

**THE INDIAN LILY
AND OTHER STORIES**

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THE INDIAN LILY

Chapter I.

It was seven o'clock in the morning when Herr von Niebeldingk opened the iron gate and stepped into the front garden whose wall of blossoming bushes separated the house from the street.

The sun of a May morning tinted the greyish walls with gold, and caused the open window-panes to flash with flame.

The master directed a brief glance at the second story whence floated the dull sound of the carpet-beater. He thrust the key rapidly into the keyhole for a desire stirred in him to slip past the porter's lodge unobserved.

"I seem almost to be—ashamed!" he murmured with a smile of self-derision as a similar impulse overcame him in front of the house door.

But John, his man—a dignified person of fifty—had observed his approach and stood in the opening door. The servant's mutton-chop whiskers and admirably silvered front-lock contrasted with a repressed reproach that hovered between his brows. He bowed deeply.

"I was delayed," said Herr von Niebeldingk, in order to say something and was vexed because this sentence sounded almost like an excuse.

"Do you desire to go to bed, captain, or would you prefer a bath?"

"A bath," the master responded. "I have slept elsewhere."

That sounded almost like another excuse.

"I'm obviously out of practice," he reflected as he entered the breakfast-room where the silver samovar steamed among the dishes of old Sèvres.

He stepped in front of the mirror and regarded himself—not with the forbearance of a friend but the keen scrutiny of a critic.

"Yellow, yellow...." He shook his head. "I must apply a curb to my feelings."

Upon the whole, however, he had reason to be fairly satisfied with himself. His figure, despite the approach of his fortieth year, had remained slender and elastic. The sternly chiselled face, surrounded by a short, half-pointed beard, showed neither flabbiness nor bloat. It was only around the dark, weary eyes that the experiences of the past night had laid a net-work of wrinkles and shadows. Ten years ago pleasure had driven the hair from his temples, but it grew energetically upon his crown and rose, above his forehead, in a Mephistophelian curve.

The civilian's costume which often lends retired officers a guise of excessive spick-and-spanness had gradually combined with an easier bearing to give his figure a natural elegance. To be sure, six years had passed since, displeased by a nagging major, he had definitely hung up the dragoon's coat of blue.

He was wealthy enough to have been able to indulge in the luxury of that displeasure. In addition his estates demanded more rigorous management.... From Christmas to late spring he lived in Berlin, where his older brother occupied one of those positions at court that mean little enough either to superior or inferior ranks, but which, in a certain social set dependent upon the court, have an influence of inestimable value. Without assuming the part of either a social lion or a patron, he used this influence with sufficient thoroughness to be popular, even, in certain cases, to be feared, and belonged to that class of men to whom one always confides one's difficulties, never one's wife.

John came to announce to his master that the bath was ready. And while Niebelding stretched himself lazily in the tepid water he let his reflections glide serenely about the delightful occurrence of the past night.

That occurrence had been due for six months, but opportunity had been lacking. "I am closely watched and well-known," she had told him, "and dare not go on secret errands." ... Now at last their chance had come and had been used with clever circumspectness.... Somewhere on the Polish boundary lived one of her cousins to whose wedding she was permitted to travel alone.... She had planned to arrive in Berlin unannounced and, instead of taking the morning train from Eydtkuhnen, to take the train of the previous evening. Thus a night was gained whose history had no necessary place in any family chronicle and the memories of which could, if need were, be obliterated from one's own consciousness.... Her arrival and departure had caused a few moments of really needless anxiety. That was all. No acquaintance had run into them, no waiter had intimated any suspicion, the very cabby who drove them through the dawn had preserved his stupid lack of expression when Niebelding suddenly sprang from the vehicle and permitted the lady to be driven on alone....

Before his eyes stood her picture—as he had seen her lying during the night in his arms, fevered with anxiety and rapture ... Ordinarily her eyes were large and serene, almost drowsy.... The night had proven to him what a glow could be kindled in them. Whether her broad brows, growing together over the nose, could be regarded as a beautiful feature—that was an open question. He liked them—so much was certain.

"Thank heaven," he thought. "At last, once more—a *woman*."

And he thought of another who for three years had been allied to him by bonds of the tenderest intimacy and whom he had this night betrayed.

"Between us," he consoled himself, "things will remain as they have been, and I can enjoy my liberty."

He sprayed his body with the icy water of the douche and rang for John who stood outside of the door with a bath-robe.

When, ten minutes later, shivering comfortably, he entered the breakfast-room, he found beside his cup a little heap of letters which the morning post had brought. There were two letters that gripped his attention.

One read:

"Berlin N., Philippstrasse 10 a.

