

‘To Let’

By B. M. Croker

Some years ago, when I was a slim young spin, I came out to India to live with my brother Tom: he and I were members of a large and somewhat impecunious family, and I do not think my mother was sorry to have one of her four grown-up daughters thus taken off her hands. Tom’s wife, Aggie, had been at school with my eldest sister; we had known and liked her all our lives. She was quite one of ourselves, and as she and the children were at home when Tom’s letter was received, and his offer accepted, she helped me to choose my slender outfit with judgement, zeal, and taste; endowed me with several pretty additions to my wardrobe; superintended the fitting of my gowns and the trying on of my hats, with most sympathetic interest, and finally escorted me out to Lucknow, under her own wing, and installed me in the only spare room in her comfortable bungalow in Dilkongha.

My sister-in-law is a pretty little brunette, rather pale, with dark hair, brilliant black eyes, a resolute mouth and a bright, intelligent expression. She is orderly, trim and feverishly energetic, and seems to live every moment of her life. Her children, her wardrobe, her house, her servants, and last, not least, her husband, are all models in their way; and yet she has plenty of time for tennis and dancing, and talking and walking. She is, undoubtedly, a remarkably talented little creature, and especially prides herself on her nerve and her power of will, or will power. I suppose they are the same thing? and I am sure they are all the same to Tom, who worships the sole of her small slipper. Strictly between ourselves she is the ruling member of the family, and turns her lord and master round her little finger. Tom is big and fair, of course, the opposite to his wife, quiet, rather easy-going and inclined to be indolent, but Aggie rouses him up, and pushes him to the front, and keeps him there. She knows all about his department, his prospects of promotion, his prospects of furlough, of getting acting appointments, and so on, even better than he does himself. The chief of Tom’s department—have I said that Tom is in the Irritation Office?—has placed it solemnly on record that he considers little Mrs Shandon a surprisingly clever woman. The two children, Bob and Tor, are merry, oppressively active monkeys, aged three and five years respectively. As for myself I am tall and fair, and I wish I could add pretty; but this is a true story. My eyes are blue, my teeth are white, my hair is red—alas, a blazing red; and I was, at this period, nineteen years of age; and now I think I have given a sufficient outline of the whole family.

We arrived at Lucknow in November, when the cold weather is delightful, and everything was delightful to me. The bustle and life of a great Indian station, the novelty of my surroundings, the early morning rides, picnics down the river, and dances at the ‘Chutter Munzil’ made me look upon Lucknow as a paradise on earth; and in this light I still regarded it, until a great change came over the temperature, and the month of April introduced me to red-hot winds, sleepless nights, and the intolerable ‘brain fever’ bird. Aggie had made up her mind definitely on one subject: we were not to go away to the hills until the rains. Tom could only get two months’ leave (July and August), and she did not intend to leave him to grill on the plains alone. As for herself and the children—not to speak of me—we had all come out from home so recently we did not require a change. The trip to Europe had made a vast hole in the family stocking, and she wished to economize; and who can economize with two establishments in full swing? Tell me this, ye Anglo-Indian matrons. With a large, cool bungalow, plenty of punkhas, khuskhus tatties,

ice, and a thermantidote, surely we could manage to brave May and June—at any rate the attempt was made. Gradually the hills drained Lucknow week by week; family after family packed up, warned us of our folly in remaining on the plains, offered to look for houses for us, and left by the night mail. By the middle of May, the place was figuratively empty. Nothing can be more dreary than a large station in the hot weather, unless it is an equally forsaken hill station in the depths of winter, when the mountains are covered with snow: the mall no longer resounds with gay voices and the tramp of Jampanies, but is visited y bears and panthers, and the houses are closed, and, as it were, put to bed in straw! As for Lucknow in the summer, it was a melancholy spot; the public gardens were deserted, the chairs at the Chutter Munzil stood empty, the very bands had gone to the hills!, the shops were shut, the baked white roads, no longer thronged with carriages and bamboo carts, gave ample room to the humble ekka, or a Dhubie's meagre donkey shuffling along in the dust.

