CARAVANS By NIGHT

HARRY HERVEY

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". . . . . Weave me a tale of Romance and Adventure—weave it on the loom of Asia; fine threads in the shuttle . . . . . that we who only read may feel the glare and glamour of those spicy, sweating cities; may feel the sheer spell of the stars and the far spaces at dusk . . . . . ."

THIS WORD-TAPESTRY IS WOVEN FOR

MY MOTHER

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Edge of the Ripple	3
II	Delhi	22
III	A Piece of Coral	53
IV	House of the Swaying Cobra	83
V	Interlude	120
VI	Hsien Sgam	154
VII	The Vermilion Room	194
VIII	"Beyond the Moon"	215
IX	Fever	241
X	Caravan	269
XI	City of the Falcon	288
XII	Lhakang-gompa	326
XIII	Falcon's Nest	348
XIV	Gyangtse	396

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CHAPTER I

THE EDGE OF THE RIPPLE

IF you go to the Great Bazaar, which lies west of the Old Palace at Indore, you will see him sitting upon a cushion in his alcove-like shop, a very magnificent figure in flowing robes and gold-edged turban.

You will find him busy, whether you visit the bazaar in mid-morning or in the afternoon; or even after sunset, when lamps embroider the lacework of lanes and alleys.

He is an amiable fellow and he will talk for hours—of silks, of jewels (for in those luxuries he deals), or still more eloquently of Peshawar, where the blue peaks of the Hindu Kush let their lips caress the sky as though it were the cheek of some siren. But mention the barbarian with corn-colored hair, or the blue-eyed Punjabi, and he will suddenly become as uncommunicative as the tongueless *fakir* who sits before the Anna Chuttra and mutely pleads for alms.

For once, at a time not long past, a mysterious hand reached out of nowhere and touched him with two equally as mysterious fingers. The barbarian with corn-colored hair was one finger, the blue-eyed Punjabi the

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other. And as swiftly, as inexplicably, as it came, this hand withdrew—but not without leaving its mark upon the memory of Muhafiz Ali, merchant and loyal servant of the Raj.

For ten years before that day when he felt the first impelling wave of intrigue his shop was a haunt for tourists and wealthy residents; for ten years he divided his days between salaaming to customers, cooking his meals over a cow-dung fire in the rear, and staring across the roadway with visible contempt at his despised rival, Venekiah, the Brahmin. For all those years Muhafiz Ali had hated Venekiah as only a Mussulman can hate one who wears the trident of Vishnu painted on his forehead. But of late there was another sore that festered deep in his heart and hour by hour fed his rancor with poison. His one son had dared the horrors of an unknown sea (oh, a thousand times larger than Back Bay, Bombay, the only water Muhafiz Ali can offer by way of comparison) on a troop-ship, and in a strange country, where monstrous metal things howled destruction and death, the parts of his only-born were buried—by Christian hands and in a Christian grave! . . . . While Venekiah's son, who never stirred from the bazaar when the sounds of India responding to the Sirkar's call rumbled from Kabul down to the Gulf of Manaar, lived and walked the streets to talk Swaraj and curse the Sirkar and everything bred of the Sirkar!

Muhafiz Ali came from the North, from Peshawar, and the sultry, throbbing heat of Central India dried up the life in his veins. He longed for the sight of his

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brother-hillmen swaggering through the Bokhara Bazaar, at Peshawar; for the smell of camels (perfume to a Peshawari) clinging to the chilly dusk. He hoped some day to have enough rupees to board one of those terrifying, though thoroughly convenient, iron demons that he frequently saw panting in the railway station and ride back to Peshawar, where he would dwell for the rest of his earthly days in a house with a garden and an azure-necked peacock that strutted and shrilled like an angry Rajput.

Meanwhile, to this end he sat daily in his shop, not shrieking at prospective customers with "Please buy my nicklass!" like that offspring of the sewer across the way, but waiting with the dignity befitting a son of the Prophet for those who came to buy. And many came. For the fame of his silks (bales from Bokhara frail as spun moonlight and the raw sheeny stuff from Samarkand) had spread through the Residency and haunted every Memsahib and Ladyship who once allowed herself to be enticed into his felt-floored treasure-room.

But his fame lay not only in silks. In formidable chests in the inner room were many necklaces and ornaments—stones precious and semi-precious, and even paste. He was a lapidary and had once served in the establishment of a great jeweller in Delhi. It required but a single glance for him to find the matrix in falsely beautiful gems, or to appraise any sort of stone from diamonds down to chalcedony. Even his Highness the Maharajah had heard of his skill in cutting and setting jewels, and on two occasions had given him commissions.

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On this particular day when the mysterious hand was very close, and Destiny had placed a chalk-mark upon a certain young woman and an officer of the empire, his hatred for Venekiah swelled to such proportions that it included every one; it quivered against the walls of his being, hot as the Indian sun that throughout the noonday blazed above the swel:ering bazaar. Nor did his rage cool when, toward sundown, lilac shadows lounged in the street and a hundred-hued swarm jostled by.

The cause of his anger was a Sulaimaneh ring, which he wore at all times. Now it is an established fact in the social orbit in which Muhafiz Ali revolved that these onyx stones will repel devils; therefore, to lose such a talisman is to invite misfortune. And Muhafiz Ali had lost his Sulaimaneh ring. Furthermore, he suspected that his enemy, Venekiah, had stolen it from his finger while he slept—although for a Brahmin to touch a Mussulman is to defile himself. Yet he felt that that heap of offal, to speak in the vernacular of the bazaars, would suffer contamination to see him at the mercy of devils.

So he sat and glared, and swore all manner of Moslem oaths under his beard, and stopped hating only long enough to look toward the kindling west beyond which Mecca lay, and prostrate himself on a rug for evening prayer.

As he lifted his eyes they encountered a Sahib with corn-colored hair and beard; a Sahib who stood not a yard away; who fanned himself with a pith-helmet, and

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looked upon the Mussulman's religious performances with a slightly cynical smile.

He was handsome, as these white unbelievers go, observed Muhafiz Ali. The eyes smiled with the assurance of one who knows a lot and is aware of his wisdom. Rather reckless eyes. His skin was tanned and the light hair and beard (beard because the word "Van Dyke" is not in Muhafiz Ali's vocabulary) made it more pronounced. White linens completed the picture.

Muhafiz Ali, his rage dissolving, salaamed.

"You 're Muhafiz Ali, the lapidary?"

The Mussulman detected in his speech a flaw that suggested he was not an English Sahib; probably American, or from one of those numerous countries behind the sunset, of which he had heard little and knew less.

"Not only a jeweller, Sahib," he returned, for he spoke English fluently, "but a dealer in silks, rugs—"

But the man brushed past him and entered the inner room. Muhafiz Ali rose and clattered after him in his loose Mohammedan slippers.

"Do you have jade?" asked the sahib.

For answer Muhafiz Ali lifted the lid of a brass-bound chest and drew forth a tray of necklaces—lustrous, creamy-green jade from Mirzapore.

"Not that kind," said the sahib, with a gesture (and had Muhafiz Ali known the meaning of the word, "Gallic" he would have applied it to that quick wave of the hand); "the clear sort."

Whereupon the Mussulman separated a string of gen-

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uine *fei tsui* from several necklaces in another tray. The stones glowed deep parrot-green.

"Ah!" This from the white man. "Do you have pearls, too—imitation pearls?"

Muhafiz Ali, somewhat disappointed, produced a necklace of his finest false pearls, and the sahib examined it with the air of one who knew the difference between the nacreous sea-jewel and blown spheres of *essence d' Orient.*

"Are you alone?" was his next question.

"Alone?" echoed Muhafiz Ali. "Alas, O worthy lordship, my son, my only—"

"No, no!"—with that quick gesture and a significant look toward the rear door. "I mean, is there any one in the back of the shop?"

"Nay, Sahib!"

A germ of suspicion took birth in Muhafiz Ali's brain. What did this foreigner want?

"You have done work for his Highness the Maharajah, I understand," said the sahib, his eyes glittering like black chalcedony. "You reset several necklaces, and . . . you made a copy of the Pearl Scarf . . . for, well, for state purposes—did n't you?"

Muhafiz Ali answered in the affirmative, still suspicious. The sahib glanced over his shoulder into the swiftly gathering dusk.

"Could you make another copy, using stones like this?"

For some inexplicable reason Muhafiz Ali felt frightened. The eyes that looked so incisively into his did

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not match the young face. He had seen the same expression, only more intense, in the eyes of a mad *mollah*.

"Could you?" pressed the sahib, "or, rather, *would* you? For an extra gift of thirty rupees?"

Thirty rupees! Muhafiz Ali's commercial instincts led him into planning. . . . But the Pearl Scarf. Why did he want a copy? The germ of suspicion grew and multiplied.

"Nay, Sahib!" he answered, his better judgment outbalancing the desire for money. "I do not remember how."

"That 's a pretty lie," interposed the man, with a laugh—a laugh that carried a cold undercurrent and made Muhafiz Ali shudder, inwardly. "You know the exact number of pearls in the scarf and how they are arranged; nine strands; with eighteen pearls in the neck-piece-clasp, each having a carat diamond inset in it. Come now—I will raise the extra amount to thirty-five rupees."

Thirty-five! The Mussulman's imagination took wings. He saw himself coming into what was to him fabulous wealth.

"The pattern is intricate, Sahib," he said doubtfully.

"I 'll risk it." Again that laugh.

Muhafiz Ali felt vaguely nervous. "I will have to think it over, Sahib," he announced.

What did he want with a copy of the Pearl Scarf? That query threaded back and forth across his thoughts.

"I am in the service of the Raj," the man confided quietly, as though answering the native's thoughts—

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confided a shade too darkly. "The Raj wants a copy of it—oh, for reasons. . . ."

Ah! Muhafiz Ali understood now. The Raj! This handsome sahib was of that invisible army that comes and goes so mysteriously from Afghanistan to Ceylon.

"It is, O fountain of wisdom," he declared, with a sly wink, "as though I stepped from the dark into the light of the sun!" He motioned toward the door, through which Venekiah, seated across the way, could be seen. "I shall be as mute as the six-armed she-devil that yonder louse worships!"

There was a humorous gleam in the white man's eyes.

"Excellent! Make your price and come to me at the dâk bungalow at eight o'clock to-night. Bring a few necklaces for effect. I will be on the veranda. My name is Leroux Sahib."

He tossed several rupees upon one of the chests, and turned and went out.

Muhafiz Ali, reflecting that Allah looked with favor upon him, gathered up the coins. And this, after he had lost the Sulaimaneh ring! Pah! Ill-fortune, indeed! He scoffed.

He was so pleased that, a few minutes later, when a blue-eyed Punjabi inquired the price of a string of *ferozees*, he did not haggle over it but sacrificed the necklace for exactly what it was worth.

"Eight o'clock," he repeated to himself. And his own price. He was a loyal servant of the Raj, yes; but that

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did not in any way affect his intention to charge the Raj well for his services.

He looked toward the shop of Venekiah.

"Brahmin dog!" he hissed in his beard. "Breeder of whelps!"

And he spat eloquently.

2

Night wove its shuttle across the sky, beading the dusk with stars. The Southern Cross lay mirrored in the Sarasvati and the Khan, and in the lake at Sukhnewás; it pulsed above the gardens of Lal Bagh, above Sharifa Street and those other narrow highways that vein the Holkar's capital; it peered down inquisitively into the gloom of the Great Bazaar as Muhafiz Ali, having finished a meal of curry and rice, quitted his shop and hurried toward the dâk bungalow.

That this Leroux Sahib had commissioned him to copy a jewel-pattern of the Maharajah's regalia no longer presaged evil in his mind. Nor did he seek an explanation. True, it mystified him. But there were some things one should not know. And, to him, the secrets of the Government were numbered among these. The Raj had banished the old order of things, for no more did princes sit in golden howdahs upon comparisoned state elephants; nor did they indulge, as of old, in the venerable pastime of pigsticking; they rode in automobiles and played a game on horseback with an absurd ball.... Muhafiz Ali had ceased long ago to wonder at the baffling

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mechanism of the Government, and satisfied himself with the assurance that Allah did not intend he should understand. So Raj meant Riddle.

When he reached the dâk bungalow he found Leroux Sahib sitting upon the veranda. The white man led him inside.

"Well?"—this with a gleam of the black eyes.

"I will do it, O cherisher of the poor."

"The price?" The Mussulman named an outrageous figure—and held his breath. The man inquired:

"How long will it take?"

"Seven days; perhaps less."

The sahib frowned, tugged at his yellow beard.

"I must have it in five days."

"Impossible, O Burra Sahib!" A pause. "Unless—of course—"

A smile. "Not another rupee do you get, you old brigand!" he declared good humoredly. "And five days, I say. Settled? Thirty-five rupees extra when it is done, half the price in advance."

He drew from his pocket a wallet and counted out a number of Government of India notes.

"Remember, this is to be quiet," he cautioned. "I will call now and then to see how you are coming on."

As Muhafiz Ali made his way back to the bazaar, he congratulated himself upon getting so easily the price he had set upon the work, and regretted that he had not inflated it a little more. However, he was well pleased

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with the day's business. He paused once on the homeward journey to place a four-anna bit in the bowl of an emaciated, ash-painted *fakir* who sat before the almshouse, and arrived at his shop in a state of excellent spirits.

He made a light and opened the chest in which he kept his necklaces. The instant he saw the top tray he detected a flaw. Unlike most merchants, he was very careful in the arrangement of his necklaces; in one tray were agates, in another blue sapphires; thus with all his beads.

And a string of creamy-luster Mirzapore jade lay in the tray with the clear, deep-green *fei tsui*.

A cold suspicion uncoiled in his brain. He stood motionless. This could mean but one thing: some one had entered his shop while he was away. He quickly counted the necklaces. None were missing. Nor did a hasty inventory of the lower tray show that anything had been removed. The other chests were under the protection of European padlocks.

Who had entered his shop, and why? Nothing had been stolen. The door was locked. . . . . But the rear! Ah! The court! Why had he not thought to barricade that also against thieves? But had a thief disturbed the beads? A thief would have taken them. After all, was not it possible that he had placed the necklaces in the wrong tray? Possible, but not probable. No, he was certain a hand other than his own had dropped the jade from Mirzapore in with the *fei tsui* stones.

Yet, he told himself, he had not been robbed. So why

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be uneasy? But he could not rid himself of the uncanny suspicion that devil-business was afoot. He would feel more secure had he not lost the Sulaimaneh ring.

Upon an impulse he went to the door and peered into the street. The shop of Venekiah, the Brahmin, was dark. From a nautch-house close by came the muffled throbbing of tom-toms—a restless pulse of the night. A man in a Punjabi head-dress lounged under a rheumy incandescent further along the dim street.

Muhafiz Ali turned back, gravely troubled. He locked the door.

Of a certainty devil-business was afoot.

3

A film of dust wavered over the bazaar and introduced a drowsy golden effect into the mid-afternoon atmosphere. Few human beings ventured forth in the glare. A half-naked *bhisti* splashed water over the dusty roadway; at one corner a street-juggler sat with a torpid python coiled in his lap.

Muhafiz Ali, absorbed in utter languor, squatted upon a brocade of light and shadow woven by the sunlight that filtered through the dust-laden leaves of a tree outside his doorway and watched a green-bronze lizard drowsing upon the flagstones. The slumberous atmosphere of the bazaar, the mingled odors of fruit, fish and cologne, held no portent of the thunderbolt that very shortly was to jar Muhafiz Ali out of his peaceful sphere.

Five days had passed since he visited Leroux Sahib at the dâk bungalow. The copy of the Pearl Scarf was fin-

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ished; it lay in a chest in the inner room. He had despatched the son of Khurrum Lal, the fruit vender, with a *chit* to the sahib telling him this, and the sahib had answered that he could call after nightfall.

Muhafiz Ali felt singularly relieved. For the past few days the Mohammedan equivalent of the sword of Damocles had hung over his head. The white man had called several times, and on each occasion the sight of him reassured Muhafiz Ali, but after his departure the native invariably relapsed into a state of nervous anticipation.

Now it was done. To-night the sahib would call and he, Muhafiz Ali, would settle back into an untroubled existence—many rupees the better. He felt peace upon him already. So he sat in the doorway of his shop and contemplated the green-bronze lizard, and breathed, almost with relish, the mingled odors of fruit and fish and cologne.

Muhafiz Ali had in him the makings of a psychic. He anticipated happenings with amazing accuracy. Therefore, when a shadow fell upon the roadway in front of him and he looked up to see Mohammed Khan, the money lender, he felt a pall descend upon him. Mohammed Khan, bearded and turbaned to exaggeration, frequently came to indulge in bazaar gossip. With a word of greeting, he sank upon the doorstep beside his brother-Mussulman.

He had startling news this day. Sadar Singh, who belonged to the Indian Escort of the Agent, had come to pay the fifteen rupees he owed him, and Sadar Singh, who never lied, had that very morning heard the Res-

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idency Surgeon talking with the Commissioner Sahib. The substance of their conversation was that there had been a robbery at the palace. The vaults had been looted of the state treasures. The famous Peacock Turban was stolen. . . . And *the Pearl Scarf*.

Muhafiz Ali's brain did not function normally for some time after this announcement. He felt frightened—nauseated. The Pearl Scarf stolen. Suppose the copy was found in his possession, and the police, who had strange ways, connected him with the robbery? The house in Peshawar dwindled; he saw the jail looming before him. He was innocent, but how could he explain? He remembered vividly the incident of the jade necklace. Could it be that Venekiah, that mountain of corruption, had spied upon him? . . . . O Allah, Allah, he wailed in silence, it was written that his lot should be misfortune from the moment he lost the Sulaimaneh ring!

Inwardly, he writhed while Mohammed Khan talked on. He was in no mood for more gossip, but Mohammed Khan stayed—stayed until late afternoon when little spirals of dust began to rise from the street, when clouds materialized out of nowhere and blotted out the sun.

After Mohammed Khan took his leave, Muhafiz Ali tried to reason with himself. The sahib had said the scarf was for the Raj, and was not that assurance enough? No. And he strove to press behind the veil and find an explanation for the affair; but his Kismet decreed that he should be a pawn, and he dug at the mystery in vain.

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A dark sky, threatening rain, hastened the dusk; and when, one by one, lights appeared in the street, like yellow sentinels, Muhafiz Ali uttered a sigh of relief and rose and entered the shop. A moment later he heard a soft patter and inhaled the fresh, cool smell of rain upon dusty air.

"Please buy my nicklass!" shrilled Venekiah's voice, and he looked over his shoulder to see Memsahib clatter by on horseback.

Behind her walked a man in a Punjabi head-dress, swinging along at a leisurely gait despite the rain.

4

The usual heavy downpour following a break in the monsoon drenched the bazaar. It came with a high wind, and doors strained at their locks and windows rattled as legions of rain rode through the streets. The torrent rumbled upon tin roofs and roofs of corrugated iron; reduced the dust in alleys to mud; lashed the thirsty, sun-scorched trees.

Muhafiz Ali sat on a cushion in the inner room of his shop with a copy of the Koran open in his lap, more intent upon the eerie sounds than the book. Frequently his eyes left the pages and sought the door as gusts of wind smote its panels, and when sudden draughts made the lamp-flame flicker and sent the shadows shuddering over the walls, a chill dread spread through him. Not until that accursed thing of imitations had been taken away would he feel safe. Surely the devils were hard besetting him for losing the Sulaimaneh ring!

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The door shook—as though impatient with the lock and hinges that held it. Outside, the storm wrung wails and groans from the bazaar. Again the door rattled, furiously.

Muhafiz Ali set aside the book, rose and crossed the room. He unlocked the door. A spray was blown into his face. No one was there. Rain poured over the street-lamps in gauzy, iridescent ribbons; it wove spumy lace upon the black roadway and trailed, fuming, into the gutters.

He shut the door and locked it. He had taken no more than two steps before a pounding brought him to a halt. He stood there for a moment, tense; then turned and pressed his lips to the crack of the door.

"Leroux Sahib?"

Faintly, from out the chaos of sounds, came—"Yes."

He turned the key. The door opened violently and slammed behind the drenched figure of the yellow-bearded sahib. Water dripped from his helmet; streams of moisture trickled down his rain-cape and gathered in pools upon the floor.

"Allah be praised!" Muhafiz Ali murmured fervently.

Leroux Sahib flung aside his cape, and the native saw that he carried a flat package under one arm. The white man shook the water from his helmet and mopped his face with a khaki handkerchief.

"Mother of God! What a night!" he exclaimed, smiling grimly. Then: "Is it ready?"

Muhafiz Ali hastily opened one of his chests and removed several trays. The sahib joined him. His eyes

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shone feverishly as the Mussulman drew forth a thing that tinkled musically. Strands of nacreous spheres reflected a soft radiance from the lamp; luster of cream-colored satin. The imitation diamonds that inset the clasp burned like star-splinters.

Leroux Sahib swore under his breath and chuckled; swore in a tongue Muhafiz Ali did not understand.

"What a joke! What a colossal joke! And they think it is for them. . . . *Bon Dieu!*"

The door rattled; the lamp-flame rippled threateningly.

"I shall place it in a tin box, Sahib," Muhafiz Ali said, for the sooner the thing was gone the sooner he would feel at ease. "See, a box no larger than the one you carry."

He moved the lid. Pearls rattled coolly. Meanwhile, the sahib counted out several banknotes.

"Count them," he instructed as Muhafiz Ali handed him the tin box, wrapped and tied.

