



I

John would have preferred to say goodbye at home. It was Mary who had insisted on accompanying him to Waterloo station, the better to fix his departure in her mind. Now she couldn't help seeing how John, dressed, as ever, in sober black, let his gaze stray across the platform to those other men, whose red uniforms, hanging swords and cheerful camaraderie labelled them part of the rump of the Sudan expedition.

She looked at those bluff officers who, intermittently swallowed in steam from the train, were exchanging handshakes and cheerful words. Their pretty wives in pretty hats, women accustomed to letting their men go, stood at their sides and smiled as she could not. Perhaps John is right, she thought. Perhaps doctors' wives, especially those who questioned their husbands' decision to go to war, are not supposed to come to the station.

She pulled nervously at her gloves and smoothed a hand down her plain, blue serge coat. How out of place I am, she thought, as she heard, above the din of the station, two of the officers promising each other that their late departure would not stop them joining Wolseley's expedition in time to go into battle.

'How admirable to speak so easily of war,' John said.

'They're soldiers.' Mary knew she must sound petulant, but that did not stop her emphasizing the point. 'It's their job.'

When John did not reply, she looked down at her tightly





buttoned boots and tried to swallow her resentment. If he thought he needed to go to the Sudan, he must be right. She was, anyway, too prone to foolish questions, sudden laughter and strange tears. Perhaps that was why he was leaving her.

A porter trundled past, his wooden trolley piled with leather trunks, cases of Veuve Clicquot balanced perilously on top.

‘Look at him.’ John indicated an officer who, in striding by, had all but shoved them aside. He was curling the ends of his moustache with one hand, while with the other he urged on the porter. ‘He has provisions a-plenty, and not a care in the world. Wolseley knows what he’s about, as do his staff. There’s no need to worry.’

‘Of course there is. You are going to war.’

‘I am,’ he conceded impatiently, ‘but not to the front. I am to run the rear hospital. As you know.’ He looked at her, sharply at first, but her glistening brown eyes and the furrowing of her pale brow tempered his irritation. How selfish I am, he thought, even as he knew that, faced with an identical call to action, he would make an identical decision.

‘Will you promise me that you will stay back from the fighting?’

Such a long journey ahead of him. From Waterloo to Portsmouth, from Portsmouth by steamer to Alexandria, and then on to Cairo where one of Mr Thomas Cook’s boats would carry him up the Nile to Aswan in southern Egypt. And that was only the beginning. At Aswan he would be met by one of General Wolseley’s especially adapted boats, which would transport him and his equipment to Wadi Halfa in the Sudan and on again to Korti, where Wolseley had set up his





forward base. It would be, by all accounts, a difficult journey. Novice as he was, he must preserve his energy.

Why could Mary not understand this? And why was she making such a great meal of their parting?

‘Promise me?’ she said again.

The irritation that had steeled his shoulders drained away, and in its place came compassion, with guilt, both of which extracted from him a ‘Yes’. He said it softly but not so softly that she would not be able to hear, ‘I promise.’

A warning blast of steam and the shouted ‘All aboard,’ of a railwayman relieved him of having to continue the conversation.

‘Well.’ His eyes darted towards the train into which the soldiers were clambering. His mind raced. ‘Well ...’ Carriage doors began to slam.

She wanted more than anything to throw her arms around him, to plead with him not to go – and, yes, she could almost see herself doing it to restrain him.

‘Keep well.’ He touched her hand gently.

She felt his touch like a scald even through her glove. She stepped away.

This, it seemed, was what he was waiting for. ‘I’ll write as soon as I can.’ He turned and was almost running. So quickly did he go that one of the officers must have remarked on it. She couldn’t hear what was said, but by the way the back of John’s neck reddened, she knew it must have been a joke that hadn’t sat well with him. Now he slowed his pace and walked, without looking back, up the steps and into the train, as if this was something to which he was accustomed.

She knew him too well to believe in the display of confidence. And yet, she thought, if I really do know him,





how is it that I cannot understand why he is doing this?

She looked up into the high span of the railway shed. She could see the rising steam from John's train and, above it, the triangulated iron girders of the roof interspersed with glass. A miracle of construction, she thought, just as Wolseley's expedition to rescue General Gordon was considered a miracle of modern warfare. Perhaps that was why John, who was always anxious to be at the forefront of new developments, had been so determined to join in.

