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He Who Sets a Trap

By

Henry Bedford-Jones

Writing under the pseudonym Gordon Keyne

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Four men have been marked for death by the vengeful Hindu who has well earned the name of Rajah from Hell. For three of the four have been murdered; and now the fourth is threatened. . . .

John Aguilar was a quiet, efficient little man in or from the Immigration Service. The day after we got to San Francisco, he sat at lunch with us in our hotel—a small, select place far out on California Street. Virginia’s English prudery thought it undesirable that we should be at the same hotel; under the circumstances, however, it was necessary, and of course our rooms were on different floors.

“So far,” Aguilar said, “I’ve not received the green light from Washington, but I’m working on the case. Have you seen Howard Chaffee yet?”

Virginia Trent shook her head and gave me a look.

“No. We’re going to see him tomorrow. Dr. Clements distrusts him.”

“Oh!” Aguilar cocked an eye at me. “We’re joining forces to save this man from murder—and yet you don’t trust him?”

“Be hanged to saving him!” I said flatly. “Look: Lajpat Rai, the so-called Rajah from Hell, came here from India in order to kill four men who he thought had wronged him during the war. Three of them are now dead, Miss Trent’s father among them. I’ve joined the effort to bring the killer to justice because Sir James Trent was my friend. Also, I know Lajpat Rai personally and in India I saved his life, and he’s grateful to me. I don’t care a hoot if he kills Chaffee, whom I dislike heartily—in fact, I think him little short of a scoundrel.”

“Personally,” Aguilar said softly, “I fancy you’re right about it.”

“Thanks,” I said with sarcasm. “You’re in it because Lajpat Rai entered this country under an assumed name, with forged papers, and because he’s an expert in electronics who has turned his knowledge and aptitude to crime. But evidence—”

“Apparently you have none that will convict him of murder,” Aguilar observed: “I have none to convict him of anything else—but I hope to get it. Every scientist in the world is playing with electronics and uranium, these days. Washington holds up my green light, and I’m helpless.”

“As regards Chaffee,” I said, “I have definite information—but I’m not telling. It may prove damned important.”

Virginia eyed me speculatively, and Aguilar chuckled.

“Clements, I like your style,” said he. “Talk when ready, not until; that’s my motto also. I must warn you two people that Lajpat Rai will have you closely watched.”

I nodded. “Understood. But he doesn’t regard us as enemies. In fact, I’d not be surprised if he called on me for help one of these days.”

Aguilar asked for no explanation of this statement, but rose and shook hands.

"I'm off. I know where to find you; you'll hear from me. I'll give you a ring tomorrow night to hear what develops with Chaffee; for the present, I feel like leaving that man alone. So long!"

He departed. I ordered some more tea; I had become an addict to tea during my years in charge of a hospital in northern India.

Virginia was still eying me.

"Come, Hugh! You have some secret about Chaffee. Telling me?"

"My dear, I love you, I hope to marry you, I want to spend the rest of my life with you," I replied. "But my knowledge remains a secret from everyone—except perhaps from Howard Chaffee himself."

She frowned, then the frown dissolved into a smile.

"You'll make an admirable husband, Hugh," she said, not too lightly. "So few of them seem to know how to keep secrets! Mr. Aguilar keeps them too. We didn't learn much from him, did we?"

I smiled. "I planted bait. He'll burn to learn all I know, and will talk when the time comes. Tomorrow night he'll be still more curious. Howard Chaffee was a teak-buyer in India before the war; that's all we know. Yet he now arrives home, long after all the fracas, with a pocket filled with spending-money. What I know is more definite; Lajpat Rai told me, so it's just hearsay. I'll prove up on it some day. . . . Well, it's too bad this is such a public place—I like it, otherwise."

"Too bad it's public? Why?" Virginia's eyes widened.

"The well-known biologic urge tells me to kiss you, but reason says you wouldn't appreciate it here. Let's take a taxicab and go down to Chinatown; then people will think we're honeymooners and won't care."

"Oh! I've never seen Chinatown," she said demurely. "And I'd love to."

For a young woman who had spent most of her life in India, Virginia Trent had a surprising eagerness about Grant Street and its Oriental shops. We bought some rather good tea and a few knickknacks. I tried to lure her into looking at engagement rings, but she balked at spending so much money; evidently I would have to select one on my own.

We spent a charming afternoon and quite forgot Lajpat Rai. I was not worried about him particularly, because a week ago in Santa Barbara he had apparently stopped a bullet, after Balfour was killed, and I thought he might be out of the game temporarily. . . . Wishful thinking, of course.

On the following afternoon Chaffee came for us in a swanky big car. He asked where Parr was. Parr, who had been Colonel Magruder's man, had attached himself to me after the murder of his master.

"He was called to Los Angeles, on some affair of the estate," I said. "He'll be here in a few days. So there are just the two of us at the moment."

Chaffee, leathery, hard-eyed, slangy, tucked us into his car. He was in his early fifties, I judged, and hard as nails. He drove us west to Golden Gate Park, then south to the western flank of the hills. The seaward side of the city stretched out before us, and the ocean beyond, bordered by the Esplanade.

"Got a quiet hillside place," he said. "Nice district, all built up solid; China boy to look after things. The Rajah from Hell won't crack *this* nut very easy. Wong can use a gun too."

It was a snug, secure place—a small stucco house and garage, bordered by stucco walls eight feet high, with a garden behind and a high iron-spiked fence in front. Inside, the house was up to date, handsomely furnished, and Chaffee was rightly proud of it. He had trophies of various kinds from Burma and India, and displayed them with a childish vanity. He was showing us a book—a Persian manuscript—containing some remarkable Mogul miniatures, which he had found in Nepal.

“A bit o’ loot,” said he. “All kinds of agents there—Communist, Jap, Chinese, Soviet. This here Lajpat Rai was one. I got this book from his effects. It was me identified him as the famous bandit when we nailed him.”

“He claims it was all framed on him, and false,” I said.

Chaffee snarled. “Arrgh! That’s a lie! I knew him. My own brother Gerard was killed by those dacoits, near the Tibet border. He had done well, too, and had made money. Why, he had two teak companies going—”

Something fell out of the book and slid to the floor; a small slip of paper on which a few words were written. Chaffee picked it up, glanced at it, and his leathery face went white. He hastily pocketed the slip of paper and called Wong, questioning him about any strangers who might have been in the house.

Wong was an alert, cheerful fellow, no longer young, and spoke fluent English. Nobody had been here today, he said; but yesterday a man from the electric-light company had called and checked up on wiring installations.

Chaffee dismissed him and led us out into the garden, which was private and charming. Delicious tea was served with mint and jasmine, and our host spoke of Aguilar.

“He couldn’t show up today. Acts sort of huffy, if you ask me—stand-off guy. Well, I have some information on Lajpat Rai I’m willing to throw in the pot, and if Aguilar won’t work with us, he can go without. You ready to talk business, Dr. Clements?”

I said yes, and asked if he had hired any guards.

Chaffee sniffed impatiently.

“No. When Parr comes, he and Wong can act. The fewer people around, the better. Do you think Lajpat Rai is here in town now?”

I shrugged. “You know as much about him as I do.”

“Well, step inside to my den, while I get that data on him. Excuse us a minute, Miss Trent; be right back.”

We went into the house, to a pleasant den overlooking the garden. Here Chaffee produced some regal cheroots, and taking one, I ventured a question.

“Pardon the personal angle—there’s a reason. Did you inherit a good deal of money from your brother who died in Tibet?”

“Aye. Everything. A goodish lot.” Chaffee turned, his sharp eyes boring into me. “Who told you that?”

“Lajpat Rai, the Rajah from Hell. He also said your brother was not dead but alive, that he had rescued him and was keeping him safe. I thought I’d better warn you.”

The man stood stock-still. After a minute he took from his pocket the bit of paper which had fallen from the book and handed it to me, without a word. I looked at the writing:

“I’ll drop in to see you one of these days.—Gerard.”

“That’s his list,” said Chaffee. “How did it get in that book? Electric man, yesterday, slipped it in. Nobody else has been here. That devil Lajpat Rai is at work, all right! Well, thanks for letting me know.”

I followed him back outside. We said nothing to Virginia of this by-play, but settled down with our cheroots and Chaffee gave me the information he had gathered. This was that Lajpat Rai had entered the country at San Francisco six months ago, under the name of Hari Lal, a student, and had papers to prove his identity.

“All forged, of course,” sniffed Chaffee. “Aguilar can sweat on that, all right. It’s his business. Who can prove that the guy is actually Lajpat Rai, though? That man is supposed to be dead back in India—heir to the Rajah of Sirvath.”

“You’re getting things balled up,” I said, and Virginia laughed uneasily. “I want evidence that he was accessory to the murder of Sir James Trent, which he was. He has killed three of the men who allegedly framed him and jailed him in India; you’re the fourth. If he’s deported, aren’t you safe?”

“Until next time, maybe,” Chaffee said sulkily. “I want to see him planted. And that’s what I want from you—help in locating him. You know him. You tell me where to find him, Clements; that’s all. I’ll see to the rest; I’ve got ways and means. But it’s got to be soon—inside of two days.”

Relations were becoming more strained. I liked Chaffee even less. Now, for the first time, I suspected his pose of wanting no one but Parr and Wong there. He was playing a deep game of some sort. I was glad when Virginia made a move to depart. Chaffee ran out his car, insisting on driving us.

“We don’t seem to be getting far with any campaign of precautions,” I said to him as he drove over Twin Peaks road and headed downtown.

He chuckled.

“Leave it to me; it’s my fight,” he replied. “What I want is all the info I can get on this fellow Lajpat Rai. Give me whatever you get. Send Parr to me—he’s an honest man. That house of mine will make the prettiest trap you ever saw.”

“He who sets a trap,” chimed in Virginia, “had better be sure what game he expects to catch in it, Mr. Chaffee.”

