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# *The Devil's Fire*

by GORDON KEYNE

*a pseudonym of*  
Henry Bedford-Jones.

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*Twice a vengeful Hindu prince has carried out his threat to murder each of four men he thought had wronged him. Now this Rajah from Hell warns his third intended victim.*

Driving with Parr, I got up to Santa Barbara from Los Angeles at an early-morning hour. We stopped at a filling-station downtown to gas up, and I sought the telephone. After some difficulty I got the residence of the Honorable Fitzjames Balfour—and a very English butler.

“This is Dr. Hugh Clements,” I said, “an old friend of Mr. Balfour just from India. Is he up and around?”

“Yes indeed, sir,” came the reply. “He’s always about early. Just now he’s somewhere downtown getting an important letter in the post.”

“The devil! Is Miss Trent there at his house?”

She was, and presently I had her on the phone, much surprised to hear my voice.

“Yes, I’m here, Virginia,” I said. “Parr is with me—Colonel Magruder’s man. Magruder was murdered last night.”

Her voice broke like a violin-string at hearing this. First her father, then Magruder!

“Balfour’s next,” I said. “Tell me what luck you had with him?”

“Oh, the very best!” she reported. “We were driving down today to meet with you and Colonel Magruder. He’ll do anything you want, will cooperate in any way you think wise. He’s downtown now, mailing a special-delivery letter to you.”

I queried her about the situation. She said to come at once to the house, and told where it was. Plenty of room, she said. Balfour would be delighted to have us.

“Be there in twenty minutes,” I said, and rang off before I could succumb to temptation and send her a kiss over the wire. She might not have liked that.

Balfour’s place was no large estate. He had retired from his prosecutor’s position in the Indian service just before the war’s end, and instead of going home to England, came to California. He got in on the ground floor, just before the real-estate boom, and took over a nice but not showy place in the new Santa Barbara development north of town. We gained it without trouble—a pleasant hillside house with a few big trees around, small grounds, and the walls of big estates on either side. There was a roomy garage with servants’ quarters above.

Virginia Trent welcomed us and took us in to breakfast; Balfour was not back yet. The house was thick with his pompous style—two English servants and so forth; a buffet breakfast, and that sort of thing. Having an unpleasantly fresh and stiff wound in my thigh, I was not very brisk, but said nothing of it. Parr disappeared, and I was thankful for a few moments alone with Virginia.

“Better save the Magruder story till Balfour gets back,” I said. “Your report is the main thing, my dear. If Balfour really means business—”

“Oh, but he does!” she exclaimed eagerly. “He knows where Chaffee lives, and has already written him. He has sent to San Francisco for guards. He’ll do anything you think best. Mrs. Balfour is visiting friends in Beverly Hills and won’t be back for a week, so there’s no interference.” She looked out of the window. “He’s back now.”

Balfour walked in and wrung my hand delightedly. He was ruddy, very fit, gray-topped, inclined to pomposity, quite a human fellow on the whole. I spared him the news about Magruder until he had breakfasted; when he found Parr was with me, he guessed the truth, and it shook him frightfully.

We gathered on his screened veranda with Parr and Virginia Trent.

“This meeting is your idea, Clements,” he said. “So take charge. Bad news?”

“Very. Let me begin at the beginning. Last week I landed here after seven years at my Lacpore hospital—”

I told how I had been thrown into contact with the Rajah from Hell (he was by right, and called himself, Rajah of Sirvath, but I knew no other name for him) and how he proved to be a man whom I had saved from death in Lacpore. Now he was wealthy, handsome, most capable; then, he had been destitute, a poor devil of whom I knew nothing.

“He holds me in real gratitude,” I went on, “but he’s imbued with venomous hatred for four men now in California. You, Balfour; Howard Chaffee, whom I don’t know; Sir James Trent and Colonel Magruder—and these last two he has already murdered.”

“But why?” puffed Balfour. “Why, in God’s name?”

“Because you people picked him up as a notorious dacoit or bandit, and sentenced him to life imprisonment. He believes you framed him; he thinks you were unjust—”

“Look here, that’s all poppycock,” Balfour broke in. “Mere eyewash, Clements! I recall the case perfectly. Government was very grateful to us. You can’t accuse us.”

