

## A GOLDEN SILENCE.

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### CHAPTER I.

IN A SMALL room, scantily furnished as a bedroom, in the Residency of Meenapore, a little girl of twelve years old or so was sitting in a rocking-chair, with a fan in one hand and a very dry and unpalatable-looking biscuit in the other.

She was a striking-looking child, very pale and pinched in the face, with black hair the colour of a raven's wing, cut close to her shapely head and parted on one side like a boy's. Her eyes were dark, and made her perhaps look more wan than if they had been blue or grey. Her muslin gown had once been white, and was full and had many flounces or little frills on the skirt thereof, each edged with fine lace—but it was very dingy in colour now, and had unmistakably been washed by an amateur in the laundry art. Her white stockings had shared the same fate as the frock, but her shoes were tidy and good.

The child's whole air was languid and listless; twice or three times she would wave the fan to and fro, then take a nibble at the dry biscuit—a nibble which had no sign of appetite about it—then she would put up one foot or the other and look at the toe of the tidy shoe or at the poor little stick of an ankle in the dingy stocking, then she would wave the fan again and turn her wistful eyes upon the figure of a lady standing at the table, the figure of her mother, that is to say.

There was not much similarity between mother and child—in fact, the six-months-old infant in the basket-cradle on a chair by the table was the living image of her mother, as the elder child was of her gallant father.

Mrs. Marchmont was tall and slight and very fragile in appearance, had pretty soft grey eyes and bright brown hair that was scarcely darker than golden and was yet distinctly brown. Nor was she

so pale as the child in the rocking-chair; but her gown, which was of a pinkish tint, was very dingy and shabby.

Again and again did the child's big dark eyes turn upon her, watching her as she washed out some gruesome bandages so stained with blood that the water in the basin was dyed crimson from them—stopping every minute or so to pick up a fan and drive away a fly from the sleeping but restless baby in the cradle, or to coax a few breaths of air to still it as it tossed to and fro.

"Oh! Mamie dear," the girl broke out at last, "I do wish you'd let me do *something* to help you."

"I'm so afraid of your fainting again, Tottie," Mrs. Marchmont answered.

"I shouldn't feel *half* so ill if I had something—anything to do," Tottie persisted. "You know, Mamie, you've always said no human being could do two things at once properly; and there you are yourself trying to wash those nasty bandages and keep the flies off baby at the same time. *Couldn't* I keep the flies off baby, at least?"

"You might do that," returned her mother, still hesitatingly, "only you know what Dr. Fox said, that you were not to exert yourself in any way until the attack had quite passed off."

"I needn't exert myself," pleaded Tottie. "You could move the cradle close up here, and just fanning her a bit wouldn't hurt me; it would not indeed, Mamie."

Thus persuaded, Mrs. Marchmont moved the chair on which the cradle stood close to the rocking-chair in which Tottie lay, and then she bent down and kissed the child tenderly.

"Don't over-tire yourself, my dearie," she said fondly. "We must be careful of you, you know, for a little while."

"All right—I'll be careful, Mamie," returned

Tottie, waving the fan to and fro and attacking the dry biscuit with new vigour.

But it was hard work for her little fever-wasted frame, in that close room without the luxury, or more truly necessity, of punkahs to which she had been accustomed during the whole of her life,—for it was in the hot month of June, in the year 1857.

Outside the Residency a fierce Indian sun shone down upon the city and fortress of Meenapore. Fortress, did I say? Well, yes, it was a fortress, although it had never been planned for any such purpose; in truth, a fortress consisting of the Residency, the English Church, and the hospital—three fairly substantial stone buildings, each standing in an enclosure or compound of its own.

And now they had become a fortress,—such a one as would scarce have stood an hour against the attack of any foes more valiant than those who, by the force of overwhelming numbers, during the summer of '57 laid waste the greater part of the Indian continent by fire and sword, and put to a miserable and shameful death hundreds and hundreds of delicately-reared European women and children, whom they hated because they were Christians, and humbled to the dust because they had white faces instead of black.