He chuckled anew at this. “Thanks, I’ll bear that in mind, Miss Trent.”

He delivered us safely at the hotel, gave me his card and phone number, said we must keep in touch, and drove away. I was glad to see him go.

Finding no mail, I guided Virginia into the tiny cocktail lounge, found a table for safe conversation, secured the proper drinks, and said:

“All right, my charming partner, let’s have it.”

“Have what?”

“Your reaction. While in his den, I gave our associate a hard jolt, but he made no comment. I think he’s double-crossing us—that is, holding back. Keeping his boasted ways and means strictly to himself! While in India, he pocketed fat rewards for false testimony, so I’m entirely willing to think him a blackguard.”

“My feeling exactly,” she agreed in her quiet way. “And I’m sorry we’re associated with him, Hugh; I’m sorry *you* are.”

“I’m playing a game of my own,” I said. “I expect something to come of it. In another day or two I’ll tell you all about it, my dear—so give me the satisfaction of seeing whether my expectations come true, as I think they will.”

She laughed softly. “As you like. When does Parr rejoin us?”

“I don’t know yet. Chaffee wants his help, seems to trust him.”

“For obvious reasons,” she said. “Parr was utterly devoted to Colonel Magruder. He wants only one thing—to get the man who murdered him. And being an old soldier, he’s absolutely ruthless and will stop at nothing; that’s why Chaffee wants him.”

I whistled softly. English girls can be smart as whips.

“You’re positively clairvoyant at times!” I said.

Virginia finished her drink and rose, smiling at me.

“Probably that is why I like you, Hugh,” she said, and left me to figure whether it was a compliment or not.

Aguilar, as he had promised, gave me a phone-call that evening.

“I had a letter from Washington today,” he said. “Indefinite: a checkup is being made with atomic-bomb people and I’ll hear in due course, and so forth. Irritating! Everyone passes the buck and is afraid of decisions. You have any luck with Chaffee?”

“Yes and no,” I replied. “Our friend entered the country here at San Francisco six months ago under the name of Hari Lal—papers okay.”

“Ho! That’s fine—I can check on that, you bet. And that’s not his name. But who can prove it?”

“So far, I don’t know. But he’ll have a hell of a job proving it is his name! However, that’s your pigeon, not mine. I don’t care about seeing him deported, nor does Chaffee. In fact, the latter wears thin on my nerves. Miss Trent and I don’t fancy him, and I suspect his intents and purposes.”

Aguilar cackled a thin little laugh.

“Excellent man, Clements! So do I, between you and me, I’d advise keeping Miss Trent on the sidelines; I rather think our excellent Chaffee is playing with firecrackers. I’ll know more about that in a day or two.”

“Oh!” I said. So he knew something. “Which Chaffee?”

“Which Chaffee?” echoed Aguilar, puzzled. “Just what do you mean?”

“Well, I may know more about it in a few days,” I said. “When you feel like explaining about your firecrackers, just let me know. Good luck.”

I rang off, knowing very well that he would understand perfectly. An amazing little man, this Aguilar; but he had to be reined in sharply, and I meant to do it.

That is, if my expectations came to anything. It was purely a gamble, but in view of what had happened before, I did not mind the risk.

CHAPTER TWO

The very next day, my expectations bore rich if somewhat perilous fruit. This was extremely lucky, because Chaffee had given me a two-day limit in which to tell him where Lajpat Rai might be found. Not put as an ultimatum, of course; all the same, I felt that anything Mr. Howard Chaffee might say was to be regarded with a serious eye. As Parr had expressed it after their first meeting, the leathery-faced gentleman was a stinger; and very well put, I thought.

The situation was one of almost ludicrous irony: Virginia and I had come here to save one man from murder, and to help the law get its hands on the killer of three others. We now distrusted the one man acutely, and I was somewhat at odds with Aguilar, who stood for the law. And I, meantime, was on passable terms with the murderer, whom I hoped to bring to justice!

I left the Stanford, our quiet little hotel, for a trip downtown. I meant to get that engagement ring, today. Virginia Trent was very English in some ways—naturally—and I figured that once she was wearing the ring it would be an irrevocable step. Not that I was afraid of losing her, but it was just a play-safe detail. And, of course, there was the sentimental side.

So I mentioned that I intended to get her ball-and-chain, kissed her with due appreciation of her spirited response, and sought a downtown-bound cable car.

Downtown I hopped off the car, having the address of a big jewelry store, and was headed for Kearny Street when it happened: A big cheerful well-dressed man overtook me.

“Beg pardon,” he said. “Are you Dr. Hugh Clements?”

“Yes,” I replied in astonishment. “But how—”

“Never mind—you were pointed out to me. This is an emergency,” he said. “Here’s my card—Dr. James Smythe. I’ve been working on a former patient of yours: old chap named Chaffee. The case has me absolutely stumped. I had to give up and shoot some dope into him to keep the muscles relaxed until I could get you. Frankly, I think he’s on the way out, but I understand you have used a peculiar technique that may save him. Will you come along and see him? I’ve a car here.”

A strange thing to happen on the street of a strange city where I was unknown. But Lajpat Rai had kept me tailed, of course.

“Yes,” I said. “As a physician, I can’t well refuse your appeal.”

“Fine!” he exclaimed, beaming. “Then hop in the car and we’ll talk en route.”

A car with a uniformed driver drew up at the curb, and we got in.

“This is my own car, Clements.” Smythe spoke reassuringly, but still rapidly. Evidently he was not at all sure of me. “Catching you has been fast and furious work—but I must impress one thing on you: Emergency, professional secrecy, no broadcast! Savvy? We’re trying to save a life—the old fellow’s life. Maybe you can succeed where I failed. But we must keep silent, say nothing to anyone. You agree?”

I looked at him, and really saw him for the first time. He was earnest, sincere, rather breathless. A good man, I thought.

“Are you acting under instructions?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Yes, by phone. I don’t know who gave them. At first I thought it was all screwy, until I got downtown here and you were pointed out to me—”

“Skip it,” I said, and leaned back. “You’re okay; for a moment I suspected you. Yes, I agree fully, if it concerns old Chaffee alone. He’s not wanted for anything.”

It began to come clear to me. Gerard Chaffee had gone under with one of his attacks. Lajpat Rai was unable to work on him; therefore had called in a good man—and I later found that Smythe was a very good man indeed—to handle him. An amazing thing was the rapidity and efficiency with which Lajpat Rai or his agents had acted. Smythe was unable to treat or understand the case, but realizing the emergency had pumped morphia into Chaffee to relax him and check the paralysis. Meantime I had been tailed downtown. Smythe was rushed to pick me up and haul me into the case. Desperately fast work!

A physician—a good one—reacts to the need of professional secrecy when it is necessary to save a life. Smythe had reacted instantly; I had to follow suit, and said as much. He nodded at me.

“I was told that you’d understand, Clements. But the case isn’t clear to me.”

“No. I’ll clear it up in a jiffy. I’m working in connection with Government men,” I said, stretching things a bit, “to locate the man behind this Gerard Chaffee—the one who gave you the instructions. So I can agree, therefore, to hold the affair confidential. I’ll explain the case to you.”

I went on to tell how I had just returned from seven years of work in India—from long before the war, indeed—how Gerard Chaffee had been on my boat, and I had been called in when the old boy had an attack. I knew the symptoms. Chaffee had undergone torture in Tibet, being bound lengthily in certain positions which induced a later muscular and nerve paralysis. My acquaintance with such things, my experience, told me what to do and so forth.

Smythe listened to my story with intent interest.

“It clears,” he said at last. “They must have kept you under close surveillance to be able to put the finger on you so rapidly.”

“Too damned close,” I agreed. “Probably foreseeing this very contingency. In fact, I foresaw the possibility myself.” I said nothing to him, of course, about Howard Chaffee, brother of the invalid. “Frankly, I don’t know if I can pull the old boy through, but we’ll have a try. . . . What the hell! Are we going *here*?”

The car was pointing up the grade for the Fairhill—the old aristocratic hotel on Nob Hill.

Smythe assented.

“Right. I’m the hotel physician. Chaffee has a room here, all alone.”

This was a facer; but evidently Lajpat Rai was playing quite safe. He had put Chaffee here and was himself somewhere else—very much somewhere else. His vital interest in keeping the old fellow alive was not at all charitable. He intended to make use of him in pursuing his dream of vengeance upon Howard Chaffee; he had told me so himself.

We were out of Smythe’s car, without delay, then down a corridor and into a fine airy room where a nurse met us.

“Miss Simms, hotel nurse—Dr. Clements,” Smythe snapped. “How is he?”

“Asleep. Relaxed. Heart not affected.”

Old Chaffee, wrinkled and scarred and twisted, lay naked under a sheet. The drug had relaxed him, but any sedative was dangerous, purely an emergency measure; the nerve ganglia, I found, were still tight, and I said so.

“There’s no cure, merely temporary relief,” I told Smythe. “Your sedative has halted the paralysis; enough to stop the action would kill him. I’ll work over the ganglia and loosen ’em up, and he’ll sleep for a bit.”

“How long does your relief last?” he queried, as I fell to work kneading and massaging the ganglia.

“Maybe a week or two, maybe less—can’t say.”

Between us, we gave that scarred, half-moribund old body a thorough going-over. While we were at it, the phone rang. The nurse answered and summoned me. I knew who it was even before I heard that remarkable voice with the timbre of a bronze bell.

“Hello, Dr. Clements! And how is Chaffee? Will he pull through?”

“I think so, Your Highness,” I said with irony.

“I’m glad you’re there. Could you consent to run over to see me, when you’ve finished with him, on similar conditions?”

“No. On no conditions whatever,” I replied—and he laughed.

“Very well. I respect your honesty. Then I’ll come and see you.”

He rang off. I hung up and returned to work, giving Smythe a nod.

“Remarkable voice,” he said. “I could hear it. Any call for police?”

