

Chapter 1

News from England

“The *post-dák* at last!” exclaimed Walter Gurney, springing to his feet, as, encompassed by a cloud of dust, the vehicle for which he had been watching appeared in the distance, the flourish of a horn announcing its approach. The youth had been reclining under the shade of a pipal tree, at the side of the road which led to a frontier station on the border line which divides India from Afghanistan. The post always had to be met at this point by Walter, as the horses were never turned down the rude road which led to a missionary’s bungalow, situated about two miles off, almost close to a native village. Rev. William Gurney, till his death, which had occurred about two months before my story opens, had always dwelt among his poor flock, “the world forgetting, by the world forgotten.” The missionary’s sole companion had been Walter, his only son, whom he had himself educated in India, the neighbourhood of mountains preventing the absolute necessity of his sending his motherless boy to England.

This was the third time that Walter had anxiously gone to meet the home mail. By his dying father’s desire he had remained at Santgunge till he should receive a letter from his grandmother in London, in answer to the announcement of the missionary’s death. Walter could not form any plans for his own future till he should hear from the nearest relative now left to him upon earth.

The expected letter was handed down by the coachman to Walter, and with another blast of the horn the *dák-gári* (post cart or carriage) rattled on its way. Walter returned to the pipal

tree, and, leaning against its trunk, examined the envelope of the letter before opening it to read the contents.

“Black-edged, but not written in my grandmother’s hand. She must have been ill, which would account for her not writing before. The news which I sent must have grieved her sorely.”

Walter broke open the letter and glanced at the signature at the end; it was that of his uncle, whose handwriting was strange to the youth. Augustus Gurney, the wealthy banker, had never cared to keep up contact with a brother who had demeaned himself, as he thought, by becoming a humble missionary. The stiff, formal, businesslike writing was characteristic of him who had penned it. The letter was dated from Eaton Square, 1871.

Dear Walter,

The melancholy announcement of your father’s decease never reached your grandmother; it arrived on the day of her funeral. I have delayed writing till all affairs were settled. You asked for directions for your future course, and whether there were any means of your finishing your education in some college in England. You will receive a frank reply. My mother’s income being only a life annuity, ceased at her death; she had no property to leave. There are no funds available to pay your passage home or start you in life. Every profession here is overcrowded. You must not look to me, as I have three sons to provide for, and I never approved of the course which your father chose to take. You had better try to find some employment in India. Doubtless you have plenty of friends there; here you would be among strangers.

Your affectionate uncle,

AUGUSTUS GURNEY

“Strangers indeed,” muttered Walter between his clenched teeth. “Can this man — I will not call him Uncle — actually receive the news of the death of his only brother — a brother whom he always neglected, a brother of whom he should have been proud — without so much as a feeling of remorse, or one

word of sympathy to his orphan? He does not wish to be burdened with a poor relation! He will certainly never be troubled by me!" Walter crushed up the letter in his hands, and with long rapid strides took his way along the rough path, overgrown with weeds, which led to his desolate home. Bitter were the orphan youth's reflections.

" 'Doubtless you have plenty of friends,' he writes. Did my uncle know nothing of the isolated life of self-denial led by my father among our ignorant peasants? I have seen nothing of the world — know no one to take me by the hand. Though I have a passion for study, I have not received the educational advantages that would fit me for government employment. I have led a kind of Robinson Crusoe life; I can shoot, can turn a straight furrow, ride, plant trees, and do a little carpenter's work; I can talk to natives of India or Afghanistan in half-a-dozen jargons, but I know little of mathematics, am only self-taught in Latin; I could pass no examination — at least I doubt that I could — and I have no funds to support me till I could study up for one. I changed my last rupee today."

It may be little to the credit of Walter that indignation toward his uncle and anxiety about his own future were the first thoughts that came into his mind on learning of the death of his aged relative in England. But Walter, brought up in the wilds of Santgunge, had never seen his grandmother nor received any letter from her. Once a month, an epistle from the old lady had regularly reached her missionary son, with a brief message to his boy at the end. Before Walter reached his home more gentle feelings prevailed. He could feel thankful that parent and son had both been spared the pang of bereavement which had wrung his own heart. Walter thought of the joyful surprise of the meeting above of those who for twenty years had been severed on earth.

