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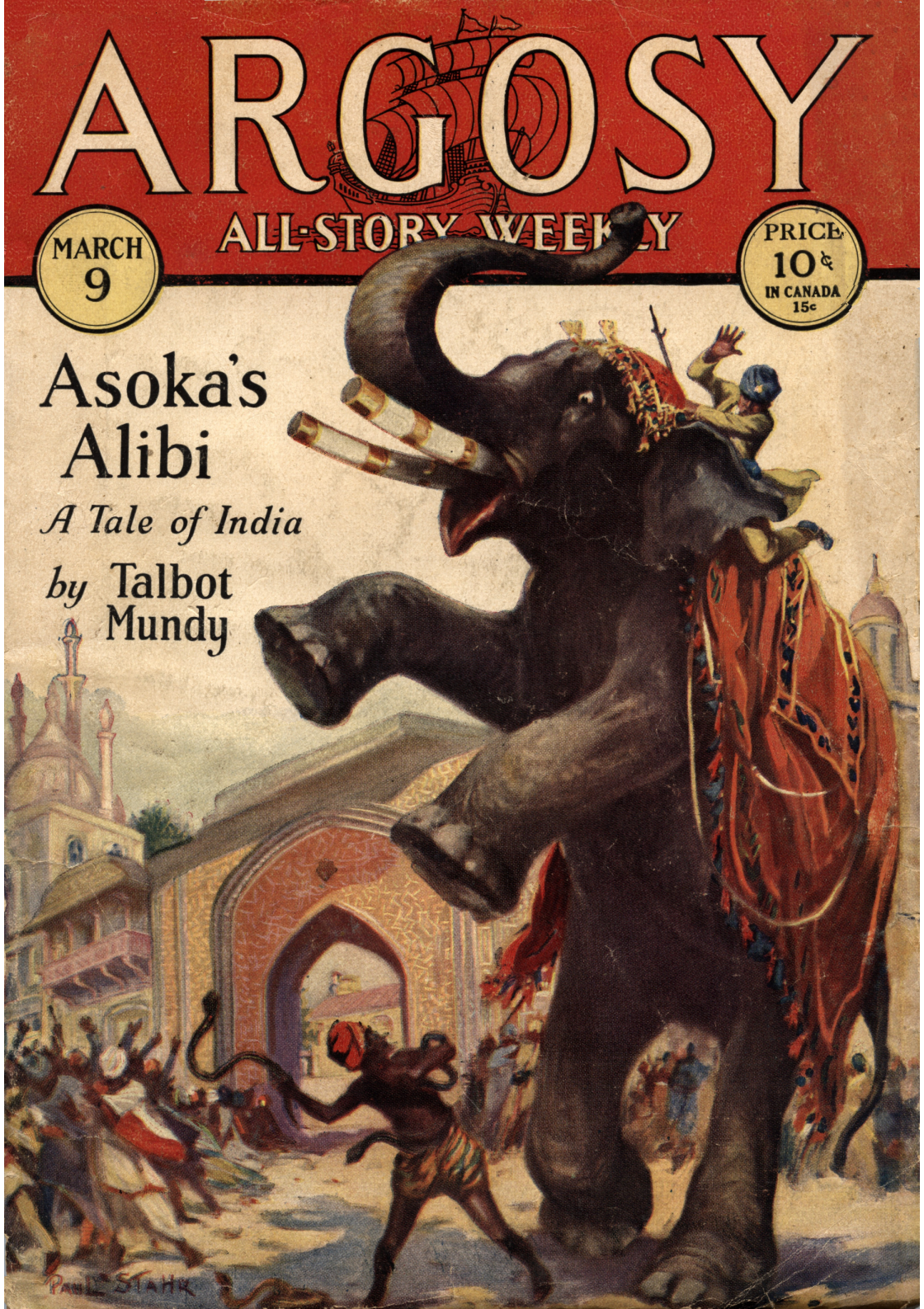
## Asoka's Alibi

*A Tale of India*

*by* Talbot Mundy



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# Asoka's Alibi

## By TALBOT MUNDY

*Author of "Ho for London Town!" "When Trails Were New," etc.*

***Asoka was a mighty elephant, and none could manage him save Quorn—sometimes; nor was carnival season, in that mad, seething India border state, the best of those times.***

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# CHAPTER I.

## THE MASTER OF ELEPHANTS.

"Reckon maybe I'm nutty," said Quorn to himself. "Hell, supposing I am! So is Narada. Elephants is the only sane folk hereabouts."

To comfort himself he looked up at Asoka, the tallest elephant in captivity, whom only he could manage at the best of times. At other times Quorn had to ride him as a fury rides a typhoon.

"You, you big stiff, if it weren't for you I'd pull my freight for Philadelphia and drive a taxicab again. If I might take you along I'd join a circus. This here circus gives me the willies."

He was referring to all Narada, not merely the elephant lines. Narada is close enough to Rajputana to be soaked with a sense of worn-out history. Treaties and its mountains have kept railroads at a distance, and the news comes dim, diluted, and distressing, by mail and word of mouth, so that people are only aware that the world is changing, without knowing why, or how, or what the changes mean.

They feel backward, and resent it, but they keep up the ancient customs for lack of intelligible new ones. Accordingly, for eleven months of every year Narada is piously miserable; during the twelfth month it is impiously mad and happy—more or less—always with a feeling that happiness has to be paid for, and, though the gods are kindly, there are as many vengeful and resentful devils as there are gods.

The carnival falls at the craziest season—April, when the heat is almost intolerable and nobody has too much money, having paid the taxes and the money-lenders' interest, so there is a fine feeling of equality, with common enemies to execrate.

There is also a yearning in common to cut loose and thumb rebellious noses at authority, so the underpaid and not too numerous police receive a lesson in self-restraint; a policeman's head, struck by a long stick, cracks as easily as any one's; the police station is of wood and would make a lovely bonfire. So the police stand by, while Narada eats, drinks, dances, sees the sights, marries and gives in marriage, is irreverent, sings naughty songs, quarrels and makes it up again, wears out its finery before some of it is paid for, and does all those things that good books say should not be done —because next month it must begin all over again working for the landlord and the money-lender.

The sun beats down on that exuberant emotion and ferments it, under the eyes of Brahmin priests, who understand a little of the law of give and take. The more impertinences now, the more abject the reaction presently; the little money fines and penitential gifts will mount up to a huge sum in the aggregate. Meanwhile even the lousy sacred monkeys feel the will to be amused and steal with twice their normal impudence, acquiring wondrous and enduring bellyache from plundered sweetmeats.

Passion of all sorts blossoms, and there are more sorts of it than most men guess. Scores of species of holy mendicants arrive from all the ends of India; so do the astrologers, clairvoyants, ordinary fortune tellers, conjurers, snake charmers, acrobats, sellers of love philters, preachers, teachers of how to get rich quick and gamblers to show how

swiftly to get poor again, owners of fighting quails and fighting bantams, story tellers and proprietors of peep shows. Each sort makes its own noise, and the din adds madness to emotion.

Murder stalks abroad. Why shouldn't it? Life and death are one, admits Narada. Death must have its innings. We might even see a murder, and get excited about it, and help to confuse the police, if we are lucky. Hot? Yes, horribly. Dusty? Whew! We sweat, and dry dust sticks to us. But let's go and see the sights, the free ones first.

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Since the legendary Gunga *sahib* reincarnated and became Ben Quorn, and the Ranee made him superintendent of her elephants, the royal elephant lines have been the finest circus in the world. So Quorn had thousands of visitors all day long; and because he was homesick for the gray fogs of Philadelphia he was more than usually kindly. His strange, agate-colored eyes had frightened people in Philadelphia; but here, under a light blue turban, they suggested rebirth from the storied past, so that it was no wonder that people who believe implicitly in reincarnation should insist he was a national hero come to life again.

Was he not exactly like the image of the Gunga *sahib* on the old wall of the market place? Had he not miraculously tamed the terrible Asoka when Asoka ran mad through the city? And was Asoka not the name of the sacred elephant the Gunga *sahib* rode in the ancient legend? And wasn't it fun to know how mad the temple Brahmins were, since they had had to

bow to public clamor and admit that the Gunga *sahib* truly had come to life in the body of Quorn from Philadelphia?

Some one—nobody knew who, but some one—had explained that Philadelphia means the City of Brotherly Love.

Could the Gunga *sahib* come from any better place than that?

So Quorn answered questions and wiped sweat from his face until his throat was dry and he was so weary that he had to sit down on the upturned packing case beside Asoka. There he could watch all of his four and thirty elephants, each under its own enormous tree, within a compound wall that was carved from end to end with legends of gods and men.

Since Quorn came, every one of the elephants had learned new tricks; and he was generous, he staged a fresh performance every hour or so. The Ranee was generous, too, or else Quorn had persuaded her; there was free lemonade in such amazing quantities that the mystery was where all the lemons came from; and the lemonade was pink, which was a miracle, but it made Quorn feel less homesick.

He had always loved a circus—always had loved elephants, although he never knew why and had never had dealings with them until he came to Narada as caretaker of some abandoned mission buildings. Accident, according to his view of it, or destiny, according to local conviction, had caused him to climb on Asoka's neck one day when he was idly curious.

Asoka had chosen that moment to go into one of his panics, had burst his picket-ring and had run amuck through the city. Quorn had stuck to him because there was nothing else to do; and when the elephant had stunned himself at last against a

wall, it was Quorn who gave him water and a cool bath in a garden pond—Quorn who coaxed him back to sanity.

It was in response to popular clamor, and only incidentally as a political move against the temple Brahmins that Quorn had been promptly put in charge of all the elephants. Nobody expected him to make good; not even Quorn had expected it. Miracle of miracles, his love of elephants had proved to be a film that overlay his natural genius for training them.

And Quorn loved his job. But he was lonely.

There was only Bamjee with whom to be intimate—Bamjee, the ex-telegraphist *babu*, who had sat at his instrument and learned so many secrets, of so many important people, that he had finally been appointed to the lucrative post of royal purchasing agent as an inducement to hold his tongue.

The only other man to talk with now and then was Blake the British resident, a gentleman so far above Quorn's social standing that, in spite of mutual respect, anything like intimacy was out of the question. Actually, at times, Blake and Quorn were suspicious of each other.

Secretly, Blake was determined, at all costs, even at the risk of his official career, to keep the Ranee on her throne and to support her modernizing efforts. Openly, Quorn was her stanch and loyal servant, cheerfully willing to run all risks and to defy temple Brahmins or any one else in her behalf. But Blake's official position as resident agent of the British-Indian government obliged him to seem critical and sometimes even threatening, so that the two men did not always understand each other.

As for the Ranee, there was no understanding her at all. Like Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth and Napoleon, she had blossomed at the age of nineteen and burst suddenly into full maturity of intellect and statecraft. The last of her royal race, she resembled a marvelous flower on a dying vine, whose whole strength had gone into this last effort.

Raised within the customary *purdah* that prevented contact with the outer world, she had contrived, with the aid of Bamjee, who would do anything for money, to import books and to learn three languages. She knew everything that has been printed about Napoleon, Frederick the Great, George Washington, Lincoln and Grant. She had read modern novels, and was more familiar with modern views than many people are who see newspapers every morning. And she had unbelievable courage. She had broken *purdah* and defied the temple Brahmins.

If she had been ugly it might not have mattered so much, but a beautiful young girl arouses comment, and when she rode through the streets in breeches with no women in attendance, even those who benefited by her modern views were scandalized.

She opened hospitals. She superintended sanitary improvements. She pulled down rat-infested tenements and built new houses for the poor. And—deadliest offense—she defied the Brahmins' wrath by refusing to do penance for having broken the rigid laws of caste.

In consequence, her throne was rather less secure than if it had been raised on powder barrels. The temple Brahmins were doing their utmost to produce anarchy, so that the

British-Indian government would have to intervene and either reduce her to the status of a puppet queen or, possibly, depose her altogether. Everybody knew that. Quorn, in particular, knew it. That was why he staged the daily circus. They were her elephants; they should help to make her popular.

"Not that them Brahmins won't get her," he reflected. "If not one way, then another. Poison." He shuddered. He, too, had to guard against poison. "Snakes. Knives in the dark. Accident. Them Brahmins only has to drop a hint or two and some crazed ijjit sticks a knife in some one else. And if she goes, I go—same way probably."

He looked up at the elephant again. "I'd start for Philadelphia to-morrow, but for her and you, you lump! Do you know what they'd do to you if I should up and leave you? They'd order out the troops and the machine gun."

That was absolutely true. Nobody but Quorn could manage the tremendous beast. And Quorn knew that the Brahmins were trying to stir public opinion to demand the summary execution of Asoka as too dangerous to live. They hoped by that means to be rid of Quorn; he might go home to Philadelphia if his beloved elephant were dead.

Quorn's perfect understanding of that phase of the situation was another reason for his taking so much pains with the daily circus; he hoped to make Asoka as well as the Ranee more popular. But he kept constantly close to Asoka, because Bamjee had warned him that an effort might be made to poison the great elephant with something deadly inserted in a tempting piece of fruit or sugar cane.

Fortunately, Bamjee also was anathema to the temple Brahmins. As the Ranee's purchasing agent it was he who had

suggested buying tons of liquid disinfectant and a spray, with which even the sacred temple precincts had been drenched for the protection of the crowds who came in carnival month.

To say that the Brahmins were annoyed with Bamjee is to understate it altogether. They were in a state of fanatical mental constipation on account of him. Nothing could restore their equanimity as long as Bamjee was alive and at liberty to pocket ten per cent commissions for inflicting what they considered outrageous sacrilege. And as long as Bamjee could pocket ten per cent commission, he would commit anything under the sun.

So it was obviously Bamjee's cue to keep Quorn posted as to developments. They quarreled very frequently about the quality and price of the corn and sugar cane supplied to the elephant lines, and Quorn had repeatedly earned Bamjee's contempt by refusing to accept a percentage of Bamjee's commission. But hardly a day passed without Bamjee visiting the elephant compound and pausing for a chat with Quorn. He came now. And, as usual, although he would have hated to have to admit it, Quorn was glad to see him.

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"Maraj is in town," said Bamjee.

"The hell you say! Tell the police."

Bamjee was a pleasant-looking little man, in a gray silk suit and a turban of the same color, blinking through platinum-rimmed spectacles. But he could look as contemptuous as the devil himself. The first part of his answer was drowned by the noise of a snake-charmer's bagpipe and the drums of itinerant

troupes of acrobats, but presently he came closer to Asoka and sat on a box beside Quorn.

"The police would resign in a body," he said, "if they were told to capture Maraj. Self also. Am get-rich-quick exponent of materialistic fallacy of me first—fallacy because of risks incurred in course of same. Like any other speculator, might go broke. Like any other egotist, might tread on toes of wrong rival and be disemboweled with a dagger—funeral to-morrow afternoon, and nobody, not even you, to pity me, because I took too many chances. But there is one chance that I do not take. I do not monkey with Maraj."

"Hell," Quorn answered. "One mean murderer, without caste or backing—who's afraid o' that man?" He knew better, but he wanted to draw Bamjee. "I've heard say Maraj is one o' them Chandala people—folk that are reckoned worse than hyenas—ain't allowed in cities—lower than sweepers—insect-eaters—bums—filthy, no account savages too skeered to look at you excep' sideways."

"They are," said Bamjee. "They are worse than that. It may be true that Maraj is one of them. But have you heard of Thuggee?"

"Thugs?" said Quorn. "Who hasn't? They were stamped out. They were the guys who used to wander about the country killing total strangers with a handkerchief—just for the love o' killing. Am I right?"

"Yes, but they were not stamped out. They invented another way of killing, that is all. Death by suicide. There is humor in that. It is better than murder. He who is murdered is not guilty of his own death, but whoever commits suicide is doomed to wander endlessly in total darkness, earth-bound on the lowest

layer of the astral plane. All religions seem to be agreed on that. Even I, who have no religion, nevertheless believe it. This new form of Thuggee, therefore, dooms its victim to almost endless misery in an astral madhouse. Maraj invented it, or so they say. His allies are the Chandala, who are allowed to rob the bodies and who cover up his tracks and run his errands. You can guess who his employers are, can't you?"

"Do you mean them temple Brahmins pay him?"

"I am not so crazy. And they are so far from being crazy that they pay for nothing. A hint—that is enough. Not even such a cunning devil as Maraj could last long unless he had protection. Nothing for nothing. How does he pay for protection? He acts on hints. He overhears two Brahmins saying so-and-so is an undesirable. There is another suicide. Nobody guilty—nobody caught—only a whisper, and the name Maraj is more dreaded than ever."

"Do you mean he kills 'em and makes it look like suicide?"

"Not so. If he is forced to kill he makes it look like accidental death. Almost always he succeeds in making them kill themselves, and there is no possible doubt about its being suicide. All sorts of ways—clever ways. Bullets. Hanging. Poison."

"Ye-e-e-s. Maybe. But that ain't suicide if they don't know what they're doing."

"But they do know. Mr. Quorn, they do know. That is his ingenuity—his creed—his purpose—his religion. It is not enough for him to kill their bodies; he must doom their spirits also."

"That guy seems to be fixing up a lonely future for himself. Even in hell there won't be many o' his kind. Well, it's pretty near time for my act. But what's the point of all this? You aren't skeered, are you, that he'll suicide me?"

"There is no knowing," Bamjee answered. "Don't say I didn't warn you. The temple Brahmins are your enemies. Maraj is in town; and Maraj is more cunning than chemicals that make no noise but work in the dark and change something into something else."

"Mind yourself," said Quorn. "I'm going to unhitch this critter."

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The crowd divided down the midst, making a lane along which Asoka moved with ponderous dignity until he reached the circular roped arena in the center of the compound.

Asoka's mood seemed perfect. He knew that the crowd wondered at him, and he enjoyed it. He quickened his pace as he neared the arena, as if he liked doing his tricks, and he commenced the first one before Quorn ordered it, limping around the arena on three legs.

According to Quorn, he was the only elephant in the world who could turn a somersault; he did it three times. Then he walked on his hind legs; he walked on his fore legs; he played the drum; he lay on Quorn without crushing him; he picked him up and swung him, as if his trunk were a trapeze; he sat and begged for biscuits as a dog does.

He caused roars of laughter by opening an umbrella and sauntering around the ring, holding it at the proper angle to the sun, with a two-foot dummy cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth. He was so well behaved that he ignored the oranges the children threw to him until Quorn told him he might pick them up.

And last of all—his most hair-raising trick—he pretended to get angry with Quorn and chased him until he caught him, swung him in the air as if about to hurl him to the ground, but placed him on his neck instead and started leisurely back toward his picket under the neem-tree.

"Not so bad, you sucker. If you make yourself all that popular," said Quorn, wiping the sweat from his face, "they're liable to forget some o' your peccadillos, such as smashing up the market place and what not else. Hey—steady now! Don't spoil it!"

But a naked fanatic whose type of holiness was dancing with a dozen snakes twined on his arms and neck had forced himself into the lane between the thronging crowd and blocked the way, giving a technically perfect exhibition of the dance of death. The crowd watched spellbound, making no room on either side of him.

