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THE BRONZE BELL



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**“NOT ONCE DID HE LOOK BACK WHILE AMBER WATCHED—
HIMSELF DIVIDED BETWEEN AMUSEMENT, ANNOYANCE,
AND ASTONISHMENT” (PAGE 14)**

THE BRONZE BELL

BY

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

Author of "THE BRASS BOWL,"

"THE BLACK BAG," Etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HARRISON FISHER

NEW YORK
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Published, March, 1900

To

F. E. Z.

Chatelaine of Juniper Lodge

*This story is dedicated by one to whom her
hospitality, transplanted from its Kentucky
home, will ever remain a charming memory*

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I DESTINY AND THE BABU	1
II THE GIRL AND THE TOKEN	16
III MAROONED	28
IV THE MAN PERDU	44
V THE GOBLIN NIGHT	69
VI RED DAWN	92
VII MASKS AND FACES	115
VIII FIRST STEPS	124
IX PINK SATIN	144
X MAHARANA OF KHANDAWAR	159
XI THE TONGA	180
XII THE LONG DAY	193
XIII THE PHOTOGRAPH	211
XIV OVER THE WATER	230
XV FROM A HIGH PLACE	249
XVI SUNRISE FOR TWO	269
XVII THE WAY TO KATHIAPUR	281
XVIII THE HOODED DEATH	307
XIX RUTTON'S DAUGHTER	329
XX A LATER DAY	350
XXI THE FINAL INCARNATION	355

ILLUSTRATIONS

- “ Not once did he look back while Amber
watched — himself divided between
amusement, annoyance, and astonish-
ment ” (page 14) Frontispiece
- Sophia Farrell Facing page 102
- “ The girl joined him on the veranda . . .
very demure and sweet to look upon in
her travelling-dress of light pongee ” “ “ 198
- “ The woman was very sweet and beautiful
in his eyes as she sat with her white,
round arms flashing over the key-
board ” “ “ 220

CHAPTER I

DESTINY AND THE BABU

BREAKING suddenly upon the steady drumming of the trucks, the prolonged and husky roar of a locomotive whistle saluted an immediate grade-crossing.

Roused by this sound from his solitary musings in the parlour-car of which he happened temporarily to be the sole occupant, Mr. David Amber put aside the magazine over which he had been dreaming, and looked out of the window, catching a glimpse of woodland road shining white between sombre walls of stunted pine. Lazily he consulted his watch.

"It's not for nothing," he observed pensively, "that this railroad wears its reputation: we are consistently late."

His gaze, again diverted to the flying countryside, noted that it had changed character, pine yielding to scrub-oak and second-growth—the ragged vestments of an area some years since denuded by fire. This, too, presently swung away, giving place to cleared land—arable acres golden with the stubble of garnered harvests or sentinelled with unkempt shocks of corn.

In the south a shimmer of laughing gold and blue edged the faded horizon.

Eagerly the young man leaned forward, dark eyes

lightening, lips parting as if already he could taste the savour of the sea.

Then, quite without warning, a deep elbow of the bay swept up almost to the railway, its surface mirror-like, profoundly blue, profoundly beautiful.

"I think," said the traveller softly—"I think it's mighty fine to be alive and—here!"

He lounged back comfortably again, smiling as he watched the wheeling landscape, his eyes glowing with expectancy. For his cares were negligible, his content boundless; he was experiencing, for the first time in many years, a sense of freedom akin to that felt by a schoolboy at the beginning of the summer vacation. The work of his heart and hand for a little time belonged equally to a forgotten Yesterday and an uncontemplated To-morrow; he existed only for the confident To-day. He had put behind him the haunts of men, and his yearning for the open places that lay before him was almost childlike in its fervency; he would, indeed, have been quite satisfied if assured that he was to find nothing to do save to play aimlessly in the sun. But, in point of fact, he looked forward to an employment much more pleasurable; he was off to shoot duck with his very dear friend, Mr. Anthony Quain, of Tanglewood Lodge, Nokomis, Long Island.

Again the whistle bawled uncannily, and the train began to moderate its speed. Objects in the foreground that otherwise had been mere streaked blurs assumed recognisable contours. North of the line a string of squat, square, unlovely "frame" edifices, aligned upon a country road, drifted back. A brakeman popped

head and shoulders into the car and out again, leaving the echo of an abrupt bark to be interpreted at the passenger's leisure. From the other door a coloured porter emerged and, fixing his lonely charge with a hungry eye, relentlessly bore down upon him.

"The nex' is yo' stashun, suh," he announced, ominously brandishing an immense whisk-broom. "Shell Ah bresh yo' off?"

"Not with my consent," replied Amber, with disarming *naïveté*. "I'd much rather get off in the usual way."

Rising he squared himself against the onslaught of the broom; but the darky, eyes opaque with incomprehension, held his hand.

"Ah dunno 's Ah connect wif that, suh," he admitted regretfully.

"Never mind. Go ahead and disperse the dust."

"Yas, suh!" Tardily convinced that his passenger's intentions were both humourous and benign, if difficult, the porter chuckled and fell to with a will. For several seconds the whisk-broom played like chain-lightning round the young man's person, leaving him immaculate.

"Shell Ah tek yo' things, suh?"

"Please." Amber parted with the expected coin and waved the negro down the aisle with his luggage; then followed him.

Slowly jolting across a rutted, dusty road, the cars stopped. Amber, alighting, found himself upon a length of board-walk platform and confronted by a distressingly matter-of-fact wooden structure, combining

the functions of waiting-room and ticket and telegraph offices. From its eaves depended a weather-worn board bearing the legend: "Nokomis."

The train, pausing only long enough to disgorge from the baggage-car a trunk or two and from the day-coaches a thin trickle of passengers, flung on into the wilderness, cracked bell clanking somewhat disdainfully.

By degrees the platform cleared, the erstwhile patrons of the road and the station loafers—for the most part hall-marked natives of the region—straggling off upon their several ways, some afoot, a majority in dilapidated surreys and buckboards. Amber watched them go with unassumed indifference; their type interested him little. But in their company he presently discovered one, a figure so thoroughly foreign and aloof in attitude, that it caught his eye, and, having caught, held it clouded with perplexity.

Abruptly he abandoned his belongings and gave chase, overtaking the object of his attention at the far end of the station.

"Doggott!" he cried. "I say, Doggott!"

His hand, falling lightly upon the man's shoulder, brought him squarely about, his expression transiently startled, if not a shade truculent.

Short and broad yet compact of body, he was something round-shouldered, with the stoop of those who serve. In a mask of immobility, full-colored and closely shaven, his lips were thin and tight, his eyes steady, grey and shallow: a countenance neither dishonest nor repellent, but one inscrutable. Standing solidly, once

halted, there remained a suggestion of alertness in the fellow's pose.

"Doggott, what the deuce brings you here? And Mr. Rutton?"

Amber's cordiality elicited no response. The grey eyes, meeting eyes dark, kindly, and penetrating, flickered and fell; so much emotion they betrayed, no more, and that as disingenuous as you could wish.

"Doggott!" insisted Amber, disconcerted. "Surely you haven't forgotten me—Mr. Amber?"

The man shook his head. "Beg pardon, sir," he said; "you've got my nyme 'andy enough, but I don't know *you*, and——"

"But Mr. Rutton?"

"Is a party I've never 'eard of, if you'll excuse my sayin' so, no more'n I 'ave of yourself, sir."

"Well!" began Amber; but paused, his face hardening as he looked the man up and down, nodding slowly.

"Per'aps," continued Mr. Doggott, unabashed, "you mistyke me for my brother, 'Enery Doggott. 'E was 'ome, in England, larst I 'eard of 'im. We look a deal alike, I've been told."

"You would be," admitted Amber drily; and, shutting his teeth upon his inherent contempt for a liar, he swung away, acknowledging with a curt nod the civil "Good-afternoon, sir," that followed him.

The man had disappeared by the time Amber regained his kit-bag and gun-case; standing over which he surveyed his surroundings with some annoyance, discovering that he now shared the station with none but the ticket-agent. A shambling and disconsolate youth,

clad in a three-days' growth of beard, a checked jumper and khaki trousers, this person lounged negligently in the doorway of the waiting-room and, caressing his rusty chin with nicotine-dyed fingers, regarded the stranger in Nokomis with an air of subtle yet vaguely melancholy superiority.

"If ye're lookin' for th' hotel," he volunteered unexpectedly, "there aint none;" and effected a masterly retreat into the ticket-booth.

Amused, the despised outlander picked up his luggage and followed amiably. "I'm not looking for the hotel that aint," he said, planting himself in front of the grating; "but I expected to be met by someone from Tanglewood——"

"Thet's the Quain place, daown by th' ba-ay," interpolated the youth from unplumbed depths of mournful abstraction.

"It is. I wired yesterday——"

"Yeour name's Amber, aint it?"

"Yes, I——"

"Well, Quain didn't get yeour message till this mornin'. I sent a kid daown with it 'baout ten o'clock."

"But why the—but I wired yesterday afternoon!"

"I knaow ye did," assented the youth wearily. "It come through raound closin' time and they wa'n't nobody baound that way, so I held it over."

"This craze for being characteristic," observed Mr. Amber obscurely, "is the only thing that really stands in the way of Nokomis becoming a thriving metropolis. Do you agree with me? No matter." He smiled engagingly: a seasoned traveller this, who could recognise

the futility of bickering over the irreparable. Moreover, he had to remind himself in all fairness, the blame was, in part at least, his own; for he had thoughtlessly worded his telegram, "Will be with you to-morrow afternoon"; and it was wholly like Quain that he should have accepted the statement at its face value, regardless of the date line.

"I can leave my things here for a little while, I presume?" Amber suggested after a pause.

The ticket-agent stared stubbornly into the infinite, making no sign till a coin rang on the window-ledge; when he started, eyed the offering with fugitive mistrust, and gloomily possessed himself of it. "I'll look after them," he said. "Be ye thinkin' of walkin'?"

"Yes," said Amber over his shoulder. He was already moving toward the door.

"Knaow yeour wa-ay?"

"I've been here before, thank you."

"Fer another quarter," drawled the agent with elaborate apathy, "I'd leave the office long enough to find somebody who'd fetch ye daown in a rig for fifty cents."

But Amber was already out of ear-shot.

Crossing the tracks, he addressed himself to the southward-stretching highway. Walking briskly at first, he soon left behind the railway-station with its few parasitic cottages; a dip in the land hid them, and he had hereafter for all company his thoughts, the desultory road, a vast and looming sky, and bare fields hedged with impoverished forest.

A deep languor brooded over the land: the still, warm enchantment of an Indian Summer which, protracted

though it were unseasonably into the Ides of November, had yet lost nothing of its witchery. There was no wind, but now and again the air stirred softly, and when it stirred was cool; as if the earth sighed in sheer lassitude. Out of a cloudless sky, translucent sapphire at its zenith fading into hazy topaz-yellow at the horizon, golden sunlight slanted, casting shadows heavy and colourful; on the edge of the woodlands they clung like thin purple smoke, but motionless, and against them, here and there, a clump of sumach blazed like a bed of embers, or some tree loath to shed its autumnal livery flamed scarlet, russet, and mauve. The peace of the hour was intense, and only emphasised by a dull, throbbing undertone—the muted murmur of the distant sea.

Amber had professed acquaintance with his way; it seemed rather to be intimacy, for when he chose to forsake the main-travelled road he did so boldly, striking off upon a wagon-track which, leading across the fields, delved presently into the heart of the forest. Here it ran snakily and, carved by broad-tired wheels and beaten out by slowly plodding hoofs in a soil more than half sand, glimmered white as rock-salt where the drifting leaves had left it naked.

Once in this semi-dusk made luminous by sunlight which touched and quivered upon dead leaf and withered bush and bare brown bough like splashes of molten gold, the young man moved more sedately. The hush of the forest world bore heavily upon his senses; the slight and stealthy rustlings in the brush, the clear dense ringing of some remote axe, an attenuated clamour of cawing from some far crows' congress, but served to accentuate

its influence. On that windless day the vital breath of the sea might not moderate the bitter-sweet aroma of decay that swam beneath the unmoving branches; and this mournful fragrance of dying Autumn wrought upon Amber's mood as might a whiff of some exquisite rare perfume revive a poignant memory in the bosom of a bereaved lover. His glance grew aimless, his temper as purposeless, lively anticipation giving way to a retrospection tinged with indefinable sadness.

Then into the silence crept a sound to rouse him from his formless reverie: at first a mere pulsing in the stillness, barely to be distinguished from the song of the surf; but presently a pounding, ever louder and more insistent. He paused, attentive; and while he waited the drumming, minute by minute gaining in volume, swept swiftly toward him—the rhythmic hoofbeats of a single horse madly ridden. When it was close upon him he stepped back into the tangled undergrowth, making room; for the track was anything but wide.

Simultaneously there burst into view, at the end of a brief aisle of trees, the horse—a vigorous black brute with white socks and muzzle—running freely, apparently under constraint neither of whip nor of spur. In the saddle a girl leaned low over the horn—a girl with eyes rapturous, face brilliant, lips parted in the least of smiles. A fold of her black habit-skirt, whipping out, almost snapped in Amber's face, so close to him she rode; yet she seemed not to see him, and very likely did not. A splendid sketch in black-and-white, of youthful spirit and joy of motion: so she passed and was gone. . . .

Hardly, however, had the forest closed upon the pic-

ture, ere a cry, a heavy crashing as of a horse threshing about in the underbrush, and a woman's scream of terror, sent Amber, in one movement, out into the road again and running at a pace which, had he been conscious of it, would have surprised him.

A short fifty yards separated him from the bend in the way round which the horse and its rider had vanished. He had no more than gained this point than he was obliged to pull up sharply to avoid running into the girl herself.

Although dismounted, she was on her feet, and apparently uninjured. She stood with one hand against the trunk of a tree, on the edge of a small clearing wherein the axes of the local lumbermen had but lately been busy. Her horse had disappeared; the rumble of his hoofs, *diminuendo*, told the way he had gone.

So much Amber comprehended in a single glance; with a second he sought the cause of the accident, and identified it with a figure so *outré* and bizarre that he momentarily and excusably questioned the testimony of his senses.

At a little distance from the girl, in the act of addressing her, stood a man, obese, gross, abnormally distended with luxurious and sluggish living, as little common to the scene as a statue of Phæbus Apollo had been: a *babu* of Bengal, every inch of him, from his dirty red-and-white turban to his well-worn and cracked patent-leather shoes. His body was enveloped in a complete suit of emerald silk, much soiled and faded, and girt with a sash of many colours, crimson predominating. His hands, fat, brown, and not overclean, alter-

nately fluttered apologetically and rubbed one another with a suggestion of extreme urbanity; his lips, thick, sensual, and cruel, mouthed a broken stream of babu-English; while his eyes, nearly as small and quite as black as shoe-buttons—eyes furtive, crafty, and cold—suddenly distended and became fixed, as with amazement, at the instant of Amber's appearance.

Instinctively, as soon as he had mastered his initial stupefaction, Amber stepped forward and past the girl, placing himself between her and this preposterous apparition, as if to shield her. He was neither overly imaginative nor of a romantic turn of mind; but, the circumstances reviewed, it's nothing to his discredit that he entertained a passing suspicion of some curious conspiracy against the girl, thought of an ambushade, and with quick eyes raked the surroundings for signs of a confederate of the Bengali.

He found, however, nothing alarming, no indication that the man were not alone; nor, for that matter, could he reasonably detect in the fellow's bearing anything but a spirit of conciliation almost servile. None the less he held himself wary and alert, and was instant to halt the babu when he, with the air of a dog cringing to his master's feet for punishment, would have drawn nearer.

"Stop right there!" Amber told him crisply; and got for response obedience, a low salaam, and the Hindu salutation accorded only to persons of high rank: "Hazaar!" But before the babu could say more the American addressed the girl. "What did he do?" he inquired, without looking at her. "Frighten your horse?"

"Just that." The girl's tone was edged with temper. "He jumped out from behind that woodpile; the horse shied and threw me."

"You're not hurt, I trust?"

"No—thank you; but"—with a nervous laugh—"I'm furiously angry."

"That's reasonable enough." Amber returned undivided attention to the Bengali. "Now then," he demanded sternly, "what 've you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by frightening this lady's horse? What are you doing here, anyway?"

Almost grovelling, the babu answered him in Urdu: "Hazoor, I am your slave——"

Without thinking Amber couched his retort in the same tongue: "Count yourself lucky you are not, dog!"

"Nay, hazoor, but I meant no harm. I was resting, being fatigued, in the shelter of the wood, when the noise of hoofs disturbed me and I stepped out to see. When the woman was thrown I sought to assist her, but she threatened me with her whip."

"That is quite true," the girl cut in over Amber's shoulder. "I don't think he intended to harm me, but it's purely an accident that he didn't."

Inasmuch as the babu's explanation had been made in fluent, vernacular Urdu, Amber's surprise at the girl's evident familiarity with that tongue was hardly to be concealed. "You understand Urdu?" he stammered.

"Aye," she told him in that tongue, "and speak it, too."

"You know this man, then?"

"No. Do you?"

"Not in the least. How should I?"

"You yourself speak Urdu."

"Well but——" The situation hardly lent itself to such a discussion; he had the babu first to dispose of. Amber resumed his cross-examination. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And what is your business in this place?"

The fat yellowish-brown face was distorted by a fugitive grimace of deprecation. "Hazoor, I am Behari Lal Chatterji, solicitor, of the Inner Temple."

"Well? And your business here?"

"Hazoor, that is for your secret ear." The babu drew himself up, assuming a certain dignity. "It is not meet that the message of the Bell should be uttered in the hearing of an Englishwoman, hazoor."