Of course we were not the *only* people remaining in the place, grumbling at the heat and dust and life in general; but there can be no sociability with the thermometer above 100 in the shade. Through the long, long Indian day we sat and gasped, in darkened rooms, and consumed quantities of 'Nimbo pegs', i.e. limes and soda water, and listened to the fierce hot winds roaring along the road and driving the roasted leaves before it; and in the evening, when the sun had set, we went for a melancholy drive through the Wingfield Park, or round by Martiniere College, and met our friends at the library and compared sensations and thermometers. The season was exceptionally bad, but people say that every year, and presently Bobby and Tor began to fade: their little white faces and listless eyes appealed to Aggie as Tom's anxious expostulations had never done. 'Yes, they must go to the hills with *me*.' But this idea I repudiated at once; I refused to undertake the responsibility—I, who could scarcely speak a word to the servants—who had no experience! Then Bobbie had a bad go of fever—intermittent fever: the beginning of the end to his alarmed mother; the end being represented by a large gravestone! She now became as firmly determined to go as she had previously been resolved to stay; but it was so late in the season to take a house. Alas, alas, for the beautiful tempting advertisements in the *Pioneer*, which we had seen and scorned! Aggie wrote to a friend in a certain hill station, called for this occasion only 'Kantia', and Tom wired to a house agent, who triumphantly replied by letter that there was not *one* unlet bungalow on his books. This missive threw us into the depths of despair; there seemed no alternative but a hill hotel, and the usual quarters that await the last comers, and the proverbial welcome for children and dogs (we had only four); but the next day brought us good news from Aggie's friend Mrs Chalmers.

Dear Mrs Shandon—she said—

I received your letter, and went at once to Cursitjee, the agent. Every hole and corner up here seems hill, and he had not a single house to let. Today I had a note from him, saving that Briarwood is vacant; the people who took it are not coming up, they have gone to Naini Tal. You *are* in luck. I have just been out to see the house, and have secured it for you. It is a mile and a half from the club, but I know that you and your sister are capital walkers. I envy you. Such a charming place—two sitting-rooms, four bedrooms, four bathrooms, a hall, servants' go-downs, stabling, and a splendid view from a very pretty garden, and only Rs. 800 for the season! Why, I am paying Rs. 1,000 for a *very* inferior house, with scarcely a stick of furniture and no view. I feel so proud of myself, and I am longing to show you my treasure trove. Telegraph when you start, and I shall have a milk man in waiting and fires in all the rooms.

Yours sincerely,
Edith Chalmers.

We now looked upon Mrs Chalmers as our best and dearest friend, and began to get under way at once. A long Journey in India is a serious business when the party comprises two ladies, two children, two ayahs and five other servants, three fox terriers, a mongoose and a Persian cat—all these animals going to the hills for the benefit of their health—not to speak of a ton of luggage, including crockery and lamps, a cottage piano, a goat and a pony. Aggie and I, the children, one ayah, two terriers, the cat and mongoose, our bedding and pillows, the tiffin basket and ice basket, were all stowed into one compartment, and I must confess that the journey was truly miserable. The heat was stifling, despite the water tatties. One of the terriers had a violent dispute with the cat, and the cat had a difference with the mongoose, and Bob and Tor had a pitched battle more than once. I actually wished myself back in Lucknow. I was most truly thankful to wake one morning to find myself under the shadow of the Himalayas—not a mighty, snow-clad range of everlasting hills, but merely the spurs—the moderate slopes, covered with scrub and loose shale and jungle, and deceitful little trickling watercourses. We sent the servants on ahead, whilst we rested at the Dak bungalow near the railway station, and then followed them at our leisure. We accomplished the ascent in dandies—open kind of boxes, half box half chair, carried on the shoulders of four men. This was an entirely novel sensation to me, and at first an agreeable one, so long as the slopes were moderate and the paths wide; but the higher we went, the narrower became the path, the steeper the naked precipice; and as my coolies would walk at the extreme edge, with the utmost indifference to my frantic appeals to ‘Bector! Bector!’—and would change poles at the most agonizing corners—my feelings were very mixed, especially when droves of loose pack ponies came thundering down hill, with no respect for the rights of the road. Late at night we passed through Kantia, and arrived at Briarwood far too weary to be critical. Fires were blazing, supper was prepared, and we dispatched it in haste, and most thankfully went to bed and slept soundly, as anyone would do who had spent thirty-six hours in a crowded compartment and ten in a cramped wooden case.