The Mussulman obeyed. The door shook again. A sudden burst of wind almost carried the notes out of his hand. The lamp gasped. A slam followed.

Muhafiz Ali looked up quickly to behold a strange tableau—a tableau that for the while suspended all thoughts from his brain and drew from his limbs the power to move.

A man had entered—a blue-eyed Punjabi. The face was vaguely familiar, and Muhafiz Ali's memory groped. . . . A string of *ferozees*. . . . The Punjabi stood with his shoulders pressed against the door, his feet planted wide apart. His soaked garments clung to his

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body; his turban dripped water into his eyes. But that did not quench the fire in them. How they burned! Blue sapphires! In his hand he held a thing that glittered like an evil eye.

Leroux Sahib had swung about. His feet, too, were planted well apart, as though he were steadying himself for an impact. The muscles of his throat stood out like white cords in the shadow of his beard. There was a hard gleam in his eyes; more than ever they resembled black chalcedony.

Afterward, Muhafiz Ali never quite remembered how it all happened. At the time he was too stupefied to observe details. The blue-eyed Punjabi laughed. It was a challenge. Leroux Sahib, suddenly smiling, answered it; lunged toward the lamp. The ring of shattered glass—and darkness wiped out the scene. Followed the thudding jar of muscle and bone against yielding flesh; swift, staccato breathing. The door was flung wide. Muhafiz Ali, crouching in a corner, saw a figure faintly silhouetted in the door-frame, an amorphous shadow upon the paler darkness of the street. It vanished. Another figure lurched out after it, and was swallowed by the storm.

Energy flashed into the Mussulman. He ran to the door. The incandescent lamps gleamed through a crystal curtain of rain. The street was deserted. For a moment he stood there, shivering. Then he shut the door; locked it; lay weakly against the panels. When he had recovered, he groped his way to where he knew

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a lantern hung. He lighted it, and a mellow radiance played upon bits of broken glass.

He rapidly counted the banknotes. Satisfied, he returned to the door and pressed his ear to the crack. Only the slush and drench of rain. He shivered again.

Whither had they gone, this Leroux Sahib and the blue-eyed Punjabi? Their eyes! Black chalcedony and blue sapphires! The Punjabi had a pistol. . . . Over imitation pearls! Strange were the ways of these white barbarians, stranger still the ways of the Raj. On the morrow would the police come and ask him all manner of confusing questions? Or had the hurricane spent itself? Was this the last he would ever see of the yellow-haired Sahib or the Punjabi?

He turned back, looking half abstractedly upon the gleaming particles of glass. He shivered for the third time. Devil-business!

And so the gods, having no further use for Muhafiz Ali, merchant and loyal servant of the Raj, left him to wonder at the source of these ripples that had touched him; left him to grope behind the drop that had suddenly fallen upon this bewildering interlude; left him to dream of the house in Peshawar and the azure-necked peacock that strutted and shrilled like an angry Rajput.

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CHAPTER II

DELHI

SEVERAL days after Muhafiz Ali delivered the imitation Pearl Scarf to the sahib in Indore, the young woman who was marked of Destiny sat in a first-class carriage of the East Indian Railway, her attention divided between a green vellum volume propped against a gray-clad knee and the sun-blistered scenery that unreeled past the window.

An elderly gentleman from Devonshire who occupied the same carriage found himself wondering why his eyes invariably returned to the girl. This particular gentleman was past youthful sentimentalizing and not yet in those riper years when age casts regretful glances over its shoulder; therefore, being no psychometric, it puzzled him that this girl should compel his gaze. Was it the hair, in whose bronzen waves a slantwise ray of sunlight ignited little glints of red-gold? Or the white throat, full with young maturity? Suddenly she looked up, and he fathomed the secret of magnetism. Brown eyes that brought to mind a deep, rich wine held to the light—or poplar leaves just before snow. He felt something of cathedral-largeness behind those eyes, something vital and alive yet intensely spiritual. The warm

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strength of sunlight in great forests; tapers in altar-gloom. These things were there. And the gentleman from Devonshire thought of a daughter in Britain and smiled to himself, and forgot hot, heart-aching India.

The lights which he had glimpsed in the girl's eyes were the very beacons that had drawn her across leagues of water—lights that were first kindled in some voyaging ancestor whose frigate dropped anchor off old New Orleans, in the gilded days of Bienville; that grew dim in the tiresome process of heredity, and flamed anew, generations later, in this girl who sat in the railway carriage—lights that were almost smothered by the snuffers of Aristocracy and Tradition.

For Dana Charteris came of a Louisiana family whose name was as old as the state itself, and who lived in a great, pillared house and had black servants and drank blacker coffee. Custom and pride and chivalry were the goddesses of the family penetralia, and debt maintained the vestal-fires. Her father was called "Colonel" for the same reason that no less than one third of the gentlemen of his plane were given that title. Her mother, who carried an air of fragrant and faded aristocracy, read Cable and regarded him as some subaltern's wives in India regarded Kipling. And her brother, Alan—Dana hardly knew Alan. When his name was spoken in the house, it was in a hushed voice. They called him "black sheep," but Dana could never associate dark fleece with the slim boy she remembered. Alan ran away when little more than fifteen—ran away to sail the Seven Seas and to find the end of the rainbow.

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Every few months letters came from him, bearing post-marks that were, to her, stamps of glamour.

In her eyes her brother wore the mantle of Jason. He rambled in all manner of weird places in his quest for the golden prize. This, while she grew in an atmosphere of sweetly-musty traditions! Before she went off to boarding-school her days were divided between the piano, paddling indolently in warm bayous—sometimes alone, sometimes not—and riding a black mare. But in the quiet, breathless nights when an army of stars thronged the sky, and from down the river came the soft crooning of a Creole song, she dreamed of enchanted lands beyond the horizon.

But the voyaging ancestor and the argonaut-brother were only partly responsible for her unrest. There was Tante Lucie, down in New Orleans. (Tante Lucie, who made one think of star-jasmines and all the romantic things that aura the Old South.) She had stories to tell, for a lover-husband had taken her adventuring. She had seen the Shwe Dagon and looked upon the Taj by moonlight. Her lover-husband was only a memory, as were the temple and the Tomb; but she loved to talk of them, sitting in her little court where the perfume of magnolias swam in the air.

Dana's father died just before her eighteenth birthday. In the years following, her mother no longer read Cable; she sat and dreamed of her argonaut-son and of the "Colonel." And Dana almost stifled her desire to cross the seas. For ominous sounds disturbed the quiet of Bayou Latouche; there were bandages to be made

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and books and boxes to be shipped to camps. During that period the letters from Alan were infrequent and from Mesopotamia.

But the interlude of khaki passed, and Bayou Latouche sank back into its stupor. Again in the starry silences Dana listened to the crooning of Creole songs down by the river and dreamed of a world beyond the dawns and dusks. She was alone then; her mother went during the interlude, and Tante Lucie no longer sat in her court and talked of foreign lands. There were no ties; except money, as always. To keep up the house she taught music.

Then, one day, she heard from Alan. Burma, this time. He held a post with the Inspector of Police at Rangoon. He had a bungalow in the cantonment, he said, and any number of servants to wait on her, if she would sell the house at Bayou Latouche and come to him. In a short time he would have a "leave." They could meet in Calcutta and "do" India together.

India—together! Those words opened the dream-portals. After she read the letter she consulted a mirror and told herself that she was twenty-three and already in demand as a chaperone for the younger set. She went into the library and stood before the portraits of her father and her mother. She cried. And then, aware that the shades of the Charteris family had stern gazes fixed upon her, she sent a cablegram to Alan.

Once aboard the great ship, she felt no regrets; to look back upon the great, pillared house was like lifting the lid of a rose-jar: it brought the fragrance of things very

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old and very faded. When she reached Calcutta, a young captain met her at Chandpal Ghat. He had a note from Alan. It explained that an urgent matter had taken him to Indore; he begged her to forgive him for not meeting her, but assured her she was in good hands. The second day in Calcutta she received a telegram from him.

"Meet me Delhi Friday," it ran. "Take express. Plan trip to Khyber."

To the Khyber! . . . . She left Calcutta that same day, and now, after a long journey through the prickly-hot United Provinces, she was speeding into the North. India, with its contrasts of filth and grandeur, had not tarnished under the touch of reality; the nearest she came to disillusion was in smoky, modern Calcutta. Now Tundla Junction lay behind in a shimmering heat-haze; ahead, beyond the roaring, sweating engine, was Delhi—Delhi, key to perished dynasties.

The engine's whistle shrieked. It sent a charge of excitement through her and she looked eagerly out of the window. Iron wheels rumbled across a bridge. Another shriek of the whistle. Brakes screamed, and the train drew up, panting, in the clamor and writhing heat of the railway station.

The gentleman from Devonshire opened the carriage door, and Dana, a grip in each hand, her heart fluttering against her breast, smiled at him and stepped into a torrid swarm. Her eyes searched the crowd. What would he look like? Suppose she did not recognize him! Vaguely nervous, yet happy, she al-

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lowed herself to be carried with the human surge.

"Hello, there!" said a voice in her ear, and she turned quickly to look into a clean-shaven tanned face. (And the gentleman from Devonshire, who was passing, saw the brown eyes acquire a deeper, richer glow.)

"Alan!"

He was tall and slim, and the eyes that looked into hers were intensely blue, the blue of sapphires. . . . . The same boy, she told herself joyously, only more tanned and grown-up!

"Oh, Alan!" she gasped, as he held her at arm's-length, despite the crowd, then drew her to him and kissed her.

"Great Lord, how you 've grown!" he exclaimed.

She remembered saying something about not being a little girl always; remembered being led through the throng. Then they were in the street. Heat and noise and colorful confusion.

"I 've reserved rooms at a quiet place beyond the Kashmir Gate," he told her as he helped her into a carriage. "From the terrace outside your room you can look upon the battlements and the river." Then, with another smile, "I can't believe it 's you! Why, you 're positively beautiful! Lord, it seems a century, a whole century, since I was in Bayou Latouche!"

He removed his topi as they wheeled off and she saw that his hair was shot with gray above the temples. They seemed so absurd, those gray hairs. And how his eyes lighted when he spoke of Bayou Latouche! She realized suddenly, with a tightening of the cords in her

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throat, that the search for the golden fleece had n't been all pleasant. In his voice, in his face and manner, was a thirst for home-talk. She understood how he needed her, there in his bungalow in Rangoon.

"Bayou Latouche is just the same," she said, placing her hand upon his. (She spoke with a faintly slurring accent that was unmistakable.) "Except, of course, so many have gone. . . . . the war. . . ." Pause. "I don't believe you 've changed a bit, Alan—you 're like that last picture you had taken before you left. Mother —how she adored you! If you could have seen the way she looked at that picture! Father, too."

He smiled soberly. She could see her father in certain of his features. A sudden fierce joy of possession ran through her. He was her's, this bronzed brother!

"I 'm glad you 've come, Dana." This solemnly.

"It's been rather lonely out here. You know the climate has a way, once it gets a hold, of sapping up the energy and mummifying a fellow before his time."

Her hand closed tighter about his. "And there has n't been a girl, Alan?"

He smiled. "You 're the only one, Dana. . . . . I was sorry I was n't in Calcutta when you landed, but this game of sleuthing has its unexpected twists. That 's why I like it. Nothing very exciting ever really happens; it 's usually humdrum thievery and dacoity. A French rogue put in his appearance in Rangoon about a month or so ago—an international character; only goes in for big loot. Don't know where he was before

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he turned up in Rangoon, but he vanished as queerly as he 'd come. The day I reached Calcutta I was in the station and I recognized him. He 'd peroxided his beard and hair! Heard him ask for a ticket to Indore, and I scented trouble in the wind. Of course, I should have had him arrested there, but I wanted to see what he was up to. I left the note with Bellingrath and took the next train."

Adventure! And he was talking of it in a matter-of-fact way!

"You caught him?" she urged.

"Has anybody ever caught Chavigny? No, he slipped through the net. And the nerve of him! He had letters to the Maharajah and the Agent! Used the name of Leroux. I dressed up in a Punjabi's garb—wanted to snoop around without arousing suspicion. I tracked Chavigny to a jeweller's shop the day I reached Indore and overheard him commission the merchant to make an imitation copy of the Maharajah Holkar's Pearl Scarf. After that I watched the jeweller, too. He—but I 'm boring you."

"Boring me!" She laughed. "My own brother masquerading as a native and shadowing a notorious thief! Go on!"

"Well, I waited, and the expected happened, only on a larger scale than I anticipated. The treasury was looted—*looted!* Thousands' worth of jewels! Why, the Pearl Scarf alone is valued at a *crore* of rupees, which is about three million, three hundred thousand in our money. And the Peacock Turban, too, cost a fabulous

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sum! Yet, confound it, Chavigny did n't go near the palace the night of the robbery! Nor had he taken the copy of the Pearl Scarf from the bazaar! The night after the theft, I followed him to the shop. Gad, how it rained that night! He got the imitation scarf—but I lost him. We had a tussle and I snatched the beastly imitation, which I 'm keeping as a souvenir of my colossal blunder in not taking the local police into my confidence. Departmental jealousy; that 's the death of justice. Chavigny left Indore by automobile or carriage—don't know which—and boarded a north-bound train at Mhow garrison. The station-babu described him and said his ticket read to Delhi. And here I am.''

"You 've notified the police that—Chavigny, is n't it?—is in the city?''

He smiled. "I did n't have to. About two hours after I arrived, I heard that Kerth—he 's the Director of Central Intelligence's best man—had got wind of Chavigny's presence and was trying to ferret him out. That relieved me of the responsibility of reporting Chavigny.''

"And you still have the copy of the Pearl Scarf?''

"Yes.''

"But is it right to keep it?'' This with a flickering deep in the brown eyes.

"Oh, I 'll not keep it; only for a while. If I can get Chavigny, then—well, there 's no telling what might happen. Too, I 'd like to beat that devilishly clever Kerth. You see, Dana, this is a big affair, much bigger than I thought at first. The Secret Service is trying to keep

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the lid on it, but of course it 's leaked out. On the same night the robbery occurred at Indore, similar robberies took place in several other cities. And in every instance it was royal loot! The Gaekwar of Baroda has one of the finest collections of diamonds in India, the famous 'Star of the Deccan' among them—and a rug, a *rug*, Dana, ten by six, made of pearls and rubies and diamonds! Think of it—and stolen! Scindia of Gwalior, the Rajah of Alwar, the Nawab of Bahawalpur, and, oh, others, too! And they all happened on the same night. Does it mean there 's a band of thieves at work, with Chavigny at the head? If so, why, great Scott, it 's the most colossal thing that 's ever been staged! But I can't understand how they intend to get away with the booty. The borders and the coast are closed as tight as a drum, and they can't dispose of the jewels in India."

Dana sighed. "To think of all that happening, Alan, just as I arrive! Would n't it be marvelous if—"

"If what?" he encouraged, smiling.

"Well, if I were to wake up and find myself in the midst of something of that sort; one of the players, not just an onlooker." Another sigh. "I 'd like to see a really notorious thief, Alan."

He laughed. "You may; for Chavigny's in a close quarter now. But here we are at the hotel."

The carriage drew up and a turbaned porter took her bags. The proprietor, an Eurasian, met them under the great front arch of the building and conducted them to their rooms.

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"Oh!" gasped the girl, drawing aside the bamboo blinds.

The casement opened upon a stone terrace flush with the city walls, and out of the green and white chaos of Shahjehanabad, or modern Delhi, rose the gilded bubbles of several domes. Beyond a dark green jungle area, the Jumna shone dully.

"India!" she exclaimed. "Moguls and howdahs and mosques!"

"India! Thugs, snakes and abominable hotels!" scoffed her brother from the adjoining room. "Here 's the copy of the Pearl Scarf, if you care to see it."

As she turned, he stepped through the communicating doorway and extended a shallow box. When she lifted the cover a little gasp of astonishment left her lips. The cream-luster of pearls; red and blue gleams from paste diamonds!

"Why, they look genuine!" she cried; then shuddered. "There 's a terrible fascination about jewels, Alan. They always have a story. Murder and pillage!"

"Grease and dirt usually, in India," he interpolated with a smile, taking the box. "But let 's forget Chavigny and the round dozen Rajahs that are wailing over their stolen jewels. I promised Gerrish—he 's an old friend—we 'd dine with him this evening. Eight o'clock."

A few minutes later Dana unpacked her grips. Dear Alan! Her brother. After all those years. She wondered if it were not a dream, if presently she would n't wake up back at Bayou Latouche, or in Tante Lucie's

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court, down in New Orleans, with Tante Lucie talking of foreign lands. . . . .

2

Night settled over Delhi. From the River Jumna to the Ridge, and beyond, tiny lights blinked at the shadows, and like a huge spirit-eye in the dusk the moon looked down upon the domes and minarets of the old Mogul capital. At the clubs electric punkahs fanned the air, ice clinked in frosted glasses and home-sick young officers read news-sheets from Britain. The network of narrow, constricted highways between Burra Bazaar and the Delhi Gate steamed and stewed, and heat and stench crawled beneath dirty eaves and balconies. South of the modern city, on the dead plain of Firozabad, thornbush and acacia rustled mournfully and ruined ramparts yielded up their nightly squadron of bats.

In his residence beyond the Civil Lines, Colonel Sir Francis Duncraigie, Director of Central Intelligence, C. S. I., and probably one of the most important men in the empire, sat alone in his writing-room beneath a mildly whirring fan, and sweltered and swore.

As a house-boy appeared like a white wraith from the dusk of the hall, he looked up.

"Well?"

"Did you call, O Presence?"

Sir Francis glared. "No!" Then, "But wait!" A pattering noise sounded from the driveway, and

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he rose and strode to the window, parting the draperies. What he saw, fantastic in the hazy moonlight, was a palanquin with drawn curtains, borne on the shoulders of four coolies.

"What 'n Tophet!" he exclaimed, for palanquins are rare in the present-day Delhi of cabs and motorcars, nor is it the custom of Mohammedan ladies, who ride in these picturesque conveyances, to call upon officers of the empire.

"If it 's anybody to see me, tell 'em I have an appointment and they 'll have to wait," he instructed briefly, turning back.

The house-boy disappeared, and Sir Francis resumed his seat. After a moment the boy returned.

"She says you have an appointment with her, O Presence!"

The colonel stared. "What!" Pause. "By George! Perhaps you 'd better show her in!"

He watched the doorway, and presently a white figure materialized. He rose. The woman wore a *bhourka*—the long cotton garment that Mohammedan ladies affect in public, and which leaves only the eyes visible.

"You wish to see me?" asked the Director of Central Intelligence.

The hood of the *bhourka* was thrown back . . . and the colonel, who while on duty hibernated under the armor of official dignity, came out of his shell. No man would question her beauty, many her type. The fea-

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tures were long and narrow, and a warm gold, suggesting an Aryan strain, underlay her clear skin. The eyes, rather heavy-lidded, were baffling, and of a deep violet shade—like the peaks of the Khyber after the sunset gun at Jamrud Fort. Black hair clouded her face.

"You are surprised to see me—like this?" she enquired, indicating the *bhourka*.

Her voice was low and rich, and marked by a huskiness that was rare in that it was musical. Her English was flawless.

"Well, rather!" confessed the colonel.

"Am I late?"—as he drew up a chair for her.

"On the minute," he lied.

She smiled tolerantly. "Will you close the door, please?"

With a speed that would have made his subalterns gasp, he hastened to obey.

"Since I received your telephone call," he told her, settling himself behind the desk, "I have been all interest. What is it this time—more plots against the Sirkar?"

She made a grimace. "Plots spring up and die overnight! If I concerned myself with such minor occurrences, I should be eternally occupied. I told you I wished to see you regarding a matter of *importance.*"

She paused and he said: "Well?"

"What happened on the night of June fourteenth?"

He stared at her. "You don't mean—"

"But I *do.*"

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He drummed upon the desk.

"You have not answered me," she reminded, after a moment. "What *did* happen on that night? Why not read me your files?"

He unlocked a drawer of his desk and removed a file cabinet. From the latter he took a sheaf of papers.

"The Treasure House at Alwar was robbed," he said, his eyes upon the papers in his hand. "The diamonds alone are worth ten thousand pounds, and—but you don't want me to go into detail, do you? Well, gems valued at three hundred thousand pounds, sterling, were spirited away from the Nazarbagh Palace at Baroda. Tukaji Rao of Indore lost his Pearl Scarf and the Peacock Turban. The treasury at Jodpur was looted. Scindia of Gwalior's pearls were stolen. Others who were robbed are: your cousin, the Nawab of Jehelumpore, the Nawab of Bahawalpur, the Rajah of Mysore and the Rajah of Tanjore." He halted, raising his eyes. "In other words, on the night of June fourteenth jewels worth millions of pounds were snatched away under the very nose of the Government, without leaving one single thread to grasp! If anyone had even suggested such a preposterous thing before, I 'd have laughed!"

"Then the 'Delhi Post' did not tell the truth this morning," ventured the woman, "when it said, 'the Intelligence Department has a valuable clue'?"

"Well, so we have," he admitted.

"Chavigny?"

He gave her a swift glance. "How did you know?"

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She dismissed the question with a shrug and said:

"You agree with me, I am sure, Sir Francis, that these robberies are connected; that it is highly improbable to think for an instant that in nine cities thefts of famous jewels merely occurred simultaneously. As for this Chavigny—judging from his reputation he is clever enough to have done it. However, reflect upon the difficulties he would encounter. India is not like Europe. There is caste to consider. He is a white man. Furthermore, the jewels were stolen from state treasuries; from buildings, in some instances vaults, that are not easily accessible."