"What are you drivelling about?" In his blank wonder, Amber returned to English as to a tongue more suited to his urgent need of forcible expression. "And, look here, you stop calling me 'Hazoor.' I'm no more a hazoor than you are—idiot!"

"Nay," contended the babu reproachfully; "is it right that you should seek to hoodwink me? Have I not eyes with which to see you, ears that can hear you speak our tongue, hazoor? I am no child, to be played with—I, the appointed Mouthpiece of the Voice!"

"I know naught of your 'Voice' or its mouthpiece; but certainly you are no child. You are either mad, or insolent—or a fool to be kicked." And in exasperation Amber took a step toward the man as if to carry into effect his implied threat.

Alarmed, the babu cringed and retreated a pace; then, suddenly, raising an arm, indicated the girl. "Hazoor!" he cried. "Be quick—the woman faints!" And as Amber hastily turned, with astonishing agility the babu sprang toward him.

Warned by his moving shadow as much as by the girl's cry, Amber leapt aside and lifted a hand to strike; but before it could deliver a blow it was caught and a small metallic object thrust into it. Upon this his fingers closed instinctively, and the babu spring back, panting and quaking.

"The Token, hazoor, the Token!" he quavered. "It is naught but that—the Token!"

"Token, you fool!" cried Amber, staring stupidly at the man. "What in thunder——!"

"Nay, hazoor; how should I tell you now, when another sees and hears? At another time, hazoor, in a week, or a day, or an hour, mayhap, I come again—for your answer. Till then and forever I am your slave, hazoor: the dust beneath your feet. Now, I go."

And with a haste that robbed the courtesy of its grace, the Bengali salaamed, then wheeled square about and, hitching his clothing round him, made off with a celerity surprising in one of his tremendous bulk, striking directly into the heart of the woods.

For as much as a minute he was easily to be followed, his head and shoulders rising above the brush through which he forged purposefully, with something of the heedless haste of a man bent on keeping a pressing engagement—or a sinner fleeing the wrath to come. Not once did he look back while Amber watched—himself di-

vided between amusement, annoyance, and astonishment. Presently the trees blotted out the red-and-white turban; the noise of the babu's elephantine retreat diminished; and Amber was left to knit his brows over the object which had been forced upon him so unexpectedly.

It proved to be a small, cubical box, something more than an inch square, fashioned of bronze and elaborately decorated with minute relief work in the best manner of ancient Indian craftsmanship.

"May I see, please?" The voice of the girl at his side recalled to Amber her existence. "May I see, too, please, Mr. Amber?" she repeated.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL AND THE TOKEN

IN his astonishment he looked round quickly to meet the gaze of mischievous eyes that strove vainly to seem simple and sincere. His own, in which amusement was blended with wonder, noted that they were very handsome eyes and rather curiously colourful, the delicate sepia shade of the pupils being lightened by a faint sheen of gold in the irides; they were, furthermore, large and set well apart. On the whole he decided that they were even beautiful, for all the dancing glimmer of perverse humour in their depths; he could fancy that they might well seem very sweet and womanly when their owner chose to be serious.

Aware that he faced an uncommonly pretty woman, who chose to study him with a straightforward interest he was nothing loath to imitate, he took time to see that she was very fair of skin, with that creamy, silken whiteness that goes with hair of the shade commonly and unjustly termed red. This girl's hair was really brown, a rich sepia interwoven with strands of raw, ruddy gold, admirably harmonious with her eyes. Her nose he thought a trace too severely perfect in its modelling, but redeemed by a broad and thoughtful brow, a strong yet absolutely feminine chin, and a mouth . . . Well, as to her mouth, the young man selected a rosebud to

liken it to; which was really quite a poor simile, for her lips were nothing at all like rose-leaves save in colour; but they were well-shapen and wide enough to suggest generosity, without being in the least too wide.

Having catalogued these several features, together with the piquant oval of her face, and remarked that her poise was good and gracious in the uncompromising lines of her riding-habit, he had a mental portrait of her he was not likely soon to forget. For it's not every day that one encounters so pretty a girl in the woods of Long Island's southern shore—or anywhere else, for that matter. He felt sure of this.

But he was equally certain that he was as much a stranger to her as she to him.

She, on her part, had been busy satisfying herself that he was a very presentable young man, in spite of the somewhat formidable reputation he wore as a person of learned attainments. There could be no better way to show him to you than through her eyes, so you must know that she saw a man of less than thirty years, with a figure slight and not over-tall but well-proportioned, and with a complexion as dark as hers was light. His eyes, indeed, were a very dark grey, and his hair was black, and his face and hands had been coloured by the sun and wind until the tan had become indelible, almost, so that his prolonged periods of studious indoor seclusion worked little toward lightening it. If his looks attracted, it was not because he was handsome, for that he wasn't, but because of certain signs of strength to be discerned in his face, as well as an engaging manner which he owned by right of ancestry, his ascendants for

several generations having been notable representatives of one of the First Families of Virginia. Amber was not inordinately proud of this fact, at least not more so than nine out of any ten Virginians; but his friends—who were many but mostly male—claimed that he wrote “F.F.V.” before the “F.R.S.” which he was entitled to inscribe after his name.

The pause which fell upon the girl’s use of his name, and during which they looked one another over, was sufficiently prolonged to excuse the reference to it which Amber chose to make.

“I’m sure,” he said with his slow smile, “that we’re satisfied we’ve never met before. Aren’t we?”

“Quite,” assented the girl.

“That only makes it the more mysterious, of course.”

“Yes,” said she provokingly; “doesn’t it?”

“You know, you’re hardly fair to me,” he asserted. “I’m rapidly beginning to entertain doubts of my senses. When I left the train at Nokomis station I met a man I know as well as I know myself—pretty nearly; and he denied me to my face. Then, a little later, I encounter a strange, mad Bengali, who apparently takes me for somebody he has business with. And finally, you call me by name.”

“It isn’t so very remarkable, when you come to consider it,” she returned soberly. “Mr. David Amber is rather well known, even in his own country. I might very well have seen your photograph published in connection with some review of—let me see. . . . Your latest book was entitled ‘The Peoples of the Hindu Kush,’ wasn’t it? You see, I haven’t read it.”

"That's sensible of you, I'm sure. Why should you . . . But your theory doesn't hold water, because I won't permit my publishers to print my picture, and, besides, reviews of such stupid books generally appear in profound monthlies which abhor illustrations."

"Oh!" She received this with a note of disappointment. "Then my explanation won't do?"

"I'm sorry," he laughed, "but you'll have to be more ingenious—and practical."

"And you won't show me the present the babu made you?"

He closed his fingers jealously over the bronze box. "Not until . . ."

"You insist on reciprocity?"

"Absolutely."

"That's very unkind of you."

"How?" he demanded blankly.

"You will have it that I must surrender my only advantage—my incognito. If I tell you how I happen to know who you are, I must tell you who I am. Immediately you will lose interest in me, because I'm really not at all advanced; I doubt if I should understand your book if I had to read it."

"Which Heaven forbid! But why," he insisted mercilessly, "do you wish me to be interested in you?"

She flushed becomingly at this and acknowledged the touch with a rueful, smiling glance. But, "Because I'm interested in you," she admitted openly.

"And . . . why?"

"Are you hardened to such adventures?" She nodded in the direction the babu had taken. "Are you

accustomed to being treated with extraordinary respect by stray Bengalis and accepting tokens from them? Is romance commonplace to you?"

"Oh," he said, disappointed, "if it's only the adventure——! Of course, that's easily enough explained. This half-witted mammoth—don't ask me how he came to be here—thought he recognised in me some one he had known in India. Let's have a look at this token-thing."

He disclosed the bronze box and let her take it in her pretty fingers.

"It must have a secret spring," she concluded, after a careful inspection.

"I think so, but . . ."

She shook it, holding it by her ear. "There's something inside—it rattles ever so slightly. I wonder!"

"No more than I."

"And what are you going to do with it?" She returned it reluctantly.

"Why, there's nothing to do but keep it till the owner turns up, that I can see."

"You won't break it open?"

"Not until curiosity overpowers me and I've exhausted every artifice, trying to find the catch."

"Are you a patient person, Mr. Amber?"

"Not extraordinarily so, Miss Farrell."

"Oh, how did you guess?"

"By remembering not to be stupid. You are Miss Sophia Farrell, daughter of Colonel Farrell of the British Diplomatic Service in India." He chuckled cheerfully over this triumph of deductive reasoning. "You are visiting the Quains for a few days, while *en*

route for India with some friends whose name I've forgotten——”

“The Rolands,” she prompted involuntarily.

“Thank you. . . . The Rolands, who are stopping in New York. You've lived several years with your father in India, went back to London to ‘come out’ and are returning, having been presented at the Court of St. James. Your mother was an American girl, a schoolmate of Mrs. Quain's. I'm afraid that's the whole sum of my knowledge of you.”

“You've turned the tables fairly, Mr. Amber,” she admitted. “And Mr. Quain wrote you all that?”

“I'm afraid he told me almost as much about you as he told you about me; we're old friends, you know. And now I come to think of it, Quain has one of the few photographs of me extant. So my chain of reasoning's complete. And I think we'd better hurry on to Tanglewood.”

“Indeed, yes. Mrs. Quain will be wild with worry if that animal finds his way back to the stable without me; I've been very thoughtless.” She caught up her riding-skirt and started down the path with Amber trudging contently beside her. “However,” she considered demurely, “I'm not at all sorry, really; it's quite an experience to have a notability at a disadvantage, even if only for a few minutes.”

“I wish you wouldn't,” he begged in boyish embarrassment. “I'm not a notability, really; Quain's been talking too much. I'll get even with him, though.”

“That sounds so modest that I almost believe I've made a mistake about your identity. But I've no doubt

you're right; Mr. Quain does exaggerate in praise of his friends. Very likely it is as you insist, and you're only an ordinary person, after all. At least, you would be if stray babus didn't make you mysterious presents."

"So long as there is that to hold your interest in me, I'm content," he told her, diverted. "How much longer shall you stay at Tanglewood, Miss Farrell?"

"Unhappily," she sighed, "I must leave on the early train to-morrow, to join the Rolands in New York."

"You don't want to go?"

"I'm half an American, Mr. Amber. I've learned to love the country already. Besides, we start immediately for San Francisco, and it'll be such a little while before I'll be in India."

"You don't care for India?"

"I've known it for less than six years, but already I've come to hate it as thoroughly as any exiled Englishwoman there. It sits there like a great, insatiable monster, devouring English lives. Indirectly it was responsible for my mother's death; she never recovered from the illness she contracted when my father was stationed in the Deccan. In the course of time it will kill my father, just as it did his father and his elder brother. It's a cruel, hateful, ungrateful land—not worth the price we pay for it."

"I know how you feel," he said with sympathy. "It's been a good many years since I visited India, and of course I then saw and heard little of the darker side. Your people are brave enough, out there."

"They are. I don't know about Government; but

its servants are loyal and devoted and unselfish and cheerful. And I don't at all understand," she added in confusion, "why I should have decided to inflict upon you my emotional hatred of the country. Your question gave me the opening, and I forgot myself."

"I assure you I was thoroughly shocked, Miss Farrell."

"You should have been—surprised, at least. Why should I pour out my woes to you—a man I've known not fifteen minutes?"

"Why not, if you felt like it? After all, you know, we're both of us merely making talk to—ah—to cover our interest in one another."

She paused momentarily to laugh at his candour. "You are outspoken, Mr. Amber! It's very pretty of you to assert an interest in me; but why should you assume that I——"

"You said so, didn't you?"

"Wel-l . . . yes, so I did."

"You can change your mind, of course."

"I shan't, honestly, until you turn stupid. And you can't do that until you stop having strange adventures. Will you tell me something?"

"If I can."

"About the man who wouldn't acknowledge knowing you? You remember saying three people had been mistaken about your identity this afternoon."

"No, only one—the babu. You're not mistaken——"

"I knew you must be David Amber the moment I heard you speaking Urdu."

"And the man at the station wasn't mistaken—un-

less I am. He knew me perfectly, I believe, but for reasons of his own refused to recognise me."

"Yes—?"

"He was an English servant named Doggott, who is—or once was—a valet in the service of an old friend, a man named Rutton."

She repeated the name: "Rutton? It seems to me I've heard of him."

"You have?"

"I don't remember," she confessed, knitting her level brows. "The name has a familiar ring, somehow. But about the valet?"

"Well, I was very intimate with his employer for a long time, though we haven't met for several years. Rutton was a strange creature, a man of extraordinary genius, who lived a friendless, solitary life—at least, so far as I knew; I once lived with him in a little place he had in Paris, for three months, and in all that time he never received a letter or a caller. He was reticent about himself, and I never asked any questions, of course, but in spite of the fact that he spoke English like an Englishman and was a public school man, apparently, I always believed he had a strain of Hungarian blood in him—or else Italian or Spanish. I know that sounds pretty broad, but he was enigmatic—a riddle I never managed to make much of. Aside from that he was wonderful: a linguist, speaking a dozen European languages and more Eastern tongues and dialects, I believe, than any other living man. We met by accident in Berlin and were drawn together by our common interest in Orientalism. Later, hearing I

was in Paris, he hunted me up and insisted that I stay with him there while finishing my big book—the one whose title you know. His assistance to me then was invaluable. After that I lost track of him.”

“And the valet?”

“Oh, I’d forgotten Doggott. He was a Cockney, as silent and self-contained as Rutton. . . . To get back to Nokomis: I met Doggott at the station, called him by name, and he refused to admit knowing me—said I must have mistaken him for his twin brother. I could tell by his eyes that he lied, and it made me wonder. It’s quite impossible that Rutton should be in this neck of the woods; he was a man who preferred to live a hermit in centres of civilisation. . . . Curious!”

“I don’t wonder you think so. Perhaps the man had been up to some mischief. . . . But,” said the girl with a note of regret, “we’re almost home!”

They had come to the seaward verge of the woodland, where the trees and scrub rose like a wild hedgerow on one side of a broad, well-metalled highway. Before them stretched the eighth of a mile of neglected land knee-deep with crisp, dry, brown stalks of weedy growths, beyond which the bay smiled, a still lake of colour mirroring the intense lapis-lazuli of the calm eastern skies of evening. Over across its waters the sand dunes of a long island glowed like a bar of new red gold, tinted by the transient scarlet and yellow glory of the smouldering Autumnal sunset. Through the woods the level, brilliant, warmthless rays ran like wild-fire, turning each dead, brilliant leaf to a wisp of incandescent flame, and tingcing the air with an evanescent ruby ra-

diance against which the slim young boles stood black and stark.

To the right, on the other side of the road, a rustic fence enclosed the trim, well-groomed plantations of Tanglewood Lodge; through the dead limbs a window of the house winked in the sunset glow like an eye of garnet. And as the two appeared a man came running up the road, shouting.

"That's Quain!" cried Amber; and sent a long cry of greeting toward him.

"Wait!" said the girl impulsively, putting out a detaining hand. "Let's keep our secret," she begged, her eyes dancing—"just for the fun of it!"

"Our secret!"

"About the babu and the Token; it's a bit of mystery and romance to me—and we don't often find that in our lives, do we? Let us keep it personal for a while—between ourselves; and you will promise to let me know if anything unusual ever comes of it, after I've gone. We can say that I was riding carelessly, which is quite true, and that the horse shied and threw me, which again is true; but the rest for ourselves only. . . . Please. . . . What do you say?"

He was infected by her spirit of irresponsible mischief. "Why, yes—I say yes," he replied; and then, more gravely: "I think it'll be very pleasant to share a secret with you, Miss Farrell. I shant say a word to any one, until I have to."

As events turned he had no need to mention the incident until the morning of the seventh day following

the girl's departure. In the interim nothing happened, and he was able to enjoy some excellent shooting with Quain, his thoughts undisturbed by any further appearance of the babu.

But on that seventh morning it became evident that a burglary had been visited upon the home of his hosts. A window had been forced in the rear of the house and a trail of burnt matches and candle-grease between that entrance and the door of Amber's room, together with the somewhat curious circumstance that nothing whatever was missing from the personal effects of the Quains, forced him to make an explanation. For his own belongings had been rifled and the bronze box alone abstracted—still preserving its secret.

In its place Amber found a soiled slip of note-paper inscribed with the round, unformed handwriting of the babu: "Pardon, sahib. A mistake has been made. I seek but to regain that which is not yours to possess. There will be naught else taken. A thousand excuses from your hmbl. obt. svt., Behari Lal Chatterji."

CHAPTER III

MAROONED

A CRY in the windy dusk; a sudden, hollow booming overhead; a vision of countless wings in panic, sketched in black upon a background of dulled silver; two heavy detonations and, with the least of intervals, a third; three vivid flashes of crimson and gold stabbing the purple twilight; and then the acrid reek of smokeless drifting into Amber's face, while from the sky, where the V-shaped flock had been, two stricken bundles of blood-stained feathers fell slowly, fluttering. . . .

Honking madly, the unscathed brethren of the slain wheeled abruptly and, lashed by the easterly gale, fled out over the open sea, triangular formation dwindling rapidly in the clouded distances.

Shot-gun poised abreast, his keen eyes marking down the fall of his prey, Amber stood without moving, exultation battling with a vague remorse in his bosom—as always when he killed. Quain, who had dropped back a pace after firing but one shot and scoring an unqualified miss at close range, now stood plucking clumsily, with half frozen fingers, at an obstinate breech-lock. This latter resisting his every wile, his temper presently slipped its leash; as violently as briefly he swore: “Damn!”

"Gladly," agreed Amber, without turning. "But what?"

"This gun!"

"Your gun?"

"Of course." There were elaborations which would not lend themselves to decorative effect upon a printed page.

"Then damn it yourself, Quain; I'm sure you can do it ever so much more thoroughly than I. But what's the matter?"