“I’m not; I’m telling you his warped beliefs. He was in Russia for a time and no doubt absorbed an anti-English bias. He escaped, you see, during the time of turmoil when the Japs were invading Bengal. He thinks himself a victim of injustice.”

I went on to describe the murders of Colonel Magruder and Sir James Trent; it was tough on Virginia and Parr, but necessary. We had no evidence on which to convict the Rajah of the murders. Last night his chauffeur had fired on us, wounding me slightly, and Parr had killed him. I held out my hand.

“There’s the proof. Parr found that silver ring beside the man’s body.”

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I took off the ring; everyone examined it. Plain silver, set with a black stone in whose heart burned a red flame—a stone unknown to any of us. I put it on my hand again.

“The Rajah wears a similar stone; therefore I fancy this ring has some connection with him and may serve us,” I said. “Now, Balfour, you have all the facts. My idea is that we should combine against this terror. If Magruder had listened to me and had come here yesterday, he’d still be alive. What d’ye think, Balfour?”

“I think you’re right,” he said. “I’ve written this Chaffee—he lives in San Francisco. We’ll hear from him. He was the one who identified our friend as the dacoit, by the way.”

“And you were the King’s Counsel who prosecuted him,” I said. “Trent was the judge who sentenced him, and so forth. He believes that you fellows framed him unjustly in India—and now he’s being tough on you. He murdered Trent, who was my friend, and I’m in the business

to prove it and get him his just deserts. He knows it, and mind you, won't hurt me; but his men will, quick enough. It's an ironic situation."

We discussed things. My idea was that Balfour would get a warning—the Rajah always gave warning before striking—before long; and that we should get in touch with Chaffee and make every effort to find the Rajah and put him behind the bars. So far, we did not even know what name he used, or where he was.

"Right," said Balfour. "Chaffee should get my letter today. I told him to telephone me instantly he got it; we'll hear from him. How about pulling in the police, what?"

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This was argued and negated, until we had some actual evidence. During the discussion I got out a cigarette and reached for an electric lighter that stood on the table. As I lit the cigarette, I was aware of a sensation, not painful, but annoying, in my finger. I looked at it. An exclamation escaped me.

The formerly black stone in the silver ring was now flaming red, as though afire! Yet it was not hot, barely warm enough to be felt.

I stared at it, still holding the lighter. So did the others. Virginia started to speak, then was silenced by another voice, faint but distinct.

"—*nothing more at present,*" it said. And it was not speaking English, but Hindustani! "*Look for orders at noon and at midnight. Ghopal Singh or I will speak each time. I shall be in Santa Barbara only a few days. I want everyone to be alert and ready. That is all.*"

The voice ceased. Also, the fiery glow died out of the stone in my ring, which again became black and glittering, with just a spark in its depths. When I put down the lighter and cord, the spark lessened.

Everyone, even Virginia, recognized the Hindustani if not the words. All were staring blankly around in search of the speaker. Except for us, the veranda was empty. I was the only one to recognize those tones; it shocked me stiff.

"What a singular vibrant voice!" exclaimed Virginia. "Who was speaking?"

"Dash it, that's what I'd like to know!" broke out Balfour. "Hindustani! Some trick of yours, Clements?"

I tried to speak and could not.

"The ring turned red as fire, sir!" Parr cried, staring at me.

I stirred, came alive, found words.

"You have just heard the voice of the man we were discussing," I said slowly, "the Rajah from Hell. Look—it's just past ten o'clock! I picked up this lighter, touching the wire. The ring turned red. It didn't burn, just turned red, blazing red. Touching that wire caused the contact, caused the supersonic waves to take hold, caused us to hear the speaker—some sort of electronics, you see! This ring belonged to the Rajah's man who was killed last night—"

They all began to talk at once. Balfour pooh-poohed the notion, then became silent as I translated the words we had heard. He got a shock, also; evidently the Rajah was here in Santa Barbara. Presently I roused myself and spoke.

"Let's accept what we all heard. Electronics—why not? We know the human body is an antenna, a radio aerial. We don't know the half of what electronic developments arose from the war, here or in Russia. Our man was a refugee in that country, for a time. It's far easier to believe than to disbelieve; that he's an electronic wizard is a fact."

"By your theory," Balfour said, "that stone is a sort of speaker by which he's in touch with his bally agents."

