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The Road to Mandalay A Tale of Burma

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TO

LT.-COLONEL A. E. CONGDON

LATE ROYAL MUNSTER FUSILIERS

FROM HIS OLD FRIEND

THE AUTHOR

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THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

CHAPTER I

BLINDS DOWN

"What do you think, Mitty? All the blinds are down at 'Littlecote,'" announced Miss Jane Tebbs, bursting open the drawing-room door and disturbing her sister in a surreptitious game of patience. In well-ordered households the mistress is understood to have various domestic tasks claiming her attention in the morning. Cards should never appear until after sunset.

"Blinds down?" echoed Miss Tebbs, hastily moving a newspaper in the hope of concealing her ill-doing. "Why are you in such a taking, Jane? I suppose the family are away."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed her relative, sinking into a chair and dragging off her gloves. "Did you ever know them all away together? Of course, Mrs. Shafto goes gadding, and Douglas is at Sandhurst, but 'he' seldom stirs. It is my opinion that something has happened. The Shaftos have lived at 'Littlecote' for ten years, and I have never seen the blinds down before to-day."

"Oh, you are so fussy and ready to imagine things!" grumbled Mitty, who meanwhile had collected and pocketed the cards with surpassing dexterity. "I don't forget the time when the curate had a smart lady in his lodgings, and you nearly went out of your mind: rampaging up and down the village, and telling everyone that the bishop must be informed; and after all your outcry she turned out to be the young man's mother!"

"That's true. I confess I was misled; but she made herself up to look like a girl of twenty. You can't deny that she powdered her nose and wore white shoes. But this is different. Drawn blinds are a sign of trouble, and there is trouble at 'Littlecote,' as sure as my name is Jane."

"Then, in that case, why don't you go up to the house and inquire?" — The query suggested a challenge.

"Mitty! You know perfectly well that I have never been inside the door since Mrs. Shafto was so rude to me about the book club, when I wrote and protested against the 'loose' novels she put upon her list. Why, you saw her letter yourself!"

Here a pause ensued, during which Miss Jane blew into every separate finger of her gloves and folded them up with the neatest exactitude. Presently she murmured with a meditative air:

"I was thinking of asking Eliza to run over."

"Oh, you may ask!" rejoined her sister, with a sniff of scorn, "but Eliza won't stir. There's a beefsteak pudding for dinner. And that reminds me that this is the egg woman's day, and I must see if she has called. I shall want three dozen."

And without another word the elder Miss Tebbs bustled out of the room and abandoned her relative to solitude and speculation.

Matilda and Jane Tebbs were the elderly orphans of a late vicar, and still considered the parish and community of Tadpool their special charge. Miss Jane was organist and Sunday school superintendent; Miss Tebbs held mothers' meetings and controlled the maternity basket and funds. Subsequent to their retirement from the vicarage the sisters had known straitened circumstances; in fact, had experienced the sharp nip of real poverty; but, no matter how painful their necessities, they contrived to keep up appearances and never withdrew from society, nor suffered their little circle to forget that their grandfather had been an archdeacon. In spite of anxious times and scanty funds, they clung with loyal tenacity to certain family relics, in the shape of old silver, china and prints, many of which were highly marketable.

In those evil days it was whispered that "the Tebbs had only one best dress between them" — a certain rich black silk. As Miss Jane was at least six inches taller than dumpy Miss Mitty, difficulties of length were cunningly surmounted by an adjustable flounce. Needless to add that on festive occasions, such as high teas, little dinners, and card parties, the sisters never appeared together, the one "out of turn" invariably excusing herself with toothache or a heavy cold.

Although they argued and bickered in private, and had opposing tastes in the matter of boiling eggs and drawing tea, the Tebbs were a deeply attached pair and presented an unbroken front to the outer world.

After several years of brave struggle, during which the wolf of want prowled hungrily round Highfield Cottage, a substantial and unexpected fortune, fell to the Tebbs, restored them to comfortable independence—and to the notice of such far-sighted parents as happened to be in quest of useful and benevolent godmothers. The sisters made but little change in their style of living; they now owned handsome furs, a separate wardrobe, and not a few rich silks; they still continued to occupy the cottage, and retained in their service a certain tyrannical treasure, widely known and feared as "the Tebbs's Eliza." Although an admirable and trustworthy servant, Eliza ruled the household, permitted no late hours, no breakfasts in bed, no unnecessary fires, no unnecessary, guests. Her mistresses were obliged to do a considerable amount of household work; for instance, they made their beds and Miss Tebbs dusted the china; she also had the charge of the linen and store-room; whilst Miss Jane was responsible for the silver, the lamps, and, on Eliza's day out, "the door."

When the door was answered by Eliza in person, her manner was so fierce and intimidating that nervous callers complained that the Tebbs' maid looked as if she was ready to fly at, and bite them! Ill-natured tongues declared that the tyrant was tolerated merely because she was a channel for the most far-reaching, fresh and sensational gossip. But let us hope that this was a malignant libel!