"Rim-jammed cartridge," explained Quain between his teeth. The lock just then yielding to his awkward manipulation, stock and barrel came apart in his hands. "Just my beastly luck!" he added gratuitously. "It wouldn't 've been me if——! How many 'd you pot, Davy?"

"Only two," said Amber, lowering his weapon, extracting the spent shells, and reloading.

"Only *two!*" The information roused in Quain a demon of sarcasm. Fumbling in his various pockets for a shell-extractor, he grunted his disgust. "Here, lend us your thingumbob; 've lost mine. Thanky. . . . Only two! How many 'd you expect to drop, on a snap-shot like that?"

"Two," returned Amber so patiently that Quain requested him, explosively, to go to the devil. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'll go after my ducks instead. You'll follow? They're over there, on our way." And accepting Quain's snort for an affirmative he strolled off in the direction indicated, hugging his gun in the crook of his arm.

Fifty yards or so away he found the ducks, side by side in a little hollow. "Fine fat birds," he adjudged them sagely, weighing each in his hand ere dropping it into his lean game-bag. "This makes up for a lot of cold and waiting."

Satisfaction glimmering in his grave dark eyes, he lingered in the hollow, while the frosty air, whipping madly through the sand-hills, stung his face till it glowed beneath the brown. But presently, like the ghost of a forgotten kiss, something moist and chill touched gently his cheek, and was gone. Startled, he glanced skywards, then extended an arm, watching it curiously while the rough fabric of his sleeve was salted generously with fine white flakes. Though to some extent apprehended (they had been blind indeed to have ignored the menace of the dour day just then dying) snow had figured in their calculations as little as the scarcity of game. Amber wondered dimly if it would work a change in their plans, prove an obstacle to their safe return across the bay.

The flurry thickening in the air, a shade of anxiety colored his mood. "This 'll never do!" he declared, and set himself to ascend a nearby dune. For a moment he slipped and slid vainly, the dry sand treacherous to his feet, the brittle grasses he clutched snapping off or coming away altogether with their roots; but in time he found himself upon the rounded summit, and stood erect, straining the bitter air into panting lungs as he cast about for bearings.

Behind him a meagre strip of sand held back a grim and angry sea; before him lay an eighth of a mile of

sand-locked desolation, and then the weltering bay—a wide two miles of leaping, shouting waves, slate-coloured but white of crests. Beyond, seen dimly as a wall through driving sheets of snow, were the darkly wooded rises of the mainland. In the west, to his left, the blank, impersonal eye of the light-house, its pillar invisible, winked red, went out, and flashed up white. Over all, beneath a low and lustreless sky as flat as a plate, violet evening shadows were closing in like spectral skirts of the imminent night.

But, in the gloom, their little cat-boat lay occult to his searching gaze.

Quain's voice recalling him, he turned to discover his host stumbling through a neighbouring vale, and obeying a peremptory wave of the elder man's hand, descended, accompanied by an avalanche in miniature.

"Better hurry," shouted Amber, as soon as he could make himself heard above the screaming of the gale. "Wind's freshening; it looks like mean weather."

"Really?" Quain fell into step at his side. "You 'stonish me. But the good Lord knows I'm willin'. Whereabout's the boat?"

"Blessed if I know: over yonder somewhere," Amber told him, waving toward the bay-shore an arm as vaguely helpful as his information.

"Thank you so much. Guess I can find her all right. Hump yo'self, Davy."

They plodded on heavily, making fair progress in spite of the hindering sand. Nevertheless it had grown sensibly darker ere they debouched upon the frozen flats that bordered the bay; and now the wind bore

down upon them in full-winged fury, shrieking in their ears, searing their eyes, tearing greedily at the very breath of their nostrils, and searching out with impish ingenuity the more penetrable portions of their clothing.

For a moment Quain paused, irresolute, peering right and left, then began to trudge eastwards, heavy boots crunching the thin sedge-ice. A little later they came to the water's edge and proceeded steadily along it, Quain leading confidently. Eventually he tripped over some obstacle, stumbled and lurched forward and recovered his balance with an effort, then remained with bowed head, staring down at his feet.

"Hurt yourself, old man?"

"No!" snapped Quain rudely.

"Then what in——"

"Eh?" Quain roused, but an instant longer looked him blankly in the eye. "Oh," he added brightly—"oh, she's gone."

"The boat——?"

"The boat," affirmed Quain, too discouraged for the obvious retort ungracious. He stooped and caught up a frayed end of rope, exhibiting it in witness to his statement. "Ain't it hell?" he inquired plaintively.

Amber's gaze followed the rope, the further end of which was rove through the ring of a small grapnel anchor half buried in the spongy earth. "Gone!" he echoed dismally.

"Gone away from here," said Quain deliberately, nodding at the rope's end. "The tide floated her off, of course; but how this happened is beyond me. I could kill Antone." He named the Portuguese labourer charged

with the care of the boats at Tanglewood. "It's his job to see that these cables are replaced when they show signs of wear." He cast the rope from him in disdain and wheeled to stare baywards. "There!" he cried, levelling an arm to indicate a dark and fleeting shadow upon the storm-whipped waters. "There she goes—not three hundred feet off. It can't be five minutes since she worked loose. I don't see why . . . ! If it hadn't been for that damned cartridge . . . ! It's the devil's own luck!"

A blur of snow swept between boat and shore; when it had passed the former was all but indistinguishable. From a full heart Quain blasphemed fluently. . . . "But if she holds as she stands," he amended quickly, his indomitable spirit fostering the forlorn hope, "she'll go aground in another five minutes—and I know just where. I'll go after her."

"The deuce you will! How?"

"There's an old skimmy up the shore a ways." Already Quain was moving off in search of it. "Noticed her this morning. Daresay she leaks like a sieve, but at worst the water's pretty shoal inshore, hereabouts."

"Cold comfort in that."

"Better than none, you amiable——"

"Can you swim?" Amber demanded pointedly.

"Like a fish. And you?"

"Not like a fish."

"Damn!" Quain brought up short with a shin barked against a thwart of the rowboat he had been seeking, and in recognition of the mishap liberally insulted his luck.

Amber, knowing that his hurt was as inconsiderable as his ill-temper, which was more than half-feigned to mask his anxiety, laughed quietly, meanwhile inspecting their find with a critical eye.

"You don't seriously mean to put off in this crazy hen-coop, do you?" he asked.

"Just precisely that. It's the only way."

"It simple madness. I won't——"

"You don't want to stay here all night, do you?"

"No, but——"

"Well, then, lend us a hand and don't stand there grumbling. Be thankful for what you've got, which is me and my enterprise."

"Oh, all right."

Together they put their shoulders to the bows of the old, flat-bottomed rowboat, with incredible exertions uprooting it from its ancient bed, and at length had it afloat.

Panting, Quain mopped his forehead with a handkerchief much the worse for a day's association with gun-grease, and peered beneath his hand into the murk that veiled the bay.

"There she is," he declared confidently: "aground." He pointed. "I'll fetch up with her in no time."

But Amber could see nothing in the least resembling the catboat, and said so with decision.

"She's there, all right," insisted Quain. "'Tain't my fault if you're blind. Here, hold this, will you, while I find me a pole of some sort." He thrust into Amber's hand an end of rotten painter at which the rowboat strained, and wandered off into the night, in

the course of time returning with an old eel-pot stake, flotsam of some summer storm. "Pure, bull-headed luck!" he crowed, jubilant, brandishing his trophy; and jumped into the boat. "Now sit tight till I come back? . . . Huh—what?"

"I'm coming, too," Amber repeated quietly.

"The hell you are! D'you want to sink us? What do you think this is, anyway—an excursion steamer? You stay where you are and—I say—take care of this till I come back, like a good fellow."

He thrust the butt of his shot-gun into Amber's face, and the latter, seizing it, was rewarded by a vigorous push that sent him back half a dozen feet. At the same time the painter slipped from his grasp and Quain, lodging an end of the eel-pot stake on the hard sand bottom, put his weight upon it. Before Amber could recover, the boat had slid off and was melting swiftly into the shadows.

After a bit Quain's voice came back: "Don't fret, Davy. I'm all right.

Amber cupped hands to mouth and sent a cheerful hail ringing in response. Simultaneously the last, least, indefinite blur that stood for the boat in the darkness, vanished in a swirl of snow; and he was alone with the storm and his misgivings. Upon these he put a check—would not dwell upon them; but their influence none the less proved strong enough to breed in him a restless restlessness and keep him tramping up and down a five-yard stretch of comparatively solid earth: to and fro, stamping his feet to keep his blood circulating, lugging both guns, one beneath either arm, hunching his

shoulders up about his ears in thankless attempt to prevent wet flakes from sifting in between his neck and collar—thus, interminably it seemed, to and fro, to and fro. . .

In the course of time this occupation defeated its purpose; the very monotony of it sent his thoughts winging back to Quain; he worried more than ever for his friend, reproaching himself unmercifully for that he had suffered him to go alone—or at all. Quain had a wife and children; that thought proved insupportable. . . . Had he missed the catboat altogether? Or had he gained it only to find the motor disabled or the propeller fouled with the wiry eel-grass that choked the shoals? In either instance he would be at the mercy of the wind, for even with the sail close-reefed he would have no choice other than to fly before the fury. Or had the boat possibly gone aground so hard and fast that Quain had found himself unable to push her off and doomed to lie in her, helpless, against the fulling of the tide? Or (last and most grudged guess of all) had the “skimmy” proved as unseaworthy as its dilapidated appearance had proclaimed it?

Twenty minutes wore wearily away. Falling ever more densely, the snow drew an impenetrable wan curtain between Amber and the world of life and light and warmth; while with each discordant blast the strength of the gale seemed to wax, its high hysteric clamour at times drowning even the incessant deep bellow of the ocean surf. Once Amber paused in his patrol, having heard, or fancying he had heard, the staccato *plut-plut-plut* of a marine motor. On impulse, with a swelling

heart, he swung his gun skywards and pulled both triggers. The double report rang in his ears loud as a thunderclap.

In the moments that followed, while he stood listening, with every fibre of his being keyed to attention, the sense of his utter isolation chilled his heart as with cold steel.

A little frantically he loaded and fired again; but what at first might have been thought the faint far echo of a hail he in the end set down reluctantly to a trick of the hag-ridden wind; to whose savage voice he durst not listen long; in such a storm, on such a night, a man had but to hearken with a credulous ear to hear strange and terrible voices whispering, shrieking, gibbering, howling untold horrors. . . .

An hour passed, punctuated at frequent intervals by gunshots. Though they evoked no answer of any sort, hope for Quain died hard in Amber's heart. With all his might he laboured to convince himself that his friend must have overtaken the drifting boat, and, forced to relinquish his efforts to regain the beach, have scudded across the bay to the mainland and safety; but this seemed a surmise at best so far-fetched, and one as well not overlong to be dwelt upon, lest by that very insistence its tenuity be emphasised, that Amber resolutely turned from it to a consideration of his own plight and problematic way of escape.

His understanding of his situation was painfully accurate: he was marooned upon what a flood tide made a desert island but which at the ebb was a peninsula—a long and narrow strip of sand, bounded on the west by

the broad, shallow channel to the ocean, on the east connected with the mainland by a sandbar which half the day lay submerged.

He had, then, these alternatives: he might either compose himself to hug the leeward side of a dune till day-break (or till relief should come) or else undertake a five-mile tramp on the desperate hope of finding at the end of it the tide out and the sandbar a safe footway from shore to shore. Between the two he vacillated not at all; anything were preferable to a night in the dunes, beaten by the implacable storm, haunted by the thought of Quain; and even though he were to find the eastern causeway under water, at least the exercise would have served to keep him from freezing.

Ten minutes after his last cartridge had been fruitlessly discharged, he set out for the ocean beach, pausing at the first dune he came upon to scrape a shallow trench in the sand and cache therein both guns and his game-bag. Marking the spot with a bit of driftwood stuck upright, he pressed on, eventually pausing on the overhanging lip of a twenty-foot bluff. To its foot the beach below was aswirl knee-deep with the wash of breakers, broad patches of water black and glossy as polished ebony alternating with vast expanses of foam and clotted spume, all aglow with pale winter phosphorescence. Momentarily, as he watched, at once fascinated and appalled, mountainous ridges of blackness heaved up out of the storm's grey heart, offshore, and, curling crests edged with luminous white, swung in to crash and shatter thunderously upon the sands.

Awed and disappointed, Amber drew back. The beach

was impassable; here was no wide and easy road to the east, such as he had thought to find; to gain the sand-bar he had now to thread a tortuous and uncertain way through the bewildering dunes. And the prospect was not a little disconcerting; afraid neither of wind nor of cold, he was wretchedly afraid of going astray in that uncertain, shifting labyrinth. To lose oneself in that trackless wilderness. . . !

A demon of anxiety prodded him on: he must learn Quain's fate, or go mad. Once on the mainland it were a matter of facility to find his way to the village of Shampton, telephone Tanglewood and charter a "team" to convey him thither. He shut his teeth on his determination and set his face to the east.

Beset and roughly buffeted by the gale; the snow settling in rippling drifts in the folds of his clothing and upon his shoulders clinging like a cloth; his face cut by clouds of sand flung horizontally with well-nigh the force of birdshot from a gun: he bowed to the blast and plodded steadily on.

Imperceptibly fatigue benumbed his senses, blunted the keen edge of his emotions; even the care for Quain became a mere dull ache in the back of his perceptions; of physical suffering he was unconscious. He fell a prey to freakish fancies—could stand aside and watch himself, an atom whirling in the mad dance of the tempest, as the snow-flakes whirled, as little potent. He saw himself pitting his puny strength of mind and body against the infinite force of the elements: saw himself fall and rise and battle on, gaining nothing: an atom, sport of high gods! To the flight of time he grew quite obli-

ous, his thoughts wandering in the past, oddly afar to half-remembered scenes, to experiences more than half-forgotten, both wholly irrelevant; picturesque and painful memories cast up from the deeps of the subconsciousness by some inexplicable convulsion of the imagination. For a long time he moved on in stupid, wondering contemplation of a shining crescent of sand backed by a green, steaming wall of jungle; there was a dense blue sky above, and below, on the beach, dense blue waters curled lazily up the feet of a little, naked, brown child that played contentedly with a shell of rainbow hues. Again he saw a throng upon a pier-head, and in its forefront an unknown woman, plainly dressed, with deep brown eyes wherein Despair dwelt, tearless but white to the lips as she watched a steamer draw away. And yet again, he seemed to stand with others upon the threshold of the cardroom of a Hong-Kong club: in a glare of garish light a man in evening dress lay prone across a table on whose absorbent, green cloth a dark and ugly stain was widening slowly. . . . But for the most part he fancied himself walking through scented, autumnal woods, beside a woman whose eyes were kind and dear, whose lips were sweet and tempting: a girl he had known not an hour but whom already he loved, though he himself did not dream it nor discover it till too late. . . . And with these many other visions formed and dissolved in dream-like phantasmagoria; but of them all the strongest and most recurrent was that of the girl in the black riding-habit, walking by his side down the aisle of trees. So that presently the tired and overwrought man believed himself talking

with her, reasoning, arguing, pleading desperately for his heart's desire; . . . and wakened with a start, to hear the echo of her voice as though she had spoken but the instant gone, to find his own lips framing the syllables of her name—"Sophia!"

Thus strangely he came to know that beyond question he loved. And he stopped short and stood blinking blindly at nothing, a little frightened by the depth and strength of this passion which had come to him with such scant presage, realising for the first time that his need for her was an insatiable hunger of the soul. . . . And she was lost to him; half a world lay between them—or soon would. All his days he had awaited, a little curiously, a little sceptical, the coming of the thing men call Love; and when it had come to him he had not known it nor guessed it until its cause had slipped away from him. . . . Beyond recall?

Abruptly he regained consciousness of his plight, and with an effort shook his senses back into his head. It was not precisely a time when he could afford to let his wits go wool-gathering. And he realised that he had been, in a way, more than half-asleep as he walked; even now he was drowsy, his eyes were heavy, his feet leaden—and numb with cold besides. He had no least notion of what distance he might have travelled or whether he had walked in a straight line or a circle; but when he thought to glance over his shoulder—there was at the moment perhaps more wind with less snow than there had been for some time—he found the lighthouse watching him as it had from the first: as if he had not won a step away from it for all his strug-

gle and his pains. The white, staring eye winked sardonically through a mist of flakes, was blotted out and turned up a baleful red. It seemed to mock him, but Amber nodded at it with no unfriendly feeling. It still might serve his purpose very well, if his strength held, since he had merely to keep his back to the light and the ocean beach upon his right to win to the Shampton sandbar, whether soon or late.

Inflexible of purpose in the face of all his weariness and discouragement, he was on the point of resuming his march when he was struck by the circumstance that the whitened shoulder of a dune, quite near at hand, should seem as if frosted with light—coldly luminous.

Staring, speculative, he hung in the wind—inquisitive as a cat but loath to waste time in footless inquiry. The snow-fall, setting in with augmented violence, decided him. Where light was, there should be man, and where man, shelter.

His third eager stride opened up a wide basin in the dunes, filled with eddying veils of snow, and set, at some distance, with two brilliant squares of light—windows in an invisible dwelling. In the space between them, doubtless, there would be a door. But a second time he paused, remembering that the island was said to be uninhabited. Only yesterday he had asked and been so informed. . . . Odd!

So passing strange he held it, indeed, that he was conscious of a singular reluctance to question the phenomenon. That superstitious dread of the unknown which lies dormant in us all, in Amber stirred and awoke and held him back like a strong hand. Or, if there be

such a thing as a premonition of misfortune, he may be said to have experienced it in that hour; certainly a presentiment of evil crawled in his brain, and he hesitated at a time when he desired naught in the world so much as that which the windows promised—light, heat and human companionship. He had positively to force himself on to seek the door, and even when he had stumbled against its step he twice lifted his hand and let it fall without knocking.

