

WAS IT A GHOST?

BY KATHERINE HAYNES

My hand was not quite steady as I took the cup offered to me by Mrs Fisher.

“What has happened?” she cried, looking from me to her husband.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” said he, “a mere trifle.”

Nothing! Was it a mere trifle to have seen a living child one moment and a dead corpse the next?

We had been returning to the Fishers’ bungalow when a boy of about ten leapt onto the running board of the car. He had bright eyes and a winning smile. He held out a small, slim hand, begging for alms.

I should have given him an anna or two, but Colonel Fisher was an impatient, hasty kind of man.

“Get away with you!” he snapped, pushing the boy in the chest. The child fell. There was a thump and we rocked slightly. The boy must have struck the bodywork of the car or the rear wheel had touched him.

Whatever the case, he lay dead in the dust.

A native woman – presumably the boy’s mother – ran out, screaming and gesticulating. She hurled curses at us as Fisher’s chauffeur drove on.

Shaken by the accident, I could barely swallow my tea, had to grip the cup in both hands. Fisher mumbled some version of the incident to his wife, excusing himself from any liability. Mary Fisher looked at me with sympathetic eyes. I knew that she had always liked me.

Perhaps realising that she had been regarding me for too long, the colonel’s wife glanced away.

“Do you think, Tom,” she said gently, “that we should somehow compensate the family, offer to pay for the child’s funeral?”

“The boy shouldn’t have been anywhere near the car. It was his own fault. These people will have to bury him themselves.”

“Whatever you think best, dear,” said Mrs Fisher, but I felt that she was disappointed in her husband.

That night I found it hard to sleep. Lying on my charpoy, I could still see the boy’s open mouth and hear his cry when I closed my eyes.

I got up and went out into the verandah, stood on the steps and looked down into the garden with its lemon trees and sundial, vines and guava trees. As I stood there, I thought I heard a yell, like that of the child when he had fallen.

Just for a moment I was sure that a woman in a sari – not Mrs Fisher’s ayah – was standing at the edge of the badminton court. I blinked and she had gone; I must have been dreaming. Despite the

warmth of the night, I found myself shivering. I went back inside, returned to the Fishers' guest bedroom.

A day or two later, Fisher's driver left his employ. He would give no reason for this sudden departure and the colonel was clearly angry at losing a man who had been in his service for some years.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I must go. If I don't leave, you must get rid of the car."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say, sir. You can keep me or you can keep your automobile. You can't keep both."

Fisher chose his motorcar over the man and, unable to find another chauffeur, determined to drive it himself.

"Are you sure it is wise?" asked Mrs Fisher anxiously. "It's a long time since you were at the wheel. What if you were driving alone and were attacked by dacoits?"

Her husband answered her rudely enough, scoffing at her fears. She made an excuse not to go with him to the club and as he drove off, I thought I could see someone – or something – crouching on the running board.

The child must have been buried by now and I could picture the mother rocking herself back and forth, beating her hands together or covering her face as she grieved for him. It was hardly my place to do anything to assist her, but I wished that I might somehow make amends.

I was sure that Mrs Fisher felt the same. Any official authority who sat on the case would be certain to rule in her husband's favour and judge the boy's death an accident.

And that is exactly what happened.

Colonel Fisher went on as usual. He would sit in a straw chair and down pegs of whisky as he dictated his memoirs. I could hear the straw creaking beneath its covering of cretonne as I made jottings in shorthand. When Fisher departed to go to the club, I went to type up my notes. There was a fat pile of manuscript on the desk in my little office. If the accident were to feature, and I doubted that it would, the colonel would present himself in the best possible light. The child had slipped from the running board. He, Fisher, had put out his hand to aid the boy, not to hurt him. It had all been very tragic, but these natives had no-one to blame save themselves.

One evening when the colonel had driven off alone, Mrs Fisher came to stand beside me on the steps of the verandah.

"Do you see anyone?" she asked me.

"Yes, I think so. There appears to be a woman in a sari standing in your rose garden."

"Do you know her?"

"No."

"Does she remind you of anyone?"

"Yes. That woman. The one who ran at us and cursed us the day the boy was killed."

"Do you believe in curses?" asked Mrs Fisher.

I turned to her.

"No," I said.

She dropped her gaze.

When we looked back to the rose garden, nobody was there.

April came and with it the intense heat. Everyone began to make for the hills, packing up tiffin baskets, bedding and crockery. Children and their ayahs, servants, dogs, cats, mongooses and monkeys were all clamouring to make their departure.

The Fishers had secured a house for the season at the cost of one thousand rupees.

"It's only a mile from the club, too," the colonel had said, sounding highly satisfied.

His wife seemed troubled and said,

"Tom, you won't take the car, surely?"

"And why shouldn't I?"

"The roads are so steep, barely passable in places. That bungalow we took last year was on the edge of a precipice."

"Nonsense! We shall drive up as far as we can, then walk or take dandies."

"I wish you wouldn't, Tom. You've no experience of driving in the mountains. And have you never noticed anything strange... about the car, or in the garden?"

The colonel was not a fanciful man. He glared at his wife and said,

"I think you must have a touch of the sun. The sooner we get into the hills, the better."

Being so much older than his wife, I suppose it was inevitable that he sometimes spoke to her as if she were a child.

