

## The Mission

**T**HE MISSIONARY'S WIFE, sitting in the veranda of the bleak, white-washed mission house, watched the dust devils pirouetting down the Grand Trunk road, and gave herself up to thought. Retrospection may be good for the soul, but it is not wise to give way to the malady of thought in India when a pitiless sun is cracking and warping the earth, and the blue of high heaven is bleached to a blinding, white hell of heat waves. Under such circumstances the average white does not think. Sometimes he seeks forgetfulness in whisky pegs; sometimes she forgets the maddening heat in the greater madness of intrigue with the wrong man.

The missionary's wife, because she was a missionary's wife and because the heart of her was innately clean, recoiled from these mental drugs. She endeavored to ward off the abnormal wave engulfing her by a renewed zeal to her religious faith; but she was so young, so untried, and so unaccustomed to viewing the world in its raw nakedness that her faith faltered and she would not be comforted. Perhaps, as the missionary sahib thought, she was a "trifle worldly"; perhaps she was. But she was very young.

Therefore she gave up herself to thought. Day by day she would sit on the veranda and watch the dust devils dancing and whirling along the Grand Trunk road. From her position she could see the road, a white ribbon of dust, stretching its length across a parched, flat country until it was lost in a haze of heat waves. From the haze would appear the dust devils, cones of light, fine dust, whipped up from the roadway by a passing breath of air. She would watch them as they came down the road towards the mission gates, spinning along in fantastic dervish dances, and she continued watching until they were lost to sight in another wall of heat haze on the opposite horizon. Between whiles she thought. Her mind ran to things green and cool; of dainty primroses smiling shyly from a moist earth, of wild violets hidden in the cool shades of Yorkshire woods, of damp moss clinging to ancient rock, of moorland, spongy underfoot, of moist mists on Ingleborough's heights. Then, another dust devil would come revolving from the heat haze, and she would find herself in India again, with its white-washed mission house, its watching days and worse than sleepless nights.

Separating the mission house from the Grand Trunk road was what the missionary had intended for a garden; but the sun had sapped the moisture from the plant life, leaving it wilted, drooping, and coated with dust. It was merely a plot of caked earth and the futile endeavor at beauty had but intensified its hideous barrenness. It had its purpose, however, in that it gave employment to the sole convert of the mission.

On the mission records he was identified as Joseph; but his native tongue could get no nearer to his baptismal name than Jojug, and Jojug he remained to the missionary's wife. The missionary sahib, who did not quite approve of levity, however, was careful to refer to him as Joseph. The convert, like the plants among which he worked, but accentuated the failure of the mission. He was the result of five years of hard, ceaseless labor, a shambling, woebegone monument in a castoff suit of European clothes. He was watering the plants while the missionary's wife sat on the veranda. It was a hopeless task, for the thirsty earth sucked up his tiny stream in an instant, leaving the surface as dry and as bare as before. Undeterred, however, he would shamble to the well to fill again a dilapidated watering can—minus the sprinkler—and proceed about his futile, useless labor. Once, when passing near the veranda, he salaamed and smiled. She raised her head as he shuffled by, but turned again to watch a new dust devil dancing in the distance.

She awoke from her apathy when her husband walked onto the veranda and threw himself into a chair. He was a big man, was the missionary sahib, with a muscular frame and a dominant jaw hidden by a short brown beard; but the heat had robbed him of his strength and fatigue showed in his every muscle.

"Another fruitless trip," he said with a sigh. "The villagers only mocked me."

It was the old story, and one to which she had listened daily ever since she had come to the mission three years before.

"I can not understand it," he said. He continued in this strain, wondering why he failed and others had succeeded. He went on rather longer than he should have done, but that was because he did not receive the usual words of sympathy and cheer from his wife. She remained silent, her eyes fixed on the heat haze in the distance.

"To make matters worse," he said, changing the subject, "Joseph's brother, the one from Kabul, is here. He spat at me as I passed him today and informed me he had come to wipe out the family disgrace. Poor Joseph! We must see that he comes to no harm."

He paused again, awaiting a reply, but his wife only nodded slightly. "Poor Joseph," continued the missionary; "if I could convert a few more he would not feel such an utter outcast. Why is it that I can not do so? Heaven knows I am sincere enough and that my faith is strong."

This also she had heard many times before and had comforted him. Perhaps, now, the heat and the thoughts of an English spring had warped her mind, for she asked quietly:

"Have you ever thought that you are not fitted for this work?"

The missionary started in surprise. It was the first time that his wife had questioned his ability. He paused a moment before answering.

"Faith," he said, "will move mountains."

His wife closed her eyes in weariness and lay back in her seat. Her husband watched her anxiously; her actions were rather strange—somewhat queer. He was a just man, was the missionary sahib, and with a great tenderness hidden away under the dominance and rigid determination of his zeal. He noticed her utter lassitude, the dead pallor of her skin, her frail wrists and hands. He recalled that three years ago he had brought her to the mission radiant and sparkling with youth and laid a caressing hand on her shoulder.

"You are tired," he said, as if in apology for this demonstration.

She sprang from her seat and faced him tense with emotion.

"Don't," she said fiercely, "don't touch me." Her body relaxed as she spoke and her shoulders drooped with her weariness. "Your hand," she added, "is so—so—abominably hot."