“Unfortunately, no,” I answered. “Evidence, warrants and such things are not yet in the picture.”

“Too bad; I hoped for excitement. See here, d’you mind if I run downstairs to my office to check on calls? Not be gone long. I’ll leave Miss Simms in case you need her.”

I had no objections, for he was of no great help to me. So he departed, and I worked away, in no good humor. What if Lajpat Rai did have the impudence to show up here? I could not have him arrested. There was no evidence against him to justify that extreme. Aguilar had no warrant. Certainly it was not my business to let Howard Chaffee know where his brother was, either. I must just lie doggo, and it irked me tremendously.

The job was finished at last. I stepped into the bathroom, washed my hands, and came back into the room, turning down my shirt-sleeves. My eye caught sight of the telephone on the dresser; a scratch-pad was attached to it, and a number was penciled on the pad—*Burl. 8397*. Easy to memorize.

A knock at the door, I called to enter, and the door opened to admit Lajpat Rai.

He smiled and walked in—handsome, assured, his small black mustache setting off his golden skin. One arm was under his coat, and the sleeve dangled.

“Good afternoon,” he said, throwing a glance at the nurse, who was putting the bed to rights. “I thought it needless to be announced. He’s asleep, Clements?”

“Yes. May stay so for a while,” I said. “After this, Dr. Smythe will be able to treat him. . . . Something wrong with your arm?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Useless for the time being.” He smiled at me. He had stopped a bullet at Santa Barbara, after murdering Balfour, but we did not mention the matter.

“Where’s Dr. Smythe’s office, Miss Simms?” I asked, and when she told me: “You might run along, and tell him I’ll stop in on my way out.”

Lajpat Rai made no objection, and she departed. He closed the door behind her, and turned to me.

“Really, Clements, I appreciate your being here,” he said quietly, earnestly. “I fully understand all it means. But there’s one thing I had to ask you. Do you consider it your duty to

inform Howard Chaffee where his brother is located?”

“No,” I replied. Now as always, he fascinated me. His tailored tweeds, his entire getup, was immaculate. “I don’t fancy your Howard Chaffee.”

“Right. He’d murder this poor old devil like a shot,” said the other. “Yet you are very anxious to protect him from me.”

“Not at all,” I replied. “Let him do that for himself. I want only to see you brought to justice as the murderer of my friend Sir James Trent.”

“Because you desire to marry his daughter,” he said, showing white, even teeth in a smile. “Well, that’s natural. I regret it, but can’t help it. If I were melodramatic and so forth, I might threaten the young lady and bring you to your senses. I shan’t do that; I’ve nothing against her, or against you. Indeed, I shall prove as much.”

I looked at him, without response. I wondered if he could feel that in my most secret heart I almost sympathized with him. After all, he fancied that a foul wrong had been done him in the past; he had every reason to seek vengeance, according to his own warped reasoning.

“No, we have different viewpoints,” he said, quite as though reading my thoughts. “A pity. Well, at a previous meeting I told you that I was wealthy, powerful, impervious to any harm from you. You must have realized that was true, Dr. Clements. You cannot even find me. So I have no intention of bribing you. But you have helped this old man, who is necessary to my plans, and I am grateful. I am leaving an evidence of my gratitude at your hotel; do not reject it—it is merely a commercial object.”

He turned to the door, paused, and gave me an amused glance over his shoulder.

“Your friend Mr. Aguilar,” he observed, “might like to know that the papers with which I entered this country were not forged. The English consul here can no doubt obtain evidence of this fact. Good day.”

He opened the door and departed. This final shot left me staring and entirely confused. What did he know, what did he guess, about Aguilar’s activities? Once more I was left with the impression of his singular force; it was as though the rest of us were using pea-shooters against a man in armor.

With this sense of futility, I was slipping into my coat when Smythe knocked and stepped into the room.

“Oh! Gone, is he? Remarkable fellow, Miss Simms says. I’ll have her keep an eye on the patient. Anything to suggest?”

I glanced at Chaffee. “No. He’s a tough old bird and can probably prescribe for himself quite safely. I’ll be getting along home.”

In no mood now for buying a ring, I went back to the Stanford, inquired for Virginia, found her gone out. The clerk handed me a plain sealed envelope, and I remembered the words of Lajpat Rai. Opening it, I found a small envelope inside, and in this something that I turned out on my palm, amazedly.

A diamond—if it were genuine—a nice-looking one of about two carats. Or some similar stone. It looked quite blue, and puzzled me. Just a commercial object, Lajpat Rai had said. An imitation stone, perhaps? With that man, anything was possible. Hm! I was not inclined to moon around the hotel all afternoon with Virginia gone. So, impulsively, I hopped a cable car and went back downtown. This was not consistent with my former mood, but a man in love is never consistent.

The gem expert tucked his glass in his eye and said, “Nice stone!”

“Yes. What kind of stone?” I asked. “That’s what I want to know.”

“There aren’t more than three or four in the country,” said he. “Blue diamond.”

I had already thought about Virginia. Women are funny about engagement rings; usually they do not like any other thoughts attached to them. And this stone was from the man who had killed Sir James Trent. So I scratched the notion, bought an expensive engagement ring and turned in the blue diamond on the price.

Regaining the hotel, I found Parr sitting in the lobby, a bag between his feet. I took him up to my room, we had a drink, and talked. He liked Chaffee no more than we did, but he wanted to get the murderer of his old master, Colonel Magruder.

“What *I* like doesn’t matter, sir! Unless you advise against it, I’ll take my place with Mr. Chaffee and be doing my bit. Isn’t that the likeliest way of getting a shot at this ’ere bloody Rajah from Hell?”

“It is,” I asserted, and reaching for the phone, called Howard Chaffee’s number. He answered in person and I gave my name.

“Parr’s here and wants to get busy. I gathered yesterday that you want him.”

“Oh, right!” said Chaffee. “Pop him in a taxi, send him here, and I’ll take care of him. If he’s after action, he’ll get it.”

“He’ll be along, then. I suppose you were joking when you spoke of wanting the address of our friend from India?”

“Eh? Who—oh, come now, Clements! Pulling my leg, are you? Joking? I’d give a thousand dollars cash on the nail to know where he is!”

“Well, his phone number is Burlingame 8397. That ought to be enough for you.”

I hung up, catching Parr’s eye and laughing.

“Is it really, sir?” he asked eagerly.

“I’m not sure, but I think so,” I said. “He’s too sharp to be caught, however.”

Parr was on the scent, though; his one purpose in life was to meet this Lajpat Rai in the flesh. It had become an obsession. I saw him into a taxi, sent him off to Chaffee’s house, and got back to my room to find my phone ringing. My colleague Smythe was on the line.

“Clements? Good! From the way you spoke this afternoon, I imagined you’d much like to know the address of that chap—Chaffee’s friend, you know. I had him tailed when he left the hotel, and I just got a report. He went to the Burlingame Arms, a hotel in Burlingame, just south of the city. He’s there under the name of Senhor Arenas—supposedly he is an Argentine businessman.”

I thanked him warmly, hung up, and swallowed hard. My guess had been a good one.

For a crowded moment I sat thinking. Lajpat Rai must have written down that phone number for old Chaffee; he had been in the room with me, must have noticed or recalled it; he was too clever to miss such a detail. However—

I got Aguilar on the line.

“Just on the point of calling you,” he said cheerfully. “I’d like to make a deal with you, Clements. Your remarks about two Chaffees—”

“All right; it’s a bargain,” I said. “Come along to lunch tomorrow, and we’ll talk. But here’s something you may be able to use, if you work fast: Lajpat Rai is at the Burlingame Arms hotel in Burlingame under the name of Arenas—presumably an Argentine capitalist. I doubt if he’ll be there long. Also, the papers under which he entered this country as Hari Lal were not forged.”

“Eh? How d’ye know that?”

“He told me so himself, an hour or two ago; said you might like to know.”

With this parting shaft, I rang off, with the Immigration man cursing me.

CHAPTER THREE

I was not at all proud of myself nor of my actions as a phone relay man; my share in apprehending Lajpat Rai was minor. And it would be fruitless. He was not one to be so easily caught, or even found. I had a feeling of contempt for Howard Chaffee. With Aguilar it was different—but I could not feel sure about him.

I said something of this when I took Virginia out to dinner and a bit of dancing at one of the night-clubs on the Esplanade, the beach at the far west side of town, that evening. She nodded at me.

“I know, Hugh. How much worse do you suppose I feel—a woman, futile, doing nothing? But really, I think you’re doing a lot. I’m glad you’re not a beast on the hunt like our Chaffee friend; that’s my impression of him.”

I nodded. Having told her about Gerard Chaffee and Lajpat Rai’s idea of using him against his brother, and the afternoon’s events, I went into the more inviting topic of diamonds. My ring was approved, and while we were dancing I slipped it on her finger. Her protests died in admiration. We had a very pleasant evening, all in all, and got back to the hotel to find a curt note in my box. It read:

“You were right—but the bird flew the nest.—A.”

Anxious to see me—so anxious that he had come to the hotel instead of waiting till the morrow! I chuckled. Aguilar was where I wanted him now; no more stand-off plays! And Lajpat Rai had skipped from the Burlingame Arms, as expected. So Chaffee had drawn blank also. . . .

Next day was Sunday. In the morning, Virginia and I went to church, and came back to find Aguilar on hand. We settled down in a corner of the empty lobby.

“I’ve made discoveries,” he said in his placid way. “Overnight, the whole state of things has changed amazingly. A special warrant is on the way from Washington, and I’ve been given charge of the case. You’d never guess why.”

“I don’t intend to guess,” I said cheerfully. “You come clean, Mister.”

He chuckled and burnished his spectacles.

“So you were talking with him yesterday! Clements, I’ll come clean. To satisfy me, first tell me whether he has a slight scar on his upper lip.”

I mentally pictured the handsome, powerful features of Lajpat Rai, and nodded.