DEAR HERR VON NIEBELDINGK:—

For the past week I have been in Berlin studying agriculture, since, as you know, I am to take charge of the estate. Papa made me promise faithfully to look you up immediately after my arrival. It is merely due to the respect I owe you that I haven't kept my promise. As I know that you won't tell Papa I might as well confess to you that I've scarcely been sober the whole week.—Oh, Berlin is a deuce of a place!

If you don't object I will drop in at noon to-morrow and convey Papa's greetings to you. Papa is again afflicted with the gout.

With warm regards,

Your very faithful

FRITZ VON EHRENBURG."

The other letter was from ... her—clear, serene, full of such literary reminiscences as always dwelt in her busy little head.

"DEAR FRIEND:—

I wouldn't ask you: Why do I not see you?—you have not called for five days—I would wait quietly till your steps led you hither without persuasion or compulsion; but 'every animal loves itself' as the old gossip Cicero says, and I feel a desire to chat with you.

I have never believed, to be sure, that we would remain indispensable to each other. '*Racine passera comme le café,*' Mme. de Sévigné says somewhere, but I would never have dreamed that we would see so little of each other before the inevitable end of all things.

You know the proverb: even old iron hates to rust, and I'm only twenty-five.

Come once again, dear Master, if you care to. I have an excellent cigarette for you—Blum Pasha. I smoke a little myself now and then, but *c'est plus fort que moi* and ends in head-ache.

Joko has at last learned to say 'Richard.' He trills the *r* cunningly. He knows that he has little need to be jealous.

Good-bye!

ALICE."

He laughed and brought forth her picture which stood, framed and glazed, upon his desk. A delicate, slender figure—"*blonde comme les blés*"—with bluish grey, eager eyes and a mocking expression of the lips—it was she herself, she who had made the last years of his life truly livable and whose fate he administered rather than ruled.

She was the wife of a wealthy mine-owner whose estates abutted on his and with whom an old friendship, founded on common sports, connected him.

One day, suspecting nothing, Niebeldingk entered the man's house and found him dragging his young wife from room to room by the hair.... Niebeldingk interfered and felt, in return, the lash of a whip.... Time and place had been decided upon when the man's physician forbade the duel.... He had been long suspected, but no certain symptoms had been alleged, since the brave little woman revealed nothing of the frightful inwardness of her married life.... Three days later he was definitely sent to a sanitarium. But between Niebeldingk and Alice the memory of that last hour of suffering soon wove a thousand threads of helplessness and pity into the web of love.

As she had long lost her parents and as she was quite defenceless against her husband's hostile guardians, the care of her interests devolved naturally upon him.... He released her from troublesome obligations and directed her demands toward a safe goal.... Then, very tenderly, he lifted her with all the roots of her being from the old, poverty-stricken soil of her earlier years and transplanted her to Berlin where, by the help of his brother's wife—still gently pressing on and smoothing the way himself—he created a new way of life for her.

In a villa, hidden by foliage from Lake Constance, her husband slowly drowsed toward dissolution. She herself ripened in the

sharp air of the capital and grew almost into another woman in this banal, disillusioned world, sober even in its intoxication.

Of society, from whose official section her fate as well as her commoner's name separated her, she saw just enough to feel the influence of the essential conceptions that governed it.

She lost diffidence and awkwardness, she became a woman of the world and a connoisseur of life. She learned to condemn one day what she forgave the next, she learned to laugh over nothing and to grieve over nothing and to be indignant over nothing.

But what surprised Niebeldingk more than these small adaptations to the omnipotent spirit of her new environment, was the deep revolution experienced by her innermost being.

She had been a clinging, self-effacing, timid soul. Within three years she became a determined and calculating little person who lacked nothing but a certain fixedness to be a complete character.

A strange coldness of the heart now emanated from her and this was strengthened by precipitate and often unkindly judgment, supported in its turn by a desire to catch her own reflection in all things and to adopt witty points of view.

Nor was this all. She acquired a desire to learn, which at first stimulated and amused Niebeldingk, but which had long grown to be something of a nuisance.

He himself was held, and rightly held, to be a man of intellect, less by virtue of rapid perception and flexible thought, than by virtue of a coolly observant vision of the world, incapable of being confused – a certain healthy cynicism which, though it never lost an element of good nature, might yet abash and even chill the souls of men.

His actual knowledge, however, had remained mere wretched patchwork, his logic came to an end wherever bold reliance upon the intuitive process was needed to supply missing links in the ratiocinative chain.

