OTHER TIGERS

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No Other Tiger

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"No other Tiger passed that way that night."—CHAP. III

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Contents

Chapter I — *A Deliberate Man*

THERE is a rough truth, no doubt, in the saying that adventures occur to the adventurous. But fantastic things may happen to anyone. No man, for instance, was ever less fantastically-minded than Lieutenant-Colonel John Strickland, late of the Coldstream Guards. He disembarked from the river steamer at Thabeikyin and motored by the jungle road over the mountains to the Burma Ruby Mines at Mogok with the simple romantic wish to buy a jewel for a lady. Yet in that remote spot, during the sixty hours of his stay, the first fantastic incident happened to him, of a whole series which was to reach out across the oceans and accomplish itself in the fever of lighted cities.

He reached the Guest-House on the slope above the town by midday, ate his luncheon, and, with a Burma cheroot between his teeth, disposed himself on a long chair for a peaceful afternoon. There was, however, to be no peace for him. For, sprung apparently from the earth, three native hawkers were immediately squatting upon the veranda at his feet and flashing at him trays full of tiny stones—splinters of sapphire and ruby, fragments of amethyst and topaz, infinitesimal tourmalines and spinels, the refuse of the ruby mines. Strickland declined their wares, at first politely, then with violence. But pertinacity was their real stock-in-trade. They sold peace rather than jewels; and they merely retired a few yards down the sloping garden, where once more they squatted side by side, patient as vultures about a victim not quite dead.

Strickland closed his eyes again and the latch of the gate at the bottom of the garden clicked. An officer in a uniform, of a solid build and a stolid face, with a small bristling moustache upon his lip, walked up the path between the carefully-tended beds of flowers. He mounted the steps to the veranda and saluted.

"I beg to introduce myself, sir," he said in a formal voice. "I am Captain Thorne, District Superintendent of Police."

Colonel Strickland sat up straight and bowed. Whatever annoyance he felt, he concealed.

"It is kind of you to call," he said. "Won't you sit down—though, to be sure, you are rather the host than I!"

"Not at all," said Captain Thorne. But he sat down and removed his topee. After that there was silence. Strickland broke it. He held out a box of cigarettes.

"Will you smoke one?"

"Thank you; I'll smoke a pipe."

The Colonel with difficulty repressed a sigh. He began to calculate how many cigarettes went to a pipe in point of time—one certainly whilst the pipe was being loaded and lit. Captain Thorne was thirty-five years old, but he had all the deliberation of an old man.

"You walked into Bhamo two days ago," he said at length.

"I crossed the hills from Yunnan," replied Strickland.

"Yes," said Thorne.

"Yes," repeated Strickland; and once more silence encompassed the two men. Thorne looked out into the garden. Responsibility sat upon his shoulders like a knapsack. Strickland could almost see it—the knapsack of a man in full marching kit. Thorne slowly turned his eyes from the garden to Strickland's face and tried again:

"You have been walking for fifteen months in China."

"Yes."

"You told my colleague in Bhamo that,"

"I did."

"It's a long time."

"I was up to no harm," said Strickland meekly.

"Of course not," said Thorne quite seriously.

"No."

"No," repeated Thorne; and once more silence came down like a blanket; and once more Thorne's eyes reverted to the garden, whilst behind a blank expression he revolved some weighty question. His trouble was that all questions, however small, to him were weighty and must be deviously approached. He was Strickland's visitor, because he wanted Strickland's help, but it was not in his nature to ask for it until he was satisfied by a veritable inquisition.

"Shooting?" he asked.

Strickland shrugged his shoulders.

"If it came my way. I had a gun and a sporting Mannlicher with me."

Thorne was clearly disappointed.

"You were making maps, then?"

"I made a few," Strickland returned. "But I had no commission to make any."

"No?" said Thorne.

"No," Strickland repeated.

The dejection of the District Superintendent was now complete. But he made a last and an audacious inquiry to determine definitely that this was not the man he wanted. He twisted a little in his chair and blurted out:

"Colonel Strickland, will you forgive me an impertinence?"

Colonel Strickland fixed a cold and steady eye upon his uncomfortable visitor.

"I should think not," he said quietly.

Captain Thorne, however, only twisted in his chair a little more.

"I must risk it nevertheless," he said stubbornly. "Isn't it a little odd that a man as young as you are, with your position, your appearance—some money, too, no doubt—with, in a word, all the enjoyments which the war has left at your hand, should go tramping about on foot in the wastes of the earth with one or two natives for servants, and an outfit which a native trader would despise? Isn't it rather odd?"

The question was an impertinence, but it was put without an impertinent intention. Thorne's voice had an apologetic timidity; his manner was deferential. Yet Strickland's colour deepened all over his sun-tanned face and he was very slow to reply.