The next morning, rested and invigorated, we set out on a tour of inspection; and it is almost worth while to undergo a certain amount of baking on the sweltering heat of the plains, in order to enjoy those deep first draughts of cool hill air, instead of a stifling, dust-laden atmosphere, and to appreciate the green valleys and blue hills by force of contrast to the far-stretching, eye-smarting, white glaring roads that intersect the burnt-up plains—roads and plains that even the pariah abandons, salamander though he be!

To our delight and surprise, Mrs Chalmers had by no means overdrawn the advantages of our new abode. The bungalow is as solidly built of stone, two storied, and ample in size. It stood on a kind of shelf, cut out of the hillside, and was surrounded by a pretty flower garden, full of roses, fuchsias, carnations. The high road passed the gate, from which the avenue descended direct to the entrance door, which was at the end of the house, and from whence ran a long passage. Off this passage three rooms opened to the right, all looking south, and all looking into a deep, delightful, flagged verandah. The stairs were very steep. At the head of them, the passage and rooms were repeated. There were small nooks, and dressing-rooms, and convenient out-houses, and plenty of good water; but the glory of Briarwood was undoubtedly its verandah: it was fully twelve feet wide, roofed with zinc, and overhung a precipice of a thousand feet—not a startlingly sheer khud, but a tolerably straight descent of grey-blue shale rocks and low jungle. From it there was a glorious view, across a valley, far away, to the snowy range. It opened at one end into the avenue, and was not inclosed; but at the side next the precipice there was a stout wooden railing, with netting at the bottom, for the safety of too enterprising dogs or children. A charming spot,

despite its rather bold situation; and as Aggie and I sat in it, surveying the scenery and inhaling the pure hill air, and watching Bob and Tor tearing up and down playing horses, we said to one another that 'the verandah alone was worth half the rent'.

'It's absurdly cheap,' exclaimed my sister-in-law complacently. 'I wish you saw the hovel I had, at Simla, for the same rent. I wonder if it is feverish, or badly drained, or what?'

'Perhaps it has a ghost,' I suggested facetiously; and at such an absurd idea we both went into peals of laughter.

At this moment Mrs Chalmers appeared, brisk, rosy, and breathlessly benevolent, having walked over from Kantia.

'So you have found it,' she said as we shook hands. 'I said nothing about this delicious verandah! I thought I would keep it as a surprise. I did not say a word too much for Briarwood, did I?'

'Not half enough,' we returned rapturously; and presently we went in a body, armed with a list from the agent, and proceeded to go over the house and take stock of its contents.

'It's not a bit like a *hill* furnished house,' boasted Mrs Chalmers, with a glow of pride, as she looked round the drawing-room; 'carpets, curtains, solid, very solid chairs, and Berlin wool worked screens, a card-table, and any quantity of pictures.'

'Yes, don't they look like family portraits?' I suggested, as we gazed at them. There was one of an officer in faded water colours, another of his wife, two of a previous generation in oils and amply gilded frames, two sketches of an English country house, and some framed photographs, groups of grinning cricketers or wedding guests. All the rooms were well, almost handsomely, furnished in an old-fashioned style. There was no scarcity of wardrobes, looking-glasses, or even armchairs, in the bedrooms, and the pantry was fitted out—a most singular circumstance—with a large supply of handsome glass and china, lamps, old moderators, coffee and tea pots, plated side dishes and candlesticks, cooking utensils and spoons and forks, wine coasters, and a cake-basket. These articles were all let with the house, much to our amazement, provided we were responsible for the same. The china was Spode, the plate old family heirlooms, with a crest—a winged horse—on everything, down to the very mustard spoons.