And so it came to pass that Alice, whom at first he had regarded as his scholar, his handiwork, his creature, had developed annoyingly beyond him.... Involuntarily and innocently she delivered the

keenest thrusts. He had, actually, to be on guard.... In the irresponsible delight of intellectual crudity she solved the deepest problems of humanity; she repeated, full of faith, the judgments of the ephemeral rapid writer, instead of venturing upon the sources of knowledge. Yet even so she impressed him by her faculty of adaptation and her shining zeal. He was often silenced, for his slow moving mind could not follow the vagaries of that rapid little brain.

What would she be at again to-day? "The old gossip Cicero...." And, "Mme. de Sévigné remarks...." What a rattling and tinkling. It provoked him.

And her love! ... That was a bad business. What is one to do with a mistress who, before falling asleep, is capable of lecturing on Schopenhauer's metaphysics of sex, and will prove to you up to the hilt how unworthy it really is to permit oneself to be duped by nature if one does not share her aim for the generations to come?

The man is still to be born upon whom such wisdom, uttered at such an hour — by lips however sweet — does not cast a chill.

Since that philosophical night he had left untouched the little key that hung yonder over his desk and that give him, in her house, the sacred privileges of a husband. And so his life became once more a hunt after new women who filled his heart with unrest and with the foolish fires of youth.

But Alice had never been angry at him. Apparently she lacked nothing....

And his thoughts wandered from her to the woman who had lain against his breast to-night, shuddering in her stolen joy.

Heavens! He had almost forgotten one thing!

He summoned John and said:

"Go to the florist and order a bunch of Indian lilies. The man knows what I mean. If he hasn't any, let him procure some by noon."

John did not move a muscle, but heaven only knew whether he did not suspect the connection between the Indian lilies and the romance of the past night. It was in his power to adduce precedents.

It was an old custom of Niebeldingk's—a remnant of his half out-lived Don Juan years—to send a bunch of Indian lilies to those women who had granted him their supreme favours. He always sent the flowers next morning. Their symbolism was plain and delicate: In spite of what has taken place you are as lofty and as sacred in my eyes as these pallid, alien flowers whose home is beside the Ganges. Therefore have the kindness—not to annoy me with remorse.

It was a delicate action and—a cynical one.

Chapter II.

At noon—Niebeldingk had just returned from his morning canter—the visitor, previously announced, was ushered in.

He was a robust young fellow, long of limb and broad of shoulder. His face was round and tanned, with hot, dark eyes. With merry boldness, yet not without diffidence, he sidled, in his blue cheviot suit, into the room.

"Morning, Herr von Niebeldingk."

Enviously and admiringly Niebeldingk surveyed the athletic figure which moved with springy grace.

"Morning, my boy ... sober?"

"In honour of the day, yes."

"Shall we breakfast?"

"Oh, with delight, Herr von Niebeldingk!"

They passed into the breakfast-room where two covers had already been laid, and while John served the caviare the flood of news burst which had mounted in their Franconian home during the past months.

Three betrothals, two important transfers of land, a wedding, Papa's gout, Mama's charities, Jenny's new target, Grete's flirtation with the American engineer. And, above all things, the examination!

"Dear Herr von Niebeldingk, it's a rotten farce. For nine years the gymnasium trains you and drills you, and in the end you don't get your trouble's worth! I'm sorry for every hour of cramming I did. They released me from the oral exam., simply sent me out like a monkey when I was just beginning to let my light shine! Did you ever hear of such a thing? *Did you ever?*"

"Well, and how about your university work, Fritz?"

That was a ticklish business, the youth averred. Law and political science was no use. Every ass took that up. And since it was after all only his purpose to pass a few years of his green youth profitably, why he thought he'd stick to his trade and find out how to plant cabbages properly.

"Have you started in anywhere yet?"

Oh, there was time enough. But he had been to some lectures—agronomy and inorganic chemistry.... You have to begin with inorganic chemistry if you want to go in for organic. And the latter was agricultural chemistry which was what concerned him.

He made these instructive remarks with a serious air and poured down glass after glass of Madeira. His cheeks began to glow, his heart expanded. "But that's all piffle, Herr von Niebeldingk, ... all this book-worm business can go to the devil.... Life—life—life—that's the main thing!"

"What do you call life, Fritz?"

With both hands he stroked the velvety surface of his close-cropped skull.

"Well, how am I to tell you? D'you know how I feel? As if I were standing in front of a great, closed garden ... and I know that all Paradise is inside ... and occasionally a strain of music floats out ... and occasionally a white garment glitters ... and I'd like to get in and I can't. That's life, you see. And I've got to stand miserably outside?"

"Well, you don't impress me as such a miserable creature?"