“That’s my notion.” I handed him the ring. “Test it at noon, twelve o’clock. Touch a wire somewhere, get his broadcast. If it’s true, then we, as well as his own men, will be in touch with him.”

An electrifying thought; it brought us all up in sharp surmise. Ghopal Singh—as Parr exclaimed, that was not a Hindu name. Sounded like a Sikh. There might be a clue!

Balfour started up.

“I know the police chief here, slightly. I’ll run downtown now and get him after information on this Ghopal Singh—won’t need to lay any charge. The fellow may have a record, y’know. I’ll be back by noon to test the ring. Care to go, Clements?”

I did not. My wound, slight as it was, bothered me when in a car, so Balfour took Parr with him, for company, and Virginia remained with me.

This affair of the ring, while it might afford us a slight lead, rather hit us all under the belt. It indicated the diabolic craft and ingenuity of the enemy. It showed that he was in command of weapons far beyond our knowledge. To be blunt, it terrified us—it did me, at least. The fire in that stone which was not fire at all was frightening.

I bathed quickly, shaved, and rejoined Virginia, feeling much more myself. We went into Balfour’s library, where his telephone was located, with the possible call from Chaffee in mind. He had a remarkable lot of Anglo-Indian directories of all sorts, and I examined these with quick interest that kindled when I came upon a volume devoted to the Indian peerage and royal houses.

Seizing on this, we examined it together, found the royal Rajput house of Sirvath listed in great detail, and in breathless excitement conned the entries. The present ruler was a brother of the previous rajah, whose only heir had been a son, a young man now dead. He had died during the war, and his name had been Lajpat Rai.

“That’s the man,” said Virginia. “No one else answers, Hugh.”

“So what?” I said. “Our man claims to be the rightful Rajah of Sirvath. Now we have his name—Lajpat Rai. He may not use it, but that’s his name, and we have it. Beyond doubt he has papers to prove some other identity, by which he entered the country. Now we put the Immigration people on him, and spike his guns!”

“Grand!” she said. “How are you going to find him to do it?”

This was a facer—it was quite impossible, so far as I could see. However, I felt we had made a step forward, a definite step. His prison conviction under the identity of another man, a bandit, had ruined our man’s pretensions to the throne of Sirvath; this was one reason for his actuating hatred of Balfour and the others. Lajpat Rai was dead—but our Rajah from Hell had been Lajpat Rai.

We were still discussing this discovery when Balfour came back with Parr, and we found it was getting close to noon. Our host was radiant.

“Jolly good work!” exclaimed Balfour, upon hearing our report. “I’ve done very well, too—excellently, in fact! It was an inspiration to go to the police. They have complete data on this Ghopal Singh. He’s a Sikh, right enough; was a worker in the hot district south of Stockton, and is badly wanted for robbery and attempted murder up there last year. If he’s in town, they’ll dig him out, be sure of that—and his master with him. This Ghopal was a Communist, as well.”

“That’s no crime,” I said. “Andrei Gromyko is one too, and lives in a grand estate on Long Island and is popular in Washington.”

Balfour winked. "All right, my lad. Wait and see. Getting just on to noon—so we'll try this ring of yours, what?" He reached out and took hold of a lamp-cord. "Any wire will do, I suppose. One minute before twelve, by my time."

He stood there, his puffy red face looking rather foolish, but his eyes were intent and combative, his mouth had an ugly set; he could be a nasty customer, I thought, especially when browbeating some poor devil of an Indian radical—a "filthy native," in his estimation.

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"Look at it!" broke from Parr. "The ring! The devil's fire!"

Balfour held up his hand; the black stone of the ring was fiery crimson.

"*Twelve o'clock,*" said none of us. "*No further orders today, my friends.*" The Rajah's voice, speaking in Hindustani. Then he switched instantly to English.

"*Good day, Dr. Clements. Good day, Mr. Balfour. I trust you are making use of that ring you obtained last night? Make the most of it, I admonish you. A message is on the way to you now. That is all.*"

The words died out; the ring became black again. I saw Parr looking at me and nodding. Balfour had purpled with anger. Virginia sat tense and white.

"He gives us credit for more ingenuity than we possess," I observed lightly. "He's not certain we've found the secret of the ring; apparently he has sent you some warning, Balfour. You can still clear out of here."