It was towards the end of the month, and already the little garrison of Meenapore had been under a close siege for nearly three weeks—a siege so close indeed that the rebels outside the wretched mud walls and stakes and barricades of the improvised fortress could, and often did, pass jeering remarks and gibes and sneers to those sepoys and natives who had been faithful to their trust and still stood by the Feringhees in their hour of need.

At all times Meenapore was an excessively hot place, and anything but healthy at this season of the year; indeed, as a matter of fact, from May to October there were usually no European women or children of any grade left in the station.

But now, in spite of the excessive and overpowering heat, one and all had to make life as endurable as was possible without those luxuries to which they had been used. For all stood on the same level now; the wives of colonel and privates shared alike the work of nursing and cooking and washing one with another, just as officers and men had forgotten all distinctions, and did each the work that his strength allowed,

standing shoulder to shoulder, men and brothers, against one common foe.

And oh, what a life it was! Over a hundred and fifty men beside the women and children, of whom there were about seventy, cooped up in three buildings, which any one of them would have declared less than three months before could not possibly have held a third of that number. Food was scarce and of the poorest quality, and was served out in the scantiest of rations, so that the evil day, when perchance they would be forced to surrender to the enemy, might be put off as long as possible. Water was not plentiful nor yet good. There were no butchers to kill the animals which still eked out a starving existence on the coarse grass of the church compound, and if there had been, there were no cooks to dress the meat. There were no washermen, and no servants to keep the punkahs going, nor yet, with one exception, any ayahs even to wash and attend to the children.

It was an awful life, for this work all fell upon the European women of every grade, they who, up to that time, had found life in the shining East only endurable by the help of such luxuries as but few have or desire to have in their own country.

They were all brave, every one of the women of that devoted band, yet without a doubt the bravest woman in the garrison was the colonel's wife, Mrs. Marchmont! She was not particularly strong, and she had not had the advantage of what is generally called a "domesticated education;" she had never been especially handy with her fingers, and knew no more how to make a pudding than she knew how to make Greek fire. She had been twelve years in India, and as a rule had led an inactive, luxurious life, lying most of her days upon a sofa, and driving out in the cool of the evening to listen to the band or chat with the other ladies of the garrison.

But when the terrible mutiny of '57 broke out at Meerut, and blazed from one end of India to the other, Mrs. Marchmont roused herself from her listless life and showed the husband who adored her that his wife was made of the right stuff, and that a brave Englishwoman is quite as capable of endurance as a gallant Englishman may be. From the hour that the mud wall was thrown up along the compound of the Residency and the last stakes were driven in in the hope of strengthening it, nothing seemed to come amiss to her hands, and without a

doubt she put her whole heart into everything that she found to do.

I do not mean to say that she became all at once a first-rate cook who could have set up cooking-classes for young ladies at South Kensington, and sent them home to poison long-suffering fathers with preserved ginger made out of lettuce stalks or apricot jam made chiefly of vegetable-marrows. I do not say for one moment that as a laundress she would have kept the washing of any respectable middle-class family in any part of London after the first trial; nor do I believe for a moment that they would have taken her in at St. John's House, or any similar institution, and have chosen her to take charge of the most critical cases which called for help from them, without the regular hospital training; but I do say that many was the jaded palate to which Mrs. Marchmont's arrowroot or beef-tea came like food for the gods, many was the wound to which she brought bandages that were cool and fresh, many the fevered and weary pillow she soothed, and many the fever-choked child that she fanned to sleep. In this world everything goes by comparison, and to the sad little world of Meenapore Mrs. Marchmont appeared very often in the guise of an angel.

## CHAPTER II.

SEVERAL days had gone by. Hour by hour the anxious watchers kept a strict look-out for the reinforcements which they believed to be already on the road to their succour. Hour by hour all ears were strained to catch, amid the crack of musketry and the din of the enemy's fortunately poor and ill-manned artillery, the sound of Scottish bag-pipes or English cheers.