"This is hysteria," he said quietly.

"You must control yourself."

She walked to the end of the veranda and turning faced him with pleading in her eyes and a sob in her voice.

"Let us go home," she said, "back to England. Take me away from here—for God's love take me away."

The missionary fingered his beard and lowered his eyes so that she might not see his agony.

"I can not," he said, very quietly.

"You can not," she replied, whipped into immediate anger. "Can't you—even you—see that the mission is a farce and that you are a failure?"

"I know that," said the missionary, somewhat sadly.

"Then do you think it just and right to yourself—to me—to allow your pride and stubbornness to longer perpetuate this failure?"

"I must remain," he replied.

"This is senseless folly. You know that the people at the church at home have given up supporting the mission when the reports could show but one convert. We are keeping it up now out of our private funds. Great heaven! What possible reason can there be for remaining longer?"

The missionary pointed to Jojug, who stood nearby, his back turned to them, patiently watering.

"There's the reason," he said. "If we had ourselves to consider I would have given up the struggle long ago. Do not think that perhaps because I am not demonstrative I do not realize the effect all this is having on you. But we we can not leave Joseph."

"And why not?"

"Because," he said simply, "Joseph gave up everything for the Christian faith. He left his wife, his children, his relatives, and home. His people, as you know, have tried time and again to have him return, but he refuses to do so. Now they threaten to kill him. His

brother, the one from Kabul, is the most vindictive. So long as he is under our protection he is safe. The natives dare not attack him so long as he is under the protection of the white sahib, but once we go—he dies. In fact, now that his brother has returned, I think it will be necessary for him to stay continually in the mission compound."

"And if I stay," she said, "I die." She laughed bitterly and jerked a contemptuous hand toward the convert.

"My life for that. Choose between us." He paled as he heard her, for in his heart he knew that the coming summer would bring the fulfillment of her words. He rose, however, to his principles.

"There was Another," he said solemnly, "who gave up His life."

"So I am to take the role of a martyr in cast-off clothing and—"

"Hush, you must not talk in that strain."

"I hate it," she said vehemently. "I hate it all. I hate your faith, your God—"

"Silence!" Her husband towered above her, his eyes aflame with anger.

"Cease your blasphemy. Even hysteria will not excuse that."

Her overstrung nerves snapped and she clung to him, sobbing and afraid.

"Forgive me," she said. "I was weak and thoughtless and—this heat—and I have not slept—have not slept—"

He led her inside. "Try to calm yourself," he said tenderly, "it will be cooler very soon. The afternoon is passing."

As he walked away his heart was wracked with sorrow; his mind was in a tumult. Her outburst had produced a doubt within him. Was his the right course? Had he, in the fulfillment of his duty, the need to sacrifice her? To send her away was out of the question. He did not possess the means, and then again he knew she would never consent to live apart from him. His was the choice—the convert or his wife! It was through him that the convert had come to the mission; through him that he had left his home, his wife

The missionary stopped in his rapid pacing. "I," he thought, "must follow in the footsteps of Joseph. It was weakness on my part to have hesitated."

He staggered into the mission house and found his wife on her knees; and at the sight of her thin hands tightly clenched in prayer and her crumpled, drooping, tired shoulders he was stricken anew. He knelt beside her and tried to pray.

In the garden Jojug shuffled from plant to plant watering the dead bushes.

"The missionary sahib," he thought, "is a good man, but like all the other sahib log. It is hard for them to understand that we may understand their tongue and yet talk our own. And the remedy is so simple."

He bowed his head on his breast

and worked on, calmly, stoically. From the heat haze came what appeared to be another dust devil, larger than any that had passed before and moving with greater rapidity. As it drew nearer Jojug saw it was not a dust devil. At the mission gates it stopped, and Jojug, watching, saw, as the dust fell away and settled, this his brother, mounted on a curveting horse, was before him—the brother from Kabul, who had vowed to wipe out the family disgrace.

"Oho, my brother," said the horseman. "There is a little matter between me and thee. It is proper that we should discuss it out of the hearing of the feringhee."

Jojug did not answer. The watering can hung limp in his hands and, as if in abstraction, he watered the driveway. It was noticeable, however, that the flowing water marked a cross on the dusty ground.

"Perhaps thy courage his departed with the faith," said the other through his teeth.

The mission would be closed. The memsahib would return to her home in Belaith—England—and would come more laugh as she did in the beginning.

"Wilt thou come?" said the horseman.

"I come, my brother," said the convert calmly, and shuffled towards the gates.

When the cool of the evening had descended on the land the missionary and his wife sought the veranda.

"Where is Joseph," asked he. "We must take care of him."

"He is here," said a voice from the gateway, and looking up the two saw a horseman riding a curveting horse. Across his saddle lay a limp something. "This," he said, "was my brother. He was set upon by a band of bush-mashes—bad men and robbers—who slew him." His voice rose in anger. "And—and—sahib, the corpse is thine."

With a kick of his boot he tipped the body in the dust, and turning his horse's head, galloped away.

For a space they gazed at what lay at their feet. Then the missionary turned to his wife.

"We are far from a police outpost," he said, "and nothing can be done. Come, let us go. I will bury Joseph while you pack up our belongings. The mission is ended."—Harry Davids, in *The Argonaut*.

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