"Be damned if I'll run from him!" snapped Balfour. "Those watchmen haven't come? No word from Chaffee? Huh! I'll stay right here, and if he tries any tricks I'll give him what for! Upon my word—the insufferable impudence of him!"

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He reverted to the practical. The police had been trying out a new radio trick—electronic plates fastened to the walls of a room, and radio reception audible between the plates, nowhere else. Something like that might explain the black stone, on whose properties we had accidentally stumbled. I shrugged; anything was possible.

The butler announced luncheon. Almost at the same moment Balfour was called to the telephone; he rejoined us with a sparkle in his eye.

"That was Howard Chaffee," he announced. "He's driving down from San Francisco. Said he'd get here sometime this evening. He has important information on our man. Said he saw in the papers about Sir James Trent's death, and had been at work on the case. Expects a Government man named Aguilar to meet him here tonight. Looks definite, what?"

"Pleasantly so," I assented cheerfully. "I knew if we got our heads together we'd get results. *Aguilar* sounds Spanish."

"Half this town is Spanish, or Mexican, or pretends to be," sniffed Balfour. "They capitalize it for tourists. Ha! Now I feel better. We can fight back. Chaffee sounded as though he meant business."

I did not mention that, from the little I knew of him, Chaffee seemed to be an arrant scoundrel. I was by no means particular.

We all relaxed under this cheerful intimation, and the meal became almost merry. The coffee had just arrived when a car drove in, and there were Balfour's three guards. We interviewed them—hard-eyed, capable men who obviously knew their business. Balfour told them his life had been threatened, and they, with Parr, were to guard the place.

"I sha'n't stir from it," he said. "I'll remain here."

“Okay,” said one of the three. “That’s the ticket, sir. Now let’s see the servants and look over the place. We’ll answer for your safety if you don’t leave the premises. If any visitors are expected, we want to know about ’em.”

They went off with Parr, and Balfour beamed at us, and returned the silver ring to me.

“I fancy we have that devil blocked now, eh? What are you two going to do for the afternoon? You said you wanted to see the town, Virginia.”

She assented. “I’ve always heard about it and have never seen it. But—”

“Then we’ll do it,” I broke in. “Everything’s safe here. We’ll see the place, do any errands for our host, maybe take in a movie, and get back for dinner and a big evening with Howard Chaffee.”

So, half an hour later, Virginia and I got away for town. . . .

Looking back now at those happenings in Balfour’s house, it is easy to realize what childish fools we all were, and I make no exception of myself. At the moment we seemed pretty smart, covering every avenue of possible danger and of approach by the Rajah from Hell, as we thought. Yet we were the veriest bungling amateurs, neglecting the most simple precautions. Aware of his deadly rapidity of action, we were hypnotized by it, and absolutely forgot the possibility that he might have made slow and careful preparation toward gaining his ends. I had previously guessed that I was watched in all I did by his agents, and paid small importance to it; I was as much to blame as anyone.

For an hour or so I drove about with Virginia, even taking a look at the vast estates in the southern suburb of Montecito. Then we came back into town, parked the car, and she did some shopping on Main Street. Fascinated by the luxury shops, she vetoed any movie, and we wandered rather expensively about the place, until I was loaded with her packages.

We were in a drugstore buying toiletries when she suddenly turned to me.

“Hugh, will you telephone Mr. Balfour? He said to get some Kleenex if I saw any, because he had run out and did not know where to find it. They have a big stock here. Ask if he wants the white or colored, and how much to get.”

There was a phone-booth in sight, so I went to it and called Balfour’s house. The butler responded; I gave my name, and Balfour came to the phone. I put Virginia’s question to him.

“Oh, get three or four packages, any color,” he replied. “And—Clements!”

“Yes?”

“I had a telegram half an hour ago, sent from Los Angeles.” His voice was quite steady. “It was unsigned, but said something would occur within two days.”

“Oh! Sirvath?”

“Obviously. I’m trying to get it traced. Won’t do much good, I fear.”

I hung up thoughtfully. So he had received his warning. The time-limit meant nothing. Lajpat Rai, to give him his true name, might strike at any time. Better not say anything to Virginia about this, I thought, as I pushed open the booth door.

“Ah, Clements! I’d like a word with you—just a word.”