'The people who own this house must be lunatics,' remarked Aggie as she peered round the pantry; 'fancy hiring out one's best family plate and good old china! And I saw some ancient music books in the drawing-room, and there is a side saddle in the bottle khana.'

'My dear, the people who owned this house are dead,' explained Mrs Chalmers. 'I heard all about them last evening from Mrs Starkey.'

'Oh, is she up there?' exclaimed Aggie somewhat fretfully.

'Yes, her husband is cantonment magistrate. This house belonged to an old retired colonel and his wife. They and his niece lived here. These were all their belongings. They died within a short time of one another, and the old man left a queer will, to say that the house was to remain precisely as they left it for twenty years, and at the end of that time it was to be sold and all the property dispersed. Mrs Starkey says she is sure that he never intended it to be *let*, but the heir-at-law insists on that, and is furious at the terms of the will.'

'Well, it is a very good thing for us,' remarked Aggie; 'we are as comfortable here as if we were in our own house: there is a stove in the kitchen; there are nice boxes for firewood in every room, clocks, real hair mattresses—in short, it is as you said, a treasure trove.'

We set to work to modernize the drawing-room with phoolkaries, Madras muslin curtains, photograph screens and frames, and such like portable articles. We placed the piano across a corner, arranged flowers in some handsome Dresden china vases, and entirely altered and

improved the character of the room. When Aggie had dispatched a most glowing description of our new quarters to Tom, and we had had tiffin, we set off to walk into Kantia to put our names down at the library and to enquire for letters at the post office. Aggie met a good many acquaintances—who does not who has lived five years in India in the same district?

Among them Mrs Starkey, an elderly lady with a prominent nose and goggle eyes, who greeted her loudly across the reading-room table in this agreeable fashion:

‘And so you have come up after *all*, Mrs Shandon. Someone told me that you meant to remain below, but I knew you never could be so wicked as to keep your poor little children in that heat.’ Then coming round and dropping into a chair beside her she said, ‘And I suppose this young lady is your sister-in-law?’

Mrs Starkey eyed me critically, evidently appraising my chances in the great marriage market. She herself had settled her own two daughters most satisfactorily, and had now nothing to do but interest herself in these people’s affairs.

‘Yes,’ acquiesced Aggie, ‘Miss Shandon— ‘Mrs Starkey.’

‘And so you have taken Briarwood?’

‘Yes, we have been most lucky to get it.’

‘I hope you will think so at the end of three months,’ observed Mrs Starkey with a significant pursing of her lips. ‘Mrs Chalmers is a stranger up here, or she would not have been in such a hurry to jump at it.’

‘Why, what is the matter with it?’ enquired Aggie. ‘It is well built, well furnished, well situated, and very cheap.’

‘That’s just it—*suspiciously* cheap. Why, my dear Mrs Shandon, if there was not something against it, it would let for two hundred rupees a month.’

‘And what is against it?’

‘It’s haunted! There you have the reason in two words.’

‘Is that all? I was afraid it was the drains. I don’t believe in ghosts and haunted houses. What are we supposed to see?’

‘Nothing,’ retorted Mrs Starkey, who seemed a good deal nettled at our smiling incredulity.

‘Nothing!’ with an exasperating laugh.

‘No, but you will make up for it in hearing. Not now—you are all right for the next six weeks—but after the monsoon breaks I give you a week at Briarwood. No one would stand it longer, and indeed you might as well bespeak your rooms at Cooper’s Hotel *now*. There is always a rush up here in July by the two month’s leave people, and you will be poked into some wretched go-down.’

Aggie laughed rather a careless ironical little laugh and said, ‘Thank you, Mrs Starkey; but I think we will stay on where we are; at any rate for the present.’

Of course it will be as *you* please. What do you think of the verandah?’ she enquired with a curious smile.

‘I think, as I was saying to Susan, that it is worth half the rent of the house.’