"Then you think it the work of some sort of organized band?"

"I think exactly as you do," she replied cryptically, "only I have foundation for my belief, while you are—rather, your department, is—well, romancing."

Silence fell. The man was the first to speak.

"I 'm to infer, then, that in your opinion Chavigny had nothing whatever to do with the robberies?"

She smiled. "Did I say that?"

"At least, you hinted that there is something rather big behind the thefts."

She continued to smile and leaned upon the desk, facing him.

"To come to the purpose of this call, Sir Francis. If you will give me four months—and a free rein—you have my word that I will recover every jewel that was stolen on the night of June fourteenth."

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It was with difficulty that the Director of Central Intelligence smothered an impulse to smile and suggested soberly:

"Won't you be more explicit? This is—well, from my viewpoint, it seems rather incredible."

"I mean, with the aid of one of your men I will do what your Department could never accomplish. May I have him?"

"The whole of the Secret Service is at your disposal!"—magnanimously.

She gestured impatiently. "Woodenheads, all of them!"

Sir Francis almost gasped. "Even Euan Kerth?" he managed to ask calmly.

"I do not know Euan Kerth, but he is reputed to be the lion of your Department. He would more than likely prove unmanageable. No, Euan Kerth does not qualify."

He chewed his lip. "Really, won't you throw a little more light on the subject?"

"No," she replied in mellifluous tones, with her most distracting smile. "You recall what happened in the affair of Amar Singh, when your men investigated? *I* shall handle this after my own manner—or wash my hands of it."

Sir Francis' forehead wrinkled in an official frown.

"This is most extraordinary! Is that a—er—threat?"

"Dare one threaten the Intelligence Department?" she purred.

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He drummed upon the surface of his desk again. His thoughts at that moment were none too pleasant.

"Well, what are your terms?" came at length from him.

She was aware that she was mistress of the situation, and she enjoyed the position.

"I wish to choose the man with whom I am to work," she began. "I am not to be spied upon by your agents; in fact, the first indication of any sort of surveillance will end our contract. The man I choose will not be permitted to communicate with you, or with anyone, until we have finished. He must obey me implicitly. If you agree to my terms, I shall name a meeting-place, and from the instant this man enters the house he is mine; he disappears from your observation completely until I give him back to the Raj. Meanwhile, you will follow up the clues you have; you will forget me, you will forget the man who is to help me—and at the end of four months I will keep my pledge."

Sir Francis concealed his thoughts under a smile, and well he did.

"You ask the impossible. Why, that 's preposterous!"

"You question my loyalty?"

A spark showed in the violet eyes—steel under the velvet.

"Your loyalty is not involved in this discussion; it is simply that you ask things that are unprecedented in the service."

"The happenings of June fourteenth are without pre-

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cedent,'' she returned swiftly. ''Come, Sir Francis, what are you losing in this venture? On the contrary, you gain much. I want no credit; when I have finished I vanish from the affair, completely. One of the stipulations is that my name must not be mentioned in connection with the work. Simply, your curiosity is piqued. And your masculine vanity suffers at the thought that a woman can do what you, with your hundreds of eyes, can not. Be reasonable. I give my word, a word that you have reason to know is always kept, that your man shall come to no harm. You do not question my loyalty, you say; then what reason for refusal have you? Simply that in the stale, musty annals of your Department such a thing has never been done!''

The Director of Central Intelligence leaned back in his chair.

''Do you know''—and he smiled as he said it—''I could have you—er—detained as a suspicious person, if I felt so disposed.''

Her musical laughter rippled out. ''But you do *not* feel so disposed, for what would it gain you?''

Their eyes met and there followed a quick duel. . . The man's smile was a sign of defeat.

''If you don't want a Secret Service man, whom *do* you want?''

''A man who has brains and imagination—and, besides those, honor.''

''Name him.''

''Major Arnold Trent of Gaya.''

Sir Francis lifted his eyebrows. ''He is a doctor.''

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"That is the way with you military men"—with a sigh. "If one is a physician, you think he knows nothing but what is taught in schools of medicine! I want some one whose brain is free of tiresome Secret Service rules."

The Colonel smiled. "You are a very resourceful woman," he declared.

"That means you accept?"

"It means I recognize your ability, and that I shall communicate with the Viceroy to-morrow and give you my decision as soon as possible."

She smiled her approval and rose.

"Then I shall not prolong this interview. Good night, Sir Francis."

She gave him her hand and moved to the door, where she halted, turning back.

"I nearly forgot," she said. "There is one other clause in the agreement. Major Trent must be kept in ignorance of the party with whom he is to work. To him you may call me—well, the Swaying Cobra." She smiled again. "By that name I was known when I danced on the Continent."

Then she departed, melting into the dusky hallway.

After a moment Sir Francis moved to the window and parted the draperies slightly. The palanquin was passing, swimming in yellow moonlight. He watched it until it lost itself in shadows.

"Now what the deuce!" he muttered.

He resumed his seat and searched several drawers until he found a black book; then he ran through the

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pages, halting at: "*Trent, Arnold Ralph, Major, R. A. M. C. . . .*" He read the lines following the name; took the receiver from a telephone on his desk; called for a number.

"Kane?" he asked when he was connected. "Duncraigie. You might come out this way to-night. Important matter. Sarojini Nanjee just called. What! Surely you remember *her!* Connection of the Nawab of Jehelumpore; danced in London and Paris for a while. Half white, fourth Rajput, and the rest devil." He chuckled. "Thought you 'd recall *her.* I 'll be waiting for you."

He placed the receiver upon the hook and sat staring reflectively at the doorway where the woman of the *bhourka* disappeared.

"Hell-cat!" he said aloud.

Which may or may not have been the impression she intended to give.

3

An hour after the interview with the Director of Central Intelligence, Sarojini Nanjee lay back in a great cane chair in the living-room of her bungalow, idly watching the smoke from her cigarette as it spiraled upward and was rent into vaporous tatters by the electric punkah.

The room, like its occupant, was exotic. A Kyoto gong kindled a bright spot among softer tones—rare rugs, brocade hangings, and a tall lamp afloat on the

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shadows, like an amber island. The woman seemed to melt into it, her very attitude expressing its utter luxury. Deep iris-hued eyes dreamed under heavy lids. Her skin glowed with a golden sheen, and the lacy folds of a negligee fell sheer from her slender ankles and embroidered the carpet with foamy white.

She had been thus for some time, her brain immersed in a languor, her thoughts propelled with as little mental volition as possible. She stirred only to flick the cigarette-ashes into a brass bowl at her elbow, or to arch one arm above her head in a gesture of complete abandon. A passing recollection of her call at Sir Francis Duncraigie's residence invariably caused a faint, inscrutable smile to slip into her eyes. But for the most part she did not burden herself with either thought or retrospection; merely sat in the dull, sweet stupor of semi-inertia.

A night beetle rattled harshly outside. The sound came to the woman as a sudden recall from her absorption. She placed her nearly burnt-out cigarette in the ash-bowl; stretched, rose, and struck the Kyoto gong. As the rich, deep-throated echo sank into a hush, the curtains on one side of the room parted and a servant in white garments and a blue turban entered.

"I shall retire now, Chandra Lal," she announced quietly. "You have your instructions."

"Yes, Heavenborn!"

"You remember the place—the room?"

"How could I forget, Heavenborn?"

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"You will"—she hesitated—"cause no injury unless necessary."

"Nay, Heavenborn!"

"Stop calling me that!"—irritably.

Scarlet betel-stained teeth were revealed in a smile.

"Very well, Memsahib."

"You may go now."

"To hear is to obey, Memsahib!"

The blue-turbaned Chandra Lal slipped noiselessly between the curtains.

Sarojini Nanjee moved to a door in the other end of the room, paused tentatively and stepped over the threshold. The door closed behind her.

And as she left the room, Chandra Lal reappeared.

He stood motionless in the division of the curtains, listening; then crept softly to a desk in a dusky corner. He produced a key from his breeches; fitted it into a lock; opened a drawer. For several seconds his hands moved swiftly, silently through the papers within. After that he wrote a line on a small scrap of paper. This he folded and slipped under the edge of his blue turban.

Noiselessly he locked the drawer and recrossed the room. At the doorway he looked back. . . . . The curtains fell together behind him.

4

Dana Charteris sat before a mirror in her room at the hotel and released her hair from all restrain-

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ing pins. It tumbled over her shoulders in ripples of gold; little bronze-tipped waves, rather reddish, glowed with soft fire under the searching rays of the electric lamp. The face that looked back at her from the mirror, a face framed in the shimmering copperish masses, had a lustrous pallor. She returned the stare of her own image solemnly and realized, not for the first time, that while the features in the mirror were those of a girl, there were hints of maturity. The fullness of the throat, of the lips, and the sympathetic, almost poignant expression in the brown eyes.

She sighed, then hummed a little tune as she ran a comb through the thick strands. The odor of tobacco floated to her from the adjoining room where Alan was making out a report. She liked the smell; it was clean and masculine.

When she had plaited her hair into two long braids, she slipped into a dressing-gown and pattered into her brother's room in bedroom sandals.

"Alan," she said, slipping her arms about his neck, "it 's so wonderful to be with you! Why, just think, two months ago I was teaching music in Bayou Latouche!"

He put his pipe aside.

"To-morrow we 'll ramble about the city, through the Fort and the bazaars," he told her. "And the next day—to Lahore."

"I always think of Lahore with a picture of *Kim* sitting on '*Zam-zammah*'."

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He smiled. "Then to Peshawar and the Khyber. I 've an old friend at Ali Masjid Fort and he 's promised to take us through the Pass."

Then he rose, picked her up bodily and carried her into her room, placing her upon the bed.

"Good night; sleep tight!"

He kissed her, turned out the light and returned to his room.

Dana slipped out of her dressing-gown; flung it across the foot of the bed; dropped her slippers upon the floor. Then she lay back upon the pillows, watching the moonlight that streamed in through the open casement.

The wide-flung windows yielded a view of the sky and the white Indian stars. In her fancy she likened them to a string of jewels. Jewels. That word brought to her mind a picture of the looted treasurers of which Alan had told her. Gems. What fascinating things! Jewels of rajahs and maharajahs, the pomp and rust of pagan rulers! Diamonds stripped from idols' eyes, and rubies and sapphires pillaged from the vaults of ancient temples! She had heard stories of the pearl fisheries of Ceylon where stones were stolen and hidden in cobras, even in human bodies. . . . . India, mother of intrigue. She shivered.

She could not forget the copy of the Pearl Scarf of Indore. It haunted her. . . . Pearls. . . . Chavigny, a thief of international notoriety. . . . Alan's pen was scratching steadily on in the next room. The odor of tobacco was comforting. It made her forget the jewels of Ind; conjured in her mind a picture of the great,

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pillared house at Bayou Latouche. And she was still thinking of Bayou Latouche, and hearing faintly the *scratch-scratch* of the pen, when she fell asleep.

5

Dana awakened with a start. Involuntarily she sat up in bed, staring drowsily about the room. It was buried in dusk. The moonlight, floating through the casement, crusted the floor with a band of pearl. As full consciousness wiped the threads of sleep from her brain, she wondered what had caused her sudden awakening. No noise, for silence shut down like a lid, made more intense by the sighing of trees beyond the stone terrace. The sounds of a clock on the dressing-table seemed to stitch the hush.

For a moment she sat there, vaguely uneasy; then swung her feet over the side and slipped them into bedroom sandals. Moving quietly to the dressing-table, she looked at the clock. After one. . . . Her sandals lisped on the floor as she crept to the window.

Delhi lay asleep in the breathless night. Temple, tower, dome and minaret swam in the moonlight, and in the jungle stretch by the river jackals were laughing hysterically. With a little shiver she returned to the bed.

Strange to awaken like this, she thought. The new surroundings probably. She sighed and settled deeper in the bed.

. . . . She was almost asleep when a shadow flitted across her vision. At first it seemed a part of the slum-

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ber that had nearly overcome her, and she lay there contemplating the window-casement where it had passed until it was borne to her, suddenly, and not without a shock, that she was fully awake and the shadow was not a shadow, but a very substantial human form that had stolen by on the stone terrace. The realization drew her muscles rigid, and she lay motionless, listening to the hammering of her heart.

A faint scraping noise came from Alan's room. What was it, a footfall? An oblong reservoir of darkness outlined the doorway. She could see nothing. . . . She must move, must call her brother. But her body was locked in a temporary paralysis, her tongue dry.

Again the sound. Unmistakable. Some one was walking stealthily. The crackle of paper.

Her fright increased, swelled, became so acute that she could no longer endure it.

"Alan!"

It was not a scream; a whisper. She found that she could move, and she sat up.

From the next room came a series of thuds; bare feet on the floor.

"Damn you—"

She leaped out of bed.

A ripping sound. A groan. Another thud, heavier this time.

Dana reached the communicating door in a few steps. A quick intake of breath. Her hands closed upon the door-frame, tightened convulsively. Dimness swam vis-

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ibly before her. Through the dark mist she saw a figure dart out upon the stone terrace and disappear.

Beside the bed, stretched full length upon the floor, was a white form.

She screamed. The dimness dissolved and she rushed to the body.

"Alan! Alan!"

She grasped his shoulders, dizzy, cold with horror. Involuntarily she drew one hand away and saw a dark stain upon her fingers. It seemed to glare out and strike her eyes. She fought against a gathering weakness; forced herself to feel his heart. Beating. But that white face! And how could she lift him to the bed, how—

Footsteps rang from the hall. Came a knock at the door; a voice penetrated the panels.

Dana rose, found the light-switch and turned it. The flood of yellow gave warmth and strength to her—showed her a blue coil in the middle of the room. Dimly she realized it was a turban cloth—probably torn from the intruder's head. She did not touch it, but unlocked the door.

The Eurasian proprieter stood outside, in a dressing-gown. Behind him was a dark-skinned porter. A door opened further along the hall.

"My brother!" she gasped, motioning toward the white form.

The Eurasian spoke to the porter. They entered and placed the unconscious man upon the bed. Oblivious

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of the fact that she was clad only in a nightdress, Dana stood by, trying to collect her scattered faculties.

"If you will call a doctor," she said, "I 'll attend to him now."

"Yes, madam. I 'll have the boy fetch some water and smelling-salts from my wife's room. How did this happen?"

"I—I can't think—now," she returned dazedly. "Later. . . ."

The Eurasian said something, but she did not remember what it was; remembered only that he and the porter went out. A moment after the door closed she heard voices in the hall.

"O Alan!' she pleaded, bending over her brother. "Can't you hear me?"

Several minutes passed before he showed any symptoms of reviving; then he mumbled a few unintelligible words, and the lids drew back from his eyes.

"Dana!"—weakly. "He—took it—"

"What, Alan, dear?"

"The scarf—confounded imitation." He closed his eyes; opened them an instant later. "I 'll be all right," —with a smile. "Nothing serious. Don't mention the scarf, or anything about it. Just say—thief. . . . ." The lids sank over his eyes. "Imitation," he muttered. And fainted again.

. . . . The Eurasian returned shortly, with the porter at his heels. The latter carried a basin of water and several bottles.

"If you 'll allow me to attend to him," offered the

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proprieter, "it will spare you much unpleasantness."

Dana nodded and sank into a chair, shivering.

Nearly an hour passed before the doctor arrived. Alan had regained consciousness, but fainted during the examination. Dana, standing beside the bed in her negligee, waited nervously to hear the decision.

"I don't think you have any cause to be uneasy," said the doctor, after what seemed an interminable time. "The wound is n't serious—only the muscles and tissues punctured—nothing internal. But I 'm going to suggest, rather, insist, that he go to a hospital."

"By all means," agreed Dana, very close to tears. "I want everything possible done for him."

The doctor smiled sympathetically. "Be sure we 'll do all we can," he assured her. "Now, if you 'll have some one fetch a basin of water, boiled, I 'll get at this dressing."

Close to dawn, after the doctor had departed and Alan was conscious, Dana went to her room to dress. At the doorway she paused—for the blue turban-cloth lay coiled upon the threshold where she had tossed it. Incidents of greater importance had crowded the remembrance of it from her brain. Now she stooped and picked it up, rather gingerly. Queer. For imitation pearls!

She lowered her eyes, suddenly, involuntarily—as though in obedience to a subconscious command.

On the spot where the turban-cloth had lain was a small scrap of paper.

Thus, having jested with a puppet at Indore and

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given a thread into the hands of Dana Charteris, Destiny, capricious as the winds, turned toward the officer of the empire upon whom a chalk-mark had previously been placed.

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CHAPTER II

A PIECE OF CORAL

SUNSET was spreading a fan of flamingo plumes above Meera, a native village to the northward of Gaya, when Arnold Trent (unaware that Destiny had been hovering over him since Dana Charteris found the scrap of paper, in Delhi, three days before) clattered out of the jungle and along the nearly deserted main street. At the council-tree, where the headman of the village sat and chewed betel-leaf, he drew rein, listening to a low, eerie wailing that came from one of the white-washed houses.

"It is Chatterjee," volunteered the headman. "His Ratanamma is dead, Dakktar Sahib."

Trent swung down from his saddle. "When did it happen, Ranjeet Singh?"

"Not an hour past, Dakktar Sahib."

Trent's eyes roved up and down the street. "Where 's everybody? Meera looks as if a plague had struck it."

Ranjeet Singh, who was a Jain, spat contemptuously.

"Some vermin-ridden priests from Tibet are at the Sacred Bo-tree," he explained, "and the worshippers of Gaudama have swarmed thither, like flies to a dung-feast!"

Trent smiled slightly and moved toward one of the whitewashed houses, swinging along with the leisurely,

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easy stride of one poised on well-controlled muscles. At the door he paused. It was dark within, and a breath of offal and man-reek greeted him. After a moment he saw, against the darkness, the pale silhouette of a white-clad figure. From this figure came the eerie wails.

"Chatterjee!" Trent called.

The silhouette ceased wailing long enough to quaver: "Dakktar Sahib!"

The Englishman, his eyes now accustomed to the gloom, strode over to a thong-strung bed and peered down at the form stretched upon it. Unable to see clearly, he struck a match. The tiny flare flickered upon bare brown skin. . . . . Trent swore.

"Stop that damned nonsense!" he commanded. "Chatterjee, you 've had some infernal *hakim* here again—against my orders!"

"My little Ratanamma, dove of my bosom, is dead!" wailed the man.

"Did you give her the medicine I left?"

"Yes, Dakktar Sahib! It was your medicine that killed her. The *hakim* said so."

Trent swore again. "I 've a notion to report you to the Karnal Sahib and have you taken up! You old murderer! Did n't you know better than to let some filthy, stinking *hakim* burn her stomach with a hot iron?"

The native was wailing again.

"Listen to me, Chatterjee," said Trent sternly, gripping the man's shoulder. "Who did this?"

"Your medicine, Dakktar Sahib!"

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Trent shook him roughly. "Will you answer me—or. . . ."

"Your medicine, Dakktar Sahib!" insisted the man.

Trent released him, realizing the futility of pressing the question.

"Very well. I 'll report you to the Karnal Sahib and he 'll have you strung up by your toes!"

He left the house abruptly—followed by feverish, glowing eyes.

Out of Meera he rode, past the temple on the river bank and along the jungle-lined road toward Gaya.

Trent was angry. But his face gave no indication of it. Twenty-three years under a tropical sun (add the ten years at school in Britain and you 'll have his age) had baked his skin to a leather brown, and a third of that time spent in the army had taught him that impassivity is man's chief advantage—a citadel against the aggressive. He had, in the vernacular of the times, a "poker face"—the mask of those who share their secrets with few. In either mufti or khaki he was not particularly handsome, and this evening, after a day of work in viscid heat, he was almost ugly. Dust was ingrained into his skin, like an ocher pigment; his throat and brows were moist with perspiration. Yet there was about him something arresting and vital—a challenging strength that pronounced him a man's man. And he was. He talked with men; ate with men; lived with men; understood men. Scales that dip into earth-dust and swing again to regions of exquisite idealism—the eternal weight and counter-weight of

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Self. That was how he defined them. And his definitions were usually metaphors. An idiosyncrasy. Give him a chair in a dim room with one of Beethoven's sonatas swelling in throat-gripping chords, or a pipe and congenial darkness somewhere close to the stars, and he was in his prime element.

As for women. . . . That there had been one—one or more—at some time in his life, nobody who knew him doubted; but it was the general opinion at Gaya and thereabouts that he was as little concerned with women as with anything else that habited the planet. Envious subordinates hinted that at one time or other he had run afoul some feminine reef. When these remarks drifted to Trent (and such remarks always do) he only smiled, for he had a generous supply of humor packed away under his impassivity. It was never known that he deliberately avoided women; it appeared that he simply accepted them as a matter of form, inevitable as waves on a sea, and sometimes as disastrous.

Only Richard Manlove, also an army doctor, who shared his bungalow, had penetrated beyond the outer-rampart of his seeming seclusiveness—"Dicky" Manlove whom Trent first saw out in dead Mesopotamia. Their friendship was a popular topic of discussion on warm afternoons when feminine Gaya gathered to perspire under one common punkah. So different, you know. . . . Young "Dicky"—a delicious boy . . . . and the major—oh, rather a decent chap, a human manual of Hindustani and all those other perfectly impos-

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sible languages, but . . . . well, it 's so disconcerting not to know what a man is thinking, is n't it?

