

The Pointing Man eBook

The Pointing Man

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Page 1

IN WHICH THE DESTINY THAT PLAYS WITH MEN MOVES THE PIECES ON THE BOARD

Dust lay thick along the road that led through the very heart of the native quarter of Mangadone; dust raised into a misty haze which hung in the air and actually introduced a light undertone of red into the effect. Dust, which covered the bare feet of the coolies, the velvet slippers of the Burmese, which encroached everywhere and no one regarded, for presently, just at sundown, shouting watermen, carrying large bamboo vessels with great spouts, would come running along the road, casting the splashing water on all sides, and reduce the dry powder to temporary mud.

The main street of the huge bazaar in Mangadone was as busy a thoroughfare as any crowded lane of the city of London, and it blazed with colour and life as the evening air grew cool. There were shops where baskets were sold, shops apparently devoted only to the sale of mirrors, shops where tailors sat on the ground and worked at sewing machines; sweet stalls, food stalls, cafes, flanked by dusty tubs of plants and crowded with customers, who reclined on sofas and chairs set right into the street itself. Nearer the river end of the street, the shops were more important, and business offices announced themselves on large placards inscribed in English, and in curling Burmese characters like small worms hooping and arching themselves, and again in thick black letters which resembled tea leaves formed into the picturesque design of Chinese writing, for Mangadone was one of the most cosmopolitan ports of the East, and stood high in the commercial world as a place for trade.

Along the street a motley of colour took itself like a sea of shades and tints. Green, crimson, lemon yellow, lapis-lazuli, royal purple, intermingled with the naked brown bodies of coolies clad only in loin-cloths, for every race and class emerged just before sunset. Rich Burmen clad in yards of stiff, rustling silk jostled the lean, spare Chinamen and the Madrassis who came to Mangadone to make money out of the indolence of the natives of a place who cared to do little but smoke and laugh. Poor Burmen in red and yellow cottons, as content with life as their wealthy brethren, loitered and smoked with the little white-coated women with flower-decked heads, and they all flowed on with the tide and filled the air with a perpetual babel of sound.

The great, high houses on either side of the street were dilapidated and gaunt, let out for the most part in flats and tenements. Screaming children swarmed naked and entirely unconcerned upon every landing, and out on the verandas that gave publicity to the way of life in the native quarter. Sometimes a rag of curtain covered the entrances to the houses, but just as often it did not. Women washed the big brass and earthenware pots, cooked the food, and played with the children in the smoky darkness, or sat to watch the evening show of the street.



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At one corner of the upper end of the street was a curio and china shop owned by a stout and wealthy Burman, Mhtoon Pah. The shop was one of the features of the place, and no globe-trotting tourist could pass through Mangadone without buying a set of tea-cups, a dancing devil, a carpet, or a Burmese gong, from Mhtoon Pah. A strange-looking effigy in tight breeches, with pointing yellow hands and a smiling yellow face, stood outside the shop, eternally asking people in wooden, dumb show, to go in and be robbed by the proprietor. He had stood there and pointed for so long that the green glaze of his coat was sun-blistered, but he invariably drew the attention of passing tourists, and acted as a sign-board. He pointed at a small door up a flight of steps, and behind the small door was a dark shop, smelling of sandal-wood and cassia, and strong with the burning fumes of joss-sticks. Innumerable cardboard boxes full of Japanese dolls, full of glass bracelets of all colours, full of ivory figures, and full of amber and jade ornaments, were piled in the shelves. Silver bands, embossed in relief with the history of the Gaudama—the Lord Buddha—stood under glass protection, and everything that the heart of the touring American or Britisher could desire was to be had, at a price, in the curio shop of Mhtoon Pah. Umbrellas of all colours from Bussan; silk from Shantung; carpets from Mirzapore; silver peacocks, Japanese embroideries, shell-trimmed bags from Shan and Cochin, all were there; and the wealth of Mhtoon Pah was great.

Everybody knew the curio dealer: he had beguiled and swindled each new arrival in Mangadone, and his personality helped to make him a very definite figure in the place. He was a large man, his size accentuated by his full silk petticoat; a man with large feet, large hands and a round bullet head, set on a thick neck. He had a few sleek black hairs at the corners of his mouth, and his long, narrow eyes, with thick yellow whites and inky-black pupils, never expressed any emotion. Clothed in strawberry-red silk and a white coat, with a crimson scarf knotted low over his forehead, he was very nearly as strange and wonderful a sight as his own shop of myriad wares, and his manner was at all times the manner of a Grand Duke. Mhtoon Pah was as well known as the pointing effigy outside, but, whereas the world in the street believed they knew what the wooden man pointed at, no one could ever tell what Mhtoon Pah saw, and no one knew except Mhtoon Pah himself.

All day long Mhtoon Pah sat inside his shop on a low divan and smoked cheroots, and only when a customer was of sufficient importance did he ever rise to conduct a sale himself. He was assisted by a thin, eager boy, a native Christian from Ootacamund, who had followed several trades before he became the shop assistant of Mhtoon Pah. He was useful because he could speak English, and he had been dressing-boy to a married Sahib who lived in a big house at the end of the Cantonment, therefore he knew something of the ways of Mem-Sahibs; and he had taken a prize at the Sunday school, therefore Absalom was a boy of good character, and was known very nearly as well as Mhtoon Pah himself.

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It was a hot, stifling evening, the evening of July the 29th. The rains had lashed the country for days, and even the trees that grew in among the houses of Paradise Street were fresh and green, though one of the hot, burning breaks of blue sky and glaring sunlight had baked the road into Indian-red dust once more, and the interior of Mhtoon Pah's curio shop was heavy with stale scents and dark shadows that crept out as the gloom of evening settled in upon it. Mhtoon Pah moved about looking at his goods, and touching them with careful hands. He hovered over an ivory lady carrying an umbrella, and looked long at a white marble Buddha, who returned his look with an equally inscrutable regard. The Buddha sat cross-legged, thinking for ever and ever about eternity, and Mhtoon Pah moved round in red velvet toe-slippers, pattering lightly as he went, for in spite of his bulk Mhtoon Pah had an almost soundless walk. Having gone over everything and stood to count the silver bowls, he waited as though he was listening, and after a little the light creak of the staircase warned him that steps were coming towards the shop from the upper rooms.

"Absalom," he called, and the steps hurried, and after a moment's talk to which the boy listened carefully as though receiving directions, he told him to close the shop and place his chair at the top of the steps, as he desired to sit outside and look at the street.

When the chair was placed, Mhtoon Pah took up his elevated position and smoked silently. The toil of the day was over, and he leaned his arm along the back of his chair and crossed one leg over his knee. He could hear Absalom closing the shop behind him, and he turned his curious, expressionless eyes upon the boy as he passed down the steps and mingled with the crowd in the street. Just opposite, a story-teller squatted on the ground in the centre of a group of men who laughed and clapped their hands, his flashing teeth and quick gesticulations adding to each point he made; it was still clear enough to see his alternating expression of assumed anger or amusement. It was clear enough to notice the coloured scarves and smiling faces of a bullock cart full of girls going slowly homewards, and it was clear enough to see and recognize the Rev. Francis Heath, hurrying at speed between the crowd; clear enough to see the Rev. Francis stop for a moment to wish his old pupil Absalom good evening, and then vanish quickly like a figure flashed on a screen by a cinematograph.

Lights came out in high windows and sounds of bagpipes and beating tom-toms began inside the open doors of a nautch house. An evil-looking house where green dragons curled up the fretted entrance, and where, overhead, faces peered from a balcony into the street. There was noise enough there to attract any amount of attention. Smart carriages, with white-uniformed syces, hurried up, bearing stout, plethoric men from the wharf offices, and Mhtoon Pah saluted several of the sahibs, who reclined in comfort behind fine pairs of trotting horses.



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Their time for passing having gone, and the street relieved of the disturbance, lamps were carried out and set upon tables and booths, but a few red streaks of evening tinted the sky, and faces that passed were still recognizable. A bay pony ridden by a lady almost at a gallop came so fast that she was up the street and round the corner in a twinkling. If Mrs. Wilder was dining out on the night of July 29th she was running things close; equally so if she was receiving guests.

A flare of light from a window opposite fell across the face of the dancing man, who pointed at Mhtoon Pah, and appeared to make him offer his principal for sale, or introduce him to the street with an indicating finger. The gloom grew, calling out the lights into strength, but the concourse did not thin: it only gathered in numbers, and the long, moaning hoot of an out-going tramp filled the air as though with a wail of sorrow at departure. Lascars in coal-begrimed tunics joined in with the rest, adding their voices to the babel, and round-hatted sailors from the Royal Indian Marine ships mingled with them.

All up and down the Mangadone River lights came out. Clear lights along the land, and wavering torch-lights in the water. Ships' port-holes cleared themselves in the darkness, ships' lights gleamed green and red in high stars up in the crows'-nests, or at the shapeless bulk of dark bows, and white sheets of strong electric clearness lay over one or two landing-stages where craft was moored alongside and overtime work still continued. Little sampans glided in and out like whispers, and small boats with crossed oars, rowed by one man, ferried to and fro, but it was late, and, gradually, all commercial traffic ceased.

It was quite late now, an hour when European life had withdrawn to the Cantonment. It was not an hour for Sahibs on foot to be about, and yet it seemed that there was one who found the night air of July 29th hot and close, and desired to go towards the river for the sake of the breeze and the fresh air. He, too, like all the others, passed along Paradise Street, passing quickly, as the others had passed, his head bent and his eyes averted from the faces that looked up at him from easy chairs, from crowded doorsteps, or that leaned over balconies. He, also, whoever he was, had not Mhtoon Pah's leisure to regard the street, and he went on with a steady, quick walk which took him out on to the wharf, and from the wharf along a waste place where the tram lines ceased, and away from there towards a cluster of lights in a house close over the dark river itself.

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The stars came out overhead, and the Southern Cross leaned down; seen from the river over the twin towers of the cathedral, seen from the cathedral brooding over the native quarter, seen in Paradise Street not at all, and not in any way missed by the inhabitants, whose eyes were not upon the stars; seen again in the Cantonment, over the massed trees of the park, and seen remarkably well from the wide veranda of Mrs. Wilder's bungalow, where the guests sat after a long dinner, remarking upon the heat and oppressiveness of the tropic night. The fire-flies danced over the trees like iridescent sparks hung on invisible gauze, and even came into the lighted drawing-room, to sparkle with less radiance against the plain white walls. Fans whirred round and round like large tee-totums set near the ceiling, and even the electric light appeared to give out heat; no breeze stirred from the far-away river, no coolness came with the dark, no relief from the brooding, sultry heat. It was no hotter than many nights in any break in the rains, but the guests invited by Mrs. Wilder felt the languor of the air, and felt it more profoundly because their hostess herself was affected by it.

Mrs. Wilder was a dark, handsome woman of thirty-five, usually full of life and animation, and her dinners were known to be entertainments in the real sense of the word. Draycott Wilder was no mate for her in appearance or manner, but Draycott Wilder was marked by the Powers as a successful man. He took very little part in the social side of their married life, and sat in the shadow near the lighted door, listening while his guests talked. The party was in no way different to many others, and it would have ended and been forgotten by all concerned if it had not been for the fact that an unusual occurrence broke it up in dismay. Mrs. Wilder complained of the heat during dinner, and she had been pale, looking doubly so in her vivid green dress; her usual animation had vanished, and she talked with evident effort and seemed glad of the darkness of the veranda.

Suddenly one of those strange silences fell over everyone, silences that may be of a few seconds' duration, but that appear like hours. What they are connected with, no one can guess. The silence lasted for a second, and it was broken with sudden violence.

"My God," said the voice of Hartley, the Head of the Police, speaking in tones of alarm. "Mrs. Wilder has fainted!" She had fallen forward in her chair, and he had caught her as she fell.

Very soon the guests dispersed and the bungalow was still for the night. One or two waited to hear what the doctor had to say, and went away satisfied in the knowledge that the heat had been too much for Mrs. Wilder, and, but for that event, the dinner-party would have been forgotten after two days. Hartley was the last to leave, and the sound of trotting hoofs grew faint along the road.



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By an hour after midnight nearly the whole white population can be presumed to be asleep; day wakes early in the East, and there are few who keep all-night hours, because morning calls men from their beds to their work, and even this hot, sultry night people lay on their beds and tried to sleep; but in the small bungalow where the Rev. Francis Heath lived with a solitary Sapper officer, the bed that he slept in was smooth and unstirred by restless tossing inside the mosquito net.

The Rev. Francis was out, sitting by the bed of a dying parishioner. He watched the long hours through, dressed as he had been in the afternoon, in a grey flannel suit, his thin neck too long and too spare for his all-around collar, and as he watched sometimes and sometimes prayed, he too felt the pressure of the night.

The woman he prayed beside was dying and quite unconscious of his presence. Now and then, to relieve the strain, he got up and stood by the window, looking at the lights against the sky and thinking very definitely of something that troubled him and drew his lips into a tight, thin line. He was a young man of the type described usually as "zealous" and "earnest," and a light that was almost the light of fanaticism shone in his eyes. A dying parishioner was no more of a novelty to Mr. Heath, than one of Mrs. Wilder's dinner-parties was to her guests, and yet the woman on the bed appealed to his pity as few others had done in his experience.

When the doctor came he nodded to the clergyman and just touched the hand on the quilt. He was in evening dress, and he explained that he had been detained owing to his hostess having been taken suddenly ill.

"Where is Rydal himself?"

He asked the question carelessly, dropping the pulseless wrist.

"Who can tell?" said the Rev. Francis Heath.

"He'd better keep out of the way," continued the doctor. "I believe there's a police warrant out for him. Hartley spoke of it to-night. She will be gone before morning, and a good job for her."

The throbbing hot night wore on, and July the 29th became July the 30th, and Mangadone awoke to a fierce, tearing thunder-storm that boomed and crashed and wore itself out in torrents of heavy rain.

II

TELLS THE STORY OF A LOSS, AND HOW IT AFFECTED THE REV. FRANCIS HEATH



Half-way up a low hill rise on the far side of the Mangadone Cantonment was the bungalow of Hartley, Head of the Police. It was a tidy, well-kept house, the house of a bachelor who had an eye to things himself and who was well served by competent servants. Hartley had reached the age of forty without having married, and he was solid of build and entirely sensible and practical of mind. He was spoken of as “sound” and “capable,” for it is thus we describe men with a word, and his mind was adjusted so as to give room for only one idea at a time. He was convinced that he was tactful to a fault, nothing had ever shaken him in this belief, and his personal courage was the courage of the British lion. Hartley was popular and on friendly and confidential terms with everybody.



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Mangadone, like most other places in the East, was as full of cliques as a book is of words, but Hartley regarded them not at all. Popularity was his weakness and his strength, and he swam in all waters and was invited everywhere. Mrs. Wilder, who knew exactly who to treat with distant condescension and who to ignore entirely, invariably included him in her intimate dinners, and the Chief Commissioner, also a bachelor, invited him frequently and discussed many topics with him as the wine circled. Even Craven Joicey, the banker, who made very few acquaintances and fewer intimates, was friendly with Hartley; one of those odd, unlikely friendships that no one understands.