Yet they came not, and the siege was not raised.

Still the men of the little garrison were dauntless in their determination to fight to their very last breath, and to guard the tender women and helpless children who were their nearest and dearest, as long as they could keep a defence of any kind standing between them and the enemy. And to this end every man who was well enough to stand upon his feet and use his hands, gave his time and strength right willingly to working at the trench which they dug within the walls and barricades of which their fortress consisted. How they dug! Ay, dug for dear life and the lives of those who were dearer to them than life itself!

And then there came an evil day when it was advisable that all but the invalids should be put on shorter rations, and that the water should be dealt out even yet more sparingly! An evil, evil day; for those whom a full allowance of food and water might have kept in comparative health and strength, were weakened and brought so low as to be in no condition to meet the yet more deadly foe that was fast stealing upon them, a foe which had no need to work mines under their feet, nor to make attacks on their barricades, a foe whom no trenches could keep at bay, the foe which was even more merciless than the insurgents, and which was called—*Cholera*.

The number of souls in the little garrison was thinned rapidly after this—the disease worked so persistently and with such deadly results; for not only were the weakly and the ailing taken, but those who seemed the best able to withstand its ravages fell victims among the first.

In short there were eight or ten deaths every day, and the difficulty of giving proper burial to those who were gone added in a terrible way to the distresses and dangers of those who were left.

Very early after the outbreak the Marchmont baby died after a few hours' illness; and then the colonel and his wife watched their remaining child, Tottie, in an agony of apprehension, dreading every day, nay, every hour, to see the signs of that fatal complaint against which they knew she would have no strength to fight. But, strange to say, although strong and seemingly healthy men were falling on all sides, here to-day and gone to-morrow, just bending their heads at the first touch of that dread hand and giving up their lives without a struggle, the delicate fever-weakened little girl lived on in safety, and the cholera passed her by. Perhaps it was because such luxuries and medicines as were at her parents' command were all lavished upon her, perhaps she was spared that she might prove to those who were older and stronger than she that in the Reign of Terror of 1857 there was not wanting one little weakly English girl who could show the whole world that the spirit had not died out which carried fair maidens into the Roman amphitheatres to meet with unflinching courage a cruel and lingering death for Christ's sake—the spirit which led their sisters of a later day to suffer and endure with unquenchable brightness all the horrors and fiendish ingenuities of the Spanish Inquisition.



Any way, the cholera passed Tottie Marchmont by, and she gained health and strength as rapidly as could be expected of her under the desperate circumstances in which the whole garrison were placed; that is to say, she crawled from sofa to rocking-chair, and when the rebels' musketry was quiet, which was not often, crept out into the compound at the back of the Residency, and between that building and the hospital, and got a few breaths of such air as the hot summer mornings or evenings afforded.

Often and often she begged hard to be allowed to help her mother at her many duties; but Mrs. Marchmont was very anxious and careful about her, and generally found that although Tottie's spirit was willing, her flesh was lamentably weak, and that any strain, no matter how small, upon the one was sure to react in intense depression upon the other. So the weary days dragged their slow length along without much occupation for her beyond the distraction of a few books which she had read at least a hundred times, and the excitement of hearing of one death after another, and of skipping out of the way of the shots which from time to time riddled the walls which sheltered them.

The siege had now been carried on for five weeks, or rather for nearly six, and still no deliverance had come to the daily decreasing band of defenders; hope had gone down very low, and it was a question whether they could hold out many days longer, not only on account of the shortness of rations and the scarcity of water, but because the rebels were evidently making great preparations for a desperate attack upon the already weak and poor defences.

"They're pretty quiet now, Mother," said Tottie one evening just before darkness began to fall. "Couldn't I go in the compound for a minute or two? I'm choked in here." The words ended in a sort of sob, which she tried hard to nip in the bud, but which the mother's love-sharpened ears heard nevertheless.

"Yes. I think you might go for a few minutes, dear," she answered tenderly. "But you will be very careful and keep by the wall, won't you?"