A loud whistle caused her to drop her head in time for the lowering of the flag.

The crowd was on the move, shouting and waving alongside the accelerating train, leaving her where she was. She was too far away to see past the backs of waving onlookers to where John must be. Dread constricted her throat. She had missed the moment of his departure.

She thought of running, but it was too late. Besides, John would not like to see her running. As the train wheels turned, and the huge hulk of iron and steel chugged down the tracks, she let her tears fall.

As his companions waved wildly at the platform, bellowing over each other's din, John stood at the window craning to see Mary. Through a gap in the cheering crowd, he eventually spotted her. There she stood. Alone, tiny and dark.

Why had she insisted on coming to the station, he wondered, only at the last to stand back? It hurt him that their parting had been so remote and that, even now, she was holding herself aloof from the other wives, with their gaily waving handkerchiefs. It was as if she were declaring herself





not to be one of them and, in doing so, saying that he could never be at one with their husbands.

At that moment a blond officer, a cigarette dangling from his lip, clapped John on the back – ‘Here you are, Doctor’ – and handed him an empty glass. The train juddered and champagne frothed out, some of it making it into the glass.

The train was gathering speed and Mary was out of sight – yet his last vision of her stayed with him so strangely that, for a moment, he found himself wondering whether that prim, navy-blue Mary might have been an apparition. Except he knew she had been real. There she had remained, apparently quiet and unmoved, though a few strands of her raven hair that had escaped her chignon and fallen across her face gave her the appearance of restraining something quite . . . untamed.

‘Death to the Mahdi,’ an officer called.

‘Death to the Mahdi,’ they echoed, raising their glasses. ‘Forward to Khartoum.’

John turned away from the window and made his way into one of the compartments, which was already smoky and hot. There, he threw the champagne down his throat. ‘To Khartoum.’

Mary weaved her way through the mass of impatient travellers. Past pedlars she went, past railwaymen blasting whistles, and newspaper vendors yelling their headlines. The hubbub rose high into the railway shed. For a moment she imagined herself rising, as light as air, into that great expanse, there to hover just below the roof and look down on the ant-like throng below. How odd it would all seem. How puny.

She thought about John on the first step of a journey to a country he did not know, in the service of an army that was





likewise alien to him. She wondered whether his anxiety would be threaded with the strange excitement she was feeling.

She walked this way and that, through a maze of platforms and ticket offices, past hoardings advertising soap and jelly until, at last, she recognized a wooden archway. It was the one they had come through on their way in for, as she emerged, she was met by the same frenetic chaos they had witnessed earlier.

Men banged picks and shovels into the ground as others pushed barrows up planks, unloading earth, mud and dust into wagons that soon trundled away. Their drivers bellowed warnings to publicans who, balancing jugs on yokes around their necks, were supplying the navvies with beer, all in the vast building site that John had told her would become the Grand Metropole Hotel. How small she felt, and lonely, until at last she found the driver who had brought them to the station. She fell gratefully into the hansom cab and he whipped his horse forwards.

The journey from Waterloo was slow. She knew that the crowds, the horse-drawn omnibuses and carts seemingly intent on collision, the din of hawkers and costermongers, the uneven cobbles, the digging of drainage ditches and underground stations were just all part of London's expansion of which John was always complaining, but she felt buffeted by the clamour. She held tightly to the leather strap at the window, staring out, seeing but not seeing. Had the driver deliberately sought out the roughest roads?

It should therefore have been a relief to roll to a stop in the quiet Barnsbury street, which, with its sedate white three-storeyed houses, invited her back into its familiarity. But Mary did not feel relieved. She felt ill at ease.





She stepped down from the cab and pushed coins – too many, she was sure – into the driver's dirty hands. He drove off so abruptly that she had to jump aside.

A neat pathway led through the ordered front garden to a gleaming black front door.

She still thought often of the house in Oxfordshire, with its grassy surroundings, as home. There, as a girl, she had loved to roam. This house in Barnsbury, the first of her married life, held no such fond memories. It was her home only because she and John had made it so. And now he had gone and, despite his promise, she feared he was not coming back.