The week following upon the thunder-storm had been a week of grey skies over an acid-green world, and even Hartley became conscious that there is something mournful about a tropical country without a sun in the sky as he sat in his writing-room. It was gloomy there, and the palm trees outside tossed and swayed, and the low mist wraiths down in the valley clung and folded like cotton-wool, hiding the town and covering it up to the very top spires of the cathedral. Hartley was making out a report on a case of dacoity against a Chinaman, but the light in the room was bad, and he pushed back his chair impatiently and shouted to the boy to bring a lamp.

His tea was set out on a small lacquer table near his chair, and his fox-terrier watched him with imploring eyes, occasionally voicing his feelings in a stifled bark. The boy came in answer to his call, carrying the lamp in his hands, and put it down near Hartley, who turned up the wick, and fell to his reading again; then, putting the report into a locked drawer, he drew his chair from the writing-table and poured out a cup of tea.

He had every reason to suppose that his day's work was done, and that he could start off for the Club when his tea was finished. The wind rattled the palm branches and came in gusts through the veranda, banging doors and shaking windows, and the evening grew dark early, with the comfortless darkness of rain overhead, when the wheels of a carriage sounded on the damp, sodden gravel outside. Hartley got up and peered through the curtain that hung across the door. Callers at such an hour upon such a day were not acceptable, and he muttered under his breath, feeling relieved, however, when he saw a fat and heavy figure in Burmese clothing get out from the *gharry*.

"If that is anyone to see me on business, say that this is neither the place nor the hour to come," he shouted to the boy, and returning to the tea-table, poured out a saucer of milk for the eager terrier, now divided between his duties as a dog and his feelings as an animal.

The boy reappeared after a pause, bearing a message to the effect that Mhtoon Pah begged an immediate interview upon a subject so pressing that it could not wait.

Hartley listened to the message, swore under his breath, and looked sharply at Mhtoon Pah when he came into the room. Usually the curio dealer had a smile and a suave, pleasant manner, but on this occasion all his suavity was gone, and his eyes, usually so inexpressive and secret, were lighted with a strange, wolfish look of anger and rage that was almost suggestive of insanity.



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He bowed before the Head of the Police and began to talk in broken, gasping words, waving his hands as he spoke. His story was confused and rambling, but what he told was to the effect that his boy, Absalom, had disappeared and could not be found.

“It was the night of the 29th of July, *Thakin*, and I sent him forth upon a business. Next morning he did not return. It was I who opened the shop, it was I who waited upon customers, and Absalom was not there.”

“What inquiries have you made?”

“All that may be made, *Thakin*. His mother comes crying to my door, his brothers have searched everywhere. Ah, that I had the body of the man who has done this thing, and held him in the sacred tank, to make food for the fishes.”

His dark eyes gleamed, and he showed his teeth like a dog.

“Nonsense, man,” said Hartley, quickly. “You seem to suppose that the boy is dead. What reason have you for imagining that there has been foul play?”

“*Seem to suppose, Thakin?*” Mhtoon Pah gasped again, like a drowning man. “And yet the *Thakin* knows the sewer city, the Chinese quarter, the streets where men laugh horribly in the dark. Houses there, *Thakin*, that crawl with yellow men, who are devils, and who split a man as they would split a fowl—” he broke off, and waved his hands about wildly.

Hartley felt a little sick; there was something so hideous in the way Mhtoon Pah expressed himself that he recoiled a step and summoned his common sense to his aid.

“Who saw Absalom last?”

“Many people must have seen him. I sat myself outside the shop at sunset to watch the street, and had sent Absalom forth upon a business, a private business: he was a good boy. Many saw him go out, but no one saw him return.”

“That is no use, Mhtoon Pah; you must give me some names. Who saw the boy besides yourself?”

Mhtoon Pah opened his mouth twice before any sound came, and he beat his hands together.

“The Padre Sahib, going in a hurry, spoke a word to him; I saw that with my eyes.”

“Mr. Heath?”

“Yes, *Thakin*, no other.”



“And besides Mr. Heath, was there anyone else who saw him?”

Mhtoon Pah bowed himself double in his chair and rocked about.

“The whole street saw him go, but none saw him return, neither will they. They took Absalom into some dark place, and when his blood ran over the floor, and out under the doors, the Chinamen got their little knives, the knives that have long tortoise-shell handles, and very sharp edges, and then—”

“For God’s sake stop talking like that,” said Hartley, abruptly. “There isn’t a fragment of evidence to prove that the boy is murdered. I am sorry for you, Mhtoon Pah, but I warn you that if you let yourself think of things like that you will be in a lunatic asylum in a week.”

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He took out a sheet of paper and made careful notes. The boy had been gone four to five days, and beyond the fact that the Rev. Francis Heath had seen and spoken to him, no one else was named as having passed along Paradise Street. The clergyman's evidence was worth nothing at all, except to prove that the boy had left Mhtoon Pah's shop at the time mentioned, and Mhtoon Pah explained that the "private business" was to buy a gold lacquer bowl desired by Mrs. Wilder, who had come to the shop a day or two before and given the order. Gold lacquer bowls were difficult to procure, and he had charged the boy to search for it in the morning and to buy it, if possible, from the opium dealer Leh Shin, who could be securely trusted to be half-drugged at an early hour.

"It was the morning I spoke of, *Thakin*," said the curio dealer, who had grown calmer. "But Absalom did not return to his home that night. He may have gone to Leh Shin; he was a diligent boy, a good boy, always eager in the pursuit of his duty and advantage."

"I am very sorry for you, Mhtoon Pah," said Hartley again, "and I shall investigate the matter. I know Leh Shin, and I consider it quite unlikely that he has had anything to do with it."

When Mhtoon Pah rattled away in the yellow *gharry*, Hartley put the notes on one side. It was a police matter, and he could trust his staff to work the subject up carefully under his supervision, and going to the telephone, he communicated the principal facts to the head office, mentioning the name of Leh Shin and the story of the gold lacquer bowl, and giving instructions that Leh Shin was to be tactfully interrogated.

When Hartley hung up the receiver he took his hat and waterproof and went out into the warm, damp dusk of the evening. There was something that he did not like about the weather. It was heavy, oppressive, stifling, and though there was air in plenty, it was the stale air of a day that seemed never to have got out of bed, but to have lain in a close room behind the shut windows of Heaven.

He remembered the boy Absalom well, and could recall his dark, eager face, bulging eyes and protuberant under-lip, and the idea of his having been decoyed off unto some place of horror haunted him. It was still on his mind when he walked into the Club veranda and joined a group of men in the bar. Joicey, the banker, was with them, silent, morose, and moody according to his wont, taking no particular notice of anything or anybody. Fitzgibbon, a young Irish barrister-at-law, was talking, and laughing and doing his best to keep the company amused, but he could get no response out of Joicey. Hartley was received with acclamations suited to his general reputation for popularity, and he stood talking for a little, glad to shake off his feeling of depression. When he saw Mr. Heath come in and go up the staircase to an upstairs room, he followed him with his eyes and decided to take the opportunity to speak to him.



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“What’s the matter, Joicey?” he asked, speaking to the banker. “You look as if you had fever.”

“I’m all right,” Joicey spoke absently. “It’s this infernally stuffy weather, and the evenings.”

“I’m glad it’s that,” laughed Fitzgibbon, “I thought that it might be me. I’m so broke that even my tea at *Chota haziri* is getting badly overdrawn.”

“Dine with me on Saturday,” suggested Hartley, “I’ve seen very little of you just lately.”

Joicey looked up and nodded.

“I’ll come,” he said, laconically, and Hartley, finishing his drink, went up the staircase.

The reading-room of the Club was usually empty at that hour, and the great tables littered with papers, free to any studious reader. When Hartley came in, the Rev. Francis Heath had the place entirely to himself, and was sitting with a copy of the *Saturday Review* in his hands. He did not hear Hartley come in, and he started as his name was spoken, and putting down the *Review*, looked at the Head of the Police with questioning eyes.

“I’ve come to talk over something with you, Heath,” Hartley began, drawing a chair close to the table. “Can you remember anything at all of what you were doing on the evening of July the twenty-ninth?”

The Rev. Francis Heath dropped his paper, and stooped to pick it up; certainly he found the evening hot, for his face ran with trickles of perspiration.

“July the twenty-ninth?”

“Yes, that’s the date. I am particularly anxious to know if you remember it.”

Mr. Heath wiped his neck with his handkerchief.

“I held service as usual at five o’clock.”

Hartley looked at him; there was something undeniably strained in the clergyman’s eyes and voice.

“Ah, but what I am after took place later.”

The Rev. Francis Heath moistened his lips and stood up.



“My memory is constantly at fault,” he said, avoiding Hartley’s eyes and looking at the ground. “I would not like to make any specific statement without—without—reference to my note-book.”

Hartley stared in astonishment.

“This is only a small matter, Heath. I was trying to get round to my point in the usual way, by giving no actual indication of what I wanted to know. You see, if you tell a man what you want, he sometimes imagines that what he did on another day is what really happened on the actual occasion, and that, as you can imagine, makes our job very difficult. I don’t want to bother you, but as your name was mentioned to me in connection with a certain investigation, I wished to test the truth of my man’s statement.”

Heath stood in the same attitude, his face pale and his eyes steadily lowered.

“It might be well for you to be more clear,” he said, after a long pause.

“Did you go down Paradise Street just after sunset?”

“I may have done so. I have several parishioners along the river bank.”



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“Why the devil is he talking like this and looking like this?” Hartley asked himself, impatiently.

“I’m not a cross-examining counsel,” he said, with some sharpness. “As I told you before, Heath, it is only a very small matter.”

The Rev. Francis Heath gripped the back of his chair and a slight flush mounted to his face.

“I resent your questions, Mr. Hartley. What I did or did not do on the evening of July the twenty-ninth can in no way affect you. I entirely refuse to be made to answer anything. You have no right to ask me, and I have no intention of replying.”

Hartley put his hand out in dismay.

“Really, Heath, your attitude is quite absurd. I have already told one man to-day that he was going mad; are you dreaming, man? I only want you to help me, and you talk as if I had accused you of something. There is nothing criminal in being seen in Paradise Street after sundown.”

Mr. Heath stood holding by the back of his chair, looking over Hartley’s head, his dark eyes burning and his face set.

“Come, then,” said the police officer abruptly, “who did you see? Did you, for instance, see the Christian boy, Absalom, Mhtoon Pah’s assistant?”

The Rev. Francis Heath made no answer.

“Did you see him?”

“I will not answer any further questions, but since you ask me, I did see the boy.”

“Thank you, Heath; that took some getting at. Now will you tell me if you saw him again later: I am supposing that you went down the wharf and came back, shall I say, in an hour’s time. Did you see Absalom again?”

The clergyman stared out of the window, and his pause was of such intensely long duration that when he said the one word, “No,” it fell like the splash of a stone dropped into a deep well.

Hartley looked at his sleeve-links for quite a long time.

“Good night, Heath,” he said, getting up, but the Rev. Francis Heath made no reply.



Hartley went back to his bungalow with something to think about. He had always regarded Heath as a difficult and rather violently religious man. They had never been friends, and he knew that they never could be friends, but he respected the man even without liking him. Now he was quite convinced that Heath, after some deliberation with his conscience, had lied to him, and it made him angry. He had admitted, with the greatest reluctance, that he had been through Paradise Street, and seen the boy, and his declaration that he had not seen him again did not ring with any real conviction. It made the whole question more interesting, but it made it unpleasant. If things came to light that called the inquiry into court, the Rev. Francis Heath might live to learn that the law has a way of obliging men to speak. If Hartley had ever been sure of anything in his life, he was sure that Heath knew something of Absalom, and knew where he had gone in search of the gold lacquer bowl that was desired by Mrs. Wilder. He made up his mind to see Mrs. Wilder and ask her about the order for the bowl; but he hardly thought of her, his mind was full of the mystery that attached itself to the question of the Rector of St. Jude's parish, and his fierce and angry refusal to talk reasonably.



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He threw open his windows and sat with the air playing on his face, and his thoughts circled round and round the central idea. Absalom was missing, and the Rev. Francis Heath had behaved in a way that led him to believe that he knew a great deal more than he cared to say, and Hartley brooded over the subject until he grew drowsy and went upstairs to bed.

III

INDICATES A STANDPOINT COMMONLY SUPPOSED TO REPRESENT THE PRINCIPLES OF THE JESUIT FATHERS

It was quite early the following morning when Hartley set out to take a stroll down Paradise Street, and from there to the Chinese quarter, where Leh Shin had a small shop in a colonnade running east and west. The houses here were very different to the houses in Paradise Street. The fronts were brightened with gilt, and green and red paint daubed the entrances. Almost every third shop was a restaurant, and Hartley did not care to think of the sort of food that was cooked and eaten within. Immense lanterns, that turned into coloured moons by night, but they were pale and dim by day, hung on the cross-beams inside the houses.

Some half-way down the colonnade, and deep in the odorous gloom, Leh Shin worked at nothing in particular, and sold devils as Mhtoon Pah sold them, but without the same success. The door of his shop was closed, and Hartley rapped upon it several times before he received an answer; then a bolt was shot back, and Leh Shin's long neck stretched itself out towards the officer. He was a thin, gaunt figure, lean as the Plague, and his spare frame was clad in cheap black stuff that hung around him like the garments of Death itself. Hartley drew back a step, for the smell of *napi* and onions is unpleasant even to the strongest of white men, and told Leh Shin to open the door wide as he wished to talk to him. Leh Shin, with many owl-like blinkings of his narrow eyes, asked Hartley to come inside. The street was not a good place for talking, and Hartley followed him into the shop.

It was very dark within, and a dim light fell from high skylight windows, giving the shop something of the suggestion of a well. Counters blocked it, making entrance a matter of single file, and, in the deep gloom at the back, two candles burned before a huge, ferocious-looking figure depicted on rice-paper and stuck against the wall. It was hard to believe that it was day outside, so heavy was the darkness, and it was a few moments before Hartley's eyes became accustomed to the sudden change. Second-hand clothes hung on pegs around the room, and all kinds of articles were jumbled together regardless of their nature. On the floor was a litter of silk and silver goods, boxes, broken portmanteaux, ropes, baskets, and on the counter nearest the door a tiny silver cage of beautiful workmanship inhabited by a tiny golden bird with ruby eyes.



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At the back of the shop and near the yellow circle of light thrown by the candles, was a boy, naked to the waist, and immensely stout and heavy. His long plait of hair was twisted round and round on his shaven forehead, and he stood perfectly still, watching the officer out of small pig eyes. He was chewing something slowly, turning it about and about inside a small, narrow slit of a mouth, and his whole expression was cunning and evil. Leh Shin followed Hartley's glance and saw the boy, and the sight of him seemed to recall him to actual life, for he spoke in words that sounded like stones knocking together and ordered him out of the shop. The boy looked at him oddly for a moment; then turned away, still munching, and lounged out of the room, stopping on the threshold of a back entrance to take one more look at Hartley.