Thus feminine Gaya catalogued him, and thus he appeared—immobile—this late afternoon as he rode out of Meera.

His anger died as he trotted on, and by the time he came within view of his bungalow, built on the flank of one of Gaya's hills, he was watching, in a whimsical, almost detached manner, the fireflies dance and reel in the dusk. When he drew nearer, he saw a figure in a white dress leave his compound, a figure that paused at the diverging roads not far from the bungalow, and. after a slight hesitation, chose the branch in his direction. Instantly he indexed her as a stranger; no female resident would think of using the isolated Meera road after dusk.

She wore a pith helmet with a veil. The veil was lifted, but as he approached, she lowered it—curiously enough, he thought. He was certain she had come from his compound; therefore, when she was within a few yards, he drew rein.

"Your pardon . . . ." as he lifted his helmet. "Do you wish to see me? I 'm Major Trent."

She halted, resting one hand upon a tree-trunk. He caught the glint of a bracelet on her white arm, and, being a man to notice details, observed a design worked in heavy relief upon it—a design that, in the half-tone of the early night, was almost indistinguishable.

"No," came the answer from under the veil, in a voice with a soft, thrilling timbre. "No."

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He was still studying the bracelet out of the corner of his eye, and he perceived that the intricate workmanship represented a king-cobra; its hood was lifted in bizarre relief. . . . A barbaric ornament for a white woman to wear, he thought.

"But, really," he persisted, "it is n't quite safe for you to go along this road. Beasts, you know."

A pause. He saw the dark pools of her eyes upon him.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I thought I was going to the dâk bungalow."

With that she turned and moved away in the direction of the metalled main highway.

"Now, that 's queer," he observed to himself, staring after her. "Anybody with even bad sight could see that this road. . . ." Certainly she was at the compound gate. Why had she falsified?

He removed his helmet and furrowed his hair—a characteristic gesture; then, still watching the woman, he jerked the reins and trotted toward the bungalow.

2

A native servant in a white cotton *chuddah* and turban switched on the light in the living-room as Trent entered.

"Has Manlove Sahib come in, Ganeesh?" asked the Englishman.

"No, Dakktar Sahib."

Trent placed his helmet upon the table and sank into a chair.

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"I sha'n't want anything to eat, so you may as well go. If Manlove Sahib has n't eaten, he can go to the barracks."

As the native quitted the room, Trent, at a sudden thought, called after him.

"Ganeesh," he said, as his servant reappeared, "has anyone been here this afternoon?"

"No, Dakktar Sahib."

"Did n't a lady call a few minutes ago?"

The man answered in the negative.

"Hmm. Very well. That 's all."

Still puzzling over the strange woman, he removed a pipe and a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, and when he had filled the bowl he lighted it. For several minutes he drew upon the amber stem, looking abstractedly into the whorls of smoke; then he picked up a brown volume from the table and opened it at a leaf that was turned under.

Here was another trait that Gaya had not discovered. Frequently when he was tired he turned to poetry—sometimes to books on the art-treasures and ancient lore of India, Indo-China and China—for relaxation.

His eyes followed these lines:

Star of the South that now through orient mist,
At nightfall off Tampico or Belize,
Greetest the sailor, rising from those seas
Where first in me, a fond romanticist,
The tropic sunset's bloom on cloudy piles
Cast out industrious cares with dreams of fabulous isles.

He rather fancied that passage. Fabulous isles.

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His brain toyed with the thought. For, although he walked down among mortals, sheathing himself in indifference and impassivity, he kept, in secret, a ladder to the stars—a concession to return at will to a guarded kingdom of his youth, the dominion of Romance and Adventure. He would have dwelt in this kingdom, secluded from earth, but for a thorn that was fastened deep within him. This thorn had pricked him since that period of adolescence when first visions and aspirations stirred in his boyish brain and set him to dreaming of the future. It had goaded him relentlessly into achievement, against the will of his adventurous spirit. Strive as he might, he could not draw it out.

It was Ambition.

Because of it he had buried a dream that at odd moments returned and haunted him, like the poignantly sweet odor of lavender rising from packed-away treasures. Reckless, this dream, dangerous. To forsake the dull earth; drink freedom from the winds. A passion for the open spaces—to explore the fabulous isles. But the lure of uncharted seas and archipelagoes beyond the sunset, sheer and calling as they were, could not entice him to trample tradition. Ambition had won. And he beheld himself now, at thirty-three, a romantic soul armored in realism; at heart a boy who had never broken away from the age when flapping canvas and groaning timbers cause a queer clutching in the throat. His reckless impulses and desires were bitted and diverted into accomplishment. He was a success. But there were times, often in the dead of the night,

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with the jungle solitude challenging speech, when he realized that, in his own eyes, he was a failure.

He sighed unconsciously, almost inaudibly, and his sea-green eyes softened to gray as he fashioned, extravagantly, a blue dragon in the tobacco smoke that coiled sinuously toward the ceiling; sighed, as he often did in the quiet of his own quarters where only the walls might hear.

His thoughts switched involuntarily to the present (and his eyes lost some of their grayness, for their color seemed to change with his moods) and focussed upon the communication he had received that morning. Under the precise military wording he sensed another element. Mystery. After all these prosaic years was he to be drawn out of his cocoon of medicines and gauze bandages and have his adventure? In all probability the affair would prove drab enough. Adventure? Well, hardly. Things of the sort set forth in the despatch were usually rather unpleasant. Yet it intrigued him. Blindfolded. And was not that it?

". . . . temporarily attached to. . . . Euan Kerth . . . . a woman called the Swaying Cobra. . . ."

Fragments of the communication filtered through his brain. Strange. From pills and antiseptics to that! It *was* leaving a cocoon! What a joke to tell Manlove. Dear old Manlove—this with warmth.

The sounds of walking in the compound announced the object of his thoughts. The footsteps drew nearer, crossed the veranda, and Manlove, uniformed and helmeted, entered.

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"Rum day," he said. "Hot as Tophet; everything wrong."

Trent made no comment; only nodded.

"There 's a big shindy up at the Sacred Bo-tree," the other added. "Some Tibetan lamas are there. I stopped by with Herrick."

He took off his helmet, the removal revealing to the light a tanned, boyish face and a healthy thatch of hair; mopped his forehead and flung his headgear carelessly across the room. That was his way, to appear careless. But at heart he was not; he liked small boundaries (while Trent craved larger ranges), homely things. He looked forward to the time when he would come into possession of "Gray Towers," ancestral abiding-place of the Manloves. Of course, he did n't want his grandfather, more familiarly known as the Old Fellow, to die or anything like that; he was simply prepared for the inevitable: The Right Honorable Richard Auckland Manlove, sitting in the House of Lords and presenting Colonial improvement measures, for India in particular; no longer "Dicky" Manlove, irresponsible adventurer, but carrying the ponderous dignity of the name. . . . . It was all very impressive. . . . .

"Mrs. Dalhousie is giving a lawn party tonight," he announced, taking a chair. "Impromptu. She told me to drag you along, if you 'd come."

"Sorry," returned Trent. "I 'm leaving for Benares early in the morning. I 'll be occupied to-night. Orders from Delhi."

Manlove withdrew a cigarette case from under his

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tunic, opened it, took out a smoke and placed it between his lips before he spoke.

"Deuce you say! Not transferred?"

"Temporarily detached; special service. You and Conningsby will have to take charge while I 'm away."

He smiled. "Been reading the papers lately?"

Manlove lighted his cigarette, glancing furtively at Trent. The latter was staring into the blue haze of smoke, half humorously, as though he found something amusing in the vaporous clouds.

"Certainly"—thus Manlove.

"Anything new about the jewels?"

Manlove smiled to himself. He had n't lived in the same house with Arnold Trent for fourteen months without learning *something* about him. The old sphinx, he thought good-humoredly.

"Nothing important"—briefly. "However, I understand, from Granville, that the Department believes an international thief—Chavigny 's his name—mixed up in it."

"Wonder where Granville got that?"

"Oh, rumors are plentiful, especially at stations like this where everybody's chief occupation is talk."

"That all?"

Manlove nodded and said nothing, for he knew Trent.

"Have you approximated the value of the stolen gems?" queried the latter, then went on: "Millions of pounds! And have you wondered how the devil they 're going to hide the loot, or get it out of India? Such well known jewels can't be sold—"

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"Unless they 're re-cut," put in Manlove. He smiled wisely. "By Kali and all the other deities, you don't mean that you, expert in cholera and dysentery, are about to—" He chuckled. "Well, I 'm damned!"

Trent moved to a desk in a corner of the room, unlocked it and took out a long, official-looking document. This he handed to Manlove, then resumed his seat. The latter unfolded it and let his eyes travel down the sheet.

"Has the heat gone to their heads at Delhi?" he demanded when he had finished. "Almighty God, why detach a perfectly good doctor, when they have a whole list of Secret Service men?"

Trent only smiled. The younger man waved his hand toward the paper.

"Surely this is n't all?"

"You know as much as I do. I leave in the morning for Benares. At the hotel I 'm to meet a fellow called Kerth—"

"Euan Kerth," Manlove interrupted, his eyes upon the document. "You 've heard of him, have n't you? He 's the best of his sort in India. He 's been in Tibet; was one of Younghusband's interpreters in nineteen-four. Speaks Hindustani, Burmese, mandarin Chinese, Tibetan, and God knows what else! You and he ought to hit it off fairly well together. But go on."

"I 'm to meet him at the hotel," Trent resumed. "Just what part he plays, I don't know yet. There I 'm also to find a message from this Swaying Cobra woman, and meet her at a place named in the message.

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And—well, that 's all.'' He smiled. ''Enlightening, is n't it?''

As he finished, Manlove strode to the door and tossed away his cigarette. There he paused, peering out.

''Where 's Ganeesh?'' he asked, looking over his shoulder.

''I let him go for the evening. Why?''

''Just saw some one leave the compound; must have been he.'' Manlove returned to his chair. ''Trent, I envy you—even if they are balmy at Delhi. This doctoring heathens is n't all it 's colored up to be. It 's getting on my nerves. I even dream about fever and stinking *fakirs.*''

Trent consulted his wrist-watch. ''I have to ride up to Colonel Urqhart's and make a report. Remember the chap at Meera, Chatterjee? Some *hakim* burned his child's stomach with an iron. Of course she died. I 'm going to make an example of him.'' He rose. ''I have to wash up a bit. I suppose you 're going to the lawn party?''

''Think not,'' decided Manlove. ''I 'll be here when you return.''

''Care to ride up with me?''

''No. I 'm rather tired.''

Trent went to his bedroom and Manlove lighted another cigarette. He 'd miss the old sphinx, he told himself. Good old Trent! Why had n't he married? Frequently he asked himself that question; never Trent. There must be a reason, he mused, flicking the ashes from his cigarette. Maybe there had been a

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woman—a typhoon. The typhoon sort could raise the deuce with a chap like Trent. Perhaps. . . . He stifled a yawn. Damn India; damn its climate. He had n't taken his leave this season; it was about due now. A jolly trip home; see the Old Fellow; see "Gray Towers."

He heard Trent moving about in the rear. He could n't picture him sleuthing it. Queer world anyhow. And Benares. What was afoot?

Another yawn. He flung his half-smoked cigarette through the doorway, and it fell upon the veranda in a mild shower of sparks, and lay there, its red tip glowing like a malevolent little eye.

3

It was after nine o'clock when Trent rode out of Sahib's Gaya and around the shoulder of a hill toward his bungalow. A golden moon floated in nebulous haze —an electric disc that transfused its heat into the night. The earth steamed and sweltered, and the perfumes of tropical blossoms stole out of the jungle and exhaled a heavy languor.

Trent, pipe clamped between his teeth, sweat running into his eyes from his helmet-band, jogged along, thinking leisurely (as men do in warmer climates) of the woman of the cobra-bracelet, and thinking more of the bracelet than the woman. It was one of his peculiarities to collect rare ornaments; among his curios he had a bangle of a Nepalese princess, a Burmese bell from a pagoda in the Pyinmana district, and a silver-

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chased, turquoise-inset teapot from Tibet. The bracelet the woman wore was finely wrought, and its design not of the ordinary; this he recognized, even though he had but a glimpse of it. A king-cobra with a lifted hood. And the wearer. . . . Why had she lowered her veil—why had she denied that she came from his compound? Mystery. . . . But, he reflected, mysteries were not rare; mysteries, to such as he, in the jungle; in the ruins and tumbled grandeur of ancient temples; in the dim, dark bazaars, spice-reeking, where filth mocks British law, and Love and Death are one. . . . .

A white figure, ahead in the scented gloom, broke into his thoughts, a figure that at first was distinguishable only as a stain of pallor on the roadway. Trent experienced a quickening of interest. She of the cobra-bracelet? No. He could see now. Not a woman; a native. The man was moving at a swift gait, almost running; but as he drew nearer, he halted, looking about irresolutely, nervously. And at that moment (he was not more than ten yards away) Trent recognized him and reined in his mare.

"Chatterjee!" he called. "D 'ye want to see me?"

The native did not answer, only fixed upon him a mute, terrified stare, and crashed through the high, dense undergrowth at the side of the road. The sounds of his flight grew fainter as he plunged deeper into the jungle.

Trent stared at the spot where he disappeared. His first impulse was to follow—an impulse that he cast aside. Now that was odd, he thought. What in flam-

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ing hades was the matter with him? For a moment he sat in mystified silence, then he kicked his mount lightly in the flanks.

A day of incidents. First, the despatch from Delhi, then the veiled woman, now this encounter. From where had the native come? The bungalow? Perhaps he was merely on his way from Meera, for the road passed his quarters. But he knew natives never walked when it was possible to ride. Anyhow, that did n't explain his actions. Confound it, he 'd have trouble with that fellow yet! This as he branched off from the main highway and clattered along the driveway to his compound.

Not until he reached the gate did he observe that the house was dark, squatting in gloomy secrecy among the surrounding trees. At first it puzzled him; then he decided that Manlove had probably gone to bed.

When his mare was stabled, he made his way into the living-room. In the dark he struck his knee on a sharp projection and swore. He fumbled for the light-switch; blinked in the sudden glare. A yawn and an indolent stretch. He 'd get a good sleep and—

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as his eyes trailed across the room to an over-turned chair. "What the devil!"

A piece of bronze, some Hindu god, lay on the floor, gleaming sinisterly, and a picture—its regular place was on the desk—had fallen to the floor. An insidious thought took root in his brain. With quick strides he reached Manlove's room. It was empty, the bed unused. Its desertion hurt him—a queer sensation,

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that. He whirled about, returned to the living-room and halted, irresolute.

"Manlove!"

Silly to call, he thought. Perhaps Manlove had gone to the lawn party. But the overturned chair and the idol did not look well. Thieves? Or. . . . Suddenly the meeting with Chatterjee shaped into significance. He knew the workings of the native brain, and a frightful possibility suggested itself.

An electric torch lay on the table. He reached for it; stood with his hands poised in the air, thought temporarily suspended from action. For his eyes, lowered involuntarily, fastened upon a small, dark spot on the matting.

Regaining the power to move, he stooped. A sudden sickness seized him. Unmistakable. But why did blood affect him? Blood. The discovery added a spark to his suspicions. His imagination painted a swift, vivid picture. The look of terror on Chatterjee's face. . . . Manlove, the innocent. . . . But no! It could n't be!

In possession of the torchlight, he strode out upon the veranda. There he discovered a trail of spots identical with that on the matting, a trail that led down the steps. He made a quick search of the compound. A sense of helplessness smote him. Manlove, perhaps somewhere within calling distance, yet unable to summon him. . . .

He halted at the gate. On the left was jungle, dark and hushed; on the right, a few lights in the nearest

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bungalow. Across the road was the mouth of a narrow path which he knew led to the ruins of an old temple hidden behind the rank foliage. At thought of the ruins an impulse made him forsake the compound and follow the path.

Less than two hundred yards from the road the growths thinned. Looming before him, spectral in the yellow mystery of the moonlight, was the temple. The outer court was throttled with weeds. Luxurious vines trailed from ruined pillar to ruined wall and wove a sanctuary for vipers. At the end of an avenue of crumbled columns gaped the black entrance of the inner court. An impalpable vapor steamed up from the moist plants and bathed the ruins in a dream-like haze, as the blurred waters of the ocean engulf and make fantastic the myriad rock-palaces of the sea-bottoms.

The dark inner court challenged Trent, and he snapped off the light and moved between the stone sentinels. A power, terrifying in its vagueness, pressed upon him, locking his muscles in a tension. A bat, startled out of hiding by the ring of his footsteps, flapped up from the parapet and wheeled across the moon's face. But for that, and an occasional rasp of an insect, the temple was swathed in a hush.

In the doorway of the inner court he paused. He groped for the shattered frame; clutched something tangible; fought against a terrible paralysis.

Yellow moonshine poured through a rent in the ceiling, drenched the walls and formed a honey-hued pool on the flagging.

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In the wan light lay a human form.

A deadly inertia coiled about Trent's brain and body. For a moment he was unable to think, to do other than struggle against the constricting coils of horror. But at length he broke the rigor. A few steps brought him to the pool of moonlight. He knelt; switched on the torch; saw the face. Dull agony spread from his throat to his limbs. In that instant he seemed to slip back through a millenium and endure the concentrated pains of a hundred bodies—a flame of cosmic anguish burning down through the dim jungles of time.

Automatically his hand went to the heart, but before his trained fingers touched the breast he knew that to feel was useless. Dark moisture stained the tunic-front. He unbuttoned the garments. Knife wound! Manlove had been dead at least a half hour.

The infinitesimal fraction of a minute that he knelt there might have been an hour for the multitude of irrelevances that sped through his brain. Orders. Benares. . . . And he had cursed when he struck his knee! Had Manlove ridden with him to Colonel Urqhart's this would not have happened. Urqhart; what an absurd name. . . . . Murder. In a vague manner he wondered who had done it; in a vague manner he felt angry. Dead. Impossible. This must be a dream, a horrid nightmare. Damn these nightmares! It was the heat . . . . heat. . . . His comrade. . . . Kasvin. . . . Kut-el-Amara. And this was the end! The futility of things swept him, a chill and shudder-

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some tide that served to wash some of the tangles from his thoughts.

He rose. He felt giddy, and the inner court, with its shadows, its pool of moonshine, swam in a throat-gripping vertigo. But it passed swiftly. Out of the mental chaos emerged a coherency: perhaps the one who had done this was still in or about the temple. The remembrance of Chatterjee immediately appeared to deny it. A solution of the affair unreeled quickly. Chatterjee, the avenger . . . . a fatal mistake. That explained the native's look of terror when he met Trent on the road, explained his flight.

Nevertheless, Trent made a search of the ruins and returned to the body. The face, outlined boyishly in the pallid moonlight, commanded his gaze with hypnotic insistence. Now that the first acute horror had dwindled, he was conscious of an abysmal loneliness, an ache that habited every nerve and fiber of his being.

He must notify Colonel Urqhart. But the body, what of that? He could n't leave it lying in this den of vipers. The very suggestion horrified him, although he knew the body was but a husk of flesh. He had some authority; he 'd act on his own responsibility.

An involuntary dread ran through him as he slipped his hands under the inert form and lifted it. His sight blurred, but he moved with a steady stride across the courtyard and through the gate. Upon reaching the bungalow, he laid the body upon the bed in Manlove's room. When he switched on the light, the boyish fea-

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tures again compelled his gaze. Manlove had told him of the dream of "Gray Towers," of the House of Lords; and the memory of it, returning through the stupefaction that still surrounded him, sent a poignant charge into his throat. To have his dream perish like this! Whatever a man's philosophy of immortality, death remains a shock.

He was about to leave the room when his attention was arrested by the gleam of a bright object in the lifeless hand. He was forced to pry open the fingers. The gleaming thing proved to be a piece of reddish stone. Coral. It was oval-shaped and some six inches in circumference. An intricate design was overlaid in silver upon the smooth salmon-hued surface—a human figure. The oval was edged with silver, and at the top was a tiny clasp. The clasp was broken. He studied the silver design. It was evidently some sort of deity, but different from any he had ever seen—an ugly little god with three eyes.

What was it? he wondered—part of a necklace, an ornament? The broken clasp testified that it had been wrenched from its fastening. Perhaps in a struggle—*the* struggle. . . .

Temporarily dismissing it from his thoughts, he left it lying upon the table and went to the telephone.

4

Meanwhile, at the dâk bungalow, which looks out upon the main street of Sahib's Gaya, the *khansammah*,

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a ghostly figure in his white garments, sat on the covered portico and watched a gharry approach in a whirl of dust.

The carriage was jerked to a halt at the compound, and from its dim interior appeared a form.

It was the strange Memsahib, the *khansammah* observed to himself.

Strange, indeed, he reflected; Memsahibs rarely wore veils, and those they affected were gossamer, cobweb-like affairs that hid not a feature. But this Memsahib wore an almost opaque veil, a veil which she lifted only to eat and when in her room. She had a beautiful face, and well that she covered it from befouling eyes. For the *khansammah* was a Mohammedan.

She was very generous, this Memsahib, oh, very generous, indeed! True, she asked many questions—about Major Trent Sahib and his friend, the other Dakktar Sahib—but she paid for the information. She had been at the dâk bungalow only since morning, and he hoped she would remain longer. Business was none too good.

Thus ran his thoughts as the woman alighted from the gharry and crossed the compound.