Asoka began to gurgle. There is no truth in the tale that elephants fear mice, but some of them fear snakes, like a man in *delirium tremens*. Asoka hated them; they made him hysterical. Quorn shouted to the fanatic to get out of the way, but the ash-smeared, naked seeker of salvation only danced the harder, making his snakes weave themselves in writhing patterns. He even began to dance toward Asoka.

Quorn shouted to the crowd to make the fool go somewhere else, although he knew they would rate it sacrilege to interfere with any one so holy. He even yelled for Bamjee, knowing that Bamjee had no fear of sacrilege; Bamjee might have courage enough to whip the fakir off the lot. But Bamjee had vanished.

Quorn tried to turn Asoka back to the arena, but the crowd had closed in behind and on either flank; there was no room to turn quickly. And suddenly the fanatic flung his snakes straight at Asoka's face. He might better have pulled the lanyard that fires a cannon. He stood still, waiting for results, perhaps for half a second.

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It appeared to Quorn—and Bamjee afterward confirmed it—that during that half second some one shouted in a strange tongue to the fanatic, who glanced, as if toward the voice, exactly at the moment when Asoka launched his charge.

Asoka may have meant to kill him, or he may have been merely hysterical and in a five-ton hurry to get home to his snakeless, comfortable picket by the neem-tree. It made no difference. The fanatic was in the way. He became a crimson mess that writhed as his snakes had done, crushed flat where Asoka trampled him in passing.

Quorn heard mocking laughter and knew he was meant to hear it, since it was pitched above the din the crowd made, but he did not dare to look to right or left; he had one purpose now—to keep his elephant from trampling the crowd that was milling in mob hysteria.

There were only fifty yards to go, and he discovered that he could guide Asoka easily. The elephant responded to the least touch. He was not in one of his tantrums.

"All right," said Quorn, between his teeth, "that guy committed suicide and you, you're not guilty o' murder. But who's to prove it? They'll get the Maxim out and shoot you full o' holes, you sucker! Hell, no—home's no use to you—keep going! Keep on going! You for the tall timber!"

There is nothing on four legs faster than an elephant for half a mile. Bamjee was by the back gate; it was he who opened it. Asoka charged through like a gun going into action and Quorn heard Bamjee shout to him something about Maraj. But his ear only caught the one word, because behind him the compound was full of the din of the crowd and Asoka, too, was not moving his tonnage in silence.

Beyond, lay the open road, dusty and winding between ancient trees that were the fringe of a forest, and Asoka seemed to know he must run for his life; but to make sure Quorn emphasized the information with the goad, the iron *ankus*.

"Give her the gun now! Step on it! You great big bone-head, think up your own alibi while you run! And then tell me where to hide you! Jumping gee whiz, who can hide an elephant?"

# CHAPTER II.

## INTRIGUE IN THE RANEE'S PALACE.

Nights are noisier than days when Narada is keeping carnival; and they are lovelier, because the colored lanterns sway amid a mystery of trees and the roofs of nearly all the ancient buildings are limned in dim fire. Shutters are closed; thieves are abroad. But doors are open; shafts of yellow light cross narrow streets; the passers-by are gaudily dressed humans at one moment, phantoms the next.

Friends and their families sit in the doors, adding din to the din. Men, women, children sleep in any corner they can find, or on the tiled floor of the market place, or in mid-street, reckless of the traffic; shadows are avoided for fear of treading on an unseen sleeper, or a drunken one who might have lost his feeling of inferiority and found his knife. There is even a certain amount of highway robbery; people wander in groups, and those who have no friends follow any group that has the kindness to endure them.

There was therefore something suspicious and worthy of comment in the way that Bamjee hurried through the city. He was alone, he avoided groups as much as possible and he kept in the shadows wherever he could. He knew Narada intimately, inside out, and yet he wandered like a lost man and selected streets that almost everybody knew were dangerous.

He passed by gambling houses, near which the strong-arm gentry lurked to rob the winners on their way home.

Somebody snatched his watch-chain.

He was so out of breath and excited that he made the mistake of trying to elbow his way through a marriage procession. Sixteen sweating dancers paused from their contortions in the colored lantern light to hold him while their overseer beat him with a long stick; then they flung him into the crowd and the crowd bullied him, not knowing who he was, until he left his gray silk jacket in their hands and escaped down an alley, where he fell over a sleeping woman, who yelled to her husband—a lusty peasant, who gave chase, crying thieves and murder.

Bamjee had to stop and bribe the peasant to let him alone, nor was the peasant satisfied until reasonably sure that he had all the money in Bamjee's possession. If he had known Bamjee, and had not been a simple peasant, he might have suspected that Bamjee did not keep all his money in one pocket.

The strangest part was that Bamjee did not head toward his own three-story house in the bazaar, with its office on the ground floor and living quarters above, where his family were keeping supper for him. He appeared to dread pursuit and yet seemed equally afraid of running into some one who might recognize him.

When he saw a policeman he ducked down an alley as swiftly as when he saw a group of temple Brahmins and their attendants armed with staves to keep the crowd from defiling them with its touch. He avoided all the temples, yet seemed deadly curious to learn what the crowds around the temples were discussing; several times he took advantage of deep shadows to approach and listen. What he learned excited him and sent him dodging again through shadows.

It was toward the palace that he headed finally, constantly glancing over his shoulder, and now and then pausing in doorways to make sure he was not being followed. He did not go through the main gate, where the men on sentry duty knew him and the officer was so involved with Bamjee in intricate schemes for grafting off the public treasury that one might suppose he would have to be friendly. Friends may be as dangerous as enemies—especially that sort of friend.

When Bamjee passed the main gate he took advantage of a four-wheeled, tented wagon going the same way to screen himself from observation. Out of breath though he was, tired though he was, he displayed the agility of a youngster when he came to a part of the wall where stones were missing and the branches of a huge tree offered means of descent on the other side.

However, his wits were tired, too. He forgot that that tree stood in an inclosure in which a sacred white bull cultivated boredom and a loathing of all bipeds. The bull was hardly larger than a big dog, but at least as active and not at all in love with being awakened in the night.

Bamjee fell almost on top of him. There was sudden and tremendous noise. Bamjee went out over the six-foot wall of the inclosure faster than a monkey, thanking a whole pantheon of gods that he did not believe in, because his pants and not his thigh muscles had caught on the bull's horn.

One pants-leg was still intact; by holding onto the other as he ran, he could make himself believe he looked presentable. It is what we believe that matters—until there is collision with a stronger disbelief.

He fled like a ghost through the trees in the palace garden, skirting the portico and the terraces until he reached the servants' quarters and the back door used by underlings. There was nothing normal about that; Bamjee, as official purchasing agent with a position to keep up before the world, had never felt he could afford to be admitted to the palace by any except the front door. Suspicion reared itself against him, blackmail springing from it, as naturally as Minerva from the brow of Jove.

He was greeted by a *hamal*, which is a kind of go-between servant who normally does all the butler's work, and gets and deserves all the blame for whatever goes wrong. The *hamal* refused to recognize him at first, although he did concede the advisability of standing in the dark to talk. Blackmail abhors witnesses as absolutely as nature abhors a vacuum.

"I am Bamjee!"

"By Siva's necklace, that is an easy thing to say and any one might say it in the dark. But Bamjee *sahib* has the name of being a liberal gentleman."

Bamjee had to feel under his shirt for money, and it was so dark in that corner behind the butler's pantry wall that he could not see the denomination of the bills he drew forth. He had to guess.

He guessed wrong. It was too much money for a *hamal*.

"Son of an immoral mother, hide that in your belly-band and take my message."

But the *hamal* turned toward the light. He saw a fifty-rupee note. He hid it with the swiftness of a roadside conjurer.

"But, Bamjee, *sahib*, my day's work is over. I am not even allowed to enter the kitchen again until to-morrow morning. Will to-morrow not do?"

"Do you know what *now* means? Ingrate! If the nowness of the now does not make you act swifter than dynamite I will see to it that you have no job to-morrow morning. You are out—a screech-owl screaming in a wilderness of debt with a wife on her way to another man's arms and your children following the chickens through the streets to pick up food, unless you take my message now! Now, do you understand me? Go before I beat the teeth out of your head!"

"But, *sahib*—"

"Very well, I will make a great noise and summon the butler. I will tell him you offered to sell me some of the palace silverware for one-fifth of its weight in rupees."

"*Sahib*, the butler would demand at least two hundred rupees to take such a message at this hour. Whereas I, if he should catch me before I whisper to one of the maids, could bribe him with only fifty. So give me fifty more and I will do it. Thus I shall have only forty for myself, because I must give the maid ten—at least ten."

Bamjee paid him in the dark and was so impatient and excited that he never knew that he had given the man an extra hundred by mistake. He sat down in the dark and waited—endlessly it seemed to him, while the *hamal* sent the message up in relays to the roof, each relay offering excuses and objections until the last possible cent had been squeezed from

the man below and the *hamal's* hundred and fifty dwindled to a hundred.

It appeared there was a party on the roof; it was no time to interrupt a royal lady, even though she was breaking every canon of tradition by entertaining men in her palace, and of the two men one an Englishman. Even Bamjee, the contemptuous skeptic, shuddered at the idea of an Englishman drinking champagne with the Ranee on the palace roof. It made him repeat to himself the dark names certain temple priests were calling her.

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The message reached its goal at last and there was no more lost time. It might be difficult to reach the Ranee from below, but when she commanded from above it was as if she pressed an electric button and things happened. Men leaped to obey.

A very important palace personage was sent to guide Bamjee up a labyrinth of stairs and passages; and because his pants were torn he was supplied with an Indian costume of crimson silk before he was ushered into the presence, amid a fairyland of colored lights, in a garden that bloomed in tiled flower beds, where baskets that seemed to have been fastened to the stars swayed gently in the night air, drenching it with the scent of musk, and a splashing fountain filled the air with music.

There was other music also; women behind a marble lattice-work were playing flutes; a man was singing the love-song of the bride of Krishna. Bamjee, stepping out of darkness with the colored lamp-light on his crimson costume looked no

longer like a *babu*; he resembled an ambassador from Araby, bringing news of caravans loaded with spices and slaves and jewels.

He even forgot his nervousness to some extent, because Marmaduke Brazenose Blake was seated smoking in a lounge chair, dressed in a black dinner jacket, with his monocle fixed in his eye and an air of bachelor enjoyment like an aura all around him. It was such a scandal that Blake should be there that Bamjee grew for the moment almost superior to his surroundings—almost, but not quite.

Facing Blake sat Rana Raj Singh, prince of a line of Rajput blood so purple that its sources—so men say—are traceable to when the gods made merry on the earth with men and were a trifle more than merry with the women. Tall, black-bearded, handsome—graceful with the litheness of a swordsman who can hunt the gray boar with a sword on horseback, who has lived clean and neither drinks nor guzzles.

His presence was, if possible, the more scandalous. Blake, it might be presumed, might hardly understand the horror of the Indian aristocracy if it should learn that he was sitting *vis-à-vis* the Ranee on her sacred roof—and she unveiled. But they would know that Rana Raj Singh understood the significance, even as Bamjee did. It meant that the pillars of Indian aristocracy were falling—or else changing; and to some people change is as bad as decay. Rana Raj Singh was a cataclysm, not a scandal; compared to his presence there, Sodom and Gomorrah were a minor incident.

But the Ranee, even at nineteen, which is a revolutionary age, had not thrown all tradition to the winds. She had kept its substance, while throwing away the shell. She had ten of her

ladies with her, five on either hand—surely sufficient witnesses to prove to any jury that she had not sinned as deeply as Mother Eve, who set the first unveiled example.

Nor had she forgotten strategy. Her ladies were as marvelously dressed as flowers in the early morning dew, but none of them was younger than herself and some were older; none was as good-looking. Her dress was the plainest and made in Paris by a magician who knew how youth should look beneath a hot night sky amid the smell of musk and the rustle of palm leaves.

Although Bamjee knew her well, and had seen her often, in that setting she made his sharp little eyes almost snap from his head, and took away all his remaining breath.

"What can it be, Bamjee, so important that you must intrude at this hour?" she asked pleasantly. But underneath the velvet voice there was a hint of iron. It might not fare well with Bamjee if his errand lacked justification. "Speak," she said. "The company will excuse you."

"Sister of the Starlight, this is terrible and secret news I bring," said Bamjee. "Is it wise to spread the scroll of evil before strangers' eyes?" he quoted.

"Who, then, is the stranger?" she asked him. "Speak, fool!"

"But, Daughter of the Dew, there are the servants—"

"Oh, very well." She clapped her hands until the chief attendant stood before her. "You and the servants have my leave to go until I send for you again. See that none waits in hiding behind the flower pots—and now," she said, staring at Bamjee. "What is it?"

"The elephant Asoka slew a man."

"I know that. It is a great pity, even though the man who was killed seems to have been almost as disgusting a reptile as the snakes that crawled like vermin on him. I am sorry to say that Asoka will have to be shot, unless—perhaps you have come to tell me some way out of it?"

"Playmate of the gods, they are saying that the man who was slain was Maraj! He was crushed out of recognition. Who shall say it was not he?"

"Who should want to say it was not Maraj? If such good news is true your intrusion is justified. We may forgive Asoka."

"Lioness of Heaven, it was not Maraj! Maraj himself has spread that rumor and the temple Brahmins are confirming it. Why? Why not? Whoever thinks Maraj is dead is less on guard against him. Nevertheless, although the temple Brahmins are helping to spread that rumor, to you they will make no such pretense. They will send to you to-morrow. They will say the slain man was a holy one and they will try to force you to order the troops to shoot Asoka. Why? Because that would cause Quorn to leave Narada and return to the United States, thus depriving you of your Gunga *sahib*, who has been so helpful in breaking the Brahmins' tyranny. This they will do to-morrow, nevertheless knowing that it was Maraj who slew that fakir with the snakes!"

"Maraj who slew him? What then had Asoka to do with it?"

"The man was suicided!"

"Hell's bells!" muttered Blake, and Rana Raj Singh scratched the chin beneath his beard.

"How do you know this, Bamjee?"

"Beloved by the Rishis, if I should dare to tell you—"

"If you should dare not to, Bamjee—do you wish to resign from your post as purchasing agent? Do you wish to leave Narada? Do you wish the auditor to publish the report that he has shown me privately?"

"Oh, my God!" said Bamjee. "This *babu* is on the horns of a dilemma! How do I know it was Maraj who suicided that abominably holy person? I know it as well as I know I also shall be suicided if it ever leaks out who told! That very holy person was the man whose poisonous serpents were employed to slay Ali Gul the Moslem money-lender, whom all hated. Was he slain? No. He was suicided. Why not? Had he not a mortgage on a property that the Brahmins said was their property? Was the mortgage found after his death? No. He also had a mortgage on a property of mine. Was that found? No. Were any of his papers found? No. How was he suicided? He was given his choice between taking a living cobra into his bed that night or being accidentally caused to break a vial of carbolic acid with his face. And how do I know that? His widow told me. How did she know? She was in the secret cabinet where Ali Gul used to hide witnesses to what were supposed to be secret conversations."

"This story sounds fishy to me," remarked Blake and Rana Raj Singh nodded, but his nod was neutral. He was possibly confirming his own estimate of Blake's neutrality. Blake turned to the Ranee. "Of course, your highness, as your guest

I cannot take official cognizance of any of this. But may I ask to be excused from hearing more. It might be awkward."

The Ranee smiled as sweetly as if she were Machiavelli himself in woman's raiment. Blake, as the official representative of the British-Indian government, with authority to advise and keep watch and report, was no bugbear to her—not though on the strength of his reports the British-Indian government might send commissioners to rule in her name and reduce her to the status of a puppet-queen. He was a sportsman and a gentleman—insuperable handicaps in dealing with a woman who understood both qualities and had the wit to play the game according to his rules, but with her own rules added.

"I might need you," she said, gazing at him. "For the present let us call this a private conversation. Confidential—under the seal of hospitality. Then, if it gets too serious, I could consent to your breaking the seal of confidence, without having to tell you it all from the beginning."

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Blake should have taken his leave. But he loved her too well, in a fatherly, middle-aged bachelor fashion. She was too amusing to be left, and also too likely to do something recklessly behind his back that might cost him months of letter-writing to his government to explain away. He was lazy and hated writing letters. His purpose was to keep her on the throne in spite of her own recklessness, and in spite of all her enemies, if he could manage it by any gentlemanly means. He repeatedly risked his own good standing with his government to cover the strategic errors due to her inexperience.

"Highly irregular," he said, frowning. "However, I will stay if you wish."

And then came Quorn—at first a message from him, saying he was downstairs in the front hall threatening mayhem to the palace servants who kept him waiting there.

"Daughter of the Dawn, he uses strange oaths, yet he is not drunk."

Then Quorn himself, treading the heels of the servant sent to bring him—Quorn in his turban, with a ready-made blue serge jacket on over his Indian costume, and in his right hand the *ankus* of office, the iron hook with which he normally controlled Asoka's ponderous movements. Servants standing near him shuddered at it. The Ranee dismissed the servants.

"Miss," he began, then hesitated, being vague on the subject of etiquette. Besides, Blake's presence bothered him. He liked Blake, but he was too much a restraining influence on the Ranee to be suffered without some resentment. Also he knew that Blake disliked that form of address to a reigning Ranee.

The Ranee nodded. She liked Quorn to call her miss—it sounded so enormously more honest than titles such as Bamjee and her servants used. She valued Quorn more highly than a dozen Blakes, and at that without robbing Blake of credit. It is only fools and knaves who undervalue one man because they recognize the different merits of another. She was neither a fool nor more of a knave than any statesman has to be.

"Yes, Mr. Quorn?"

"You heard what Asoka done, miss? 'Tweren't his fault. He was behaving gentle as a lamb. That there holy feller went

and beaned him with a raft o' snakes that would have made a temple statue throw a fit. And mind you, it was done a-purpose. Some one laughed. Maybe you don't know the kind o' laugh I mean! There's Brahmins at the bottom of it, them there temple Brahmins. I've been home to clean up, miss, and my Eurasian servant Moses had an earful for me. They've been bragging to him—told him now you'll have to order out the Maxim squad to shoot Asoka first thing to-morrow morning."

"Have you any suggestions to offer, Mr. Quorn?"

"No, miss—excepting, if you will pardon me, miss, and no insolence intended—I'd as soon they'd shoot me first. I couldn't tell you, miss, how much that critter means to me. And he weren't guilty. No, miss, he didn't even throw a tantrum. He was same as me or you if we'd had poison snakes thrown at us.

"And the devil who did it had time to get out o' the road, too. He was one o' these here fanatics. He chose that way o' dying. Miss, it wouldn't be fair to shoot Asoka—not for that."

"Where is Asoka now?" she asked him.

"Miss, I've got him hid."

Because she was young and not yet spoiled by life, the Ranee did not sigh relief, she smiled it. It was Blake who sighed. Rana Raj Singh grunted.

"I have heard of hiding needles in a haystack," said the Ranee. "Are you sure that no one knows where you have hidden him?"

"No, miss, I ain't sure of nothing. But I'm reasonably sure."

"How will you feed him? Can't they follow you when you come and go?"

"That's just exactly it, miss. I want leave of absence, please, and some money."

"My steward shall give you money. Yes, you may have leave of absence."

"There was something else, miss." Quorn glanced sidewise at Bamjee, whom he trusted at any time about half as far as he could see him.

