LONELY FURROW

BY

MAUD DIVER

AUTHOR OF "FAR TO SEEK," "DESMOND'S DAUGHTER," "THE STRONG HOURS," ETC.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1923

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO

CONNIE

COUSIN AND FRIEND

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.

SHAKESPEARE

For all your labour, you get strength, not fruit.

E. S. Bolton

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALTHOUGH certain Indian incidents in my story — notably that in Chapter Five, Phase Three — are taken from life, I wish to state that all my characters are imaginary.

I append a guide to the pronunciation of certain Indian names:

Ladakh	Ladawk
Kardang	Kurdong
Gulmarg	Goolmerg
Gangabal	Gungabarl
Nanga Parbat	Nunga Purbut

M. DIVER

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PRELUDE

I

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
Psalms of David.

DARKNESS and a solitary horseman; the hour, nearing midnight; the figures of man and beast, sharply silhouetted, black on grey, both straining forward a little in the effort of ascent: — only a drooping sombrero needed and the tip of a scabbard jutting from under the inevitable cloak to complete the time-honoured prelude to adventure of mediæval romance. . . .

But this solitary rider of the twentieth century rode unarmed. He wore nothing more imposing than the *shikari* helmet and sheepskin coat of Northern India; and the lonely road, innocent of jovial taverns, climbed up and over the great Kailas range that divides Western Thibet from Central Asia. Inside or out, there was little of the romantic about Colonel Ian Challoner, C.S.I. — soldier-civilian of some repute on the Frontier; and less of the mediæval, beyond the prosaic detail that he was nearing middle age, and was feeling, just then, more alive to the symptoms of that incurable ailment than would nine men out of ten who had ripened under England's mellow influences or the chances and changes of military service.

And yet — the mere fact of his present occupation, at the dead end of night, was proof conclusive that there still survived in him traces of the perennial boy, inherent in most Englishmen; the boy who never quite grows up, and who remains an insoluble riddle to the very much grown-up men of more purely intellectual breeds.

Your true wanderer seeks no logical impulse to explain his vagaries; and it so happened that in more than twenty years

of strenuous Indian service, Colonel Challoner had never yet visited Ladakh — that strange region of lamas and monasteries and mulberry-coloured mountains lying between the edge of Kashmir proper and Leh, where the ceaseless stream of caravans between India and Central Asia foregather and pass on; unhurried, untroubled, by the soundless drift of centuries or the reverberate clash of a world in arms. Keen student as he was of Eastern thought and character, this particular journey had been a private dream of his for many years. But the given moment had been long in arriving. His few chances had been so persistently torpedoed, by some trivial exigency, that he had almost given up hope. Also he had married early; and the essence of the idea was — to go alone.

At the present time, he was rather conspicuously alone. It was six years since he last returned from Home in the troubled summer of 1915; and in the course of those years the difficulties of life and work in India had increased sixfold. It takes a sanguine man to go forward undismayed in an atmosphere rank with race-hatred, clouded with uncertainty in every quarter — uncertainty of tenure, of the prevailing temper in court or city or district; worse than all, uncertainty of Government support in moments of swift critical decision. And his best friend could not call Colonel Challoner a sanguine man.

Hampered financially and officially — old friendly sense of trust and coöperation almost gone — he was beset by recurrent moods of black depression, when he felt tempted to accept the sop of a proportionate pension in exchange for the eclipse of his dearest ambitions; to have done with India, whose service had been the master passion of his life; the ideal passion that asks no reward beyond intimate knowledge and unceasing toil.

But always there hovered the lurking question — Could one pull it through when one came to the point? Would it look like deserting the ship? Would it be fair to a man's wife and children at Home? At least, it would save Edyth the trouble of deciding when she intended to honour him with her company again; but a permanently narrowed margin would scarcely suit her taste. . . .

At that juncture, he usually gave it up, till next time. . . .

It was one of these moods — an acute attack — that accounted for his presence at midnight near the summit of the Kardang Pass. A restless craving to snatch a breathing-space away from Peshawur and all its works; a chance-heard scrap of talk at the Club; two months' leave temptingly available: — and he had said in his heart, "Why not?"