When she reached the steps he rose and rendered a salaam. As usual, her veil was lowered. He sensed a repressed excitement in the manner that her white hand closed upon the post of the veranda; a bracelet shone softly on her arm.

"*Khansammah,*" she began, in a low, vibrant voice that made him think of the golden tongue of a certain

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singing-nautch he had once heard, "When does the next train leave for Mughal Sarai? Do you know?"

"Hah, Memsahib!"—with regret. "Must you leave? "Has not my hospitalit*ee* been all the Memsahib could __"

"Of course," she broke in, impatiently. "But the train?"

"At midnight, Memsahib. But it is unlike*lee* the Memsahib can get accommodations, for there is ver*ee* much travel at this time of the year—oh, ver*ee* much!"

"At midnight," she repeated, as though she had heard only that.

Then she entered—and the *khansammah* thought he saw her pause, falter, as with a sudden stroke of weakness.

5

And again meanwhile—

The moon paled, sank. Its senescent glamour lingered upon the towering plinth and fluted pillars of the temple of the Sacred Bo-tree, seven miles south of Gaya-town. A warm wind fretted the tapering leaves of the holy tree; the sunken courtyard was a cistern of gloom where tiny yellow lights swam like foam-flecks on a dark sea. These flecks of light, forming a semicircle about the Sacred Bo-tree, were many little butter-lamps. Their glow revealed a man seated on the Diamond Throne (just as Gaudama sat on the same spot in a buried century and contemplated his Dewa Laka); revealed his yellow features, his tonsured skull and

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magenta robes; revealed the stone image of Buddha that looked down from the shrine with an expression of serene omniscience; revealed the row of crimson-togaed monks that knelt within the semi-circle of butter-lamps and murmured prayers.

The man on the Diamond Throne sat motionless. Only his lips moved, and his eyes. A hint of guile showed in his face. He repeated a *mantra* automatically, for his thoughts were elsewhere.

This was no other than his Holiness the Grand Lama of Tsagan-dhuka, who had pilgrimaged from his Tibetan abby to the Sacred Bo-tree—the first journey of the sort to be made by a lama of high rank since the visit of that venerable pontiff, the Tashi Lama. . . . Behold him, then, in the magenta robes of his office, squatting upon the Diamond Throne, reciting a Buddhist prayer.

The patter of bare feet on stone caused him to shift his gaze to the gloom beyond the courtyard. His black eyes squinted, and he traced the outline of a palanquin. The primitive conveyance came to a halt. A figure in loose robes took shape between the parted curtains; the light of the butter-lamps fell upon a man in scarlet, a man who descended into the sunken courtyard and approached the Diamond Throne. No mere priest, this newcomer, for he wore a mitre-shaped hat; a very obese, very pompous personage as he waddled up to his Holiness of Tsagan-dhuka.

The crimson cardinal spoke; and had anyone who understood Tibetan been standing close by, he would have heard:

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"His Excellency the Governor of Shingtse-lunpo has arrived."

The Grand Lama ceased his *mantra.*

"Tell him I shall be with him when I have finished my reflections."

The cardinal bowed and took his leave. The curtains of the palanquin blotted out his corpulent person. Again the patter of naked feet sounded above the surreptitious whispering of the Bo-tree.

A cryptic smile slid across the Grand Lama's eyes; the lids dropped to hide it. He resumed the prayer.

"Om mani Padme hum. . . ."

Thus he sat—just as Gaudama sat on the same spot in a buried century. However, the Abbot of Tsagandhuka was not contemplating his Dewa Laka.

Above him the plinth of the temple strove skyward, secure in the knowledge of the riddle of Life and Death.

6

A half hour after Trent took the receiver from the telephone, Colonel Urqhart and Merriton, Head of the Police, rattled into his compound in a dog-cart. Accompanying them were several officers to whom Trent spoke by name.

". . . . And you found him in the ruined temple!" exclaimed the colonel, in the living-room, when the customary formalities had been observed. "Good God, major, what a pity! The poor, poor boy! His father and I were friends, y'know."

"I 'm positive Chatterjee did it," declared Trent.

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"You see. . . ." And he told of the encounter on the road and the subsequent events.

"What were you saying, major?" asked the Head of the Police, coming out of the bedroom just as he finished. "But first—what 's this?"

He held out the oval of silver-overlaid coral, and Trent explained how he had found it.

"Some sort of native charm, I dare say," observed Merriton. "Tell me about this Chatterjee."

When Trent had retold his story, the Head of the Police enquired:

"Where 's the telephone? Ah! I see it!"

It was nearly midnight when Colonel Urqhart and Merriton prepared to leave.

"Major," said Trent's commanding officer, "you 'd better get some sleep. Eckard and Gerrish will remain to—"

"Sleep?" echoed Trent.

"You 'll need it if you 're going in the morning—and you *are* going? Orders, y' know. There 's nothing you can do here. I 'll personally attend to everything."

"Of course I 'll go." This from Trent as he passed his hand wearily over his forehead. "However, I shall sit up to-night. Eckard and Gerrish can remain—but I 'd rather be alone."

The colonel cast a glance toward Manlove's room.

"Poor chap!" he sighed. He extended his hand. "Well, good luck, major. I probably won't see you again before you leave."

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Chatterjee yet,'' announced the colonel. ''Cleared out, it seems. But they 'll get him.''

''Uncommonly nice of you, Colonel,'' returned Trent. His face was drawn, his eyes veined with red, and a pallor underlay his tanned skin.

The colonel waved his hand toward the door. ''My cart 's outside. I 'll drive you to the station. 'Bout time, is n't it?''

Trent nodded. He strode to the door of Manlove 's room and halted on the threshold, looking with dry eyes into the hushed apartment. A diamond-winged dragon-fly lay dreaming on the window-sill . . . . the white face shone through the mosquito-curtain. . . . . Thus Trent stood for a moment, then he turned and joined the colonel.

He talked very little during the ride to the station, and Colonel Urqhart did not press conversation. In the midst of chattering native passengers and a few whites, with an engine puffing heat into the already suffocating air, he parted with the colonel,—a hand-shake and a few perfunctory words—and settled down in his carriage.

Not until the train jerked out of the station did the strain snap. He relaxed wearily upon the leather-lined seat, a steady hammer of pain at the back of his neck. He felt suddenly alone, intensely alone—a sensation that carried him back to his boyhood, to a night when he awoke in a strange, black-dark room. He shuddered involuntarily. His eyelids burned. Sleep—sleep. The engine seemed to purr that one word, and the swaying

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and rocking of the carriage lulled him into drowsiness.

He fell asleep, suddenly, with a picture of the hushed room—the diamond-winged dragonfly—painted upon his vision.

7

Trent was brought out of slumber by the sound of his name. He opened his eyes and perceived that the train was at a standstill. Heat pressed close about him, stifling him. Thrusting his head out of the window, he read the name of the station. He was but a short distance from Gaya. A telegraph messenger was walking along the platform shrilling:

"Major-rr Tr-rent Sahib!"

Trent called him, and as the train pulled out he tore open the envelope.

"Chatterjee found in river this morning," the message ran. "Stabbed. Let you hear particulars at Benares. Urqhart."

For some time after Trent read it he stared out of the carriage-window. Chatterjee—stabbed. He let the words filter and re-filter through his brain, let them settle and sink in. They gave a new significance to the encounter with the native on the previous night. Chatterjee—stabbed. Murdered? Or had he taken his own life—in remorse? But the river. . . . No. Murdered. That word stood out like wet type. Chatterjee— stabbed. Why? Obvious enough. The native's look of fright explained that. Perhaps he knew who slew Manlove. Chatterjee, whose lips were sealed. Blind

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alley. He faced a wall behind which was hidden the identity of Manlove's slayer. Manlove, who, to his knowledge, had n't an enemy—

He stiffened at a sudden recollection; brought his fist down upon his thigh. Idiot! Colossal idiot! Why had not this occurred to him before? It was fantastic, yet. . . .

He procured from his pocket a pencil and an envelope, and scribbled on the back of the latter—scribbled a description of the woman he had met on the Meera road; of the cobra-bracelet, of the encounter and his suspicions. This he would send to Colonel Urqhart at the next station.

When he had finished, he read it, struck out a few words; folded the envelope; returned it to his pocket, and settled back in the seat to reflect upon the tragic immutability of circumstance.

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CHAPTER IV

HOUSE OF THE SWAYING COBRA

TRENT, rested only by short naps on the way, stepped from the railway carriage in the Cantonment Station, in Benares, and, after a ride past dusty red brick barracks, reached the hotel—a series of small houses, with one main building. To his disappointment he found no message from Colonel Urqhart. Nor was Euan Kerth there. Mr. Kerth had arrived, he was told, but was not in at present. Trent left word to be notified directly Kerth returned, and went to his room, in one of the out-buildings.

Several hours later, refreshed by a sleep, washed and shaved, he seated himself on the portico to wait for Euan Kerth. On one end, peddlers were besieging a group of tourists; on the other, a girl with bronze-colored hair sat reading, a native in a flowered chintz coat drowsing at her feet. There was something slumberous and torpid in the scene. India, like the world, relapsed into a lethargy after the tumult of war.

When he slipped his hand into his tunic pocket for his cheroots, he found, instead of smokes, a hard, cold object. Withdrawing it, he recognized, not without some surprise, the oval of coral he had found in Manlove's hand. He remembered that Merriton had left it on the table in his bungalow, and he had put it in his

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pocket with the intention of returning it to the Head of Police before leaving Gaya. He would have to send it back, now that a new complication had arisen—namely, the death of Chatterjee; it might prove a valuable clue.

He studied it. Time had mellowed the design and smoothed the once-sharp edges of the silver that rimmed the oval. Coral, he knew, was rarely used for purposes of ornamentation in India. Too, the three-eyed deity, a hideous figure, puzzled him, though he was by no means unversed in the symbolism of the many religions of the land. Coral and silver. The combination haunted him, was linked with an illusive fragment in his memory. It came to him suddenly. Tibet. Coral and silver from Tibet. While he was stationed at Darjeeling he frequently saw men from Phari and Gyangste with coral and silver ornaments.

He continued to stare at the oval. The ugly face of the three-eyed little god seemed to mock him; challenged him to fathom the power that impelled these waves of mystery that lapped up and touched him, and receded with their secrets. It brought a vision, too, of the hushed room at Gaya.

That was a hurt which only the ointment of time could heal. The tissues of human relationship mend slowly. His friendship for Manlove had taken seed deeply, in a measure unconsciously, nurtured by months of intimate companionship; and now his sensitive nature tingled and throbbed at the violence with which it had been wrenched from its roots.

With the murder looming in his thoughts, his mission

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shrank. Adventure! Fabulous isles! . . . . Queer how last night's stars lose their fever and passion when they become a memory. But perhaps the work would distract him. At least it was different, and in his present mental condition the very thought of medicines and human ills was intolerable.

Shadows lengthened between the buildings; the peddlers and tourists disappeared; the bronze-haired girl had closed her book and lay back in the chair, staring into space. Upon her he unconsciously focussed his attention, and as he contemplated her, impersonally and as he would an inanimate object, she shifted her eyes to him, stared coolly, turned away, rose and entered her room.

And Trent forgot her.

A few minutes later, as he was at the point of making another inquiry about Euan Kerth, he saw a man leave the central building and move toward the portico where he sat—a man who approached and spoke his name.

"Major Trent?"

They shook hands. Kerth was an immaculately dressed fellow, with smooth, olive-tinted features. A rather Mephistophelian face. A small black mustache, carefully waxed, helped the suggestion. His hair was shiny-black, as were his eyes, and his dark complexion was only emphasized by white twills and a white felt hat. His fingers were long and slim, almost too well-shaped to be masculine. Something very fine and sleek, Gallic rather than Anglo-Saxon—that was Euan Kerth.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he apologized in a

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too-long-in-the-tropics drawl. "I've been with the Commissioner. You arrived this afternoon?"

Trent nodded. He saw behind the assumed languorous air a keen, searching glance; Kerth was measuring him as he was measuring Kerth. He came to the tentative decision that he was n't quite sure he liked him.

"Sit down, won't you?"—perfunctorily.

Kerth dropped with lazy grace into a chair and sat with his legs sprawled wide apart. He proffered some of the blackest cheroots Trent had ever seen.

"My Tamils," he explained, with an indolent smile. When the smokes were lighted, he asked: "Just how much do you know of this little party we 're about to start, major?"

"As little as possible, I think."

Kerth puffed on his cheroot. "Ever heard of this woman who styles herself the Swaying Cobra?"

"Never."

"Neither have I." A pause. "Of course you 've heard of Chavigny?"

Trent's answer was a smile.

"We almost got him the other day, in Delhi. We traced him to a native serai—Queen's Serai; but he eluded us. Left only a few blood-stains on the floor of his room. Blood-stains sometimes tell a lot, but they did n't in this instance. But Chavigny's bottled up in Delhi. Yet"—Kerth smiled—"yet I would n't be at all surprised if he pulled the wool over the Department's eyes. Of course you think he's involved in this affair?"

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Trent's eyes followed the spiral of smoke from his cheroot.

"He might be," was the slow reply, "and, again, he might not. What does Sir Francis think?"

A wry smile. "He rarely confides in the Department. At any rate, I don't fancy we 'll encounter this Chavigny. You know he 's been running at large under the name of Leroux—Gilbert Leroux. Remember that; might be useful some time. If you want my opinion—But I 'm sure you don't. Now, as for this Swaying Cobra—"

But he was interrupted as a porter appeared and salaamed.

"Major Trent Sahib?" he enquired.

Trent nodded and received an envelope with his name written upon it.

"Pardon me"—this to Kerth as he tore off the end.

The missive was written in English, in feminine handwriting, and carried a faint, illusive odor—that of sandalwood.

GREETINGS!

I, the Swaying Cobra, welcome you to the Sacred City and beg the honor of a visit from you to-night. If you will be at the shop of Abdul Kerim, in the Sadar Bazaar, at eight-thirty o'clock, my trusted servant, Chandra Lal, will meet you and conduct you to my humble dwelling.

Your faithful servant,

THE SWAYING COBRA

When he had read it, he handed it to Kerth, who let his eyes run down the page and smiled.

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"Suppose we move to the dining-hall?" the latter suggested. "I 'll finish what I have to say there."

Trent assented, and they rose and left the veranda.

As the purple-tongued shadows lapped them up, the last of the row of doors opened, and the girl with the bronze hair came out and moved after them toward the dining-hall.

2

"In other words," said Kerth, as a soft-shod "boy" arrayed the meal before them, "you are to deliver yourself blindfolded into the hands of this Swaying Cobra, and if she says go to the moon, then, according to the Old Man, you 're to go there, without questioning."

Trent listened, apparently abstractedly, for he was studying the amazingly clear profile of the girl at the next table. Punkahs, worked by electricity, disturbed straying tendrils of reddish-gold hair.

"The woman mystifies me as much as the affair itself," Kerth went on. "Who is she? It 's evident the Old Man trusts her—to a degree. From her name, 'Swaying Cobra,' I'd judge she's a nautch, yet, on the other hand, I 'm inclined to think she 's above that. Fact is, the Old Man was too infernally secretive about her; seemed afraid he 'd tell me something. However, he is n't absolutely sure of her. If he was, I would n't be here."

A tourist, was Trent's conclusion. (For he was still studying the girl.) She choked over the greasy, pep-

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pery curry concoction. A moment later her soft voice floated to him as she spoke to her "boy."

"Confound him! Is he listening to me?" Kerth wondered. Then aloud, "My part is this: I'm to rig myself up as a native—a Rajput—and accompany you as your servant. My name will be Rawul Din."

Trent's eyes turned sharply from the girl to Kerth. He noticed, incidentally, that the latter's hair would need no lamp-black to make it like a native's.

"Suppose she objects?"

Kerth smiled—an expression that was almost sinister because of his dark, satanic features.

"That 's the point: she *must not* object!" After a pause he resumed: "The Old Man wanted that firmly impressed. In some way or other she must be forced to agree to that condition. You 're the diplomat of this expedition; that means it 's up to you. So said the Old Man. I 'm to be the connecting link between you and the Department."

"Is that keeping faith with her?"

"According to the letter of the contract, yes; morally, no. As I understand it, she demanded your word of honor you would n't 'communicate' any information. Therefore, you must not; what I don't hear and learn for myself is the Department's loss. Neat way of beating the devil around the bush, is n't it?"

It was not visible upon Trent's face whether or not he agreed with Kerth. However, his next question hinted negatively.

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"If she discovers you 're not Rawul Din, the Rajput, what then?"

Kerth shrugged. "*Adrushtam!*" he said, which means, "It is Fate!" Then he lighted a cheroot and leaned upon his elbows, a queer smile lurking in the corners of his mouth. "It means this, major," he continued. "If she 's loyal, as the Old Man believes, she will either be very angry and throw over the whole business, or overlook it and simply demand that espionage be discontinued. But"—his face, veiled by smoke, looked more satanic than ever— "if she is n't loyal, then—well, we 'll both probably. . . ." He finished with a lift of his eyebrows.

Trent watched the bronze-haired girl as she left the dining-hall—as did others, for she was a type to draw eyes.

"To-night's the test," Kerth observed aloud. "If you succeed in forcing your point, good. Otherwise, I return to Delhi." He looked at his watch. "It 's close to seven now, and my metamorphosis will require some time. Shall we adjourn?"

They did.

3

Before Trent left his room he placed the oval of coral in his handbag; then he went out on the portico to smoke and watch the stars gather about the cleaving silhouette of a church steeple across from the hotel grounds.

At one end of the veranda two shadowy forms were

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conversing; a woman's voice drifted to him, a soft voice that slurred and caressed the words it spoke. It was vaguely familiar, and in a detached manner he identified it with the girl of the dining-hall.

The phosphorescent hands of his wrist-watch crept to five minutes to eight before Euan Kerth put in his appearance. A heavy footstep announced a turbaned man. He halted in the light cast from a window; executed a salaam. He wore white breeches, an alpaca coat and a white shawl. A huge turban shadowed a brown face and a carefully waxed mustache. Had it not been for that and the slim hands, Trent would not have recognized him.

"*Salaam, Huzoor!*" was his greeting. "Is the *Huzoor* ready?"—this in the manner of a native trying to affect an Oxford accent.

Trent nodded and rose, and Kerth fell in behind.

"There 's no need to take a gharry," said Kerth. "The Sadar Bazaar is n't far."

Their walk led them past the dusty red brick barracks that Trent had seen that afternoon, and within a short while they reached the Sadar Bazaar, where, after many inquiries, they were directed to the shop of Abdul Kerim—a dingy little hole in a narrow lane. A native was lounging in the doorway, but at their approach he straightened up and salaamed.

"Major Trent Sahib?" he queried respectfully, with a grin that displayed betel-stained teeth. "I am Chandra Lal." Then he looked inquisitively at Kerth. "Who is this, Sahib?"

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"My servant."

Chandra Lal shook his head. "I was instructed to bring only Major Trent Sahib."

"But it is my wish that my bearer accompany me."

The native shifted uncomfortably. "The sahib's wish is law; yet if I do other than I have been bidden I will be a disobedient servant." Another glimpse of scarlet teeth; a rather nervous smile. "So what shall I do, Sahib?"

"My man shall go—*maloom hai!*"—sternly. "I will be responsible to your mistress."

Chandra Lal saluted. "*Achcha,* Sahib! I have a carriage in the street!"

At the mouth of the lane a landau was waiting, and when Trent and Kerth were seated on cushioned springs, Chandra Lal flicked his whip.

Out of the Cantonment they were whirled, and eastward into the old city, where constricted streets refused passage to any vehicle. They drew up by an oval-shaped, tree-grown expanse, and the landau was left in charge of a man who was waiting for that particular purpose. Then began a journey on foot that was memorable to the two Englishmen because of the muddle of dim, narrow highways into which it took them. Chandra Lal leading, they percolated through streets and passages that stank of every unpleasantness known to Indian cities; mere clefts where the stars swam at distances immeasurable; stairs, tunneled lanes and alleys, and amidst ramshackle, tumbled buildings and temples and shrines.

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Trent's sense of direction was completely baffled when they came at length to a quarter where the houses were more pretentious—a long street of several-storied dwellings, of projecting eaves, of white walls and of latticed windows that hinted at the lurking mystery of zenana and harem.

Into one of these houses the native guided them, up a short flight of stairs and into a dark room. The air was fresh and cool, fanned by invisible punkahs. A snap brought on electric lights, and Trent blinked about him; blinked and suppressed a smile, for he realized the entrance into the room while it was yet unlighted was done for purely dramatic effect.

His eyes, roving around the chamber, missed not a detail; a chamber wholly amazing and incredible to the Westerner, who rarely, if ever, sees into the houses of the wealthy, high caste Hindus. Trent, however, (to whom India was an open book, as much as it ever will be to any white man) was only mildly surprised. The chandeliers were crystal, tinted amber by the yellow lights. Brassware and gold brocade (the latter hung to hide all doors except the one by which they had entered) introduced an effect of rich browns and richer golds; and a spire of incense uncoiled from a brazen bowl to be dispelled by punkahs and leave the heavy fragrance of musk swimming in the air.

"My mistress will join you presently," announced Chandra Lal. "Be seated, Sahib, and you will be served with refreshments!"

Trent flung himself upon a divan pushed against the

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wall; silken cushions yielded to his weight and clung to him caressingly. Kerth dropped cross-legged at his feet.