I stood immobile, transfixed. There was Virginia, across the store—and here, within a foot, smiling at me coolly, stood the Rajah from Hell! Hat pulled over his darkly luminous eyes, he wore natty flannels and looked quite at his ease.

“Glad you found Miss Trent unhurt and well,” he said swiftly, as though we were old friends. “I want to emphasize my kindly feelings toward you, Dr. Clements, by asking you to pull out of this Balfour thing—you and her both. It would grieve me if accidents happened.”



“Grieve you?” I repeated. “You and your cheap tricks—see here, you’ll get badly bitten if you keep up this deviltry of yours!”

“As though you or your friends could harm me, or even find me!” he said. “Sorry you’re stubborn about it, but I must admit the reason is charming. Well, I warn you: clear out before evening comes—for her sake. I can’t be answerable otherwise.”

With a nod he turned away; Virginia was coming toward us. My childish outburst had been weak, pitiful. There was nothing I could do—no use in making a scene.

“Lajpat Rai!” I exclaimed. He looked back at me, pausing. “What stone is in that silver ring?”

His white teeth showed in a faint grin.

“An uranium compound, of course! So long.”

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I watched him out the side door, helpless, unable to think or move. Virginia came to me, smiling.

“Who’s your handsome friend—oh, what’s the matter?”

“Everything,” I said. “That was the Rajah from Hell—and he answered to the name of Lajpat Rai—here, come along to the soda fountain; we can talk there.”

We got a little table, sat down, gave our order; and I told Virginia what Balfour had said, too—no use trying to hold anything back. The drinks came. Virginia was as white as a sheet, but otherwise never turned a hair.

“There was nothing you could do,” she said quietly. “Nothing I could have done either, except to lose my head. Glad I didn’t know who he was. I’ll know him next time.”

“His warnings are to be respected, and this one was well meant. Think you’d better respect it, and leave?”

“No,” she replied. “I can do no good, I know, but I intend to exert every effort to bring him to justice for Father’s murder, Hugh. I think we’re getting somewhere, too. If one of his men can be caught and made to talk, we’ll have him. Balfour has the police after this Ghopal Singh, and Chaffee will give us something important when he comes. . . . No, I want to wait for developments. Do you blame me?”

I did not, of course. She was the vitally interested party; she was the one to prosecute if Lajpat Rai could be linked with the murder of Sir James Trent. Some attempt on Balfour’s life would be made within two days. It seemed safe enough for her to stick around until morning, anyhow. We might even get our hands on the chief devil himself.

So there was no further argument.

Getting to the car, we drove out to Balfour’s house, getting there about four o’clock, and called Parr and Balfour into consultation. They heard my report of the meeting, and Balfour urged Virginia to accept the warning and leave. She refused flatly.

“Wait till morning, anyhow,” she concluded. “I must hear what Chaffee has to tell us, you know.”

“All right, then.” Balfour shrugged and assented. “So he says the black stone is uranium? Bosh! . . . Where’s the bally thing now, Clements?”

“Lying on my dresser. Want to give Chaffee a demonstration at midnight?”

“We might,” he said. “Hello—what’s this, now?”

“This” proved to be one of the three guards, asking for a hearing.

“We’ve been doing a little checking up, Mr. Balfour,” he said. “Your phone wires come to the garage first, then to the house. Why?”

“Eh? How the devil would I know?” said Balfour. “Ask the telephone people.”

“Well, it’d be a cinch for anyone living in those upstairs garage rooms to tap your wires. All that’s needed is a magneto, or a magnet wrapped magneto style. Who stays up there? The two menservants and the cook, I understand.”

“Correct,” said Balfour. “Both men have been with me for ten years or more. The cook, Mrs. Brown, was employed by my wife three months ago. Local woman. Steady, reliable and a good cook. There’s a phone in the garage, by the way.”

The guard grinned. “That answers my first question, then. Suppose Mrs. Brown was a spy and reporting all that was said on your phone here?”

We looked at one another. “Well, we’d be in the soup,” said Balfour. “I say! I can telephone Mrs. Balfour in Beverly Hills and get this woman’s references, and you can look her up in the morning, eh?”

“I’d say do it now,” replied the guard, “and one of us can look her up tonight. If you’re on a spot, there’s no sense in wasting time. We don’t want her to listen in and get wise, though; she’s in her room now. I’ll go chin with her while you’re on the wire.”