True, Edyth's recent letters had dwelt a little plaintively on the eternal difficulty of making ends meet; and he had promised to increase his remittance. No easy job; the 'bloated' civilian being an extinct species. Once upon a time, the cost of such an expedition would have been negligible. Coolies were coolies, then. Now, they were 'gentlemen of the road' demanding their rupee a march; liable, at any awkward moment, to 'non-co-operate' and leave the discredited Sahib ignominiously in the lurch.

So far, they had given no trouble — thanks to Faizullah, a servant of the old school, who had a way of his own with coolies. For himself, his individual ache of loneliness had been swallowed up in the immense desolation of Ladakh, as a raindrop is swallowed in the sea.

Edyth, of course, would disapprove. Senseless, selfish waste of money, would be her verdict — with John going up to Oxford in the autumn and Beryl on the ground for new frocks. Well, so be it. John would get his Oxford, and Beryl her frocks. And he would get his breathing-space into the bargain, without trying to explain to an eminently sensible wife what it meant to him — this all too brief respite from hot-weather work and hot-weather amenities, and all the jangling discords of India in transition.

Still less could he justify, to her of all people, this crowning whim of his lone adventure. For he was not the man to rest content with reaching the curious desert town of Leh, set among naked hills, twelve thousand feet up. He must needs cast an eye of longing on the great range immediately behind the city, its far-flung peaks confronting him like a challenge. Here was a chance that might never come again; a fitting finale for his pilgrimage. Nothing to be gained by it, he honestly admitted,

beyond the gain of a new experience; the fulfilling of a desire as irrational as it is irresistible to those who are so made.

On enquiry he had learnt that the Pass was just open; that, on the Leh side, it presented no peculiar difficulties, beyond a stiff pull, and a chance of mountain sickness from the abrupt ascent into rarefied air. His informant was one Captain Flower, a jovial Indian Army officer, spending three months' leave in Ladakh for the only conceivable masculine reason — sport. During his brief halt at Leh, he was installed in the Residency bungalow, by leave of his friend Captain Thorne, Commissioner of Ladakh, now on his way up for the caravan season, when the little town would be humming like a hive with cosmopolitan life.

In view of the long light evenings and 'a moon on' after twelve, Flower had counselled a night march — a common expedient at high altitudes — to avoid the blinding glare of the sun on a world of snow and the devastating wind of those high regions that blows viciously from ten o'clock till after dark. Given a reliable guide, it ought to be fairly plain sailing.

"But it'll be perishing, I warn you, sir," he had added, "and you'll be beastly uncomfortable before you reach the top — if you and the gee don't cave in halfway up. Nothing short of a forty-four-inch ibex would induce *me* to shin up any old Pass!"

By the twinkle in his bloodshot blue eye, Challoner knew the man was of those who failed to understand. But his taste in adventure was his own affair; and, undaunted by warnings, he had set out at seven, muffled in fur coat, boots, and gloves; duly escorted by the reliable guide, whose imposing array of *chits* told a more flattering tale than his unimposing features and shifty eyes.

The start, across the rising plain of the Indus Valley, had been pleasant enough: draughts of air, like iced champagne from the far snow-line; the peculiar exhilaration of ascent . . .

Then the sun had slipped out of view, though his light still lingered on outstanding peaks and hovering films of cloud; deepening to orange and rose, swelling to a crescendo of crimson, like inaudible strains of some ethereal symphony fading and dying into the night, as music dies into silence.

In the darkening sky, planets and stars gleamed like corpse candles above the pallor of the snows; and with every upward mile the cold intensified stealthily, as if some invisible hand were tightening its grasp on horse and man and the whole sleeping earth.

In this fashion he had been journeying for more than five hours; and the 'beastly, uncomfortable sensations' promised by Flower had not been spared him. The night was at its blackest, the darker for a ghostly gleam of starshine; and something seemed to have gone wrong with the moon. It was after twelve. She was due to be rising by now.

The reliable guide, who had been ambling on ahead, a shadow among shadows, had vanished round a sharp turn of the hill. It was the first time Challoner had lost sight of him.