As a rule Hartley was not affected by the peculiarities of the people he dealt with, but Leh Shin's assistant impressed him unpleasantly. Everything he did was offensive, and his whole suggestion loathsome. Hartley was still thinking of him when he looked at Leh Shin, who stood blinking before him, awaiting his words patiently.

"Now, Leh Shin, I want to ask you a few questions. Do you sell lacquer in this shop?"

The Chinaman indicated that he sold anything that anyone would buy.

"Do you happen to know that Mhtoon Pah was looking for a bowl of gold lacquer, and that he sent his boy Absalom here to get it?"

Leh Shin shook his head. He was a poor man, and he knew nothing. Moreover, he knew nothing of July the twenty-ninth, he did not count days. He had not seen the boy Absalom.

"Let me advise you to be truthful, Leh Shin," said Hartley. "You may be called upon to give an account of yourself on the evening and night of July the twenty-ninth."

Leh Shin looked stolidly at the mildewed clothes and tried to remember, but he failed to be explicit, and the greasy, obese creature, still chewing, was recalled to assist his master's memory. He spoke in a high chirping voice, and looked at Hartley with angry eyes as he asserted that his master had been ill upon the evening mentioned and that he had closed the shop early, and that he himself had gone to the nautch house to witness a dance that had lasted until morning.

"You can prove what you say, I suppose," said Hartley, speaking to Leh Shin, "and satisfy me that the boy Absalom was not here, and did not come here?"

Leh Shin, moved to sudden life, protested that he could prove it, that he could call half Hong Kong Street to prove it.

"I don't want Hong Kong Street. I want a creditable witness," said Hartley, and he turned to go. "So far as I know, you are an honest dealer, Leh Shin, and I am quite

ready to believe, if you can help me, that you were ill that night, but I must have a creditable witness.”

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When he left the shop, Leh Shin looked at the fat, sodden boy, and the boy returned his look for a moment, but neither of them spoke, and a few minutes later the door was bolted from within, and they were once more alone in the shadows, with the rags, the broken portmanteaux, the relics of art, and the animal smell, and Hartley was out in the street. He was pretty secure in the belief that Leh Shin had not seen the boy, and that he knew nothing of the gold lacquer bowl, but he also believed that Mhtoon Pah had been far too crafty to tell the Chinaman that anyone particularly wanted such a treasure of art. Mhtoon Pah, or his emissary, would have priced everything in the shop down to the most maggot-eaten rag before he would have mentioned the subject of lacquer bowls.

There was no mystery connected with the bowl, but there was something sickening about Leh Shin's shop, and something utterly horrible about his assistant. Hartley wished he had not seen him, he wished that he had remained in ignorance of his personality. He thought of him in the sweating darkness he had left, and as he thought he remembered Mhtoon Pah's wild, extravagant fancies, and they grew real to his mind.

It was next to impossible to discover what the truth was about Leh Shin's illness on the night of July the 29th, and it really did not bear very much upon the matter, unless there was no other clue to what had become of the boy. Hartley returned to other matters and put the case on one side for the moment. On his way back for luncheon he looked in at Mhtoon Pah's shop. He had intended to pass, but the sight of the little wooden man ushering him up the steps made him turn and stop and then go in. Mhtoon Pah sat on his divan in the scented gloom, very different to the interior of Leh Shin's shop, and when he saw Hartley he struggled to his feet and demanded news of Absalom.

"There is none yet," said Hartley, sitting down. "Now, Mhtoon Pah, are you quite sure that it was Mr. Heath that you saw that evening?"

"I saw him with these eyes. I saw him pass, and he was going quickly. I read the walk of men and tell much by it. The Reverend was in a great hurry. Twice did he pull out his watch as he came along the street, and he pushed through the crowd like a rogue elephant going through a rice crop. I have seen the Reverend walking before, and he walked slowly, he spoke with the *Babus* from the Baptist mission, but this day," Mhtoon Pah flung his hands to the roof, "shall I forget it? This day he walked with speed, and when my little Absalom salaamed before him, he hardly stopped, which is not the habit of the Reverend."

"Did you see him come back? Mr. Heath, I mean?"

Mhtoon Pah stood and looked curiously at Hartley, and remained in a state of suspended animation for a second.



“How could I see him come back?” he said, in a flat, expressionless voice. “I went to the Pagoda, *Thakin*. I am building a shrine there, and shall thereby acquire much merit. I did not see the Reverend return. Besides, he might not have come by the way of Paradise Street.”



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“He might not.”

“It is not known,” said Mhtoon Pah, shaking his head dubiously, and then rage seemed to flare up in him once more. “It is Leh Shin, the Chinaman,” he said, violently. “Let it be known to you, *Thakin*, they eat strange meats, they hold strange revels. I have heard things—” he lowered his voice. “I have been told of how they slay.”

“Then keep the information to yourself, unless you can prove it,” said Hartley, firmly. “I want to hear nothing about it.” He got up and looked around the shop. “I suppose you haven’t got the lacquer bowl since?”

“No, *Thakin*, I have not got it, neither have I seen Leh Shin, an evil man. The Lady Sahib will have to wait; neither has she been here since, nor asked for the bowl.”

Hartley walked down the steps; he was troubled by the thought, and the more he tried to work out some definite theory that left Mr. Heath outside the ring that he proposed to draw around his subject, the more he appeared on the horizon of his mind, always walking quickly and looking at his watch.

Through lunch he went over the facts and faced the Heath question squarely, considering that if Heath knew that the boy was in trouble, and had connived at his escape, he would be muzzled, but there was nothing to show that Absalom had ever broken the law. His employer, Mhtoon Pah, was in despair at his disappearance, his record was blameless, and he had been entrusted with the deal in lacquer to be carried out the following morning.

Looking for Absalom was like tracing a shadow that has passed along a street on soundless feet, and Hartley felt an eager determination seize him to catch up with this flying wraith.

Still with the same idea in his mind, he drove along the principal roads in his buggy, directing his way towards the bungalow where the Rector of St. Jude’s lived with Atkins, the Sapper. The house was draped in climbing and trailing creepers, and the grass grew into the red drive that curved in a half-circle from one rickety gate to another. He came up quietly on the soft, wet clay, and looked up at the house before he called for the bearer, and as he looked up he saw a face disappear quickly from behind a window. After a few minutes the boy came running down a flight of steps from the back, and hurried in to get a tray, which he held out for the customary card.

“Take that away,” said Hartley, “and tell the Padre Sahib that I must see him.”

“The Padre Sahib is out, Sahib.”

The boy still held the tray like a collecting-plate.

“Out,” said Hartley, “nonsense. Go and tell your master that my business is important.”

After a moment the boy returned again, the tray still in his hand.

“Gone out, Sahib,” he said, resolutely, and without waiting for any more Hartley turned the pony’s head and drove out slowly.

Twice in two days Heath had lied, to his certain knowledge, and as he glanced back at the bungalow, a curtain in an upper window moved slightly as though it had been dropped in haste.

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Just as he turned into the road he came face to face with Atkins, Heath's bungalow companion, and he pulled up short.

"I've been trying to call on the Padre," he said, carelessly, "but he was out."

"Out," said Atkins, in a tone of surprise. "Why, that is odd. He told me he was due at a meeting at half-past five, and that he wasn't going out until then. I suppose he changed his mind."

"It looks like it," said Hartley, dryly.

"He hasn't been well these last few days," went on Atkins, quickly, "said he felt the weather, and he certainly seems ill. I don't believe the poor devil sleeps at all. Whenever I wake, I can see his light in the passage."

"That is bad," Hartley's voice grew sympathetic. "Has he been long like this?"

"Not long," said Atkins, who was constitutionally accurate. "I think it began about the night after the thunder-storm, but I can't say for certain."

"Well, I won't keep you." Hartley touched the pony's quarters with his whip. "I'm sorry I missed Heath, as I wanted to see him about something rather important."

"I'll tell him," said Atkins, cheerfully, "and probably he'll look you up at your own house."

"Will he, I wonder?" thought the police officer, and he set to work upon the treadmill of his thoughts again.

There is nothing in the world so tantalizing, and so hard to bear, as the conviction that knowledge is just within reach and that it is deliberately withheld. Heath stood between him and elucidation, and the more firmly the clergyman held his ground, and the more definitely he blocked the path, the more sure Hartley became that he did so of set purpose.

"But *why, why?*" he asked himself, as he drove through the Cantonment towards Mrs. Wilder's bungalow.

Atkins got off his bicycle and handed it over to his boy as he arrived at the dreary entrance.

"The Padre Sahib is out?" he said, in his brisk, matter-of-fact tones.

"The Padre Sahib is upstairs," said the boy, with an immovable face; and Atkins went up quickly.



“Hallo, Heath, I met Hartley just now, and he said you were out.”

Heath looked up from a sheet of paper laid out on the writing-table before him.

“I did not feel up to seeing Hartley,” he said, a little stiffly. “It is not a convenient hour for callers, so I availed myself of an excuse.”

“He told me to tell you that it was rather a pressing matter that brought him here, and I said that I would give you his message, and that you would probably go round to see him.”

“You said that, Atkins?”

His face was so drawn and unnatural that Atkins looked at him in surprise.

“I suppose I was right?”

“If Hartley wants to see me,” said Heath, in a loud, angry voice, “or if he wants to come bullying and blustering, he must write and make an appointment. I have every right to protect myself from a man who asks personal and most impertinent questions.”



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“Hartley, impertinent?” Atkins’ eyes grew round.

“When I say impertinent, I mean not pertinent, or bearing upon any subject that I intend to discuss with him.”

The Rev. Francis Heath got up and walked towards the window, turning his back upon the room.

“I don’t mix in social politics,” said Atkins, soothingly. “But at the same time, I can’t understand you, Heath. What the devil does Hartley want to know?”

The clergyman caught at the curtain and gripped it as he had gripped the back of his chair at the Club.

“Never ask me that again, Atkins,” he said, in a low, hoarse voice. “Never speak to me about this again.”

Atkins retreated quickly from the room; there was something in the manner of the Rev. Francis Heath that he did not like, and he registered a mental vow to let the subject drop, so far as he, a lieutenant in His Majesty’s Royal Engineers, was concerned, and never to allude to it, either for “fear or favour,” again.

IV

INTRODUCES THE READER TO MRS. WILDER IN A SECRETIVE MOOD

Draycott Wilder was a man who hoarded his passions and concentrated them upon a very few objects. His work came first, and his intense ambition, and after his work, his wife. She was the right sort of wife for a man who put worldly success first, and through the years of their marriage had helped him a great deal more than he ever admitted. Clarice Wilder was beautiful, and had a surface cleverness combined with a natural gift of tact that made her an admirable hostess. She could talk to anybody and send them away pleased and satisfied with themselves, and she had made the best of Draycott for a good number of years. She had married him when marriage seemed a big thing and a wonderful thing, and her country home in Devonshire a small, breathless place where nothing ever happened, and where life was one long Sunday at Home, and Draycott, back from the East, had appeared as interesting as a white Othello.

For a time she received all she needed out of life, and she threw herself into her husband’s promotion-hunger; understanding it, because she, too, wanted to reign, and it gave her an inexplicable feeling of respect for him, for Clarice knew that had she been born a man, she, too, would have worked and schemed and pushed herself out into the front of the ranks. She combined with him as only an ambitious woman can combine, and she supplied all he lacked. It filled her mind, and she never awoke the jealousy that



lay like a sleeping python in the heart of Draycott Wilder. It was when they were in India that Clarice, for the first time, lost her grip and allowed her senses to get the better of her common sense, and she became for a brief time a woman with a very troublesome heart. Hector Coplestone, a young man newly come to the Indian Civil Service, was sent to their Punjaub station. He made Mrs. Wilder realize her own charm, he made her terribly conscious that she was older than him, he made her anxious and distracted and madly, idiotically in love with him. She forgot that there were other things in life, she put aside ambition for a stronger temptation, and she did not care what Draycott thought or supposed.



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No one ever knew what happened, but everyone guessed that Wilder had made trouble. They left India under the same cloud of silence, and they reappeared in Mangadone to outside eyes the same couple who had pulled together for successful years of marriage; and if some whisper, for whispers carry far in the East, came after them, no one regarded it, and the Coplestone incident was considered permanently closed. Draycott Wilder was the same silent man who was the despair of his dinner partners, and Clarice had her old brilliancy and her old way of making men pleased with themselves; and though some people, chiefly young girls, described her as “hard,” she represented a centre of attraction, and her one mad year was a thing of the past.

Among the men who went to the terraced house in its huge gardens, she always particularly welcomed Hartley, the Head of the Police. He never demanded effort, and he had a good nature and a flow of small talk. Nearly every woman liked Hartley, though very few of them could have said why. He had fair, fluffy hair and a pink face; he was just weak enough to be easily influenced, and he fell platonically in love with every new woman he met without being in the least faithless to the others. Mrs. Wilder had a corner in her heart for him, and he, in return, looked upon Mrs. Wilder as a brilliant and lovely woman very much too good for Draycott. He did not know that he took his ideas from her whenever she wished him to do so; Mrs. Wilder, like a clever conjurer, palmed her ideas like cards, and upheld the principle of free will while she did so, and if she had desired to impress Hartley with fifty-two new notions he would have left her positive in his own mind that they were his own.

Thus, Clarice Wilder may be classed as that melodramatic type that goes about labelled “dangerous,” only she had the wit to take off the label and to advertise herself under the guise of a harmless soothing mixture.

The bungalow in which the Wilders lived was an immense place, standing over a terraced garden beautifully planted with flowers. Steps, covered with white marble, led from terrace to terrace, and down to a jade-green lake where water-lilies blossomed and pink lotus flowers floated. Dark green trees plumed with shaded purple flowers accentuated the massed yellow of the golden laburnums. The topmost flight of steps led up to the house, and was flanked on either side with variegated laurel growing in sea-green pots, and the red avenue, that took its lengthy way from the main road, curved into a wide sweep outside the flower-hung veranda.

Hartley arrived at the house just as Mrs. Wilder was having tea alone in the big drawing-room, and she smiled up at him with her curious eyes, that were the colour of granite. Without exactly knowing what her age was, Hartley felt, somehow, that she looked younger than she was, and that she did not do so without some aid from “boxes,” but he liked her none the less for that, and possibly

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admired her more. He sat down and asked her how she was, and, as he looked at her, he wondered to think that she had ever fainted. Clearly, she was the last woman on earth who could be accused of Victorian ways, and to see her in her white lace dress, dark, distinguished, and perfectly mistress of her emotions, was to be bewildered at the memory. She treated the question with scant ceremony, and remarked upon the fact that the night had been hot, and that everyone had felt it.