This was good advice; it would have been better a few hours earlier. Thought of what any such spy might have reported to Lajpat Rai via the garage phone was disturbing. Balfour called Long Distance; before he got his wife, the guard came back hotfoot. Mrs. Brown had gone, disappeared—gone for a walk half an hour ago, another guard said. It had not been considered worth while reporting. She had carried only a leather arm-bag.

“With the magneto and wire in it,” said the guard, and went off to search the woman’s room. The search revealed nothing suspicious, but Mrs. Brown did not come back; and this looked bad, but not necessarily suspicious.

There was plenty of food in the house, and Balfour’s two menservants threw a meal together without trouble. Just as we were about to sit down, the telephone summoned our host. He rejoined us, rubbing his hands and chuckling.

“I knew it! I knew the blighter would overstep!” Balfour exclaimed. “They’ve got Ghopal Singh—found him driving a car that’s registered in his own name, and he’s behind the bars now. The chief said I’d better come down this evening when he’s questioned. I’ll go in an hour or so. . . . Risk? Poppycock! No risk at all.”

Knowing the infernal craft of Lajpat Rai, I was not so sure; however, it was great news, and put us all into an excited dither. At last we had one of the enemy’s men in limbo! A start had been made; the Rajah from Hell was not impervious. It put heart into us all. It has often occurred to me, however, that this lucky stroke of ours may have forced Lajpat Rai to change his plans and get into faster motion. . . .

At any rate, we made a merry meal, seasoned with facile predictions on what the morrow would bring forth. The coffee was being served when again Balfour was summoned to the phone by a long-distance call. Once more he returned joyously, and picked a fat cheroot from the open box on the table before he explained.

“That was Chaffee on the line. He’s at Santa Maria, a town just north of here. Had some tire trouble and was delayed. Hopes to be along here in a couple of hours. He says not to open any fight on our man until we’ve talked with Aguilar—dashed important. By the way, we’ve heard nothing from the fellow, eh?”

“Did he say what branch of Government service this Aguilar was in?” I demanded.

“Eh? Oh, yes—Immigration Service.”

“Then we may have our man nailed. He probably, almost certainly, entered the country under a false name, and with false papers, and Aguilar is laying for him. Lucky thing Chaffee got into this with us.”

“Still, we must catch the wolf,” said Virginia Trent, “before we can skin him.”

Balfour chuckled over his cheroot, but there was an unhappy truth in her words. Laying hands on the Rajah from Hell would not be easy.

Our host, with activity at hand, became a careful general. He meant to be back from police headquarters before Chaffee arrived. He sent Parr to get out his car and to drive him downtown, and called in the three guards.

“No trouble likely tonight,” he said, “and I’ll have a radio car sent to prowl on this road; but keep a sharp eye out just the same. Admit nobody except a man named Aguilar, and another named Chaffee; each will be driving. As soon as I return from downtown, Parr will join you, and you’d best form watches to break up the night. That’s all.”

“What if anyone else shows up?” asked one. “Strangers?”

“Detain them,” Balfour directed. “That’s what you’re here for.”

The forces scattered; the car honked; Balfour bade us a cheery farewell and departed with Parr at the wheel. The evening was pitch dark.

I took a look at things outside, and did not envy the guards their job, though they were armed and had flashlights. Balfour had one floodlight that would illumine the garage front; he should have had a dozen to cover the whole house and its approaches. Still, two men should be able to guard the place.

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Half an hour passed. Virginia, at the piano, was playing softly. I finished a cigar and went upstairs. The slight flesh-wound in my thigh was burning a bit, and I decided to put on a fresh dressing. I switched on the lights in my bedroom, and while getting the gauze and adhesive tape, noticed the silver ring with the black stone lying on my dresser. Better take it downstairs when I went, was my thought; Chaffee would want to have a look at it. We might even test it out at midnight.

My room was at the corner of the house overlooking the drive and the approach to the garage. It was warm weather and the windows were open. I mention all these details, not because of their importance, but to counter the allegations that have been made regarding the luck of Lajpat Rai. I do not believe it was luck. I am not so sure there is any such thing as luck, even. I do know that the man went to amazing care, and was swift to take advantage of conditions as they were—and this, for some people, means luck.

