

# *The Sleeper*

H. Bedford-Jones

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# *The Sleeper*

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

*Ranjit Singh, the East Indian necromancer and stage magician, was dead and buried, so they said—but what was that thing in the mummy-case?*

I met Ranjit Singh several times, back in the early days when his “sleeping” act was becoming famous. In fact, as an ardent newspaper man, I studied the act with the idea of exposing it, until Ranjit convinced me. A great guy, this Ranjit Singh!

Yes, he was good. I had not thought about him for a long time, not for years, until the sight of that mummy somehow reminded me of him. Why Jim Bledsoe would want an Egyptian mummy in his apartment, I still fail to see, but there is no accounting for tastes. Bledsoe was older than when I knew him in the old days. That scrawny, cavernous face of his showed his age terribly and always did give me the shivers. When I ran into him on the street, however, he was so heartily glad to see me that I went home with him. However, I regretted it. I dreamed about his deep black eyes, his long slithery fingers, and that silent, ghastly laugh of his. They haunt me now, as I write.

Possibly you remember Ranjit Singh? He started out as a small-time magician, and worked up to doing his “sleeping” act before crowned heads, a good many years ago. He was no more Hindoo than I am, but I could never get him to admit his real birth. He was swarthy, but not black, and handsome as a Greek statue.

That man had something on the ball. He was no faker, because I convinced myself, and I was skeptic enough. Ranjit was supposed to go into a trance, and he did go into a trance—but not where the women were concerned! He could wind any woman on earth around his little finger. They fell for him right and left, and pulled him into some bad scrapes, because he did not have sense enough to leave married women alone.

Many and many a time I watched his act close at hand, watched him like a hawk. Back in those early days before he took up with Jim Bledsoe, his manager and helper was an old chap called Ali—a real Hindoo, scrawny,

with a wispy white beard and no lost motion, who could squat on his heels by the hour. I have heard that Ranjit Singh got all he knew from this same Ali.

Despite all our science, catalepsy and self-hypnotism are still closed subjects to us, and mysterious enough. The fact that Ranjit Singh was buried alive for days at a time seemed preposterous to me; I meant to expose him and even told him so. He only laughed and offered me every facility—and made his offer good! There was a devilish charm about the fellow. He had a personality that no one could resist.

**B**efore describing my meeting with Bledsoe, the other day, let me tell just how Ranjit Singh did his act, and why he convinced me. In preparation, he would fast for several days. Then, the audience assembled, Ali would lead him out and Ranjit would lie on a couch in full sight, fold his hands over his breast, and go to sleep.

It was not really sleep; it was catalepsy.

Ali, with two assistants from the audience, would pull a linen bag over Ranjit's entire figure and tie the draw-strings above his head. They would lift him into an ordinary padded coffin, without air-holes, screw down the lid, and lower the coffin into the prepared grave—usually a dozen feet down. The earth would be thrown in.

No illusion, mind! No trickery of any kind. I have watched that grave day and night. I have paid men to watch it, and paid other men to watch the watchers. When the coffin was exhumed, after days or even weeks, I have been one of the assistants. Always the same scene, always the same result. I even had doctors who certified to it.

Always Ranjit's brain was warm, the rest of the body cold and shriveled. Ali would bathe him with hot water and olive oil, and massage his limbs. Gradually they would relax. There was no pulsation in the heart or the wrist, but it would slowly come. His mouth, when opened, showed the tongue curved back. Ali would rub the eyelids with oil, an electric heater being applied to the top of Ranjit's head. Gradually respiration came back; sometimes the man was violently convulsed. The glazed eyes would take on life. When Ranjit Singh finally rose and spoke a word or two, the show was over.

Yes, Ranjit had something, and no mistake!

I heard, in course of time, that old Ali had died, and that Ranjit had taken up with Jim Bledsoe, who was a born showman despite his queerness. Bledsoe took Ranjit abroad and made a great hit; then I never heard any more from them. What with the war and various other things, I forgot them both over a period of years.