“Yes. It’s barely visible under the small black mustache, but it shows.”

“That settles it; he’s our man.” Aguilar sighed contentedly and relaxed. “A man of a hundred identities! The one we want is Colonel Nicholas Myedin, so-called. Posing as a secret agent for China, he pulled some funny tricks on our Burmese forces at the close of the war. The specific charge is murder and theft of papers—a few weeks ago one of the officers engaged in the Bikini bomb tests was killed and his reports were taken, by Myedin. This is sacredly confidential, understand.”

“And this Myedin is our Lajpat Rai?” I asked.

“Absolutely. Luckily, he thinks I’m only an Immigration inspector.”

I was dazed. “Do you imply that he’s a secret agent for China?”

“No, no! Of course not. A free lance. The man’s an electrical wizard, Clements; he’s now engaged in selling some amazing electronic devices to the Scott-Ames people of Vancouver, but he’s not tied up with them. Scott, the head of the firm, is now here in the city. We’ve warned him and he sniffs; you know how Canadians can sniff. Like the British.”

“I see. Chaffee got you into this game. Does he suspect that you—”

“That I’m a Federal agent? Nobody does,” Aguilar said earnestly. “Howard Chaffee was a dope-smuggler out of India and China. He’s in with a bad crowd here—and I mean *bad!* He probably has half a dozen guns working for him right now—killers, the worst kind.”

This was a new light on the leathery Chaffee. Things were opening up.

I talked—and kept nothing back. Now Lajpat Rai stood in a new light entirely, with murder as his business; I kicked myself for my sneaking sympathy with him. He had lied like a Trojan in all he had said to me. He had not been framed at all in India; he had just been caught, whatever he might fancy about injustice.

“If I’d given you quicker information yesterday, you’d have got him,” I said. “You didn’t like to talk, so I didn’t know the truth—”

He grinned, “Too many miss because they like to talk. I don’t.”

“Well, the whole situation now stands in a new and clearer light. Colonel Nicholas Myedin, eh? Then you don’t care about Miss Trent’s laying any charge against him in connection with her father’s murder.”

“I most certainly do,” Aguilar said quickly. “The more charges the better. I’m not inclined to pass up any bets. He’s slippery, and has a mean record.”

I liked John Aguilar still more.

We decided to eat, and Virginia said she was dying to visit Fishermen’s Wharf. At this, Aguilar shrugged.

“You’ve heard too much loose talk,” said he. “It’s a trap for sucker tourists who believe anything. Oh, well, there are one or two very good places there, so come on.”

We took a taxicab and had an admirable fish dinner, because Aguilar knew his way around and everyone knew him. He was a contradictory fellow even in looks, never to be taken on face value.

After the meal, he left us, intent on business. Virginia and I decided to walk home; she loved long walks. My thoughts were naturally on Lajpat Rai—or Nicholas Myedin, as he had now become. A strange man, there; a free lance treading the verge of dizzy heights, strangely alone, strangely capable, holding murder a game to be played with huge zest!

Virginia and I did not discuss him. She wanted to see the city’s unfamiliar places; we took little streets, all hill and dale, seeing the sort of landscapes that any city can produce in its meaner aspects.

Of course we missed our way and went far astray, which mattered nothing. We found incredible shops, crazy streets, odd corners among those steep hills. And as we climbed one short street of little apartments, mostly with garages beneath them, I saw a man putting away his car. He opened the garage doors, got into his car, and drove it in. I had a good look at him, and thought nothing of it; then as we came to the next corner, I remembered something.

His face—a kindly, aged, white-mustached face, the face of an old Hindu. The face of the old servitor of Lajpat Rai I had seen in his Los Angeles quarters weeks ago before Sir James Trent was murdered.

“Turn back, Virginia,” I said. “Cross the street and turn back down—I want to get the number of a house. And what’s the name of the street?”

We walked down past the garage; on the steep slope the ground floors were garages or walled, so we were below the casual sight of anyone in the house. “Thought I saw someone I knew,” was my light explanation. “Evidently wrong about it.” Virginia paid little attention, so I got what I wanted: 742 Colsax Street. With that address buzzing in my head, we finished our long walk.

Thinking it over, I was less sure. Perhaps mistaken recognition; perhaps merely someone who looked like the old Hindu. If that old chap were here with a car, then Lajpat Rai was here—a most unlikely and improbable thing, indeed. I was shaken, and lost confidence. Our man was a swaggering patron of great hotels and elegant hostelries, not a dweller in a hide-out in a dingy street of little flats.

So reason argued me into uncertainty; I dared take no chances on mistakes. The thing pestered me mentally all night. Go back there afoot and hang around? No, no! The whole street, except the spot immediately in front, was commanded by the house windows. I had to make sure.

Virginia was to devote most of the day to a hairdresser, so I felt quite free. Midmorning saw me on Colsax Street, comfortably in the back of a taxicab. The driver halted on the hillside opposite 742, left the cab, and mounted to two different entrances in search of a mythical Horace Green who had sent in a call. He did a lot of talking and gained me quite a bit of time in which to keep an eye on 742 from my hiding-place, for I had wisely taken him into my confidence.

I saw nothing significant; that two-story apartment looked deserted, the windows remained empty, no one appeared in sight. But, when my driver returned, he settled under his wheel, started the car up the hill, and nodded at me.

“No rooms to rent around here at all,” he reported. “Couldn’t find out who lives in 742, neither; but I did learn the place had been sold about a week ago. That help you any?”

“Not particularly,” I replied. “But if you want an extra ten-spot, come back here tonight or tomorrow, do some more gossiping, and let me have any details you can pick up about the people in 742—what they look like and so forth. Anything at all.”

He said “okay,” and took me back to the Stanford. I was by no means satisfied and yet not thrown off the track by what I had just learned. Rents being what they were, it was not unlikely that Lajpat Rai would buy a place, money being no object to him. And yet my notion might be all moonshine, so I had to go slow, until I obtained something definite by way of evidence. And if I got it, I did not intend to take it to Chaffee. Aguilar was now in position to handle our man to more effect.

Chaffee phoned me that afternoon.

“I keep my promises, Clements,” he said. “There’s a check for you in the mail, a thousand. You had the goods on the guy, but I went there with Parr too late. How did you chance on that telephone number?”

“Pure accident,” I said. “I wasn’t too certain about it. And I don’t want your money, Chaffee—”

“Forget that stuff,” he broke in. “You know that paper we found in the old book? I guess it was genuine. What you told me about my brother being alive was true—and who’s behind him. A lawyer has jumped on me and it looks like I’m stuck; got to pay out big money. Well, that’s all right; I’m trusting it’ll lead me to Lajpat Rai. Parr is a good man. I’m glad to have him on the job. Hey! Hold the line, will you?”

I assented, for excitement had shrilled in his voice. After a moment of waiting, I heard Chaffee again.

“Clements? Well, I’ve got something. Parr just came in. He’s been scouting around a hotel at Burlingame—that’s where your phone number sent us. And he’s learned something there. He got the license number of the Rajah’s car: a Buick sedan, registered in the name of Howard Smith, at an address in Yreka—”

“What town?” I demanded.

“Yreka.” He spelled it out. “That’s a town north of here. Fake name and address, of course; but it’s a starting-point to look for here. Do you want the number?”

I took it down, with a jumpy thrill; if that car garaged at 742 Colsax Street carried this license plate 7E-24-55, then I had the answer! Chaffee vouchsafed that the number had been obtained from the hotel garage, which listed all the cars of clients. Parr, he said, had learned that the Brazilian capitalist, Arenas, had a chauffeur, name unknown, and I could guess that this was another crafty dodge of Lajpat Rai, who never had a car registered in his own name.

“How will this thing do you any good?” I demanded.

“Any traffic cop who spots this number gets a hundred bucks, Clements. The same reward will be out in other quarters, too. You’d be surprised what a reward can accomplish! It may lead to nothing in this case, but I’m betting it will turn up something good.”

There was sense in what he said, in his whole attitude. After all, he was fighting for his life. If resources had been pooled weeks ago, as I had desired, before the Rajah from Hell reached so many of his victims, a winning battle might have been waged against him—and good men might be still alive.

Excited as I was over the possibilities, I had to keep away from that Colsax Street house. One glimpse of me hanging about would blow the game, and off would be our quarry. How to make sure, then, in regard to the car and its license plate? Virginia, I, Parr, Aguilar—all of us were known by sight to Lajpat Rai, and he probably had men tailing us all. He must have a small army working for him; but now, while he had one arm out of commission, was the time to run him down, if ever.

I was expecting Virginia back about five. Slightly before then, Aguilar walked into the hotel and we adjourned to the cocktail lounge.

“Accident,” said he. “I merely happened to be going past and dropped in to say hello. I suppose you know all about the legal troubles that have descended on our friend Chaffee.”

“No,” I said. “He mentioned something of the sort over the phone, though. He called to give me the license number on Lajpat Rai’s car.”

Aguilar smiled. “Yes, I got that, too, at the hotel. Happens to be a last year’s plate, one of the old yellow ones, the car is undoubtedly sporting an up-to-date plate now. Parr wouldn’t be up to the mark on such details of strategy.”

This was a facer; it really knocked me for a loop. I tried to dissemble my feelings and asked about Chaffee’s legal troubles.

These, said Aguilar, were bad. Howard Chaffee had inherited something like a hundred thousand dollars from the estate of his dead brother Gerard. Now it seemed that Gerard was not dead at all, but was here in San Francisco and was suing for the value of the estate. And Howard Chaffee, to cover up certain frauds of his own in connection with evidence of his brother’s death in Tibet, would have to settle up on the nail.

“He admitted as much,” I commented. “Lajpat Rai is behind it, of course. He regards Chaffee with venomous hatred, and I don’t blame him. But tell me—how the devil do you

know so much detail?"