“I’ve got an excellent reason for remembering the date,” said Hartley reflectively. “By the way, wasn’t Absalom, old Mhtoon Pah’s assistant, once a dressing-boy or something in your establishment?”

“He was, and then he went sick, and took to this other kind of work.”

“He was quite honest, I suppose?”

“Perfectly honest,” said Mrs. Wilder, with a slight lift of her eyebrows, “and a nice little boy. I hope that question doesn’t mean that you are professionally interested in his past?” she laughed carelessly. “I am quite prepared to stand up for Absalom; he was the soul of integrity.”

Hartley put down his cup on the table.

“The boy has disappeared,” he said, talking with interest, for the subject filled his mind.

“But when, and how? I saw him quite lately.”

Hartley’s round, China-blue eyes fixed upon her.

“Can you tell me when you saw him?”

“One night—evening, I should say—I was out riding and I passed him going towards the wharf, not towards the wharf exactly, but to the houses that lie out by the end of the tram lines.”

“What evening? I wish you could remember for me.”

“It was the night of my own dinner-party.”

“Then that was July the twenty-ninth?”

Mrs. Wilder looked at him, and bit her lip.

“Was it the twenty-ninth?” Hartley repeated the question.



“Probably it was, if you say so. I told you just now that I had Burma head. But where has Absalom gone to?”

Hartley took up his cup again and stirred the spoon round and round.

“Forgive me for pelting you with questions, but did you see Mr. Heath that evening?”

“Now, what *are* you trying to get out of me, Mr. Hartley? Did Mr. Heath tell you that he had seen me?”

Hartley stared at his feet.

“Heath has got Burma head, too, and won’t tell me anything. It might help his memory if you were able to say whether you had seen him or not that evening.”

Mrs. Wilder’s fine eyes glittered into a smile that was not exactly mirthful or pleasant.

“I don’t see that I can possibly say one way or another. I often do . . . I often do see him going about the native quarter when I ride through, but I do not write it down in my book, so it is quite impossible for me to say.”

“Anyhow, you saw Absalom?”

“Oh, yes, I saw the boy. What a persistent man you are, and you haven’t told me a word yourself.”



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"Absalom was to have got a gold lacquer bowl that you ordered from Mhtoon Pah?"

"Quite correct," laughed Mrs. Wilder with more of her usual manner. "That old Barabbas has never sent it to me yet, either. I ordered it a month ago. I love lacquer because it looks like nothing else, and particularly gold lacquer."

"Well, all I can tell you is that Absalom had an order from Mhtoon Pah to get the bowl the next morning, if it was to be got, and he went away as usual the night of the twenty-ninth, and never appeared again. Heath saw him, and you saw him, and that is pretty nearly all the evidence I can collect."

"Evidence?" Mrs. Wilder's voice had a piercing note in it.

"Yes, evidence. You see the only way to trace a man is to find out exactly who saw him last, and where."

"Ah, I see. You find out what everyone was doing, and where they were, and you piece the bits in. It's like a jig-saw, and how very interesting it must be."

Hartley laughed.

"Not what the other people were doing exactly, but where they were. It is something to know that you saw the boy, but I wish you could remember if you saw Heath."

Mrs. Wilder got up and walked to the window.

"I do hope he will be found. Did he take my lacquer bowl with him?"

"He had not got it," said Hartley, in his steady, matter-of-fact voice.

"Are you *worried* about it?" She turned and looked across the room. "Why should you be? If Absalom has chosen to leave, I really don't see why he shouldn't be allowed to go in peace."

"I don't know that he did *choose* to leave; that is just the point."

He was longing to ask her another question about Heath, and yet he did not like to press her.

"Here are some callers," she remarked, and then, with a short laugh, "I wonder if they were out and about that evening. If you go on like this, Mr. Hartley, you will make yourself the most popular man in Mangadone. Take my advice and let Absalom come back in his own way. Perhaps he is looking for my bowl." She turned her head and glanced at some cards that the bearer had brought in on a tray. "Show the ladies in, Gulab."



In a few minutes the room was full of voices and laughter, and Mrs. Wilder became unconscious of Hartley. She remained so unconscious of him that he felt uncomfortable and began to wonder if he had offended her in any way. He looked at her from time to time, and when he got up to go she gave him her hand as though she was only just sure that he was really there.

The disappearance of Absalom was taking strange shapes in his mind, and he had so far come to the conclusion that Heath knew something about Absalom, and his visit to Mrs. Wilder added the puzzling fact to his mental arithmetic that Mrs. Wilder knew something about Heath. It was one thing to corner Heath, but Heath standing behind Mrs. Wilder's protection, became formidable.

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Yet it was not in the Cantonment that Hartley expected to find any clue to the vanished Absalom: it was down in the native quarter. Down there where the Chinese eating-houses were beginning to fill, and where the night life was only just awaking from its slumber of the day, was where Absalom, the Christian boy, had last been seen, and it was there, if anywhere, that he must be searched for and found.

What possible connection could there be between an upright, Godly man who went his austere way along the high, cold path of duty, and a woman whose husband was madly grasping at the biggest prize of his profession? What link could bind life with life, when lives were divided by such yawning gulfs of space and class and race? To connect Mrs. Wilder with Heath was almost as mad a piece of folly as to connect Absalom with the clergyman, and yet, Hartley argued, he had not set out to do it. Something that had not begun with any act or question of his had brought about the junction of the ideas, and he felt like a man in a dark room trying to make his way to the window, and meeting with unrecognizable obstacles.

The small tinkle of the church bell attracted his attention, and, following a sudden whim, he went into the tin building and sat down near the door. Mr. Heath did not look down the sparsely-filled church as he read the evening service, and he prayed with an almost violent fervour. Certainly to-night the Rev. Francis Heath was praying as though he was alone, and the odd imploring misery of his voice struck Hartley.—“To perceive and know the things that we ought to do, and to have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same.”

Heath's voice had broken into a kind of sob, the sound that tells of strain and hysteria, but what was there in Mangadone to make a respectable parson strained and hysterical?

V

CRAVEN JOICEY, THE BANKER, FINDS THAT HIS MEMORY IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED

Just as Draycott Wilder stood high in the eyes of the Powers that govern the Civil Service of India, so, too, in his own way, was Craven Joicey, the Banker, a man with a solid reputation. If you build a reputation solidly for the first half of a lifetime, it will last the latter half without much attention or care, and, contrariwise, a bad beginning is frequently stronger than any reformation, and stronger than integrity that comes too late.

Joicey had begun well, and had, as the saying goes, “made his way.” He was a large, heavy man, representative in figure and slow and careful of speech. He kept the secrets of his bank, and he kept his own secrets, if he had any, and was a walking tomb for confidences not known as “tender.” No one would have attempted to tell him their

affairs of the heart, but almost anyone with money to invest would go direct to Craven Joicey. He had no wife, no child, and, as far as anyone knew, no kith or kin,

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and he had no intimate friends. He had one of those strange, shut faces; a mouth that told nothing, eyes that were nearly as expressionless as the eyes of Mhtoon Pah, and he had no restless movements. A plethoric man, Joicey, a man who got up and sat down heavily, a man who looked at his business and not beyond it, and never troubled Society. He probably knew that Heath lived in Mangadone, that was if Heath banked with him; otherwise, he might easily not have known it.

He knew of the Wilders. He knew what Draycott Wilder owned, and he knew that Mrs. Wilder had a very small allowance of her own, paid quarterly through a Devonshire bank, but more than this he neither knew nor wished to know of them, and he never went to their house.

Joicey had not "worn well"; there was no denying that sweating years of Burmese rains and hot weathers had made him prematurely old. His thick hair was patched with white, and his face was flabby and yellow. Craven Joicey was one of those men, who, if he had died suddenly, would have made people remember that they always thought him unhealthy-looking. There was nothing, romantic, exciting, or interesting about him; his mind was a huge pass-book, and his brain a network of facts and figures. He played no games, went only seldom to the Club, and knew no one in the place better than he knew Hartley, which was little, but at any rate Hartley dined once or twice in the year with him, and he occasionally dined in return with the Head of the Police.

Hartley was so occupied with his trouble of mind on the subject of Absalom that he very nearly forgot that he had invited Joicey to dinner the following Saturday. The police had discovered nothing whatever, and he had received another visit at his house from the curio dealer. Mhtoon Pah, in a condition bordering upon frenzy, stated that when he had stood on his steps in the morning, intending to go to the Pagoda to offer alms to the priests, he had noticed his wooden effigy and gone down to look closer at him. The yellow man pointed as was his wont, but over the pointing hand lay a rag soaked in blood.

Mhtoon Pah, immense and splendid in his silk, had given forth wild noises as he produced the rag, noises that reminded Hartley irresistibly of the trumpeting of elephants, but they were terrible to hear.

"It is enough," he said, his face quivering. "This is the work of the Chinamen. They slit his veins, *Thakin*, they are doing it slowly. The *Thakin* can understand that Absalom still lives, his blood is fresh and red, it is not dead blood that runs like treacle, it is living blood that spouts out hot, and that steams and smokes. *Thakin, Thakin*, I cry for vengeance."



“I’m doing all I can, Mhtoon Pah,” said Hartley, desperately. “I can’t go and arrest Leh Shin on suspicion, because there isn’t a vestige of suspicion attached to the man.”

“Not after this?” Mhtoon Pah pointed to the rag that lay loathsomely on the table.



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“That may be goat’s blood, or dog’s blood; we can’t say it is Absalom’s,” objected Hartley. “Leave the horrid thing there, Mhtoon Pah, and I will have it analysed later on.”

Mhtoon Pah gasped and beat his breast.

“He was a good boy, he attended the Mission with regularity, and they are doing terrible things. They wind wires around the finger-nails and the toe-nails until they turn black and drop off. You do not know these Chinamen, *Thakin*, as I know them. Have you seen the assistant of Leh Shin?”

Hartley wished that he had not; he frequently wished that he had never seen that man.

Mhtoon Pah bent near the Head of the Police and spoke in low, sibilant tones:

“He is a butcher’s mate, *Thakin*. He is a slayer of flesh. He kills in the shambles. Oh, it is true. I saw him slit the mouth of a dog with his knife for his own mirth—”

“Swine!” said Hartley.

“Why he left there and went to live with Leh Shin is unknown. He has secrets. He knows the best mixtures of opium, he knows—”

“I don’t want to hear what he knows.”

“He knows where Absalom is.”

“You only think that,” said Hartley, roughly. “It is a dangerous thing to make these assertions. It is only your idea, Mhtoon Pah.”

The Burman groaned aloud and held the rag between his hands.

“Put that down,” said Hartley. Mhtoon Pah’s very agony of desire to find the boy was almost disgusting, and he turned away from the sight. “There is no use your staying here, and no use your coming, unless there is more of this devil’s work,” he pointed to the blood-stained cloth. “Leave the thing here, and I will see what the doctors have to say about it.”

“*Thakin, Thakin,*” said Mhtoon Pah. “The time grows late. My night’s rest is taken from me, and the Chinaman, Leh Shin, walks the roads. I saw him from my place at sunset. I saw him go by like a cat that prowls when night falls and it grows dark. He passed by my wooden image of a dancing man, and he touched him as he passed—” he gave a despairing gesture with his heavy hands. “Oh, Absalom, Absalom, my grief is heavy!”

“He will be either found or accounted for,” said Hartley, with a decision and firmness he was far from feeling, and Mhtoon Pah, with bent head, went away out of the room.



The rain that had held off all day began to come down in pitiless torrents, blown in by the wind, and fighting against bolts and bars. It ruffled the muddy waters of the river, ran along the kennels of the Chinese quarter, drove the inhabitants of Paradise Street indoors and soused down over the Cantonment gardens, and battered on the travelling carriage of Craven Joicey, that came along the road, a waterproof over the pony's back and another covering the syce, and Joicey sat inside the small green box, holding the window-strings under his heavy arms.

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Joicey was not a cheerful companion, and in his present mood Fitzgibbon, the Barrister, would have suited Hartley better; but he had asked Joicey, and Joicey was on his way, thinking about Bank business in all probability, thinking of money lent out at interest, thinking of careful ledgers and neat rows of figures, and certainly not in the least likely to be thinking of the Chinese quarter, or of a person of so small account, financially, as Absalom, the Christian native. The river or the ships or the back lanes of Mangadone might swallow a thousand Absaloms and make no difference to the Bank, and therefore none to Craven Joicey.

Absalom, that shadow of the night, had gone to heaven or hell, and left no bills behind, and it is by bills that some men's memories are recorded. He was only another grain of red dust blown about by the wind of Fate, and though the Rector of St. Jude's might consider that, having been marked by the sign of the Cross, he was in some way different from the rest, neither Craven Joicey nor Clarice Wilder could be expected to take very much heed of the fact.

All stories of disappearance, from time immemorial, have held interest, and everyone has known of some case which has never been explained or accounted for. Someone who got into a cab and never appeared again, and left the impression that he had driven over the edge of the world into space, for the cab, the cab driver, the horse, the vehicle and the passenger inside were lost from that moment; someone who went for a bicycle ride in England, and was found later selling old clothes in Chicago; someone who went away by train, someone who went away by boat; the world is full of instances, and they are always tinged with the greatest mystery of all mysteries, because they foreshadow the ultimate mystery that awaits the soul of man. For this universal reason, it might be concluded that Joicey might listen with attention to the story of Absalom, though his lowly station and his total lack of the most necessary form of balance, very naturally made him merely a black cypher of no special account in the eyes of a man of figures.

Certainly Craven Joicey had not worn well. Hartley noticed it as he stood taking off his scarf in the hall, and he noticed it again as the Banker sat sipping a sherry and bitters under the strong light of the electric lamp. He looked fagged and tired, and though he cheered up a little as dinner went through, he relapsed into a heavy, silent mood again, as if he was dragged at by thoughts that had power over him.

"There is nothing the matter with you, is there, Joicey?" asked his host. "You don't seem to be up to the mark."

"What mark?" said Joicey, with a laugh. "Up to your mark, Hartley, or my own mark, or someone else's mark? The average mark in Mangadone is low water. There have been a lot of defaulters this year, and even admitting that the place is rich, there is a good deal more insolvency about than I like or than the directors care for. It keeps me grinding and grinding, and wears the nerves."



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“By George,” said Hartley, “I should have said that my own job was about the most nerve-tattering of any. I had an interview with Mhtoon Pah this afternoon that shook me up a bit.”

“Ah, I heard that his boy has disappeared.”

The door between the dining-and the drawing-room was thrown open, and dinner announced as Joicey spoke, and the conversation took another turn. Many things were bothering Joicey—the financial year generally, a big commercial failure, the outlook for the rice crop—and as the meal wore on he grew more dreary, and a pessimism that is part of some men’s minds tinged everything he touched.

“Did Rydal’s disappearance affect you at all, personally?” Hartley asked, with some show of interest.

“Not personally, but it cost the Bank close upon a quarter of a lakh.” Joicey drummed his square-topped fingers on the table. “I can’t imagine how he managed to get away.”