Highfield Cottage was old, two-storied and solid; elsewhere than Tadpool it might have ventured to pose as a villa residence, but Tadpool, a fine, sixteenth century, self-respecting and historical village, tolerated no villas. If such abodes ventured to arise, they sprouted timidly in the fields beyond its boundaries. Moreover, the age and history of Highfield Cottage were too widely known for any change of name. The cottage was connected with the high road by a prim little garden and a red-tiled footpath; eight long narrow windows commanded a satisfactory outlook—including Littlecote Hall—a square white mansion withdrawn in dignified retirement

behind elms and beeches, in age the contemporary of its humbler *vis-à-vis*.

Here resided Edward Shafto, late Fellow of St. John's, Oxford, his wife Lucilla, and his son Douglas. Ten years previously the family had descended on Tadpool as from the skies—or as a heavy stone cast into some quiet mill pond. No one in the neighbourhood could discover anything about them—although Jane Tebbs's exertions in the matter were admittedly prodigious and unwearied. The house agent proved disappointingly vague, and could only inform her that a gentleman who happened to hear of the place had come down from London, inspected the house, liked its lofty, spacious rooms with their old mahogany doors (it recalled his home), was much taken with the gardens—and promptly signed the lease! Certainly it was an audacious step to invade a strange neighbourhood without a social sponsor or reference. However, the community breathed more freely when they beheld the new tenant of "Little-cote," a middle-aged, distinguished-looking individual; and Miss Jane discovered, or pretended to discover, that he was one of the Shaftos of Shafton Court.

Mrs. Shafto (who looked surprisingly young to be the mother of a tall lad of ten) had a pretty figure, quantities of lightish red hair, an animated manner, and a pair of hard blue eyes. She was fashionably turned out, and her hat of a remarkable shape was discussed in the village for weeks.

The arrival of furniture vans, horses, carriages and a number of servants, afforded unqualified interest to the Misses Tebbs; and moreover advertised the fact that the new-comers were well-to-do; and after allowing a reasonable time for the strangers to settle down, the neighbours called.

By and by these calls were returned by Mrs. Shafto in a smart victoria and a still smarter costume; her husband was merely represented by a neatly printed card, which bore the name of "Mr. Edward Shafto, Athenaeum Club." Mr. Edward Shafto was rarely to be met beyond his grounds and garden, unless driving through the village to Bricklands railway station, en route for London. He did not sit on the Bench, nor was he a churchwarden, the usual grounds of meeting. When encountered he was invariably agreeable and had

charming easy manners, but not much to say for himself, and his acquaintance, like the farmers and the claret, got "no forrarder." Gradually the painful truth was accepted that Shafto did not care to know people. He never dined out, he did not shoot or hunt, but it was mysteriously whispered that "he wrote." What, no one precisely knew, but one fact was common property: he was fond of horticulture and the once famous gardens of "Littlecote" had been delightfully restored.

If Tadpool was held at arm's length by Edward Shafto, the community had no difficulty in making acquaintance with his consort, a pretty vivacious lady who accepted all invitations, and herself gave tennis parties, bridge parties, luncheons and teas. For some time the neighbourhood was disposed to like her, although perhaps she was not quite "off the top shelf," a little too demonstrative, loud and unreserved; then by degrees Mrs. Shafto fell into disfavour; quiet folk were afraid of her, she enjoyed repeating ill-natured remarks, was capricious in her likes and dislikes, made a good deal of mischief, and separated chief friends.

The lady was not disposed to be reticent respecting her family affairs; there was something satisfactory in this! People learned that her husband was really a Shafto of Shafton, and also that his elder brother, who actually reigned in the family place, was "a brute." She volubly explained that they had deserted the Border and moved south, partly because "the pater" wished to be within easy reach of London, his Club and musty old libraries, and also because it was more convenient for Douglas, who was at Winchester.

Then gradually it came to pass that the village bored the newcomer; bored her to death. She became restless and quarrelsome, had a coolness with the vicarage regarding a pew, with Mrs. Tremenheere at the Park about a housemaid, and actually cut Mrs. General Finch "dead" in the village post office, owing to a mislaid visiting-card. At the end of three years Lucilla Shafto had embroiled herself with almost everyone in her immediate vicinity, and found her true level and most congenial companions in the busy bustling town of Bricklands, a rapidly growing and prosperous mushroom place, situated thirty miles south of London, and within two miles of our ancient and respectable hamlet. Here she belonged to several

clubs, bridge, tennis and croquet; enjoyed being a Triton among minnows; entertained a third-rate set at "Littlecote," and joined gay little theatre parties to London to "do a play," and return home by the last train.

Housekeeping sat but lightly on Mrs. Shafto's graceful shoulders, for the Shaftos also possessed a family treasure named Hannah, an elderly woman, who had been in service with "the family" and now managed the house, and looked after the comforts and buttons of her master and his boy.