But the Ranee had a trick of trusting untrustworthy people in the same way that some people skate on thin ice, going where others don't dare to go. It pays if you can do it; and if you can't you only drown, so it doesn't matter.

"Listen to this, Bamjee," she said. "Listen well. It would do your credit with me no harm if you should happen this once —this first time—to be loyal and secretive."

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Bamjee smirked a protest of his loyalty. He bowed acknowledgment of trust. He opened his eyes and snapped his mouth shut, symbolizing secrecy. He threw a chest. Manfully he held his hands behind him. He deceived the Ranee as thoroughly as a child deceives its nurse at hide-and-seek.

"I will order the treasurer to hold up for the present all the money due you for commissions," continued the Ranee. "And now, Mr. Quorn, what is it?"

"This, miss. Them there Brahmins. I figure you're number three on the Brahmins' list. They mean to get Asoka first, me next, and then you. If they can force you to order Asoka shot, that gets rid o' me automatic. I'd go home. You could get along, o' course, without me, easy.

"But you can't afford to have them Brahmins bragging they put one over on you. So I'm here to say I'll stand by you and take all chances o' black magic, and snakes, and this here murderer Maraj, if you'll okay me."

"What do you mean—okay you?"

"War, miss! War to a finish! Back me until I get this guy Maraj and prove him on the Brahmins! Flynn ain't my name. I'm no Pinkerton or Burns. I'm plain yours truly with his goat got and his dander good and riz. There won't be no widow or orphans if they get my number. I wrote my will the other day. I named Asoka; he's to have my bit of insurance money. If Asoka dies first, then it goes in a lump to the feller that gets the crook who killed him. Only, if Asoka should be executed, then the money goes where it can do the most harm; I've named a gang of reformers in the States who'll make more trouble for the Brahmins with my bit o' money than Asoka himself could if he tore loose at one o' their celebrations. So that's that, miss. Are you in on it?"

She nodded. Blake looked nervous; he knew the danger of what Quorn proposed.

Rana Raj Singh, thrusting his jaw forward, stroked it, running his fingers through his beard.

"My God!" said Bamjee. "You bequeath your money to an elephant?"

"Mr. Quorn," said the Ranee, "I appoint you my special agent to investigate Maraj and his association with the Brahmins. You may kill him wherever you find him. You may give whatever orders you please. You may employ the troops, the police, my palace servants, Bamjee—any one. I will put that in writing and sign and seal it. If any one refuses to obey you you may have him put in prison. If you catch Maraj or kill him, and if you prove he was in any way associated with the Brahmins, I will raise you to the rank of *Sirdar* and I will use what influence I have with Mr. Blake to get the British government to confirm the title. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, miss."

"What else? You seem to have something else on your mind?"

Quorn looked straight at Rana Raj Singh—very straight indeed, but he could see Blake's face at the same time, and he knew better than vaguely what was going on in Blake's mind.

As an independent prince without a fortune, but with a tremendous reputation, who was modern enough to woo the Ranee in the modern way, Rana Raj Singh would be a deadly dangerous spark to plunge into the magazine of local politics. His interference might provide excuse for riots. On the other hand, he had a handful of Rajput followers, than whom there could not possibly be better and braver or more willing experts at hunting a murderer down.

Rana Raj Singh slowly rose out of his chair. He nodded at Quorn. He smiled at the Ranee, showing wonderful white teeth. He smiled at Blake. Then he nodded at Quorn again.

"You will need help," he said. "I will provide it. You may order me, too."

"Oh, my God!" said Bamjee.

That was reasonable comment. When a prince, whose pedigree is older than the proudest European king's, submits himself to the disposal of a man of an alien race, whose business is training elephants and whose pedigree dates from just before the time when births in Philadelphia were legally recorded, it is thinkable, even by Bamjee, that the two of them are first-class men.

Blake actually dropped his monocle, and had to screw it in again. The Ranee's ladies fluttered with astonishment.

The Ranee looked with wondering eyes from Quorn to Rana Raj Singh and then back again. Quorn stiffened himself, caught Rana Raj Singh's eye and answered him with four words:

"Sir to you, sir."

# CHAPTER III.

## THE ART OF THUGGEE.

Say this for England: a Residency is a place where any one is safe, no matter who he is nor why he has taken refuge. Since '57, when they held the Lucknow Residency against as long odds as were ever laid against a garrison, it has become a part of India's superstition that a Residency is inviolable.

The upper classes recognize it as an embassy or legation, with all that implies; the lower classes don't reason about it, but even the criminals respect it as a sanctuary, where life at any rate is safe until the law determines otherwise. No violence in Residency grounds.

"Quorn," said Blake as they left the palace, "I'm going to take you up behind me on my horse and ride you to the Residency. I've a notion you may have been followed here, and they may be on the lookout for you. I will talk with you—unofficially—after we reach my quarters."

Blake's whaler mare behaved abominably, not being used to the weight of two men, and Quorn was no horseman. They clattered on the stones beneath the guardhouse gate: they plunged and lunged along the street outside, shying at every shadow; and they made so much noise that all Narada might have heard and seen and recognized them.

However, nothing happened, and Blake's servant, running alongside, reported that, as far as he knew, they were not being followed—until they left the zone of partially lighted streets and plunged into the pitch-dark lane between high

walls that led toward the Residency compound. There the servant fell and smashed his lantern.

Blake reined in, and Quorn jumped down to help the man. He could hear him sobbing. He groped for him in total darkness, finding him—feeling him just as the sobbing ceased. He could feel two men. They were both dead.

"Got a match, sir?"

Blake passed him a box of matches. Blake's Moslem servant, Abdul, lay dead of a knife wound. He was lying prone on another man, who lay face upward and who seemed to have been dead for quite a little while before Abdul tripped and fell belly downward on the long, razor-edged knife whose hilt was in the dead man's hand.

"But there's another, smaller blade below the hilt, sir," Quorn reported, striking match after match. "It's one o' them there weapons that can be used as sword and dagger. The shorter blade is stuck into the dead guy's stomach; that's what held the knife upright.

"Yes, sir, Abdul is stone dead. The long blade passed clean through him—there's three inches of it sticking out of his back. If you should ask me, he couldn't fall that hard. I'd say not. There's something tricky about the way the lamp was smashed—as if it was knocked out of his hand on purpose. Would you care to look, sir, if I hold the horse? It looks to me as if some one jumped on Abdul's back and forced him down on the knife."

"Are you positive he's dead?" asked Blake.

"As dead as mutton."

"Well, the thing to do is to get his body to the Residency. Which shall it be? Will you run on and bring back any of my servants you can find? Or will you wait here while I gallop and get them?"

"Go ahead, sir. That's the quickest. Do you pack a gat, sir?"

"Do I do what?"

"Carry an automatic?"

"No, confound it. Here, are you sure both men are dead? Get up behind me then and we'll both go. That's safer."

"No, sir, I'll be all right. I'll stay here. You hurry."

It was Blake's off night. No human being ever lived who did not make a murderous mistake at one time or another. Blake rammed in his spurs and thundered down the dark lane like a whole troop of cavalry. He made enough noise to drown the shouts of ten men, and his own shouts, to his servants, as he neared the Residency, were enough to deafen them to any noises Quorn made—not that Quorn made any.

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He hardly knew what struck him. He felt a stinging blow from behind and smelled the misty stench of a burlap gag that was thrust into his mouth and wrapped around his head.

He struck out blindly with his fists, but hardly felt his wrists seized and pinioned, hardly felt his ankles being tied before he became unconscious from the blow—or perhaps from some drug with which the gag was soaked; it tasted beastly.

He had seen nobody; he had heard no sound; he could not even swear that a cry had escaped his own lips.

He recovered consciousness within a dark room and lay listening to voices that, for a long time, seemed to be inside his own head. It seemed to him he was home in Philadelphia. His taxicab had been in some sort of smash-up—his first. He felt ashamed, and afraid for his license. After awhile he shook off that feeling, but the voices seemed to come from another world—inhuman, without emotion, hollow.

At last, though, he was able to recognize a few words in the local native tongue, but it was a long time before he could make any sense of what was being said. There was an argument—hot on one side, ice cold on the other. One man was urging action, to which the other appeared insolently indifferent.

"If you don't kill him now—"

"I know my business."

"He is probably listening!"

"Let him."

"Can't you understand that the Englishman, Blake, will raise such a hue and cry that—"

"I have understanding. I am not in need of advice from you."

"By Jinendra's nose, I am not giving you advice! I order you!"

"Order somebody who will obey you—some priest, for instance. I am no temple rat."

"Too much success has made you insolent."

"No. I was always insolent."

"Suppose we should turn against you?"

"That is not hard to imagine. You are sure to do it sooner or later. I am not afraid of you. You know why. Cease talking. You annoy me. It is not safe to annoy me."

Some one took a cover off a lamp. The light hurt Quorn's eyes; he shut them for a moment. When he opened them again a man was squatting beside him, gazing at him. He was a man with a big head, crowned with a shock of shaggy hair that seemed to have been bleached to the color of new manila rope.

He had dark eyebrows and a shaggy, dark beard and mustache that half hid and yet exaggerated the coarseness of a big mouth, around whose corners a sort of humor lurked. His nose was coarse and honeycombed with pock-marks. His big, full, deep-set eyes had humor of a sort too, but it was cruel humor; they would have been splendid eyes if they had had more color, but they were so light—gray, blue, green perhaps—as to look hardly human.

"Why do you not go to the United States?"

It was the bored voice that had pleaded insolence. Quorn lay still, trying whether he could move his wrists and ankles, wondering whether he could break the man's neck if he had his arms free. He felt an impulse to kill.

Quorn was a man who had almost never raised his hand in violence; certainly he had never contemplated doing murder; he would have been willing to bet all his money, at any time, that he never would commit murder, and would never wish to do it. Yet he felt now he would almost rather kill that man

who gazed at him than go on living. There was nothing to argue about, he just wanted to kill him.

"Do you wish ever to see the United States again?" the man asked him, in the same cold, incurious voice.

Quorn did not trust himself even to try to speak. He was working hard to regain possession of his senses, which recognized, in the man who was talking to him, something vaguely suggestive of his own peculiar influence over animals.

Nevertheless, he had never pretended to understand that influence; and this man's was not quite the same, it seemed reversed, although to save his life Quorn could not have explained the difference. Black magic was the thought that came into his mind. His head felt woozy, and he knew that was only partly due to the blow, only partly due to the drug he still tasted; there was still something else that he felt he could fight and overcome.

"Understand me," said the man, and he spoke English with only a trace of accent, "you are physically at my mercy—absolutely. I can kill you slowly or quickly, however I please, in my own time, in my own way, for my own pleasure. Sit up. I will show you something else."

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He seized Quorn's shoulders and raised him until he sat with his back propped in the corner of a wall. His strength appeared to be prodigious; it produced in its victim a sense of helplessness that had nothing to do with the cords around wrists and ankles. It was like the strength of machinery.

"There is a fool here," he said, "who has wearied me."

Quorn discovered it was painful to turn his head; however, he managed it, and decided he had not been badly hurt. He was in a small square room with whitewashed walls. The only furniture was heaps of gunnysacks, that looked rat eaten, and a small glass lamp on an upturned packing case. Another man sat on a heap of sacks, whom Quorn recognized at the first glance as the individual used by the temple Brahmins as go-between, whenever they had business with persons with whom their caste forbade them to associate—a man in a long yellow robe with a variation from the Brahmin caste-mark on his forehead—a sort of bastard Brahmin, a metaphysical eunuch, authorized to touch defilement in the name of holiness without infecting his masters.

"You shall watch him die."

As if he had been shot out of a catapult the other man made headlong for the door. But the door was locked.

"You would escape from Maraj? In what way are you more clever than all those others? Come here."

His panic-stricken effort having failed, the man seemed paralyzed by fear. He turned ashen gray, trembled, unable to speak. The man who had called himself Maraj reached out with his right hand, seized him by the ankle, twisted it, drew him forward, changed his hold to the shoulder and hurled him back on the heap of sacking—all with one hand and without much noticeable effort.

"I will not kill him. He shall kill himself."

At those words the man found speech at last. He jabbered, stuttered, threatened, pleaded—until his voice died to a

meaningless mumble and his jaw fell.

Then Quorn spoke for the first time:

"Out with the light, you idiot!"

The advice came too late. The Brahmin did make a move toward the lamp, but the other man seized his ankle and twisted it again until he screamed and struggled like a landed fish. Maraj then put the lamp up on a beam; he had to stand on the box to do it.

"It is time to die now," said Maraj. "Which way do you prefer? Painless, of course. They all seek painless ways, as if that made any difference! Die! Do you hear me? Kill yourself!"

He turned to Quorn: "The poor fool threatened me. He had the impudence to order me. He said he would betray me unless I slew you out of hand. He could do it, too; he could have betrayed me easily if I had let him. But he hasn't much intelligence. Let us see which way he chooses."

He sat down close to Quorn and waited, watching his victim, who seemed several times as if going to speak—and as if then the uselessness of speech occurred to him. He even seemed to try to summon dignity, but found none.

"What will you do?" Maraj asked. "You have no knife—no rope. How will you kill yourself?"

Quorn spoke again, surprised by the impersonal aloofness of his own voice, that sounded as if it belonged to some one else.

"Why not have a crack at killing *him*, you idiot!" he heard himself say to the terrified prisoner, "I'll help you if you'll

loose me some way."

Maraj chuckled. "Why not?" he suggested. "Would that not be suicide? Try killing me!"

The man found speech again. Quorn's voice seemed to have stirred lees of manhood in him. He spoke in the native tongue cold-calmly, every word a concentrated curse.

"You offspring of all the dogs that ever lay in filth! You soul of stinks! You carcass of—"

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He rushed him suddenly—and died that instant. He who had called himself Maraj stepped sidewise with the skill of a toreador in the arena. No eye could have followed the speed of the silken handkerchief that licked across the man's neck and killed him infinitely more neatly than a hangman's rope.

It left no mark on him. It severed him from life; and was out of sight again before the knees could yield under his weight and let him begin falling to the floor; and yet he fell as if there never had been life in him nor any bones to keep him straight.

"That is the art of Thuggee, so-called," said Maraj. "Isn't it brilliant? In a world where so many forms of death are messy, what do you candidly think of a so-called government that tries to stamp out and abolish such a mystery as that? Mind you, it is a mystery. It is more than an art.

"You couldn't learn it—not in fifty years—not even though I should be fool enough to try to teach you."

He rolled the body over with his foot, then sat by Quorn again. For a moment or two he paused as if turning over matters of importance in his mind. Then:

"Don't you think they ought to make me public executioner? It would make me so happy. It would save them so much trouble. Often I make a victim really kill himself, but that fool's fear was of the sort that is not easy to control. He was not sentimental. You are. Where have you hidden your elephant?"

"He ain't mine," Quorn answered.

"Liar—or else imbecile! You have no bill of sale for him; therefore he is not yours, eh? Show me a bill of sale then for the death you will presently die! Will it not be your death? Ownership! Where is the elephant?"

"He belongs to the Ranee. Ask her."

"You mistake me, I think, for a worse fool than she is. Your Ranee's hours are numbered. I said hours, I should almost have said minutes. These pretty ones—young ones—they taste sweeter on the teeth of death than carrion like that thing." He kicked at the corpse on the floor. "Does she love life? Will she cling to it? Ah, then what a sacrifice to death! Mn-n-n—what an offering! You love her, don't you? And that elephant loves you? Ah! You shall kill her. Then you shall see me kill the elephant. Then I will kill you. Perfect! Look at me."

He peered into Quorn's eyes, leaning over him. If he was human he hardly seemed so. Mania, as if it were a monstrous spirit from another plane of consciousness, had entire

possession of him—a monster to whom death was life and cruelty was beauty.

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***Maraj glared at him—a monster to whom death was life and cruelty was beauty.***

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Not for nothing had Quorn handled elephants in all their moods; he recognized the likeness of the thing that seized Asoka now and then. Only this was more developed—had more intelligence. He had thought of it, when Asoka threw his tantrums, as the spirit of one of nature's cataclysms, weary of blind energy and seeking a sensual outlet. But this man seemed to have the spirit of all evil in him.

"Death is a devourer—hungry. One must feed death daily, if he wants to live. Keep death fed full—and live forever! Hah! Feed life—and die forever! But you are too silly to understand that. I understand it, that is the point. You shall obey me!"

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Quorn lay still. He was thinking elephant. How did he manage Asoka when the fits of frenzy seized him? Let him run—offer him no opposition—hang on and wait and pretend to be one with him, seeking the same goal with the same wrath. Pretend to encourage him. Get him to use his strength

against some obstacle that did not matter. Get him to exhaust himself, and at the first chance get him to believe he had done all his havoc by request. It had worked all right; the tantrums were fewer nowadays. Something of the same sort might work now—maybe—a bare chance—worth trying.

"Hell!" said Quorn. "What's all the yawp about? Do you kid yourself you're tough because you kill a few poor suckers? Yah! You don't know what tough is! You should see 'em where I come from."

"You mistake me," said Maraj. "I have been where you come from. Toughness has nothing to do with it. The tough ones die the easiest. They love life and they dread death, though they think they don't. They dread passion; therefore they are its slaves. I love passion; therefore it is my slave, even as a woman who is properly loved is the slave of a man."

"Aw, hell! That's talk. I've heard 'em on a soapbox handing out a better line o' yawp than that—bolshevists and such like. Show me. Talk don't mean nothing. I can't teach a guy to drive an automobile by singing songs to him. I got to show him. Show me. I won't believe a word of it until you show me."

All the East asserts that there is no such thing as luck, yet Quorn had stumbled on something that the men of science labored for a century to find—and doubted then. To save his soul he could not have analyzed it or have put it into plain words. What he knew, by the change in the maniac's eyes, was that he had touched off something that might presently give him the upper hand. He had gained time. He had flattered cunning. Cunning proposed to magnify itself before it had its climax.

"Why not show you? Knowledge increases suffering. Suffering is cruel. Cruelty is the delicious essence of all nature. It is essence that I seek. I find it daily. Do you understand me? Essence."

"Hell," Quorn answered, "any fool could understand that. Essence? Huh!"

"You are ignorant, but I will teach you. Ignorant men don't suffer much, not even in this world, under torture—although I know tortures that are exquisite, and I will show you several. Suffering increases as the square of knowledge. Do you know what that means? The suffering of this world is as nothing to the infinite agony provided in the next. Those who suffer genuinely here take with them an increased ability to suffer. They add to the hell—to the hell—to the hell! Do you understand me? Spiritual, mental, infinite, eternal hell! Ah-h-h! So I shall show you, I will teach you. You shall not go forth in ignorance. You shall be a delicious morsel for the spiritual fiends of torment. What does this life matter when you have eternity in which to revel in the blistering, nervous dissonance of death?"

"It don't matter a damn—not a damn," Quorn answered. "That's an easy one."

"Where is your elephant?"

"I can find him for you any time. Say, all you've said is talk so far—lower grade stuff. You've got me interested, but you haven't proved a thing. I saw you kill that sucker, but, hell—that weren't much; I could have killed him myself with half a brick. You show me something A-1—genuine magic. I'll name the stunt—you do it. If you win, I join your gang. How'd that be?"