Hartley frowned.

“I had all the landing-stages carefully watched, and the plague police warned. He must have gone before the warrant was out, that is, if he has ever left the country at all.”

Joicey shrugged his heavy shoulders.

“In any case, the man’s not much use to us, and the money has gone. I’m not altogether sorry he got away.” His eyes grew full of brooding shadows and he sat silent, still tapping the cloth with his fingers.

“It’s an odd coincidence,” said Hartley, and his face grew keen again. “Mhtoon Pah’s boy, Absalom, disappeared that same night. I wish you could tell me, Joicey, if you saw Heath that evening when you went down Paradise Street. It was the same evening that the Bank laid their information against Rydal, the twenty-ninth.”

Joicey had just poured himself out a glass of port, and was raising it to his lips as Hartley spoke, and the hand that held the glass jerked slightly, splashing a little of the wine on to the front of his white shirt. Joicey did not set the glass back on to the table, he held it between him and the light, and eyed it, or, rather, it should be said that he watched his own hand, and when he saw that it was quite steady he set down the wine untasted.

“Paradise Street? I never go down there. I wasn’t in Mangadone that night,” his face was dead white with a sick, leprous whiteness. “If Heath said he saw me, Heath was wrong.”



“Heath didn’t say so,” said Hartley. “It was the policeman on duty at the corner who said that he had seen you.”

“I tell you I wasn’t in the place,” said Joicey again.

Hartley coughed awkwardly.

“Well, if you weren’t there, you weren’t there,” he said, pacifically.

“And Heath, what did Heath say?”

“I told you he said nothing, except that he had seen Absalom. I can’t understand this business, Joicey; directly I ask the smallest question about that infernal night of July the twenty-ninth I am always met in just the same way.”



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"I know nothing about it," said Joicey, shortly. "I wasn't here and I don't know what Heath was doing, so there's no use asking me questions about him."

The Banker relapsed into his former dull apathy, and leaned back in his chair.

"I've had insomnia lately," he said, after a perceptible pause. "It plays the deuce with one's nerves. I believe I need a change. This cursed country gets into one's bones if one stays out too long. I've forgotten what England looks like and I've got over the desire to go back there, and so I rot through the rains and the steam and the tepid cold weather, and it isn't doing me any good at all."

They walked into the drawing-room, Hartley with his hand on Joicey's shoulder. The Banker sat for a little time making a visible effort to talk easily, but long before his usual hour for leaving he pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"It may seem rude to clear off so soon, but I'm tired, Hartley, and shall be much obliged if I may shout for my carriage."

He looked tired enough to make any excuse of exhaustion or ill-health quite a valid one, and Hartley was concerned for his friend.

"Don't overdo it, Joicey," he said.

"Overdo what?"

Joicey got up with the heavy lift of an old, weary man, and yet there was not two years between him and Hartley.

"The insomnia," said Hartley.

"Good night," replied Joicey shortly, and closed the carriage-door behind him.

He drove along the dark roads, his arms in the window-straps and his head bent forward. The head of the Mangadone Banking Firm was suffering, if not from insomnia, from something that was heavier than the heaviest night of sleeplessness, and something that was darker than the dark road, and something that was deep as the brown waters that carried outgoing craft to sea.

VI

TELLS HOW ATKINS EXPLAINS FACTS BY PEOPLE AND NOT PEOPLE BY FACTS, AND HOW HARTLEY, HEAD OF THE POLICE, SMELLS THE SCENT OF APPLE ORCHARDS GROWING IN A FOOL'S PARADISE



Social life went its way in Mangadone much as it had before the 29th of July, but Hartley was not allowed to rest and feel comfortable and easy for very long. Mhtoon Pah waylaid him in the dark when he was riding home from the Club, and waited for him for hours in his bungalow. Like his own shadow, Mhtoon Pah followed him and dogged his comings and goings, always with the same imploring tale, but never with any further evidence. Leh Shin was officially watched, and Leh Shin's assistant was also under the paternal eye of authority, but all that authority could discover about him was that he led a gay life, gambled and drugged himself, hung about evil houses, and had been seen loitering in the vicinity of the curio shop; but, as Paradise Street was an open thoroughfare, he had as much right to be there as any leprous beggar.



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Hartley's peace of mind was soon shattered again, this time by a new element that Hartley had not thought of, and so he was caught in another net without any previous warning.

Atkins, the rector of St. Jude's bungalow companion, was a dry little man, adhering to simple facts, and neither a sensationalist nor an alarmist; therefore his words had weight. He was a small man, always dressed in clothes a little too small, with his whole mind given up to the subject of his profession; besides which he was religious, a non-smoker, a teetotaler, and particular upon these points.

Being but little in the habit of going into Mangadone society, he seldom met Hartley except at the Club, and it was there that he ran him into a corner and asked for a word or two in private. Hartley took him out into the dim green space where basket chairs were set at intervals, and drawing two well away from the others, sat down to listen.

Sweet scents were wafted up on the evening air, and drowsy, dark clouds followed the moonlike heavy wisps of black cotton-wool, drowning the light from time to time and then clearing off again; and all over the grass, glimmering groups of men in white clothes and women in trailing skirts filled the air with an indistinct murmur of sound.

"It is understood at the outset," began Atkins, clearing his throat with a crowing sound, "that what I have to say is said strictly in a private and confidential sense. I only say it because I am driven to do so."

Hartley's basket chair squeaked as he moved, but he said nothing, and Atkins dropped his voice into an intimate tone and went on:

"You came to see Heath one day lately, and I told you he was ill. Well, so he was, but there are illnesses of the mind as well as of the body, and Heath was mind-sick. I am a light sleeper, Hartley. I wake at a sound, and twice lately I have been awakened by sounds."

"The *Durwan*," suggested Hartley.

"Not the *Durwan*. If it had been, I would not have spoken to you about it. Heath has been visited towards morning by a man, and it was the sound of voices that awoke me. It is no business of mine to pry or to talk, and I would say nothing if it were not that I admire and respect Heath, and I believe that he is in some horrible difficulty, out of which he either will not, or cannot, extricate himself."

"Who was the man?"

Atkins ignored the question.



“I admit that I listened, but I overheard almost nothing, except just the confused sounds of talking in low voices, but I heard Heath say, ‘I will not endure it, I am bearing too much already.’ I think he spoke more to himself than to the man in his room, but it was a ghastly thing to hear, as he said it.”

“Go on,” said Hartley. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

“I heard the door on to the back veranda open, and I heard the sound of feet go along it—bare feet, mind you, Hartley—and then I went to sleep. That was a week ago.”



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“And something of the same nature has occurred since?”

Atkins dried his hands with his handkerchief.

“I said something to Heath at breakfast about having had a bad night, and he got up at once and left the table. After that nothing happened until last night. I had been out all day, and came home dog-tired. I turned in early and left Heath reading a theological book in the veranda. I said, I remember, ‘I’m absolutely beat, Padre; I have had enough to-day to give me nine or ten hours without stirring,’ and he looked up and said, ‘Don’t complain of that, Atkins; there are worse things than sound sleep.’ It struck me then that he hadn’t known what it was for weeks, he looked so gaunt and thin, and I thought again of that other night that we had neither of us spoken about.”

“Heath never explained anything?”

“No, I never asked him to.”

“What happened then?” Hartley’s voice was hardly above a whisper, and he leaned close to Atkins to listen.

“I slept for hours, fairly hogged it until it must have been two or three in the morning, judging by the light, and then I awoke suddenly, the way one wakes when there is some noise that is different to usual noises, and after a moment or two I heard the sound of voices, and I got out of bed and went very quietly into the veranda. Heath’s lamp was burning, his room is at the far end from mine, and I stood there, shivering like a leaf out of sheer jumps. I had a regular ‘night attack’ feeling over me. I heard a chair pushed back, and I heard Heath say in a low voice ‘If you come here again, or if you dog me again, I’ll hand you over to the police,’ and the man laughed. I can’t describe his laugh; it was the most damnable thing I ever listened to, and I thought of running in, but something stopped me, God knows why. ‘Take your pay,’ said Heath; I heard him say it, and then I heard the door open again, and the same sound of feet.” He shivered.

“They stopped outside my room, and I caught the outline of a head, a huge head and enormous, heavy shoulders, and then he was gone.”

“Why the devil didn’t you raise the alarm?” Hartley’s voice was angry. “You’ve got a policeman on the road. Why didn’t you shout?”

“Because I was thinking of Heath,” said Atkins a little stiffly. “He is the man we have both got to think about. Some devil of a native is blackmailing him, and Heath is one of the best and straightest men I know. Not one item of all this mystery goes against him in my mind, but what I want you to do, is to have the bungalow watched.”



“I shall certainly do that,” said Hartley with decision. “And as for your opinion of Heath—well, it strikes me as curious that a man of good character should be a mark for blackmail.”

“I explain facts by people, not people by facts,” said Atkins hotly. “And I have told you —”

“I think it is only fair to say that you have told me something that lays Heath under suspicion,” said Hartley, slowly. “He behaved very oddly, lately, when I asked him a simple question, and he chose to refuse to see me when I went to his house. All that was a small matter, but what you tell me now is serious.”



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“Serious for Heath, and for that very reason I particularly want him protected. But as for suspicion, I know the man thoroughly, and that is quite absurd.” Atkins got up and terminated the interview. “It is absurd to talk of suspicion,” he said again, irritably. “I hope you will drop that attitude, Hartley. If I had imagined for a moment that you were likely to adopt it, I should have kept my mouth shut.”

He went away, his narrow shoulders humped, and his whole figure testifying to his annoyance, and Hartley sat alone, watching the moonlight and thinking his own thoughts. He was interrupted by a woman’s voice, and Mrs. Wilder sat down in the chair left vacant by Atkins.

“What are you pondering about, Mr. Hartley? Are you seeing ghosts or moon spirits? You certainly give the idea that you are immensely preoccupied.”

“Do I?” Hartley laughed awkwardly. “Well, as a matter of fact, I was not thinking of anything very pleasant.”

“Can I help?”—her voice was very soft and alluring.

“No one can, I am afraid.”

She touched his arm with a little intimate gesture, and her eyes shone in the moonlight.

“How can you say that? If I were in any sort of fix, or in any sort of trouble, I would ask you to advise me, and to tell me what to do, before I would go to anyone else, even Draycott, and why should you leave me outside your worries?”

“You see, that’s just it, they aren’t exactly mine. If they were I would tell you, but I can’t tell you, because what I was thinking about was connected entirely with someone else.”

Mrs. Wilder’s eyes narrowed, and she lifted her slightly pointed nose a very little.

“Ah, now you make me inquisitive, and that is most unfair of you. Don’t tell me anything, Mr. Hartley, except just the name of the person concerned. I’m very safe, as you know. Could you tell me the name, or would it be wrong of you?”

“The name won’t convey very much to you,” said Hartley, laughing. “I was thinking of the Padre, Heath. That doesn’t give you much clue, does it?”

It was too dark for him to see a look that sprang into Mrs. Wilder’s eyes, or perhaps Hartley might have found a considerable disparity between her look and her light words.

“Poor Mr. Heath, he is one of those terribly serious, conscientious people, who go about life making themselves wretched for the good of their souls. He ought to have lived in the Middle Ages. I won’t ask you *why* you are thinking about him”—she got up and



lingered a little, and Hartley rose also—“but you know that you should not think of anyone unless you want to make others think of them, too; it isn’t at all safe. I shall have to think of Mr. Heath all the way home, and he is *such* a gaunt, scraggy kind of thought.”

“I wish I could replace him with myself,” said Hartley, in a burst of admiration.

Mrs. Wilder accepted his compliment graciously and walked across the grass to the drive, where her car panted almost noiselessly, as is the way of good cars, and he put her in with the manner of a jeweller putting a precious diamond pendant into a case. He watched the car disappear, and considered that some men are undeservedly lucky in this life.



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Hartley was nearly forty, that dangerously sentimental age, and he began to wonder if, by chance, he had met Clarice Wilder years ago in a Devonshire orchard, life might not have been a wonderful thing. He called her a “sweet woman” in his mind, and it was almost a pity that Mrs. Wilder did not know, because her sense of humour was subtle and acute, and she would have thoroughly enjoyed the description of herself. She could read Hartley as quickly as she could read the telegrams in the *Mangadone Times*, and she could play upon him as she played upon her own grand piano.

She had not asked any questions, and she knew nothing of what Atkins had said about Heath; but her face was set and tense as she drove towards her bungalow. She was certainly thinking very definitely, quite as definitely as Hartley had been thinking as he watched the moonlight playing hide-and-seek with the shadows of the palm branches and the darkness of the trees, and her thoughts left no pleasant look upon her face or in her eyes; and yet Hartley, on his way to the bungalow where he lived, was thinking of her in a white dress and a shady hat, with a fleecy blue and white sky overhead and the scent of apple-blossom in the air.

The power of romance is strong in adolescence, but it is stronger still when the turnstile of years is reached and there is finality in the air. Hartley was built for platonics; Fate gave him the necessary touch of the commonplace that dispels romance and replaces it with a kind of deadly domesticity; and yet Hartley was unaware of the fact.

He had never thought of being “in love” with Mrs. Wilder, partly because he felt it would be “no use,” and partly because she had never seemed to expect it from him, but as he walked along the road he began to find that her manner had of late altered considerably. She seemed to take an interest in him, and though she had always been his friend, her new attitude was charged with invisible electricity.

So far as Mrs. Wilder was concerned, Hartley was to her what a sitting hen would be to a sporting man. You couldn't shoot the confiding thing; but you might wring its neck if necessary, or push it out of the way with an impatient foot. She knew her power over him to a nicety, and she knew of his secret desire for “situations,” because her instinct was never at fault; but she felt nothing more than contempt, slightly charged with pity towards him. Hartley was a good-natured, idiotic man, and Hartley had principles; Clarice Wilder had none herself, though she felt that they were definite factors in any game, but she also believed that principles were things that could be got over, or got at, by any woman who knew enough about life to manage such as Hartley.

All the same, it was not of Hartley that she thought. She had been quite truthful when she said that he had suggested Heath to her mind, and that she would have to consider his gaunt face and hollow cheeks during her drive.



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If he had sat on the vacant seat beside her, the Rev. Francis Heath could hardly have been more clearly before her eyes, and could hardly have drawn her mind more strongly, and it was because of her thought of him that she preserved her steady look and strange eyes.

A strong woman, a woman with character, a woman who once she saw her way, was able to follow it faithfully, wherever it twisted, wherever it wound, and wherever it eventually brought her. No one could picture her flinching or turning back along a road she had set out to follow; if it had run in blood, she would have gone on in bare feet, not picking her steps, and yet Hartley dreamed of apple orchards and an Eve in a white muslin dress.