Then, the other night, I ran into Bledsoe on the street. There was no mistaking his cadaverous, black-clad figure, though his hair and mustache were now gray. He called my name, and wrung my hand heartily. His grip was cold, clammy, sent a shiver through me.

“You must come up to my place and have a drink and a chat!” he exclaimed. “I’m delighted, delighted! Come along; we’ll go over old times. I’m all alone.”

“Alone?” I repeated, fearing to ask after his wife. One is always afraid to ask, when years have intervened. Besides, Jim Bledsoe had been utterly devoted to his wife. “You don’t mean — —”

He hooked his arm in mine. I drew away from his touch; I would have backed out then and there, but for his reply.

“Yes, my dear fellow; I’m alone,” he said. His voice was indescribably mournful. “I see your meaning. She was lost to me, lost to the world, years ago. Do come! It’ll do me good to talk with you. I’ve been horribly lonely of late.”

**D**espite the sensation of revulsion that he inspired, I felt instantly sorry for him. I was alone, too, and knew what it meant. Talking the sorrow out to an old friend is the only help left in the world. So I complied. Not that he was melancholy — not in the least!

It was only a short walk to his apartment, which was luxurious in the extreme; clearly enough, Bledsoe was under no financial difficulties.

He ushered me into a huge living-room; it was the sort of place one might expect such a man to have. At one side, standing on a slant, was a magnificently painted mummy-case. All about the room were queer objects — Pharaonic carvings in wood and stone, Chinese masks, African gods in black wood, a brass pentacle, used in divination, and so forth. Bledsoe drew up a tantalus, opened a humidor, and threw himself into an easy-chair.

As we talked, gradually breaking through the crust of the years, my eyes dwelt frequently on an oil painting near by. It showed a nude woman; a

small painting but so exquisitely done, so lovely in every detail, that it reached the heart. Bledsoe caught my glances, I was aware, but he made no comment.

“Last I heard of you,” I said at length, “you were handling that cataleptic chap, Ranjit Singh. Whatever became of him? I tried hard to expose him once, but failed.”

Bledsoe’s black eyes glittered with a spark of flame, and he laughed in his silent manner, which sent a chill up my spine.

“Not you alone, my friend! Yes, many tried to expose him, but there was nothing to expose. Real! Ranjit Singh was real, no faker! His trance was real. He was a great money-maker, too. Our success really was the foundation of my fortune.”

He laughed again, without a sound. His sallow, cadaverous face lit up, and those long smooth fingers of his played with his Corona.

“Poor Ranjit!” he said, and shrugged. “You know, we were great friends. He initiated me into all his secrets—and I can swear to you, as one friend to another, that his act had not one particle of illusion or trickery about it! He was simply possessed of the God-given gift, that was all. In Egypt, as the result of investigation by some French savants, he remained buried for five weeks—five weeks, do you understand?”

He gave me a shrewd, excited look, as his voice rose.

“It seems incredible,” I rejoined, and he laughed silently at this.

“So they said; but we proved it to them!”

“What became of him?” I queried.

He puffed at his cigar for a moment. Through the blue haze, I saw his eye darting at me, probing me, like red jewels in a grotesque mask. I noted how white and perfect his teeth were, despite his age.

“Poor Ranjit!” he said, and a sigh escaped him. I sensed a certain cunning in his glance, and wondered if he were trying to conceal something. “He broke down at last—the strain got on his nerves, I imagine. We had made plenty of money, too. Yes, he went to pieces. He determined one night to return to India—this was after we had come back to Egypt. He knew his nerve was gone, and quit. You know how it is with such people.”

I nodded. This was quite true. There comes the sudden snap—and it is over.

“He didn’t go on with his magic, then?”

Bledsoe made a gesture of contempt. “Magic! Illusion and trickery, all of it. No, he did not need to return to that. He caught the next boat through the canal, and a few months later I heard he had died in Bombay. But this was while I—while we were in Paris, where I was having troubles of my own.”

“Queer that he should go to India!” I commented.