There were none the less twenty reasons which he could have given off-hand, each one of which held some grain of truth. A strain of the gipsy in his blood; the time-limit of his command when he was still too young for retirement; the loss of his friends; an aching sense of boredom; a feeling that he and his contemporaries were in the way of the busy flam-buoyant armies of young people who were so convinced that their elders had made a dreadful hash of their own epoch; a cynical inclination to stand aside and observe whether the new generation would do any better—any of these would have sufficed. But the real ultimate reason, the *causa causans* of his wandering—no, he would give that to no one.

He chose in the end yet another reason, and that, too, had its share of truth.

"I am not the only one, even of my own regiment, who has gone walking," he said, and then cited the names of several. "One of them, indeed, died not so long ago over in Yunnan."

"I remember," said Thorne.

"Well, we have all one thing in common," continued Strickland. "Ordinarily, amongst the life interests of the people you have described, people like myself, an enormous place is occupied by the horse. Horses keep half the country houses open and make the very best of summers just a pleasant overture to the winter, isn't that so?"

"I suppose it is," said Thorne in that tone of surprise with which a fresh idea is received.

"The one thing we all have in common," Strickland continued, "is that none of us is fond of a horse."

Thorne accepted the reason. He asked no more questions. A look of gloom settled upon his face. This last explanation alone was enough to persuade him that Strickland was not the man, nor belonged to the family of the man, of whom he stood in need.

"I am sorry," he said as he knocked out his pipe. "When they telegraphed to me from Bhamo that you had started down the Irawadi, I hoped against hope that you would disembark at Thabeikyin and come up to Mogok."

"Well, so I did!" exclaimed Strickland.

"And that you would come with a particular object."

"So I did," Strickland repeated, but this time with a smile of amusement. He had never been able to take the hush-hush men seriously. The war had developed them by brigades and divisions, as a bacteriologist multiplies microbes—the men who would never ask you out to dinner until by devious questions they had found out whether you could accept, the man who talked of "particular objects," and twisted commonplaces into mysteries. Here was one of the very aces of the tribe.

"So I did. I came up to Mogok to buy a ruby." And, had Thorne been a close observer, he would have seen the blood once more darken Colonel Strickland's forehead. But he had no eyes for such details.

He rose from his chair with an air of finality, and took up his hat and his stick.

"No doubt you will get what you want at the office. I am sorry to have troubled you. Good morning!"

Captain Thorne was actually going. But this unceremonious departure was too much even for Strickland's equanimity. Thorne's foot was on the first of the steps down from the veranda, when a totally new and unexpected voice brought him to a stop.

"That won't do, Captain Thorne."

The voice was Colonel Strickland's. It was calm and pitched in a low key, but it was resonant with a quite compelling authority. Thorne's disdain vanished at the mere sound of it. He turned.

"Sit down again," said Strickland, and he pointed with a finger to the chair from which Thorne had risen. The Head of the Mogok police obeyed—slowly, not because he had a thought to disobey, but because he needed a moment or two to revise his judgments. After all, Colonel Strickland had commanded great bodies of men. A brigade during the last year of the war had been under his command, whilst he himself, Thorne, had never had more to deal with than a company.

"You asked me a moment ago to forgive you an impertinence," said Strickland quietly, as soon as Thorne was seated. "That was all very well. I forgave it. But you have taken it upon yourself to ask me a great many questions, and I certainly will not put up with the impertinence of your departure before you explain to me why you put them."

Thorne looked curiously at his inquisitor. He laid his hat and stick again on the table at his side. The relation in which the two men stood to each other was completely reversed, and by nothing more than the habit of authority in a voice.

"I was in the wrong, sir," he agreed, and he speculated whether he had not been as wrong in his

judgment as in his manners. After all, this might be the man he wanted.

"I hoped that you had been hunting big game during these fifteen months," he explained. "I hoped that you had landed at Thabeikyin and come up to Mogok to look for big game about here."

Thereupon he told his need. Behind the Dâk-bungalow stretched a continent of jungle, dotted sparsely with villages. One of these villages, no more distant than a four hours' march from Mogok, was suffering from the depredations of a tiger, was actually in a state of siege. A buffalo and other cattle had been eaten, a woman on the outskirts of the village had been carried off in broad daylight, a man had been dragged out of his hut and killed during the night.

"The village is in a panic," Thorne continued. "It has sent in a deputation to ask us what about it. But we are in a difficulty. The Forest Officers are a long way off upon their duties. I am tied to mine here. And though there's a famous hunter in the service of the mines, he's lying down there"—Thorne pointed to a white house on their left at the foot of the hill—"with a broken leg. So, you see, I was hoping that you would prove a godsend to us, and go out and deal with the brute."