VII

FINDS THE REV. FRANCIS HEATH READING GEORGE HERBERT'S POEMS, AND LEAVES HIM PLEDGED TO A POSSIBLY COMPROMISING SILENCE

The Reverend Francis Heath was sitting in his upstairs room, for of late he had avoided the veranda. It was the leisure hour of the day, the slow hour when the light wanes and it is too early to call for a lamp; the hour when memory or fear can both be poignant in tropical climates.

The house was very still, Atkins had gone to the Club and the servants had all returned to their own quarters. Outside, noises were many. Birds, with ugly, tuneless notes that were not songs but cries, flitted in the trees, and the rumble of traffic on the road came up in the evening air, broken occasionally by the shrill persistence of an exhaust whistle or the clamour of a motor-horn, and above all other sounds the long-drawn, occasional hoot from a ship anchored in the river highway. There was noise, and to spare, outside, but within everything was still, except for the chittering of a nest of bats in the eaves, and the sudden, relaxing creak of bamboo chairs, that behave sometimes as though ghosts sat restlessly in their arms.

The sunlight that fell into the garden and caught its green, turning it into flaming emerald, climbed in at Mr. Heath's window, and lay across his writing-table; it touched his shoulder and withdrew a little, touched the lines on his forehead for a moment, touched the open book before him, and fell away, followed by a shadow that grew deeper as it passed. It faded out of the garden like a memory that cannot be held back by human striving. The distances turned into shadowy blue, and from blue to purple, until only a few flecks of golden light across the pearl-silver told that it was gone eternally; that its hour was spent, for good or ill, and that Mangadone had come one evening nearer to the end of measureless Time; but the Rev. Francis Heath did not regard its going. His face was sad with a terrible, tragic sadness that is the sadness of life and not death, and yet it was of death and not of life that he thought. A little book of

George Herbert's poems lay open before him and he had been reading it with a scholar's love of quaint phraseology:

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“I made a posy, while the days ran by;
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
My life within this band.
But Time did beckon to the flowers, and they,
By noon, most cunningly did steal away,
And wither’d in my hand.”

He read the lines over and over again, and gave a deep, heart-broken sigh, bending his face between his hands, and bowing his shoulders as though under a heavy weight. His gaunt frame was thin and spare, his black alpaca coat hung on it like a sack, and his whole attitude spoke of sorrow. He might have been the presentment of an unwilling ghost, who stood with the Ferryman’s farthing under his palm, waiting to be taken across the cheerless, dark waters to a limbo of drifting souls. He took his hands from before his face and clasped them over the book, looking out of the window to the evening shadows, as if he tried to find peace in the very act of contemplation.

The sad things he came in daily contact with had conquered his faith in life, though they had not succeeded in killing his trust in God’s eventual plan of redemption; and his mind wandered in terrible places, places he had forced his way into, places he could never forget. He suffered from all a reformer’s agony, an agony that is the small reflection of the great story of the mystic burden heavy as the sins of the whole world, and he tried, out of the simple, childlike fancy of the words he read, to grasp at a better mind.

Heath was one of those men who could not understand effortless faith; he was crushed by his own lack of success, and bowed down by his own failure. Since he could not rout the enemy single-handed, he believed that the battle was against the Hosts of the Lord. He knew no leisure from the war of his own thoughts, and as he clasped his hands, his face grew tense and set, and his eyes haggard and terrible. For a moment he sat very still, and his eyes followed the lines written by a man who had the faith of a little child:

“But Time did beckon to the flowers, and they,
By noon, most cunningly did steal away.”

Heath had never gathered flowers, either as a lesson to himself or a gift for others; they hardly spoke of careless beauty to him, they were emblems of lightness and thoughtlessness, and Heath had no time to stop and consider the lilies of the field.

He moved suddenly like a man who is awakened from a thought heavier than sleep, and listened with a hunted look, the look of a man who is afraid of footsteps; he stood up, gathering his loose limbs together and watching the door. Steps came up the staircase, steps that stumbled a little, and if Heath had possessed Mhtoon Pah’s art of reading the walk of his fellow creatures, he would have known that he might expect a woman and not a man.



“Mr. Heath,” a low voice called in the passage, and Heath’s tension relaxed, giving place to surprise.

The voice was strange to him, and he passed his handkerchief over his face and walked to the door, just as his name was called again, in the same low, penetrating voice.



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“Who wants me?” he asked, almost roughly, and then he saw a tall, dark woman standing at the top of the staircase.

“Mrs. Wilder,” he said in surprise, and she made a little imperious movement with her hand.

“I did not call your servant, I came up, because I wanted to find you alone. You are alone?”

“Certainly, I am alone.”

“May I come in?”

Heath held the door open for her to pass, and she walked in, looking around the darkening room with hard, curious eyes.

She took the chair he gave her, in silence, and sat down near the writing-table, and, feeling that she would speak after a time, Heath took his own place again and waited.

“I hardly know where to begin,” she said, always speaking in the same low, intent voice. “Do you recall the evening of the twenty-ninth?”

An odd spasm caught Heath’s face, and he paused for a moment before he answered.

“I do recall it.”

“Perhaps you remember seeing me? I was riding along the road when I first passed you, and you were walking.”

“I remember that I did pass you then, and also that I saw you later.”

Heath’s sombre eyes were on her face, and his fingers touched a gold cross that hung from his watch-chain.

“You passed me, and you passed Absalom, the Christian boy, and you have been questioned about Absalom.”

“I have,” he said heavily. “Why do you ask?”

Mrs. Wilder took a quick breath.

“Because I am afraid that you may be asked again. You understand, Mr. Heath, that I know it was the merest chance that brought you there that evening, but, as you were there, and as Mr. Hartley has got it into his head that you know something more than



you have told him, I beg of you to bear in mind that if you mention my name you may get me into serious trouble. You would not do that willingly, I think?"

"I certainly would not. What motive took you there is a question for your own conscience. It is not for me to press that question, Mrs. Wilder."

She pressed her lips together tightly.

"I went there to see an old friend who was in great trouble."

"And yet you have to keep it secret?"

"Haven't we all our secrets, Mr. Heath?" Her voice was raised a little. "Will you pledge me your solemn word to keep this knowledge from anyone who asks?" She put her elbows on the table and drew closer to him.

"I will respect your confidence," he said slowly. "But is it likely that Hartley will ask me?"

Mrs. Wilder made a gesture of denial.

"I *think* not, but who can tell? This thing has been like lead on my mind and will not let me rest. Oh, Mr. Heath, if you knew what I have already paid, you would be sorry for me."

"I am sorry," he said gently. "More sorry for you than you can tell. You, too, saw Absalom, and spoke to him?"

"He has nothing to do with what I came here about,"—her tone grew impatient. "I only wanted to make sure that I was safe with you. It was no little thing that drove me to come. I am a proud woman, Mr. Heath, and I do not usually ask favours, yet I ask you now—"



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“Not a favour,” he said, taking her up quickly. “God knows I have every reason to help you if I can. Does Hartley suspect you? Does he question you? Does he try to wring admissions out of you?”

In the darkness Heath’s voice rang hard and, metallic, like the voice of a man whose thoughts return upon something that maddens him.

“He has not done so, but he has asked me questions that made me frightened. It is a terrible thing to be afraid.”

“And Joicey?” said Heath in a quiet voice. “I saw Joicey, but he did not stop to speak to me. Has he, too, been interrogated?”

“So far as I know, he has not. But this question presses only on me. What took you there is, I feel sure, easily accounted for, and what took Mr. Joicey there is not likely to be a matter of the smallest importance; it is *I* who suffer, it is on me that all this weight lies. If the police begin investigations they come close upon the fact that I went there to meet a man whom my husband has forbidden me to meet. Any little turn of evidence that involves me, any little accident that obliges me to admit it, and I am lost,”—her voice thrilled and pleaded.

“It is you who are lost,” he echoed dully. “I can understand how you feel. If I can ease your burden or lessen the anxiety you suffer from, you may depend upon me, Mrs. Wilder. This matter is a dark road where I, too, walk blind, not knowing the path I follow, but, at least, I can give you my word that under no circumstances shall I be led to mention your name. You can be sure of that, Mrs. Wilder. If I can add your trouble to my own burden I shall not feel its weight, but I would counsel you to be honest with your husband. Tell him the truth.”

“I will,” said Mrs. Wilder, with an acquiescence that came too quickly. “I assure you that I will, but even when I do, you see what a position the least publicity places me in?”

Heath got up and paced the floor with long, restless strides.

“Publicity. The open avowal of a hidden thing; the knowledge that the whole world judges and condemns, and does not understand.”

“That is what I feel.”

After all, he was more human than she had expected. Clarice Wilder had looked upon the Rev. Francis as a hermit, an ascetic, whose comprehension was limited; and her eyes grew keen as she watched his gaunt figure.



“To be dragged down, to be accused, to be cast so low,” he continued, in his sad, heavy voice, “so low that the lowest have cause to deride and to scorn.” He stopped before her. “Is it true that I can save you from that?”

“It is true.”

She did not tell him that she had lied to Draycott; it did not appear necessary; neither did she tell him that Draycott’s memory was long and sure and unerring.

“Then, if there is one man in all God’s universe,”—Heath cast out his arms as he spoke—“one man above all others whom you could appeal to, could trust most entirely, that man is myself. Give me your burden, your distress of mind, and I will take them; I cannot say more—”



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“Of course, it may never be necessary for you to—to avoid telling Mr. Hartley,” broke in Mrs. Wilder quickly. Heath was getting on her nerves, and she rose to her feet. “I cannot thank you sufficiently, and I fear that I have upset you, made you feel my own cares too profoundly,”—her voice grew almost tender. “I have never known such ready sympathy, but you feel too intensely, Mr. Heath. You make my little trouble your own, and you have made me very grateful. Are you in any trouble yourself?”

Heath stopped for a moment, an outline against the light of the window. She thought he was going to speak, and she waited with an odd feeling of excitement to hear what was coming, when he suddenly retired back into his usual manner.

A light was travelling up the staircase, casting great shadows before it, and when the boy came to the door of the Padre Sahib's room, he saw his master saying good-bye to a tall, dark lady who smiled at him and gave him her hand.

“Good night, Mr. Heath, I hardly know how to thank you sufficiently.”

She hurried down the staircase, and as she walked out, she met Atkins coming in on his bicycle. He jumped off as he saw her, and spoke in surprise.

“I have just been calling on the Padre,” replied Mrs. Wilder pleasantly, as he commented with ever-ready tactlessness upon her presence in the Compound. “One of my servants is ill; a member of his community. By the way, do you think that Mr. Heath is quite well himself?”

“Indeed I do not think so. He overworks. I have a great admiration for Heath.”

“He must be rather depressing in the rains,” she said, with a careless laugh. “He positively gave me the shivers. I can hardly envy you boxed up there with him. I believe he sees ghosts, and I think they must be horrid ghosts or he couldn't look as he does.”

Her car was waiting down the road, and Atkins walked beside her and saw her get in. Mrs. Wilder was very charming to him; she leaned out and smiled at him again.

“Do take care of the Padre,” she called as she drove off.

“There goes a sensible, good-looking woman,” thought Atkins, and he thought highly of Mrs. Wilder for her visit to Heath. He said so to the Rector of St. Jude's as they dined together, remarking on the fact that very few women bothered about sick servants, and he was surprised at the cold lack of enthusiasm with which Heath accepted his remark.

“That was what she said?”



“Yes, and I call it unusual in a country where servants are treated like machines. I’ve never known Mrs. Wilder very well, but she is an interesting woman; don’t you think so, Heath?”

“I don’t know,” said Heath absently. “I never form definite opinions about people on a slight knowledge of them.”

Atkins felt snubbed, but he only laughed good-naturedly, and Heath relapsed into silence.

Mrs. Wilder was dining out that night, and she looked so superbly handsome and so defiantly well that everyone remarked upon her; and even Draycott Wilder, who might have been supposed to be used to her beauty and her wit, watched her with his slow, following look. Hartley was not at the dinner-party, but afterwards echoes of its success reached him, and a description of Mrs. Wilder herself that thrilled his romantic sense as he listened.



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Hartley was worried about the Padre, and he had warned the policeman to watch the Compound at night; but all the watching in the world did not explain the cause of these visits. There was a connection somewhere and somehow between Heath and the missing Absalom, and Hartley wondered if he could venture to speak to Mrs. Wilder again about the night of the 29th of July, and implore her to let him know if she had seen Heath with Absalom.

It seemed, judging by what Atkins had heard, that Heath was paying for silence, and Hartley disliked the idea of working up evidence against the Padre. The more he thought of it the less he liked it, and yet his duty and his sense of responsibility would not let him rest. Mrs. Wilder had said that she had seen Heath and Absalom, and had then refused to say anything more, but Hartley saw in her reserve a suggestion of further knowledge that could not be ignored or denied.

Mhtoon Pah was quieter for the moment. He believed that Leh Shin was being cautiously tracked, and the pointing image had held no further traces of bloodshed upon his yellow hands. Hartley had grown to loathe the grinning figure, and to loathe the whole tedious, difficult tragedy of the lost boy. If it had lain in the native quarter he could have found interest in the excitement of the chase, but if it ramified into the Cantonment, Hartley had no mind for it. He was a man first, a sociable, kindly man, and, later, an officer of the law.

VIII

SHOWS HOW THE CLOAK OF DARKNESS OF ONE NIGHT HIDES MANY EMOTIONS, AND MRS. WILDER IS FRANKLY INQUISITIVE

Darkness brooded everywhere, but the gloom of night is a darkness that is impenetrable only to our eyes because we creatures of the hard glare of daylight cannot see in the strange clearness that brings out the stars. Only in the houses of men real darkness has its habitation. Under close roofs, confined within walls, shut into rooms, and lurking in corners: there, darkness may be found, and because man made it, it has its own special terror, as have all the creatures of man's hand. Dark, menacing and noiseless, the shadows flock in as daylight wanes, filing up like heavy thoughts and sad thoughts, and casting a gloom with their coming that is not the blackness of earth's restful night.

Mrs. Wilder paced her room with the steps of a woman whose heart drives sleep out with scorpion-whips of memory; and she went softly, for sound travels far at night, and Draycott Wilder, in the next room, was a light sleeper. She was thinking steadily, and she was trying to force her will across the distance into the stronghold of Hartley's inner consciousness.



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Night brought no more rest to Mrs. Draycott Wilder than it did to Craven Joicey, the Banker, but Joicey did not sit in the dark. Madness lies in the dark for some minds, and he had turned on the electric light, that showed his face yellow and weary. On the wall the lizards, awakened by the sudden glare, resumed their fly-catching, and scuttled with a dry, scurrying sound over the walls, breaking the silence with a perpetual “chuck-chuck” as they chased each other. Joicey looked as though he was dreaming evil dreams, and nothing of his surroundings was real to him. The room became another room, the tables and chairs grew indistinct, the face of a small *Gaudama* on the mantel-piece became a living face that menaced him, and the “chuck-chuck” of the lizards, the rattle of dice falling on to a board at some remote distance miles and miles away, and yet strangely audible to his dull ears. Still he sat there, and flashes of fancies came and went. Sometimes he stood in an English garden, with a far-away sunlit glimpse of glittering waters, and a cuckoo crying in a wood of waving trees, and then he knew that he was a boy, and that he had forgotten everything that had happened since; and then, without warning, he was swept out of the garden and stood under Eastern trees, lost in a wild place, with the haunting face of the image at his shoulder. The face altered. Sometimes it was Mhtoon Pah’s pointing man, and what he pointed at was never clear. The mistiness bothered him horribly.