There was not a sound within that he could hear above the clamour of the goblin night.

In the end, however, he knocked stoutly enough.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN PERDU

A shadow swept swiftly across one of the windows, and the stranger at the door was aware of a slight jarring, as though some more than ordinarily brutal gust of wind had shaken the house upon its foundation, or an inner door had been slammed violently. But otherwise he had so little evidence that his summons had fallen on aught but empty walls or deaf ears that he had begun to debate his right to enter without permission, when a chain rattled, a bolt grated, and the door swung wide. A flood of radiance together with a gust of heated air struck him in the face. Dazzled, he reeled across the threshold.

The door banged, and again the house in the dunes shuddered as the storm fell upon it with momentarily trebled ferocity; as if, cheated of its foreordained prey, it would rend apart his frail refuge to regain him.

Three paces within the room Amber paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust themselves to the light. Vaguely conscious of a presence behind him, he faced another—the slight, spare silhouette of a man's figure between him and the lamp; and at the same time felt that he was being subjected to a close scrutiny—both searching and, at its outset, the reverse of hospitable. But he had no more than become sensitive to this than the man

before him stepped quickly forward and with two strong hands clasped his shoulders.

"David Amber!" he heard his name pronounced in a voice singularly resonant and pleasant. "So you've run me to earth at last!"

Amber's face was blank with incredulity as he recognised the speaker. "Rutton!" he stammered. "Rutton—why—by all that's strange!"

"Guilty," said the other with a quiet laugh. "But sit down." He swung Amber about, gently guiding him to a chair. "You look pretty well done up. How long have you been out in this infernal night? But never mind answering; I can wait. Doggott!"

"Yes, sir."

"Take Mr. Amber's coat and boots and bring him my dressing-gown and slippers."

"Yes, sir."

"And a hot toddy and something to eat—and be quick about it."

"Very good, sir."

Rutton's body-servant moved noiselessly to Amber's side, deftly helping him remove his shooting-jacket, whereon snow had caked in thin and brittle sheets. His eyes, grey and shallow, flickered recognition and softened, but he did not speak in anticipation of Amber's kindly "Good-evening, Doggott." To which he responded quietly: "Good-evening, Mr. Amber. It's a pleasure to see you again. I trust you are well."

"Quite, thank you. And you?"

"I'm very fit, thank you sir."

“And”—Amber sat down again, Doggott kneeling at his feet to unlace and remove his heavy pigskin hunting-boots—“and your brother?”

For a moment the man did not answer. His head was lowered so that his features were invisible, but a dull, warm flush overspread his cheeks.

“And your brother, Doggott?”

“I’m sorry, sir, about that; but it was Mr. Rutton’s order,” muttered the man.

“You’re talking of the day you met Doggott at Nokomis station?” interposed his employer from the stand he had taken at one side of the fireplace, his back to the broad hearth whereon blazed a grateful drift-wood fire.

Amber looked up inquiringly, nodding an unspoken affirmative.

“It was my fault that he—er—prevaricated, I’m afraid; as he says, it was by my order.”

Rutton’s expression was masked by the shadows; Amber could make nothing of his curious reticence, and remained silent, waiting a further explanation. It came, presently, with an effect of embarrassment.

“I had—have peculiar reasons for not wishing my refuge here to be discovered. I told Doggott to be careful, should he meet any one we knew. Although, of course, neither of us anticipated . . .”

“I don’t think Doggott was any more dumfounded than I,” said Amber. “I couldn’t believe he’d left you, yet it seemed impossible that you should be here—of all places—in the neighbourhood of Nokomis, I mean. As for that—” Amber shook his head expressively, glanc-

ing round the mean room in which he had found this man of such extraordinary qualities. "It's altogether inconceivable," he summed up his bewilderment.

"It does seem so—even to me, at times."

"Then why—in Heaven's name——"

By now Doggott had invested Amber in his master's dressing-gown and slippers; rising he left them, passing out through an inner door which led, evidently, to the only other room in the cottage. Rutton delayed his reply until the man had shut the door behind him, then suddenly, with the manner of one yielding to the inevitable, drew a chair up to face Amber's and dropped into it.

"I see I must tell you something—a little; as little as I can help—of the truth."

"I'm afraid you must; though I'm damned if I can detect a glimmer of either rhyme or reason in this preposterous situation."

Rutton laughed quietly, lounging in his armchair and lacing before him the fingers of hands singularly small and delicate in view of their very considerable strength—to which Amber's shoulder still bore aching testimony.

"In three words," he said deliberately: "I am hiding."

"Hiding!"

"Obviously."

Amber bent forward, studying the elder man's face intently. Thin and dark—not tanned like Amber's, but with a native darkness of skin like that of the Spanish—it was strongly marked, its features at once promi-

ment and finely modelled. The hair intensely black, the eyes as dark and of peculiar fire, the lips broad, full, and sympathetic, the cheekbones high, the forehead high and something narrow: these combined to form a strangely striking ensemble, and none the less striking for its weird resemblance to Amber's own cast of countenance.

Indeed, their likeness one to the other was nothing less than weird in that it could be so superficially strong, yet so elusive. No two men were ever more unlike than these save in this superficial accident of facial contours and complexion. No one knowing Amber (let us say) could ever have mistaken him for Rutton; and yet any one, strange to both, armed with a description of Rutton, might pardonably have believed Amber to be his man. Yet manifestly they were products of alien races, even of different climes—their individualities as dissimilar as the poles. Where in Rutton's bearing burned an inextinguishable, almost an insolent pride, beneath an ice-like surface of self-constraint, in Amber's one detected merely quiet consciousness of strength and breeding—his inalienable heritage from many generations of Anglo-Saxon forebears; and while Rutton continually betrayed, by look or tone or gesture, a birth-right of fierce passions savagely tamed, from Amber one seldom obtained a hint of aught but the broad and humorous tolerance of an American gentleman.

But to-night the Virginian had undergone enough to have lost much of his habitual poise. "Hiding!" he reiterated in a tone scarcely louder than a whisper.

“And you have found me out, my friend.”

“But—but I don’t——”

Rutton lifted a hand in deprecation; and as he did so the door in the rear of the room opened and Doggott entered. Cat-like, passing behind Amber, he placed upon the table a small tray, and from a steaming pitcher poured him a glass of hot spiced wine. At a look from his employer he filled a second.

“There’s sandwiches, sir,” he said; “the best I could manage at short notice, Mr. Amber. If you’ll wait a bit I can fix you up something ’ot.”

“Thank you, Doggott, that won’t be necessary; the sandwiches look mighty good to me.”

“Thank you, sir Will there be anything else, Mr. Rutton?”

“If there is, I’ll call you.”

“Yes, sir. Good-night, sir. Good-night, Mr. Amber.”

As Doggott shut himself out of the room, Amber lifted his fragrant glass. “You’re joining me, Rutton?”

“With all my heart!” The man came forward to his glass. “For old sake’s sake, David. Shall we drink a toast?” He hesitated, with a marked air of embarrassment, then impulsively swung his glass aloft. “Drink standing!” he cried, his voice oddly vibrant. And Amber rose. “To the King—the King, God bless him!”

“To the King!” It was more an exclamation of surprise than an echo to the toast; nevertheless Amber drained his drink to the final drop. As he resumed his

seat, the room rang with the crash of splintering glass; Rutton had dashed his tumbler to atoms on the hearth-stone.

"Well!" commented Amber, lifting his brows questioningly. "You *are* sincere, Rutton. But who in blazes would ever have suspected you of being a British subject?"

"Why not?"

"But it seems to me I should have known——"

"What have you ever really known about me, David, save that I am myself?"

"Well—when you put it that way—little enough—nothing." Amber laughed nervously, disconcerted.

"And I? Who and what am I?" No answer was expected—so much was plain from Rutton's tone; he was talking to himself more than addressing his guest. His long brown fingers strayed to the box and conveyed a cigarette to his lips; staring dreamily into the fire, he smoked a little ere continuing. "What does it mean, this eternal 'I' round which the world revolves?" His voice trailed off into silence.

Amber snapped the tension with a chuckle. "You can search me," he said irreverently. And his host returned his smile. "Now, will you please pay attention to me, my friend? Or do you wish me to turn and rend myself with curiosity—after I've attended to these excellent sandwiches? . . . Seriously, I want to know several things. What have you been doing with yourself these past three years?"

Rutton shook his head gravely. "I can't say."

"You mean you won't?"

"If you will have it that way."

"Well . . . I give you up."

"That's the most profitable thing you could do, David."

"But, seriously now, this foolish talk about hiding is all a joke, isn't it?"

"No," said Rutton soberly; "no, it's no joke." He sighed profoundly. "As for my recent whereabouts, I have been—ah—travelling considerably; moving about from pillar to post." To this the man added a single word, the more significant in that it embodied the nearest approach to a confidence that Amber had ever known him to make: "Hunted."

"Hunted by whom?"

"I beg your pardon." Rutton bent forward and pushed the cigarettes to Amber's elbow. "I am—ah—so preoccupied with my own mean troubles, David, that I had forgotten that you had nothing to smoke. Forgive me."

"That's no matter, I——"

Amber cut short his impatient catechism in deference to the other's mute plea. And Rutton thanked him with a glance—one of those looks which, between friends, are more eloquent than words. Sighing, he shook his head, his eyes once more seeking the flames. And silently studying his face—the play of light from lamp and hearth throwing its features into salient relief—for the first time Amber, his wits warmed back to activity from the stupor the bitter cold had put upon them, noticed how time and care had worn upon the man since they had last parted. He had never suspected Rutton to be his

senior by more years than ten, at the most; to-night, however, he might well be taken for fifty were his age to be reckoned by its accepted signs—the hollowing of cheek and temple, the sinking of eyes into their sockets, the deepening of the maze of lines about the mouth and on the forehead.

Impulsively the younger man sat up and put a hand upon the arm of Rutton's chair. "What can I do?" he asked simply.

Rutton roused, returning his regard with a smile slow, charming, infinitely sad. "Nothing," he replied; "absolutely nothing."

"But surely——!"

"No man can do for me what I cannot do for myself. When the time comes"—he lifted his shoulders lightly—"I will do what I can. Till then . . ." He diverged at a tangent. "After all, the world is quite as tiny as the worn-out aphorism has it. To think that you should find me here! It's less than a week since Doggott and I hit upon this place and settled down, quite convinced we had, at last, lost ourselves . . . and might have peace, for a little space at least!"

Amber glanced curiously round the room; sparsely furnished, bare, unlovely, it seemed a most cheerless sort of spot to be considered a haven of peace.

"And now," concluded Rutton, "we have to move on."

"Because I've found you here?"

"Because you have found me."

"I don't understand."

"My dear boy, I never meant you should."

"But if you're in any danger——"

"I am not."

"You're not! But you just said——"

"I'm in no danger whatever; humanity is, if I'm found."

"I don't follow you at all."

Again Rutton smiled wearily. "I didn't expect you to, David. But this misadventure makes it necessary that I should tell you something; you must be made to believe in me. I beg you to; I'm neither mad nor making game of you." There was no questioning the sane sincerity of the man. He continued slowly. "It's a simple fact, incredible but absolute, that, were my whereabouts to be made public, a great, a staggering blow would be struck against the peace and security of the world. . . . Don't laugh, David; I mean it."

"I'm not laughing, Rutton; but you must know that's a pretty large order. Most men would——"

"Call me mad. Yes, I know," Rutton took up his words as Amber paused, confused. "I can't expect you to understand me: you couldn't unless I were to tell you what I may not. But you know me—better, perhaps, than any living man save Doggott . . . and one other. You know whether or not I would seek to delude you, David. And, knowing that I could not, you know why it seems to me imperative that, this hole being discovered, Doggott and I must betake ourselves elsewhere. Surely there must be solitudes——!" He rose with a gesture of impatience and began restlessly to move to and fro.

Amber started suddenly, flushing. "If you mean——"

Rutton's kindly hand forced him back into his chair. "Sit down, David. I never meant that—never for an instant dreamed you'd intentionally betray my secret. It's enough that you should know it, should occasionally think of me as being here, to bring misfortune down upon me, to work an incalculable disaster to the progress of this civilisation of ours."

"You mean," Amber asked uncertainly, "thought transference?"

"Something of the sort—yes." The man came to a pause beside Amber, looking down almost pitifully into his face. "I daresay all this sounds hopelessly melodramatic and neurotic and tommyrotic, David, but . . . I can tell you nothing more. I'm sorry."

"But only let me help you—any way in my power, Rutton. There's nothing I'd not do . . ."

"I know, David, I know it. But my case is beyond human aid, since I am powerless to apply a remedy myself."

"And you *are* powerless?"

Rutton was silent a long moment. Then, "Time will tell," he said quietly. "There is one way . . ." He resumed his monotonous round of the room.

Mechanically Amber began to smoke, trying hard to think, to penetrate by reasoning or intuition the wall of mystery which, it seemed, Rutton chose to set between himself and the world. The intense earnestness of the man's hopeless confession had carried conviction. Amber believed him, believed in the reality of his trouble;

and, divining it dimly, a monstrous, menacing shape in the vagueness of the unknown, was himself dismayed and a little fearful. He owed much to this man, was bound to him by ties not only of gratitude but of affection, yet, finding him distressed, found himself simultaneously powerless to render aid. Inwardly mutinous, he had to school himself to quiescence; lacking the confidence which Rutton so steadfastly refused him, he was impotent.

Presently he grew conscious that Rutton was standing as if listening, his eyes averted to the windows. But when Amber looked they showed, beneath their half-drawn muslin shades, naught save the grey horizontal rush of snow beyond the panes. And he heard nothing save the endless raving of the maniac wind.

"What is it?" he inquired at length, unable longer to endure the tensity of the pause.

"Nothing. I beg your pardon, David." Rutton returned to his chair, making a visible effort to shake off his preoccupation. "It's an ugly night, out there. Lucky you blundered on this place. Tell me how it happened. What became of the other man—your friend?"

The thought of Quain stabbed Amber's consciousness with a mental pang as keen as acute physical anguish. He jumped up in torment. "God!" he cried chokingly. "I'd forgotten! He's out there on the bay, poor devil!—freezing to death if not drowned. Our boat went adrift somehow; Quain would insist on going after her in a leaky old skiff we found on the shore . . . and didn't come back. I waited till it was hopeless, then

concluded I'd make a try to cross to Shampton by way of the tidal bar. And I must!"

"It's impossible," Rutton told him with grave sympathy.

"But I must; think of his wife and children, Rutton! There's a chance yet—a bare chance; he may have reached the boat. If he did, every minute I waste here is killing him by inches; he'll die of exposure! But from Shampton we could send a boat—"

"The tide falls about midnight to-night," interrupted Rutton, consulting his watch. "It's after nine,—and there's a heavy surf breaking over the bar now. By ten it'll be impassable, and you couldn't reach it before eleven. Be content, David; you're powerless."

"You're right—I know that," groaned Amber, his head in his hands. "I was afraid it was hopeless, but—but——"

"I know, dear boy, I know!"

With a gesture of despair Amber resumed his seat. For some time he remained deep sunk in dejection. At length, mastering his emotion, he looked up. "How did you know about Quain—that we were together?" he asked.

"Doggott saw you land this morning, and I've been watching you all day with my field-glasses, prepared to take cover the minute you turned my way. Don't be angry with me, David; it wasn't that I didn't yearn to see you face to face again, but that . . . I didn't dare."

"Oh, that!" exclaimed Amber with an exasperated

fling of his hand. "Between the two of you—you and Quain—you'll drive me mad with worry."

"I'm sorry, David. I only wish I might say more. It hurts a bit to have you doubt me."

"I don't doubt," Amber declared in desperation; "at least, I mean I won't if you'll be sensible and let me stand by and see you through this trouble—whatever it is."

Rutton turned to the fire, his head drooping despondently. "That may not be," he said heavily. "The greatest service you can do me is to forget my existence, now and henceforth, erase our friendship from the tablets of your memory, pass me as a stranger should our ways ever cross again." He flicked the stub of a cigarette into the flames. "Kismet! . . . I mean that, David, from my heart. Won't you do this for me—one last favour, old friend?"

"I'll try; I'll even promise, on condition that you send me word if ever you have need of me."

"That will be never."

"But if——"

"I'll send for you if ever I may, David; I promise faithfully. And in return I have your word?"

Amber nodded.

"Then . . ." Rutton attempted to divert the subject. "I think you said Quain? Any relation to Quain's 'Aryan Invasion of India'?"

"The same man. He asked me down for the shooting—owns a country place across the bay: Tanglewood."

"A very able man; I wish I might have met him.

. . . What of yourself? What have you been doing these three years? Have you married?"

"I've been too busy to think of that. . . . I mean, till lately."

"Ah?"

Amber flushed boyishly. "There was a girl at Quain's—a guest. . . . But she left before I dared speak. Perhaps it was as well."

"Why?"

"Because she was too fine and sweet and good for me, Rutton."

"Like every man's first love."

The elder man's glance was keen—too keen for Amber to dissimulate successfully under it. "You're right," he admitted ruefully. "It's the first sure-enough trouble of the sort I ever experienced. And, of course, it had to be hopeless."

"Why?" persisted Rutton.

"Because—I've half a notion there's a chap waiting for her at home."

"At home?"

"In England." The need for a confidant was suddenly imperative upon the younger man. "She's an English girl—half English, that is; her mother was an American, a schoolmate of Quain's wife; her father, an Englishman in the Indian service."

"Her name?"

"Sophia Farrell." A peculiar quality, a certain tensivity, in Rutton's manner, forced itself upon Amber's attention. "Why?" he asked. "Do you know the Farrells? What's the matter?"