I could hear the piano faintly. To change the dressing on my hurt was no great job. I removed my trousers, took off the bandage Parr had applied, and went to the window. I had heard a car drive up, saw a flashlight beam stabbing about down below, and heard voices.

“Who is it?” I demanded. “Is that Mr. Balfour back?”

“It’s a Mr. Aguilar looking for him,” replied one of the guards. Aguilar! So the Government man was here!

“Good,” I rejoined. “I’ll be down in five minutes. Bring him in.”

They never had a chance to bring him in.

I went into the adjoining bathroom to get some iodine, found mercurochrome instead, and carefully dabbed it on the torn flesh; to use that stuff requires attention, because it spills and stains. On top of it I put the cotton, gauze and strips of tape, well fastening the dressing. The

whole thing had not taken more than three minutes, if that. I looked approvingly at the result, caught a slight sound, and looked up.

Across the bedroom, the top of my dresser was gushing flame.

I was spellbound by the incredible sight. Flames were rolling and breaking in a wave; and the wave came from that silver ring. It was like a blow-torch, only a hundred times worse. The window curtains had already caught, and fire was bursting up the old-fashioned wooden Venetian blinds. I heard a yell of alarm from outside.

Then I was darting for my trousers. I yanked them on, got bath-towels and went to the flames. It was like fighting blazing gasoline; the towels whipped the flames all over the place and started a dozen more fires—and the damned ring gushed forth fire until the towel knocked it aside and knocked it under the bed. Then the flames really took hold of things.

Chemical of some sort, naturally; we never learned whether some form of radiant energy started the thing, or whether it was spontaneous. The room was a blazing furnace when at length I gave up the useless effort and staggered out into the hall, slamming the door behind me. Virginia was calling frantically at the foot of the stairs; men were shouting outside.

“Get out of the place!” I called to her. “Phone for the fire department!”

Panic had seized me, I admit. Still, I got downstairs and to the phone, and sent the alarm before she could do so. Balfour’s two servants and the guards were already at my room, and opening it up merely spread the blaze. I got Virginia outside, and got my rented car out of the garage. It was the only thing saved.

Naturally, everything else had been crowded out of my head—Aguilar’s arrival and the rest. I was taking the car down the road a bit when Balfour’s car roared up past me on its return. The whole corner of the house was ablaze now, and the ruddy glare showed me the faces of Parr and Balfour very clearly.

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I stopped the car as quickly as possible and hastened back to the fire. Little time had passed, rapidly as the blaze had gained. Balfour was out of his car, running to Virginia and the guards, who stood out in the road, well away from the heat. The two menservants had rigged a hose and were dousing the garage roof, to which the flames were nearly reaching. Everything at this side of the house was in a full glare of light. As I approached, I caught sight of another car standing just past the house—that in which Aguilar had arrived. Parr joined me, shouting questions above the roar and crackle of the flames, and we hurried on to the group.

I caught one of the guards by the arm. “Where’s that man Aguilar?”

“Gosh, I dunno!” he said, staring around. “He was here a minute ago—back out of the heat somewhere, I guess.”

A distant siren, just then, told of coming help. Balfour strode out from us, shouting something at his two servants. I was watching the flames gush out through the house-wall, and thinking how fantastic and improbable must be my story of the fire’s origin. We had all forgotten any thought of danger to Balfour.

Then it happened. From the road-edge I saw a tiny spurt of reddish flame; the crack of a shot pierced through the flame-crackle. Balfour threw out his arms and pitched forward in the glare of light.

“There he goes!” yelled one of the guards. I saw a running figure in light gray go darting toward the car up the road. The guard had seen it first, and the gun in his hand spat three rapid shots. The figure fell, rolled over, then was up and in the car. Another guard beside me yelled.

“That’s him! That’s Aguilar! *Get* him!”

But nobody could get him. A driver must have been waiting with the engine going; the car slipped away and leaped into the darkness and was gone. Aguilar—Lajpat Rai had come giving Aguilar's name, had done his work, had been hit—and was gone. But he had been hit! One of those pursuing bullets had reached him!

Not that this did any good. Just as the fire chief arrived with siren screaming, we dragged Balfour out of the heat, and found him dead, shot through the head.