The *Durwan* outside played on a wistful little flute, thinking that his master was asleep; he heard it, and it did not concern him; he was dead to all outward things just then, and the flute only added to the mystery of the dream that spun itself in his brain. He wandered in a place so near actual things and yet so far from them, that the gigantic mistake of it all, and the consciousness that the inner life could at times conquer the outer life, made him fall away between the two conditions, lost and helpless. His head nodded forward, and his lower lip dropped, and yet his eyes were open, as he sat facing the small squatting Buddha, whose changeless face changed only for him.

The three little flute-notes tripped out after each other with no semblance at a tune, repeating and reiterating the sound in the dark outside, and Joicey listened as though something of weight depended upon his hearing steadily. The sound was the one thing that made him know that he was real, and once it ceased, or he ceased to hear it, he would be across the gulf and terribly lost; a mind without a body, let loose in a world where there were no landmarks, no known roads, nothing but windy space, and he was afraid of that place, and feared terribly to go there.

Something shuffled on the stone veranda, another sound, and sound was of value to Craven Joicey, since it made a vital note in the circling numbness around him. He could hear whispering voices, and the thump of the *Durwan*’s stick, as that musically-minded man walked round to the back of the house, where his lighted window showed that Craven Joicey did not sleep. Again a voice whispered, and a low sound of discreet knocking followed.



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Joicey sprang up and called out hoarsely:

“Who is it?”

“Sahib, Sahib”—the *Durwan*’s whine was apologetic. “Is the Sahib awake?”

“Who wants me?”

“Leh Shin, the Chinaman.”

Joicey wiped his face with his handkerchief and pulled open the door with a violent movement.

“Come in,” he said, trying to speak naturally. “What is it, Leh Shin?”

The Chinaman held a tweed hat in his hand and stole into the room like a shadow.

“What now, Leh Shin?”

Joicey spoke in Yunnanese with the fluency of long habit, and even though he was angry he kept his voice low as though he feared to be overheard.

“The Master of Masters will speak for me,” said the Chinaman, standing before him. “All day the police stand near to my house, and at night they do not leave it. At one word from the Master, whose speech is constructed of gold and precious metals, they can be withdrawn, and for that word I wait—” He made a quick gesture with his tweed cap.

“You will gain nothing by coming to my house, you swine,” said Joicey, his eyes staring and his veins standing out on his forehead. “I will see what Mr. Hartley will do, but if you drag in my name or refer him to me you will do yourself no good, do you hear? No good.”

Leh Shin watched him passively and waited until he had finished.

“I will swear the oath,” he said, blinking his eyes. “I will not speak the name of the Master, but my doors are locked, my house is a house for the water-rats, and until the big Lord frees me I am a poor man.”

Joicey sat down heavily on a low chair.

“It shall be stopped,” he said desperately. “I will see that there is no more of this police supervision; you may take my word for it.”

The Chinaman stood still, moving one foot to the other.



“In dreams the Master has spoken these promises to me before. Can I be sure that it is not in a dream that the Master speaks again?”

“I am awake,” said Joicey, bitterly. “Mr. Hartley is looking for the boy, and if the boy were found, all search would stop,”—he eyed the Chinaman carefully, but the mask-like face did not change.

“And the little boy? Perhaps, Ruler and King, the little boy is gone dead.”

“You ask me *that*, you devil?”

“It is for the servant to ask,” said Leh Shin, dropping his lids for a second.

“Now, get out,” said Joicey, between his clenched teeth. “And if you come here to me again, at night, I’ll kill you.”

“The Great One will not do that,” said Leh Shin, placidly. “My assistant waits for me. It would be known as fire is known when the forest is dry. To-morrow or next day, if the police are gone, my little house will be open again.” He spoke the words with deep emphasis.

“Get out,” said Joicey, turning away his head.

Leh Shin looked at him with a sudden, oblique glance like the flash of a knife.



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“Speak no more, Lord of men and elephants; the *Durwan* is now outside the door, and he listens.”

“Good-night,” said Joicey loudly, and he clicked off the light and went to bed.

If the darkness was close in the large houses of the Cantonment, it was shut into the very essence of itself in the curio shop in Paradise Street. It hid the carved devils from one another, it obliterated the stone monsters that no one ever bought, and which had grown to belong to the shop itself; it dropped its black veil over the green dragons, and the china ladies, and the silver bowls and the little ivories, hiding everything out of sight; but it did not hide the figure outside in the street. The little man, with his pointed headdress and short jacket, had the clear darkness all to himself. He was just as polite by night as he was by day, and he bowed and ushered imaginary buyers up the stone steps with the same perpetual civility, and the same unceasing smile, that bagged out his varnished cheeks into joviality.

Dark as it was inside the shop, it must have been darker along the rat-burrows of stairs, and the loft-like rooms near the roof, but either up above or down below, the scent of cassia and sandal-wood clung everywhere inside the curio shop, smelling strongest around the glass cases and bales of delicate silks.

Mhtoon Pah’s *Durwan* slept across the doorway, and was therefore the only object for the attention of the little man, and likewise, therefore, he did not point to his master, who came in, in the dead, heavy hours before dawn. He could not have been far; there was hardly any dust on his red velvet slippers, and he brushed what there was from them with a careful hand. As he placed his lamp on the floor, the light threw odd shadows up the walls, turning that of Mhtoon Pah himself into a grotesque and gigantic mass of darkness, and when he stooped and stood erect it jumped with a sudden living spring.

Mhtoon Pah moved about the shop on light feet. He bent here and there to examine some of the objects closely, with the manner and gesture of a man who loves beautiful things for their own sakes as well as for the profit he hoped to gain from their sale. When he had twice made a tour of inspection, he placed an alabaster Buddha in the centre of a carved table and sat down before it. The Buddha was dead white, with a red chain around his neck, and on his head a gold cap with long, gem-set ears hanging to the shoulders, and Mhtoon Pah sat long in front of the figure, swaying a little and moving his lips soundlessly. He appeared like a man who is self-mesmerized by the flame of a candle, and his face worked with suppressed and violent emotion; at any moment it seemed as though he might break the silence with some awful, passion-tossed sound.

Suddenly, he stopped in his voiceless worship, and, leaning forward quickly, extinguished the lamp. If he had heard any sound, it was apparently from below, for he crouched on the ground with his head close to the teak boarding, and crawled with slow,



noiseless care towards the door. A silk curtain covered the window, hiding the interior of the shop from the street, and, when he reached the low woodwork above which it hung, he twitched the curtain back with a sudden movement of his hand and raised himself slowly until his head was on a level with the glass.



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Mhtoon Pah grew suddenly rigid, and the thick black hair on his head seemed to bristle. Pressed close against the window, with only a slender barrier of glass between them, was the face of Leh Shin, the Chinaman. A ray of white moonlight fell across them both, and its clear radiance lighted up every feature of the curio dealer's face, changing its brown into a strange, ghastly pallor. For a moment they stood immovable, staring into each other's eyes, and the shadows behind Mhtoon Pah in the shop, and the shadows behind Leh Shin in the street, seemed to listen and wait with them, seemed to creep closer and enfold them, seemed to draw up and up on noiseless feet and hang suspended around them. The moment might have endured for years, so full was it of menace and passion, and then the man outside moved quickly and the moonlight flooded in across the face and shoulders of the Burman.

For a second longer he remained as though fascinated, and then Mhtoon Pah wrenched at the door and thundered back the heavy bolts. There were flecks of foam on his lips, and his eyes rolled as he dashed through the door and out down the steps, rending the air with cries of murder. He was too late, the Chinaman had gone. When the street flocked out to see what the disturbance meant, Mhtoon Pah was crouching on his steps in a kind of fit.

"I have seen the face of the slayer of Absalom," he shrieked, when the crowd had carried him in, and recovered him to his senses.

"Is he a devil?" asked a young Burman, in tones of joyful excitement. "A devil with iron claws has been seen several nights lately."

"A Chinese devil," groaned Mhtoon Pah, speaking through his clenched teeth. "One who shall yet be hanged for his crime."

"Ah! ah!" said the watchers. "He dreams that it is a man, but it is known that a devil has walked in Paradise Street, his jaws open. Certainly he has eaten little Absalom."

Dawn was breaking, the pale, still hour that is often the hour of death; and a cool breeze rippled in the date palms and in the flat green leaves of the rubber plants, and the festoons of succulent green growths that climbed up the houses of the Cantonments, and dawn found the Rev. Francis Heath sleeping quietly. He was lying with one arm under his head, and his worn face in almost child-like repose. Wherever he was, sleep had carried him to a place of peace and refreshment. When he awoke he would have forgotten his dream, but for the moment the dream sufficed, and he rested in the circle of its charm.

All the time that we are young and careless and happy, we are building retreats for memory that make harbours of rest in later years, when the storms come with force. All the old things that did not count, come back to calm and to restore. The school-room,

where the light flickered on a special corner of the ceiling, telling the children to come out and play; the tapping of the laurels outside the church windows,



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and the musty smell of red rep cushions along the pew where the hours were very slow in passing; the white clover in the field behind the garden, got at easily through a hole in the privet hedge. The play of light and shadow over the hills of home, the dusk at nightfall, and the homely cawing of rooks. All the delicious things that went with the smell of ripe strawberries under nets, where thieving birds fluttered until the gardener let them free again; and the mystery of sparks flying up the chimney when the winter logs blazed. Every simple joy is stored away in some lumber corner of the minds of men, and when sleep comes, sometimes the old things are taken out again.

The Rev. Francis Heath, like the rest of the world, had his own secret doorway that led back to wonderland, and it may have been that he was far away from Mangadone in this child-world which is so hard to find again, as he slept, and the outside world grew from grey to green, and from green to misty gold. The sunlight flamed on the spire of the Pagoda, it danced up the brown river and threw long shadows before its coming, those translucent shadows that no artist has ever yet been able to paint. It turned the mohur trees blood-red, and the grass to shining emerald green, and Mangadone looked as though it had just come fresh from the hands of its Creator.

Mhtoon Pah, recovered from his fit, was in his shop early, and he himself went out to cleanse the effigy outside with a white duster, and to set his wares in order. It was a good day for sales, as a liner had come in and brought with it many rich Americans, and Mhtoon Pah was glad to sell to such as they. His stock-in-trade was beautiful and attractive, and in the centre of the table, where the unset stones glittered and shone on white velvet, there stood a bowl, a gold lacquer bowl of perfect symmetry and very great beauty. He poised it on his hands once or twice and examined it carefully. As it was already sold it was not to remain in the curio shop, but Mhtoon Pah was a careful man, and he desired that Mrs. Wilder should fetch it herself; besides, he liked her car to stand outside his shop, and he liked her to come in and look at his goods. Very few people who came in to look, went away without having bought several things they did not in the least want. Mhtoon Pah knew exactly how to lure by influence, and he knew that Mrs. Wilder could no more turn away from a grey-and-pink shot silk than Eve could refuse the forbidden fruit.

He spread out a sea-blue Mandarin's coat, embroidered with peaches, and small, crafty touches of black here and there, and looked at it with the loving eye of a connoisseur. His whole shop was a fountain of colour, and he was not unworthy of it in his silk petticoat. A ray of sunlight fell in through the door and touched a few threads of gold in the coat as Mhtoon Pah hung it up to good advantage, and turned to see a customer come in. It was the Rev. Francis Heath; and Mhtoon Pah's face fell. "Reverends" were not good buyers, specially when they had not any wives, and Mr. Heath took no notice of the attractive display as he stood, black and forbidding, in the centre of the shop.



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"I have come here, Mhtoon Pah, to ask for news of Absalom," he said, meeting his eyes forcefully. "Where is he?"

Mhtoon Pah bowed low, as befitted the dignity of his guest, who was, after all, a *Hypongyi*, even though he wore no yellow robes.

"It is unknown," he said, in a heavy voice. "The Reverend himself might know, since the Reverend saw my little Absalom that night."

"You *must* have suspicions?"

Mhtoon Pah's face worked violently.

"Leh Shin," he whispered. "Look there for what is left."

Heath retreated before his fury.

"You yourself sent the boy there."

"*Wah! Wah!* I sent him and he did not return."

"What are you talking about?" said the fresh, gay voice of Mrs. Wilder. "Where is my lacquer bowl, Mhtoon Pah?" She came in, bright as the morning outside, and smiled at the Rev. Francis Heath. "So you have got it for me."

"I did not get it, Lady Sahib," said Mhtoon Pah. "It came here, how I know not. I found it outside my shop in the care of the wooden image when I went to dust his limbs this morning."

Mrs. Wilder laughed.

"In that case I shall not have to pay for it. But what do you mean, Mhtoon Pah?"

"It is blood money," said Mhtoon Pah, with a wild gasp. "Only one man knew of the bowl, only one man could have put it there. I shall tell Hartley Sahib; the *Thakin* will strike surely and swiftly."

"He will do nothing of the kind," said Mrs. Wilder, with a quick look at Heath. "Give me my bowl, Mhtoon Pah; you are letting yourself dream foolish things. Absalom"—she tapped the polished floor with her well-shaped foot—"will come back and explain everything himself, and then—whoever is responsible—will bear the penalty."

"They have tied his head to his elbows, and set snakes to sting him," said Mhtoon Pah. "This have they done, and worse things, Lady Sahib."



Mrs. Wilder shivered.

“Give me my bowl, you horrible old man. Absalom is blacking boots in a New York hotel, weeks ago.—Ah! what a coat! Are you buying anything, Mr. Heath?”

“I am going to the school,” he answered slowly.

“Then let me drive you there. Send me up the Mandarin’s coat, Mhtoon Pah, and I will haggle another day.”

Heath followed her reluctantly down the steps. He wished she had not made a point of taking him in her motor, but he felt instinctively sorry for her, which fact, had she known it, would have surprised and affronted her.

“Will you come and dine with us one night?” she asked, looking at him with her fine eyes; “it would give us great pleasure, and I do not think you have met my husband.”

“I rarely do dine out,” said Heath, staring before him as the car backed round in the limited space of Paradise Street.

“Then make this an exception. I won’t ask you to a function, just a quiet little family party.”



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“You are very kind.”

He was still abstracted, and hardly seemed to hear her, and, when he got out and shut the door, she leaned from the window, smiling like weary royalty.

“I will write and arrange an evening later on. It is a promise, Mr. Heath.”

“I will come,” he replied, in the same preoccupied voice, as he raised his battered *topi*.