‘And in *my* opinion the house is worth double rent without it,’ and with this enigmatic remark she rose and sailed away.

‘Horrid old frump,’ exclaimed Aggie as we walked home in the starlight. ‘She is jealous and angry that she did not get Briarwood *herself*—I know her so well. She is always hinting and repeating stories about the nicest people—always decrying your prettiest dress or your best servant.’

We soon forgot all about Mrs Starkey and her dismal prophecy, being too gay and too busy to give her, or it, a thought. We had so many engagements—tennis parties and tournaments, picnics, concerts, dances and little dinners. We ourselves gave occasional afternoon teas in the verandah, using the best Spode cups and saucers and the old silver cake-basket, and were warmly complimented on our good fortune in securing such a charming house and garden. One day the children discovered to their great joy that the old chowkidar belonging to the bungalow possessed an African grey parrot—a rare bird indeed in India; he had a battered Europe cage, doubtless a remnant of better days, and swung on his ring, looking up at us enquiringly out of his impudent little black eyes.

The parrot had been the property of the former inmates of Briarwood, and as it was a long-lived creature, had survived its master and mistress, and was boarded out with the chowkidar, at one rupee per month.

The chowkidar willingly carried the cage into the verandah, where the bird seemed perfectly at home.

We got a little table for its cage, and the children were delighted with him, as he swung to and fro, with a bit of cake in his wrinkled claw.

Presently he startled us all by suddenly calling ‘Lucy’, in a voice that was as distinct as if it had come from a human throat, ‘Pretty Lucy—Lu—cy.’

‘That must have been the niece,’ said Aggie. ‘I expect she was the original of that picture over the chimney-piece in your room; she looks like a Lucy.’

It was a large framed half-length photograph of a very pretty girl, in a white dress, with gigantic open sleeves. The ancient parrot talked incessantly now that he had been restored to society; he whistled for the dogs, and brought them flying to his summons, to his great satisfaction and their equally great indignation. He called ‘Qui hye’ so naturally, in a lady’s shrill soprano, or a gruff male bellow, that I have no doubt our servants would have liked to have wrung his neck. He coughed and expectorated like an old gentleman, and whined like a puppy, and mewed like a cat, and I am sorry to add, sometimes swore like a trooper; but his most constant cry was, ‘Lucy, where are you, pretty Lucy—Lucy—Lu—cy?’

Aggie and I went to various picnics, but to that given by the Chalmers (in honour of Mr Chalmers’s brother Charlie, a captain in a Gurkha regiment, just come up to Kantia on leave) Aggie was unavoidably absent. Tor had a little touch of fever, and she did not like to leave him; but I went under my hostess’s care, and expected to enjoy myself immensely. Alas! on that self-same afternoon the long expected monsoon broke, and we were nearly drowned! We rode to the selected spot, five miles from Kantia, laughing and chattering, indifferent to the big blue-black clouds that came slowly, but surely, sailing up from below; it was a way they had had for days and nothing had come of it. We spread the tablecloth, boiled the kettle, unpacked the hampers, in spite of sharp gusts of wind and warning rumbling thunder, Just as we had commenced to reap the reward of our exertions, there fell a few huge drops, followed by a vivid flash, and then a tremendous crash of thunder, like a whole park of artillery, that seemed to shake the mountains, and after this the deluge. In less than a minute we were soaked through; we hastily gathered up the tablecloth by its four ends, gave it to the coolies and fled. It was all I could do to stand against the wind; only for Captain Chalmers I believe I would have been blown away; as it was I lost my hat, it was whirled into space. Mrs Chalmers lost her boa, and Mrs Starkey, not merely her bonnet, but some portion of her hair. We were truly in a wretched plight, the water streaming down our faces and squealing in our boots; the little trickling mountain rivulets Were now like

racing seas of turbid water; the lightning was almost blinding; the trees rocked dangerously and lashed one another with their quivering branches. I had never been out in such a storm before, and I hope I never may again. We reached Kantia more dead than alive, and Mrs Chalmers sent an express to Aggie, and kept me till the next day. After raining as it only *can* rain in the Himalayas, the weather cleared, the sun shone, and I rode home in borrowed plumes, full of my adventures and in the highest spirits. I found Aggie sitting over the fire in the drawing-room, looking ghastly white: that was nothing uncommon; but terribly depressed, which was most unusual. 'I am afraid you have neuralgia?' I said as I kissed her; she nodded and made no reply.