Mr. and Mrs. Shafto went their separate ways, and were rarely to be seen in one another's company. The lady assured her friends that her husband's health was indifferent, and that he did not care for society; for her part she liked amusement, excitement, life; whilst he preferred to read, write, overlook his garden, and occasionally run up to London. She did not trouble herself much about her son—a handsome active boy, resembling his father in looks. Between these there undoubtedly existed a deep affection. During the holidays they were frequently to be met walking or riding together, and Shafto *père* would so far emerge from his retirement as to be a proud spectator at cricket matches in Tremenheere Park and elsewhere. Douglas and two of the Tremenheere boys were school-mates, and he was in continual request at their home. Unfortunately these visits were displeasing to Mrs. Shafto, as was also his intimacy with the young people at the vicarage; and poor Douglas had an awkward part to play. He could not avoid or drop his friends; yet, on the other hand, there were painful difficulties with his mother, who declared that he was a mean fellow to run after people who had *insulted* her, and one day, when in a towering passion, she had been overheard to scream "that he was a thorn in her side, and a true Shafto!"

But all this time Miss Jane Tebbs remains stationed at the drawing-room window, watching the road with unwinking vigilance. For a long while she beheld no object of special interest, but at last, after seeing the grocer's cart, a travelling tinker, two cows and a boy go by, her patience was handsomely rewarded. To her delight, she descried Mrs. Billing, the doctor's wife, emerge from "Littlecote"

and, hammering on the window to attract notice, she flew down to open the hall door.

Mrs. Billing, a stout, middle-aged lady, looked unusually hot and flustered as she waddled through the little green gate and entered the cottage.

"Why, my dear, you seem quite upset!" cried Jane, as she welcomed the visitor, "come into the dining-room, and have a glass of milk."

But Mrs. Billing dismissing the proffered refreshment with a dramatic wave of her hand, subsided upon the only chair in the narrow hall and gasped out:

"I have just come from 'Littlecote.' Mr. Shafto is gone—he died last night!"

CHAPTER II

WHAT HANNAH SAID

On hearing this announcement, Jane Tebbs gave a little lurch and leant against the wall in speechless horror; and yet in her heart she had been more than half expecting—we will not say hoping for—some tragedy. Then she made a rush to the store-room, where Miss Mitty, invested in a large blue apron, was methodically marking eggs.

"Sister, sister, come out!" she cried. "Mrs. Billing is here; she says Mr. Shafto is dead; I told you that something had happened!"

"Dead!" repeated Mitty, staring blankly at her relative. Then she cast aside her apron and hurried into the hall. "Let us all go into the dining-room," she continued, leading the way. "What a shocking thing, Mrs. Billing!"—turning to her visitor. "Do tell us the particulars. I can hardly believe it! Why, I saw Mr. Shafto in Bricklands on Tuesday, and he looked as well as he ever did in his life."

"That was the day he heard the news," announced Mrs. Billing, selecting an arm-chair and casting off her feather boa.

"Bad news?" suggested Miss Jane.

"Very bad indeed—could not be worse. He heard he'd lost every penny he possessed in the wide world."

"Great patience!" ejaculated Miss Tebbs; "you don't say so; but how?"

"Well, you know he was always comfortably off; indeed, one might say rich."

"That's true! They keep five maids indoors, and a charwoman three times a week, two men and a boy in the garden, and two men in the stables," glibly enumerated Miss Jane. "All that is not done on small means, and I happen to know that Mr. Shafto himself paid

everything monthly – which is more than we can say for his wife; even her bridge losses"; here she halted on the brink of scandal.

After hesitating for a second, Mrs. Billing continued:

"Well, it appears, from what my husband can gather, that Mr. Shafto trusted all his money and investments to a man who had managed his affairs for years, and in whom he had the most absolute confidence; he just drew his income regularly, lived his quiet life, and never troubled his head about business. It seems that for a considerable time this agent had been speculating with his clients' capital, and paying them the interest to the day. He staved off the reckoning by every possible device, and when he could no longer hide his wickedness, when liabilities poured in, and proceedings were instituted, he shot himself! Not much comfort in that for the families he has beggared. I believe he had a splendid establishment at Hampstead; greenhouses, pictures, motor-cars, and entertained like a prince. He squandered the handsome fortune that was left to Mr. Shafto, and all that Mr. Shafto could be sure of, about a hundred and fifty pounds a year, belongs to Douglas."

"Oh, my dear, never mind the money, but do tell us about poor Mr. Shafto," urged Jane. "What was the cause of his death? Suicide? This morning I thought I heard a shot!"

"No, no, no – heart failure," hastily interposed Mrs. Billing. "He was always troubled with a rickety heart, and on several occasions my husband attended him for rather dangerous fainting attacks; no doubt that was partly the reason why he lived so quietly, just taken up with his books, his garden, and, when he was at home, his boy. It appears that when Mr. Shafto heard of the smash, he went straight up to London, interviewed a lawyer, and learnt the worst. He returned in the afternoon, very tired and excited, broke the news to his wife, and had a serious fainting attack. My husband was sent for, but he found Mr. Shafto sinking. He died at midnight. He himself had wired for Douglas, who arrived just in time for the end. Poor boy! He feels it terribly."

"Yes," assented Miss Mitty, "Douglas and his father were such friends. The loss of money will make a sad difference to him. There will be no going into the Army now, no more hunting and cricket; he will have to take a clerkship. Did you see him?"