She lifted a gloved hand to the brass lion's head knocker, but before she had touched it, the door swung open. 'Oh, there you are, ma'am.' Betty, the maid, gave a frightened little curtsy. 'I was beginning to wonder.'

Annoyed that Betty should consider her incapable of finding her way from Waterloo, she brushed off the girl's clumsy attempts to help and hung up her own coat.

'Will you be wanting tea?' Despite a voracious appetite, Betty looked permanently underfed and now, as always, she licked her lips at the idea of food.

'Is it not tea time?' Mary opened the door to the drawing room. 'Why is it so cold?'

'I laid the fire, ma'am, but I didn't light it. I thought—'

'That I would not need a fire now that Dr Clarke is away?'

'No, ma'am.' Betty's thin bottom lip trembled. 'But – but—'

'But what?'

'You have your tea in the library.'

This was correct. And even if it hadn't been, she should not take out her misery on the maid. 'I will let it pass this





time, Betty,' she said, 'but with my husband away, you will take your orders from me.'

'Very good, ma'am.'

'Tea?'

Betty turned and fled.

The sight of that thin, skittering back destroyed the vague consciousness of her own power that had buoyed Mary up. Now she looked around the drawing room, with its plump chairs and covered side tables, its polished mirrors and silk brocade. It seemed empty.

Of life.

Of her husband.

How would she manage now that he had gone?

The day dragged interminably. She took up her needlepoint, but her stitches were so haphazard that she made herself unpick them. Fresh air, she decided. She walked out into the small garden, but it was so bleak and cold that she soon went back inside. She took up *The Trumpet Major* but, with John away to war, it had become distasteful. She put it down, unread.

She wandered through the drawing room and the library, grasping objects and turning them, as if inspecting them for dust. Eventually she made herself pick up the book again, but it provided such little interest or meaning that she was grateful when the light faded. She stood up and went to the canary's cage. John had bought the little bird to keep her company, but when she put a finger through the bars to stroke it, it hopped out of reach. She told herself it would get used to her. She was sure it would. She refused Betty's offer to light the lamps, and sat, unthinking, in the dark.





She wasn't hungry, but when Betty served asparagus soup, boiled beef and stewed apple, she ate a little. Then she was consumed by lethargy. Why should she be so tired? She had done no more than go to Waterloo, far less than she would accomplish in a normal day.

Her life, her old life that had now come to an end, had been structured by John's needs. By making sure he had breakfasted; remembering which of his patients would collect medicine from his dispensary, then writing down what she should charge; inspecting his wardrobe for necessary repairs; planning the hearty pies that would tempt him to eat; making shopping lists and telling Betty where to purchase the items; writing up the accounts; and, above all, preparing herself for his return from work.

The last, it now seemed to her, had consumed most of her day. How would she fill her time now?

The sensation that had overcome her in the station, which she had partly recognized as excitement, returned as dread. Her heart was thumping. Was she ill – and, if so, would care for her?

She jumped up and, in her agitation, knocked a tall vase off a side table. It bounced against the skirting-board and broke. Shards of glass spiked around its twisting silver-plated frame to lie glinting on the rug.

She was bending to pick up the pieces when Betty's 'Let me, ma'am' made her jump. The maid took from her a piece of glass, which Mary hadn't been conscious of holding.

She realized she was crying.

'What is it, ma'am?'

'The vase was a wedding present. It meant a great deal to me ...'

*





She woke up with a start.

Someone had been shouting.

She pulled herself up in bed, and propped herself against the pillows. The room was quiet, and so was the rest of the house. The shouting voice could only have been hers.

It was not the first time that her own shouting had awakened her. But in the past John had been there to calm her. He would gently rub her hands and feet, and should she be really overcome, he would go down to his dispensary and fetch her a small dose of laudanum. Now she lay in the emptiness of their cold bed and, even though her teeth were chattering, she was too hot. She pushed off the covers and, without lighting the lamp, made her way barefoot across the floor to the window.

It was very dark outside, and when she touched the window she felt ice on the pane. She remembered the cold touch of John's parting and realized her face was wet: she must have been weeping in her sleep.

Why? She could not remember. Which, again, was not unusual. How often had he asked her why she was crying? And how often had she tried to find words to explain what she herself did not understand?

Was this why he had left?