He drew rein and called, "Is all well? Are you there?"

No answer. He rode cautiously on, round the corner.

Not a sign of the familiar shadow on the lesser dark of the frozen track. What the devil . . . ?

He flashed his electric torch between Shahzada's ears, illumining the delicate hairs that fringed their velvet edges. The pale circle of light, deepening the surrounding dark, revealed nothing except those erect ears, one of them cocked backward, enquiring what was wrong.

Again he halted and sat listening — very erect and still — in a silence so profound that a small pulse throbbing in his temples sounded like the tremor of a distant drum.

Beyond that fantastic illusion, not the whisper of a footfall . . .

Once — twice — he shouted again, in peremptory tones — and waited . . .

Only the frail echo of his own voice came quavering back to him from the surrounding emptiness — and he knew himself alone. The presence of his sais, leisurely toiling after him, in no way mitigated that unpleasant sensation.

Either the scoundrel — after bargaining for half payment in advance — had given him the slip; or he had missed the track and fallen — goodness knew how many feet; clean gone; engulfed without a cry . . .

It was as if one had dropped a pin into the void.

"Probably half his precious *chits* [1] were faked or stolen," Challoner reflected grimly. "All the same . . . poor devil!"

A faint, uncomfortable chill trickled down his spine. Supposing he had ridden on, round that sharp curve, lost in some absorbing train of thought, it might have been a case of two pins dropped into the void — and not two pins to choose between them in the vast indifference of things.

"A narrow squeak," he coolly dismissed it, in the manner of his kind.

"The hand of Providence" would have been the verdict of an earlier day, when the individual was of more account — or believed himself so — in the mysterious workings of the universe.

His own father — a man of Spartan courage and childlike faith — had been very strong on the hand of Providence. He, himself, even as a small boy, had felt dimly sceptical of the familiar phrase; secretly puzzled by the mental picture it evoked of a gigantic Hand and Arm stretched out of the quiet sky, ceaselessly pursuing the elect, to snatch them from the brink of disaster.

He had never dared breathe a word to anyone of that irreverent vision. But always, fatally, the phrase called up the picture: and, looking back, he often wondered how far that ludicrous trick of fancy had engendered early scepticism, and futile friction with his good old father. For, like many sons of ardent believers, Challoner's faith in the Unbeholden was so deeply tinctured with doubt as to be hardly worthy of the name. Remained hope — a fitful visitant to men of his temperament; and courage, that mercifully had not failed him yet.

But if it needed courage to go on, it needed even more to turn his back on a Pass once he had set his face to it. From the saddle he could not clearly see to follow the path; but on foot, with the help of his torch, he might manage till the moon appeared.

When his sais came up with him, he briefly explained the situation; and Jagasar, bored with the whole affair, contributed a

[1] Testimonials.

perfunctory "*Di-di*, Sahib!" When the madness of mountains came upon men, these little accidents would happen. The Presence would return? No: the Presence would walk till the moon came. Let a blanket be thrown over the horse. Further madness! But among Sahibs the disease was too common for serious consideration.

While the man obeyed orders, Challoner talked confidentially to Shahzada, soothing him with hand and voice; for it was plain, from his laboured breathing, that the good beast also had uncomfortable sensations.

In this fashion they progressed cautiously, laboriously, for about half a mile. Then mountain sickness took him again: the breathlessness, the curious depression of spirit and the stunning, explosive headache, as if, any moment, a blood vessel might burst in his brain. The foolhardy ass he was — with all those human responsibilities on his shoulders! And no earthly excuse — but the adventure of the thing, the temperament of his race. And Edyth didn't understand temperament. She packed it in one of her handy jars, and labelled it affectation . . .

Oh, confound his splitting head! And the caprices of the moon!

He came to a standstill, from sheer physical necessity; but the instant of his pulse was not purely physical.

There, at least, above the massed shadows of the east, an unmistakable glimmer — the herald of her coming.

Fascinated, relieved, he stood there, awaiting the moment that never, to certain minds, quite loses its quality of miracle.