"No, no, in a way, not. On the coarser side, so to speak, I have a good deal of fun. Out there around *Philippstrasse* and *Marienstrasse* there are women enough—stylish and fine-looking and everything you want. And my friends are great fellows, too. Every one can stand his fifteen glasses ... I suppose I am an ass, and perhaps it's only moral *katzenjammer* on account of this past week. But when I walk the streets and see the tall, distinguished houses and think of all those people and their lives, yonder a millionaire, here a minister of state, and think that, once upon a time, they were all crude boys like myself—well, then I have the feeling as if I'd never attain anything, but always remain what I am."

"Well, my dear Fritz, the only remedy for that lies in that 'book-worm business' as you call it. Sit down on your breeches and work!"

"No, Herr von Niebeldingk, it isn't that either ... let me tell you. Day before yesterday I was at the opera.... They sang the *Götterdämmerung*.... You know, of course. There is *Siegfried*, a fellow like myself, ... not more than twenty ... I sat upstairs in the third row with two seamstresses. I'd picked them up in the *Chausseestrasse*—cute little beasts, too.... But when *Brunhilde* stretched out her wonderful, white arms to him and sang: 'On to new deeds, O hero!' why I felt like taking the two girls by the scruff of the neck and pitching them down into the pit, I was so ashamed. Because, you see, *Siegfried* had his *Brunhilde* who inspired him to do great deeds. And what have I? ... A couple of hard cases picked up in the street."

"Afterwards, I suppose, you felt more reconciled?"

"That shows how little you know me. I'd promised the girls supper. So I had to eat with them. But when that was over I let 'em slide. I ran about in the streets and just—howled!"

"Very well, but what exactly are you after?"

"That's what I don't know, Herr von Niebeldingk. Oh, if I knew! But it's something quite indefinite—hard to think, hard to comprehend. I'd like to howl with laughter and I don't know why ... to shriek, and
I don't know what about."

"Blessed youth!" Niebeldingk thought, and looked at the enthusiastic boy full of emotion. ...

John, who was serving, announced that the florist's girl had come with the Indian lilies.

"Indian lilies, what sort of lilies are they?" asked Fritz overcome by a hesitant admiration.

"You'll see," Niebeldingk answered and ordered the girl to be admitted.

She struggled through the door, a half-grown thing with plump red cheeks and smooth yellow hair. Diffident and frightened, she nevertheless began to flirt with Fritz. In front of her she held the long stems of the exotic lilies whose blossoms, like gigantic narcissi, brooded in star-like rest over chaste and alien dreams. From the middle of each chalice came a sharp, green shimmer which faded gently along the petals of the flowers.

"Confound it, but they're beautiful!" cried Fritz. "Surely they have quite a peculiar significance."

Niebeldingk arose, wrote the address without permitting John, who stood in suspicious proximity, to throw a glance at it, handed cards and flowers to the girl, gave her a tip, and escorted her to the door himself.

"So they do mean something special?" Fritz asked eagerly. He couldn't get over his enthusiasm.

"Yes, my boy."

"And may one know...."

"Surely, one may know. I give these lilies to that lady whose lofty purity transcends all doubt—I give them as a symbol of my chaste and desireless admiration."

Fritz's eyes shone.

"Ah, but I'd like to know a lady like that—some day!" he cried and pressed his hands to his forehead.

"That will come! That will come!" Niebeldingk tapped the youth's shoulder calmingly.

"Will you have some salad?"

Chapter III.

Around the hour of afternoon tea Niebeldingk, true to a dear, old habit, went to see his friend.

She inhabited a small second-floor apartment in the *Regentenstrasse* which he had himself selected for her when she came as a stranger to Berlin. With flowers and palms and oriental rugs she had moulded a delicious retreat, and before her bed-room windows the nightingales sang in the springtime.

She seemed to be expecting him. In the great, raised bay, separated from the rest of the drawing-room by a thicket of dark leaves, the stout tea-urn was already expectantly humming.

In a bright, girlish dress, devoid of coquetry or pouting, Alice came to meet him.

"I'm glad you're here again, Richard."

That was all.

He wanted to launch out into the tale which he had meant to tell her, but she cut him short.

"Since when do I demand excuses, Richard? You come and there you are. And if you don't come, I have to be content too." "You should really be a little less tolerant," he warned her.

"A blessed lot it would help me," she answered merrily.

Gently she took his arm and led him to his old place. Then silently, and with that restrained eagerness that characterised all her actions she busied herself with the tea-urn.

His critical and discriminating gaze followed her movements. With swift, delicate gestures she pushed forward the Chinese dish, shook the tea from the canister and poured the first drops of boiling