"Yes, a time will come when we will care little whether our path was rough or smooth on earth, whether it led upward to distinction or downward to poverty and trouble," said Walter to himself, as he entered the little bungalow in which he had dwelt from his birth. It was a most unadorned dwelling, built chiefly of sun-dried bricks, and by no means in good repair, for

the rains had injured the walls and white ants eaten into the timber. The interior matched the outside; a few prints and texts, with an old brown map, were the only ornaments; the rough mat on the brick floor had been worn into holes by the tread of many bare feet. A few chairs and a table, a bookcase and its contents, chiefly religious books, reports, and Urdu pamphlets, summed up the furniture of the room which Walter entered. The youth's own appearance was in character with his surroundings. His clothes, originally of common material, were worn almost threadbare. Walter was tall and slight, and the first impression which a stranger would receive was that he was overgrown and underfed. Though his age was barely seventeen, there were signs of care on his countenance and a sunken look under his eyes that told of months of night-watching and daily hardship. Yet a second glance at his form, and the broad expansive brow from which the weary lad now pushed back the wavy auburn hair, would suggest a presage that after a few years the figure could be remarkably fine, the countenance singularly intellectual.

Walter threw himself on a chair. Raising his eyes, their glance rested on a picture with a time-stained margin which had been familiar to him from his earliest childhood. The youth's almost sole recollection of his mother was her explaining the meaning of the print to her little boy, then young enough to be raised in her arms. The print represented the Israelites encamped at night in the desert, their tents made visible by the light streaming from the pillar of fire before them. That print had been, as it were, the text of the last exhortation which Walter had heard from his father, which recurred now vividly to the mind of the desolate youth.

“God may lead us into the desert, my boy, but it is a blessed way if His presence goes with us. The eye of faith still sees the pillar of cloud and fire to guide us wherever God wills we should go, and we are safe — yes, and happy — as long as we follow the path marked out by Him who is all wisdom and love.”

“The pillar has rested long over this place for me,” said Walter to himself; “I would not have left my father, with his broken health, to struggle on alone. But now the pillar will move on. I

wonder to where! I had hoped to England — to Cambridge — with future honour and usefulness beyond. That letter has dashed down all my castles in the air! The desert around me looks very bare; but O my God! . . . my father's God! Wilt Thou guide me, and give me grace and courage to follow on, nor turn aside to the right or the left." Walter knelt down in his desolate home, and in a short but fervent prayer commended himself to the guardian care of a Saviour God. He arose from his knees cheered and refreshed. Walter then applied himself to the homely care of preparing his evening meal, for, soon after his father's death, he had dismissed his only servant. Some of the native flock would willingly have worked for the missionary's son, without hope of payment beyond that of a kind look and word, but their offers had been declined with grateful thanks by the orphan.

Walter's gun had on this day supplied him with a more sumptuous repast than usually fell to his lot, but he had emptied his powder-flask for the charge which had brought down his pheasant, and had no means of filling it again. The youth, as he plucked off the beautiful feathers of his prize, saw in their loveliness a pledge that He who had so clothed the bird of the jungle would not leave His child uncared for. Walter had to light his fire and cook his food, as well as provide it. His kitchen was the open air; his oven — native fashion — was formed of dried mud and was of the simplest construction. The apparatus comprised merely a few brass vessels and an iron plate for cooking *chapatties*.¹ While the pheasant was being stewed, Walter went to prepare this simple substitute for the bread, which was a rare luxury in Santgunge. Skilled as he was by practice, round balls of dough in Walter's hand were successively patted out and flattened, then spread on the heated iron and turned, till a nicely browned chapattie was ready. Walter, engaged in his humble occupation and absorbed in thoughts quite unconnected with chapatties, did not notice the sound of a horse's hoofs, and was rather startled by the loud voice of its rider which suddenly broke on the silence.

¹ Flat unleavened cakes.