Firemen arrived, police arrived; water streams blasted into the house and saved half of it, and the garage, from the flames; but Balfour was dead, murdered. Our efforts had accomplished nothing—except, perhaps, to drive Lajpat Rai into this desperately clumsy murder which could not be disguised as being anything else. He must have planned something far more refined and clever. Certainly his get-away was perfect.

Hundreds of cars and a tumultuous crowd poured on the scene. Parr came through it to where Virginia and I were talking with the police chief. He led another man—a slight, inconspicuous little man.

“Here’s Aguilar, Dr. Clements,” he said. “The real one.”

A quiet, small man, saying almost nothing. But he went down to police headquarters with us and sat in on the investigation. Chaffee showed up later, upon his arrival. He was not so old as the others, being in his early fifties; a spry, leathery-faced, hard-eyed man, also with the ability to keep silent, and a bad egg in spite of his money. He was in time to hear everything and put into dry blunt words what the police chief would not say.

“It’s a bust, Dr. Clements,” he murmured to me. “The beggar’s made a bloody fool of us again, and we’re damned well bilked.”

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And that was precisely the case. The single fact on record was that Balfour had been shot; by whom, none could say. Nobody had identified the murderer. In fact, the coroner next morning got a verdict from his jury of person or persons unknown. The hunt went out for the person we described as Lajpat Rai—and that was the end of it, practically.

“Not quite, of course,” Aguilar said that afternoon. He, Parr, Chaffee, Virginia and I were in consultation. “He entered the country with false papers, under a false name. That much remains fact, and it sells me chips to sit into the game. That’s a crime. We can’t pin Balfour’s death on him, maybe. We can’t pin Colonel Magruder’s death on him, maybe. But he’s an accessory to the murder of Sir James Trent; do you want to make that charge, Miss Trent?”

“I certainly do,” replied Virginia.

I nodded to her.

Howard Chaffee, who had done very little talking to now, spoke up.

“I haven’t had much chance to gam with you folks, but by all accounts I’m next on the list of this Rajah from Hell, so I’d better take the ball and run with it. I’ve got a place up at Frisco, no family, lots of room, and I aim to give this guy one hell of a fight when he comes along to monkey with me.”

“You’ll probably have a respite,” I said, “since it’s pretty sure he drew a bullet last night and may be laid up temporarily.”

Chaffee nodded. He was a cool, level-headed sort, and while disliking him heartily, I felt he was the right man for us.

“Okay, then, if you folks want to join in, come along,” he offered. “I can use help, yes. Parr wants to get him because of the killing of his master, Colonel Magruder. Miss Trent has

her father's murder in mind. Aguilar has a Government job to handle. You, Dr. Clements, have no direct interest—”

“But I have,” I said, and met Virginia's eyes for an instant. “Sir James was my friend, and I'm assisting his daughter. Also, I'm the only one of you all who knows the man and can identify him, so that lets me in. Further, I didn't tell the police the truth about how the fire started last night. The truth would be incredible.”

Then and there, I gave it to them. Told them about the ring, the black stone, what Lajpat Rai had said concerning it, and what I had seen as the fire's origin.

“Nothing mystical or occult about it,” I concluded. “Nothing fuzzy about my brains either. What I saw, I saw, and I can't explain it. Take it for what it's worth.”

There was a silence while they eyed me. Then Aguilar spoke in his soft, quiet way, almost apologetically.

“Electronics happens to be a hobby of mine,” he said. “During the war I was working with the navy on radar, and the many other electronic devices that were invented. What you've just said, Dr. Clements, is quite credible. I'd say it's clear that this man we're after is an electronics and possibly a radium expert, and therefore dangerous and most interesting in Government eyes. He learned of my expected arrival from the wire-tapping servant and came in my name—impersonating me. I fully intend to wire Washington regarding the issue of a special warrant for his arrest. And for the near future I expect to be located in San Francisco. Do I make myself clear?”

He did, at least to me, for his sidelong glance at Howard Chaffee gave me a hint. He did not entirely like the company he was keeping; nor did I blame him.

“Okay, folks!” Chaffee rose blithely. “I'll get back up to Frisco. You have my address, so show up as soon as you're done with the formalities here. We'll set a trap for Lajpat Rai that will settle him for keeps!”

He little dreamed who would be the victim of his trap—nor did we.

[The end of *The Devil's Fire* by Henry Bedford-Jones (as Gordon Keyne)]