In the utter darkness, that clear rim of light, struck sharp on the knife-edge of a distant peak, had almost the thrill of a cry: "I am here!"

The unearthly beauty of it held thought and sensation in suspense, while the thin sickle swelled and blossomed into the fuller radiance of a faintly distorted moon. A moment, she hung poised, her foot upon the mountain-top; the next she sailed free of contact, as if the earth sighing in its sleep had gently wafted her into space . . .

Imperceptibly, resistlessly, her presence invaded the darkness,

dispelling it here, intensifying it there; eerily illumining the grandeur and desolation of the heights.

Shahzada, close behind him, shook his ears and gently pawed the ground, as if aware that things had taken a more hopeful turn; and even Challoner had a moment's irrational sense of the heavens having come to his rescue. The moon's advent made progress easier — but for the misery that was on them all. He could scarcely achieve more than thirty or forty paces at a stretch; and the other two had not his incentive to persevere.

By now the ridge must be within reach. The thrill of expectation quickened his pulses; and, bidding the sais await orders, he made a cautious reconnaissance, only to find himself up against a towering ice-cliff. Its summit, revealed by the moon, curved threateningly, like an Atlantic roller in mid-career. One knew it for illusion; but the ghostly light gave it an impressive effect of actuality, heightened by reaction on his brain of the prosaic facts that he was cold and exhausted to a degree. There were biscuits and chocolate in his haversack; but even a mild bout of mountain sickness put food out of the question.

Nothing save reluctance to return impelled him to push on; and, shouting an order to his man, he pressed forward up the moonlit path — vaguely relieved to get clear of the wave-like cliff and its icy breath.

As the moon rode higher, light and more light swept, like a soundless incoming tide, over leagues of rock and snow. The infinite clarity of the air made stars and moon seem incredibly bright, the farthest peaks incredibly near. In the unearthly stillness the click, click, of Shahzada's hoofs behind him got on his nerves, like a clock ticking in the dark. It broke the eerie spell that had him in thrall.

Free among the immensities, detached utterly from the familiar round, there came over him a passing illusion of escape from the tyranny of worries, official and domestic, that buzzed like mosquitoes about his exacting conscience; but, unlike mosquitoes, could never be exultantly caught and slain. To-night he would have none of them. It was his moment. It would never come again. While it lasted, he was neither Revenue Commis-

sioner of Peshawur, nor husband of Edyth, nor father of John and Beryl, or Eve — delight of his eyes — or Tony, whom he knew only as a vociferous bundle of imperious needs, imperiously demanded — the real master of the house. He was none of these. He was himself alone . . .

And all the while the friendly click of Shahzada's hoofs behind him derided that foolish fancy.

Clear of the ice-cliff, he halted again. Sais and horse followed suit at a respectful distance. The derisive clicking ceased. He looked at his watch. A quarter to one. And he stood there debating — what next? Forward or back?

Feeling his head, and the wretched difficulty of breathing, he seated himself on a ledge of rock; drew his *poshteen* close about him and lit a cigarette.

A strange, satisfying sensation — sitting there all alone seventeen thousand feet above the sweltering plains, in a region untouched by man's restlessness, his needs, his limited sense of time. Challoner had climbed as high before now; but always with others. Now to the exhilaration of height was added the more subtle spell of solitude. It was as if some vital part of him had quietly slipped out of life; as if all the hundred and one concerns, that mattered so urgently to the husk he had shed, were of no more consequence or substance than the delusion of a dream. The eternal snows with their vast perspectives of space and time gave a man a wholesome if disconcerting sense of his own insignificance — transient flicker of life that he was in a multitude of blazing worlds.

"A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday . . ." One caught a glimmer, up here, of the truth enshrined in that staggering poetic utterance, which in the far-off days of family prayers had so intrigued his budding imagination . . .

Once in a while, it happens that the dream of a lifetime comes true. Though the breadth of view he craved was lacking, this withdrawn moment of isolation between the perpetual snows of earth and the perpetual fires of heaven had been the life-dream of Ian Challoner — the essential Challoner, son of a Highland mother. For the man was a poet at heart. Always, dimly,