Strickland stared at his visitor and gasped.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have been putting all these questions to me about my life and its object, to discover whether you think me worthy to go out and shoot a tiger for you?" he cried indignantly. "I wonder you didn't want to know whether I had been at Eton."

"No, no, sir, that wasn't necessary," Thorne returned gravely. He was now neither impertinent nor abashed. Indeed, he felt himself to be once more upon equal terms with the guest of the bungalow.

"You would never have been surprised at my questions, sir, if you had once sat out alone all through a long night on the branch of a tree in the heart of the jungle, waiting for a man-eating tiger. You would have known that a night alone in a haunted house could not put your nerves to a greater strain."

Captain Thorne was very much in earnest. A metaphor so picturesque coming from his unimaginative lips startled Strickland a little, awakened his curiosity and something more than his curiosity—the combative instinct in him.

"I certainly have had no such experience," he said. "But I could borrow a rifle, I suppose?"

Thorne looked John Strickland doubtfully over from head to foot. Strickland was slim, no more than of the middle height, a little under it perhaps—nimble in his movements, built for endurance, no doubt. But the face was perhaps a little too fine, the eyes, in repose, a little too brooding for the ordeal. There was an aloofness, a look of the mystical about him—that look which is the mark of lonely men—and one of Thorne's practical and gregarious stamp could not but distrust it. On the other hand there was Strickland's record . . . yes, that was not to be forgotten.

Thorne rose abruptly. He nodded in the direction of the white house at the foot of the hill.

"Let us go down and talk to Wingrove," he said. "He is not in pain now and can see us."

The two men walked down to the famous hunter's bungalow.

Chapter II *The Bird, the Cat and——*

WINGROVE, a blond giant of a man, received them in an upstairs room, where he lay in bed with a cradle lifting the bedclothes from his broken leg. He was

propped against a heap of pillows, his face and head showing up against the white linen like a gigantic orange, and he was reading with the concentration of a student the latest issue of *The Sporting Times* obtainable in Mogok. He dropped his newspaper as his visitors were shown into the room and ordered chairs to be set for them by the bed.

"So you are going to help us, Colonel Strickland?" he said. "We shall be very grateful, I can assure you."

"But I don't know that he's going to help us," Thorne rejoined. "We have come to you to advise us."

Wingrove looked from one to the other of his visitors.

"What's the difficulty? If it's a rifle, I have a ·470 Rigby, which is at Colonel Strickland's disposal."

"Thank you," said Strickland with a smile. He was quite willing to let Thorne argue. He had not a doubt that Wingrove and he could, and would, arrange the expedition between them before he left the house.

"But the rifle isn't the difficulty at all," cried Thorne, and he explained that Strickland had had no experience at all. "I am putting the worst of it, of course, Wingrove, because I want him to go, if it's fair to let him go?"

Strickland had slept out, no doubt, in the strangest places; he had been alone, no doubt, under the most exacting conditions. But this one thing he had not done. He had not sat up in a tree, absolutely by himself, through a whole night, waiting for a tiger in the depths of a jungle.

"It's a nerve-racking business when you're one of a party. But alone! The first time! What have you got to say to that?"

Wingrove's face really made words unnecessary. It grew very grave and doubtful. Strickland was provoked by it to a flippancy which he regretted before he had completed its utterance. For these

two men, both of them armed with knowledge, were weighing him in the balance. He felt suddenly as though he were a small boy before a board of examiners. But, above all, he felt an intense curiosity. He must know, by experience, what sort of a test this ordeal about which they were all so grave might be. Thorne had spoken of a night in a haunted house. Within a minute Strickland had yet another image and parallel to put beside that.

"I can't see what risk there can be, unless I fall asleep and tumble off my branch," he said lightly.

Wingrove shook his head and let it fall back against the pillows.

"You won't do that, Colonel Strickland," he answered softly. "No, there's not the slightest fear of it."

He remained for a few moments silent, with his eyes closed. Then he opened them again and smiled.

"I was trying to recapture the sensations which I experienced the first night I set out for a tiger. But it's not so easy after all these years and all the other expeditions. And I wasn't alone either. Remember that, Colonel Strickland! I had a friend in the next tree. I could have spoken to him and he would have answered. That makes a world of difference. But even so——" He hoisted himself up suddenly upon his elbow, whilst a spasm of pain distorted his face. But he had remembered.

"I thought of a novice keeping her vigil in her convent chapel through the night before she took her vows. Curious, eh? The crack of a board would sound like a thunderclap. Some tiny animal, a mouse or a rat, scampering across the stones of the aisle behind her would seem the fluttering feet of the dead risen from their tombs. The whirr of a bat would be to her, kneeling upon the flags, the hovering of demons above her head. And the night would be eternal, eh? Yes, eternal."