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## THE RED-HEADED TIGRESS.\*

—By J. OLIVIER CURWOOD—

You see, Fleetwood struck the station like this. Fleetwood's name, and incidentally the rank of his pecuniary attachment, had preceded him by at least a fortnight and several hundred miles, so subaltern stock suddenly took a sensational flier among the marriageable young ladies of Jagadhri. He came in on the wings of a sand-bull right straight from the shoulder of the Rajputana, and that, in a measure, as Mrs. Colonel Hotspur afterward declared, concealed his branded cheek.

Now the deceased Colonel's wife had reverently and with a befittingly appropriate sacrifice of tears planted her beloved spouse beneath the family hollyhock nearly three years previous, and the advent of the Colonel's old Punjaub associate awakened interests in her that rejuvenated the inflexible pangs of romantic sentiment lost in her youth. She was pretty, very pretty when the sun or torchlight shone on her golden-red hair, and fascinating. This much the marriageable young ladies acknowledged, but nothing more. They were listed in the ranks, and moreover, they conceded it respectively; while she simply posed as a delightful chaperon.

But Fleetwood was only a police subaltern, and that struck watchful papas and fanciful mammas as too stringent a circumstance to pass unobserved. True, he exercised authority over a scant sextette; but that in turn revolved with the ideas of a senior subaltern at department headquarters. Besides, the duties of Fleetwood carried him, and his sextette, off into the jungles, and that was worse still. If prepossessing personal qualities could have wiped out the insane notions of elders, it is morally safe to con-

jecture that he would have experienced an existence in Jagadhri little less delightful than that of a paradise beyond the Hills. But only Mrs. Hotspur was safe with him, and she the safer because of the scarred brand on his cheek. There were whispers current that young Fleetwood had received this while trekking out a furlough across the Himalayas with a murderous Hindustanee sirdar. But a departmental aide from the north suggested that it was the imprint of a tiger's tooth, and to his immediate coadjutant he confided remarks intended alone for very conservative ears. His name was Yarkand.

Fleetwood oftentimes detailed his first man to the authority of his own rank, and spent the hours he purloined from the department in Mrs. Hotspur's parlor, that sweetly unconscious lady herself insisting that it was the height of impropriety for him to leave before late—occasionally very late—tea. On these occasions he always seemed like one held under the influence of a strange dream, and once, late at night, when the moon was glimmering sickly yellow through lurid clouds of storm dust in the east, he bent lingeringly over Mrs. Hotspur's golden head and whispered softly, "O, by the way, Mrs. Hotspur, were you ever carried away by a tigress?" When Fleetwood asked the question he fainted dead away.

Mrs. Hotspur divulged her secret with exquisite talent, and after the imperturbable police subaltern had complimented her rare tact by a sympathetic proxy, he courteously retired with his sextette to the jungles. When the incident reached Yarkand's ears he winked slyly, and entered a red-ink memorandum in his note book.

Then came the little, raw, weazened Commissioner, Benares, and with him intelligence that turned the phlegmatic station upside down. Fleetwood? Why, of course he knew Fleetwood. "A deuced good chap, you know, jolly, but a trifle eccentric; father carries votes in London, son rather irregular and inclined to ease off a little on fever swamps and jungles. Not bad, you know, just incredibly wretched taste, when the gov'ner's allowance would carry him shoulders high in the south. There's a mystery back of it all somewhere, an' the gov'ner knows it. It's five years since father and son have met." Yarkand immediately made a confidant of the new arrival.

The Colonel's wife sent a plaintive little missive to Fleetwood exculpating her deplorable indiscretion; but, somehow, no answer came from the jungles, and the departmental aide shrugged his shoulders insinuatingly, as he watched the regular excursions of Benares from the station.

Mrs. Hotspur then virtually abandoned herself to the prudent advances of the commissioner; but back of it all there lurked something that cautioned Benares against dispensing too liberally his subaltern tirades. This happened just when the fever season was at its worst.



"O, BY THE WAY, MRS. HOTSPUR, WERE YOU EVER CARRIED AWAY BY A TIGRESS?"

It was now that the shriveled old Nepaleese, whose cousins had occasioned Fleetwood's police such a wretched lump of trouble, serenely sauntered down from the sand-hills and petitioned the station for a tiger's worth of men; which meant the jungle sahib. Of course Fleetwood was detailed to go.

The homes of the lower people were hot with malaria; and where the tiger kittens gamboled in the moonlight on the outskirts of the thickets their parents coughed a sickly offal, and together they spat-tered their mangy hides till the stench was sickening. It rose above the jungles, and carried with it the fever germs.

Coincidental with Fleetwood's injunction came a ten days' fur-  
lough for Yarkand, and he joined the party. Benares chewed his  
finger nails, and Mrs. Hotspur began to find an interest in the de-  
partmental aide.

It was a red-headed tiger, somebody said, and the Nepaleese corroborated it in his own peculiar style. Directly from the mo-  
ment the fact was thoroughly substantiated, Fleetwood began to  
grow thinner every day; and by the time the sand-hills were reached  
one could indisputably see the fever had taken root in him. The  
police subaltern computed his time, and composedly subjoined three  
days of grace; which is the ordinary time between the symptomatic  
derangement and death. Then he wrote a letter to Mrs. Hotspur,  
the most pitiful thing of all, and committed it to the care of Yar-  
kand. After that he rode in a hekka, and doctored up on quinine.