"You will be my disciple? You will yield your soul to me? You will try to learn what I shall teach? Hee-ee! That would be amusing. You will go mad, but never mind. What do you wish me to do?"

"I'll set you an easy test. Put one over on them temple Brahmins. Put it over on 'em good, mind. Trick 'em—trap 'em—show 'em up—bring shame on 'em—reduce 'em to a common joke. Then set yourself in place of 'em—me under you. I'm game if you are. The folks say I'm Gunga *sahib* come to life; that ought to make it easy if you have imagination. Maybe you haven't—you haven't showed me any yet. How about it?"

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There was a long pause. Maniac imagination thrilled itself with ecstasies of vision—Brahminism going the way of all things mortal, only in an agony more awful than any sane man could invent. Watching the maniac eyes, Quorn played his trump:

"'Fore I'd reckon you worth learning from, I'd have to see you out from under them temple Brahmins' influence. Hell, they've been giving you orders. They've been claiming they protect you. Yah! I'm not the thousandth o' what you are, yet I wouldn't let that gang claim they was protecting me. I'd show 'em different. You show 'em where they get off, and I'll join you, elephant and all."

Maraj looked keenly at him. Quorn's face was as innocent as any actor's. The blind spot that is in the brain of every

maniac, however supernormal his intelligence may be, permitted vanity to smother cunning.

"You'd better let me go and get my elephant," said Quorn. "Come with me if you like," he added, noticing a sudden constriction of the irises of the madman's eyes. "Then you make all the plans, remember. This ain't my problem, it's yours. I'm yours if you work it out right. Anything you say, I'll do, barring that I don't have to kill nobody until the temple Brahmins quit, and fire a lee gun, and haul their flag down. Get me? After that I'll kill as many as you say."

"Tell me," Maraj leaned over him again. "Do your wrists hurt? Does the cord cut your ankles?"

If the East is right and there is no such thing as luck, perhaps luck is a form of genius. Again Quorn stumbled on the key to freedom, though he paid a high price.

"Yeah, it hurts fine. I like it," he answered.

"Hee-ee! You do? You like it? Try this. Is it exquisite now?"

He knew where to touch the nerves that carry torture to the brain. Quorn writhed, but the lamp threw shadow on him. Maraj had rolled him over on his face. Quorn's quivering and grunting might be masochistic ecstasy.

"You will do, you will do for a pupil," said Maraj. He cut the cords; Quorn almost sobbed with the relief. "That is not a bad beginning. I can teach you. You shall learn that pain is the only pleasure. Go now. Go and find your elephant."

"Are you coming with me?" Quorn asked.

Sudden fury seized the maniac. "You witless idiot!" he shouted. "Who are you to dare to question me, your master?

Do you think I need to watch a fool like you? Can you escape me? Try it! Go before I—"

He made a gesture as if to produce the handkerchief with which he could kill with such consummate art. Quorn staggered to the door, in torture from his rope-raw ankles. It was locked. His wit deserted him; he could not imagine what to do. He glanced at the glass lamp on the beam. With his ankles in that shape could he jump up from the box and smash the lamp, and take a chance in darkness? He decided he would try.

He had gathered his strength for the spring when he heard voices. Something on the outside struck the door. He heard the hinges give. He saw Maraj spring, swinging for a moment like a monkey on the beam—spring like a monkey again and break an opening, feet first, through the thatched roof. Blake burst in then—Blake and half a dozen servants. It was like a dream.

"Here you are, eh? Hurt much? Had a hard time finding you. Hello—who's dead? Well, I'll be damned—another murder, eh? Oh, look out there—catch Quorn, or he'll tumble. Lay him on that sacking."

# CHAPTER IV.

## THE BABU AND THE BRAHMIN.

Rats are credited with instinct that enables them to leave a ship some time before it sinks. Bamjee had perhaps evolved beyond that animal characteristic without losing the desire to practice it. He was as fearful and as fearless as a rat—as full of cunning and as energetic—as suspicious and as keen on testing information for himself. What he lacked in actual intuition was compensated by peculiar alertness.

He was not at all afraid of venturing so near to a trap, or even into one, that a sneeze or a sigh would have snapped the spring. But he was difficult to catch. And being an incredulous, irreverent, observant rat he understood the ways of temple Brahmins—which is more than quite a number of the Brahmins do, since, like the rest of us, they are, generally speaking, lazy and accept as truth much untruth as their seniors believe it wise to tell them.

"My God!" said Bamjee to himself, when he had shed the palace finery and once more held his silken pants-leg as he flitted through the palace shrubbery in quest of secret foothold on the palace wall. "My God! If she should order that cursed auditor to tell the truth about me—Krishna! Women in authority are worse than men. They are more cunning. They are willing to let themselves be cheated, so as to have you by the short hair. And they hang on—dammit! Dammit! Dammit! On the other hand, should she lose her throne, this *babu's* job is gone. The auditor would see to that; I should have paid that scoundrel a better percentage—maybe

—maybe—but beggars on horseback ride you down. To hell with them. And if she wins this battle with the Brahmins she will probably dismiss me anyhow and try to find an honest man for my job. There aren't any. She will ruin herself learning that the honest men are too big fools to be trusted. But that won't help poor Bamjee. This *babu* must climb on fence, part hair in middle for balancing purposes and be ready to jump kerplunk into the arms of either side with nuisance value well established."

For a beginning he climbed the palace wall in total darkness, leaving his pants inside the palace grounds. He did not propose to go home yet, partly from fear that his movements might be traced. It might not matter if they were traced, but—

"If I should choose to qualify the truth a little, it might be awkward if some liar knew where I actually went. I can do my own lying, thank you. And it costs less."

So he found a small storekeeper who owed him money and who felt flattered by being aroused from bed by such an important personage. To him he told a long yarn about having been stripped by thieves—

"And if it were known that such bad thieves lurk in your neighborhood, where there is only your shop and a few stables, you might find yourself in bad with the police, who would come and search you—and you know what that means! So you had better say nothing about it."

He bought several yards of cotton cloth and dressed himself native style. He also bought a cotton turban, wrapping the silk one carefully around his body underneath his shirt, and into that he tucked his remaining money.

"Now perhaps I can venture homeward without being robbed," he remarked to the storekeeper; and having started homeward because he was sure the storekeeper would watch him out of sight, he made a circuit and went hurrying in the opposite direction.

His goal now was the Pul-ke-Nichi—the long, narrow thoroughfare on the far side of the city, that dipped down between two mounds, on which the temples of Siva and Kali stood, connected by an ancient bridge. He had no fear of not finding Brahmins awake.

"Two things would wake them anyhow," he told himself, "the chink of money; and the least little whisper of smelly, secret news—they love it."

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He was tired to the bone, but he solved that problem. To the pious horror of the temple Brahmins the Ranee had recently installed a modern hospital in that part of town in charge of a young Sikh doctor, who was nothing if not keen on getting cases. There was a motor cycle ambulance, and a night bell.

Bamjee rang the bell, gave a false name and told circumstantial details of an accident. He offered to show the way to where the victim was, and the doctor decided to drive the ambulance himself; his presence on the scene, instead of the ignorant ambulance man, might save the victim's life.

So Bamjee lay in comfort in the ambulance while the doctor drove at full tilt through the city, missing the legs of sleeping men by inches, clearing the way with his horn and breaking all the rules of even reckless driving with a confidence in

destiny and disregard for risk that would never occur to any one except a Sikh intent on winning laurels for himself.

And in the dark trough of the Pul-ke-Nichi, where the bridge cast pitch-black shadows and there were too many sleeping nondescripts for even a Sikh to take that chance of killing some one, Bamjee stepped out of the ambulance to find the supposititious victim—

"Compound fracture of both thigh bones, doctor, and the ribs of both sides—one arm broken also, and perhaps internal injury—a very interesting case."

That was the last the doctor saw of him. He slid into a shadow and followed it beside the ponderous wall of Siva's temple.

There he was challenged. Two men in yellow robes ran out and blocked his way. They scurrilously mocked his glib confession of sinfulness and a desire to meditate on the omnipresence of death in life and life in death. They called him a casteless miscreant, who might go and mock his lady mother on a dung hill. So Bamjee was obliged to change his method.

"Business," he whispered, "with the high priest! You are undoubtedly 'twice born,' both of you, to make you twice as stupid as you look, but you had better tell the high priest Bamjee is here. Yes, Bamjee! Yes, Bamjee—the man who caused your temple to be defiled with Johnson's Jubilee Germ Exterminator! Bamjee with a message for the high priest—sounds important, doesn't it?"

There was whispered consultation. One man took the message and the other stayed. There followed prickly silence for a space of fifteen minutes, broken into irregular intervals

by the impatient honking of the Sikh doctor's horn, until the messenger returned.

Bamjee was to be admitted—not into the temple, but into the cell across the courtyard in which virtually unclean visitors were sometimes as an act of mercy, blessed through a hole in a wall of the temple basement. So he was soused with water that had been treated by incantation, hustled across the courtyard along a row of flagstones that were also immunized against the tread of ritually unclean feet, and thrust into a bare stone chamber. Bamjee shuddered as the door slammed shut behind him and he heard the bolt slide home.

"Oh, my God!" he said. "What a man won't risk to save his neck!"

On three or four walls little lamps were burning, leaving the door in shadow. In the wall that faced the door there was a round hole, showing that the masonry was ten feet thick; the hole was trumpet-shaped, its small end inward; Bamjee did not dare to examine that very closely until he had blown out two of the three lamps and adjusted the wick of the third.

"But they will hardly dare to kill me," he reflected. "Nobody knows I was not seen to enter here. Phuh—death is an unpleasant topic—let me think of something else."

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He examined the stone chamber. There was no window. He could hear nothing except his own blood surging in his veins. He crept close to the wall and peered very cautiously into the trumpet-shaped hole, but could see nothing; it appeared to be closed at the far end. However, presently he heard a shutter

slide in iron grooves at the end of the hole in the wall. A voice spoke angrily, complaining that the lamps were not properly lit in the chamber. Another voice offered to send an attendant to light them.

"No, but discover whose fault it is. Impose a heavy penance. Go now. Close the door."

"Is that the most holy and reverend twice-born confidant of gods and treasurer of wisdom who presides over all the Brahmins of this temple to be an example to men and a blessing to the world?" asked Bamjee. "Humbly then I kiss feet. Humbly I ask blessing."

Through the hole came the mumbled perfunctory formula. Then:

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"All-wise, I am Bamjee bearing bad news."

"Because, for the sake of your pocket, you defiled this temple, you are doomed for a thousand lives to be a blind worm in the belly of a dog!"

"I know it! I know it! I sinned and the sin is on my head. (*Dog of a Brahmin! Humble am I? You shall pay for it!*) But may I not commence to purge my sin? (*Purge your own, you old tyrant!*) This *babu* has had sudden change of heart. Some god has probably observed what wrong this *babu* did (*You old devil, I'd like to drown you in a tub of sewage!*) and stirred an impulse to do better and to make amends. Oh, Most Wise—*Muddle-head*—if this *babu* has wrought evil, you yourself will do worse evil unless you give him opportunity to make compensation for his ill deeds! Am contrite! Am able to do

valuable service. Am, above all, ab-so-lutely bent on telling truth and nothing but truth. Pity me and listen!"

"You shall be heard."

The shutter squealed back into place along its iron grooves and there was silence again so almost absolute that Bamjee knew he would go mad if it should last long. He could hear the noises in his head that are so quiet and so intimate that we are unconscious of them until real silence stimulates hearing and imagination invents mysterious reasons for them. Silence is no sedative. It arouses self-analysis. But in Bamjee it also aroused a saving sense of humor.

"Yes, am rogue undoubtedly. Am that sort of person. But it takes *all* sorts of persons to make a universe, and I did not create myself—unfortunately. Had I done so this poor *babu* would be billionaire—most estimable personage, with lickspittles by the dozen to say to him, 'Yes, *sahib*' and 'marvellous' and 'such high-mindedness'! Instead of which, even these rascally Brahmins dare to call me a low-minded nasty crook! No, this *babu* did not build the universe. Not guilty! And by Krishna, who is a legend, and by Ingersoll and Bradlaugh, who lifted themselves by the seat of the pants in order to prove there are no such things as miracles, these noises in my head will give me religion unless I watch out! Ah!"

Somebody was coming. The door bolt rattled. Bamjee was himself again, and by the time the door opened he looked like an idol made of hardened india-rubber, squatting with his back against the wall.

"Such hospitality! Such courtesy!" he exclaimed. "You have a mat for yourself, I see. Bring two mats. This stone floor is not

salubrious to sit on."

The partly opened door slammed shut again.

"High priest is one thing," Bamjee remarked to himself. "High priest's deputy assistant walking alibi is camel of a different smell. Noose that would neatly fit neck of high priest would not make finger-ring for expert alibi. Must use ax—verbally that is—plus irritant. An irritant deputy assistant alibi is good—as ginger under horse's tail—will kick his master into difficulties. Now then—"

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The bolt rattled again. A temple servant entered, threw a mat on the floor and walked out. Bamjee spread the mat and sat on it, resuming his look of molded impassivity.

A Brahmin entered, well-fed, rather athletic-looking, haughty, with the self-esteem derived from a monopoly of wisdom, carrying his sacred mat under his arm. He spread the mat as far away from Bamjee as he could and sat down, muttering incantations calculated to preserve him from contamination.

"I kiss feet," Bamjee murmured with almost as much perfunctory insolence as the Brahmin conveyed with his answering, equally formal, blessing.

"You are a spy," said the Brahmin.

"I am," said Bamjee. That admission rather took the Brahmin's breath away. He blinked perceptibly. There was a long pause. Presently: "You have the impudence to try to spy on us?"

"Have? No. Had? Yes. No further need. Have found out what is necessary. Business of bargain now."

"Miscreant! Who would bargain with you?"

"Any sort of half-wise, sanctimonious sweeper of crumbs of sanctity who did not want to pass up any wise bets."

"Do you know what happens to fools who are disrespectful to the Brahmins?"

"I know what happens to Brahmins who shut their eyes to opportunity. They are just like other people—only more so. Esteeming themselves higher they fall harder and it hurts worse. This *babu* is versed in several theologies, including atheism and relativity—perfectly familiar with theory that all is illusion and nothing provable. Am possibly a hypothetical assemblage of imaginary atoms, saying nothing to nobody in a vacuum abhorred by nonexistent nature. Nevertheless, you kid yourself you are somebody very important. Self, am pragmatist with positivistic tendencies that tell me your fall from your high place would hurt your imaginary feelings more than my fall from my low place could hurt mine. So you had better get down off that high place. It is much more comfortable down here."

The Brahmin scowled. Special sanctity can endure all inflictions except ridicule.

"Concerning what do you wish to drive a bargain?"

And now Bamjee showed genius. He knew he had pitted himself against a system—a morass of metaphysical influence that could swamp any individual as surely as stone age swamps yielded and smothered the mastodons' strength. He who would prance upon swamps requires agility and wit.

Metaphysics must be met with metaphysics; bludgeons are no use whatever.

"Lost in mazes of speculative philosophy, this *babu* seeks something to which to cling—something that somebody else thinks is solid, even if it isn't. If we are all kidding ourselves, why not do it in easiest possible way. You may be right. Your teachings may be right. If they are wrong, it doesn't matter, and if they are right then the sooner this *babu* accepts them the better, not only for me but for you also. If it is true that you have power to bless and curse, I buy blessing! With money? No. Money is imaginary and evasive symbol of gross materialism—much too difficult to get—and of no importance to one of your sanctity. This *babu's* services, however, are for sale, also without money payment. In other words, with swap. My definite and dangerous deeds in this world, against your hypothetical assistance in the next!

"Am, like English Prime Minister Balfour, an honest doubter, doubting own agnosticism and afraid of consequences—if any. Shamelessly, therefore, will sell to you, in this world, now, if there is such a thing as now, all secrets of Her Highness, the Ranee, insofar as they are known to this *babu*, together with this *babu's* allegiance—in exchange for forgiveness of past offenses and recognition as eligible candidate for preferment in after life, if, as, and when. Something for nothing—maybe. But your nothing may be something after all. If so, I want it."

"You speak like a man possessed by devils."

"Many devils. Mad ones. Some so devilish that if you refuse to accept my repentance and to put me on favored waiting list of applicants for spiritual bliss, I will certainly be much more

devilish and instead of working against the Ranee, I will work against you. Instead of telling you what I know about her, I will tell her what I know about you. In other words, if I can save my soul, I will; but if I am to be damned, there shall be no more damnable enemy of sanctity, living or dead, than myself. So now you know. Forgive me, bless me and use my services—or look out!"

"Blessedness can make no bargains."

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"Too bad. Blessedness will wish it were cussedness before I have finished, in that case. I am not afraid of you in this world. It is the next I am thinking about. You can, of course, detain me if you wish, and I know there are dark dungeons somewhere, into which inconvenient enemies of Brahmins vanish. Oh, yes, indeed. I even know where those dungeons are. And I know the names of individuals who have vanished into them. But I did not come here alone, and if I fail to reappear within a certain time there will be reprisals."

"Liar! You came in an ambulance. You gave a false name to the doctor who brought you. You are a servant of the Ranee and an accomplice of that impostor Quorn, who calls himself the Gunga *sahib*. Quorn—even at this minute—is meeting the fate he deserves. You? For you, what evil destiny is bad enough?"

"Oh, well, no use talking to you. Let me go," said Bamjee, covering his agony of fear under a very well-acted cloak of indifference. Cold sweat was bursting out of every pore in his

body and he felt sick at the stomach, but he looked belligerently insolent.

The Brahmin rose, rolled up his mat and made a signal on the teak door, rapping with his heavy finger-ring. The door opened and the Brahmin stood back to let Bamjee precede him.

"To your doom!" he remarked in a strange, startling voice. "Never enter this temple again!"

"Sanctity first!" said Bamjee with a mocking bow of abject reverence. He waited. The Brahmin waited. At last the Brahmin shrugged his shoulders, began murmuring a *mantram* nasally, like an angry swarm of hornets, and led the way out.

His signal, it appeared, was misinterpreted. A long stick, swung with strong hands by a man who hid beside the wall on tiptoe, came down like a pole-ax on his shaved crown. It broke the stick. It cracked his skull. A second stick, from the opposite side of the door, descended on him before the blood had time to burst through the broken skin or his knees had time to give beneath him. Then he fell like a steer and his blood went pouring on the paving-stones.

The apparition—the white, whirling specter that seized half the broken stick, leaped over the body and dived into the darkest courtyard shadow—was Bamjee. One of the men beside the door gave chase—until a shadow leaped to life and the point of Bamjee's broken stick so nearly disemboweled him that he rolled in silent agony, his knees on his chest. Somebody shouted to the men on guard to close the outer gate. There was a clash of chains, the hinges squealed and the

gate shut with a clang in Bamjee's face. But it was pitch-dark by the gate. None saw him.

"Seize him!" a voice shouted.

"Too late—too late!" came the answer. "He escaped us."

# CHAPTER V.

## LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

One reason why Brazenose Blake had been picked for the post of British Resident in Nerada was his genius for official inertia and strictly unofficial action. He could be incredibly indiscreet and get away with it.