'How is Tor?' I enquired as I drew a chair up to the fire,

'Better—quite well.'

'Any news—any letter?'

'Not a word—not a line.'

'Has anything happened to Pip'—Pip was a fox terrier, renowned for having the shortest tail and being the most impertinent dog in Lucknow—'or the mongoose?'

'No, you silly girl! Why do you ask such questions?'

'I was afraid something was amiss; you seem rather down on your luck.' Aggie shrugged her shoulders and then said:

'What put such an absurd idea into your head? Tell me all about the picnic,' and she began to talk rapidly and to ask me various questions; but I observed that once she had set me going—no difficult task—her attention flagged, her eyes wandered from my face to the fire. She was not listening to half I said, and my most thrilling descriptions were utterly lost on this indifferent, abstracted little creature! I noticed from this time that she had become strangely nervous for her. She invited herself to the share of half my bed; she was restless, *distract*, and even irritable; and when I was asked out to spend the day, dispensed with my company with an alacrity that was by no means flattering. Formerly, of an evening she used to herd the children home at sundown, and tear me away from the delights of the reading-room at seven o'clock; now she hung about the library until almost the last moment, until it was time to put out the lamps, and kept the children with her, making transparent pretexts for their company. Often we did not arrive at home till half-past eight o'clock. I made no objections to these late hours, neither did Charlie Chalmers, who often walked back with us and remained to dinner. I was amazed to notice that Aggie seemed delighted to have his company, for she had always expressed a rooted aversion to what she called 'tame young men', and here was this new acquaintance dining with us at least thrice a week! About a month after the picnic we had a spell of dreadful weather—thunderstorms accompanied by torrents. One pouring afternoon, Aggie and I were sitting over the drawing-room fire, whilst the rain came fizzing down among the logs and ran in rivers off the roof and out of the spouts. There had been no going out that day, and we were feeling rather flat and dull, as we sat in a kind of ghostly twilight, with all outdoor objects swallowed up in mist, listening to the violent battering of the rain on the zinc verandah, and the storm which was growling round the hills. 'Oh, for a visitor!' I exclaimed; 'but no one but a fish or a lunatic would be out on such an evening.'

'No one, indeed,' echoed Aggie in a melancholy tone. 'We may as well draw the curtains and have in the lamp and tea to cheer us up.'

She had scarcely finished speaking when I heard the brisk trot of a horse along the road. It stopped at the gate and came rapidly down our avenue. I heard the wet gravel crunching under his hoofs and—yes—a man's cheery whistle. My heart jumped, and I half rose from my chair. It must be Charlie Chalmers braving the elements to see *me!*—such, I must confess, was my

incredible vanity! He did not stop at the front door as usual, but rode straight into the verandah, which afforded ample room and shelter for half-a-dozen mounted men.

‘Aggie,’ I said eagerly, ‘do you hear? It must be—’

I paused—my tongue silenced by the awful pallor of her face and the expression of her eyes as she sat with her little hands clutching the arms of her chair, and her whole figure bent forward in an attitude of listening—an attitude of terror.

‘What is it, Aggie?’ I said, ‘Are you ill?’

As I spoke the horse’s hoofs made a loud clattering noise on the stone-paved verandah outside and a man’s voice—a young man’s eager voice—called, ‘Lucy’.