She turned away from the pitch of night that was pressing in on her. She could, she knew, go downstairs and see if there was fire enough still to warm some milk. It might help her sleep. Or, she thought, I could ...

No. She would not, could not, allow in that thought. Not with John away.

She made herself go back to bed, pulled up the cover so





that it was almost at her chin, and calmed herself by thinking of her husband.

The sound of gunfire catapulted John to his feet so fast that he hit his head against the wall. No time to attend to that. He stood stock still and tried to work out what was going on. His heart was banging – it seemed to have produced a visible tremor in his chest – and although he had only been reading, he was panting as if he had been running. He forced himself into calm and stood listening.

All he could hear was the relentless grinding of the ship's screw propeller. They were in open sea, not yet at Port Said. His first thought – an attack – must have been wrong.

His embarrassment at his panic – he was glad no one had witnessed it – he set aside. There *had* been gunfire, but why? Taking care not to knock over the stool that stood beside the two narrow bunks, he peered through the clouded porthole.

Sea was all he saw, no longer as grey as it had been on their departure from England, but still empty water. If he wanted to know what was going on, he must leave his cabin and investigate.

He pushed open the little wooden door and looked out into the dark corridor that ran past a line of similar cabins. Nothing. And, apart from the ceaseless noise of the screw, no other sound.

Had he dreamed the gunfire?

It came again: a volley that was the unmistakable discharge of many guns. Something was happening on deck but, in the absence of running feet and urgent cries, it could not be an





attack. Mortified by the fear that had flooded him again, he grabbed the oilskin hanging from a hook at the back of the door and left his cabin.

With both arms out, he swayed along the corridor, then hauled himself up the iron ladder and on to the deck. Spray hit him as he emerged. He looked to the prow as the huge old steamship rolled through the waves. Nothing to see there. He looked back to the stern. Men crowded at the rails facing out to sea. Most appeared to be loading guns, but others were carrying a strange assortment of objects, including shapes made of straw, old boxes and empty bottles.

'Give them room,' someone shouted, and the gunners stepped back.

The packmen lined the rail. When a sergeant shouted, 'Get ready,' they whirled both arms and, to the slow count of 'One, two, three,' flung their projectiles high, then stepped smartly out of the way. The gunners unleashed their fire at the surface of the sea so that bottles jumped, boxes were holed and straw dissolved. One salvo, and the first line stepped back to be replaced by a second, the last shots aimed, as far as John could see, at waves and foam.

Thick clouds of white smoke filled the air. John held his nose against the acrid stench of gunpowder.

The packmen were readying themselves to fetch more targets but the sergeant yelled, 'That's all for today.' The military order dissolved and the men, alone or in small groups, strolled away.

They were dressed in the grey serge of their newly created desert uniforms, so that the only way to distinguish one man from another was to read the red cloth patches on which had





been sewn their corps' initials. Strange, John thought, how each unit stuck together, but that was the ethos and camaraderie of the army: those who fought together bonded together. Something else to learn.

In Portsmouth he had felt himself to be very much the odd man out. After five days at sea, he was more acclimatized and beginning to deepen his acquaintance with the officers, the first step, he hoped, to friendship. As if in proof of this, a young major, whose 5L label proclaimed him one of the Lancers, now peeled off from his fellows to throw in John's direction, 'Quite an exhibition of firepower – and of the men's ingenuity. They have ammunition a-plenty but no targets. Care for a snifter, Doctor?'

'Why not?' Seasickness and timidity had kept John too long in his own company. Now as he strolled beside the major and another officer who had joined them, he realized that his isolation had been partly self-imposed. 'Physician, heal thyself,' he muttered under his breath.

'Talking to yourself,' the friendly officer said. 'First sign of madness.'

The second chipped in, 'Wouldn't be surprised if Gordon hadn't started talking to himself, poor bugger, trapped in Khartoum by the Mahdi and with only savages for company.'

'They say he can't last much longer,' John observed.

'That's complete rot.' The first officer laughed. 'Gordon's as valiant and able a soldier as ever was. He'll hold out until we get there. Don't you agree, Thompson?'

A sage nod. 'If anybody can hold Khartoum, Gordon can.' Then he frowned. 'Even so, it can't be much fun. Rumour runs that they're nearly out of supplies.'