Bledsoe gave me a sharp, flaming look. “He was a Hindoo, you know! He had come from there as a boy.”

**R**anjit was nothing of the sort, as I well knew, but I did not intend to get into any argument with Bledsoe about it. I had the feeling that if he got too excited, he would go smash. To change the subject, I looked up at the picture on the wall.

“An extraordinary thing you have there!” I exclaimed. “It has an odd fascination, Bledsoe. The coloring, the workmanship, is exquisite; the figure has a delicacy, a touch of fairy beauty, that’s remarkable. By gad, there’s something haunting about that face!”

“There ought to be,” he said. “Felicien Hans did it for me.”

His face had darkened. His voice was curt, ugly, vibrant with deep and sinister emotions. But his words left me really astonished.

Felicien Hans, of all people—the genius who died in a madhouse! I never knew that Hans did or could do such pictures as this. He was famous for his pictures of the ghastly, the macabre, the horrible; in all he did was a certain awful blasphemy against God and man and nature. Much of his work could not be published, so unspeakably lewd was it. And to think that he had done this delicate, lovely canvas!

“No wonder there’s genius in it,” I commented.

Bledsoe looked up at me, and I surprized in his face so deep and terrible a look, that its unutterable tragedy gave me a positive shock.

“My friend, that is her portrait,” he said in a low voice. “Hers! We had to come to it, I know; I do not think you ever knew her!”

Embarrassed, I shook my head.

“No. And I didn’t mean to touch on any unhappy subject, Bledsoe— —”

“Oh, be at ease, my friend! It relieves my soul; to speak of her, to tell you the truth, is to share my own load!” he said with earnest animation. A flame lit his face; a flame that alarmed me, frightened me.

“It is no long story,” he went on, laying aside his cigar. “You see, we were both quite fond of Ranjit Singh. Poor Anna was subject to frightful headaches, and Ranjit could banish them with the touch of his hand. They were like two happy children!”

I started slightly—was it possible? Had Ranjit Singh, who could never refrain from any woman who took his fancy, come between this couple? Then, as Bledsoe went on, I saw my mistake.

“When Ranjit left us so suddenly,” he pursued, “Anna was quite well for a time. We went to Paris. Then she broke down; she became subject to hallucinations. Yes, my friend, I must tell you the worst,” he went on gravely, solemnly. “Her mind failed. Nothing could help her. She begged for Ranjit, but by this time we had news of his death. She came to think that he was with us still. She fancied that he was in the same house with us, in the same room!”

**A**s he spoke, I was conscious of a frightful sensation. Some telepathic quality leaped from his mind to my own, inspiring me with acute horror. I realized that my fingers were trembling, my heart was pounding.

“That is all,” and Bledsoe, perhaps perceiving my agitation, leaned back suddenly in his chair. “Nothing could be done for her, my friend. She is still alive, still there in Paris, well cared for—hopeless! And I have never had happiness since then, although a certain satisfaction comes to me at times — —”

He broke off abruptly and sat in an attitude of dejection. But I caught a glimmer from his black eyes, knew he was directing keen, crafty glances at me. With an effort, I struggled to break loose from the singular sensations he had evoked in me, and putting down the cigar, I lifted a drink to my lips. The liquor warmed me instantly.

“I’m sorry, Bledsoe,” was all I could say. “I had no idea of such a tragedy in your life— —”

“Oh, the worst of it lies in the past,” he exclaimed, in a lighter voice, and awoke from his dejection. “I am glad we have touched upon it; I feel much better. The old loneliness, the ache, is relieved! By the way, here is something that might interest you to see. Perhaps you’ll recognize it.”

He went to a table and opened a drawer. I wanted to get away, to get out of this place, but could not decently go at once. The cunning in Bledsoe's eyes, the gleams of crafty mental agility, gave me the idea that he, too, might be a little mad.

Coming back, he handed me a ring, set with a lapis lazuli scarab.

"Ranjit gave me this when we parted," he said. "Do you remember it?"