Instantly a chair near the writing-table was pushed back and someone went quickly to the window—a French one—and bungled for a moment with the fastening—I always had a difficulty with that window *myself*. Aggie and I were within the bright circle of the firelight, but the rest of the room was dint and outside the streaming grey sky was spasmodically illuminated by occasional vivid flashes that lit up the surrounding hills as if it were daylight. The trampling of impatient hoofs and the rattling of a door handle were the only sounds that were audible for a few breathless seconds; but during those seconds Pip, bristling like a porcupine and trembling violently in even joint, had sprung off my lap and crawled abjectly under Aggie’s chair, seemingly in a transport of fear. The door was opened audibly, and a cold, icy blast swept in, that seemed to freeze my very heart and made me shiver from head to foot. At this moment there came with a sinister blue glare the most vivid flash of lightning I ever saw. It lit up the whole room, which was empty save for ourselves, and was instantly followed by a clap of thunder that caused my knees to knock together and that terrified me and filled me with horror. It evidently terrified the horse too; there was a violent plunge, a clattering of hoofs on the stones, a sudden loud crash of smashing timber, a woman’s long, loud, piercing shriek, which stopped the very beating of my heart, and then a frenzied struggle in the cruel, crumbling, treacherous shale, the rattle of loose stones and the hollow roar of something sliding down the precipice.

I rushed to the door and tore it open, with that awful despairing cry still ringing in my ears. The verandah was empty; there was not a soul to be seen or a sound to be heard, save the rain on the roof.

‘Aggie,’ I screamed, ‘come here! Someone has gone over the verandah and down the khud! You heard him.’

‘Yes,’ she said, following me out; ‘but come in—come in.’

‘I believe it was Charlie Chalmers’—shaking her as I spoke. ‘He has been killed—killed—killed! And you stand and do nothing. Send people! Let us go ourselves! Bearer! Ayah! Khidmatgar!’ I cried, raising my voice.

‘Hush! It was *not* Charlie Chalmers,’ she said, vainly endeavouring to draw me into the drawing-room. ‘Come in—come in.’

‘No, no!’—pushing her away and wringing my hands. ‘How cruel you are! How inhuman! There is a path. Let us go at once—at once!’

‘You need not trouble yourself, Susan.’ she interrupted; ‘and you need not cry and tremble—they will bring him up. What you heard was supernatural; it was not real.’

‘No—no—no! It was all real. Oh! that scream is in my ears still.’

‘I will convince you,’ said Aggie, taking my hand as she spoke. ‘Feel all along the verandah. are the railings broken?’

I did as she bade me. No, though was wet and clammy, the railing was intact.

‘Where is the broken place?’ she asked.

Where, indeed?

'Now,' she continued, 'since you will not come in, look over, and you will see something more presently.'

Shivering with fear and cold, drifting rain, I gazed down as she bade me, and there far below I saw lights moving rapidly to and fro, evidently in search of something. After a little delay they congregated in one place. There was a low, booming murmur—they had found him—and presently they commenced to ascend the hill, with the 'hum-hum' of coolies carrying a burden. Nearer and nearer the lights and sounds came up to the very brink of the khud, past the end of the verandah. Many steps and many torches—faint blue torches held by invisible hands—invisible but heavy-footed bearers carried their burden slowly upstairs and along the passage, and deposited it with a dump in Aggie's bedroom! As we stood clasped in one another's arms and shaking all over, the steps descended, the ghostly lights passed up the avenue and disappeared in the gathering darkness. The repetition of the tragedy was over for that day.

'Have you heard it before?' I asked with chattering teeth, as I bolted the drawing-room window.

'Yes, the evening of the picnic and twice since. That is the reason I have always tried to stay out till late and to keep you out. I was hoping and praying you might never hear it. It always happens just before dark. I am afraid you have thought me very queer of late. I have told no end of stories to keep you and the children from harm—I have—'

'I think you have been very kind,' I interrupted. 'Oh, Aggie, shall you ever get that crash and that awful cry out of your head?'

'Never!' hastily lighting the candles as she spoke.

'Is there anything more?' I asked tremulously.

'Yes; sometimes at night the most terrible weeping and sobbing in my bedroom,' and she shuddered at the mere recollection.

'Do the servants know?' I asked anxiously.