"Yes. But can't you come?" imploringly.

"Not for ten minutes or so. I must make the arrowroot for poor Mr. Bell—he has had so little to-day, poor fellow."

"Then I'll wait for you, Mamie," said Tottie resignedly.

"No, no. Go and sit outside at least, darling. I will come to you in a few minutes. I fancy you will find Father out there—he went out to see how Captain Evans is to-day."

"Over at the hospital?"

"Yes, dear."

"If I went over I might ask how Nelly is, mightn't I?" Tottie asked.

"Yes, of course, and I will bring Mr. Bell's arrowroot over as soon as it is ready."

So Tottie gave her mother a kiss and went out to run across the compound. Run? No, poor Tottie did not run much in those days, but to creep across the compound to the hospital and inquire after her little friend Nelly Davis, who had been slightly wounded by a splinter from a shell which had exploded within the defences the previous morning, and then to find her father of whom she saw but little at this time.

Left behind, Mrs. Marchmont finished ironing the big pile of bandages which she had undertaken to wash for the hospital, and then to work to make the arrowroot for Mr. Bell, and not only for him but for as many other patients as possible. When it was ready she poured it into a large jug in which to carry it across the compound.

"Here is the arrowroot, doctor," she panted, as she gained the veranda of the hospital. "Has Colonel Marchmont been over here?"

"Yes, here he is," answered the doctor, seizing on the big jug eagerly.

"Oh, you are here," she said to the colonel. "And where is Tottie?"

"Tottie? I haven't seen her," the colonel answered.

"She came across to see Nelly Davis and to find you," Mrs. Marchmont said. "She was so tired of being indoors, poor child. I dare say she is with Nelly."

"No. I have just come from little Nelly—been dressing her wound, you know. Tottie was not there," said the doctor.

"Then she is somewhere in the hospital," Mrs. Marchmont replied, without showing or indeed feeling any uneasiness. "Or perhaps she went back into the house. How is Nelly to-day, doctor?"

"Very feverish and excited," the doctor answered. "It's not much of a wound, but the child is rather hysterical. By the by, I'll send her up a cupful of your arrowroot."

"Do, poor little soul," said the colonel's wife kindly : then, after she had paid a short visit to one or two invalids, she took her husband's arm and went back across the compound to the Residency.

But Tottie was not there ! Had not in fact been seen by any one since she had left her mother at work on the pile of bandages, to go across the compound and ask after her little wounded friend.

"Ned," cried the mother when she realised that the child was nowhere in the house, "is it possible that any harm can have come to her?"

She was white to the very lips as she put the idea into words, and his bronzed cheek paled in spite of himself.

"No, my dear, no. All has been perfectly quiet for an hour or more—not a shot has been fired. What could have happened to her? Don't distress yourself, my love; she has gone into somebody's room or other. I will go round and find out. Happily—" with a sigh for the situation in which they were—"there is not very far to look."

But, small as the ground was over which they had to search, they found no sign or trace of the child. Apparently she had disappeared as utterly as if she had never been at all.

Colonel Marchmont and his wife were well nigh beside themselves with distress, and the entire garrison was more disturbed and excited and concerned at the mystery than they had been by all the deaths from cholera or misadventure that had taken place.

It was so mysterious ! All had been quiet, unusually so in fact, the child had gone out in broad daylight, for there is no twilight in India, to go across two strips of compound, and, from that moment, had disappeared, leaving no trace of any kind behind. Where could she have gone? Who could have spirited her away? What was her fate? All these questions passed freely to and fro and led to another, which was even more important still to each one who asked it—"What traitor have we amongst us, and who will be taken in like way next?"

### CHAPTER III.

THE long hours of that long evening passed slowly by, each moment seeming at least an hour; up and down and in and out did the colonel

and his wife wander, searching rooms and verandas over and over again in the forlorn hope of finding their lost child. "She will get her death in this night air," Mrs. Marchmont cried more than once; and the brave soldier felt a deadly chill creep over him as he remembered that, in all probability, his poor little Tottie had already met her fate.