It was two days and a night before the transgressor was sub-  
stantially located, and then after a few transient glimpses of a  
spotted red and yellow hide it disappeared again. The Nepaleese  
was fearfully apprehensive, and Fleetwood feverishly impatient to  
accomplish his purpose. The plans for its final consummation were  
accurately developed by a lucky predestination of fortune, and one  
late afternoon the mottled head of the tigress was brought in on a  
native stretcher.

Fleetwood was just on the verge of mental collapse when the  
information, along with the head, was carried to him. He smiled  
gravely at Yarkand, and motioned him to his side. "Was it true,"  
he whispered eagerly, "that the—the—that it was a red-headed  
brute?"

Yarkand pressed a glass of cold water to the police subaltern's  
lips before he answered, then replied in the affirmative.

The sick man shuddered, and his fingers clutched convulsively at  
the aide's waistcoat. "Was—it—a—Tiger?" he asked feebly.

"No," said Yarkand, pitilessly. "It was a Tigress, Fleetwood."

That settled the police subaltern, and that night the depart-  
mental aide and a trio of hillsmen carried him northward from the  
sand-hills into Rajputana and upper India. The sextette returned  
to Jagadhri, and the names of Yarkand and Fleetwood were wiped  
off the government list.

It was months before Mrs. Hotspur could bring herself to the tearful realization that Fleetwood had, indeed, gone out of her life forever. She learned the subaltern's letter by heart—Yarkand had sent it on by a hillsman—and wept over it, and cherished it night and day in her bosom. Benares found it a convenient opportunity to apply for a change of location, and ultimately established his residence at a line station farther south where cosmopolite commissioners were more fully appreciated.

It was utterly impossible for Mrs. Hotspur to remain at Jagadhri, and only the poor thing sleeping unconscious beneath the hollyhock bade her stay a little longer. What Fleetwood said in his letter was so hopeless and touching, and it must have told his piteous story well, too; for the woman simply cried her feelings aloud without caring to hide them. Yarkand had died with the police subaltern, they intimated at the station; their graves were plotted somewhere in the North, and the Government didn't propose to expend a fraction of its valuable resources in investigating the remains of lost deserters. The Nepaleese tendered Mrs. Hotspur a fabricated clew for the fabulous sum of three rupees, and she accepted in good faith. Because she had no one to advise her she forthwith hired an elaborate outfit for the Colonel's old stamping ground in Rajputana.

The next season's exodus to the Hills had just begun when she returned, and with her came Yarkand. The whole station turned out en masse to welcome home the retrieved departmental aide and the Colonel's wife. She was a trifle older, and Yarkand merely a distempered semblance of his former self. In the hot summer nights that followed they often confided to one another the strange story of the police subaltern, illustrated partly by the halfcrazed contents of the letter, and less indifferently by Yarkand's own experience during the deranged man's fever days.

When Benares became cognizant of the facts—by rumors, it seems, he dappled his finger-tips in red ink and revenged himself with a pithy expatiation in his book of personal memoirs. It savored strongly of the disgusted commissioner's rancor, and ran something like this: "That pig-headed police subaltern, Fleetwood—mightily whole-souled fellow, but a deuced idiot—finally jumped the margin. Old woman's considerably cut up now, since she knows the whole thing, and trying to make the station believe she is going away. Seems Fleetwood was fool enough to get married a while back, and then ran off on a honeymoon into the jungles, where he contrived to loaf 'round just long enough to get his wife chawed up by a tiger—No, confound it, 'twas a red-headed tigress—and that's what set the poor witling agog when he stumbled into Jagadhri. Hotspur was an alluring resemblance of Mrs. Fleetwood, deceased, only a bit older—considerably so, if the dolt only possessed sense enough to see it—and together with the discovery of the only red-

headed tigress in India, the poor fellow's brain—what little he had—went crazy as a laughing jackass. He's dead now, poor cuss, and Hotspur's still wearing weeds, but whether for him, or the one under the hollyhock, would be dishonorable for a gentleman to say." When Yarkand read this a year later he thought it pretty good.

Jagadhri hadn't missed a dust storm since the station was planned, and as the windy season drew on the aide often explained to his protege how the police subaltern had stolen from his hut in the dead of the stormy night and disappeared forever. Yarkand believed the fever had indirectly drawn Fleetwood to his grave. Thus matters stood when the storm that shattered Sorgut struck Jagadhri.

First came a burning hot wind that lashed the tree tops like a thousand furies. Then the sand-hills seemed to be tumbling down in great heaps, and the atmosphere grew stifling even in cellars. The warm torrents of rain came and strove to clear a way for the floodlight of the great, red, throbbing moon, but the palpitating waves were lost before they had cast more than a fleeting reflection athwart the wind-tossed sky. The Colonel's wife pressed her white face against the window pane and watched the roaring, whirling darkness outside. Close beside her stood Yarkand.

Suddenly a vivid flash of lightning streamed the whole breadth of the firmament, and with one triumphant cry of joy the woman staggered backward and fell in a dead faint at Yarkand's feet.

My God! Fleetwood!

The police subaltern was presented a re-enlistment by the government, but first confirmed the equity of his claim to a three month's furlough, during which he ran down to show off his bride to his friends in the South. How do I know this to be true? Well, you see, I am Yarkand.