Rutton's eyes met his stonily; out of the ashen mask of his face, that suddenly had whitened beneath the brown, they glared, afire but unseeing. His hands writhed, the fingers twisting together with cruel force, the knuckles grey. Abruptly, as if abandoning the attempt to reassert his self-control, he jumped up and went quickly to a window, there to stand, his back to Amber, staring fixedly out into the storm-racked night. "I knew her father," he said at length, his tone constricted and odd, "long ago, in India."

"He's out there now—a Political, I believe they call him, or something of the sort."

"Yes."

"She's going out to rejoin him."

"What!" Rutton came swiftly back to Amber, his voice shaking. "What did you say?"

"Why, yes. She travels with friends by the western route to join Colonel Farrell at Darjeeling, where he's stationed just now. Shortly after I came down she left; Mrs. Quain had a wire a day or so ago, saying she was on the point of sailing from San Francisco. . . . Good Lord, Rutton! are you ill?"

Something in the man's face had brought Amber to his feet, a prey to inexpressible concern; it was as if a mask had dropped and he were looking upon the soul of a man in mortal torture.

"No," gasped Rutton, "I'm all right. Besides," he added beneath his breath, so that Amber barely caught the syllables, "it's too late."

As rapidly as he had lost he seemed to regain mastery of his inexplicable emotion. His face became again

composed, almost immobile, and stepping to the table he selected a cigarette and rolled it gently between his slim brown fingers. "I'm sorry to have alarmed you," he said, his tone a bit too even not to breed a doubt in the mind of his hearer. "It's nothing serious—a little trouble of the heart, of long standing, incurable—I hope."

Perplexed, yet hesitating to press him further, Amber watched him furtively, instinctively assured that between this man and the Farrells there existed some extraordinary bond; wondering how that could be, convinced in his soul that somehow the entanglement involved the woman he loved, he still feared to put his suspicions to the question, lest he should learn that which he had no right to know . . . and while he watched was startled by the change that came over Rutton. At ease, one moment, outwardly composed if absorbed in thought, the next he was rigid, every muscle taut, every nerve tense as a steel spring, his keen, thoughtful face hardening with a look of brutal hatred, his eyes narrowing until no more than a glint of fire was visible between the lashes, lips straining apart until they showed thin and bloodless, with a gleam of white, set teeth between. His head jerked back suddenly, his gaze fixing itself first upon the window, then shifting to the door. And his fingers, contracting, tore the cigarette in half.

"Rutton, what the deuce is the matter?"

Rutton seemed not to hear; Amber got his answer from the door, which was swung wide and slammed shut. A blast of frosty air and a flurry of snow swept across

the room. And against the door there leaned a man puffing for breath and coughing spasmodically—a gross and monstrous bulk of flesh, unclean and unwholesome to the eye, attired in an extravagant array of coloured garments, tawdry silks and satins clinging, sodden, to his ponderous and unwieldy limbs.

“The babu!” cried Amber unconsciously; and was rewarded by a flash of recognition from the coal-black, beady, evil eyes of the man.

But for that involuntary exclamation the tableau held unbroken for a space; Rutton standing transfixed, the torn halves of the cigarette between his fingers, his head well up and back, his stare level, direct, uncompromising, a steady challenge to the intruder; the babu resting with one shoulder against the door, panting stertorously and trembling with the cold and exposure he had undergone, yet with his attention unflinchingly concentrated upon Rutton; and, finally, Amber, a little out of the picture and quite unconsidered of the others, not without a certain effect as of a supernumerary standing in the wings and watching the development of the drama.

Then, demanding Amber’s silence with an imperative movement of his hand, Rutton spoke. “Well, babu?” he said quietly, the shadow of a bitter and weary smile curving his thin, hard lips.

The Bengali moved a pace or two from the door, and plucked nervously at the throat of his surtout, finally managing to insert one hand in the folds of silk across his bosom.

“I seek,” he said distinctly in Urdu, and not without

a definite note of menace in his manner, "the man calling himself Rutton Sahib?"

Very deliberately Rutton inclined his head. "I am he."

"Hazoor!" The babu laboriously doubled up his enormous body in profound obeisance. Having recovered, he nodded to Amber with the easy familiarity of an old acquaintance. "To you, likewise, greeting, Amber Sahib."

"What!" Rutton swung sharply to Amber with an exclamation of amazement. "You know this fellow, David?"

The babu cut in hastily, stimulated by a pressing anxiety to clear himself. "Hazoor, I did but err, being misled by his knowledge of our tongue as well as by that pale look of you he wears. And, indeed, is it strange that I should take him for you, who was told to seek you in this wild land?"

"Be silent!" Rutton told him angrily.

"My lord's will is his slave's." Resignedly the babu folded his fat arms.

"Tell me about this," Rutton demanded of Amber.

"The ass ran across me in the woods south of the station, the day I came down," explained Amber, summarising the episode as succinctly as he could. "He didn't call me by your name, but I've no doubt he's telling the truth about mistaking me for you. At all events he hazoor-ed me a number of times, talked a lot of rot about some silly 'Voice,' and finally made me a free gift of a nice little bronze box that wouldn't open. After which he took to his heels, saying he'd call later

for my answer—whatever he meant by that. He did call by night and stole the box. That's about all I know of him, thus far. But I'd watch out for him, if I were you; if he isn't a raving luntic, I miss my guess."

"Indeed, my lord, it is all quite as the sahib says," the babu admitted graciously, his eyes gleaming with sardonic amusement. "Circumstances conspired to mislead me; but that I was swift to discover. Nor did I lose time in remedying the error, as you have heard. Moreover——"

He shut up suddenly at a sign from Rutton, with a ludicrous shrug of his huge shoulders disclaiming any ill-intent or wrong-doing; and while Rutton remained deep in thought by the table, the babu held silence, his gaze flickering suspiciously round the room, searching the shadows, questioning the closed door behind which Doggott lay asleep (evidence of which fact was not wanting in his snores), resting fleetingly on Amber's face, returning to Rutton. His features were composed; his face, indeed, might have been taken as a model for some weird mask of unctuous depravity, but for his eyes, which betrayed a score of differing phases of emotion. He was by turns apparently possessed by fear, malice, distrust, a subtle sense of triumph, contempt for Amber, deference to Rutton, and a feeling that he was master not alone of the situation but of the man whom he professed to honor so extravagantly.

At length Rutton looked up, suppressing a sigh. "Your errand, babu?"

"Is it, then, your will that I should speak before this man?" The Bengali nodded impudently at Amber.

"It is my will."

"Shabash! I bear a message, hazoor, from the Bell."

"You are the Mouthpiece of the Voice?"

"That honor is mine, hazoor. For the rest I am——"

"Behari Lal Chatterji," interrupted Rutton impatiently; "solicitor of the Inner Temple—disbarred; anointed thief, liar, jackal, lickspittle, and perjurer—I know you."

"My lord," said the man insolently, "omits from his catalogue of my accomplishments my chiefest honour; he forgets that, with him, I am an accepted Member of the Body."

"The Body wears strange members that employs you, babu," commented Rutton bitterly. "It has fallen upon evil days when such as you are charged with a message of the Bell."

"My lord is harsh to one who would be his slave in all things. Fortunate indeed am I to own the protection of the Token." A slow leer widened greasily upon his moon-like face.

"Ah, the Token!" Rutton repeated tensely, beneath his breath. "It is true that you have the Token?"

"Aye; it is even here, my lord." The heavy brown hand returned to the spot it had sought soon after the babu's entrance, within the folds of silk across his bosom, and groped therein for an instant. "Even here," he iterated with a maddening manner of supreme self-complacency, producing the bronze box and waddling over to drop it into Rutton's hand. "My lord is satisfied?" he gurgled maliciously.

Without answering Rutton turned the box over in his palm, his slender fingers playing about the bosses of the relief work; there followed a click and one side of it swung open. The Bengali fell back a pace with a whisper of awe—real or affected: "The Token, hazoor!" Amber himself gasped slightly.

Unheeded, the box dropped to the floor. Between Rutton's thumb and forefinger there blazed a great emerald set in a ring of red old gold. He turned it this way and that, inspecting it critically; and the lamp-light, catching on the facets, struck from it blinding shafts of intensely green radiance. Rutton nodded as if in recognition of the stone and, turning, with an effect of carelessness, tossed it to Amber.

"Keep that for me, David, please," he said. And Amber, catching it, dropped the ring into his pocket.

"My lord is satisfied with my credentials, then?" the babu persisted.

"It is the Token," Rutton assented wearily. "Now, your message. Be brief."

"The utterances of the Voice be infrequent, hazoor, its words few—but charged with meaning: as you know of old." The Bengali drew himself up, holding up his head and rolling forth his phrases in a voice of great resonance and depth. "These be the words of the Voice, hazoor:

"To all my peoples:

"Even now the Gateway of Swords yawns wide, that he who is without fear may pass within; to the end that the Body be purged of the Scarlet Evil.

“ ‘*The Elect are bidden to the Ordeal with no exception.*’ ”

The sonorous accents subsided, and a tense wait ensued, none speaking. Rutton stood in stony apathy, his eyes lifted to a dim corner of the ceiling, his gaze—like his thoughts—perhaps ranging far beyond the dreary confines of the cabin in the dunes. Minute after minute passed, he making no sign, the babu poised before him in inscrutable triumph, watching him keenly with his black and evil eyes of a beast. Amber hung breathless upon the issue, sensing a conflict of terrible forces in Rutton's mind, but comprehending nothing of their natures. In the hush within-doors he became acutely conscious of the war of elements without: the mad elfin yammering of the gale tearing at the cabin as though trying to seize it up bodily and whirl it off into the witches' dance of the storm; the deep and awful booming of the breakers, whose incessant impact upon the beach seemed to rock the very island on its base. Somehow he divined a similitude between the struggle within and the struggle without, seemed to see the contending elements personified before his eyes—the spirit of evil incarnate in the Bengali, vast, loathsome, terrible in his inflexibility of malign purpose; the force of right symbolized in Rutton, frail of stature, fine of mould, strong in his unbending loyalty to his conception of honour and duty. The Virginian could have predicted the outcome confidently, believing as he did in his friend. It came eventually on the heels of a movement of the babu's; unable longer to hold his pose, he shifted slightly. And Rutton awoke as from a sleep.

"The Voice has spoken, babu," he said, not ungently, "and I have heard."

"And your answer, lord?"

"There is no answer."

"Hazoor!"

"I have said," Rutton confirmed evenly, "there is no answer."

"You will obey?"

"That is between me and my God. Go back to the Hall of the Bell, Behari Lal Chatterji, and deliver your report; say that you have seen me, that I have listened to the words of the Voice, and that I sent no answer."

"Hazoor, I may not. I am charged to return only with you."

"Make your peace with the Bell in what manner you will, babu; it is no concern of mine. Go, now, while yet time is granted you to avoid a longer journey this night."

"Hazoor!"

"Go." Rutton pointed to the door, his voice imperative.

Upon this the babu abandoned argument, realising that further resistance were futile. And in a twinkling his dignity, his Urdu and his cloak of mystery, were discarded, and he was merely an over-educated and over-fed Bengali, jabbering babu-English.

"Oah, as for thatt," he affirmed easily, with an oleaginous smirk, "I daresay I shall be able to make adequate explanation. It shall be as you say, sar. I confess to fright, however, because of storm." He included

Amber affably in his confidences. "By Gad, sar, thees climate iss most trying to person of my habits. The journey hither *via* causeway from mainland was veree fearful. Thee sea is most agitated. You observe my wetness from association with spray. I am of opinion if I am not damn-careful I jolly well catch-my-death on return. But *thatt* is all in day's work."

He rolled sluggishly toward the door, dragging his inadequate overcoat across his barrel-like chest; and paused to cough affectingly, with one hand on the knob. Rutton eyed him contemptuously.

"If you care to run the risk," he said suddenly, "you may have a chair by the fire till the storm breaks, babu."

"Beg pardon?" The babu's eyes widened. "Oah, yess; I see. 'If I care to run risk.' Veree considerate of you, I'm sure. But as we say in Bengal, 'thee favour of kings iss ass a sword of two edges.' Noah, thanks; the servants of thee Bell do not linger by wayside, soa to speak. Besides, I am in great hurree. Mister Amber, good night. Rutton Sahib"—with a flash of his sinister humour—" *au revoir*; I mean to say, till we meet in thee Hall of thee Bell. Good night."

He nodded insolently to the man whom a little time since he had hailed as "my lord," shrugged his coat collar up round his fat, dirty neck, shivered in anticipation, jerked the door open and plunged ponderously out.

A second later Amber saw the confused mass of his turban glide past the window.

CHAPTER V

THE GOBLIN NIGHT

AMBER whistled low. "Impossible!" he said thoughtfully.

Rutton had crossed to and was bending over a small leather trunk that stood in one corner of the room. In the act of opening it, he glanced over his shoulder. "What?" he demanded sharply.

"I was only thinking; there's something I can't see through in that babu's willingness to go."

"He was afraid to stay."

"Why?"

Rutton, rummaging in the trunk, made no reply. After a moment Amber resumed.

"You know what Bengalis are; that fellow'd do anything, brave any ordinary danger, rather than try to cross that sandbar again—if he really came that way; which I am inclined to doubt. On the other hand, he's intelligent enough to know that a night like this in the dunes would kill him. Well, what then?"

Rutton was not listening. As Amber concluded he seemed to find what he had been seeking, thrust it hurriedly into the breast-pocket of his coat, and with a muttered word, unintelligible, dashed to the door and flung it open and himself out.

With a shriek of demoniac glee the wind entered into and took possession of the room. A cloud of snow swept

across the floor like a veil. The door battered against the wall as if trying to break it down. A pile of newspapers was swept from the table and scattered to the four corners of the room. The rug lifted beneath the table and flapped against it like a broken wing. The cheap tin kerosene lamp jumped as though caught up by a hand; its flame leapt high and blue above the chimney—and was not. In darkness but for the fitful flare of the fire that had been dying in embers on the hearth, Amber, seeking the doorway, fell over a chair, blundered flat into the wall, and stumbled unexpectedly out of the house.

His concern was all for Rutton; he had no other thought. He ran a little way down the hollow, heartsick with horror and cold with dread. Then he paused, bewildered. Other than the wan glimmer of the snow-clad earth he had no light to guide him; with this poor aid he could see no more than that the vale was deserted. Whither in that white whirling world Rutton might have wandered, it was impossible to surmise. In despair the Virginian turned back.

When he had found his way to the door of the cabin, it was closed; as he entered and shut it behind him, a match flared and expired in the middle of the room, and a man cursed brokenly.

“Rutton?” cried Amber in a flush of hope.

“Is that you, Mr. Amber? Thank Gawd! Wyte a minute.”

A second match spluttered, its flame waxing in the pink cup of Doggott's hands. The servant's head and shoulders stood out in dim relief against the darkness.

"I've burnt me 'and somethin' 'orrid on this damn' 'ot chimney," he complained nervously.

He succeeded in setting fire to the wick. The light showed him barefoot and shivering in shirt and trousers. He lifted a bemused red face to Amber, blinking and nursing his scorched hand. "For pity's syke, sir, w'at's 'appened?"

"It's hard to say," replied Amber vaguely, preoccupied. He went immediately to a window and stood there, looking out.

"But w'ere's Mr. Rutton, sir?"

"Gone—out there—I don't know just where." Amber moved back to the table. "You see, he had a caller."

"A caller, sir—on a night like this?"

"The man he came here to hide from," said Amber.

"I knew 'e was tryin' to dodge somethin', sir; but 'e never told me aught about it. What kind of a person was 'e, sir, and what made Mr. Rutton go aw'y with 'im?"

"He didn't; he went after him to . . ." Amber caught his tongue on the verge of an indiscretion; no matter what his fears, they were not yet become a suitable subject for discussion with Rutton's servant. "I think," he amended lamely, "he had forgotten something."

"And 'e's out there now! My Gawd, *what* a night!" He hung in hesitation for a little. "Did 'e wear 'is topcoat and 'at, sir?"

"No; he went suddenly. I don't think he intended to be gone long."

"I'd better go after 'im, then. 'E'll 'ave pneumonia

“ . . . I’ll just jump into me clothes and——” He slipped into the back room, to reappear with surprisingly little delay, fully dressed and buttoning a long ulster round his throat. “ You didn’t ’appen to notice which w’y ’e went, sir? ”

“ As well as I could judge, to the east.”

Doggott took down a second ulster and a cap from pegs in the wall. “ I’ll do my best to find ’im; ’e might lose ’imself, you know, with no light nor nothin’.”

“ And you? ”

“ I’ll be all right; I’ll follow ’is footprints in the snow. I’ve a ’andy little electric bull’s-eye to ’elp me, in my pocket.”

“ Are you armed, Doggott? ”

“ By Mr. Rutton’s orders, sir, I’ve carried a revolver for years. You aren’t thinkin’ it’s come to that, sir? ”

“ I don’t know . . . If I was sure I wouldn’t let you go alone,” said Amber, frowning. “ It’s only that Mr. Rutton may not want me about . . . I wish I knew! ”

“ It’ll be better, sir, for you to stay and keep the fire up—if you don’t mind my makin’ so free as to advise—in case ’e’s ’arf-froze when ’e gets back, as is likely. But I’d better ’urry, ’specially if . . .” Doggott’s color faded a little and his mouth tightened. “ But I ’ope you’re mistyken, sir. Good-night.”

The door slammed behind him.

Alone, and a prey to misgivings he scarce dared name to himself, Amber from the window watched the blot of light from Doggott’s handlamp fade and vanish in the storm; then, becoming sensible to the cold, went to the

fireplace, kicked the embers together until they blazed, and piled on more fuel.