Did I, indeed! Far better than he knew. Ranjit Singh always wore it. On one occasion he had mentioned to me that this ring would never leave him, that it had never left his finger and would be buried with him. Ranjit had some deep belief in it as a charm, I imagine. And he had given it to Bledsoe? Well, perhaps. . . .

"Yes," I said, returning it. "I recall he invariably wore it. Well, old man, I must run along—it's later than I realized!"

"And I'm not very cheerful company, eh?" Bledsoe laughed silently, and slipped the ring on his finger. "But before going, come and look at my mummy. It's rather remarkable, they tell me, because so well preserved. The face is exposed, and has never changed from the time I unwrapped it. I got it, of course, before the present rigid restrictions on the removal of antiquities from Egypt."

He crossed to the gorgeous mummy-case, and I followed him, more anxious than ever to get away. That noiseless, ghastly laugh of his, his tragic story, was on my nerves.

Taking hold of the heavy lid, Bledsoe lifted it away and stood it against the wall. Beneath was a heavy plate-glass lid which he had fitted to the case; as he explained, it kept out the air and lessened the chance of the mummy falling to dust, as so many of them did upon exposure.

There, wrapped in the innumerable wrappings of the dead, was the mummy, intact. I was astonished by the sight of the exposed face; it did not have the dried, skin-and-bone appearance of most mummies. Still, it was shriveled enough. The singular thing was that the hair, mustache and beard were intact.

"A bearded mummy!" I exclaimed. "Why, Bledsoe, I never heard of such a thing!"

He was enjoying my amazement.

"It is probably unique," he observed. "Perhaps it is not an Egyptian at all—who knows? Some day I must have the inscriptions translated."

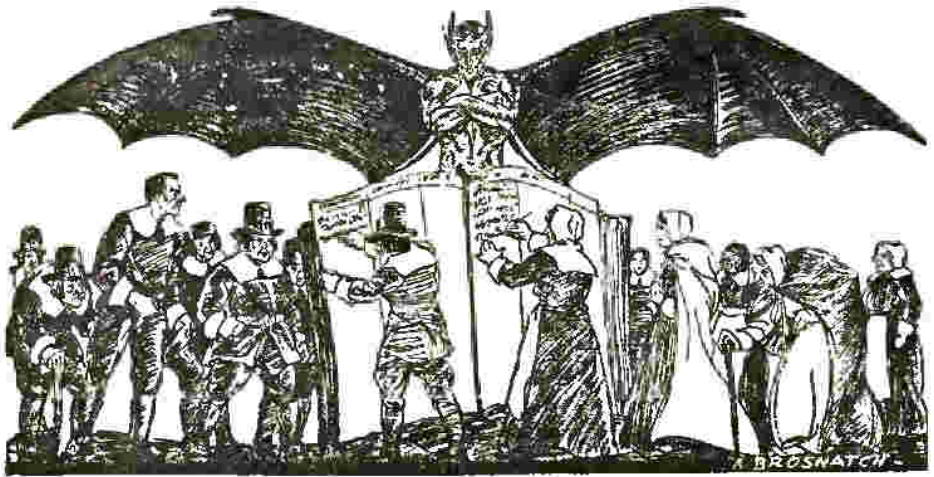
I turned away. Something in that face wakened a chord in my memory; odd as it seemed, it made me think of Ranjit Singh as I had frequently seen him before he was wakened from the cataleptic trance. I flung another glance at the mummy.

“Queer!” I murmured. “This chap has rather the look of Ranjit, somehow—or is it my imagination?”

“No, no,” Bledsoe said, and chuckled. “Do you know, I have fancied the same thing myself, at times? Well, old man, I wish you wouldn’t go— —”

Go I did, however, and drew a breath of sane relief when I emerged alone into the night air. That cackling chuckle of Bledsoe’s still rang in my ears. And I dreamed of him, of his noiseless, hideous laugh, and in my dream saw his long hands, with the lapis scarab on the smooth finger. . . .

I have had enough of meeting old friends.



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Sleeper* by Henry Bedford-Jones]