Before Chandra Lal made his exit he drew the gold-hued draperies opposite where Trent reclined, drew bamboo blinds and disclosed a white arch that framed a portion of a garden. Stone steps sank into a courtyard where rustling shrubs wove shadows about a fountain; falling water played flute-notes on a tiled basin; stars scraped a white wall.

"She 's no novice, this cobra," thought Trent. "Wonder if she 's anything like her lair?"

". . . . wine," thought Kerth. "And we must drink it . . . . unless—yes, guile for guile."

Suddenly, from behind gold curtains, came the faint whispering of music. Trent smothered an insurgent desire to laugh. Incongruity, the essence of India! The music was made by a gramophone! Presently he recognized the tune—Tschaikowsky's "Serenade Melancholique"!

He glanced furtively at Kerth. The latter's face was expressionless, his slim hands toying with the tassel of a cushion. Trent sensed in his attitude the same wild desire to laugh that possessed him.

"Steady!" he mentally encouraged himself, fixing his gaze upon a piece of brassware close by—a *lota* overlaid with copper and chased with mythological figures. "Hmm. . . . Half as old as India, I 'll wager," ran his musings. "Siva—who the deuce is the other chap?"

Gold brocades parted and a turbaned servant glided

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out silently with a tray, which he placed on a pearl-inlaid table. Claret-hued wine glowed in twin beaten-brass goblets, rich as melted rubies. One he passed to Trent, the other to Kerth. Then he made a soundless departure.

Inwardly, Trent smiled. And drained his goblet. The gramophone ceased; only the music of the fountain stole to him, with a breath of fragrant shrubs that made the incense seem sensuous and heavy.

Again the brass *lota* claimed his gaze; held it until he heard a sigh from Kerth and looked down to see the latter's eyelids droop, to see his eyes close and his chin sink into his white shawl.

"Damn!" he swore, almost inaudibly, and his hand sprang to Kerth's shoulder and gripped it none too gently. "Rawul Din!"

As he pronounced the name, Kerth fell against the cushions of the divan, drugged in sleep. Some one laughed—a laugh that rippled low in the throat. Trent did not look toward the sound immediately, although that was his first impulse. He let his eyes turn naturally and rest, at first incredulously, upon the woman who had entered and who stood regarding him with a mocking smile. The blood flooded his temples; after a second it receded, leaving him cold, numb, with a tingling sense of unreality. He did not rise; merely stared; and presently forced a smile.

"Sarojini Nanjee," he said, trying to put down the emotions that declared insurrection against his will. And he repeated, "Sarojini Nanjee, the Swaying

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Cobra?'' He smiled. ''I confess, I never once suspected.''

Outlined against the gold draperies she stood, dressed as nautches dress, only with more richness and without the customary head-scarf. Her garments were full and as shimmery as cobwebs in the sun, and confined at the waist with a goldcloth girdle that matched the tint of her marvelously smooth skin. Her eyes burned under heavy lids, burned and mocked him; and by their feverish brightness he understood that this meeting wrought in her an excitement equal to his, although she was prepared for it.

''I did not intend that you should suspect,'' she told him as she moved to the divan where he reclined. ''I knew you would not come if you did.''

Not until then did he rise. He smiled, and the smile lingered as she bent over Kerth and drew back the lids from his eyes.

''Why did you disobey me by bringing this man?'' she demanded, and, assured that Kerth was drugged, dropped gracefully upon the cushions.

''Why did you drug him?'' he countered.

The blood still throbbed at his temples. The irony of it, that they should meet again! And on this mission! She was as beautiful as ever. But the lure of her eyes—eyes as purple as moist violets—of her smooth golden skin and lithe body, no longer affected him. All that was in the sepulcher of the past. A memory that was like the taste of stale wine upon the tongue.

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"I put a sleeping powder in his wine because what I am going to say is for only *your* ears," she replied.

"And you 're called the Swaying Cobra," he mused, more to himself than to the woman, "or did another write that note?"

"I am the Swaying Cobra." A pause. She studied him from under half-lowered lids. "I dance for those I love. I have only venom for those I hate."

The Swaying Cobra! He almost laughed. That was a good symptom, that he could be amused. A pretty viper! Resolving to let her open the subject of his visit, he allowed his eyes to wander about the room.

"Here I cease trying to be an Englishwoman," she said, perceiving his inquisitive look. He did not fail to register the ring of bitterness beneath that assertion. "In Jehelumpore and in Delhi it is different, but here—here I am a Rajputni." Another pause. She laughed, and it was not without a sting. "I know what you are thinking: that you will refuse to work with me because—because of a foolish Anglo-Saxon sentimentalism!"

She waited for him to respond; he did not.

"But why not forget that we ever knew each other—and did we ever really know each other? Why not regard this as an impersonal affair? Individuals do not count where an empire is concerned."

Trent smiled discreetly and held his tongue.

"I bear you no rancor," she went on. "On the contrary, I recognize and respect the qualities that

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prompted me to select you for this mission—imagination, wits, honor! Yes, for these things I chose you—forgetting that when we last saw each other it was not under the most pleasant circumstances. What is dead is dead.''

She fell silent, and he spoke for the first time.

''You 've anticipated,'' he said. ''I was sent here to work with you and I intend to. I 've already forgot that we ever met before to-night. What is dead is dead.''

The woman smiled—but had she known what was in his mind at that moment she might not have been so pleased. However, she did not. And she lay back among the brocaded cushions, quite at ease, her hands clasped behind her head, chin tilted, eyes looking upon him as a cat's eyes look upon the mouse it is about to play with.

All of which did not pass unobserved by Trent, who pictured, instead of a woman lying upon the gold silks with her head lifted, a lithe, beautiful cobra with its black hood raised above the cushions; pictured her thus, and returned her gaze with frankness and a smile that disarmed her.

She clapped her hands and a servant brought wine. ''Were you well informed as to the terms of the agreement?'' she questioned, handing him a cup of claret-hued liquor.

''I believe so.''

''That when you leave this house you are no longer Major Arnold Trent, but another—a well of secrets

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from which no man can draw, and as mute as the Buddha at Sarnath?''

He demonstrated that he could do so by remaining silent. She resumed:

''And you will do as I direct?''

''To a reasonable extent,'' he modified.

''To a reasonable extent,'' she repeated, and nodded. ''And if you do not understand a thing, you will trust to my judgment that it is better you do not understand it.''

''Then I 'm to deliver myself blindfolded?'' he put in, remembering Kerth's words of the early evening and glancing involuntarily toward the drugged figure.

''You will be told all that it is consistent to tell.'' She took a sip of wine and surveyed him. ''What is your first question?''

He thrust back the query that came to his tongue and reverted to his conservative tactics. He sat as mute and expressionless as the Buddha at Sarnath. When a moment had passed, she announced:

''You would like to know how I know what I know about the jewels; is it not so?''

''I would like to know *what* you know first,'' he corrected.

She laughed—that laugh that rippled low in her throat.

''What I know is locked away safely until the time is ripe to bring it forth. Meanwhile, I will say this much: the jewels have not left India.''

''Then they *will*?''

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He flashed out the question with the air of a fencer thrusting at a weak point in his opponent's guard. But foil met foil. She replied:

"Did I say so, O wise one? Again your thoughts are as clear as a crystal pool. You say to yourself, 'Such a hoard of jewels cannot be smuggled out of India; she is trying to confuse me.' But nay! The gods of India are many and I swear by all of them that every gem that was stolen, down to the last pearl, can be spirited out of India at any moment it is so desired—and under the very eyes, nay, the protection, of your Secret Service!"

If this statement surprised him, his face did not betray it; he disconcerted her by looking interestedly at the brass *lota*. His indifference drew fire.

"I said it could be done!" she declared. "Whether it will be is for you to learn. Oh, you do not deceive me! I know you are consumed with curiosity, under that shell of yours! Your Raj, well fed and growing fat with wisdom, thinks it has a clue. Chavigny! The Raj thinks Chavigny is involved!"

She leaned closer; peered intently into his eyes. The illusive fragrance of sandalwood from her hair was not calculated to make him feel any more at ease. But he did not stir nor wink an eyelid under the close scrutiny.

"Chavigny!" she mocked. "Chavigny, the famous thief! Chavigny, whom some silly Secret Service man tracked to Indore—and lost! Chavigny, driven into hiding in Delhi! Pah! Let the Raj search for Cha-

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vigny, let it turn Delhi inside out—while we look on and laugh! You—you have imagination! I can guess what is in your mind, for I, too, have imagination! You have pictured a gigantic criminal organization—a gem syndicate, let us say—a flock of jewel vultures who have swooped down and plucked clean the bones of the empire! And perhaps you even think Chavigny the leader, yes?''

She smiled, quite pleased with herself. Then once more she leaned close to him.

''What would you think if I told you there *is* such a band—an order, we will call it—of jewel vultures who have flown away with riches worth a dozen rajah's ransoms? What would you think? Only''—she paused dramatically—''we will omit Chavigny, for if there be such an order he is not its head nor in it!''

He drew out his cheroots; passed them to her. She refused, and he lighted a cigarette and flicked the match through the archway. Then he suggested:

''Are n't all cards to go on the table?''

She smiled wisely. ''No, I can play them more effectively one by one,'' was her retort.

His brain was working swiftly yet carefully. When he had selected his words he uttered them.

''Presuming there is such an order, as you call it, we'll go further and say that you, by some unguessable means, have become a member; and are working with them for the Raj.''

She looked her approval. ''Presumably''—with a nod. That word was a key to further knowledge.

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"Then it would seem logical, if I 'm to work with you, for me to be initiated into the mysteries of this order—become a member, in other words."

"Go on," she encouraged.

"So the purpose of this visit, I take it, is for me to learn the 'Open Sesame' of the order."

And having said that much, he realized it was sufficient and relapsed into quiet to let her do the rest of the talking.

"You have already proved that I chose well," she announced. "But before I go on you must give me your word of honor that all I have said and will say, all that occurs until I release you from the promise, will never be repeated—by word or writing."

"I give it," he returned quietly.

She leaned over and deftly drew back the lids from Kerth's eyes; Trent caught a fleeting glimpse of the whites.

"To-morrow you leave Benares," she directed, again assured. "You will take a train in the morning for Bombay and go to an address which I shall give you; and do as I instruct." Her hand slipped under her waist and brought out a long blank envelope. "In this envelope are your instructions. I must have your promise not to read them until you are on the train to Bombay; then destroy them immediately."

He inclined his head and placed the envelope in his pocket.

"You said that when I leave this house I am no longer Major Trent," he reminded.

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"You are Robert Tavernake, a jeweller, from London. All that is contained in the instructions."

"Including the name of the order?"—his curiosity escaping him.

For answer she clapped her hands and curtains parted to admit a servant with a black lacquer tray. From the tray she lifted a small box; opened it as the servant padded out.

"This is the symbol of the order"—removing a string of beads.

Had Trent felt any hesitancy about plunging into this blind mission it would have vanished at sight of the beads—reddish coral beads, with an oval-shaped pendant overlaid with the silver image of a three-eyed god! The only emotion he displayed was to moisten his lips; but it required all the force he could marshal to check the questions that flooded to his tongue, to mask his surprise and reach with a steady hand for the beads. Despite his control, it seemed for a momnt that he would betray his nervousness.

". . . . the Order of the Falcon," he heard her say. "See—" She inserted her fingernail under the silver band that finished the coral; the pendant opened, like a locket. The interior was silver and a name was engraved upon the back—"Robert Tavernake."

She snapped the oval shut and he took the beads; twisted them carelessly around his fingers, until the deep reddish coral seemed like huge drops of blood welling from his hand. As he caught the significance of the illusion, he looked up quickly and spoke.

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"Am I to carry these?"

She nodded.

His thoughts swung back to the oval that lay in his handbag at the hotel.

"Is it customary to have the name engraved—like this?"—with a gesture.

After the words left his mouth he realized he had made an indiscreet move. She looked at him suspiciously, then answered:

"Customary, yes—among those who possess such beads."

He did not fail to grasp the insinuation that her speech bore. He glanced down at the beads in his hand, casually enough; toyed with them; slipped them into his pocket. His heart had not resumed its normal beat, but the tension had eased. He fastened his eyes upon the relaxed figure of Kerth and—

"It will be permissible, I presume," he began, as though the sight of the turbaned head suggested the question, "to take my bearer along?"

Did a smile flicker across her eyes, he wondered, or was it only his fancy? The answer came decisively.

"It is scarcely practicable."

"Why?"—a shade too artlessly.

"Servants have eyes to see and ears to hear."

Something in her tone caused him to wonder if she had penetrated under Kerth's masquerade. All the while he was subconsciously thinking of the mate to the oval in his pocket.

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"What harm in taking him to Bombay?" he pursued, conscious that he was losing ground.

Again he could have taken oath that he saw the shadow of a smile in her eyes.

"To Bombay?" she repeated thoughtfully. "No"—slowly—"no, I see no objection. I concede that." But he did not like the manner in which she said it. "Conditionally, however," she added. "He must leave to-night. When he reaches Bombay let him reserve a room for you at the Taj Mahal—and wait."

Trent was discreet enough to accept her terms without question. His eyes returned to Kerth. He saw him stir slightly, heard a sigh leave his lips. The woman, too, saw and heard.

"He is awakening," she observed. "I shall summon Chandra Lal to guide you back to your hotel."

Again she clapped her hands; again the servant appeared. She spoke to him swiftly, not in English nor Hindustani, but in a tongue Trent did not understand, and the man vanished with a salaam.

Sarojini rose; Trent, too, got up.

"*Salaam, Burra Dakktar,*" she said, lapsing into Hindustani and bringing the visit to an end. "I, the Swaying Cobra—who dance for those I love, but have only venom for those I hate—bid thee farewell until the gods bring us together again. And may that be soon!"

She smiled and contemplated him, once more as a cat contemplating prey; smiled with eyes that spoke mockery as she suffered him to salute her fingers; and

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the last picture he had of her was as she crossed the golden room and parted the golden curtains, vanishing like a cobra into its lair.

He turned then to Kerth and shook him. The latter was slow to awaken. Lids lifted to reveal rheumy eyes, but as he recognized Trent sleep was wiped away, like a cobweb. His gaze swept the room; he rose unsteadily.

"I am ready, Sahib!" announced Chandra Lal, appearing in the doorway.

Kerth opened his mouth, as if to speak; shut it; shot Trent a cryptic glance.

"Come." This from Trent, laconically.

Thus they left the house of the Swaying Cobra, left it with its vain, old-world atmosphere and its golden room; re-traversed the labyrinth of streets; got into the landau; whirled toward the Cantonment.

4

Not until they reached the hotel, until Chandra Lal flicked his whip and rolled away into the gloom, did either of the Englishmen speak.

"So you 've known her before!" observed Kerth as they approached Trent's room.

Trent said, without surprise: "You heard?"

"Everything. . . . I 'll drop over and find out about the Bombay trains; join you in a moment."

As Kerth moved toward the central building, Trent unlocked the door. After he switched on the light, his first act was to open his bag and insert his hand into the pocket where he had left the piece of coral. His

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fingers trembled, for he felt that he was questioning for the identity of Manlove's slayer; trembled—and groped in an empty pocket.

For several seconds he stood motionless, trying to adjust himself to the situation. When he came into full sentience, he looked carefully through the bag. He even searched his pockets. But the oval was not to be found. . . Some one had entered his room; stolen it. The realization burned like acid into his brain. But if—

His mental inquest was cut short as a knock announced Kerth.

"Message for you," said the latter, extending a telegram.

Trent hastily tore it open; read:

"Party fitting description bought ticket for Mughal Sarai last night. *Khansammah* at dâk bungalow says she asked questions about you and Manlove. Following up clue. Nothing new. Urqhart."

A sense of disappointment smote him. First Chatterjee; then the oval; now this! A series of blind alleys.

He applied a match to the telegram and watched it burn.

"Train leaves in an hour and a half," Kerth volunteered, taking a seat and staring inquisitively at the ashes as they fluttered to the floor.

"How 'd you suspect the wine?" Trent enquired, unbuttoning his tunic.

"It 's my business to suspect. I emptied the cup under the divan and, afterwards, expected any minute

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to see it seeping out. As it is, I 'm not sure she did n't smell a mouse. Gad! The way she pulled back my eyelids!"

Trent hung his tunic on a chair. "Don't object if I get comfortable, do you?" he asked. "Rather done up; awake all last night, you know."

Kerth waved his slim hand. "Go ahead; I 'll have to pack up shortly." Then, as Trent undressed: "This Sarojini, she's a shrewd one, major, and I don't envy you the task of matching blades with her. However, you gained a point on her to-night. I was rather surprised that she gave in so easily; not so sure, either, that there is n't a trick in it." He laughed easily. "Oh, I 'll wager she has a bag of tricks! And do you think she was telling the truth when she said Chavigny has nothing to do with this Order of the Falcon?"

Trent, stripped but for one garment, propped himself against two pillows, pencil and pad in hand.

"I 'm sure I don't know," he returned, making a notation. "Pardon me for taking a few notes; 'fraid I 'll forget 'em. No, don't go. . . . . About Chavigny: why should she say he is n't, if he is?"

"To confuse you." Kerth drew out a silver cigarette case. "Have a smoke? And what d' you suppose she meant by saying the jewels could be spirited out of India under the protection of the S. S.?" Kerth searched from pocket to pocket for a match. "Have you a light, major?"

Trent's hand moved involuntarily to his side; then he motioned toward his tunic.

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"In the pocket."

And he continued to write as Kerth reached into the pocket of his coat. He read the notes he had made:

Who the deuce would want the pendant? Answer: if a name is engraved inside, it would be very valuable to the owner. Yet the fact that the coral was found in M.'s hand doesn't prove conclusively that its owner is the murderer.

He looked up as Kerth extended a lighted match, took it and held it to his cheroot.

"Thanks"—briefly.

"Do you think," interrogated Kerth, "you could find her lair without a guide?"

Trent smiled. "Hardly."

"I 'd take oath that her man, Chandra Lal, led us along the same street twice! Oh, she 's a wily one! And the way she had us taken into the room while it was dark!"

He puffed on his cheroot and Trent continued to jot down notes.

"Furthermore," Kerth drawled, "why does n't she want you to read those instructions until to-morrow? Some catch in it."

Conversation languished, and presently Kerth drew out his watch and observed: "Nearly midnight. I 'll have to be moving on."

He rose and extended his hand.

"I 'll take a room at a native serai in Bombay—for atmosphere—and meet you at the station. Until then, good luck!"

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In the doorway he paused. He looked particularly satanic at that moment, and again Trent was not quite sure that he liked him.

"Bombay, major!" were his parting words. And the door closed behind him.

Trent stared at the blank panels for a moment; then, while he ran his fingers through his hair, he glanced over his notes:

Something queer about this Chavigny. May not belong to Order, but he's not to be overlooked. Last alias was Gilbert Leroux, Kerth said. Kerth is a downy bird. Gilbert Leroux. Names mean nothing. Sarojini took particular pains to empress it upon me that Chavigny is *non compos mentis*. Therefore, he isn't. He's something. What? And—Sarojini is a connection of the Nawab of Jehelumpore—the jewels of the Nawab were among those stolen. Find out if she was in Jehelumpore at time of theft.

Then he tore off the slip of paper, crumpled it and held a corner to his cheroot. When the blaze lapped up to his fingers he let the paper fall to the floor, then swung his feet over the edge of the bed and reached for his tunic. From the inside pocket he removed the long envelope Sarojini Nanjee had given him. It was sealed and its white surface invited inspection. He made a movement to open it; hesitated. Why not? As Kerth suggested, there might be a trick—and he knew only too well that she was not above chicanery. But he did not open it; slipped it under his pillow.

A glance at his wrist-watch. He procured his revolver; snapped open the breech; inspected the car-

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tridges; clicked it shut; placed it beneath the pillow with the envelope. Then he switched off the light and lay with his cheroot's end glowing in the darkness.

The discovery of the symbol of the Order revealed another side to the mystery surrounding Manlove's death, and during the ride back to the hotel he had constructed a new theory—a theory that he reviewed now. The analogy between the Swaying Cobra and the woman of the cobra-bracelet did not escape him. One suggested the other. Surely it was plausible to surmise that Sarojini was the veiled woman, although he was at a loss to find a convincing motive for her presence at Gaya. However, Colonel Urqhart's telegram stated that the woman had made inquiries about him—and what other woman was interested? Further proof was offered by the fact that the mysterious woman left Gaya on the night of the tragedy for Mughal Sarai, the junction for Benares. Finally, there was the coral pendant-stone. Sarojini had called it the "symbol" of the Order; therefore, only a member of that mysterious band was likely to possess it, and had not she admitted she was a member? And the pendant-stone was stolen —evidently for the reason that engraved inside was the name of its owner. Sarojini was in Benares; it was logical to assume, then, that some one in her employ had entered his room and removed the condemning evidence.

But, on the other hand, there were elements to upset this theory. Clues indicated that Manlove was stabbed at the bungalow and carried to the temple-ruins.

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Could a woman do that? Under the stress of circumstances, yes. But why move the body—unless to hide it? Or had Manlove been mortally wounded at the house and gone of his own volition to the ruins before his death? Possible—but he could conjecture no cause for such action.

And there was Chatterjee. Since the receipt of the telegram telling of his death, Trent was of the opinion that the native knew something about the crime and for that reason was killed. Had Chatterjee gone to the bungalow that night, grief-crazed and believing Trent responsible for his child's death, to administer primitive justice? Had he witnessed the crime and fled? Of course, there was the possibility that Chatterjee's death might have been a coincidence—the termination of a quarrel between him and another native. Yet Trent was not inclined to lay great importance upon this, as he considered, meager explanation and his thoughts returned to the woman.