A more meticulous observer of precedent and the proprieties would have sent for the police. Blake searched the dead Brahmin's clothing, asked Quorn all the questions he could think of, left the Brahmin's body lying in the hut and took Quorn to the Residency, where, the moment he arrived, he sent a galloper in search of Rana Raj Singh. Then he gave Quorn a carefully measured dose of whisky, personally rendered first aid to the tortured wrists and ankles, bit the end from an expensive cigar, sat down and waited, with his feet on the veranda rail.

"No use getting excited," he said. "You've twenty minutes, Quorn, to lie still and remember all that happened. When Rana Raj Singh comes, you can tell the whole story to both of us at the same time. Save breath and exertion."

So Quorn fell asleep, which was exactly what Blake intended, and when Rana Raj Singh came thundering down the lane at last—only a sound in the night—black suit, black boots, black beard, on a black horse—and drew rein like a landslide at the front door, Quorn had recovered to a point where he could tell his story almost as it happened. But his account of Maraj was understated; he was afraid that if he told the whole

truth, and described the maniac whose picture had been burned into his brain, neither Blake nor Rana Raj Singh would believe a word of it.

"That's all," he said at last. "The next best thing is for me to get back to Asoka before he busts loose and comes looking for me. He's liable to look good. He knows he's only got to shove down a wall to see what's t'other side."

But Blake had not finished yet. "I found this," he said, "on the dead man's body." He unfolded a slip of yellowish paper and passed it to Rana Raj Singh. "Will you read it to us? Do you mind translating it?"

Rana Raj Singh carried the writing to the lantern that hung from a hook on the porch and studied it, stroking his beard, looking almost like a disembodied phantom because the unusual black suit that he had put on shaded imperceptibly into the darkness, offering almost no outline. Then he strode back.

"Temple jargon," he remarked. "A sort of slang in shorthand that the Brahmins use for confidential communications. It appears to me to mean: 'M'—that may stand for Maraj —'bungled elephant affair. Faquir killed uselessly, since no rioting occurred and Quorn escaped on elephant. Find M and tell him he must finish Q'—that is Quorn, I suppose—'or coöperation must cease.' I suppose it means they intend to denounce him unless he kills Quorn. It might mean that. I can't think of anything else it could mean."

"Cinch," said Quorn abruptly. "You keep that, sir, and let's pretend I have it. Them Brahmins'll try all the harder to get me, and we'll trap 'em that much easier."

He watched Blake fold the piece of paper in his wallet. Then he turned to Rana Raj Singh: "Maraj ain't far off. He's as mad as Nebuchadnezzar the king was in them Bible times. But maybe they didn't teach you about Nebuchadnezzar, sir. Anyhow, he's mad, and he's got it all set in his mind to make a devil out o' me. So if you watch me you'll get him easy. But that won't get them Brahmins all compromised up with him the way we want. My thought is, sir, that madmen maybe are like any other kind o' mad critter—one idee at a time but covered awful cunning, so it maybe looks like just plain random cussedness, whereas it isn't. Get me?

"This guy's got it in his head to prove himself superior to Brahmins on all points. He's all set to take a fall out o' that gang that run Siva's temple. They've used him for a heap o' dirty work and me, I heard that dead guy threaten him. They mean to double cross him whenever it suits 'em, and Maraj, he knows it. What's more, he figures two can play that game. So the Brahmins have it in for him and me; he has it in for me and the Brahmins. The Brahmins want to get me first and then him. He wants to get the Brahmins first and then have a good time turning me so crazy that even Satan 'u'd feel jealous. 'Tain't worse than a crossword puzzle. We ought to be able to work it out."

"The thing to do," said Rana Raj Singh, "is to follow you and kill him the first moment he shows himself."

"You'll pardon me, sir, if I talk back?"

Rana Raj Singh nodded. Blake bit another cigar, scowling. All three listened for a moment to a noise outside; it was difficult to guess where it came from, but it might have been close to the compound wall, a hundred yards away.

"If that is Maraj," said Rana Raj Singh, "I expect we have him. Ten of my men followed me. They are rather good at approaching a place silently."

"'Twould be a sin to kill that sucker and let them temple Brahmins get off free," said Quorn. "I'm mean about 'em. Maybe it ain't good manners, sir, to mention your young lady, but she's my employer. I think such a hell of a lot of her I'd take a long chance for her sake and I've no sort o' use for swine that 'u'd try to make her kill a decent elephant. I'd go the limit—and there ain't no limit—just to down her enemies and leave her sitting pretty. I know her as good as anybody does. She'd say, 'Take all chances, Mr. Quorn, and let's win this! Don't let's have another drawn game?' That's what she'd say. Can't I get you, sir, to see it that way?"

Rana Raj Singh's white teeth showed in a slowly widening smile.

"I am afraid you have my promise, Mr. Quorn. You may command me. I obey!"

Before Quorn could think of an answer to that a peculiar whistle—high C, B, C sharp—thrilled out of the darkness not far off. Then a horse tripped on a stone and stumbled. Rana Raj Singh answered the whistle, vaulted the veranda rail, leaped on to his black horse and was gone like a galloping ghost.

Suddenly: "What's that, sir?" Quorn asked in a low voice.

"What?" demanded Blake. "What d'ye mean? Where?"

Any man's hair would have stood on end, and his blood run cold. The end of the veranda was some fifteen feet away, screened by woven wire and hung with creepers. Lamp-light, streaming past the edge of a carelessly drawn blind, made a fan-shaped, milky opalescence in which a tangle of wire and creepers were clearly visible.

Something as irresistible as destiny was tearing that tangle apart—opening it, as curtains are opened down the center. There was hardly any noise. Then, in the midst of the opening, full in the lamp-light, grinned a face—a human face, inhuman as a nightmare.

"God!" cried Blake. "Who is it?"

He mastered himself. He had no weapon. He forced himself up from his chair, and the face vanished. Blake strode toward where it had been, and stood there staring at the broken strands of wire and of creeper that would have been difficult to cut through even with an ax.

Quorn watched him—until a hand came through the veranda railing and seized Quorn's leg in a grip that checked the flow of blood. It checked speech, paralyzing like the cold-iron grip of nameless fear.

Then the face of Maraj came up out of the dark—and the lips of Maraj smiled upward—and the eyes of him gleamed at Quorn. They were like an animal's and Quorn knew they were watching Blake alertly even though they stared so straight into his own eyes. Then the lips moved and a voice that was hardly a voice at all, and yet that carried as distinctly as sounds carry in dreams, said:

"Get your elephant and meet me—"

There was no time for him to finish. Blake was turning, starting back toward his chair. Horses were coming—clattering, cantering, scattering stones, making as much noise as Rajputs always do when they are done with ghostly silence. Quorn felt the blood flow again as the grip ceased from his leg.

"Thought we had him," said Rana Raj Singh, vaulting from the saddle and throwing his reins to a man who galloped up from behind him. "One of my men saw him, another heard him, but he gave us all the slip."

"He was here not a minute ago—there—at the end of the veranda," Blake said. "I distinctly saw him."

"Hell, I felt him!" said Quorn. "Look at this." He held his leg toward the light and drew his trousers up to show the marks where the maniac's hand had gripped. "He ain't far off."

Rana Raj Singh whistled all his men and there began a hunt amid the shrubbery that bade fair to lay Blake's garden waste. Blake ran to the other end of the veranda and slammed a window shut, then ran into the house and locked it on the inside. As he came out he slammed the door and turned the key.

"Fine howdy-do if she should bolt into the house!" he remarked. "Why haven't I a dog? Goldarn it! Never again will I live without a decent dog. Why, even a terrier would—"

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He vaulted the veranda rail and vanished into the darkness to help Rana Raj Singh and his companions search the

shrubbery. Quorn heard the click of the Colt revolver that Blake had brought with him out of the house.

"Too bad if they get him yet," he muttered. "We've a first rate chance, if we use it right, to teach them Brahmins a lesson they won't forget—not in *her* time."

He sat considering the Ranee and his duty to her, wondering whether it was possible, in these democratic days, to be the benevolently autocratic ruler that she aspired to be. He knew there are more than a hundred different kinds of government in India, ranging from a theocratic despotism to the fringes of fascism and socialistic experiment.

"Tyrannies, all of 'em," he muttered. "Maybe she can do it." He spoke louder than he realized—and suddenly he almost leaped out of his chair.

"Of course I can!" a voice said quietly behind him.

It was the Ranee herself, in riding-breeches. He jumped to his feet, but it hurt his ankles, so he leaned against the railing.

"No, you are not dreaming, Mr. Quorn. You talk aloud so often to your elephant that you think aloud when you are alone. It is dangerous. And those others all talk at the top of their voices, which is foolish; but people are ruled by being foolish, not by any wisdom in their rulers. Have you heard of Haroun-al-Raschid—and Peter the Great—and Amir Abdurrahman? Each of them was his own secret service. I follow in their footsteps, in some respects.

"Do please be seated, Mr. Quorn. I came when I learned that Rana Raj Singh had been sent for, and I have been listening. Maraj was within three feet of me—he even touched me without knowing it. Mr. Blake looked straight at me through

the hole that Maraj made in the trellis. How blind men are unless they know what they are looking for! I heard what you said. Have you anything to tell me that you haven't told those others?"

"Yes, miss! You go home! This ain't no place or time o' night for pretty ladies with a throne to lose! Who came with you?"

"Nobody."

"No guards nor nothing? I'll be sugared! The President o' the United States can't move around without he's watched, and he's supposed to live in a safe country. Prince Rana Raj Singh —what will he say?"

"We will soon know," she answered. "I hear him coming."

Blake came up the steps to the veranda. Rana Raj Singh caught sight of the Ranee in the lamp-light and vaulted out of the saddle over the veranda rail. His gesture as he stood before her was inimitable, blended of an Old World courtesy, a lover's privilege, anger, self-control, a sense of outraged dignity, and hopelessness of ever teaching her the elements of common sense. But he was too steeped in dignity to reproach her in Quorn's presence.

Blake had less compunction. "You?" he said. "At this hour? Have you come to claim protection? No? What do you suppose my government will think of a queen of your age who runs such personal risks in darkness? Don't you realize your enemies will represent—"

Her musical answering laugh disarmed him. "I came for sport!" she said. "Politicians are fogeys, but is there any need to lecture Mr. Blake on sportsmanship? Rana Raj Singh is another story. Listen!" She laid her right hand on the Rajput's.

He seized it and the slumbering fire in his dark eyes leaped into passion, but he subdued that.

"When your ancestors in Rajasthan went forth to war," she said, "who held the castle? Women! When your ancestors were slain in battle and the enemy laid siege, who defended the castle? Wives and sweethearts! If a woman had not held your castle against the Mahratta hordes, she ever in the front rank of the fighting, until her son was born and the Mahratta army gave up the siege in weariness—would you be alive to frown at me to-day? You talk to me, and rightly and proudly you talk to me, of the ancient deeds of Rajput men and women. Would you have me something less than they were? This little war we wage against the Brahmins of Narada—is it something that should make a coward of me? You—on whom I count to help me make my throne a power and my people free!"

He bowed dramatically, with a hint of half-grudging good humor. Not yet officially recognized as even her future consort, he was hardly in any position to restrain her. Besides, her logic was not answerable. Logic is exasperating stuff, which women never use unless they wish to defend their illogical intuition. Rana Raj Singh stiffened himself, a grim determination to stand by and face whatever consequences she might bring down on himself and herself simply bristling from him.

"Danger and death are nothing. It is how we die and how we meet danger that counts," he remarked.

"This is neutral territory. Let us talk things over amicably and make a good plan," said the Ranee.

"Neutral be damned!" Blake muttered. He had his eye on a shadowy perpendicular pen-stroke in the darkness—nothing more important than the pole on which, by day, the British flag was raised. He wondered how many treaties and laws were being broken, using his neutral veranda for a jumping-off place in a raid on Brahmins.

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"After all," said the Ranee, "it is me they are after. Quorn and Asoka are pawns they think they have to take before they catch the queen. I wish I knew where Bamjee is. I might send Bamjee to the temple with misinformation that should cause those Brahmins to trap themselves. Bamjee is crooked and unreliable, but I can depend on him to do the wrong thing at the right minute. If you know what somebody will do, then you know yourself what to do. But where is Bamjee? No, he didn't go home. I often have Bamjee watched; it pays. But he didn't go out through the palace gate, so the watcher hunted for him and found his trousers lying near a place where an active man could climb the wall. Bamjee is up to mischief."

"So is Asoka, miss, I'll bet you!" Quorn retorted. "I hid him good, but he won't stay hid long. He has hay enough, but he'll miss me and he'll miss his warm cakes. Folks with long noses like his have a way o' getting so darned inquisitive that rope won't hold 'em. And the rope weren't none too up-to-date. Rats had et some of it. How will I get to him? I can't walk."

"Do you think Maraj would follow if you should go on horseback?" the Ranee asked. "He heard him order you to get your elephant and meet him. Did he tell you where to meet him?"

"No, miss, he was interrupted."

"He is very likely listening to us now," said Blake, leaning out over the veranda rail to peer into the night.

"No," said Rana Raj Singh. "We have searched every bush and shadow. He escaped, but my men are watching. Not a rat could get past them. He may be lurking outside their circle, but he is not inside it."

"Very well then. Somebody give Mr. Quorn a horse," the Ranee ordered. "Let it be a tame horse, one that he can sit on even if he can't ride. And let somebody give him a big white turban and voluminous white clothing, so as to make him unrecognizable. Be sure you shorten his stirrup leathers—otherwise a child would see through the disguise. Let Mr. Quorn go to his elephant and two or three men follow him on horseback at a distance, taking care not to appear to follow him. If they are half wide-awake, they may capture Maraj. If the Brahmins are watching Quorn, some Brahmins might be caught, too. If we had the luck to catch Maraj alive, and two or three Brahmins as well, and lock them into one room—and listen—"

"Don't trust luck. Luck is always with your enemy," said Blake. "Two or three men—could they take that many prisoners? It might take more than three of them to hold Maraj, even supposing they could catch him and tie him."

"I will follow Quorn," said Rana Raj Singh, "and I will take eight men. Let the others be your escort to the palace. It is no man's business to ask me whither I ride at any hour, day or night, so if any one asks—"

"Take all your men," the Ranee interrupted. She looked appraisingly at Blake. "Would Mr. Blake mind riding with me to the palace?"

"Honored. Shall we go now?" Blake answered promptly. He wanted her out of the residency before some spy should recognize her and send secret reports to the Central Government that might keep him writing explanations for a twelve-month.

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"And if this plan fails us?" asked the Ranee.

"Which it will," Blake interrupted. "But it's a good plan, because it sends you back to the palace out of danger."

"If it fails us, there is this: the Brahmins are sure to send a deputation to me in the morning to demand the execution of Asoka and probably, too, the dismissal of Mr. Quorn. I shall refuse, of course, and that will make them far more irritated than they are already. I will publicly arrange to send Asoka to the old hermitage beyond the river. That will be a challenge to them; they claim the hermitage as theirs, whereas it isn't. I will ride Asoka to the hermitage, and I will ride rashly without my soldiers. That should tempt the Brahmins to occupy the hermitage and to attack me on the way, or to cause others to attack me, as is more likely. Rana Raj Singh will provide them the answer to that!"

Suddenly she turned to Rana Raj Singh—touched his hand again. "You and I have quarreled, because I rode from my palace at night, unattended, to the residence of Mr. Blake, who is a bachelor! You are leaving me—riding away in

disgust with all your men! I will spread that story. All Narada shall have heard it by to-morrow noon. So you shall be a surprise to the Brahmins. Watch Quorn—keep yourself and your men under cover—let Mr. Blake know where you are, so that he can find you or get a message to you without any one suspecting you are in secret touch with me." She smiled at Blake. "Everybody knows that Mr. Blake would never stoop to interference in local intrigue, so no one will suspect him—not even his government."

Blake winced. Smoking in a powder magazine is a sane, safe and comfortable form of self-preservation in comparison to overstepping the bounds of diplomatic privilege in India. However, he who coined the motto "safety first" forgot that safety is the enemy of all adventure and of all things new, as well as of the ancient virtues such as chivalry.

"Oh, damn!" said Blake. "Well, go on. What next? I'm in for it."

"Each to his task," said the Ranee. "I go home. If any of you happens to see Bamjee, don't be too rough with him, but send him to me at the palace. Good night, Mr. Quorn. I hope your ankles and wrists will soon get well again." Suddenly she remembered she had made Quorn her special agent with full authority. "Is the plan all right? Is it a good one?"

"Yes, miss. Good as any other, I guess."

"Very well then, it stands. Mr. Blake, shall we let them ride away before you take me to the palace?"

Ten minutes later she bowed to convention enough to let Blake hold her stirrup while she swung into the saddle.

Less than thirty seconds after their backs were turned—almost before the lamp-light ceased to gleam on their horses' quarters—Blake's office window was gently raised and a man stepped out on the veranda. One of Blake's servants saw him, started after him.

The man waited and the servant rushed him. The man stepped aside. A silken handkerchief flickered almost too fast for human eyes to follow and the servant fell face forward, separated from his life as if electric energy had drawn his very nerves into itself. He did not move. He made no sound except the thump of falling. For a second the owner of the handkerchief stood on the rail of the veranda, holding to an upright, listening. Then he leaped into a shadow and was gone.

# CHAPTER VI.

## AT THE FEET OF SIVA.

Siva's temple stands on Siva's breast, which is a hill. Kali is the dreadful bride of Siva. Kali's temple stands on Kali's breast, which is another hill.

An ancient bridge unites the two, and underneath the bridge the Pul-ke-Nichi runs—a narrow street between the hills, a few feet higher than the level of the temple basements, which were excavated century by century until the hills are like honeycombs and no man—except certain Brahmins—knows the secret of the interlacing tunnels or how deep the dungeons lie in the foundations below the basement and the courtyard level.

Nobody knows what happens in the dungeons, or has happened in them. Certainly Bamjee did not know, although he had boasted to the contrary. He only knew that the courtyard where he stood was almost at street level, but between him and the street was a teak door, possibly a foot thick, that exactly fitted a ponderous arch and frame of cyclopean masonry. There was no escape by that route.

Crouching like a rat in the shadow he listened. He heard the gate-men say he had escaped. He heard them reprimanded, heard the order given to keep the gate locked until morning—worshipers were to be told to enter the temple by the small door on the far side of the hill. Bamjee's problem was to get into the temple, in which there was never an hour of day or night that did not see somebody, and normally a number of

people, meditating or clicking rosaries and chanting *mantrams*. From the temple he could walk out through the small door unobserved.

There were two chief difficulties, of which the more immediate was the danger of crossing the courtyard. There was no guessing how many temple attendants lurked in the pitch-dark shadows; it was a hot night and every one off-duty probably had spread his mattress under the stars.

"And such dogs sleep with one eye open," Bamjee muttered.

However, it had to be risked. Another difficulty was that he had dressed as a low-caste nondescript who had no business within those sacred walls. A caste-mark did not matter; that would be invisible at night, but the huge white turban and the flowing cotton garments were a problem. He had to solve that first.

He remembered the silken turban he had coiled around his waist, and the thought of that reminded him that he still had money tucked away.

"Could buy a high priest if I had enough," he muttered. "How much have I? It feels like five hundred rupees. I remember the time when that much would have bought me five times over. I was always better than two Brahmins. That is therefore ten times too much for a Brahmin's honor. He must therefore throw in something. Courage, Bamjee-bhai! If you can escape from this place there is no reason why something besides dirt should not stick to you. I think those gate-men have gone to sleep."