A cosy, crackling sound began to be audible in the room; sibilant jets of flame, scarlet, yellow, violet, and green, spurted up from the driftwood. Under the hypnotic influence of the comforting warmth, weariness descended upon Amber like a burden; he was afraid to close his eyes or to sit down, lest sleep should overcome him for all his intense excitement and anxiety. He forced himself to move steadily round the room, struggling against a feeling that all that he had witnessed must have been untrue, an evil dream, akin to the waking visions that had beset him between the loss of Quain and the finding of Rutton. The very mediocrity of the surroundings seemed to discredit the testimony of his wits.

Unmistakably a camp erected for its owners' convenience during the hunting season, alike in design and furnishing the cabin was almost painfully crude and homely. The walls were of rough-hewn logs from which the bark had not been removed; the interstices were stopped only with coarse plaster; the partition dividing it into two rooms was of pine, unpainted. In one corner near Rutton's trunk, a bed-hammock swung from a beam. The few chairs were plain and rude. There were two deal tables, a plate-rack nailed to the partition, and a wall-seat in the chimney-corner. On the centre table, aside from the lamp, were a couple of books, some out-of-date magazines, and a common tin alarm-clock ticking stolidly.

In a setting so hopelessly commonplace and everyday, one act of a drama of blood and fire had been played;

into these mean premises the breath of the storm, as the babu entered, had blown Romance. . . . Incredible!

And yet Amber's hand, dropping idly in his coat-pocket, encountered a priceless witness to the reality of what had passed. Frowning, troubled, he drew forth the ring and slipped it upon his finger; rays of blinding emerald light coruscated from it, dazzling him. With a low cry of wonder he took it to the lamplight. Never had he looked upon so fine a stone, so strangely cut.

It was set in ruddy soft gold, worked and graven with exquisite art in the semblance of a two-headed cobra; inside the band was an inscription so worn and faint that Amber experienced some difficulty in deciphering the word RAO (king) in Devanagari, flanked by swastikas. Aside from the stone entirely, he speculated, the value of the ring as an antique would have proven inestimable. As for the emerald itself, in its original state, before cutting, it must have been worth the ransom of an emperor; much had certainly been sacrificed to fashion it in its present form. The cunning of a jewel-cutter whose art was lost before Tyre and Nineveh upreared their heads must have been taxed by the task. Its innumerable facets reproduced with wonderful fidelity a human eyeball, unwinking, sleepless. In the enigmatic heart of its impenetrable iris cold fire lived, cold passionless flames leaped and died and leaped again like the sorcerous fire of a pythoness.

To gaze into its depths was like questioning the inscrutable green heart of the sea. Fascinated, Amber felt his consciousness slip from him as a mantle might

slip from his shoulders; awake, staring wide-eyed into the emerald eye, he forgot self, forgot the world, and dreamed, dreamed curiously. . . .

The crash of the door closing behind him brought him to the right-about in a panic flutter. He glared stupidly for a time before comprehending that Rutton and Doggott had returned. How long they had been absent he had no means of reckoning; the interval might have been five minutes or an hour in duration. The time since he had stooped to examine the ring was as indefinite; but his back was aching and his thoughts were drowsy and confused. He had a sensation as of being violently recalled to a dull and colourless world from some far realm of barbaric enchantment. His brain reeled and his vision was blurred as if by the flash and glamour of many vivid colours.

With an effort he managed to force himself to understand that Rutton was back. After that he felt more normal. His thoughts slid back into their accustomed grooves.

If there were anything peculiar in his manner, Rutton did not remark it. Indeed, he seemed unconscious, for a time, of the presence either of Amber or of Doggott. The servant relieved him of his overcoat and hat, and he strode directly to the fire, bending over to chafe and warm his frost-nipped hands. Unquestionably he laboured under the influence of an extraordinary agitation. His limbs twitched and jerked nervously; his eyebrows were tensely elevated, his eyes blazing, his nostrils dilated; his face was ashen grey.

From across the room Doggott signalled silence to

Amber, with a forefinger to his lips; and with a discretion bred of long knowledge of his master's temper, tiptoed through into the back room and shut the door.

Amber respected the admonition throughout a wait that seemed endless.

The tin clock hammered off five minutes or more. Suddenly Rutton started and wheeled round, every trace of excitement smoothed away. Meeting Amber's gaze he nodded as if casually, and said, "Oh, Amber," quietly, with an effect of faint surprise. Then he dropped heavily into a chair by the table.

"Well," he said slowly, "that is over."

Amber, without speaking, went to his side and touched his shoulder with that pitifully inadequate gesture of sympathy which men so frequently employ.

"I killed him," said Rutton dully.

"Yes," replied Amber. He was not surprised; he had apprehended the tragedy from the moment that Rutton had fled him, speechless; the feeling of horror that he had at first experienced had ebbed, merged into a sort of apathetic acknowledgment of the inevitable.

After a bit Rutton turned to the table and drew an automatic pistol from his pocket, opening the magazine. Five cartridges remained in the clip, showing that two had been exploded. "I was not sure," he said thoughtfully, "how many times I had fired." His curiosity satisfied, he reloaded the weapon and returned it to his pocket. "He died like a dog," he said, "whimpering and blaspheming in the face of eternity . . . out

there in the cold and the night. . . . It was sickening—the sound of the bullets tearing through his flesh. . . .”

He shuddered.

“Didn’t he resist?” Amber asked involuntarily.

“He tried to. I let him pop away with his revolver until it was empty. Then . . .”

“What made you wait?”

“I didn’t care; it didn’t matter. One of us had to die to-night; he should have known that when I refused to accompany him back to . . . I was hungry for his bullet more than for his life; I gave him every chance. But it had to be as it was. That was Fate. Now . . .” He paused and after a little went on in a more controlled voice. “Quaintly enough, if there’s anything in the theory of heredity, David, my hands have been stained with no man’s blood before to-night. Yet my forebears were a murderous lot. . . . Until this hour I never realised how swift and uncontrollable could be the impulse to slay. . . .”

His voice trailed off into silence and he sat staring into the flickering flames that played about the driftwood. Now and again his lips moved noiselessly.

With a wrench Amber pulled himself together. He had been mentally a witness to the murder—had seen the Bengali, obese, monstrous, flabby, his unclean carcass a gross casing for a dark spirit of iniquity and treachery, writhing and whining in the throes of death. . . . “Rutton,” he demanded suddenly, without premeditation, “what are you going to do?”

“Do?” Rutton looked up, his eyes perplexed.

“Why, what is there to do? Get away as best I can, I presume—seek another hole to hide in.”

“But how about the law?”

“The law? Why need it ever be known—what has happened to-night? I can count on your silence—I have no need to ask. Doggott would die rather than betray me. He and I can dispose of—it. No one comes here at this time of the year save hunting parties; and their eyes are not upon the ground. You will go your way in the morning. We’ll clear out immediately after.”

“You’d better take no chances.”

Suddenly Rutton smote the table with his fist. “By Indur!” he swore strangely, his voice quavering with joy; “I had not thought of that!” He jumped up and began to move excitedly to and fro. “I am free! None but you and I know of the passing of the Token and the delivery of the message—none can possibly know for days, perhaps weeks. For so much time at least I am in no danger of——”

He shut his mouth like a trap on words that might have enlightened Amber.

“Of what?”

“Let me see: there are still waste places in the world where a man may lose himself. There’s Canada—the Hudson Bay region, Labrador. . . .”

A discreet knock sounded on the door in the partition, and it was opened gently. Doggott appeared on the threshold, pale and careworn. Rutton paused, facing him.

“Well?”

“Any orders, sir?”

"Yes; begin packing up. We leave to-morrow."

"Very good, sir."

"That is all to-night."

"Yes, sir. Good-night. Good-night, Mr. Amber."

The man retired and at intervals thereafter Amber could hear him moving about, apparently obeying orders.

Rutton replenished the fire and stood with his back to it, smiling almost happily. All evidence of remorse had disappeared. He seemed momentarily almost light-hearted, certainly in better spirits than he had been at any time that night. "Free!" he cried softly. "And by the simplest of solutions. Strange that I should never have thought before to-night of——" He glanced carelessly toward the window; and it was as if his lips had been wiped clean of speech.

Amber turned, thrilling, his flesh creeping with the horror that he had divined in Rutton's transfixed gaze.

Outside the glass, that was lightly silvered with frost, something moved—the spectral shadow of a turbaned head—moved and was stationary for the space of twenty heartbeats. Beneath the turban Amber seemed to see two eyes, wide staring and terribly alight.

"God!" cried Rutton thickly, jerking forth his pistol.

The shadow vanished.

With a single thought Amber sprang upon Rutton, snatched the weapon from his nerveless fingers, and, leaping to the door, let himself out.

The snow had ceased; only the wind raved with untempered force. Overhead it was blowing clear;

through rifts and rents in the fast-moving cloud-rack pale turquoise patches of moonlit sky showed, here and there inlaid with a far shining star. The dunes were coldly a-glimmer with the meagre light that penetrated to the earth and was cast back by its white and spotless shroud.

But Amber, at pause a few paces beyond the doorstep, his forefinger ready upon the trigger of the automatic pistol, was alone in the hollow.

Cautiously, and, to be frank, a bit dismayed, he made a reconnaissance, circling the building, but discovered nothing to reward his pains. The snow lay unbroken except in front of the cabin, where the traces of feet existed in profuse confusion; Amber himself, Rutton, Doggott, the babu, and perhaps another, had passed and repassed there; the trail they had beaten streamed out of the vale, to the eastwards. Only, before the window, through which he had seen the peering turbaned head, he found the impressions of two feet, rather deep and definite, toes pointing toward the house, as though some one had lingered there, looking in. The sight of them reassured him ridiculously.

"At least," he reflected, "disembodied spirits leave no footprints!"

He found Rutton precisely as he had left him, his very attitude an unuttered question.

"No," Amber told him, "he'd made a quick get-away. The marks of his feet were plain enough, outside the window, but he was gone, and . . . somehow I wasn't over-keen to follow him up."

"Right," said the elder man dejectedly. "I might

have known Chatterji would not have come alone. So my crime was futile." He spoke without spirit, as if completely fagged, and moved slowly to the door. "I don't want another interruption to-night," he continued, shooting the bolts. He turned to the windows, "Nor peeping Toms," he added, drawing the shade of one down to the sill.

Amber started for him in a panic. "Get away from that window, Rutton! For the love of heaven don't be foolhardy!"

Rutton drew the second shade deliberately. "Dear boy!" he said with his slow, tired smile, "I'm in no danger personally. Not a hair of my head will be touched until . . ." Again he left his thought half-expressed.

"But if that fellow out there was Chatterji's companion——!"

"He undoubtedly was. But you don't understand; my life is not threatened—yet."

"Chatterji fired at you," Amber argued stubbornly.

"Only when he found it was his life or mine. I tell you, David, if our enemy in the outer darkness were the babu's brother, he would not touch a hair of my head unless in self-defense."

"I don't understand. It's all so impossible!" Amber threw out his hands helplessly, "Unbelievable! For God's sake wake me up and tell me I've had a nightmare!"

"I would that were so, David. But the end is not yet."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Amber, startled.

"Simply, that we have more to endure, you and I. Consider the limitations of the human understanding, David; a little while ago I promised to ask your aid if ever the time should come when I might be free to do so; I said, 'That hour will never strike.' Yet already it is here; I need you. Will you help me?"

"You know that."

"I know. . . . One moment's patience, David." Rutton glanced at the clock. "Time for my medicine," he said; "that heart trouble I mentioned. . . ."

He drew from a waistcoat pocket a small silver tube, or phial, and uncorking this, measured out a certain number of drops into a silver spoon. As he swallowed the dose the phial slipped from his fingers and rang upon the hearthstone, spilling its contents in the ashes. A pungent and heady odour flavoured the air.

"No matter," said Rutton indifferently. "I shan't need it again for some time." He picked up and restored the phial to his pocket. "Now let me think a bit." He took a quick turn up the room and down again. Amber remarked that the medicine was having its effect; though the brilliance of Rutton's eyes seemed somewhat dimmed a dull flush had crept into his dark cheeks, and when he spoke it was in stronger accents—with a manner more assured, composed.

"A mad dance," he observed thoughtfully: "this thing we call life. We meet and whirl asunder—motes in a sunbeam. To-night Destiny chose to throw

us together for a little space; to-morrow we shall be irrevocably parted, for all time."

"Don't say that, Rutton."

"It is so written, David." The man's smile was strangely placid. "After this night, we'll never meet. In the morning Doggott will ferry you over——"

"Shan't we go together?"

"No," said Rutton serenely; "I must leave before you."

"Without Doggott?"

"Without Doggott; I wish him to go with you."

"Where?"

"On the errand I am going to ask you to do for me. You are free to leave this country for several months?"

"Quite. I corrected the final galleys of my 'Analysis of Sanskrit Literature' just before I came down. Now I've nothing on my mind—or hands. Go on."

"Wait." Rutton went a second time to the leather trunk, lifted the lid, and came back with two small parcels. The one, which appeared to contain documents of some sort, he cast negligently on the fire, with the air of one who destroys that which is no longer of value to him. It caught immediately and began to flame and smoke and smoulder. The other was several inches square and flat, wrapped in plain paper, without a superscription, and sealed with several heavy blobs of red wax.

Rutton drew a chair close to Amber and sat down, breaking the seals methodically.

"You shall go a long journey, David," he said slowly—"a long journey, to a far land, where you shall

brave perils that I may not warn you against. It will put your friendship to the test."

"I'm ready."

The elder man ripped the cover from the packet, exposing the back of what seemed to be a photograph. Holding this to the light, its face invisible to Amber, he studied it for several minutes, in silence, a tender light kindling in his eyes to soften the almost ascetic austerity of his expression. "In the end, if you live, you shall win a rich reward," he said at length. He placed the photograph face down upon the table.

"How—a reward?"

"The love of a woman worthy of you, David."

"But——!" In consternation Amber rose, almost knocking over his chair. "But—Great Scott, man!"

"Bear with me, David, for yet a little while," Rutton begged. "Sit down."

"All right, but——!" Amber resumed his seat, staring.

"You and Doggott are to seek her out, wherever she may be, and rescue her from what may be worse than death. And it shall come to pass that you shall love one another and marry and live happily ever after—just as though you were a prince and she an enchanted princess in a fairy tale, David."

"I must say you seem pretty damn' sure about it!"

"It must be so, David; it shall be so! I am an old man—older than you think, perhaps—and with age there sometimes comes something strangely akin to the gift of second-sight. So I know it will be so, though you think me a madman."

"I don't, indeed, but you . . . Well! I give it up." Amber laughed uneasily. "Go on. Where's this maiden in distress?"

"In India—I'm not sure just where. You'll find her, however."

"And then——?"

"Then you are to bring her home with you, without delay."

"But suppose——"

"You must win her first; then she will come gladly."

"But I've just told you I loved another woman, Rutton, and besides——"

"You mean the Miss Farrell you mentioned?"

"Yes. I——"

"That will be no obstacle."

"What! How in thunder d'you know it won't?" Amber expostulated. A faint suspicion of the truth quickened his wits. "Who is this woman you want me to marry?"

"My daughter."

"Your daughter!"

"My only child, David."

"Then why won't my—my love for Sophia Farrell interfere?"

"Because," said Rutton slowly, "my daughter and Sophia Farrell are the same. . . . No; listen to me; I'm not raving. Here is my proof—her latest photograph." He put it into Amber's hands.

Dazed, the younger man stared blankly at the likeness of the woman he loved; it was unquestionably she. Fair, sweet, and imperious, her face looked up to his

from the bit of cardboard in his hands; the direct and fearless eyes met his—eyes frank, virginal, and serene, beautiful with the beauty of a soul as unsullied and untroubled as the soul of a child.

He gasped, trembling, astounded. "Sophia . . .!" he said thickly, colouring hotly. He was conscious of a tightening of his throat muscles, making speech a matter of difficulty. "But—but——" he stammered.

"Her mother," said Rutton softly, looking away, "was a Russian noblewoman. Sophia is Farrell's daughter by adoption only. Farrell was once my closest friend. When my wife died . . ." He covered his eyes with his hand and remained silent for a few seconds. "When Sophia was left motherless, an infant in arms, Farrell offered to adopt her. Because I became, about that time, aware of this horror that has poisoned my life—this thing of which you have seen something to-night—I accepted on condition that the truth be never revealed to her. It cost me the friendship of Farrell; he was then but lately married and—and I thought it dangerous to be seen with him too much. I left England, having settled upon my daughter the best part of my fortune, retaining only enough for my needs. From that day I never saw her or heard from Farrell. Yet I knew I could trust him. Last summer, when my daughter was presented at Court, I was in London; I discovered the name of her photographer and bribed him to sell me this." He indicated the photograph.

"And she doesn't know!"

"She must never know." Rutton leaned forward and

caught Amber's hand in a compelling grasp. "Remember that. Whatever you do, my name must never pass your lips—with reference to herself, at least. No one must even suspect that you know me—Farrell least of all."

"Sophia knows that now," said Amber. "Quain and I spoke of you one night, but the name made no impression on her. I'm sure of that."

"That is good; Farrell has been true. Now . . . you will go to India?"

"I will go," Amber promised.

"You will be kind to her, and true, David? You'll love her faithfully and make her love you?"

"I'll do my best," said the young man humbly.

"It must be so—she must be taught to love you. It is essential, imperative, that she marry you and leave India with you without a day's delay."

Amber sat back in his chair, breathing quickly, his mouth tense. "I'll do my best. But, Rutton, why? Won't you tell me? Shouldn't I know—I, who am to be her husband, her protector?"

"Not from me. I am bound by an oath, David. Some day it may be that you will know. Perhaps not. You may guess what you will—you have much to go on. But from me, nothing. Now, let us settle the details. I've very little time." He glanced again at the shoddy tin clock, with a slight but noticeable shiver.