But he said nothing of his fears to his wife, and if such thoughts crossed her mind, she did not express them in words, but sought on, hoping against hope, and not admitting the fear of the worst even to herself. And oh! what hours of agony and dread they were—seven—eight—nine—ten—eleven! As if the night would never go!

"It is nearly midnight," said the colonel at last. "My love, will you not go in and rest? You are wearing yourself out."

"I *can't* go in and rest," she answered desperately. "If I stop to think for a moment I shall go mad. Don't try to make me, Ned darling. I can't do it."

"Then I will not," he said tenderly, putting his arm about her and drawing her close to him. "You shall stop with me all night, if need be—" He broke off short as he spoke to look more closely at a little fox-terrier which had suddenly come upon the scene and began frisking about them. "Why, what has Fly got round his neck? Has he been hurt in any way?"

The woman's eyes were keener than the man's, and Mrs. Marchmont dropped upon her knees beside the little animal with a cry of joy.

"Don't you see—he has come from her," she exclaimed; "it is a strip of Tottie's frock, and see, it has my darling's ring upon it. She is alive. Oh, thank God—thank God!"

She held up a strip of soiled muslin edged with fine lace and showed him that it was passed through a little gold ring set with turquoises. The colonel stared at it for a moment in perplexity.

"She must be within the barricades still," he declared, "else how could the dog have got here? Here—Wilson, Powis, Muir, quick! News of the child! See what the dog has brought."

"Try if he'll guide you to her," suggested Muir; and so they all hurried out together, Wilson whispering to Powis that likely enough it was just a dodge of those black devils outside to give the mother and father another pang.

In far less time than it takes me to write the words, they had a lantern ready and were trying to

persuade the dog to show where his young mistress was hidden.

"Good little chap—where is she? Go find," began the colonel, patting him encouragingly; and after a puzzled look at him for a minute, Fly started off at a quick trot across the compound, looking back every few yards or so to make sure that they were following him.

Follow him! Ay, did they not! And out of the Residency ground he led them, into that in which the church stood, then cut straight across to that corner which was the nearest to the rebels, and therefore the most strongly protected and guarded.

There were several men on guard at this point, both European and native, and also a couple of native soldiers lying asleep against the wall. To the left, about a dozen paces away, grew a thick clump of bushes, and beyond that the wall turned at a sharp angle and ran out to meet the wall of the Residency compound.

Fly ran straight across the coarse grass to the trench which had been dug within the wall, and made for the planks which gave footway to the barricade itself. These he crossed, followed closely by the four men and Mrs. Marchmont, and, passing the men on guard and the two natives lying asleep, dashed behind the thick clump of bushes and began whining and barking.

And there they found her, lying on the cold, damp earth heavy with the night dews, her pale face more drawn and pinched than it had ever been before, pinned down to the ground by a mass of masonry which had been knocked off the wall during the evening by a rebel shot.

Mrs. Marchmont uttered a cry of thankfulness and joy as she fell upon her knees beside her. "I want Father—quick—I'm so faint," the child gasped out.

"Ned—quick!" cried the colonel's wife.

"Father, put your ear close down to my mouth," she said eagerly. "Do you see those two natives lying asleep here, close to me?"

"Yes," he whispered back.

"Never mind me—arrest them at once—don't lose an instant. Never mind me. I shall do very well till that is done. I can't get up because some of the wall fell on my leg. Be quick, Father, don't lose a moment."

Thus bidden, the colonel asked not another question nor made the delay of a moment.

"Wilson, Muir," he said, "have you your revolvers ready?"

"Yes, sir," they answered.

"Help me to arrest these men," he said, and forthwith stepped round the bushes and went up to the astonished natives, who were just making an elaborate display of awaking from the deepest of slumbers.

"Put down your arms," he said, presenting his revolver full in the face of one, while the two younger officers took charge of the other.