Aguilar accepted a cigarette. "My boy, we're dealing with a smart man, one of the most clever fellows alive, in Colonel Nicholas Myedin. But let me tell you that no one, whether Al Capone or a Rajah from Hell, is smart and wealthy and powerful enough to thumb his nose at Uncle Sam's law-enforcement agencies. We're dealing with a crook, a scoundrel, a murderer. No guy like that is clever enough to beat it—in the end. Cleverness won't help him—it'd take an act of God."

I had my doubts, despite everything. Lajpat Rai, or Myedin, was a shadow, a myth. Trace him through Gerard Chaffee? Aguilar merely sniffed. Try everything, he said, neglect nothing, fail at every move—but sooner or later, the end would come. Maybe through Howard Chaffee, too. Another reason to give Chaffee rope, let him play his own game. . . .

Now Virginia arrived, interrupting us. Aguilar stayed for another drink, refused dinner, and left us. After Virginia had changed her dress, we took a cab downtown to the Palace for a sensible old-fashioned dinner at the Garden Court—a regular London atmosphere, and excellent wine. Subdued lights, soft music, perfect service combined to make it a memorable occasion.

We were halfway through the meal, when Virginia gave me a startled glance.

"I'm not sure—or yes, I am too," she exclaimed. "Do you remember the man I saw in a drugstore at Santa Barbara, just for a moment?"

I caught my breath, as I met her eyes.

"You don't mean— No, it can't be—not here, of all places!"

"Yes. To your left and behind you; the table against the wall."

I turned a little, and saw him, slim and debonair in his evening attire, the jeweled miniature of some decoration flashing on his shirt-front—Colonel Nicholas Myedin, as he actually was—Lajpat Rai, as I knew him.

CHAPTER FOUR

A glimpse—I dared no more, and turned to Virginia, breathless.

“Yes, that’s the man! His empty sleeve is proof enough.”

“Oh! That’s what puzzled me; he seemed one-armed.”

Her eyes flashed; I knew she was thinking of her father’s murder.

“Careful, my dear,” I warned. “He has seen you; therefore he knows we’re here. He’s no fool. Who is that with him?”

“I don’t know him; a white man,” she said. “Well, do something!”

“Whatever you say.” I looked at her. “What?”

At this, she bit her lip. “I’m a fool, Hugh; there’s nothing we can do.”

“Yes, there is, but don’t get hasty,” I said. “If he hasn’t noticed you already, he will. He wouldn’t be here unless he were perfectly safe, be sure of that. The only person I know who can tag him down for keeps is Aguilar, who has a warrant for him. Making a scene or calling in the house detectives would be just so much old horse. Neither you nor I can go find a phone without attracting his direct attention; and he’d guess what for.”

“Then what?” she said.

“Call our waiter, or the head-waiter, either one you see.” While speaking, I wrote on the wine-list Aguilar’s name and telephone-number.

Presently our waiter came and hovered above her. Virginia handed him the list, and I did the talking.

“An extra ten-spot for you if you’ll make this call: Get Mr. Aguilar and tell him to come here immediately, that the man he wants is here. I am Dr. Clements. Do it fast.”

No questions, no repetitions; the waiter was intelligent. He just bowed and went away.

I smiled at Virginia.

“Now calm down. Have a cigarette; don’t watch him. It’s a grand play if it wins, so don’t spoil it.”

She nodded and lit a cigarette at the match I held. I could have sworn she never again looked at that other table, yet all the while she was watching it from the corner of her eye, and reported to me. They had ordered; they were having cocktails. A wine-bucket was brought and set at one side.

Our waiter came back. Smart man! With him he brought the *sommelier*, as a plausible excuse for his errand, who displayed a bottle of wine to me and talked it up. I nodded and it was opened. The waiter brushed my sleeve as he leaned forward, with a glass.

“He’ll be here immediately, sir,” he said softly. The job was done.

Five minutes passed. When Aguilar would get here I had no idea. Virginia was looking past me, while apparently absorbed in conversation. She reached for the ash-tray and spoke softly.

“He’s showing something to the other man; it looks like a little clock in a case, but it’s not a clock. He’s turning things and explaining it. Not a radio either; too small for that. Now he has put it on the table and is turning a dial, apparently. Perhaps it is a radio. He’s moving it closer and saying something—”

Her eyes widened on me. She heard it too! A curiously quiet voice came from beside me, though no one was there. It was the voice of Lajpat Rai, like the lingering note of a bronze bell.

“Good evening, Miss Trent—Dr. Clements. This is a pleasant surprise.”

A gasp escaped Virginia. “Hugh! It can’t be! That table is thirty feet away! It’s not real—”

“It is quite real.” Lajpat Rai laughed softly. “We are talking, and no one else can hear. What do you think, Clements? Magic?”

“Hardly that,” I said, not loudly. Turning, I looked at him. “If it’s not some trick—some walkie-talkie or electronic development—”

“Right!” said he. “Trust your shrewd, practical brain to hit the mark! Yes, a new thing in electronics and sensory vibration. In a year or so you’ll see it on the market, I believe.”

Lajpat, or Myedin, reached forward and touched the glinting thing like a clock that stood before him. He was laughing at his companion, whose back was to us. There was no more voice. I turned back and met the startled gaze of Virginia Trent.

“Nobody else heard,” she murmured. “No one is looking, no attention was attracted! Hugh, is it real?”

“I expect it is, my dear,” I replied, and reaching over, touched her cold hand. “A bit of showing off, no doubt for his companion. Yes, give him due credit; he’s a past master at electronics and such things.”

“He’s getting up,” she said. “Putting the clock in his coat pocket—”

“Are they leaving?” I asked quickly.

“No. At least, the other man isn’t; apparently he’s just going out for something. He’s asking the head-waiter something—now he’s going out—he’s gone.” Her eyes came back to me. “What a handsome man; there’s a fascination about him—terrible!”

She was badly wrought up. I glanced around. The other man sat at the table, smoking unconcernedly, evidently awaiting his companion’s return.

“Good,” I said, relieved. “Colonel Nicholas Myedin has been having a bit of fun, for which he’ll pay presently. Let me fill your glass, my dear; the wine is good.”

She nodded. I refilled our glasses. We clicked them across the table and she responded faintly to my smile. Our waiter came, replaced the bottle in its cooler, brought up another chair and laid the place.

“He said he was coming at once, sir,” he said softly. “Mr. Aguilar, I mean.”

I nodded to him. “Well, Virginia, we have him trapped. It’ll be interesting to see how our friend Aguilar goes to work. That double-action walkie-talkie thing will be an entertaining and valuable capture, too.”

“Strange that he was so open about it,” she said, frowning slightly. “Almost a defiance. I don’t like it, Hugh; I wish he hadn’t gone out! I wish we had stopped him.”

“How?” I rejoined. “Short of brute force, I don’t see how. Here comes Aguilar now. Any sign of Lajpat returning?”

Her gaze swept the room behind me. “No.”

Aguilar arrived, wearing a tuxedo; his shirt was not fresh; he looked as usual, mussed and off trim. He spoke to Virginia, shook hands with me. The waiter drew back his chair and he seated himself placidly.

“A surprising summons, Clements, but I think I made good time,” he said in his mild way. “Outside and in here are now nine agents in all; every exit is watched too. Now, if you’ll—”

Ah!”

He broke off, looking past me. I glanced around. Myedin’s companion had risen and was walking past—a chunky, efficient-looking man, a stranger to me.

“Interesting fellow,” Aguilar said. “He’s the French consul here in the city, an important man. Why, what’s wrong?”

Our faces must have appraised him, as the appalling realization took us. The French consul! Myedin had been dining with him, entertaining him with that electronic gadget—and had skipped out to escape the net. I knew it with ghastly certainty.

“French?” repeated Virginia. “You mean that he—that Myedin is tied up with the French consul?”

“Lord, no! Probably making use of him,” snapped Aguilar. “But where is he?”

“Dining with the man who just passed,” I said. “Or was. He’s gone now.”

Between us, we acquainted Aguilar with the situation. My worst fears were too obviously true; the table where Myedin had sat was now being cleared, he was gone. In the very instant of victory we had lost our man. He had slipped away before our faces. Like a clever magician, he had bemused us with that toy of his—then vanished.

However, in this hard moment I had to admire Aguilar. He never turned a hair.

“Too bad, but you did well, Clements,” he said quietly. “We’re just not good enough. Next time we must do better. I can’t touch that consul, of course; diplomats are inviolate, and Myedin has just made use of him.”

“He had no reason to skip out,” I protested. “It was mere chance that we came.”

“But he saw you and took warning.” Aguilar sipped his wine, then leaned over and patted Virginia’s hand. “Sorry, my dear; however, I’ve some interesting news for you. Wait till I dismiss my men.”

He lifted a hand. Two dark-clad men came from the foyer and to our table. Aguilar looked up at them.

“I was too slow, boys,” he said, with unwarranted self-blame. “Send everyone away and hope for better luck next time. It’s a miss.”

The two men went away. Aguilar hauled some papers from his pocket and produced an amazingly poor photograph or snapshot of three men in whites. He showed it to Virginia.

“Can you recognize any of these?”

“Of course. The one in the center—he has a mustache now, but he’s Lajpat Rai. At least, Dr. Clements says he is. He’s the man who was recently here.”

Aguilar turned to me and shoved over the picture.

“That’s your man, yes,” I said. “What’s all this about?”

“Business,” said he. “Miss Trent, when your father was—er—murdered, the actual criminal was killed. He has since been identified. He was formerly a personal servant to Lajpat Rai, also to Colonel Nicholas Myedin. Tomorrow morning I’m going to ask that you sign the complaint charging Myedin with being accessory to your father’s murder. Eh?”

“Of course,” she responded. “That’s what I’ve wanted to do, but you lacked any evidence.”

“I think there’s enough now, with what Dr. Clements can give us, to support the charge,” he said. “We don’t need it, perhaps, but I like to neglect nothing.”

