mad. No, Miss North, war is the last thing that our most peaceful-minded Commissioner desires. He is coming to bring this benighted province up to date, and assimilate it to the well-governed districts he has known hitherto.”

“After all, we can’t be sure of his intentions,” said Georgia. “What we have heard may be only rumour.”

“No; he is on the war-path, Mrs North, as I said. Young Timson, of the Telegraphs, who came up with him, was in with me just now, and says that he talked quite openly of his plans.”

“I don’t mind the man’s intentions,” cried Dick hotly, “if they are founded on an honest opinion. What I do mind is his talking of them to outsiders as if they were accomplished facts, before he has said a word to the men on the spot.”

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