The men were so taken by surprise that they submitted quietly enough, and were marched off to the Residency cellar, where they were bound hand and foot as a precaution against their attempting to escape.

This done, the three officers went back to see how Tottie was to be brought in, but found that Powis and one of the men on guard had managed to get the mass of masonry lifted off her, and that Powis had taken her in his arms and was carrying her as quickly as he could to the hospital.

"She fainted dead away when he lifted her," said Mrs. Marchmont, who was holding one of her darling's hands.

"Is she much hurt?" the colonel asked anxiously.

"Leg broken, I'm afraid, colonel," answered Powis pitifully.

And they found that it was so. As soon as they got her laid upon a cot and the doctor gave a glance at the leg, he said: "H'm—broken! Good thing it wasn't a foot higher—would have smashed her knee and——" He made a significant gesture, by which those gathered around realised that he meant amputation; they all knew what that would have been to a delicate child like Tottie.

After a few minutes Tottie opened her eyes and looked at them. "I want Father," she said, in a very small faint voice.

"And I want you to keep very still," the doctor answered in peremptory tones. "And then I'll manage to make that leg of yours a little more comfortable."

"I must tell Father first," Tottie cried. "Give me something to let me tell him. I must tell him before it is too late."

"Better let me hear it," said the colonel, and then Tottie began her tale.

"I went out, meaning to cross the compound to the hospital," she said, "Mother had said I



might go out for a little while and get a breath of air. I was so tired of being indoors," with a sigh. "Well, Fly persisted in chasing a big butterfly, and presently he tumbled into the trench and couldn't get out. I scrambled down to help him out—for you know what a little stupid he is when he can't do anything he wants—and then, to my disgust, he coolly scrambled up on the other side. I thought I might as well get up by the lower side as the high one to come back, and was walking along under the barricade, when just as I got to the bushes where you found me, I heard one of those two natives say to the other, 'Well, I should like to have the killing of the colonel myself.' I didn't wait a minute. I knew that they had not seen me, and I knew too that nobody in the garrison understood their dialect so well as I, because they were both of the same caste as my old ayah. So I slipped behind the bushes and heard all their plot. They were to open the west gate as soon after midnight as they had a chance, and each was to have fifty rupees for himself to-morrow, and twenty for every native taken by the rebels.

"I thought the only thing for me to do was to wait until they were taken off guard or till it was dark, so I lay down under the wall and trusted to the bushes hiding me. It would have been all right, only a shot hit the top of the wall and tipped a great lump of it over on to me; so I couldn't move if I would, and did not dare call out, lest they should be the only ones to hear me, and should just kill me as I lay there."

"But they were off guard," said the colonel.

"Yes, only you see, dear Father, my leg hurt me a good bit, and I think I must have fainted or

something, for I didn't see the guard changed at all, and the next thing I knew was that they were lying quite close to me pretending to be asleep, and Fly was scratching at my hands and licking my face. And then, after a long time, I thought of trying to get him to bring you my ring; and then, you came, and that was all."

"And what time was it when the shot struck the wall?" Muir asked eagerly.

"It was not quite dark," answered Tottie simply.

And then all at once the child's small stock of strength gave way and she slipped off into a dead faint again, on which the doctor unceremoniously turned them all out of the room, with the exception of Mrs. Marchmont and one other lady, who was the doctor's right hand in the hospital.

"Colonel," said Muir, "she must have been about four hours——"

"Yes," said the colonel in a choking voice.

There was a moment's silence.

"Colonel," said Muir, "how long shall you give those beggars?"

"Ten minutes," said the colonel shortly.

"*That's* all right," chimed in the three younger men together, as with one voice.

And three days later help came and the siege was raised, and, by and by, Tottie Marchmont went home, with her father and mother, to the country she had never seen; not only went home, but found herself a greater heroine by far than any one in India thought themselves in those dark days, for every one was anxious to see the brave little English girl, who, while in frightful suffering, saved a whole garrison by four hours of golden silence.