"How's that? It's hours till morning."

"I shall never see the dawn, David," said Rutton quietly.

"What——"

"I have but ten minutes more of life. . . . If you must know—in a word: poison. . . . That I be saved a blacker sin, David!"

"You mean that medicine—the silver phial?" Amber stammered, sick with horror.

"Yes. Don't be alarmed; it's slow but sure and painless, dear boy. It works infallibly within half an hour. There'll be no agony—merely the drawing of the curtain. Best of all, it leaves no traces; a diagnostician would call it heart-failure. . . . And thus I escape *that*." He nodded coolly toward the door.

"But this must not be, Rutton!" Amber rose suddenly, pushing back his chair. "Something must be done. "Doggott——"

"Not so loud, please—you might alarm him. After it's all over, call him. But now—it's useless; the thing is done; there's no known antidote. Be kind to me, David, in this hour of mine extremity. There's much still to be said between us . . . and in seven minutes more . . ."

Rutton retained his clutch upon Amber's hand; and his eyes, their lustre dimmed, held Amber's, pitiful, passionate, inexorable in their entreaty. Amber sat down, his soul shaken with the pity of it.

"Ah-h!" sighed Rutton. Relieved, the tension relaxed; he released Amber's hand; his body sank a little in the chair. Becoming conscious of this, he pulled himself together. . . . "Enter India by way of Calcutta," he said in a dull and heavy voice. "There, in the Machua Bazaar, you will find a goldsmith and money-lender called Dhola Baksh. Go to him secretly,

show him the ring—the Token. He will understand and do all in his power to aid you, should there be any trouble about your leaving with Sophia. To no one else in India are you to mention my name. Deny me, if taxed with knowing me. Do you understand?”

“No. Why?”

“Never mind—but remember these two things: you do not know me and you must under no circumstances have anything to do with the police. They could do nothing to help you; on the other hand, to be seen with them, to have it known that you communicate with them, would be the equivalent of a seal upon your death warrant. You remember the money-lender’s name?”

“Dhola Baksh of the Machua Bazaar.”

“Trust him—and trust Doggott. . . . Four minutes more!”

“Rutton!” cried Amber in a broken voice. Cold sweat broke out upon his forehead.

The man smiled fearlessly. “Believe me, this is the better way—the only way. . . . Some day you may meet a little chap named Labertouche—a queer fish I once knew in Calcutta. But I daresay he’s dead by now. But if you should meet him, tell him that you’ve seen his B-Formula work flawlessly in one instance at least. You see, he dabbled in chemistry and entomology and a lot of uncommon pursuits—a solicitor by profession, he never seemed to have any practice to speak of—and he invented this stuff and named it the B-Formula.” Rutton tapped the silver phial in his waistcoat pocket, smiling faintly. “He was a good

little man. . . . Two minutes. Strange how little one cares, when it's inevitable. . . ."

He ceased to speak and closed his eyes. A great stillness made itself felt within the room. In the other, Doggott was silent—probably asleep. Amber noted the fact subconsciously, even as he was aware that the high fury of the wind was moderating. But consciously he was bowed down with sorrow, inexpressibly racked.

In the hush the metallic hammering of the mean tin clock rang loud and harsh; Amber's heart seemed to beat in funeral time to its steady, unhurried, immutable ticking.

It was close upon two in the morning.

"Amber," said Rutton suddenly and very clearly, "you'll find a will in my despatch box. Doggott is to have all I possess. The emerald ring—the Token—I give to you."

"Yes, I—I——"

"Your hand. . . . Mine is cold? No? I fancied it was," said the man drowsily. And later: "Sophia. You will be kind to her, David?"

"On my faith!"

Rutton's fingers tightened cruelly upon his, then relaxed suddenly. He began to nod, his chin drooping toward his breast.

"The Gateway . . . the Bell . . ."

The words were no more than whispers dying on lips that stilled as they spoke.

For a long time Amber sat unmoving, his fingers imprisoned in that quiet, cooling grasp, his thoughts astray in a black mist of mourning and bewilderment.

Through the hush of death the tin clock ticked on, placidly, monotonously, complacently. In the fireplace a charred log broke with a crash and a shower of live cinders.

Out of doors something made a circuit of the cabin, like a beast of the night, stealthy footsteps muffled by the snow: *pad—pad—pad . . .*

In the emerald ring on Amber's finger the deathless fire leaped and pulsed.

CHAPTER VI

RED DAWN

PRESENTLY Amber rose and quietly exchanged dressing-gown and slippers for his own shooting-jacket and boots—which by now were dry, thanks to Doggott's thoughtfulness in placing them near the fire.

The shabby tin clock had droned through thirty minutes since Rutton had spoken his last word. In that interval, sitting face to face, and for a little time hand in hand, with the man to whom he had pledged his honour, Amber had thought deeply, carefully weighing ways and means; nor did he move until he believed his plans mature and definite.

But before he could take one step toward redeeming his word to Rutton, he had many cares to dispose of. In the hut, Rutton lay dead of poison; somewhere amongst the dunes the babu lay in his blood, shot to death—foully murdered, the world would say. Should these things become known, he would be detained indefinitely in Nokomis as a witness—if, indeed, he escaped a graver charge.

It was, then, with a mind burdened with black anxiety that he went to arouse Doggott.

The rear room proved to be as cheerless as the other. Of approximately the same dimensions, it too had been furnished with little regard for anything but the barest conveniences of camp-life. It contained a small sheet-

iron stove for cooking, a table, a rack of shelves, two chairs, and a rickety cot-bed in addition to another trunk. On the table a tin kerosene-lamp had burned low, poisoning the air with its bitter reek. On the cot Doggott sprawled in his clothing, his strained position—half reclining, feet upon the floor—suggesting an un contemplated surrender to fatigue. His face was flushed and he was breathing heavily.

The Virginian stood over him for several minutes before he could bring himself to the point of awakening the man to the news of Rutton's death. Aware of that steadfast loyalty which Doggott had borne his master through many years of service, he shrank with conceivable reluctance from the duty. But necessity drove him with a taut rein; and finally he bent over and shook the sleeper by the shoulder.

With a jerk the man sat up and recognised Amber.

"Beg pardon, sir," he muttered, lifting himself sluggishly; "I didn't mean to fall asleep—I'd only sat down for a moment's rest. Has—has anything gone bad, sir?" he added hastily, remarking with troubled eyes the sympathy and concern in Amber's expression.

Amber looked away. "Mr. Rutton is dead, Doggott," he managed to say with some difficulty.

Doggott exclaimed beneath his breath. "Dead!" he cried in a tone of daze. In two strides he had left Amber and was kneeling by Rutton's side. The most cursory examination, however, sufficed to resolve his every doubt: the hanging head and arms, the livid face with its staring yet sightless eyes, the shrunken figure seeming so pitifully slight and unsubstantial in com-

parison with its accustomed strong and virile poise, hopelessly confirmed Amber's statement.

"Dead!" whispered the servant. He rose and stood swaying, his lips a-tremble, his eyes blinking through a mist, his head bowed. "'E always was uncommon' good to me, Mr. Amber," he said brokenly. "It's a bit 'ard, comin' this w'y. 'Ow—'ow did it——" He broke down completely for a time, and staggered away to the wall, there to stand with his head pillowed on his crossed forearms.

When he had himself in more control Amber told him as briefly as possible of the head at the window and of its sequel—Rutton's despairing suicide.

Doggott listened in silence, nodding his comprehension. "I've always looked for it, sir," he commented. "'E'd warned me never to touch that silver tube; 'e never said poison, but I suspected it, 'e being blue and melancholy-like, by fits and turns—'e never told me why."

Then, reverently, they took up the body and laid it out upon the hammock-bed, Doggott arranging the limbs and closing the eyes before spreading a sheet over the rigid form.

"And now, what, Mr. Amber?" he asked.

Amber had returned to the table. He pondered his problems for some time before answering; a distasteful duty devolved upon him of questioning the servant about his master's secrets, of delving into the mystery which Rutton had chosen always to preserve about himself—which, indeed, he had chosen to die without disclosing to the man whom he had termed his sole intimate. Yet this task, too, must be gone through with.

"Mr. Rutton spoke of a despatch-box, Doggott. You know where to find it?"

"Yes, sir."

The servant brought from Rutton's leather trunk a battered black-japanned tin box, which, upon exploration, proved to contain little that might not have been anticipated. A bankbook issued by the house of Rothschild Frères, Paris, showed a balance to the credit of H. D. Rutton of something slightly under a million francs. There was American money, chiefly in gold certificates of large denominations, to the value of, roundly, twenty thousand dollars, together with a handful of French, German and English bank-notes which might have brought in exchange about two hundred and fifty dollars. In addition to these there was merely a single envelope, superscribed: "To be opened in event of my death only. H. D. R."

Amber broke the seal and read the enclosures once to himself and a second time aloud to Doggott. The date was barely a year old.

"For reasons personal to myself and sufficient," Rutton had written, "I choose not to make a formal will. I shall die, probably in the near future, by my own hand, of poison. I wish to emphasise this statement in event the circumstances surrounding my demise should appear to attach suspicion of murder upon any person or persons whatever. I am a widower and childless. What relations may survive me are distant and will never appear to claim what estate I may leave—this I know. I therefore desire that my body-servant, Henry Doggott, an English citizen, shall inherit and appro-

priate to his own use all my property and effects, providing he be in my service at the time of my death. To facilitate his entering into possession of my means, whatever they may be, without the necessity of legal procedure of any kind, I enclose a cheque to his order upon my bankers, signed by myself and bearing the date of this memorandum. He is to fill it in with the amount remaining to my credit upon my bank-book. Should he have died or left me, however, the disposition of my effects is a matter about which I am wholly careless."

The signature was unmistakably genuine—the formal "H. D. Rutton" with which Amber was familiar. It was unwitnessed.

The Virginian put aside the paper and offered Doggott the blank cheque on Rothschilds'. "This," he said, "makes you pretty nearly independently rich, Doggott."

"Yes, sir." Doggott took the slip of paper in a hand that trembled even as his voice, and eyed it incredulously. "I've never 'ad anything like this before, sir; I 'ardly know what it means."

"It means," explained Amber, "that, when you've filled in that blank and had the money collected from the Rothschilds, you'll be worth—with what cash is here—in the neighbourhood of forty-five thousand pounds sterling."

Doggott gasped, temporarily inarticulate. "Forty-five thousand pounds! . . . Mr. Amber," he declared earnestly, "I never looked for nothin' like this I—I never—I—" Quite without warning he was quiet and composed again. "Might I ask it of you as a

favour, sir, to look after this"—he offered to return the cheque—"for a while, till I can myke up my mind what to do with it."

"Certainly." Amber took the paper, folded it and placed it in his card-case. "I'd suggest that you deposit it as soon as possible in a New York bank for collection. In the meantime, these bills are yours; you'd better take care of them yourself until you open the banking account. I'll keep Mr. Rutton's bank-book with the cheque." He placed the book in his pocket with the singular document Rutton had called his "will," and motioned Doggott to possess himself of the money in the despatch-box.

"It'll keep as well in 'ere as anywheres," Doggott considered, relocking the box. "I 'aven't 'ardly any use for money, except, of course, to tide me over till I find another position."

"What!" exclaimed Amber in amaze.

"Yes, sir," affirmed Doggott respectfully. "I'm a bit too old to chynge my w'ys; a valet I've been all my life and a valet I'll die, sir. It's too lyte to think of anything else."

"But with this money, Doggott——"

"Beg pardon, sir, but I know; I could live easy like a gentleman if I liked—but I wouldn't be a gentleman, so what's the use of that? I could go 'ome and buy me a public-'ouse; but that wouldn't do neither. I'd not be 'appy; if you'll pardon my s'ying so, I've associated too long with gentlemen and gentlemen's gentlemen to feel at ease, so to speak, with the kind that 'angs round publics. So the w'y I look at it, there's

naught for me but go on valeting until I'm too old; after that the money'll be a comfort, I dares'y. . . . Don't you think so, sir?"

"I believe you're right, Doggott; only, your common-sense surprises me. But it makes it easier in a way. . . ." Amber fell thoughtful again.

"'Ow's that, sir—if I m'y ask?"

"This way," said Amber: "Before he died, Mr. Rutton asked me to do him a service. I agreed. He suggested that I take you with me."

"I'm ready, sir," interrupted Doggott eagerly. "There's no gentleman I'd like to valet for better than yourself."

"But there will be dangers, Doggott—I don't know precisely what. That's the rub: we'll have to travel half-way round the world and face unknown perils. If Mr. Rutton were right about it, we'll be lucky to get away with our lives."

"I'll go, sir; it was 'is wish. I'll go with you to India, Mr. Amber."

"Very well. . . ." Amber spoke abstractedly, reviewing his plans. "But," he enquired suddenly, "I didn't mention India. How did you know——?"

"Why—I suppose I must 'ave guessed it, sir. It seemed so likely, knowing what I do about Mr. Rutton."

Amber sat silent, unable to bring himself to put a single question in regard to the dead man's antecedents. But after a pause the servant continued voluntarily.

"He always 'ad a deal to do with persons who came from India—niggers—I mean, natives. It didn't much matter where we'd be—London or Paris or Berlin or

Rome—they'd 'unt 'im up; some 'e'd give money to and they'd go aw'y; others 'e'd be locked up with in 'is study for hours, talking, talking. They'd 'ardly ever come the same one twice. 'E 'ated 'em all, Mr. Rutton did. And yet, sir, I always 'ad a suspicion——”

Doggott hesitated, lowering his voice, his gaze shifting uneasily to the still, shrouded figure in the corner.

“What?” demanded Amber tensely.

“I alw'ys thought per'aps 'e was what we call in England a man of colour, 'imself, sir.”

“Doggott!”

“I don't mean no 'arm, sir; it was just their 'ounding him, like, and 'is being a dark-complected man the syne as them, and speakin' their language so ready, that made me think it. At least 'e might 'ave 'ad a little of their blood in 'im, sir. Things 'd seem unaccountable otherwise,” concluded Doggott vaguely.

“It's impossible!” cried Amber.

“Yes, sir; at least, I mean I 'ope so, sir. Not that it 'd myke any difference to me, the w'y I felt towards 'im. 'E was a gentleman, white or black. I'd 've died for 'im any d'y.”

“Doggott!” The Virginian had risen and was pacing excitedly to and fro. “Doggott! don't ever repeat one word of this to man or woman—while you're faithful to the memory of Mr. Rutton.”

The servant stared, visibly impressed. “Very good, Mr. Amber. I'll remember, sir. I don't ordinarily gossip, sir; but you and him being so thick, and everything 'appening to-night so 'orrible, I forgot myself. I 'ope you'll excuse me, sir.”

“God in Heaven!” cried the young man hoarsely. “It can’t be true!” He flung himself into his chair, burying his face in his hands. “It can’t!”

Yet irresistibly the conviction was being forced upon him that Doggott had surmised aright. Circumstance backed up circumstance within his knowledge of or his experience with the man, all seeming to prove incontestably the truth of what at the first blush had seemed so incredible. What did he, Amber, know of Rutton’s parentage or history that would refute the calm belief of the body-servant of the dead man? Rutton himself had consistently kept sealed lips upon the subject of his antecedents; in Amber’s intercourse with him the understanding that what had passed was a closed book had been implicit. But it had never occurred to Amber to question the man’s title to the blood of the Caucasian peoples. Not that the mystery with which Rutton had ever shrouded his identity had not inevitably of itself been a provocation to Amber’s imagination; he had hazarded many an idle, secret guess at the riddle that was Rutton. Who or what the man was or might have been was ever a field of fascinating speculation to the American, but his wildest conjecture had never travelled east of Italy or Hungary. He had always fancied that one, at least, of Rutton’s parents had been a native of the European Continent. He had even, at a certain time when his imagination had been stimulated by the witchery of “Lavengro” and “The Romany Rye,” gone so far as to wonder if, perchance, Rutton were not descended from Gipsy stock—a fancy which he was quick to dismiss as absurd. Yet now it seemed as if he

had not been far wrong; if Doggott were right—and Amber had come to believe that the valet was right—it was no far cry from the Hindu to the Romany, both offshoots of the Aryan root.

And then Amber's intelligence was smitten by a thought as by a club; and he began to tremble violently, uncontrollably, being weakened by fatigue and the strain of that endless, terrible night. A strangled cry escaped him without his knowledge: "Sophia!"

Sophia Farrell, the woman he had promised to wed, nay even the woman he loved with all his being—a half-breed, a mulatto! His mind sickened with the horror of that thought. All the inbred contempt of the Southerner for the servile races surged up to overwhelm his passion, to make it seem more than impossible, revolting, that the mistress of his dreams should be a creature tainted by the blood of a brown-skinned people. Though her mother had been of noble Russian family, as her father had declared; though her secret were contained in his knowledge and Farrell's alone, and though it were to be preserved by them ever inviolate—could he, David Amber, ever forget it? Could he make her his bride and take her home to his mother and his sisters in Virginia—offer them as daughter and sister a woman who, though she were fairer than the dawn, was in part a product of intermarriage between white and black?

His very soul seemed to shudder and his reason cried out that the thing could never be. . . . Yet in his heart of hearts still he loved her, still desired her with all his strength and will; in his heart there was no wavering. Whatever Rutton had been, whatever his daugh-

ter might be, he loved her. And more, the honour of the Ambers was in pledge, holding him steadfast to his purpose to seek her out in India or wherever she might be and to bear her away from the unnamed danger that threatened her—even to marry her, if she would have him. He had promised; his word had passed; there could now be no withdrawal. . . .

An hour elapsed, its passing raucously emphasised by the tin clock. Amber remained at the table, his head upon it, his face hidden by his arms, so still that Doggott would have thought him sleeping but for his uneven breathing.