“A dozen warrants won’t help you arrest Myedin unless you can find him,” I said.

“True,” assented Aguilar. “Too true, in fact. Tonight is an example. He laughs at us; but the last laugh is what counts most. Well, I’ll come around to your hotel in the morning, if I may, and run you down to police headquarters to get the papers duly signed and so forth.”

He departed. Virginia lit a cigarette and eyed me uneasily.

“I don’t like it,” she said, “any of it! That man isn’t my notion of a proper bulldog on the trail. He’s not brisk and threatening. Then there’s Lajpat Rai or Myedin or whatever his name is. Why, he seemed positively frivolous, Hugh! I don’t understand it at all!”

I smiled. “You’ve been reading detective stories, my dear. If I work all day in the lab with a microscope and blood-specimens, I don’t come home at night spotted all over with gore, you know.”

“That’s not the same,” she said.

“Precisely the same. Colonel Nicholas Myedin, bless him, has blood on his hands an inch thick, but he keeps them outwardly clean.”

That must have made her think of her father. She shivered slightly, and gathered up her coat. I called for the check, and we rose. The evening had been spoiled for us; everything had gone wrong.

Still, I wondered. Lajpat Rai never took chances without a reason. Granted that the encounter with us had been unexpected, why had he appeared here with the French consul? What considered calculation lay behind it? The thought worried me. I knew the gentleman far too well to doubt there was much chance at work—except our presence. He had shown off his electronic trick with set purpose, he had dined publicly with the French consul from set purpose, and there was nothing frivolous about it either. The more I reflected on it, the more convinced I was of this fact, and it loomed with sinister force. No man deliberately risks life and liberty for a petty gain.

One pleasing thing about our little hotel was that it had the right idea about service. The morning paper, for instance, was always pushed under the door at an early hour. I wakened next morning in good time, obtained the news sheet, and hopped back into bed to read luxuriously. Later in the morning Aguilar would come for Virginia, and I would go along with them; probably much later. No use worrying over that until the time came.

The news held nothing disquieting, I remember. International affairs were not so bad; following the Bikini bomb test of July past, things had quieted down a good deal. United States and Soviet relations were on the whole doing all right, although the usual pinpricks showed a bit of tension. I glanced at a headline “Three Men Shot” and paid no attention, until suddenly the thing rose out of the printed page and hit me like a blow in the face, as I read the sub-head over the story:

THREE MEN SHOT

MYSTERY BATTLE SHOCKS FAIRVIEW STREET

Three men were killed at 9:30 last night in what is believed to have been an echo of Indian feuds. James Parr, caretaker of the premises at 795 Fairview Street, was shot to death and two visitors, Irwan Dhas of Bombay and an elderly man named Gerard Chaffee were the victims of the shooting. No witnesses of the affray remained to tell what took place. It was possibly a tragedy of errors, since the

premises are occupied by Howard Chaffee, a brother of the dead man, who last evening was out of the city . . .

Incredulity seized upon me as I read. Parr, good old Scotty Parr, dead! It seemed impossible. And old Chaffee, my patient—why, he was assuredly no gunman; he could barely walk, much less go in for killings! But there it was, in cold print. The story went on to play up the mystery. Neighbors had been aroused by a sudden fusillade of shots from the house, before which a car stood at the curb—a car belonging, it was later ascertained, to Irwan Dhas. What took place, no one knew. Parr had been alone in the house, presumably. It was known that he had recently come from India. Howard Chaffee could not be reached at the time of going to press.

I looked back again at the beginning of the news item. Nine-thirty! That was precisely when Colonel Nicholas Myedin had been going through his electronic antics last evening. So my wondering was answered.

He had prepared a very careful, foolproof alibi. It explained everything, except the meaning of what had happened.

CHAPTER FIVE

I bathed, shaved, breakfasted, and was still eating eggs and bacon when Aguilar arrived. He joined me in the hotel coffee-shop, sat down with a nod, and ordered coffee.

“Myedin picked himself a good alibi last night, eh?”

“Obviously. So you’ve seen the story.”

“Seen it?” He permitted himself a snort. “I’ve been working on it since four this morning, when one of my men picked it up. Within the past hour everything has been straightened out smooth as silk. Our man is a great detail worker.”

“Glad you’re informed,” I said. “I don’t see how, or why, Parr shot those two men—old Chaffee and the strange Hindu.”

“He didn’t,” said Aguilar. “Must have been three or four gunmen on hand. They all opened up at once, boggled things a bit, and the Hindu got a crack at Parr and killed him. That, I imagine, is what actually happened; no one knows certainly. For lagniappe, as they used to say in New Orleans, there’s the odd way the Hindu was dressed: in evening clothes.”

I made no comment, and Aguilar related what had happened, as he figured it.

A trap, obviously. Howard Chaffee, who must have handed out a fat lot of money at his brother’s orders, had arranged for a visit from Gerard and Lajpat Rai. The trap set, he skipped out to San José for the night. The visitors had come, with Irwan Dhas playing the part of the Rajah from Hell. Parr had admitted them into the house and the hidden killers had blasted them. Chaffee had got rid of his poor old brother, anyhow.

“I’ve investigated Myedin’s connection with the French consul,” Aguilar stated. “He’s been selling to French interests certain electronic inventions for use with hydro-electric equipment—apparently quite legitimate. Old Gerard Chaffee left a will leaving everything he owned to the French consul here, too. Consulate lawyers have produced the will and established the claim.”

“Behind that false front, Myedin collars the money?” I said.

Aguilar nodded.

“Right. All legitimate enough, of course. The man’s infernally clever.”

“Has Howard Chaffee come back to town?”

“Oh, sure. He’s being grilled, but there’s nothing on him to prove he laid any trap, of course. He remains blandly innocent.”

“And can’t you make any arrest?”

“No. We’ve no reason to touch the French interests, of course. Howard Chaffee thinks himself smart; he’s a fool. Myedin will make some deal, probably killing him, and depart at will for fresh pastures. He’s made a fat haul out of Gerard Chaffee.”

“And you can’t touch him?”

“Yes, if I could find him.” Aguilar smiled and rubbed up his glasses. “That’s my problem—finding him! I do not seek a battle of wits. My sole aim is to pounce on him, and if he resists arrest, to shoot.”

“Simple,” I commented ironically. Poor old Chaffee from Tibet! He had been no more than a pawn. He had deserved a better fate.

“Do you think Miss Trent is ready to go?” Aguilar asked. “We’d best get off.”

“I don’t know,” I said discourteously. “Look her up yourself.”

He left to do so; I paid the check and stepped outside for a breath of fresh air, feeling morose and shocked. Parr's death left me much disturbed, too. In passing the desk, I took an envelope that was shoved at me as my mail. After a few moments I opened it.

The sole contents was a check for a thousand dollars, signed by Howard Chaffee—the money he had said was in the mail. I stood there in the sunlight, staring at it, then abruptly tore it into scraps and stepped over to the gutter, throwing away the pieces. I wanted none of his money. It was no less than an insult.

"Hey, there! Hey, Mister!" said a voice. "It's me!"

I glanced around. A taxi had drawn up at the curb almost beside me. There was a face I recognized, grinning at me. With a rush, I remembered the taxi-man I had sent to pick up anything he could at the Colsax Street house. He had slipped clear out of my mind with the rush of events.

"Oh, hello!" I said, and opening the cab door, got in. "Stick around; we'll be needing you in a few minutes. Get anything on that house?"

"Yeah, but I been sick," he replied. "I sent a couple kids around there to scout. They done a good job. Only person they seen was an old guy, dark-complexioned, like a Mexican, with white mustache."

I nodded. The same man I had seen.

"Buick sedan in the garage," he went on.

I caught at the name. Lajpat Rai had used a Buick at Burlingame.

"Did they see the license number?"

"Yeah; California, but they didn't get the number—just kids, you know." He spoke apologetically. "Got something else they hauled out of a trash-barrel back of the house last night. Don't know if it means anything to you or not. It's a last year's plate, of course, orange and black instead of black and white—"

He lugged forth into sight a bent, bedraggled old license plate. When I saw the orange number upon it, I think my heart stood still for an instant. The number was 7E-24-55: the number of Lajpat Rai's car at the Burlingame Arms. The car had returned to this house on Colsax Street, the old plates had been stripped off and replaced by new ones—and this was one of the old plates from a trash-barrel!

That house *was* the secret hideaway of Nicholas Myedin!

I fumbled some money into his hand, seized the plate and shoved it under my coat, and got into the hotel; I did not feel safe until I had reached my room and put the thing out of sight. Then I came back down and met Virginia and Aguilar, and put them into the taxicab. I begged off going along; I was not needed, and did need to sit down and think what I was to do.

It was not so easy. The obvious thing, of course, was to advise Aguilar at once and let him fall to work. To be honest, I was afraid of failure, I think. Last night's affair had unsettled me; I could picture Myedin again scenting a trap and taking to flight. I was unsure of Aguilar, and too bitterly sure of the Rajah from Hell.

Yet what else could I do? Alone, nothing whatever. I sat in my room, shaking with buck fever, unable to determine on anything. I had the positive certainty now: Our man was in that house. Gradually the conviction came to me that there was only one thing to do—put my information in Aguilar's hands and let him act upon it. This was sensible, and calmed me to realize it. Thought of Parr did urge me to tell Chaffee and let him put his gunmen to work, but this would be folly and I knew it.

My room phone rang. I picked up the receiver to hear Chaffee's voice.

"Clements? I'm down here in the bar. Can you come down? Can't stop five minutes."

"Right down," I said, and suited action to words.

I found him seated at a drink, and the sight of him was a shock. He looked ten years older, shaken, nervous.

"You've seen the papers? I've had a hell of a time with the cops and all," he snarled. "On my way home now. Just stopped in for a minute. I don't suppose you know anything—bad business last night, all of it. Well, I've had my notice."