'The ayah Mumà has heard it, and the khánsámáh says his mother is sick and he must go, and the bearer wants to attend his brother's wedding. They will *all* leave.'

'I suppose most people know too?' I suggested dejectedly.

'Yes, don't you remember Mrs Starkey's warnings and her saying that without the verandah the house was worth double rent? We understand that dark speech of hers *now*, and we have not come to Cooper's Hotel yet.'

'No, not *yet*. I wish we *had*. I wonder what Tom will say? He will be here in another fortnight. Oh, I wish he was here now.'

In spite of our heart-shaking experience, we managed to eat and drink and sleep, yea, to play tennis—somewhat solemnly, it is true—and go to the club, where we remained to the very *last* moment; needless to mention that I now entered into Aggie's manœuvre *con amore*. Mrs Starkey evidently divined the reason of our loitering in Kantia, and said in her most truculent manner, as she squared up to us:

'You keep your children out very late, Mrs Shandon.'

'Yes, but we like to have them with us,' rejoined Aggie in a meek apologetic voice.

'Then why don't you go home earlier?'

'Because it is so stupid and lonely,' was the mendacious answer.

'Lonely is not the word *I* should use. I wonder if you are as wise as your neighbours now? Come now, Mrs Shandon.'

'About what?' said Aggie with ill-feigned innocence.

‘About Briarwood. Haven’t you heard it yet? The ghastly precipice and horse affair?’

‘Yes, I suppose we may as well confess that we *have*.’

‘Humph! you are a brave couple to stay on. The Tombs tried it last year for three weeks. The Paxtons took it the year before, and then sub-let it, not that *they* believed in ghosts—oh, dear no,’ and she laughed ironically.

‘And what is the story?’ I enquired eagerly.

‘Well the story is this. An old retired officer and his wife and their pretty niece lived at Briarwood a good many years ago. The girl was engaged to be married to a fine young fellow in the Guides. The day before the wedding what you know of happened, and has happened every monsoon ever since. The poor girl went out of her mind and destroyed herself, and the old colonel and his wife did not long survive her. The house is uninhabitable in the monsoon, and there seems nothing for it but to auction off the furniture and pull it down; it will always be the same as long as it stands. Take my advice and come into Cooper’s Hotel. I believe you can have that small set of rooms at the back. The sitting-room smokes, but beggars can’t be choosers.’

‘That will only be our very last resource,’ said Aggie hotly.

‘It’s not very grand, I grant you, but any port in a storm.’

Tom arrived, was doubly welcome, and was charmed with Briarwood. Chaffed us unmercifully and derided our fears until *he* himself had a similar experience, and he heard the phantom horse plunging in the verandah and that wild, unearthly and utterly appalling shriek. No, he could not laugh *that* away, and seeing that we had now a mortal abhorrence of the place, that the children had be kept abroad in the damp till long after dark, that Aggie was a mere hollow-eyed spectre, and that we had scarcely a servant left, that—in short, one day we packed up precipitately and fled in a body to Cooper’s Hotel. But we did not basely endeavour to sub-let, nor advertise Briarwood as ‘a delightfully situated pukka built house, containing all the requirements of a gentleman’s family’. No, no. Tom bore the loss of the rent and—a more difficult feat—Aggie bore Mrs Starkey’s insufferable, ‘I told you so.’

Aggie was at Kantia again last season. She walked out early one morning to see our former abode. The chowkidar and parrot are still in possession, and are likely to remain the sole tenants on the premises. The parrot suns and dusts his ancient feathers in the empty verandah, which re-echoes with his cry of ‘Lucy, where are you, pretty Lucy?’ The chowkidar inhabits a secluded go-down at the back, where he passes most of the day in sleeping, or smoking the soothing ‘huka’. The place has a forlorn, uncared-for appearance now. The flowers are nearly all gone; the paint has peeled off the doors and windows; the avenue is grass-grown. Briarwood appears to have resigned itself to emptiness, neglect and decay, although outside the gate there still hangs a battered board on which, if you look very closely you can decipher the words ‘*To Let*’.