On tiptoe the man-servant moved in and out of the room, making ready for the day, mechanically carrying out his dead master's last instructions, to pack up against an early departing. His face was grave and sorrowful and now and again he paused in the midst of his preparations to watch for an instant the sheeted form upon the hammock-bed, his head bowed, his eyes filling; or to cast a sympathetic glance at the back and shoulders of the living, his new employer. In his day Doggott had known trouble; he was ignorant of the cause, but now intuitively he divined that Amber was suffering mental torment indescribable and beyond his power to assuage.

At length the young man called him and Doggott found him sitting up, with a haggard and careworn face but with the sane light of a mind composed in his eyes.

"Doggott," he asked in an even, toneless voice, "have you ever mentioned to anybody your suspicion about Mr. Rutton's race?"



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SOPHIA FARRELL

"Only to you, sir."

"That's good. And you won't?"

"No, sir."

"Have you," continued Amber, looking away and speaking slowly, "ever heard him mention his marriage?"

"Never, sir. 'E says in that paper 'e was a widower; I fancy the lady must have died before I entered 'is service. 'E was always a lonely man, all the fifteen year I've been with 'im, keepin' very much to 'imself, sir."

"He never spoke of a—daughter?"

"No, sir. Didn't 'e say 'e was childless?"

"Yes. I merely wondered. . . . Tell me, now, do you know of any letters or papers of his that we should destroy? If there are any, he would wish us to."

"'E never 'ad many, sir. What letters 'e got 'e answered right away and destroyed 'em. There was a little packet in 'is trunk, but I see that's gone."

"He burned it himself this evening. There's nothing else?"

"Nothing whatever, sir."

"That's all right, then. We have nothing to do but . . . see that he's decently buried and get away as soon as we can. There's no time to lose. It's after four, now, and as soon as it's daylight— You must have a boat somewhere about?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Rutton 'ad me 'ire a little power launch before 'e came down. It's down by the bayside, 'alf a mile aw'y."

"Very well. The wind is dying down and by sunrise the bay will be safe to cross—if it isn't now. These

shallow waters smoothe out very quickly. We'll——” He cut his words short and got up abruptly with a sharp exclamation: “What’s that?”

Doggott, too, had heard and been startled. “It sounded like a gun-shot, sir, and a man shouting,” he said, moving toward the door.

But Amber anticipated him there.

As he stepped out into the bitter-cold air of early morning, he received an impression that a shadow in the hollow had been alarmed by his sudden appearance and had flitted silently and swiftly out upon the beaten eastward path. But of this he could not be sure.

He stood shivering and staring, waiting with attentive senses for a repetition of the sound. The wind had indeed fallen, and the world was very still—a hush that overspread and lay unbroken upon the deep, ceaseless growling of the sea, like oil on water. The moon had set and the darkness was but faintly tempered by the starlight on the snow—or was it the first wan promise of the dawn that seemed to quiver in the formless void between earth and sky?

In the doorway Doggott grew impatient. “You don’t ’ear anything, sir?”

“Not a sound.”

“It’s cruel cold, Mr. Amber. ’Adn’t you better come inside, sir?”

“I suppose so.” He abandoned hope disconsolately and returned to the hut, his teeth inclined to chatter and his stomach assailed by qualms—premonitions of exhaustion in a body insufficiently nourished.

Doggott, himself similarly affected, perhaps, was

quick to recognise the symptoms. "I'll get a bite of breakfast, sir," he suggested; "you 'aven't 'ad enough to eat, and 'unger's tyking 'old of you. If you'll pardon my saying so, you look a bit sickly; but a cup of hot coffee 'll set that right in a jiffy."

"Thank you, Doggott; I believe you're right. Though disappointment has a good deal to do with the way I look. I'd hoped it might be Mr. Quain come to look for me."

Doggott disappeared to prepare the meal, but within five minutes a second gun-shot sounded startlingly near at hand. The Virginian's appearance at the door was coincident with a clear hail of "Aho-oy, Amber!"—unmistakably Quain's voice, raised at a distance of not over two hundred yards.

Amber's answering cry quavered with joy. And with a bear-like rush Quain topped the nearest dune; dropped down into the hollow, and was upon him.

"By the Lord Harry!" he cried, almost embracing Amber in his excitement and relief; "I'd almost given you up for good and all!"

"And I you," said Amber, watching curiously and somewhat distrustfully a second man follow Quain into the vale. "Who's that?" he demanded.

"Only Antone. We've him to thank. He remembered this old camp here—I'd completely forgotten it—and was sure you'd taken refuge in it. Come inside." He dragged Amber in, the Portuguese following. "Let's have a look at you by the light. Lord! you seem to be pretty comfortable—and I've been worrying myself sick for fear you——" He swept the room with

an approving glance which passed over Doggott and became transfixed as it rested upon the hammock-bed with its burden; and his jaw fell. "What's this? What's this?" He swung upon Amber, appraising with relentless eyes the havoc his night's experience had wrought upon the man. "You look like hell!" he exploded. "What's up here? Eh?"

Amber turned to Doggott. "Take Antone out there with you and keep him until I call, please. This is Mr. Quain; I want to talk with him undisturbed. . . . But you can bring us coffee when it's ready."

Quain motioned to Antone; the Portuguese disappeared into the back room with Doggott, who closed the communicating door.

"You first," said Amber. "If you've fretted about me, I've been crazy about you—what time I've had to think."

Quain deferred to his insistence. "It was simple enough—and damned hard," he explained. "I caught the *Echo* by the skin of my teeth, the skimmy almost sinking under me. She was hard and fast aground, but I managed to get the motor going and backed her off. As soon as that was all right we got a wave aboard that soused the motor—like a fool I'd left the hatch off—and short-circuited the coil. After that there was hell to pay. I worked for half an hour reefing, and meanwhile we went aground again. The oar broke and I had to go overboard and get wet to my waist before I got her off. By that time it was blowing great guns and dead from the beach. I had to stand off and make for the mainland—nothing else to do. We beached

about a mile below the lighthouse and I had the four-mile tramp home. Then after I'd thawed out and had a drink and a change of clothes, we had to wait two hours for the sea to go down enough to make a crossing in the launch practicable. That's all for mine. Now you? What's that there?"

"A suicide; a friend of mine—the man Rutton whom we were discussing the night I came down. And that's not half. There's a man out there somewhere, shot to death by Rutton—a Bengali babu. . . . Quain, I've lived in Purgatory ever since we parted and now . . . I'm about done."

He was; the coming of Quain with the ease of mind it brought had snapped the high nervous tension which had sustained Amber. He was now on the edge of collapse and showed it plainly. But two circumstances aided him to recover his grip upon himself: Quain's compassionate consideration in forbearing to press his story from him, and Doggott's opportune appearance with a pot of coffee, steaming and black. Two cups of this restored Amber to a condition somewhat approaching the normal. He lit a cigarette and began to talk.

For all his affection for and confidence in his friend, there were things he might not tell Quain; wherefore he couched his narrative in the fewest possible words and was miserly of detail. Of the coming of the babu and his going Amber was fairly free to speak; he suppressed little if any of that episode. Moreover he had forgotten to remove the Token from his finger, and Quain instantly remarked it and demanded an explanation. But of the nature of the errand on which he was

to go, Amber said nothing; it was, he averred, Rutton's private business. Nor did he touch upon the question of Rutton's nationality. Sophia Farrell he never mentioned.

Nevertheless, he said enough to render Quain thoughtful. . . . "You're set on this thing, I suppose?" he asked some time after Amber had concluded.

"Set upon it, dear man? I've no choice. I must go—I promised."

"Of course. That's you, all over. Personally, I think it'll turn out a fool's errand. But there's something you haven't told me—I'm not ass enough to have missed that and no doubt that influences you."

"I've told you everything that, in honor, I could."

"Hmm—yes; I dare say. . . ." Quain scowled over the problem for some time. "It's plain enough," he asserted forcibly: "that man was involved in some infernal secret society. Just how and why's the question. Think I'll have a look at him."

Amber would have protested, but thought better of it and held his peace while Quain went to the hammock-bed, turned back the sheet, and for several minutes lingered there, scrutinising the stony, upturned face.

"So!" he said, coming back. "Here's news that'll help you some. You were blind not to see it yourself. That man's—was, I should say—a Rajput." He waited for the comment which did not come. "You knew it?"

"I . . . suspected, to-night."

"It's as plain as print; the mark of his caste is all

over him. But perhaps he was able to disguise it a little with his manner—alive; undoubtedly, I'd say. He was a genius of his kind—a prodigy; a mental giant. That translation of the 'Tantras'—! Wonderful! . . . Well, he's gone his own way: God be with him. . . . When do you want to start?"

"As soon as possible—sooner. I've not a day to lose—not an hour."

"Urgent as that, eh?" Quain peered keenly into his face. "I wish I knew what you know. I wish to Heaven I might go with you. But I'm married now—and respectable. If I 'ear the East a-callin' and daren't answer, it's my own fault for ever being fool enough to have heard it. Well . . ." He proceeded to take charge of the situation with his masterful habit. "The morning train leaves Nokomis at seven-thirty. You can make that, if you must. But you need sleep—rest."

"I'll get that on the train."

"'Knew you'd say that. Very well. This is Tuesday. The *Mauretania*—or the *Lusitania*, I don't know which—sails to-morrow. You can catch that, too. It's the quickest route, eastwards—"

"But I've decided to go west."

"That means a week more, and you said you were in a hurry."

"I am; but by going westwards it's barely possible I may be able to transact or wind up the business on the way."

As a matter of fact Amber was hoping the Rolands, with Sophia Farrell, might linger somewhere *en*

route, remembering that the girl had discussed a tentative project to stop over between steamers at Yokohama.

“Very well,” Quain gave in; “you’re the doctor. Now as for things here, make your mind easy. I’ll take charge and keep the affair quiet. There’s no reason I can see for its ever getting out. I can answer for myself and Antone; and the two of us can wind things up. That man Rutton is at peace now—’chances are he’d prefer a quiet grave here on the island. Then that devilish babu—he doesn’t count; Antone and I’ll get him under the ground in a jiffy. No one ever gets over here but me, now; come summer and there’ll be a few wanderers, but by that time. . . . The dunes ’ll hold their secrets fast: be sure of that. Finally, if any one round here knows about this place being occupied, your departure ’ll be public enough to make them think it’s being abandoned again. Keep your hat-brim down and your coat-collar up at the station; and they’ll never know you aren’t Rutton himself; and you’ll have Doggott to back up the deception. So there’ll be no questions asked. . . . Get ready now to trot along, and I’ll take care of everything.”

“There’s no way of thanking you.”

“That’s a comfort. Call Doggott now and tell him to get ready. You haven’t much time to lose. I’d land at the lighthouse dock, if I were you, and take the short-cut up to the station by the wood road. If you land at Tanglewood, Madge ’ll hold you up for a hot breakfast and make you miss your train. I’ll cook up some yarn to account for your defection; and when

you get back with your blooming bride you can tell her the whole story, by way of amends."

Amber wheeled upon him, colouring to the brows. "My bride! What do you mean by that? I said nothing——"

Quain rubbed his big hands, chuckling. "Of course you didn't. But I'm wise enough to know there's bound to be a woman in this case. Besides, it's Romance—and what's a romance without a woman?"

"Oh, go to thunder," said Amber good-naturedly, and went to give Doggott his orders.

While they waited for the servant to pack his hand-bag—it being obvious that to take the trunks with them was not feasible; while Quain was to care for Amber's things at Tanglewood until his return from India—Quain was possessed by an idea which he was pleased to christen an inspiration.

"It's this," he explained: "what do you know about Calcutta?"

"Little or nothing. I've been there—that's about all."

"Precisely. Now *I* know the place, and I know you'll never find this goldsmith in the Machua Bazaar without a guide. The ordinary, common-or-garden guide is out of the question, of course. But I happen to know an Englishman there who knows more about the dark side of India than any other ten men in the world. He'll be invaluable to you, and you can trust him as you would Doggott. Go to him in my name—you'll need no other introduction—and tell him what you've told me."

"That's impossible. Rutton expressly prohibited my mentioning his name to any one in India."

"Oh, very well. You haven't, have you? And you won't have to. I'll take care of that, when I write and tell Labertouche you're coming."

"What name?"

"Labertouche. Why? You don't know him."

"No; but Rutton did. Rutton got that poison from him."

Quain whistled, his eyes round. "Did, eh? So much the better; he'll probably know all about Rutton and 'll take a keener interest."

"But you forget——"

"Hang your promise. I'm not bound by it and this is business—blacker business than you seem to realise, Davy. You're bent on jumping blindfold and with your hands tied into the seething pool of infamy and intrigue that is India. And I won't stand for it. Don't think for an instant that I'm going to let you go without doing everything I can to make things as pleasant as possible for you. . . . No; Labertouche is your man."

And to this Quain held inflexibly; so that, in the end, Amber, unable to move him, was obliged to leave the matter in his hands.

A sullen and portentous dawn hung in the sky when the little party left the cabin. In the east the entire firmament was ensanguined with sinister crimson and barred with long reefs of purple-black clouds in motionless suspense. Upon the earth the red glare fell ominously; the eastern faces of the snow-clad dunes shone

like rubies; westward the shadows streamed long and dense and violet. The stillness was intense.

A little awed, it may be, and certainly more than a little depressed, they left the hollow by the beaten way, the Portuguese Antone leading with a pick and spade, Amber and Quain following side by side, Doggott with his valise bringing up the rear. Beyond the hollow the tracks diverged toward the bay shore; and presently they came to the scene of the tragedy.

Between two sandhills the Bengali lay supine, a huddled heap of garish colour—scarlet, yellow, tan—against the cold bluish-grey of snow. A veil of unmelted flakes blurred his heavy, contorted features and his small, black eyes—eyes as evil now, staring glassily up to the zenith, as when quickened by his malign intelligence. About him were many footprints, some recently made—presumably by his companion. The latter, however, kept himself discreetly invisible.

At a word from Quain the Portuguese paused and began to dig. Quain, Amber, and Doggott went on a little distance, then, by mutual consent, halted within sight of Antone.

“I wouldn’t leave him if I were you,” Amber told Quain, nodding back at the Portuguese. “It mightn’t be safe, with that other devil skulking round—Heaven knows where.”

“Right-O!” agreed Quain. His hand sought Amber’s. “Good-bye, and God be with you,” he said huskily.

Amber tightened his clasp upon the man’s fingers. “I can’t improve on that, Tony,” said he with a feeble

smile. "Good-bye, and God be with you." He dropped his hand and turned away. "Come along, Doggott."

The servant led the way baywards. Behind them the angry morning blazed brighter in the sky.

In the sedge of the shore they found a rowboat and, launching it, embarked for the power-boat, which swung at her mooring in deeper water. When they were aboard the latter, Doggott took charge of the motor, leaving to Amber the wheel, and with little delay they were in motion.

As their distance from the shore increased Amber glanced back. The island rested low against the flaming sky, a shape of empurpled shadows, scarcely more substantial to the vision than the rack of cloud above. In the dark sedges the pools, here and there, caught the light from above and shone blood-red. And suddenly the attention of the Virginian was arrested by the discovery of a human figure—a man standing upon a dune-top some distance inland, and staring steadfastly after the boat. He seemed of extraordinary height and very thin; upon his head there was a turban; his arms were folded. While Amber watched he held his pose, a living menace—like some fantastic statue bulking black against the grim red dawn.

CHAPTER VII

MASKS AND FACES

LIKE many a wiser and a better man, Amber was able upon occasion to change his mind without entertaining serious misgivings as to his stability of purpose. Therefore, on second thought, he elected to journey India-wards *via* the Suez Canal rather than by the western route. As he understood the situation, he had no time to waste; the quicker way to his destination was the eastern way; and, viewed soberly, the chance upon which he had speculated, that of overtaking the girl's party somewhere *en route*, appeared a long one—a gambler's risk, and far too risky if he did not exaggerate the urgency of his errand. Rutton's instructions had, moreover, been explicit upon one point: Amber was to enter India only by the port of Calcutta. In deferring to this the Virginian lost several days waiting in London for the fortnightly P. & O. boat for Calcutta: a delay which might have been obviated by taking the overland route to Brindisi, connecting there with the weekly P. & O. boat for Bombay, from which latter point Calcutta could have been quickly reached by rail across the Indian Peninsula.

Now Quain's letter to Labertouche went by this quicker route and so anticipated Amber's arrival at the capital of India by about a week; during all of which time it languished unread.

A nice young English boy in Mr. Labertouche's employ received and stamped it with the date of delivery and put it away with the rest of the incoming correspondence in a substantial-looking safe. After which he returned to his desk in the ante-room and resumed his study of the law; which he pursued comfortably enough with a cigarette in his mouth, his chair tilted back, and his feet gently but firmly implanted upon the fair printed pages of an open volume of Blackstone. His official duties, otherwise, seemed to consist solely in imparting to all and sundry the information that Mr. Labertouche was "somewhere up in the Mofussil, hunting bugs—I don't know exactly where."

This was, broadly speaking, perfectly true, within the limitations of the youth's personal knowledge. He was a pleasant-mannered boy of twenty or thereabouts, with an engaging air of candour which successfully masked a close-mouthed reticence, even as his ostensibly heedless, happy-go-lucky ways disguised a habit of extreme caution and keen and particular observation: qualities which caused him to be considered an invaluable office-assistant to a solicitor without any clientèle worth mentioning, and who chose to spend most of his time somewhere up in the Mofussil hunting bugs.

The Mofussil, by the way, is an extremely elastic term, standing as it does in the vocabulary of the resident Calcutta-man, for the Empire of India outside the seat of its Government.

Precisely why Mr. Labertouche maintained his office was a matter for casual conjecture to his wide circle of acquaintances; although it's not unlikely that, were