His manner, his snarling whine, put me off any thought of confiding in him.

"Your notice? What d'you mean?" I inquired.

"Telegram, unsigned. Said all accounts would be settled inside two days," he responded jerkily. "You know what that means—same as the others. I've got to use my head now; I'm going to let that bastard come after me, and then get him for keeps. By the way, I'm sorry about Parr."

"So am I," was my reply.

That was all. He had left his car outside, and I went out to it with him.

"So long," he said. "Don't count me out yet; I'm going to get him. If you pick up anything, let me know."

I merely nodded, and he drove off. I did feel a little guilty for letting him go and saying nothing—but it was the only wise course. Aguilar was the only man to trust.

I had to pay in worry for my indecision, however. Virginia came home alone; Aguilar had been detained on some business, she said. She had learned all about last night's affair, too, and it had put her into a dither of nervousness.

I was even worse off, for I tried everywhere to get hold of Aguilar, and could not. It was three in the afternoon before he telephoned.

"You'd better get here on the jump," I said.

"No can do," he rejoined. "I've an important meeting—"

"Listen," I broke in. "I've got everything you want—*everything*, understand? I haven't told even Virginia. I'm the only soul who knows, and I won't talk over the wire. But this is the wind-up if you don't bungle it."

"Oh!" he said slowly. "All right, then. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Three minutes later my phone rang again. I answered.

"Hi, Clements. This is Chaffee. Free this evening?"

"Unfortunately, no," I answered. "But why?"

"I thought you might like to sit in on a party with me," he said. "Looks as if it would clean up this business of ours at one crack. Get me?"

"Oh!" I thought fast. "You mean you've found the fellow?"

"No. I've got him coming to me. I got a line on him and I'm using it."

"Sorry," I rejoined, in relief. The game was still mine, and I wanted none of his traps. "I'm definitely tied up, tempting as you make it sound."

"Okay—your loss," he responded, and hung up in an evident huff.

I was not worried about his reaction, but wiped my brow; for an instant he had started me sweating, with the suspicion that he had discovered about the Colsax Street house. So he had got a line on Colonel Nicholas and had laid another trap? Evidently he had not learned his lesson the first time, I reflected. A bungler; and I had been so tempted to reveal my precious secret to such a rogue!

Virginia heard nothing of the secret. Not that I distrusted her, of course; I distrusted fate. When Aguilar arrived, he came directly to my room. I let him in and pointed to a chair. He settled into it.

“Very odd thing, if you spoke the truth over the phone,” he said. “Chaffee had a notion to end the game tonight, too. I was with him when I called you.”

“Howard Chaffee?” I stared at him.

He nodded, calm and unexcited.

“Right. He’s been lucky in a way. Remember the fellow killed last night in company with Gerard Chaffee—Irwan Dhas? Well, Chaffee found he had a brother working in a store on Dupont Street and thinks it’s a direct lead to Colonel Nicholas Myedin; so he’s given the fellow a message to deliver. Of course, the man swears he never heard of Lajpat Rai and so forth; I think myself he lies, and the message will be delivered. Chaffee wanted me in on it; I refused.”

“Does Chaffee know you for what you are?”

He shook his head, smiling slightly. “No. I think he suspects something, though, from my pull with the cops. He’s probably heard of the FBI and such organizations.”

“But I don’t savvy it, Aguilar! What kind of a message to our man?”

“A damn’ fool one. Precisely what Myedin will most like to hear. Chaffee is the bait; he’ll be waiting in a car marked with a blue tail-light at nine tonight, on the outer Esplanade drive opposite McGinty’s Café. Fine deserted sea-coast at that spot. He wants Lajpat to meet him and call everything off—offers big money and so forth.”

“Still I don’t get it. Will he really be in the car?”

“Absolutely. He figures he’s being closely watched and Lajpat will come to finish him. But he has or will have men hidden, marksmen. He gambles his life on their ability to act first.”

“Damned nonsense!” I exclaimed. “It’s no more than a childish variant of the trap he set last night—brave, if you like, but silly.”

Aguilar nodded. “So I tried to argue. But that’s Chaffee himself—courageous, perfectly willing to gamble his life, but nervous and shaken, unstable, at extremes. Did you get me here to receive news, or to talk my head off?”

“Oh! Excuse me,” I said quickly. “The point is, Chaffee called me and offered to let me in on the party, just after you had left him.”

“He talks too much.” Aguilar made a nervous gesture. “I think Myedin will copper him tonight, somehow. That fellow smells a trap afar off. I’d not want to be in Chaffee’s boots at nine tonight.”

He sat looking at me. A muscle twitched in his cheek; he was actually nervous as hell and trying to keep it hidden. I smiled at him.

“Oh, you want information! Very well. The Rajah from Hell is living at 742 Colsax Street, apparently with only one servant.”

Aguilar blinked. “Guesswork?” he said.

I reached out the license plate. “This is real, solid fact. Finger it. I’ll tell you the whole thing, and you can draw your own conclusions.”

So, unhurriedly, I began with the car at the Burlingame Arms, told how my attention had fallen upon the Colsax Street house, and what had happened since. Through it all, John Aguilar listened in utter silence, eyes fastened upon me, until I had finished. He looked blank, emotionless, stony.

“I see,” he said at last. “You’ve been careful. Good work, Dr. Clements. Very pretty work indeed.” He stirred and rose. “I must be off.”

“Eh?” I said, surprised. “Off? Where?”

“To find a taxicab and have a look at that house myself, now, in the full light of day. Our man’s there, no doubt of that. We’ll smoke him out tonight—unless Chaffee gets him first. We’ll do it, in fact, while Chaffee is springing his little silly trap.”

CHAPTER SIX

Aguilar got his look around, which of course showed him only a blank house. To my surprise, however, he showed up with a city survey of the district, showing everything in and about each lot.

He advised saying nothing to Virginia, and I agreed. She would necessarily have worried keenly. Besides, he wanted to keep the facts known only to the two of us; like me, he feared lest the Rajah from Hell could pick secrets from out of the very air. And he could just about do that with his electronic apparatus, too.

Aguilar showed up for dinner with us at the hotel. I told Virginia I was going out with him later to hold a conference upon the whole business, and she asked no questions. In fact, we left immediately after dinner; Aguilar had a car, and drove downtown on Post Street to a bungalow that served him for living-quarters and office. He had a bare, homeless sort of place there. His office had nothing in it except a big city map on the wall, an ancient roll-top desk, three telephones and a couple of chairs.

"Well, it's seven-thirty—loads of time." Aguilar took a creaky chair at the desk and began to load a pipe. Before he had it lighted, the phones began to ring; he got five calls within two minutes. To each one he replied just three words:

"Nine o'clock. Okay."

He hung up finally and grinned at me. "Military dispositions, Clements. This time, no mistake; everything covered. Even so, I expect he'll spring something on us at the last minute; maybe he'll vanish into thin air."

A sour jest—too apt to come true.

"Nine o'clock?" I said. "That's precisely when Chaffee has set his trap. Aren't you going to stop that foolishness?"

"No. It's very opportune for us," said Aguilar, smoking comfortably. "It's a long way from that house over to the Esplanade; gives us plenty of time to operate."

"Suppose the trap works and Chaffee kills him?"

He shrugged. "I'll not mind. I've given up all hope of catching him alive."

"And if Chaffee is killed?"

"No particular loss, as I look at it," he returned calmly. "Might even be a distinct gain. Anyhow, the thing distracts our man's attention."

"If he goes himself," I added. "He may not."

"We'll know before we leave here," said Aguilar. I gave him a sharp inquiring glance but he vouchsafed no information. Apparently he wanted to divulge none of his preparations, and I blamed him not a bit.

It was a dismal hour that we put in, so far as I was concerned. We smoked, talked, got occasional phone reports. Eight-thirty came. Aguilar rose, opened a closet, and came out with a long walkie-talkie outfit. I helped him get it on his back.

"Expect to use this thing—in a city?" I demanded.

"The Signal Corps has developed it for that express purpose, my skeptical friend. We're going to fight the Rajah from Hell with his own weapons— Ah!"

A buzz; he made answer, listened, stood there smiling, and cut off.

“We’d better go, Clements. The Buick sedan is just leaving the Colsax Street garage now,” he said. “Two men in it—Myedin himself is on the job. And for the first time, he’s made a mistake, a serious one. Never mind; you’ll see when we get there. My car has a driver; come along. You have a gun?”

I nodded, and we left the bungalow. Outside, a driver was in his car. We got in and the car started. Aguilar had to sit hunched over because of the walkie-talkie; from time to time, he got reports. To Colsax Street was only a short distance. When we turned into it, we drove past the house without stopping. The garage doors were closed. A floodlight at the top of the steps illuminated them brightly; no one could approach the house from the street below without being distinctly visible.

“That’s his mistake,” said Aguilar softly. Our car stopped at the curb slightly up the street and opposite. “Plenty of light there—none in back! And it’s possible to get at the house from the rear. Keep your eye on the place, now; we’re running on schedule.”

I looked, and saw not a soul in the street, though down the block two or three cars stood at the curb. A small car came toiling up the hill and stopped before 742. A man got out and started up the stairs that climbed to the house. In that floodlight every detail was visible. He wore a telegraph messenger’s uniform and cap. A telegram for Colonel Nicholas Myedin, no doubt. He was all alone. No one else was in his car.

It was close to nine o’clock, almost upon the hour, in fact.

I watched those lighted steps, and saw no one. The house entrance itself was of course invisible from the street. Suddenly there came a buzz from Aguilar’s contraption; he answered, listened, then spoke.

“Okay. . . . Here, Clements! Help me off with this thing.”

In the confined space, it was a job getting the straps unbuckled and off. As he got clear, he told me:

“As we expected: Chaffee’s parked car was just smashed to flinders by another car. Not the Buick, of course; Myedin was too smart for that—probably had another car all set for the job. No details yet, of course. Well, that finishes Chaffee; now we’ll have to step on it. All right, Charley; come along with us.”