He could hear one of them snoring; of the other he was not so certain. However, he contrived to strip himself stark naked

without making any noticeable sound. Then he bound the silken turban on his head and, timing the sound to the snores of the sleeper, he tore the cotton sheeting until he had enough to make one simple loin-cloth, which he wrapped around his waist. He could now pass for a Chattrya, who had a right to worship, but no right whatever except in a certain section of the temple set apart for non-Brahmin suppliants for Siva's notice.

So far, so good. But to reach the tunnel leading to the winding stairway, hewn out of the rock, that led upward to the temple floor appeared impossible. He could dimly see shadowy forms of men sitting in groups in the courtyard. He could hear the murmur and drone of their conversation. It would be impossible to get by them unnoticed, nor did he dare to risk losing himself in any of the other passages and tunnels whose dark openings loomed like ink-blots in the night.

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He crept toward the courtyard until, on his right, he could see the flight of steps leading to a parapet from which, he knew, the bridge stretched over the street toward Kali's temple. Kali's temple would be worse than Siva's, as far as concerned getting out of it; its priests were not on speaking terms with Siva's priests, whom they regarded as loafers lacking discipline and zeal.

But Bamjee knew that the parapet, and the bridge beyond it, as far as the midway barrier erected and protected by the rival priests of Kali, was a zone where idlers often broke the temple rules unknown to their superiors.

It is not alone in Christian churches that the devil incites the sanctified to shoot craps in a vestry now and then; the critics of Christianity have problems also. Bamjee, seeing that the moonlight streamed down one side of the steps and left the other half in darkness, tiptoed silently along the shadow by the wall and climbed in search of sinners *in delictu*.

"Luck," said Bamjee to himself, "is a hole in the roller of God that otherwise crushes us. I have found one or two in my day. Maybe I find another now."

He did. There were no card parties, such as he hoped for; no surreptitious singing of immodest songs; no drinking—nothing of any blackmail value, until he peered around an image of the temple god, on whose impassive shoulders scores of pigeons slept, and saw a woman, who shrunk herself into a niche in the masonry, weeping. Never a man met misery with greater pleasure.

"Woman," remarked Bamjee, "I disagree with you. It may be you are all he said you are, and worse, but you are not the most desperate person. I am he. I, too, am made incredulous of the divine because I rashly trusted a disciple of divinity. What shall you do? I don't know—until you tell me what the matter is. First you shall tell me your sad tale, then I will tell mine. Thus we may help each other."

She was a pretty, soft-willed little woman of the sort that any rascal can seduce with words that ooze romance, and she had given all she had to somebody, no doubt of it.

But like many another little fool, she had seemed so foolish that her sanctified betrayer had dared to warm his vanity at the flame of her admiration by revealing secrets to her that he thought were safe in her simple mind, and now she only

asked for sympathy to make her bubble them all forth, the last first, in the order in which they crowded memory.

She had not depth enough of grief to be ashamed; she was only sorry for herself. First come, first served; if she had known that Bamjee was an expert at uncorking secrets, she would have told hers nevertheless. She simply had to talk.

"A little cash," said Bamjee to himself, "applied at the proper moment, in the right way, heals all the smarts of ignorance. It is only knowledge that is incurable." So he applied the cash.

He pointed out to her how money pays for care at the Ranee's hospital; and he told her of the Ranee's school of industry where women became self-supporting and were protected from rapacious relatives, so that even lawful husbands could not claim them and collect their earnings. Such talk was like a fairy tale, but the hundred rupees that she clenched in her hand were true enough. So she told the truth, too—first the name of her seducer, then his temple rank, and then, to match those wonder tales of Bamjee's, one by one his secrets.

"And he will come for you? He will come for you here?" asked Bamjee.

"Oh, he must. He will come to get rid of me when he comes off duty. I can't get out of the temple without his help."

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So Bamjee waited, getting her to tell the tale again until she grew suspicious and, having told it all twice over, suddenly decided to be secretive. Bamjee knew exactly what to do with that mood.

"If you say one word more I will ask the Ranee not to admit you to her hospital and to her school after your baby is born. From now on, silence! If you speak when the priest comes, I will tell him what you have told me."

It was late—hardly an hour before sunrise, when the culprit came: a shaven, well-fed, healthy Brahmin, with a long nose and a mouth less cruel than irresponsible. He did not see Bamjee, who had perched himself up on the arm of Siva's statue, disturbing numbers of pigeons that came back and slept on his shoulders. The Brahmin began upbraiding the woman, resuming a conversation where it had been interrupted when he went on duty in the temple:

"How should I know that the child is mine? And if it were, what of it? Do you know how great an honor is intimacy with one of my caste? Do you know the penalty for bringing a Brahmin into disrepute? Do you know the law against adultery? Do you know what your husband can do to you if he suspects that child is not his own? And do you know the penalty for trespassing within this temple? Do you know the sin of ingratitude? Do you know—"

"Do you know who I am?" Bamjee asked him. When he moved he disturbed the pigeons, so that up there on Siva's arm he must have looked amazing at the first glimpse; the Brahmin's imagination may have clothed him in other-world emblems of association with the gods. The Brahmin put the palms of his hands together and touched his forehead. Then he knelt with bowed head.

Bamjee stepped on to his head. He rapped his forehead smartly against the stone work. Then he squatted, and when

the Brahmin looked up it was at Bamjee's platinum-rimmed spectacles.

"Who are you?" he demanded then, angrily, aware that he had made a fool of himself. Perhaps he suspected that Bamjee was the woman's husband.

"Point is, I know who you are," Bamjee answered. "I know what you have been doing and I know what you are going to do."

Recognizing Bamjee as any rate not of Brahmin caste, the Brahmin resorted to the insolence that is the essence of the pretensions of his breed. "Dogs now and then bark at their betters, but—"

"But the betters avoid being bitten sometimes," Bamjee answered. "One thing you will do, when I am ready, is to guide me and this woman from the temple."

"Oh, is she your woman?"

"The whole temple shall know she is yours, at the top of my lungs," said Bamjee, "her lungs also, probably—unless you swallow your impertinence and listen. You will do exactly what I tell you. Otherwise you shall be known as a Brahmin who has defiled himself—and much more also. The Ranee shall learn all about your plans. Oh, yes, I know all about them. No, no, you cannot immure me in a dungeon—not for many minutes. It is known where I am. I am not at all afraid of being caught in here. I am a spy! Yes, certainly, a very good one. And I don't mind telling you who pays me: a committee of the merchants of Narada! What for? They are weary of the Ranee. They desire to know whether or not you

Brahmins are concerting action against her. If so, they will be very generous to the temple treasury, but if not—"

"If not, what then?" the Brahmin demanded.

"Never mind. I know your plans now. They are good ones."

The Brahmin sneered. "You have learned them from that fool?" He glared at the shrinking woman as if eyes could burn her up. Not even the dark shadow of the overhanging statue prevented the woman from seeing and feeling his wrath. In another moment she would have denied having told anything, but Bamjee forestalled her.

"I have said I am a good spy, oh, person of small intelligence!" Bamjee was itching to get away, but he betrayed no trace of it; he appeared willing to talk until after daylight.

"Would a good spy listen to a woman? To a woman with a grievance? I have been all night listening to the twice-born groups of holy chatterers who sweat below there in the courtyard. As for the woman, I only use her as a stick to beat you with, to make you guide me out of the temple. In return I will see you well rid of the woman. I will attend to the woman. You need not give another thought to her. Give her your blessing—and perhaps a little money—"

Bamjee knew perfectly well that no temple Brahmin would give up money to a woman. Thoroughly he understood the money hunger of the men who were supposed to get along without it.

"Money? I have none," said the Brahmin.

"Never mind. If she agrees to be silent, perhaps I myself will give her some," said Bamjee. "I have plenty. The merchants of Narada pay me handsomely, in return for the risks I undertake. How many men are there who would dare to spy into this temple? Daring and intelligence such as mine command a market price. I could even spare you some—perhaps—if you should need it."

"To the giver the reward," the Brahmin answered. "There is virtue in giving."

"Yes, undoubtedly. But"—Bamjee blinked behind his spectacles. He was taking a long shot at a venture, betting on his own imagination and the inspiration of the moment—"who is to guarantee that Maraj will perform his part of the bargain? Maraj bungled that elephant business. It is true he induced a fakir to frighten the elephant, and the fakir was silenced by instant death, but who else suffered?"

The Brahmin's breath was almost taken by the question. Leaning, almost touching faces, Bamjee thought he noticed signs of that snail-like withdrawal into a mental shell that all the East knows how to practice and that is so difficult to probe. So he went on talking, telling what he really had learned from the woman, not what he guessed:

"It is a good plan to demand that the elephant be slain and that Quorn be dismissed from her service. She will refuse both demands, undoubtedly. The next move after that is equally well considered, since she is proud and obstinate and fearless. Let the deputation say to her: 'If true that this monster is fit to live, and that Quorn can manage him, prove that to us. Ride him yourself. Order Quorn to put the howdah

on him, and do you ride in the howdah.' That is excellent, and she will do it, because she is young and foolish and excitable. But who is to guarantee that Maraj will make the elephant unmanageable? Who? Who guarantees that? I have a sum of money for that man, if I can find him. Some now, more afterward. Who is he?"

The Brahmin tapped his own chest. Bamjee nodded, but produced no money yet. He knew those Brahmins.

"How will you go about it? How will you manage a maniac?" Bamjee asked.

"Easily. We would withdraw our protection—he would not last one day if he should fail us. Besides, the old hermitage has been his hiding place so long that he feels like a ghost that haunts it. Maniacs have iron minds. They yield up no obsessions. Rather than be driven from the hermitage Maraj would—anything. There is nothing he would not do rather than yield that hiding place. Part of the plan is to speak to the Ranee craftily about the hermitage, inducing her to claim she owns it. We defy her. She goes for a ride on the elephant. Somebody subtly suggests to her to ride toward the hermitage and take possession. Then I notify Maraj that she is coming to cast him forth. And there will be enough of us near the hermitage to be witnesses that she was on her way to seize temple property. Thus all Narada will know afterward that her death was a just penalty inflicted on her by the gods."

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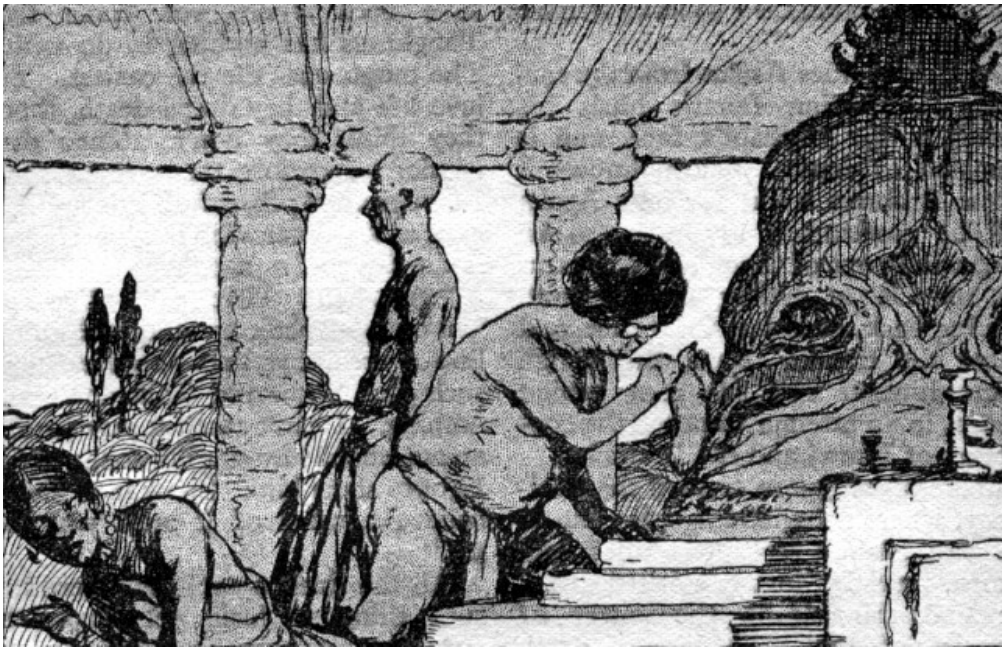
"Are you sure you can find Maraj?"

"Oh, yes, I can always find him. I have only to make a certain signal. Then I meet him at a certain place. Two of us know that signal. One of us is with Maraj to-night. He was to try to persuade Maraj to kill Quorn, but the plan appeared to me ridiculous—too risky—too many chances for Quorn to escape. I am sure he will be back soon saying that the plan failed. I hope it does fail. To-morrow's plan is better because she and Quorn will both die at the same time—Maraj also, perhaps."

"Much better," said Bamjee. "Here are three hundred rupees for you. There will be three thousand more if the plan succeeds. Will you be at the hermitage?"

"Yes. Please bring the money to the hermitage. And now you had better go if I am to guide you and this woman without your being seen."

"Come, woman! Come!" commanded Bamjee. But before he went he wrote his name in pencil on the toe of Siva's image.



***Craftily Bamjee wrote his name in pencil on the toe of Siva's image.***

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"Proof," he muttered, "proof that I have been here might help, if the Brahmins—yes, it might help either way the cat jumps."

Through a maze of passages, in darkness, up and down enormous stairs between enormous walls, they reached a narrow door at last that opened on an alley.

When the door was shut behind them Bamjee sat down on the step. He had his pencil, but no paper, so he tore a corner off his cotton loin-cloth, and on that he wrote a short note to his wife. He gave it to the woman.

"Take it to her," he commanded, "and say nothing until you see me. You will receive food and a bed to sleep in. But

before you go to sleep, remember and remember and remember every word you heard that Brahmin say to me. Now run!"

The woman ran. Bamjee sat still on the step, his head between his hands. He was tired to the verge of hysteria.

"What next? What now? Are there any gods? I doubt it. If there were they would admire—they would inspire me! To the palace? Tell her? Certainly not; she would get the credit and Bamjee would be left out in the cold as usual. Then what? Never mind the danger—danger is the spice of profit. Who—where—what is the key to the riddle now? Quorn is!

"Can I find him? Where did he hide that elephant? Puzzle: find an elephant. Only all outdoors in which to look. And at that he may be indoors. Nevertheless, if I find the elephant I find Quorn. Not there? Only have to wait, perhaps sleep—Quorn will arrive presently. If I can find him, tell him, make him understand, perhaps—oh, damn perhaps! I am a genius—I can be what that idiot Blake calls a god in a box—no, god out of a box. Critical moment, pull plug—save everybody—here—credit—thank you, Bamjee—profitable—very. Where could Quorn have hidden that abominable pachydermatous atrocity? Oh—all that distance?—walk—well—"

Bamjee walked until he found a pony that had stood all night hitched to a shop door. It had a bridle, but no saddle.

"Flagrant breach of regulation number so-and-so—duty of any citizen aware of same to take steps—pony, do you know where the city pound is? Neither do I. Let us look for it. Canter, you hairy curse, or somebody may catch us!"

# CHAPTER VII.

## ASOKA IN HIDING.

The outcast's lot is not a happy one, but there are compensations. The Chandala are regarded as so untouchable that even sweepers will have nothing to do with them. They are not allowed in cities. Such villages as they have are in the jungle, where they are neither taxed nor troubled by the census taker. If they die, they die; and if they rot, they rot; it is nobody's business.

So they are as free as any sort of human being can be, and the proof that they are actually human is that they crave what they have not got—servitude.

They ignorantly ache for a red-hot religion and rules and a boss to deprive them of liberty—a fact which had made it very easy for Maraj to pose among them as a being from another world.

Quorn had merely taken pity on them and employed them to cut grass for his elephants. He had made a number of journeys into the jungle to show them what kind of grass he wanted, and on one of these expeditions he had found a ruined building, roofless but otherwise serviceable. It had been full of trash and brambles when he first discovered it, but he had made use of the elephants to clean it out, and he was using it now as a place in which to hide Asoka from the machinations of the Brahmins.

He could with fair confidence count on the Chandala not to give away the hiding place because of their ingrained,

justified and lively mistrust of any one asking questions or even trespassing into their part of the jungle. It was not very far from Narada—at any rate, not more than twenty miles—and he reached it on Blake's skewbald errand pony not long after daybreak. He was rather surprised that there were no Chandala, lean and dirty-looking, perching on the walls like vultures to stare at Asoka.

He turned the pony into a roofless room beside a heap of hay and limped into Asoka's chamber, where a glance told him that nothing whatever was wrong. Asoka greeted him, gathered him up in his trunk, hoisted him up on his head, and the two went down to the creek for the morning drink and a mud bath.

That took time, because the mud had to be washed off afterward, which meant a long swim and a lot of fooling, so the sun was well up over the trees when Quorn rode back along the jungle glade and reëntered the ruin. He could see, at a bend in the glade, the broken branches that Rana Raj Singh had thrown down to mark and at the same time to conceal the trail down which he and his men had ridden to hide in the *nullah* not far away. It was probable that one man, or perhaps two, were in the trees on the alert, but it would need second-sight to discover a Rajput scout, even if you knew exactly where to look.

Quorn proposed to himself to get some sleep, although it was a poor place for it because the flies were awful. However, he gathered green leaves with which to cover himself, shook the hay to make sure there were no snakes in it, and lay down, near enough to Asoka to be awakened if the monster should grow restless.

He was watching, through a chink between the leaves, the great body swaying to the rhythm of the spheres, or whatever it is that elephants are conscious of, when Bamjee came cantering down the glade and, after turning his pony into the same inclosure with Quorn's, broke in on Quorn's peace.

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"Oh!" said Bamjee. "I am glad to see you!"

"Can't return the compliment," said Quorn, sitting up and brushing hay out of his hair. "You're a buzzard of ill-omen. Any time you show up there's grief around the corner. What's eating you? You didn't run me down for nothing?"

"Nothing? What is nothing? If everything is nothing, as the Yogis say, then nothing is everything. Everything is enough. I have every reason. Shall I name one?"

Quorn sighed and filled his pipe. "You look like the wreck o' the Hesperus. Indecent, you, a father of a family, sporting around in a turban and cotton gee-string. I'm ashamed of the elephant seeing you."

"Nevertheless," said Bamjee, "I am the person who will cause you to become a Sirdar. Sirdar Benjamin Quorn: how will that look on the envelope? I know now what the Brahmins intend to do. You shall defeat them with my help. You shall have all the credit, but you must promise to pay me half of the big bonus that the Ranee will undoubtedly give you."

"Nix," Quorn answered. "Getting's keepings. Play your own hand. You wouldn't offer to deal me in unless you wanted me so damn bad you're fair busting. So shoot."

"Well, I could easily go to the Ranee with my story."

"You can soap yourself and slide to hell with it. I ain't particular."

"If I should tell you what I have ascertained, will you promise to recommend me also for a bonus?"

"No. You make enough off the gum you lick off postage stamps to pay my salary twice over. When I make promises, I know why. And when I don't make 'em I know why. You're why. Get me?"

"Well, if I should take you into my confidence—"

"You mean get me to trust you? Can't be done."