He could fix the guilt upon neither Sarojini Nanjee nor Chatterjee. Of the two, he least suspected the native. He knew the woman to be unscrupulous—whether to the point of murder he was uncertain. True, it may not have been deliberate murder. She might have gone to the bungalow for (again) a mysterious reason; might have been discovered by Manlove. . . . But the glove did not exactly fit. Nor had he any concrete reason to believe her the woman of the cobra-bracelet—or to believe the woman of the cobra-bracelet involved. That the latter had worn a heavy veil, sur-

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rounded her, in his eyes, with an aura of mystery. This he realized, and gave her the benefit of the doubt.

Nevertheless, the coral pendant linked Sarojini with the crime; suggested that even though she did not actually commit the deed, she was undoubtedly implicated.

All of which did not clear the mystery; instead, bewildered him the more and kept suspicion, like the needle of a compass, wavering between Chatterjee, Sarojini Nanjee, the woman of the cobra-bracelet (if she were not Sarojini) and a person unknown.

His cheroot had burned low, and he got up and flung it away, and made sure the door was secure before he returned to the bed; then he relaxed and lay staring up into the darkness—darkness that was hotter because of the thick mosquito-curtain—until he fell asleep.

5

Trent returned to consciousness gradually, as a diver rising from the bottom of the sea. He was aware of another presence in the room before he was completely awake, and he strained at the threads of sleep that still entangled him.

The first proof of a presence in the hot, dark void that enclosed him was the sound of repressed breathing. He felt, now at the helm of his faculties, a movement under his pillow—realized it was a *hand*, a hand that withdrew stealthily, that belonged to a dark figure crouched outside the mosquito-curtain. A turban and

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shoulders were silhouetted upon the gray rectangle of a window. He sensed eyes upon him, cat-like eyes that saw despite the darkness.

With a stealth that proved that the intruder was no novice, but of the school of thieves that graduate well-nigh perfect adepts in the art of silent movement, the silhouette receded from the bed. Trent realized that in all probability his revolver had been placed beyond reach; attack by surprise was impossible because of the mosquito-curtain. So he lay there, undecided, scarcely breathing; and, after a moment, he let his hand slide slowly, cautiously, toward his pillow.

The silhouette halted; was motionless.

Trent's hand touched the seam of the pillow and pressed underneath. It encountered steel.

The silhouetted turban was moving again—toward the door.

Trent gripped the revolver. He turned on his side noisily and sighed, as though in sleep. At the sounds, the dark figure stepped swiftly to one side of the window, thus vacating the gray rectangle.

Trent waited no longer. He raised the mosquito-curtain and jumped. And the thing he apprehended happened. His head and shoulders became enmeshed in the netting. Cursing his awkwardness, he rent the fabric with a downward sweep of his hand. As he leaped through the opening, he saw the door flung wide, saw the man plunge out.

He pressed the trigger—and it snapped harmlessly.

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"Damn!" he spat out, knowing the weapon had been tampered with.

Again he pressed the trigger; again that absurd click.

Meanwhile the door slammed. The crash awakened him to the fact that the thief was escaping, and he dashed across the room and threw open the door. As he emerged, a figure disappeared behind the far corner.

He rushed in pursuit, his bare feet padding upon the stone flags. At the end of the portico he halted sharply, almost colliding with something in white—a something that appeared, as if by magic, from behind a suddenly opened door; that came to a standstill as abruptly as he, and gasped.

"Oh!"

Words died in Trent's throat. The girl, whom he recognized as she of the bronze hair, wore a long white garment, and her hair fell in heavy braids over her shoulders; her hands were at her throat.

For a moment they stood and stared, both speechless. Then:

"Oh!" she repeated, with a hysterical little laugh. "You frightened me! I woke up and—" She swallowed with difficulty. Her eyes dropped to her nightdress, she threw a significant look toward him and darted into her room.

Not until he heard the key turn in the lock did he remember the very substantial reason for his presence on the portico—and then that reason was nowhere in

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sight, but was, he surmised, at a safe distance, laughing at the awkwardness of all sahibs in general and one sahib in particular.

His face burning, and not altogether from the heat, he returned to his room. The glowing hands of his wrist-watch pointed to nearly two o'clock.

When he switched on the light it shone on six cartridges lying upon the table—cartridges that deft fingers had removed from his revolver and left to mock him. It was no mystery how the thief had managed to get in, for he knew that entrance could be effected with the aid of a master key, but it did puzzle him that neither his money nor the contents of his bag were touched. He suspected, however, now that he had time to review the affair, that the intruder had not come bent on loot, but after one particular thing—and when he assured himself that that thing was safe under his pillow, he guessed that his awakening had prevented the man from making away with it.

As he held up the envelope, he was once more seized by an impulse to open it. But, as before, he placed the tempting object under the pillow. Then he returned the cartridges to the breech, and, after propping a chair against the door, turned off the light and stretched himself upon the bed.

Again a wave of mystery had lapped up and touched him, and receded without leaving a hint of the power that energized it. He could not suspect Sarojini Nanjee, for he saw no reason why she should have

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the envelope stolen. Other hands were at work.

But thoughts and questions did not harry him long. He felt certain that he need not fear another intrusion that night, and when drowsiness returned he yielded to it.

6

The next morning at *burra hazri*, or "big breakfast," he found himself searching the dining-hall for the bronze-haired girl; but she was not there, nor did she appear during the meal.

When he returned to his room he discovered a letter under the door, and tore it open with quickened interest as he recognized the handwriting and inhaled the delicate fragrance of sandalwood.

GREETINGS!

You will no doubt be surprised when I inform you that instead of going to Bombay, you will go to Calcutta. The address of the place to which you are to report is set forth in the packet I gave you, and which you, being a man of honor, have not read ere you receive this. I told you Bombay last night because one can never be sure there are no ears listening, even in one's own house.

Your bearer, Rawul Din (who, I assure you, is worthy of the confidence you impose in him) will by this time be on his way to Bombay, which inconvenience to you I regret exceedingly. However, you shall have a servant. One Tambusami, an excellent bearer, will meet you in Calcutta. Regarding your own man, Rawul Din: he is, I am sure, a

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most obedient servant and will carry out your instructions by waiting in Bombay.

Meanwhile, I trust you will have a most pleasant journey and will grow in both wisdom and prosperity.

Your humble servant,

SAROJINI NANJEE

When Trent finished reading the letter he smiled. He felt no anger, nor even chagrin; he was amused; he could picture with what satisfaction she penned that missive. She was as full of tricks as a street-juggler, this Swaying Cobra. Whether she discovered Kerth's true identity or only suspected he might act as a listening-post for the Intelligence Department, he did not know; he knew only that Sarojini Nanjee had outwitted the Government in the first move of the game.

The remainder of the morning he spent in making arrangements for his departure. While he was having his luggage removed from his room he saw the bronze-haired girl—a glimpse of white and gold as she crossed the portico. She did not even glance at him.

Two-thirty, with a sun glaring down implacably upon the dusty Cantonment, found him pacing the platform of the railway station. Suddenly he caught a glimmer of bronze, a familiar face among many unfamiliar ones. It may have been the advent of the train, roaring up in a cloud of heat, that made her turn quickly —and it may not. She hurried into a carriage, followed by a porter in a flowered chintz coat.

As the train puffed out, Trent drew from his pocket the envelope Sarojini Nanjee had given him and tore

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off the end; read the closely written pages; reread them; made a few notes; memorized certain passages, and consigned the packet to ashes. One sentence stood out in his brain, in raised lettering:

. . . Thursday night to the house of his Excellency the Mandarin Li Kwai Kung, in the Street of the River of the Moon, which is in the Chinese colony at Calcutta.

It was Wednesday now.

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CHAPTER V

INTERLUDE

CALCUTTA was luxuriating in the amber and blue of a clear day when Trent detrained in the Howrah Station the following morning; detrained as Mr. Robert Tavernake of London, in light gray tweeds, instead of Major Arnold Trent of Gaya, whose military trappings, with his identity, were secreted in a trunk.

As he neared the front arches of the building, with a porter in tow, he was hailed by a drill-clad officer.

"Hello, Trent!" exclaimed the uniformed one, whom he recognized as a former messmate. "*Quo vadis*, you old mummy?"

Trent, not blind to the fact that he was being eyed by a native in horn-rimmed spectacles and a pink turban, returned the greeting with a polite smile.

"Sorry," he said; "You must be mistaken" —and walked on.

"Crazy?" wondered the surprised officer, "or am I?"

He stared at Trent's gray back and sunburnt neck —and he was not the only one, for at least two others did.

As the porter put Trent's luggage into an automobile, the expected happened: the spectacled, pink-turbaned native approached, beamed upon him and spoke in suave tones, in English.

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"You are Tavernake Sahib?"

Trent nodded. "Tambusami?"

The pink turban inclined forward as he salaamed. "I have a communication for the Presence!" he announced, extending an envelope that distilled an unmistakable perfume.

Trent did not open it, but thrust it into his pocket and instructed:

"Get in."

The motor car rolled across the Hoogly and deposited Trent and his involuntarily acquired servant at a hotel off the Maidan. There he dismissed his bearer.

"I sha'n't want you this morning," he told the pink-turbaned Tambusami, resolving to experiment with him.

And the native departed with a most profound salaam.

A half hour later, over breakfast, Trent read the note from Sarojini Nanjee. It wished him welcome to Calcutta and urged him to listen well when he visited his Excellency the Mandarin Li Kwai Kung—"who lives in that very poetic Street of the River of the Moon," as she put it. "I regret that it will be impossible for me to see you in Calcutta," she concluded. "Meanwhile, I trust you will find Tambusami an excellent bearer."

"Hmm," he thought, "if she won't be able to see me in Calcutta, where the deuce will she see me?"

Then he turned his attention to the "Daily Indian News," perused the closely-set columns while he finished his meal, and, after breakfast, set out for a stroll. He

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moved north along Chowringhee, past green-grown gardens, and into a quarter where the streets swam in intense white sunlight and men and women of every caste and color pressed close to the flanks of harnessed beasts. It did not disturb him in the least when a backward glance showed him a pink turban following at a discreet distance; he smiled. When he had filled his pipe, he turned toward the riverfront. He felt rather in the mood for a tramp, so he increased his pace—strode on. He reached the Hoogly Bridge; followed Harrison Road. After an hour of steady walking he of the pink turban showed signs of weakening. Trent, perspiring freely yet not uncomfortable, suddenly plunged into a side street, made a series of turns and came out, eventually, near the Secretariat—without the pink turban. There he encountered the officer he had met in the Howrah Station earlier that morning.

"Hello, Ayrton," was Trent's genial greeting. "Sorry I could n't speak to you this morning—but too many ears were listening."

"So!" commented the officer, wisely. "You 're doing *that* now!" He shook his head with assumed gravity. "Government 's gone mad—madder 'n a March hare!" A laugh. "I suppose you 're shadowing Ghandi!"

Trent grinned and made an inconsequential remark.

"Here permanently?" he queried.

"End of my life, I daresay," was the gloomy reply.

"You can do me a favor, then"—thus Trent. "I 've a uniform I want to rid myself of temporarily; don't

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object if I send it around for you to keep? . . . Thanks.''

They chatted for a few minutes; then the officer entered one of the buildings facing the square, and Trent returned to his hotel.

He arrived hot and perspiring, and sat down upon the veranda to wait. And before long the pink turban appeared in the street below. Their glances met and Trent motioned to him.

''Why did you follow me?'' he demanded, as Tambusami, sweat flowing from every pore of his brown face, salaamed.

''My orders, O Presence!''

''Whose orders?''

''The Presence knows!''

Trent thought a moment. Then: ''I object to it.''

Tambusami smiled broadly. ''But, O Presence, it is for your good that I follow—to protect you!''

And knowing it was useless to tell him he lied, the Englishman dismissed him curtly.

Trent spent an idle afternoon. He did not leave the hotel, for he feared that he would encounter other acquaintances, as he had met Ayrton, and with Tambusami tracking him it might make more insecure his position. To be sure, Sarojini Nanjee knew he was Arnold Trent—but did Tambusami?

As he lay sprawled across his bed, enjoying the inactivity and listening abstractedly to the sounds from the street, a recollection of the bronze-haired girl insinuated itself into his thoughts. Subconsciously, he

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wondered why the remembrance of her came to him. He had n't seen her since she entered the carriage at Benares Cantonment; did n't know whether she left the train along the route or in Calcutta. Queer that this girl should have crossed the border of mere observation. Yet, had he analyzed it, he would have known the reason. The world, that is, the great firmament of existence around his immediate sphere, was to him a scroll of faces. Now and then some countenance was lifted from the multitude—a swift glimpse of eyes in the dusk, eyes he would never see again, and for many nights afterward, when he sat alone with his pipe and the stars, he would spin webs of glamour. A quixotic person, this Trent. . . . The girl, then, was one of the lifted faces. Skin of old ivory hue, he mused, and hair —now, just what color was it? His imagination supplied a simile. Golden, with little flickerings of auburn—like firelight on bronze. The figure rather pleased him. Firelight on bronze. A contrast to Sarojini Nanjee. One the jungle orchid, blossom of purple shadows; the other . . . . well, the type one liked to picture at a piano in a dusk-deepened room, with hands gleaming pale as moonlight. . . .

Sentimentalism, he concluded. And dropped off to sleep.

2

Dusk had fallen when he awakened. He dressed quickly and went below. Tambusami was nowhere in sight; however, he suspected his shadow was not far

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away. Doubtless the native knew of his appointment in the Chinese quarter, but he determined if possible not to have him at his heels. To this end he took an automobile part of the way, by a roundabout route; then, certain he had eluded his tracker, set out on foot to finish the journey.

An intense vitality lived in every line of his body as he swung along crowded streets, a tall, trim figure in white linens, smoking a cheroot with the air of a globe-trotter trickling through the evening swarm for no other purpose than to absorb atmosphere, instead of a man approaching an uncertain venture.

Native Calcutta was airing itself after a hot day, and a film of color and life unreeled in the early night. He passed two sailors from a British man-o'-war, younger by ten years than himself, clean-clipped chaps. The sight of them brought back the old dream—freedom and the quest for fabulous isles. He rather envied that pair, irresponsibly young. Always there, this dream, lurking in the subconscious, eager for some incident to draw it into the conscious.

From the thronged bazaars he turned into a quarter that was no less crowded, but with people of a different sort. It was as though he had descended into another world, a planet of dirt and filth and sin—sin in its nakedness, as only Asiatic cities know how to strip it of its glamour. A foul artery fed with the virus of the East—beings whose faces were mottles of yellow and brown and chocolate black upon the mephitic gloom. A woman in satin trousers ran out of a balconied house

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and clutched his arm, whispering an entreaty; she cursed him in bastard English when he thrust her away. Something of psychic consciousness came to him from the street, as though fanned into momentary being were the sparks of old evil . . . . Babylon and Rome, and the perished cities of the Nile. . . .

Once clear of this humanity-clogged artery with its aura of ancient sin, he found himself in the quieter, though scarcely cleaner, Chinese quarter. Jews, Parsees and Chinamen; black and gilt signs; open doors that, like dragon-mouths, expelled the mingled odors of *samshu* and soy, of cassia and joss-sticks and opium; an atmosphere that transported Trent to the picturesquely wicked towns of the Straits Settlements.

The Street of the River of the Moon belied its name; it was no more than an alley and it slunk in the shadows of unpretentious houses. Its lights were dim, many-colored globes afloat on warm darkness; it was as mysterious as the numerous slant-eyed yellow men who came and went so soundlessly in its shifting dusks. After several inquiries Trent located the residence of his Excellency the Mandarin Li Kwai Kung—a dark, colonnaded pile. He jerked the leather strap that hung from a panel of the door; heard a muffled tinkle, the padding of feet. The door opened wide enough to permit a yellow face to peer out.

"Tell his Excellency that Mr. Tavernake is here," Trent instructed.

The door closed quickly; again the padding of feet. After a moment the yellow face reappeared. This

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time the door opened sufficiently for Trent to see a house-boy in a slop-shop suit and a black skull-cap.

"His Excellency sends greetings and bids you enter his dwelling," announced the house-boy.

The door closed behind Trent. He was in a hall where a *dong*, swinging from brass chains, kindled an orange flame against the semi-darkness, where a stale-sweet scent clung to the air and gloom varnished everything.

The house-boy took his shoes and gave him straw sandals, afterward leading him through a series of doors to a corridor where the rich, stupefying odor of opium saturated the atmosphere. A sliding door was pushed back—a black door inlaid with characters in glistening nacre—and Trent stepped into a dimly illuminated area.

A lamp with a yellow shade hung by invisible means from an invisible ceiling, casting a pyramid of ochre light upon a figure that squatted on silken cushions beneath it—a figure arrayed in a loose yellow garment and the embroidered boots of a mandarin's undress. He was grossly obese, with drooping gray mustaches and oblique, beady eyes—a grotesque effigy made more unreal by the incense that floated up from a brazier at his side and wreathed bluish spirals on the dead air around him. Trent received an impression of sheeny hangings beyond the radius of the lamp; vases and gold-embroidered screens—a web of shadows, with, in its center, this gorged yellow spider.

His Excellency rose with visible effort, smiled blandly and shook his own hands within his brocaded sleeves.

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"You will do me the honor to be seated?" he enquired, gesturing toward a pile of cushions opposite him. "My house is flattered that one of such fame should lighten it with his presence."

Trent waited for his host to be seated, knowing this to be a custom, then dropped cross-legged on the cushions. Followed the usual exchange of lilied words, of felicitations and compliments. Afterward, Li Kwai Kung struck a gong and a little rice-powdered, red-lipped girl appeared from behind the dusky screens, like a figure out of one of Pan Chih Yu's poems, and set a brass basin filled with scented water before Trent. When he had washed his hands the basin was removed. More lilied words, more felicitations and compliments. Then, a few minutes later, the first course of the meal was served.

"*Ch'ing chih fan,*" said the mandarin graciously—by which he invited Trent to eat.

Bamboo shoots, rice-cakes and honey; roast duck flavored with soy, seeds of lotus in syrup; prawns, sweetmeats, nuts and tea made fragrant with petals of jasmine. A very celestial meal. They talked as they ate, and if his Excellency clung to the custom of balancing food on his chop sticks and thrusting it unexpectedly into his guest's mouth, as an act of courtesy, he refrained from doing so on this occasion. Trent grew anxious to have the formalities over with. He knew he was undergoing a test; upon the success of this interview, he imagined, depended his future safety.

When the meal was finished, Li Kwai Kung asked:

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"Will you join me with a pipe? . . . . No?"

A ring of the gong brought the serving-maid with cigars. His Excellency declined to smoke tobacco; instead he spoke to the girl in his own tongue and she vanished, to reappear presently with the requisites of an opium smoker—a lighted lamp on a tray, a blue jar containing poppy-treacle, and a metal pipe. The jar, Trent observed, was a piece of blue porcelain of the Sung period.

Then, after the manner of the East, which is to say, obliquely, his Excellency approached the subject of Trent's visit.

"There are certain necessary precautions," he began, while the girl twisted a black gummy substance about a needle and held it over the lamp, "before we enter into any discussion."

Trent opened his shirt and revealed a coral pendant chased with silver, lying against his skin. Li Kwai Kung nodded.

"And if I say, 'It is a wise man who holds his tongue in the presence of knaves,'" pursued the mandarin, "what would be your comment?"

"I would reply with the ancient wisdom of Lao Tzü —'By many words wit is exhausted; it is better to preserve a mien.'"

Li Kwai Kung nodded again. "*Hao,*" he grunted —and his guest did not know that was a signal for the house-boy, armed with a revolver, to retire from behind one of the many screens.

"It is needless, I am sure," the Oriental resumed,

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"for me to caution you, who are about to start on a journey to the dwelling-place of *He-whose-wisdom-is-as-a-lamp-filled-with-much-oil,* that the discreet man questions himself, a fool others. You will tread the path of discretion, I know, for I perceive that the light of intelligence burns with much brightness in your brain."

A pause. Trent studied the blue porcelain jar. Li Kwai Kung took the metal pipe from the girl and inhaled; bluish vapor welled from his nostrils, half-obscuring his countenance.

"The arm of the Order is long and powerful, like Mother Yangtze, and its eyes are as many as the stars." Their glances met; no expression was mirrored in either face. "Yours is a great work to do," continued his Excellency, sinking deeper among the cushions and expelling smoke. "The Order will reward the faithful; they shall flourish as the willow-branch. The first step of your journey to the City of the Falcon will be taken shortly—and what sage was it that said, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step'?"

The obese effigy smiled, pleased with his knowledge, and Trent felt that each word had its own hidden significance. Curiosity pricked him, like a needle flashing back and forth across the loom of thought. But he smoked his cigar and stared at the blue jar as if he had nothing weightier than the Sung porcelain upon his mind.

"As a man climbs a mountain by terraces, so will you travel to the city where dwells the Falcon, he who

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guides the workings of the Order,'' Li Kwai Kung went on. ''There, having attained the summit, you will—er—see light. The next terrace of your journey is Burma.''

He withdrew an object from under the cushions and Trent looked upon a packet wrapped in white silk. The mandarin, placing his pipe in a bowl at his side, rested a contemplative gaze upon the silken wrapping.