"So, you have seen it, too," I said to Mrs Fisher once her husband had left for the club.

"Seen?"

"Not only the figure of the woman who walks in your garden, but the thing on the running board."

She walked away from me, wringing her hands.

"I don't see it all the time," she said, "only at dusk, only in the starlight or when there is a moon. And then only from the corner of my eye."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, Mr Durrant, I do not."

"I could make enquiries," I volunteered, "find out about the boy and his mother."

"I don't wish you to. The child is dead."

"And the mother?"

"I don't know. And I don't want to."

Mrs Fisher's ayah, the other servants and the household goods were to ascend the hills in traditional fashion. The coolness and the breezes of the heights were welcome after the warmth of the plains, though Mrs Fisher was clearly nervous of the khud – or ravine – beyond the house. The road ran along beside it and there were magnificent views over the valley from here.

While Mary Fisher called upon friends and neighbours, the colonel went on with his memoirs. I spent a good deal of time alone, either making up my notes or typing, while the Fishers attended picnics and tennis-parties. Some days it was only at dinner that I got to see other people and to make conversation.

Fisher had brought his car up somehow when he left his house to come above. Once in the hills, he didn't use it much, preferring to walk. He seemed oblivious to the shadow which hung over him. I had been aware of the child many times, crouched upon the running board and feared – yes, feared – to get into the automobile because of it. The woman's curses still rang in my ears. I hadn't been to blame but was I, too, cursed?

A night came when the colonel and Mrs Fisher had been asked to dine at a house some two miles distant. I hadn't been included in the invitation and time hung heavy on my hands while the Fishers were dressing.

Gazing out at the garden, the air of which was filled with the scent of roses, I saw the woman in the sari. It was a shock to learn she had followed us, pursued the colonel.

She looked directly at me, then wheeled and pointed at the car, which Fisher had parked outside the gate. I could see the dark hump of the boy's figure on the running board.

When I turned again to the woman, she was no longer there.

Mrs Fisher, dressed for the evening, came out into the verandah. Her ayah had styled her hair. I laid a hand on her arm and said,

"Don't go."

She seemed startled, jumping at my touch, and moved away from me. Her gown was pale in the twilight and I could see the sparkle of her jewels.

"Why ever not?"

There was tension in the air. I felt as if a thunderstorm might be brewing.

"I have a presentiment. I fear for you. Please don't go."

"Tom will be angry."

"Stop him from going, if you can."

"That is not very likely. You know what he is once his mind is made up."

When the colonel appeared, she pleaded a headache. Her husband was clearly annoyed.

"I shall go alone," he announced.

"Oh, Tom, dear, won't you stay and keep me company?"

"Mr Durrant can do that," said the colonel. I have never known what – if anything – he meant us to read into that remark.

I went out to the car with him, handing him a sheath of papers – the latest chapter of his book – which he wished a fellow officer to look over. As he approached the vehicle there was a hesitation in his step and I realised that he could see it. He could see the boy. Knowing him to possess little imagination, this proved to me that it must really be there, that it actually existed.

Fisher's shoulders moved as if he were pulling himself together. He might be a bully, but he was a brave man and didn't lack courage. He got behind the wheel, took the manuscript from me, then wished me good night before driving away.

I never saw him alive again.

The evening passed with almost intolerable slowness, the dusk deepening into night. Mrs Fisher changed out of her party clothes, took off her diamonds. She paced about, roaming from the verandah to the drawing-room and back again as I smoked cigarette after cigarette and tried – uselessly – to read.

There came a rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning.

"I should never have let him go alone. I hope he gets back before the storm breaks," said Mrs Fisher.

A little later, we could hear the sound of a car approaching, drawing near.

"It's him," cried Mary, "it's Tom!"

She raced to the top of the verandah steps, peering out into the gloom.

Thunder boomed and the lightning dazzled me as I took my place at her side.

There was a screeching sound, as if the colonel had caused the car to swerve, as if he were trying to avoid hitting something. Then came a moment of perfectly dead silence, followed by a tremendous crash.

I could picture the vehicle suspended for a moment at the edge of the ravine, then dropping down through the empty air to land in the jungle far below.

"Tom, Tom!" screamed Mrs Fisher.

“Look after her,” I said, pushing her into the arms of her ayah, who had run out to see what was happening.

Calling for help, I sped as fast as I could towards the trees which bordered the road, knowing all the time that it was too late.

The woman in the sari stood in my path. She smiled at me, a horrible, gloating smile, then vanished.

What kind of thing was the woman? Was it a ghost? Some astral projection of a living person? I shall never know.

I stood and stared after her, barely conscious of the people who had rushed to help me. The rain started. It began beating down upon the zinc roof of the verandah and on the rooftops of all the bungalows. It soaked me and those around me to the skin.

After a decent interval, the young and widowed Mrs Fisher consented to become my wife. My hand is steady as I take the cup she holds out to me.

We smile at one another and speak of many things, but we rarely mention the night the colonel died. His memoirs have yet to be published. My wife and I are working together on the final chapters and will dedicate the book to his memory.

As we go to the club or visit friends or make any kind of excursion, we travel by bandy or gharry, ekka or tonga. I am also teaching my Mary how to ride.

We are determined never to own a motorcar.