"If I should tell you what I know, and you should use that information, and by using it should not only save the Ranee's life, but also catch the Brahmins in their own trap, would you see that I get credit for it?"

"Mebbe."

"Is that your best bid? Listen, Mr. Quorn. The Ranee appointed you her agent to hunt down Maraj and to connect him with the Brahmins. You may order everybody—troops, police, palace servants, Prince Rana Raj Singh, even myself. I have information, and I am willing to tell you how to solve the riddle—how to give the necessary orders and so snatch fame and reward in the very face of destiny. What will you do for me?"

"You mean if you ain't lying? If you really have that information? I'll hold you underneath that elephant while he does a Charleston on your belly—unless you tell me dam-quick every word you know. Sit down there. Spill it. Satan's

high hat! You, as naked as a nigger, coming here to try and *sell* me something that might save *her* life? Act your age, Bamjee. Say all you know, and say it quick."

Even his enemies, of whom he has several, say this of Bamjee: that he knows when to capitulate, and that he does it with a good grace. He ignored Quorn's rudeness, threw all stipulation to the winds, and plunged into his story, relating in minute detail what had happened in the Brahmin temple.

"And I tell you, Mr. Quorn, that they are tired of Maraj, even though they do not say so in plain words. They are afraid of him. They are almost as anxious to see the end of him as of you and the Ranee. I think it likely they will snap him in the same trap in which they hope to catch you. All you need to do is ride into the trap and have Prince Rana Raj Singh lie in ambush; each of his men will have a Brahmin on his lance before the day is over.

"But if you tell the Ranee before-hand she will give neither you nor me the credit. And if you tell Prince Rana Raj Singh, it will be the same story—"

A shadow fell between them. Then a hollow voice:

"And if you tell Maraj? What if you should tell Maraj?"

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Bamjee almost fainted. Maraj had climbed over the wall and approached from behind them. His maniac eyes looked burned by lack of sleep, and his movement was almost simian, but an intelligence, mocking and masterful, glowed beneath the surface. However dry his eyes might seem, they

looked indomitable. He lifted Bamjee by the neck with one hand and dumped him beside Quorn.

Then he sat and faced them both. Quorn noticed that Asoka was beginning to grow nervous.

"Snap Maraj in a trap! That is funny!"

"Hell!" said Quorn. "Of course they couldn't catch you in a trap."

"But I will catch them!"

"Sure you will. O' course you will. That's a part o' the bargain you made with me."

Genius has nothing whatever to do with education. It is a gift for recognizing the essence of things and what to do about it. Quorn knew nothing about maniacs, just as he had known nothing about elephants until he came to Narada. He could not have explained his method; it would certainly not have occurred to him to say there was something simple about a man whose manhood had been lost in a maze of egotism and murderous cunning.

He did not think about it. He acted, simply.

"Would you break our bargain?"

But Maraj was suspicious. "There is new horse-dung on the track. Whose horses?"

"Mine. Bamjee's."

"Many horses. Whose?"

"Rana Raj Singh and his men. Rana Raj Singh quarreled with the Ranee—pulled his freight. Off in a huff. Nobody knows where he's going, and nobody cares."

Something in the maniac's eyes altered. Cunning beneath cunning readjusted purpose beneath purpose. Quorn noticed a sudden blaze of anger that was instantly suppressed and hidden under too much suavity; but he had no means of knowing that Maraj had listened through Blake's window to the whole of the Ranee's conversation.

"He is after Maraj," said the maniac.

He was being so subtle now that subtlety oozed from his lips in a conceited smile, defeating its own end. Simultaneously Quorn and Bamjee recognized that his conceit could be his own undoing.

"What do you care?" Quorn asked. "Ain't you a match for him?"

"Yes, and for the Brahmins also." He fixed his eyes on Bamjee's. "You did not know, did you, that I was listening behind the wall? I heard you say the Brahmins mean to snap me in the same trap with the Ranee. So they shall. I will be the bait. I will draw the Brahmins, too, into their own trap. Rana Raj Singh shall find them in it, and destroy them. But, first, they shall destroy the Ranee, so that he shall have the impulse to destroy them. Ho, but we will feed death! And though they close me in a trap without an outlet, can they keep me in it?"

He grinned, glaring again into Quorn's eyes. "Afterward, you and I will keep that tryst—when you have no elephant to think about—nothing to think about except me, your master."

Maraj got up and stared at Asoka, having glanced first at the ropes that held the monster's hind feet. He was well out of reach of his trunk. He said nothing—did nothing—only stared. But the elephant, already nervous, suddenly grew panic-stricken, screamed, tried to reach him and kill him. He did his best to burst the heel ropes.

Quorn's fingers were on a piece of broken masonry; the intention to crush the maniac's skull with it burned in his brain and his veins, but the stone was too heavy to lift. Maraj turned to him and grinned:

"Soon—soon now you shall learn what it means to be all-passionate, and at the same time helpless. That is agony—exquisite, exquisite agony; dew on the flowers of death. So fragrant! So delicious! Wait and see."

He sprang to the wall in three strides then, vaulted it, and vanished. Quorn went to Asoka and spent a whole hour coaxing him back to calmness.

"Did a bogy scare him? Daddy's big boy! Never mind, we'll show 'em. Nex' time, maybe, we won't have no heel ropes on—and then what?"

Suddenly Quorn turned on Bamjee: "Get a move on, you. Time enough to take it easy when you're dead. Go find the Ranee and tell her every word of what's took place. Don't you leave one word out. And if them Brahmins have already been to her with their demands, you tell her from me to give out that she'll ride Asoka to that there hermitage to-morrow morning. I'll have him saddled and ready and at the palace door.

"She'd better order about half the troops to march behind her, but remember: them guys aren't dependable against the Brahmins, so they'd better start late and come along slow; they're jes' for appearances. I'll see the Prince. And say, see Mr. Blake. Tell him if he wants to see sport and maybe be a bit useful, he'd better ride Asoka with the Ranee. That's all. Get your pony and get out o' here."

When Bamjee had departed, Quorn took Asoka for another mud bath and a swim.

"Lord," he muttered as he rode out of the ruined building, "do you suppose that maniac heard what I jus' said to Bamjee? Well—who cares? I'm betting on the Prince and twenty Rajputs. There'll be a picnic." Then he went on talking to Asoka: "Trouble you make, don't you? Never mind, though, you ain't guilty this time. Use your big bean, or they'll execute you day after to-morrow at sunrise.

"What you're needing is a first-class working alibi, and durn me if I know one. You killed a guy. You've got to offset that somehow. Maybe alibi's the wrong word—I ain't no lawyer. Anyhow you use your bean, you sucker, and I'll use mine, and we'll get you a verdict o' not guilty somehow—somehow. Self-defense? Extreme provocation? No evidence? Hell—none o' them won't do. We got to get an alibi or bust!"

# CHAPTER VIII.

## A TRAP FOR ASOKA.

Narada knew that there were tantrums in the wind. It was the time of year when corn-fed elephants go *musth* and men are inflamed by all the tom-tom of the marriage drums until imagination, like a strange gas, maddens the whole mob.

It was normal in the month of carnival for slumbering resentment of a thousand years of wrongs to blaze into sudden flame and make a smoke-black ruin of—perhaps a street of money-lenders' houses, or a mean mosque, raised by poor Mahommedans whose chaste and inexpensive minaret had too long pointed to a scorching sky.

No agitator needed to harangue hot crowds and tongue-lash lethargy into a spate of violence. It only needed murmurs—of the right sort, from the right source. And it is a strange fact that the more men mock the methods, and the servants, and the outer symbols of religion, that much easier it is for whisperers to stir them to the state where they will stab each other.

Nowhere more than in Narada are the Brahmins hated. Nowhere is it easier for Brahmins of a certain sort to stir with almost noiseless tongue the terrible volcano that resides in ignorant minds.

And so it happened that the Ranee's troops could not march on the day when Quorn brought back Asoka to the city, polished him until he shone, harnessed him with the lightest hunting *howdah*, and rode him, stately as a page of legend,

through the crowded streets toward the palace. The troops were needed to the last man—fifty of them—to parade with gleaming bayonets and make rioting look like too risky a gamble.

There were two tales circulating. One was that the Ranee had defied the Brahmins, which nobody minded much, although they shuddered at the sacrilege while they secretly and even openly enjoyed the scandal.

It was the other tale that made men glower when they heard it. It was not enough that the Ranee kept and protected and used an elephant that had slain a very holy fakir. She had employed Maraj to cause the elephant to do it. The Brahmins said so.

And to show how fair and strictly truthful the Brahmins could be on occasion, had the Brahmins not admitted publicly, and now privately, that Quorn truly was the reincarnated Gunga *sahib*? The Brahmins had explained it perfectly: it was just another case of ingratitude to the gods who had provided the Ranee with agents for the accomplishment of holy purposes, in the form of Quorn and his elephant; agents which she had promptly used for unholy purposes.

There could only be one possible end to it. Quorn, of course, would have to suffer for letting himself be so misused. The elephant—the Ranee—well, whoever should kill all three of them might have to be a martyr for it, but inevitably he would turn out to be the agent of the angry gods who would mete out due reward in the hereafter.

As for Maraj, it was obvious now how he had escaped capture and punishment for all those horrible murders. Anybody could understand it now, since the Brahmins had told the truth

about it. The Ranee had been protecting him all along. Her offer of a heavy reward for his capture had been nothing but a blind to deceive people. She had been making use of Maraj to get rid of her enemies.

True, many of the people murdered by Maraj had seemed unimportant and not dangerous. It was equally true that some of them had been notorious enemies of the Brahmins.

But there were plain answers to both those questions. In the first place, tyrants grow afraid of shadows, and kill imagined enemies without rhyme or reason, that being one of the aspects of tyranny. In the second place, people who oppose themselves to religious authority must not blame the authorities if the gods take steps to destroy such opposition.

Nobody should blame the Brahmins for the gods' annoyance. One did not have to like the Brahmins personally, or even collectively, nor need one approve of all their arrogance, in order to see the unfairness of blaming them for what the gods might do. One did not have to hate the Ranee or to call her beauty ugliness and her generosity meanness, in order to see what a fool she had made of herself, and what a wicked woman she had been to employ and subsidize Maraj.

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Besides, the Ranee had discarded *purdah* and neglected many of the ancient customs. She had repeatedly defied the Brahmins who are, after all, the fountain-head of wisdom. She had opened hospitals, where people died at the hands of heretical doctors in spite of all the genuine remedies that were smuggled to their bedside.

She had opened a school for women, where women were actually taught, in so many words, that they had rights as well as obligations. She had closed the brothels, which, as everybody knew, were a social safety-valve. And she was proposing to marry a man of her own choosing.

The gods don't tolerate such infidelity for long; when they are weary of it, they act suddenly and swiftly.

So the city was in an expectant, ugly mood, and there were ugly rumors, borne on the wings of nobody knew what. Everybody knew that something terrible was going to happen. Those who owned property were afraid, and those who owned none, or owed money, were belligerently watchful.

The only thing that prevented rioting from breaking out in a sort of spontaneous combustion was the gleam on the bayonets of the Ranee's infantry and the beautifully polished brass of their machine gun, strategically stationed where they could do the greatest amount of damage in the shortest possible time.

The sun beat down on all that mixed emotion like a million discordant cymbals of yellow brass, heat and noise being only different vibrations of the self-same violence.

So as Quorn rode Asoka through the streets he did not receive his usual ovation. Children were not lifted up to look at him. No women threw him little bunches of waxy flowers. And the story of Asoka's slaying of the holy fakir had been so spread and so exaggerated that the throngs in the narrow streets melted away ahead of him; whereas it had always been Asoka's reputation that, though his temper was terrific, he was dignified and patient toward a crowd, particularly if the crowd was noisy in its admiration.

Asoka sensed the change of public sentiment almost, if not quite as readily as Quorn perceived it, and by the time he reached the palace he was already showing symptoms of uncertain temper. Quorn's voice kept him in control and he behaved beautifully under the palace portico while they set the ladder against him and the Ranee climbed into the *howdah*; but as he started off he was rumbling in a way that called for several smart raps with the *ankus* to remind him he was not his own master.

Blake was on horseback and had brought four mounted servants with him. They were a sort of superior *sais*, quite undependable except as grooms, and unarmed, but Blake's own automatic reposed in a holster underneath his shirt; he appeared ill-tempered, in a mood to use that pistol, in spite of his diplomatic status.

Blake was the type of man who, when he does get involved in indiscretion—as every diplomat worth trusting, and every diplomat who ever accomplished anything, must do at times—never retreated but, by even greater indiscretion, usually saved the day. The only thoroughly discreet men are the dead ones, and the ill-served governments are those whose agents never make mistakes because they don't dare. Blake and his servants formed the rear guard, Blake being of the reasonable opinion that his own presence, as a sort of unofficial escort, and official witness, ought to make the Ranee safer than her own troops would have done.

The advance-guard was a party of the sons of the nobility, courtiers all, eight in number, beautifully horsed and splendid in their colored turbans, but unarmed because they were not Rajputs and because, by treaty, the Ranee's troops were limited to fifty men. No non-military individuals in India,

except the Rajputs, are allowed to carry even their native weapons, so there was neither sword nor lance in all that party. But by the same law they had the right to suppose they would not be met with weapons.

As they swayed toward the open country the Ranee lay chin-on-elbows in the *howdah*, merely sitting up at intervals to let any one who cared to know it see that she was trusting herself on Asoka's back.

She was in riding-breeches and a turban made of cloth of green and gold. Her white silk shirt was fastened at the throat with an emerald worth her ransom, but except for the diamond aigrette in her turban she wore no other jewelry; she was out to do things and defeat her enemies, not to adorn Narada. And as usual she talked with Quorn as if he were a minister of state who knew all her personal secrets.

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"Miss," he said over his shoulder, "I seen the prince, and him and me understood each other. He has all his twenty Rajputs with him. Half have lances and the other half have sabers. And if you want my guess, there's bootleg automatics under cover, but I know the law and I ain't seen nothing. The prince told me he knows a *nullah* near the hermitage where he can hide his men perfect; there's high reeds and a swamp, with the river back o' that, so you can only come at the hiding place by one track. He took along food for men and horses and he aimed to get in there last night, or early before daylight. And he says there's a kind of island in the *nullah*, quite high, with a clump o' tall trees on it, so he can watch the hermitage and know what's going on."

"Let us hope," she remarked.

"Hope, miss? You can bet your boots he's on the job!"

"I hope," she said, "there will be a job for him to do. It is not so simple in these days for a prince to prove his mettle. Do you know, Mr. Quorn, if it weren't for that—that Rana Raj Singh needs an opportunity to prove to himself that he is fit to be my consort—to himself, you understand?—I would have sought some other way of solving this problem."

"Miss, there ain't no other way. You've got to soak it to them Brahmins good. You can't argue with 'em. They've got laws and rules and spiritual reggilations every way you turn and all amounting to the same thing: Brahmins is right and everybody else is wrong, plus damn-bad, ornery and wicked. Did Bamjee tell you all he knows?"

"Bamjee never tells all he knows, but he told enough. Poor Bamjee! I have sent him to the hermitage."

"Good God, miss! What for?"

"Simply to make trouble on general principles. Since we are to have trouble anyhow, let us have lots of it. Bamjee told me that the Brahmins have sent about a dozen of their number to the hermitage with orders not to move out of it. Rana Raj Singh shall drive them out. When the highest spiritual authorities turn crooked they always ally themselves with the lowest elements, so I don't doubt we shall have the Chandala to deal with. Maraj has probably stirred the Chandala against me. Bamjee says the Brahmins are growing afraid of Maraj and intend to betray him—"

"And Maraj, miss, he means to betray the Brahmins—"

"And the Brahmins, I happen to know through reliable spies, have taken a number of ruffians with them to the hermitage."

"There'll be hell to pay, miss—and no soldiers!"

"Yes, this looks like real opportunity for Rana Raj Singh!"

"And Asoka, miss? You ain't going to have him executed, nohow, are you? Not whatever the outcome?"

"This is his chance, too, I think," she answered.

Quorn thumped Asoka with the *ankus*. "Do you hear that, you big bum? Strut your stuff and think up your own alibi!"

The hell that was to pay began when they had just crossed the wide lower ford of Narada River. The advance-guard, laughing and chatting, drew abreast of a swamp where the reeds were ten feet higher than a man's head. The road they were to follow led around that swamp and then eastward along the river bank. On the right was a porphyry cliff with enormous bowlders at its foot, and ahead was the road to the railway station, two days' march away.

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Asoka was the first to fore-sense trouble; he curled up his precious trunk out of harm's way and began shaking his ears. Quorn hardly had time to get a firm grip with his knees when one of the escort threw up his hand and shouted.

With no other warning at all, from two directions—from the bowlders and the reeds—at least a hundred water-buffalo came charging down on them in one of those blind,

irresistible rushes in which one mind, one terror governs a whole herd and whelms whatever stands in front of it.

The horsemen scattered and Asoka plunged into the reeds, the Ranee laughing gayly as she clung to the *howdah*—until she saw a naked man on a sort of raft open the reeds with his hands, leap carefully from clump to clump of roots and jab at the elephant's rump with a spear.

Asoka screamed with anger. Three more naked spearmen tried to work their way toward him, but he plunged again out of the swamp at almost the place where he had entered and proceeded to remove himself from that scene at a speed that would have made a horse a Derby winner.

"Hang on, miss!" Quorn cried.

Fear takes hold of elephants as suddenly as typhoons smite the sea. Frenzy as well as fear took hold of Asoka, arousing his whole strength, his entire speed, blinding him, deafening him to Quorn's voice, making him almost as unconscious as a landslide or a monster in a dream.

He crashed into the jungle, smashed the *howdah* roof against a branch, thundered through undergrowth, slid down *nullahs* like an avalanche with earth-banks breaking under him, charged through clinging clumps of thorn-brush, floundered into a wallow where the buffalo had lain, came out of it smothered with mud and butted, squealing like a bucking pony, against a tree that blocked his path. The tree cracked, splintered and fell.

Then, glimpsing through his blood-shot eyes a glade beyond a bamboo thicket, he crashed through the thicket and began to lay the long leagues underfoot.

An elephant driven by terror can run for a day without stopping. Quorn was satisfied to hold on for the present. He was pleased that he had not dropped the iron *ankus*. Branches had whipped his forehead; with his free hand he wiped the blood that had streamed in his eyes; it was the blood that prevented him from seeing what was happening along the glade. The Ranee, clinging to the low brass rail in front of the *howdah* and with her feet jammed under the side-rails, leaned out and touched Quorn between the shoulders.

"Do you see?" she shouted. "Fires!"

He heard the word and used his sleeve to wipe his eyes. Men—Chandala, he could see them now, lean, rusty-skinned, filthy—had set heaped thorn-wood fires along the glade. They blazed and crackled suddenly as Asoka drew near. They were all on one side of the glade—to the right.

Asoka swerved away from them, until he left that glade where his path was blocked by a wall of sputtering flame, and tore along a left-hand opening between the trees in the direction of the river. The Ranee touched Quorn's back again.

"Can you turn him?"

"No, miss."

"I feel sure we are being driven into a trap!"

Quorn began using every faculty he had. He had been half-stunned by the whipping branches, but he threw off that sensation—or lack of it—as a fighter in the ring does in the minute's interval between rounds.