''Passage for Rangoon has been booked for you on the *Manchester*, which leaves day after to-morrow. Here''—indicating the packet—''are all necessary papers. When you reach Rangoon you will take a train, as soon as convenient, for Myitkyina, where you will go to the shop of Da-yak, the Tibetan, and identify yourself by showing the symbol of the Order. He will furnish you with a *hu-chao*, or, as you would say, a passport, to a—er—higher terrace.''

He handed the packet to the Englishman, who placed it in his pocket. Trent's thoughts were revolving about what he had just heard—revolving and reaching no end. Myitkyina. Upper Burma. Were the jewels in Burma? But why Burma? How were they taken there? ''Under the protection of your Secret Service,'' Sarojini Nanjee had said. Were they hidden somewhere in the hills? Myitkyina. He tried to visualize a map; failed. . . . This City of the Falcon: in Burma? And the Falcon? Who was he? White or Oriental? . . . . Groping—groping in the dark—a purposeless circle. At least, this Order was no small one.

''I believe there are no further instructions to de-

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liver," he heard Li Kwai Kung say. "Regarding the trivial matter of your—er—incidentals, I presume you have been told to keep an account and submit it at the proper time? . . . . No? . . . . Then do so, as it is the wish of the Order that you suffer no personal expenses. . . . Stay,"—as Trent made a move to leave —"it would be ungracious for me to allow so honorable a guest to depart without further hospitality!"

The little Chinese maid brought liquor—a sort of *arak* that, despite his Excellency's comment that it was a draught of the gods, tasted like sweetened vinegar to Trent. As the Englishman sipped the wine he continued to mull over what Li Kwai Kung had told him. The formidableness of the Order amazed him, troubled him not a little. This Falcon had a nest in Calcutta and Myitkyina. Where else? What of his brood? Why not, he mused, report what he knew to the Intelligence Department; let them swoop down upon these two nests; thus avoid any treachery that Sarojini might contemplate? An idea that he instantly dismissed, for to act prematurely was to invite defeat. He was under orders—and he had given his word of honor. Seek the root of the vine, the seed from which the Order flowered; then exterminate it.

Trent saw by his wrist-watch that it was nearly ten o'clock when he finally rose to take his leave. Li Kwai Kung lifted his corpulent person with an effort and repeated the ceremony of vigorously shaking his own hands.

"A sage once said, 'A man's actions are the mirrors

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of his heart,'" was his parting remark. "And, verily, I have looked into your heart!" (Which, Trent reflected later, was a rather cryptic compliment.) "May you flourish in wisdom and wealth, as the blossoms of the almond tree flourish after the snows have melted and run down from the Yunnan-fu!"

Trent inclined his head gravely. "And may the Green Gods grant you the Twelve Desires!" he returned.

The house-boy appeared; his Excellency sank among his cushions, like a spider retiring to its gossamer web; and Trent was led back through the series of doors to the outer portal, where he exchanged the straw sandals for his shoes, and left the colonnaded residence—left a world of mystery for a world of noise and heat, of odorous reality and pale lanterns that reflected upon yellow faces and sloe-dark eyes.

He was a short distance beyond the mouth of the alleyway when a gharry rolled by. He started to call after it—an impulse born dead. It was not late; he would walk. Motion accelerated his thoughts. And he wanted to think.

As he strode along the street, fragments of the obese mandarin's conversation slid into his brain and receded, like waves gently insinuating themselves upon a beach. Casually (he had turned into a narrow highway of balconies, of swinging signs and Chinese scrolls) he noticed a white woman on the opposite side of the street—only noticed her, for he knew the type that haunted this quarter. He would have expelled her instantly from his mind had not she moved from the shadow into a

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band of light that extended beyond a doorway; had not he seen her pause and draw away, as from a plague, as a Chinaman slunk past. The glow fell upon a face of old ivory hue, upon hair as bronze as the lettering upon the black scroll above her wide-brimmed hat.

He drew a quick breath.

The girl evidently recognized him as he recognized her, for she darted out of the band of light and to his side. Dark eyes looked into his from under the brim of her hat. She smiled, half with fright, half ashamed.

"I—I 've been very foolish," she said, much after the manner of a truant child. "Please take me out of this dreadful place!"

Trent did not speak immediately; grasped her arm; looked about; hailed a dilapidated carriage that was rattling by. As it came to a halt he said "Get in!" much after the manner of a stern parent.

She smiled again, that same half-frightened, half-ashamed smile, and obeyed.

Thus she of the bronze hair stepped from Trent's world-scroll into a sphere of more intimate association.

3

The girl was the first to speak.

"Really, I don't know what to say. I hope you don't think—"

"I think as you do," he interposed, "that you 've been very foolish."

She laughed tremulously. A voice as soft as a gentle monsoon rain—a voice that slurred over its words.

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Wisps of hair were burnished by passing lights; her throat shone palely. Only the eyes were in the shadow —dark eyes, deep with mystery and a promise of revelations. . . . Old ivory and bronze. A picture of soft tones and colors.

"My brother would—well, I hardly know what he *would* do if he knew about this!"

"Your brother 's in the city?"—conscious of a lingering strain.

She shook her head. "I 'm alone, or I would n't have done what I did to-night—or what I 'm doing now. It was brazen of me to come up to you as I did, but I was frightened—terribly!" Then, with that nervous little laugh, she added, "But it was n't as though I were approaching a totally strange person, for—for I believe you were at the hotel in Benares."

Trent remembered his uniform and that now he was Tavernake—remembered divers things. He decided quickly.

"You must be mistaken about having seen me at Benares; but I 've a brother there—in the Army. Perhaps you saw him. He passed through the city today."

"Oh! Perhaps so!"—this rather frigidly. "What a striking likeness!" He felt her eyes upon him—those dark eyes. A moment passed before she said: "I must explain why I 'm here, at this hour. Of course it will seem foolish to you, but I 'm a tourist, and I wanted to see Calcutta's Chinese colony at night—oh, it had to be night, because I knew everything would be tawdry and ugly in daylight!"

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It did n't seem at all foolish to him, only indiscreet.

"I hired a registered guide. He was to show me the temple of—of Kwan-te, I believe. Anyhow, he assured me it would be perfectly safe—and, knowing that it was n't, but rather enjoying the idea, I went. But I did n't see the temple. There was a street fight between some Chinese and Brahmins—Chinese and Brahmins *do* fight, don't they? In the confusion my guide disappeared. Perhaps he joined in or ran—I suspect the latter. I was so frightened when I found myself alone—and I—well, I walked a short distance—and then—then I saw you."

He realized he ought to say something to fill in the gap that followed, but he was not a man given to much conversation and for the time nothing suggested itself. Finally:

"I hope you 've learned a lesson"—grimly.

She laughed, and the nervous note had gone from her voice. Again he thought of cool monsoon showers.

"I 'm afraid I 'm incorrigible! Now that I 'm safe, I think I really enjoyed it. Being a man, you 'll disapprove."

"Thoroughly," he responded.

Conversation lagged for a brief spell. The girl took it up.

"You see, Mr.—"

She stopped and he supplied:

"Tavernake—Robert Tavernake."

"I forgot we had n't been introduced. My name is Dana Charteris. I was going to say that this is like a

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fairy tale to me—some 'Arabian Nights' story. Since I was a child I 've wanted to travel—to see Aladdin's palace and Sinbad's islands—and now I 'm doing it. I lived in a town called Bayou Latouche, in Louisiana, U. S. A., and, you know, Bayou Latouche scarcely prepares one for this!''—with a gesture. ''It reminds me of carnival in New Orleans.''

''You 've not been disillusioned?''

''In India? No.''

''Of course you have visited Agra.''

''No, I have n't seen the Taj. It 's a frightful confession to make, is n't it?''

He reflected upon the question and decided:

''It 's rather jolly to find some one who 's traveled in India without seeing the Taj. Sort of different. But I forgot to ask where you wanted to go. For some reason I took it for granted that you 're staying at the Grand.''

''That 's almost clairvoyant; I am stopping there.''

When he had instructed the *gharry-wallah*, she asked:

''You don't live in Calcutta?''

Making conversation, he thought.

''My home is the world.'' Then, specifically, ''I live in London. I represent a diamond firm.''

Before she spoke he knew quite well what she was going to say.

''Jewels always fascinate me. Is n't it frightful about the gems that were stolen?''

''Rather,'' was the close-mouthed reply.

''Just fancy losing all those jewels!'' she went on.

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"My brother said they are worth millions or *lakhs* and *lakhs* of rupees, to be proper. I suppose it 's the work of this Chavigny who 's reported to be at large. You 've heard of him, have n't you?"

He answered in the affirmative and, inwardly, expressed relief that they were nearing the end of the ride.

"I can't ever thank you enough," she told him as they left the gharry and entered the hotel.

In the better light he saw her eyes for the first time and explored a new dimension of strength and dignity. He felt as though he looked into the rich glow of autumn forests, spaces of warmth and color and spirit—an initiation into the sense of discovery and lofty exhilaration that Balboa must have known when he gazed upon the shining expanse of an unknown sea. It was a glimpse into some high arcanum—to him new, but to the world as ancient as the tale of Cana of Galilee.

"I hope I 'll see you before I leave," she said in a way that would have made it impossible for him to misunderstand, had he been inclined to do so. "Good night."

He watched her go. . . . And when he reached his room and examined the silk-wrapped papers Li Kwai Kung had given him, she persisted in cleaving through his thoughts, in appearing from the pages before him and distracting him; and after a few minutes he rewrapped the packet and placed it in his trunk.

Long after he plunged the room into darkness he lay thinking—thinking of Kerth in Bombay, of his Excellency Li Kwai Kung sitting in his shadowy room, like a

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yellow-bellied spider, and of the Order of the Falcon. The *Manchester* was to sail Saturday; it was Thursday now. Two days, an interlude; then the Bay, Rangoon and—

But would he see *her* before he left?

4

Morning and a hint of coolness caressing the air. Sampans and other craft rocked and crooned in the murky Hoogly. Gauzy streamers of smoke floated over the jute-mills of Howrah. Sunshine drenched the modern buildings of Dalhousie Square and Government Row; submerged the myriad bazaars and shops in yellow liquor; crept into the room where Trent was sleeping and aroused him with an impelling finger.

He dressed and went to breakfast. When he left the dining-hall his attention was arrested by a black straw hat with a sheaf of cornflowers and ripe yellow wheat about the crown. A tendril of hair glowed against the somber brim. She was talking with a native, an itinerant merchant; a string of beads hung from her white fingers. Trent approached from behind and spoke.

"He 's asking entirely too much for those stones, Miss Charteris."

She turned, smiling. He felt the same warmth in her brown eyes as on the previous night.

"You always appear at the psychological moment—or rather," she interpolated, "this time at the financial moment."

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She returned the beads to the merchant, who took no pains to hide his displeasure at Trent's interposition.

"I 'm really glad you appeared—for a purely selfish reason. I want to buy some things to send home, and I know if I go alone I 'll be cheated outrageously. I wonder if you 'd care to go with me? However, I suppose that, man-like, you detest shopping with a woman."

"I don't object at all," he said.

"And you really have n't any business engagements?"

"I 'm free until to-morrow."

"Oh, you 're leaving Calcutta then?"

"Yes."

"So am I"—with a smile.

She raised a silk parasol of pongee-color as they left the hotel, and the sun reflected a rich glow through the fine texture.

"You see," she explained, "I taught music at Bayou Latouche and I promised my pupils I 'd send them each a remembrance from India."

He might have known she was a musician. There was a depth of conception in her that was lyrical, a somber yet thrillingly-alive tone, of which her eyes were the pinnacle-expression. *Andante appassionato.* Queerly, that term came to him. His mental portrait of the day before blended in with actuality: White hands brushing the keys in a dusk-varnished room; nothing heavy, some old song, redolent of recollections. . . .

"Is this your first trip to India?" he heard her asking. The clamor of Chowringhee was in his ears, but

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her voice rang clearly through the sounds, an unbroken thread in the tangle of city streets.

"No. Mother India called me when I was a boy. I used to hunt with my father." That was true; for some reason he detested lying to her.

"Hunting! Tiger?"

He nodded.

"Is it true," she queried, "that there are mystics who walk in the jungles with animals—who belong to a sort of brotherhood of the wild and understand tiger and python and cobra?"

"The jungle has her own secrets," was his reply; "things that white men will never know."

"I heard a man," she resumed, "a converted Brahmin priest, lecture in New Orleans. He told of his boyhood; of the magic lore of the 'Mahabarata' and the 'Ramayana'; and of a time when an old priest—he called him a *Saddhu*—took him into the jungle at night, and he heard the many animal-sounds—the voices of the jungle. He said that once green eyes peered at them, so close that he could hear the quick breathing of the beast, and the old priest only looked into the eyes—oh, he described that look as so potent and unafraid!—and soon the eyes disappeared. I 've always remembered that. Since then I 've wanted to *feel* the jungle—and the power of will that can soothe a great animal. Yet I suppose Mother India, as you call her, is suspicious of us foreigners who try to pry into her secrets. And yet"—the brown eyes were filled with reflections—"perhaps she has a right to

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be resentful, for men have maligned and misrepresented her so, credited her with false mysticism, with *Mahatmas* and cults of which she is n't guilty." Then she laughed—a little ripple that broke the smooth spell. "I—an outsider—talk as if I were intimate with India! Although sometimes I do feel that I must have known India before; a haunting familiarity. That 's why I came—to see if my visions were aright." Again the rippling laugh. "But I 'm sure you 'll think me an Annie Besant, incognito, if I talk on like this!"

"Not at all"—smiling. "I 'm interested."

"But you should tell me of India; for you 've hunted in her forests and wild places. Oh, it must be wonderful to know the world!"

"Well, I 'd scarcely say I know the world," he corrected; "only a few Indian and Persian cities—and some of the more southern watering-places of Asia. I was stationed for a while at Singapore."

"Stationed? You mean in the interest of your firm—or were you in the Army then, like your brother?"

"In the Army," he answered, again experiencing that insurrection against falsehood.

"I see," she commented. A wistful sigh. "I think I should have been a man. Penang, Shanghai and Zanzibar, those cities with such thrillingly wicked names, fascinate me; Tibet and inner China, all the far places, call. There's something pagan and magnificent about it—a sort of broken thread in me that matches the tapestry of it all. Oh, I 'm sure I should have been a man! I know if I were, I 'd be an ex-

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plorer and hunt among the ruins of the Phœnicians and the Incas, and those other remnants of ancient civilizations.''

Her words brought a tightening of the cords in his throat. Another who dreamed of the fabulous isles! But, for a reason he did not analyze, he could not place her in the picture she painted. Always, to him, the music-room—white hands in the dusk.

''But I 'll have my fling,'' she continued; ''only in a mild degree. My brother's home is in Burma. I 'm going to live with him, and we plan to slip off every now and then. A trip to Malaya or Borneo or Java—I 've heard so much of the beauty of Batavia—or up the other way to Siam. Siam! Isn't the very name magic? Bejewelled dancers and emerald Buddhas and theaters where they pantomime ancient tales! . . . I 'm not a reformist in the least, but there 's one sort of 'uplift work' I 'd love to do—a 'purpose in life,' as some call it. I 'd like to visit the far places and return home and lecture to those whose boundaries are their own yards, and try to make them understand that on the other side of the world there are civilizations so much mellower than their own, and doctrines of existence that have nothing to do with mints and stock exchanges!''

Her voice was an expression of the high arcanum that he had glimpsed in her eyes. Here was a woman who possessed the rare triumvirate of flesh and mind and soul; whose gifts to men were other than brief summer passions and earthly donations. He felt that it was

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irreverent when he asked if he might smoke. As he touched a match to his cheroot, she went on:

"Oh, the West knows so little about the East, and the East so little about the West, that it is n't strange that one misunderstands the other. . . . But I 'm boring you with this talk," she broke off irrelevantly.

"Won't you go on?" —earnestly.

She smiled. "It 's impertinence for me to tamper with mysteries that I have n't explored. No,"—still smiling—"I 'm going back to my ken—to Siamese dancers and pantomime shows. And that reminds me, is it safe to go to a native theater? I 'd feel as if I 'd missed part of Calcutta if I did n't see a Bengali performance."

"I would n't advise you to go alone." This soberly. "Too, if you don't understand the language, it would prove rather dry entertainment."

Another smile. "Why must a woman have such narrow man-made boundaries? If you hint that it 's dangerous, then you 'll intrigue me the more."

A recollection of the Chinese quarter flashed through him.

"If you insist on going," he said, and he, too, was smiling, "I daresay nothing can stop you—and the best possible thing for me to do is to offer my guardianship."

"It really would n't be stealing your time? Oh, it would be splendid! . . . . But you 're leading me by all these shops. Shall we go in here?"

It was an epochal morning for Trent. After the

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tension of the past few days, he craved relaxation. This recess had a warmth and exhilarating intimacy that was a stimulus to him, and he luxuriated in it, listening attentively as the girl talked—talk that revealed little brilliant flashes of her nature—and drinking in the study of rich tints that her face and hair presented in the straw-colored light beneath her sunshade. He had the feeling of a seaman in port, a boyish thrill at the freedom from restraint; a few hours shore leave, then the sea again. He entirely forgot his substantial shadow until they returned to the hotel. The sight of the pink turban whipped him back into tension.

"At five-thirty," she said as they parted. "And I 'm sure it will be a wonderful adventure."

As she left him, Tambusami approached, smiling his ingratiating smile.

"I have news to report, Presence," he announced. "It is indeed well that I am here to protect your interests, for while you were away some one entered your room, and had not I appeared at the opportune moment he might—"

"You had him arrested?" Trent cut in.

"I went to your room, and hearing strange sounds within, I looked through the keyhole and saw a man —a brown man. Knowing he was a thief, I took the liberty of entering. He had opened your trunk—oh, they are clever, these thieves!—but he did not have a chance to steal anything."

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"You caught him?"

The smile left Tambusami's face. "He was too strong for me, Presence; he had muscles like the unicorn!"

Trent considered a moment. Then: "Whose servant are you—mine or hers?"

Tambusami beamed. "*She* pays me to be *your* bearer!"

"Then say to her that I 'm capable of taking care of myself and that you 're to be my servant from now on and *not* my shadow. We 'll only be here until tomorrow, which no doubt she 's already told you, but until then you 'll watch my room instead of me."

Trent found the silk-wrapped packet safe in his trunk. Nothing was disturbed or missing. However, he surmised that the "thief" gained what he came after—knowledge of his, Trent's, destination. Was this the hand of that mysterious power he had felt in Benares when he awakened to discover an intruder in his room? But what power could it be? Not Sarojini Nanjee. Who? . . . . Plot and counter-plot. Each day fixed in him more immovably the belief that behind the activities in which he was involved was a sinister purpose, more stupendous, when revealed, than he imagined. Every new incident, like a hand in the night, lured him, beckoning, but never fulfilling the promise of disclosure. Adventure! And only one thorn to prick the joy from it. . . . Manlove. . . .

It came to him suddenly that perhaps, unaware of it, he was exploring the fabulous isles of his fancy.

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5

They had tea at a restaurant in Government Place. She wore the black straw hat with cornflowers and wheat woven about the crown. White voile caressed slender limbs and fell away in a deep hem to give a glimpse of silk-stockinged ankles and suède shoes.

They rode along Beadon Street in a glamorous after-sunset glow (the car was threading through swarms whose sheet-like garments blended softly with the gray pastel of houses and the lingering rose-light) and Trent, eyes upon the girl, felt the sheer call of youth and romance at dusk. The very atmosphere was an electrode, drawing its current from the first white stars. Nor was Dana Charteris unreceptive. She was aware of a shielding warmth, and not of the physical, in his presence. The play of muscles of sunburnt cheek and jaw was vital and challenging, but behind that, more convincing because it was not visible to the eye, but to a sense of inner perception, was a compelling cleanliness; strength that had not to do with thews or tendons.

The theater was in a neighborhood of white houses and green palms, close to Beadon Square; their seats in an orchestra-stall. Over the pit hung oil lamps, round yellow moons suspended in cavernous gloom; dim electric lights in the ceiling; about them, a loose-robed, turbaned audience, the majority chewing pellets of crushed areca-nut and lime.

Musicians in white raiment filed in and played an overture, and the performance began. . . . . A tale of

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chivalrous deeds and chivalrous days (thus translated Trent in a whisper, as the actors, flashes against the rich gloom of a back-drop, recited their lines); of Kurnavati, the Rani of Chitor, and Humayun, the Great Mogul. Bahadur Shah, so went the story, was hurling his armies against Chitor. The Rani had sent out the pride of the Rajputs, but they could not check the onrush of Bahadur Shah. Chitor was lost. Then the Rani, recalling a custom, took from her arm a bracelet and gave it to a servant, bidding him carry it, with a plea for succor, to Humayun, the Great Mogul. The servant departed. . . . And the first act ended.

"And you said it would be dull!" This from Dana Charteris when Trent had explained all that happened. "Somehow it makes me think of the Brahmin priest who lectured—a sort of thrilling mysticism; color and tragedy."

Just before the second act Trent glanced around the betel-chewing audience and saw—a pink turban. It disappeared as he looked, and he smiled at the thought of Tambusami crouching between the seats of the back row of stalls.

The second act was at the court of Humayun. The messenger of the Rani of Chitor arrived; presented the bracelet. Humayun, knowing of the custom, accepted it. By that act he became the bracelet-brother of the Rani, bound by custom to go to her if she called. Then the servant delivered the Rani's plea. And Humayun, who was a noble monarch, drew a jewelled sword from a jewelled scabbard and declared that the blade should

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