The driver hopped out as we left the car, and I caught the bulge of a holster at his belt. Aguilar led the way, and as we crossed the street, the figure of the messenger came down the lighted steps, fast, got into his car and shoved off. We were going up those lighted steps almost before he was gone.

So Howard Chaffee was probably done for! Twice he had set a trap and caught the wrong prey. Well, he had been warned. I had no doubt that he was dead; when Lajpat Rai struck, he did not waste his blows. And what were we walking into, here in this blaze of light where anybody up above could see us clearly? Perhaps Aguilar suspected my hesitation.

“Step fast, Clements!” he said. “If the messenger got anyone in the house to answer the door, it’s all right. If not, it isn’t.”

Our chauffeur dashed ahead of us, a flashlight in his hand. We were at the top, and out of the floodlight. Ahead was darkness and movement, and the stabbing beam of the flashlight.

“Okay, boss,” said a composed voice. “Just like clockwork. Got him.”

Understanding broke upon me: The messenger was a decoy. Here under the ray of light was Lajpat Rai’s servitor, the gentle, kindly old man whom I knew by sight. He was now handcuffed and between two other men who held him. They had come in from the rear, to the house.

“Good work,” Aguilar said. “Inside with him somewhere, out of the way. Tie him in a chair and gag him. Make sure that he touches nothing. Charley, take a look through the house. Careful not to touch anything.”

He had a small flashlight and signaled with it, as the others moved into the house, which was all dark. I caught two answering stabs of light from the bushes around; more men were stationed there. The little entrance porch where we stood was in inky darkness.

“I think, Doctor,” said Aguilar, “we’d better stop right here. Catch him in the entrance; a flashlight is always very startling. He may double back for the street, and then my men down below will have him trapped on the stairs.”

“‘Him’? There’ll be another man with him,” I said. “Two men left here.”

“Yes, of course. I wonder why? Must be a reason,” he said musingly. “Well, we’d better shut up. He’s a bit overdue now. We’ll have warning when he comes into the garage; we can hear the doors.”

We waited a long while; everything was black, everything was still. A dog in the adjoining yard began to bark, but roused no response and desisted. Deceptive as the minutes were, I knew they were flitting steadily away. To get here from the Esplanade, with a good driver, should take no more than ten minutes, with luck. Much more than that had elapsed since the report of the crash had come in on the walkie-talkie.

The porch on which we stood was only a step above the ground and was surrounded by a low half-rail a couple of feet high. The house door was standing wide open. I caught a brief ray of light in the hall and heard a footstep. The light struck us and vanished.

“It’s me,” said the voice of our driver, Charley, who was undoubtedly one of Aguilar’s men. He spoke under his breath, cautiously: “House is empty. Lot of scientific apparatus in one room. One of the upper rooms projects and has a full view of the street below, and the steps up, in that blaze of light.”

“Scram,” said Aguilar. “And quick about it.”

As he spoke, I heard a car door slam, and the sound prickled in every nerve. Charley disappeared silently. I listened for the scull of feet on the cement steps, but could hear nothing. Then, causing a distinct shock that was almost panic, an electric light over our heads flashed on, bathing the entrance in light.

I met the staring, startled gaze of Aguilar. I must have looked still more wide-eyed, for a shadowy smile came to his lips. He pointed down, and I understood. Someone in the garage, below, must have turned a switch. It was as simple as that. Colonel Nicholas Myedin had come home, and the trap was sprung.

No doing anything about it, of course. I questioned Aguilar with a look, and he shrugged. After all, it did not matter. If Myedin got this far, he was caught, and the light would merely prevent any attempt at escape. So, producing a cigarette, I lighted it and we waited. Now we could hear the sound of footsteps. Aguilar quietly stepped to the house door and pulled it nearly shut. Everything was strangely prosaic. Our anticipations had been absurd; there was no flourish of pistols, nothing melodramatic—just a man walking into the trap.

It seemed almost a pity, I thought, that the Rajah from Hell should end up in so tame and unglamorous a fashion. For he had no earthly chance of evasion or escape. Men inside the house, around it, men down below closing in upon him—

The footsteps were closer now. A voice was murmuring low words; I caught the metallic timbre of the voice I knew so well. A figure moved at the edge of the light. I flipped away my

cigarette; no further need now of any concealment. Then I stood petrified, as the approaching figure came into the light with a sudden cry and a quick step forward.

“Oh, Hugh! He—he said you’d be here—”

It was Virginia Trent.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There was an instant of stupefied silence.

I stared past Virginia, as I folded an arm about her, and saw Lajpat Rai standing there, within the circle of light. His guard was down: he looked utterly astounded as he regarded us. Virginia was speaking rapidly.

“He said you were here, that you wanted me; I thought it was a lie, but I couldn’t refuse to come—he was very polite—”

Lajpat Rai broke into a laugh, and stepped forward.

“A delicious irony,” he said. “Yes, I did say you were here; I meant to get you later, Clements, and somehow arrange with both of you an end to hostilities. And here you are! Evidently I was right in suspecting that your continued enmity would be perilous. I disregarded you too long.”

But before I could speak, Aguilar stepped out.

“Here you’re not dealing with Dr. Clements, but with me. Colonel Nicholas Myedin, I have a warrant in my pocket. You’re under arrest for murder; I counsel you to make no attempt to escape. I have men covering you this moment.”

“Indeed! Mr. Aguilar, I believe.” Myedin surveyed him with arrogance, seemed about to go on speaking, then checked himself abruptly. Pride, perhaps, or vanity. His trim figure, with one sleeve dangling, looked grotesque.

“Your hand, please,” Aguilar commanded. I saw that he held a pair of handcuffs. Myedin saw it also, and started slightly.

“No,” he said, a flat statement, a positive refusal. “You should add kidnap charges to your fantastic list. Or don’t you suppose I kidnaped Miss Trent?”

“Oh, don’t be silly!” broke out Virginia. “He didn’t at all, really. I came quite voluntarily; everything was very pleasant!”

Myedin bowed to her. “Thank you, Miss Trent. May I suggest that things might be more comfortable all around if we stepped into the house?”

“No!” I exclaimed sharply. All eyes went to me. “Careful, Aguilar! He’s an expert illusionist. You’ve forgotten one important thing: two men left this house—where’s the other one?”

I had hit the mark; Myedin’s face told me as much. Then he stepped forward past us to the doorway and paused, turning.

“Nonsense!” he exclaimed cheerfully. “These charges are fantastic. If Mr. Aguilar really has a warrant, I demand to see it. Come inside, and let’s go at the thing reasonably. I sha’n’t refuse to accompany you to police headquarters if you insist; naturally, I’m not fool enough to resist, since I can clear away all accusations in no time—”

He spoke rapidly, genially, giving no one any chance to object. As he spoke, he put out his one hand and shoved the door open. It all happened rapidly after I had cried out my protest, too swiftly for other action. And as he pushed open the door, he found a switch inside and clicked it.

The light here was extinguished; we were plunged into pitch darkness.

Noise—alarmed voices burst forth everywhere. I pulled Virginia to one side and held her close. Men came rushing upon the porch from every side. Aguilar, I think, reached the switch

and the light returned, to show Myedin gone—into the house, of course. A pistol exploded somewhere inside, and at this everyone was shoving in. I abandoned Virginia and pushed in with the others, furious and aghast at the happening.

Tumult, darkness, men stumbling into one another, flashlights stabbing long rays of light across the rooms, everything in confusion—and then, so suddenly that it frightened us all, a burst of red flame erupting in our faces. How or why, we knew not. Half a dozen shots roared out; then we were frantically shoving back, away from the fierce redness—for the rooms ahead of us were alight in an instant, as though the house had leaped all at once into flames.

So it had, too, doubtless made ready beforehand. For as we retreated, the fire came gushing after us in a most incredible and appalling manner. We tumbled outside—two men shot and nearly helpless, another dead and dragged forth limply. Everyone was shouting; an access of fear and horror had seized all except Aguilar, who continued shouting frantic orders. He made himself heard; the men scattered.

I reached Virginia, caught her hand, and we got away from the searing heat into a corner of the grounds. The house was now a pillar of spouting flame and thick oily smoke; everything was bright as day. The hurt men were brought to me—one dead, two with bullet-wounds, a couple more badly burned. Virginia and I, the only persons halfway calm, took charge and did what we could. The old Hindu servant of Lajpat Rai had apparently not been got clear.

“I think we got Myedin.” Aguilar joined us, shouting above the crackling roar of flame. “Two men are positive they dropped him; they say he’s still in there.”

“We’d better scam before we roast to death,” I responded.

This made sense. We got past a fence and into the next backyard with our wounded. The houses adjoining were already in wild commotion, with people running about like mad.

In time—it seemed a century—police and firemen arrived; by then, the house was a fiery mass past any saving. Virginia and I were taken back to the hotel in a radio car; to re-enter that peaceful, serene atmosphere seemed like a dream. I was astonished to find my clothes dotted with burns. In the wild excitement I had been unaware of damage.

An hour later Aguilar arrived. He came direct to my room and nodded as he saw my ruined garments spread out. His own were almost as bad.

“Chemicals,” he said. “The damned place was a volcano, Clements!”

I poured him a drink, and he gulped it.

“Well?” I demanded. “Did you make certain about—him?”

He looked at me. “Eh? Him? Two of my men swore they got him. If so, his body is there still. He didn’t get away through the cordon; they’re all sure of that. We’ll know later on, when the ashes can be searched. If they find no trace of him—”

They found none, though they located the old Hindu servant. This proved nothing. Three days later Virginia and I were married and left San Francisco. The authorities were quite satisfied that the Rajah from Hell was dead.

But as for me—well, two men left that house in the Buick sedan. We saw one return. Did the other come by some unguessed route? Well, it’s none of my business. I have my own life to live.