"Got to think—got to think like hell!" he muttered. "This big bum ain't thinking."

He began to encourage Asoka to run, instead of merely sitting still and letting him. Pitching his voice to the familiar note of command he urged him forward—faster!—faster!—until a shadowy, comforting sense of obedience began to invade Asoka's consciousness.

It seemed to the elephant now that he had obeyed Quorn in the beginning; obeying him, he had outdistanced horror; he was ready to obey again—presently—presently—maybe—when he should feel quite sure.

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There were fires again now, and more of them, at closer intervals; and through a gap in the trees, ahead, Quorn saw the river gleaming like burnished metal in the morning sun. He saw where the path they were following forked; both branches led toward the river, but the left-hand path was blocked by an inferno of crashing thorn-bush. Certainly the trap was somewhere down the right-hand fork. Men leaped out of the undergrowth with burning fire-brands, taking all risks, setting the grass alight to drive Asoka down the right-hand fairway.

And then Bamjee dropped out of a tree. It was like a dream. He was torn, disheveled, he had lost his turban. He stood in the midst of the right-hand path and waved his arms. He shouted. Then he fled into the jungle with two of the Chandala following, hard on his heels.

Quorn used the *ankus* then. He used it cruelly. Voice, knees, *ankus*, all together urged the elephant to turn left. Once again Asoka curled his trunk. He did not hesitate. He caught a

glimpse of the river between the trees, swung left between two blazing fires that almost singed his flanks and scooted for the friendly water where he knew no fire could follow.

Quorn had forgotten the waterfall. There was a fifty-foot drop, heavy water plunging onto crags, and he could hear the roar of it as the river bank broke beneath Asoka's weight and the monster plunged in head-first, turning almost a somersault, displacing tons of water.

How Quorn hung on he never knew. He was half-drowned. For awhile he was conscious of nothing except the need to cling with heels and hands and knees, and to keep Asoka, if he could, from being swept down-river and on to the crags below the fall. That thought obsessed him.

Almost the first clear glimpse he had was of the river bank a hundred yards away, and of the roaring falls not fifty feet beyond him on his left hand. He could see the pale-green film of the crest of the plunging water. In the same moment he knew that the Ranee was no longer in the *howdah*.

For a moment—just one moment—he ceased to care then whether he went over the falls or not. The universe went blank. He had not known how much he loved the Ranee. Then, as suddenly, a rage took hold of him. He beat Asoka with his fists.

"You big bum! Turn and find her!"

But Asoka was cooling his hot flanks, comfortable, careless—as indifferent to the world he had left behind as he was to waterfalls. He had fled from terror.

He had found peace, that included Quorn with no *ankus* in his hand. Quorn's fists were funny.

He submerged himself, breathing through his trunk that stuck a foot above the water, giving Quorn a bath, too. Possibly he thought his friend Quorn would enjoy that. Then, because the water, and the sense of safety, and the physical reaction made him happy, he amused himself and drove Quorn nearly frantic by pretending that the current was drawing him over the waterfall.

He let himself drift until the water thundered in Quorn's ears and the glassy curve of the descending wave was almost within hand-reach; then he slowly swam upstream—only to repeat the performance again, and again, and again. At last, when he was nice and cool and the thought of grass seemed good to him, he permitted himself to recognize that he was being ordered out on dry land.

Dry land be it, then. But not the bank where horror had pursued him. Whenever Quorn tried to turn him toward the south bank, he submerged himself, pretending he supposed Quorn wanted that; and it was on the north bank that he emerged at last, ten feet above the waterfall, as pleasant-tempered as he had been frantic half an hour ago.

Narada River is deep at that point, banked up by the dyke that forms the waterfall; below the fall it shallows to a ford a quarter of a mile wide. Far across the river Quorn could see a stream of crimson topped with billowing smoke where the thorn fires had caught the jungle undergrowth. There were no men in sight. Doubtless they had fled from the spreading flame. There was no wind just then; the fire was eating its way outward in a circle.

"Maybe I can get this fool across the ford," Quorn muttered.

# CHAPTER IX.

## THE LOST RANEE.

There was a well-defined track down the rocks to the foot of the fall, and below that there was a footpath all along the river to the ford. Quorn rode along that, watching the troubled water, half-expecting to see the Ranee's body, mangled by the crags, floating in mid-stream or stranded. But he knew there were alligators, slimy, greedy devils; floating bodies had a slim chance; even the fords were sometimes dangerous for passengers on foot.

All that way along the river bank Quorn was sick at heart and careless even of Asoka's comfort or his destiny; however, he began to be puzzled before long by symptoms that he noticed, and he was more than ever puzzled by Asoka's willingness to cross the river when they reached the ford.

"What's eating you? What's making you forget?" he wondered.

All the way across the ford he indulged in sentimental guesswork as to whether the Ranee's death had not humiliated and broken Asoka's spirit. Nearly every one is capable at times of that sort of imagination.

However, on the far bank he got down to search for what the matter might be, and soon discovered the spear-wound in Asoka's rump. It was nothing serious, although it might be painful, and he understood then that Asoka had been merely asking for attention.

He made Asoka kneel and, having no remedies handy, made a fly-brush of grass at the end of a string that would sway with the elephant's movement and prevent the stinging flies from laying eggs in the open cut.

It was while he was tying the string to the *howdah* rail that Bamjee came. By this time the *babu* had lost his spectacles. There was hardly a shred of untorn clothing on his body and almost every inch of him was bleeding from the thorns. He was breathless and he fell at Quorn's feet. For a minute or two he lay and vomited. Then suddenly his will power triumphed and he knelt—sputtered—exploded:

"Damn! Loafer! Bloody fool! You wait here? Oh, my God! I saw you on the far bank—didn't you see my signal?"

"Looking for the Ranee," Quorn answered. Then he lowered his voice. "She's drownded."

"Liar!"

"She is. She's drownded."

"Liar, I tell you! I saw her swim—she was washed out of the *howdah* close inshore—caught the grass in her hands and climbed out—scrambled up the bank. He seized her—"

"For the love o' God, who did?"

"Maraj! Pounced on her like a hawk on a bird. He had a trap set. I warned you, and you avoided it. I had to run, and they thought they killed me, but I came back. When Maraj saw you plunge into the river he ran to the place. And when he saw the Ranee in the water he hid himself. I tried to yell to her, but I had no voice. I couldn't whisper! And so she climbed out, and Maraj pounced on her.

"I saw him pick her up—she was kicking—he carried her—he ran—and I ran—he choked her until she left off kicking—then I saw him take her to the hermitage, which is full of Brahmins and cutthroats—and I don't know where the Prince is—and we can't get to the hermitage now—*because the whole damn jungle is on fire! Oh, my God!*"

He lay and beat the hard earth with his flat palms. He beat his forehead on the ground. Quorn lifted him, took him by shoulders and heel and hoisted him into the *howdah*. Then he climbed up to his own place on Asoka's neck, after he had broken off a short stick for administrative purposes.

"Come on now, and no bunk!"

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Quorn was not even quite sure where the hermitage lay, and it was no use asking Bamjee, who was moaning and out of his senses, rolling from side to side of the *howdah*. But Bamjee had told the truth about the jungle fire; the hot-weather wind was rising and the roar and heat and smell of it were coming closer every second.

There were birds and animals in full flight—scores of them—even a leopard that passed within six feet and did not pause to look at a man on an elephant. Asoka, too, was getting difficult to manage.

So Quorn turned down-wind, but headed southward as much as possible, in order to make a circuit of the fire; but he had to make a very wide circuit indeed because of Asoka's nervousness. However, Asoka was willing, and put his best foot forward; they covered five or six miles faster than a

horse could have done it, which brought them out of the zone of rolling smoke.

And when they were out of the haze of the smoke Quorn presently saw Blake on horseback on a knoll, gazing under his hand in every direction. He clapped his spurs in and came galloping the moment he caught sight of Asoka.

"For God's sake, where is the Ranee?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

Quorn was laconic. Bamjee stuck his head over the *howdah* rail and repeated Quorn's words after him—adding to them.

"Go to her—for God's sake, go to her!" he almost screamed, and then collapsed.

But in another moment he was on his knees again, and it was Bamjee who first caught sight of Rana Raj Singh and ten of his men moving westward in an extended line with the long slow-swinging canter that saves horses' strength against emergency.

"Bloody dam-fool! Go back!" Bamjee yelled. But Rana Raj Singh came on at a gallop, drew rein in a dust cloud and sat silent, waiting for Blake to speak first.

Blake told him all that he and Quorn knew.

There was no pause between Blake's last words and Rana Raj Singh's order to his men. They wheeled and, like eleven arrows launched out of eleven bows, they sped back along the course by which they had come, Blake after them, swallowing dust, and Asoka bringing up the rear in no great hurry, since the horses' utmost limit of speed was easily within his scope.

They rode as a blast of wind goes ripping through the scrub. Jungle, *nullahs*, crags and trees went past them like a motion picture, and the horses were blowing heavily when Rana Raj Singh halted at last in full view of a building half a mile away.

It was a domed structure surrounded by a mud-and-stone wall, with plenty of space between building and wall and some trees in the inclosure. Considerably less than half a mile beyond it was another group of trees. Rana Raj Singh pointed to them:

"Ten of my men are in hiding near those trees. One man is up in a tree. They have seen us." He waved his right arm. Blake's keen eyes were not keen enough to read the answering signal from the tree-top, but Rana Raj Singh seemed satisfied; he turned to Blake again.

"I waited," he said, "and grew weary of waiting. I did not understand what was happening in that hermitage, or why the Ranee did not come. A number of Brahmins came. I was astonished; they had their high priest with them—an unheard-of thing. They also brought a lot of ruffians with *lathis*.[1] Then I saw the jungle on fire, and no Ranee. So I left ten men in hiding and rode to see what might have happened. Ah! My men come."

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Ten men armed with lances rode in to view from a depression near the trees. They formed into a line with wide-spaced intervals and halted, watching for a signal. Quorn drew as near to Rana Raj Singh as the nervous horse would let him.

"Did I hear you say, sir, that the high priest o' them Brahmins is in that building?"

Rana Raj Singh nodded. Quorn slowly moved Asoka forward until he was in front of all the horses.

"Me and you won't miss this, soldier! Durn your old hide, but you was born lucky. A *habeas corpus* beats an alibi. You *habeas* the *corpus* o' that high priest and a legislature couldn't hang you!"

Rana Raj Singh signalled. The men opposite approached, extending their line as Rana Raj Singh maneuvered his ten to meet them, until they formed a wide arc of a circle with Asoka in the midst. Blake was at Asoka's left, Rana Raj Singh to right of him, and for a moment or two they halted in that position while men's heads stared at them from over the hermitage wall.

There was evidently some confusion in the hermitage. Two men who appeared not to be Brahmins let themselves down from the wall and took to their heels toward the *nullah* where the Rajputs had been hidden.

"Catch them alive," commanded Rana Raj Singh. Two of his men gave chase.

Then a gate of the hermitage opened and three Brahmins approached, waving a white cloth. Rana Raj Singh rode to meet them, Blake almost abreast of him and Quorn on Asoka keeping well within earshot.

"Halt!" commanded Rana Raj Singh. "Where is the Ranee?"

Bamjee came to life and knelt up in the *howdah*, clearing his throat to shout something, but Quorn cursed him into silence.

"She is with us in the hermitage," the Brahmin answered insolently. "She bids you go home."

Bamjee exploded, Quorn or no Quorn. "Liar!" he shouted. "Your highness, that man is the go-between who tells Maraj what to do. I know him!"

The Brahmin promptly played his trump card. "Her Highness the Ranee has apologized to the high priest and has received his blessing. You are to take that elephant away and shoot him. The person known as Maraj has been imprisoned in the hermitage and will be taken to Narada to be tried and executed.

"We ourselves will be the Ranee's escort to Narada."

Rana Raj Singh's men came dragging prisoners. They threw them to the ground and held them there at the lance-point.

"Prince, they say the Ranee is locked into a cell. There are forty more of this sort in there, prepared to defend the place. Maraj is a prisoner, but the Brahmins have offered him freedom if we attack and he helps the defense."

They tied the prisoners back to back by necks, hands and feet. There began to be a great commotion in the hermitage—an uproar—and another Brahmin came running, but not through the gate; he climbed the wall, jumped, fell, hurt himself and limped, hurrying as best he could. He stammered; it was hard to understand him. Quorn, who could see the roof of the building better than the rest could, understood first.

"Hell's bells!" he exclaimed. "Maraj is loose. He's on the roof. He has turned those other guys against the Brahmins! This guy wants us to go help the high priest! Can you beat that?"

"Can you break that wall?" asked Rana Raj Singh.

Always the easiest thing in the world was to start Asoka smashing things. Quorn's only immediate worry was the risk of damage to Asoka's head, so he chose the mud-and-stone wall rather than the teak gate and sent Asoka charging at it like a five-ton battering-ram.

He heard Bamjee crying, "Oh, my God!" behind him—heard the thunder of the Rajput horsemen closing in behind him, two by two, to burst through the gap he should make, saw—through the edge of his eyes—Blake and Rana Raj Singh slightly to his rear, one on either flank, distinctly heard and felt the *ping* of several bullets, thought he heard Blake answer them, and was dimly aware that a man on the roof was shooting at him, but kept on missing.

Then came the shudder and shock as Asoka struck the wall with his enormous forehead—strained his weight against it—grunted—and a section of the wall fell inward in a cloud of dust.

***Then came the shudder and shock as Asoka struck the wall with his enormous forehead.***

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Asoka staggered through the gap. Behind him the horsemen streamed through, wheeling right and left. And then confusion, in which Bamjee scrambled to the ground by clinging to Asoka's tail and vanished into the building.

Asoka swung a limp trunk, swaying with his eyes shut, more than half-stunned by the impact. Quorn slipped to the ground.

"Lean against that wall, you sucker. Keep your feet. No lying down or you'll kid yourself you're all in."

For a moment or two he watched the elephant, since that was his first charge. He decided Asoka would stand there—at the

worst he would hardly stray far—at the utmost worst he might stagger off home to the elephant lines in Narada; but he was likeliest to stand.

He left him. There was fighting going on in every direction—horsemen charging; Brahmins and their own hired ruffians at throat-grips, some of them rolling on the ground together; other ruffians trying to climb the wall and being skewered by the Rajput lances; two men in the gap to guard that, sabering whoever tried to slip through; and a maniac—a leaping maniac—a prancing, yelling maniac who jabbered in an unknown tongue as he raced around the parapet of the rambling building, brandishing an empty Colt revolver.

"Maraj!" Quorn muttered to himself. "I guess you're my meat!"

But he had no weapon, nor any notion how he was going to kill the maniac. He ran all along the building looking for an entrance. There were dozens of doors, all leading into cells, but he came on a passage at last that led between two cells into a dark hall under a dome, with columns to support the dome.

He saw the Ranee leaning on Rana Raj Singh's arm. The prince's saber was all bloody and there were several dead men lying around the door of the cell from which the Ranee had been rescued. The door had not been opened, it was smashed in, but Quorn had not time to be curious how that had happened—he saw a stairway leading to the roof.

It was narrow. Near its summit stood the high priest, taking refuge there for fear his sacred person might be defiled by the touch of common mortals—much more afraid of that than of being killed or injured. In fact, he did not appear afraid.

Quorn charged up the steps. The high priest retreated in front of him, dreading that Quorn might bump against him. Three steps backward, and he bumped into the door that opened on the roof—it yielded, and there he was out on the roof with Quorn staring at him, until Maraj came prancing along the parapet.

The high priest looked afraid then, as Maraj paused, grinning at him—grinning at Quorn, too: and Quorn cursed himself for a bigger idiot than any one, because he had no weapon. Maraj twisted the Colt revolver in his hands, broke it as if his hands were a gorilla's, dropped it as if he had never been conscious of it. And then human speech returned to him.

"The oh, so holy—twice born—high priest—who commanded Maraj to be tied and—handed over—in Narada —to the judge—and the executioner!"

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Maraj glanced down from the parapet. Asoka stood beneath him, midway between wall and building, shaking his head, but with his eyes open now. Suddenly Maraj came leaping at the high priest, seized him, crushed him in a right arm that was like a vise. He caught Quorn with the other hand and nearly crushed his ribs.

"You shall come and learn what Maraj knows!"

Quorn's right hand was free; he rained blows on the maniac's face, but their only effect was to make him tighten the terrific grip. The high priest groaned with the agony of in-bent ribs. Maraj hove both of them off their feet and rushed toward the parapet, mounted it, paused there. He laughed so loud that

even the fighting Rajputs looked up. Shouting something, in an unknown tongue again, and hugging his captives, he leaped, feet first for Asoka's back.

Asoka moved away from under them—by instinct perhaps, intuition, whatever it is that forewarns animals. Quorn's feet struck Asoka's forehead, which set all three men turning in the air. Maraj struggled, clinging to Quorn and the high priest, trying to turn them under him and break his own fall, but the reverse of that happened; his back struck the earth. Quorn and the high priest fell on top of him, the high priest with a broken shoulder and Quorn shaken up but not hurt otherwise.

He rolled clear. Then he dragged the high priest free, and swung him roughly out of reach of Asoka's trunk and forefoot that were dangerously close.

Maraj seemed dead—but suddenly he sat up, staring at Asoka. He seemed to remember something about that elephant.

Asoka, too, seemed to remember; he rumbled. Then Maraj saw Quorn, and then the high priest. Suddenly he tried to stand up, but his legs refused to function, so he rolled—he tried to seize the high priest by the leg. Quorn spoke quite quietly:

"There's your alibi, Asoka—soak him!"

It was only two steps forward—one foot on the belly of the maniac, the other on his head. Quorn took Asoka by the trunk and turned him around, led him to where he had left him near the gap in the wall.

"You win," he said, "you great big lucky stiff! I think you done it in a dream. I don't believe you know which end of you

is your head. I hope your skull ain't split—you hit that wall a hummer."

Then the Ranee and the prince, and many Brahmins clustering around the high priest, some of them bruised and bloody, and every one of them as nervous as a wet hen because they had been defiled by the touch of low-caste ruffians.

The Ranee's voice—a stern note that Quorn had never heard before—the high priest answering, and all the Brahmins echoing him in chorus—promises, Quorn supposed—agreements, to be broken when the time came. Pity she couldn't hang 'em all. He sat down, more stunned than he had realized he was, his head so swimming that it was several seconds before he recognized Bamjee with a big ax in his hand.

"We win, I think," said Bamjee, "both of us! I chopped the door down while the prince was slaying dragons—six men at least! Oh, my God! I chopped with all that going on behind me—think of it! But it was I who released her from the cell—can she forget that?"

Then the Ranee's voice, the Ranee's sweet young face amid a sea of others that persisted in whirling around in a circle. Somewhere in the whirl Blake's monocle and a glimpse of Blake cleaning an automatic with his handkerchief.

"I thank you, Sirdar Benjamin Quorn. Do you think you could make Asoka understand how much I thank him?"

And then Blake's voice: "Gad! I don't know, Quorn—I might—you never know—I might be able to persuade our

government to recognize that title. Do my best, old fellow—do my best for you at any time!"

THE END.

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[1]Long sticks.

[The end of *Asoka's Alibi* by Talbot Mundy]