“What has he been doing?” she asked herself, in surprise, and again and again she put the same question to herself, not only that morning, but often, later on, and with ever-increasing curiosity.

IX

MRS. WILDER IS PRESENTED IN A MELTING MOOD, AND DRAYCOTT WILDER IS FORCED TO RECALL THE LINES COMMENCING “A FOOL THERE WAS”

It was a bright morning with a high wind blowing and a breath of freshness in the air that has a charm to inspire a better outlook upon life. Everywhere it made itself felt in Mangadone, and like Pippa in the poem, the wind passed along, leaving everything and everybody a little better for its coming. It passed through the open veranda of the huge hospital, and touched the fever patients with its cool breath; it hurried through the Chinese quarter, blew along Paradise Street, dusting the gesticulating man, and went on up the river, pretending to make the brown water change its muddy mind and run backwards instead of forwards. It paid a little freakish attention to Mrs. Wilder’s dark hair, and it cooled the back of Hartley’s neck, as they rode along together, by the way of a lake.

They had met quite accidentally, and Hartley, who had been vaguely wishing for an opportunity to speak to Mrs. Wilder, seized upon it and offered himself as her escort. She agreed with complimentary readiness, and they turned along a wooded road, where the shadows were deep and where Hartley felt the gripping hands of romance loosen his heart-strings.

Mrs. Wilder listened to him, or appeared to do so, which is much the same in effect, and Hartley was not critical. She was a good listener, as women who have something else to think about often are; and so they rode along the twisting path, and the wind sang in the plumes of the bamboo trees, and Hartley believed that it sang a romantic lyric of platonic admiration, exquisitely hinted at by a tactful man, and properly appreciated by a very beautiful woman.



“By the way,” she said carelessly, “have you found that wretched little Absalom yet? What a bother he has been since he took it into his head to go off to America, or wherever it is he went to.”

“I am glad you mentioned him,” said Hartley, his face growing suddenly serious. “I have a question or two that I want very much to ask you.”

“A question or two? That sounds so very legal. Really, Mr. Hartley, I believe you credit me with having Absalom’s body hanging up in one of my *almirahs*. Honestly, don’t you really believe that I had a hand in putting him out of the way?”



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She laughed her hard little laugh, and shot a look at him over her shoulder.

“You do know something, some little thing it may be, but something that might help me.”

“About Absalom, or about someone else?”

“About whoever you saw him with.”

Hartley pushed his pony alongside of hers, but her face revealed nothing, and was quite expressionless.

“Whoever I saw him with?” she echoed reflectively. “Ah, but it is so long ago, Mr. Hartley, I can’t even remember now whether I was out or not that evening.”

“You are only playing with me,” said Hartley a little irritably. “The policeman on duty at the cross-roads below Paradise Street saw you.”

Her face became suddenly so drawn and startled that Hartley regretted his words almost as he spoke them.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Hartley,” she said, in a strained, hard voice. “You have to explain to me why you have asked your men questions connected with me.”

“I did not ask questions; I was told.”

She pulled up her pony, and, turning her head away from him, looked out silently over the dip of ground below them. Hartley did not break her silence. He saw that he had come close to some deep emotion, and he watched her curiously, but Mrs. Wilder, even if she was conscious of his look, appeared quite indifferent to it. He could form no idea along what road her silent concentration led her; but he knew that she pursued an idea that was compelling and strong. He knew enough of her to know that even her silence was not the silence that arises out of lack of subject for talk, but that it meant something as definite and clear as though she spoke direct words to him.

The Head of the Police would have given much at that moment to have been able to penetrate her thoughts, but he only stared at her with his blue eyes a little wider open than usual, and waited for her to speak. She looked before her steadily, but not with the eyes of a woman who dreams; Mrs. Wilder was thinking definitely, and while Hartley waited, her mind travelled at speed across years and came to a halt at the moment where she now found herself, and from that moment she looked out forcefully into the future.

Usually, in the tragic instants of life there is very little time for thought before the need for action forces the will, with relentless hands. Clarice Wilder knew as well as she knew anything that her position was one of some peril, and that much more than she



could weigh or measure at that moment lay beyond the next spoken word. She was telling herself to be careful, steadying her nerve and reining in a desire to pour out a flood of circumstantial evidence, calculated to convince the Head of the Police.

If there is one thing more than another that the man or the woman driven against the ropes should avoid, it is prolixity; the snare that catches craft in its own net. Clarice Wilder desired to be overpowering, redundant and extreme in the wordy proof of her innocence of purpose that evening of July the 29th, but she held back and waited steadfastly until she was quite sure of herself again, and then she turned her head and glanced at Hartley with a smile.



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"How silent you are," she said gently.

Hartley flushed and looked self-conscious.

"To be quite candid, that was what I was thinking of you," he replied awkwardly.

"What were we saying?" went on Mrs. Wilder. "Oh, of course, I remember. You thought I could tell you something about poor Mr. Heath, didn't you? I only wish I could, but it was so long ago. I do remember the evening. It was very hot and I rode along by the river to get some fresh air," her eyes grew hazy. "I can remember thinking that Mangadone looked as if it was a great ball of amber, with the sun shining through it, but as for being able to tell you what Mr. Heath was doing, or who he was with, it is impossible. You should have pinned me down to it the day you called on me, when this troublesome little boy first went off." She gathered up the reins, and Hartley mounted reluctantly. "I am so sorry. I would love to be able to help you, but I cannot remember."

If Hartley had been asked on oath how it was that Mrs. Wilder had led him clean away from the subject under discussion, to something infinitely more satisfying and interesting, he could not have sworn to it. They loitered by the road and came slowly back to the bungalow, where they parted at the gate, and he watched her go in, hoping she might turn her head, but she did not, and Hartley took his way towards his own house and thought very little of Absalom or the Rev. Francis Heath. One thing he did think of, and that was that Mrs. Wilder had looked at him earnestly, and said that she wished he was not "mixed up" in anything likely to bring uneasiness to the mind of the Rector of St. Jude's Church. "Mixed up" was a curious way of expressing his connection with the case, but Hartley felt that he knew what she meant. He pulled at his short moustache and wished with all his heart that he really did know; but all the wishes in the world could not help him out of a professional dilemma.

Mrs. Wilder had not looked round, though she very well knew that Hartley was waiting and hoping that she would, and once she had turned the first bend she touched the pony with her heel and cantered up the hill, throwing the reins to the syce who came in answer to her impatient call.

"Idiot," she said, as she shut the door of her room and flung her *topi* on the bed, and she repeated the word several times with increasing animosity and vigour. She hated Hartley at that moment, and felt under no further obligation to hide her real feelings; and then Mrs. Wilder sat down and thought hard.

The mental power of exaggerating danger is limitless, and she could not deny that her fear was playing tricks with her nerves. She knew that she had done creditably under the strain of acute nervous tension, but she felt also that much more of the same thing would be unendurable.



Draycott came in to luncheon, and she was there to receive him, but even to his careless eye, Clarice was oddly abstracted, and he glanced at her curiously, wondering what it was that occupied her mind and made her frown as she thought.



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She could not get away from the grip of her morning interview. Try as she would, she could not shake it off. It caught her back in the middle of her talk, made her answer at random, and held her with a terrible power. She considered that there were a thousand other things she might have said or done, a hundred ways by which she might have appealed to Hartley, and yet her common sense told her that the less she said on the subject the better it would be, if, in the end, the Rev. Francis Heath was led into the awful pitfalls of cross-examination. Anyone may forget and recall facts later, but to state facts that may be used as evidence is to stand handcuffed before inexorable justice, and Mrs. Wilder had left her hands free.

"Is anything the matter?" Draycott jerked out the question as he got up to leave the room. "You seem rather silent."

Clarice laughed, and her laugh was slightly forced.

"I went for a ride this morning, and met Mr. Hartley. He is the most exhausting man I ever met."

"I hope you told him so," said Wilder shortly. "He's about here frequently enough, even though he *does* bore you."

Something in his voice made her eyes focus him very clearly and distinctly.

"I have a very good mind to tell him," she said easily, "but he is blessed with a skin that would turn the edge of any ordinary hatchet; he would think I was merely being 'funny.'"

"It's an odd fact," said Draycott with a sneer in his eyes, "that however much a woman complains of a man's stupidity, she will let him hang about her, and make a grievance of it, until she sees fit to drop him. When that moment arrives she can make him let go, and lower away all right. Just now Hartley is hanging on quite perceptibly, and if it entertains you to slang him behind his back, I suppose you will slang him, but he won't drop off before you've done with him, Clarice, if I know anything of your methods." Her face flushed and she began to look angry. "Mind you, I don't object to Hartley. As you say, he's a fool, a silly, trusting ass, the sort of man who is child's-play to a girl of sixteen. If you must have a string of loafers to prove that your attractions outwear *anno domini*, I must accept Hartley, and other Hartleys, so long as you continue to play the same game. *Hartleys*, I said, Clarice."

There was no doubt about the emphasis he laid upon the name.

"You flatter Mr. Hartley considerably," she said, but her voice was conciliatory and her laugh nervous.

"He represents a type; a type that some married men may be thankful continues to exist. God!" he broke out violently, "if he could hear you talk of him, it would be a lesson



to the fool, but he won't hear you. No man ever does hear these things until the knowledge comes too late to be of any use to him. You have got to have your strings"—he shrugged his shoulders—"because your life isn't here, in this house; it is at the Club, and at dinners and races and so on, and to be left to your husband is the beginning of the end. Don't deny it, Clarice, it's no earthly use. Women like you have your own ideas of life, I suppose, and I ought to be thankful they're no worse."



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He stood by the door all the time he spoke, and his colourless face and pale eyes never altered.

“You’re talking absolute nonsense,” said Mrs. Wilder, preserving an amiable tone. “We *have* to entertain, Draycott, and you can’t round on me for what I have done for years. It has helped you on, and you know it.”

“I wasn’t talking of that,” he said drearily. “I was talking of you. You’re getting old, for a woman, Clarice, and when you’re worried, as you are to-day, you show it; though how an imbecile like Hartley got at you to the extent of making you worried, I don’t pretend to guess.”

“Old,” she said angrily. “You aren’t troubling to be particularly polite.”

“No, I’m damnably truthful; just because it makes me wonder at you all the more. You can go on smiling at any number of idiots, because you must have the applause, I suppose. You don’t even believe in it—*now*.”

His allusion was definite, and Mrs. Wilder felt about in her mind for some way to change the conversation. Quagmires are bad ground for walking, and she was in a hurry to reach *terra firma* again. She came round the table and slipped her arm through his.

“After all these years. Draycott—be a little generous.”

If she had fought him, some deep, hidden anger in his cold heart would have flared up, but her gesture softened him and he patted her hand.

“I know,” he said slowly. “Only I can’t quite forget. I simply can’t, Clarice.”

She smiled at him and touched his face with a light hand.

“Shall I tell you why? Because even if I am old—and thirty-six isn’t so very dreadful—you are still in love with me.”

She went with him to the door and smiled as he drove away, smiled and waved as he reappeared round a distant bend, and watched him return her signal, and then she went back into the large drawing-room and her face grew grey and pinched, and she sat with her chin propped on her hands, thinking.

She had proved that there are more fools in the world than those who go about disguised as Heads of Police, and had added another specimen to the general list, but she found no mirth in the idea as she considered it.

**X****IN WHICH CRAVEN JOICEY IS OVERCOME BY A SUDDEN INDISPOSITION, AND HARTLEY, WITHOUT LOOKING FOR HIM, FINDS THE MAN HE WANTED**

It seemed to Hartley that Fate had dealt very hardly with him. He was interested in the case of the boy Absalom, and he felt that the possibility of clearing it up was well within reach, and then he found himself face to face with an unpleasant and painful duty.

All his gregarious sociable nature cried out against any act that would cause a scandal in Mangadone, the magnitude of which he could hardly gauge but only guess at; and yet, wherever he went, the thought haunted him. His feelings gave him no rest, and he remained inactive and listless for several days after his ride with Mrs. Wilder. If she had told him that she implored him personally to drop the case he could not have felt more certain that she desired him to do so. She worked indirectly upon his feelings, a much surer way with some natures than a direct appeal, and the thought brought something akin to misery into the mind and heart of the police officer.

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Absalom had gone, leaving no visible footprint to indicate whither he had vanished, but the inexorable detail of circumstance after circumstance led on to a very definite conclusion. The wooden figure outside the curio dealer's shop pointed up his master's steps, and did no one any wrong, but the awful fixed finger of changeless fact indicated the creeper-covered bungalow of the Rev. Francis Heath.

Hartley sat in his room, his elbows on the writing-table, and stared out before him. A sluicing shower had come up suddenly, obscuring all the brightness of the day, and the eaves of the veranda dripped mournfully with a sound like the patter of a thousand tiny feet; the patter sounded like the falling of tears, and he wondered if Heath, too, listened to the light persistent noise, and read into it the footsteps of departing hopes and lost ideals, or merely all the terrible monotonous detail that preceded an act that was a crime.

Hartley had dealt considerably with criminal cases, but never with anything the least like the case of the boy Absalom, and the speculations that came across his mind were new to him. He realized that a criminal of the class of the Rev. Francis Heath is a criminal who is driven slowly, inch by inch, into action, and each inch given only at the cost of blood and tears. It was little short of ghastly to consider what Heath must have gone through and suffered, and what he still must suffer, and must continue to suffer as he went along the dark loneliness of the awful road into which he had turned.

People who have pity and to spare for the murdered body, or for the dupe who has suffered plunder, think very little of the agony of mind and the horror of the man who has held a good position, secure and honoured, and who falls into the bottomless abyss of crime and detection. Hartley had never considered it before. He was on the side of law and order, and he was incapable of even dimly visualizing any condition of affairs that could force him into illegal action, and yet he felt in the darkness after some comprehension of the mind of the Rector of St. Jude's Parish Church.

The rain passed over, and the veranda was crossed with strips of yellow sunlight, the pale washed sunlight of a wet evening, and still the drip from the eaves fell intermittently with its melancholy noise, so softly now, as hardly to be heard, and Hartley got up, and, putting on his hat, walked across the scrunching wet gravel, and out on to the road, making his way towards the Club.

Far away, gleams of light lay soft over the trees of the park, the green sad light that is only seen in damp atmospheres. There was no gladness in the day, only a sense of deficiency and sorrow, even in its lingering beauty; and the lake that reflected the trees and the sky was deadly still, with a brooding, waiting stillness. Hartley stopped as he went towards the further gates of the park, and watched the glassy reflections with troubled eyes. No breeze touched the woods into movement, and the long, yellow bars of evening light were full of dim stillness. The very lifelessness of it affected Hartley strangely. Except where, here and there, a flash of the low sunset caught the water, the

whole prospect was motionless, and he stood like a man spellbound by the mystery of its silence.



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Hartley had chosen the less frequented road through the Park, and there was no one in sight when he had stopped to look at the pale sheet of water with its mirrored reproduction of tree and sky. It held him strangely, and he felt a curious tension of his nerves, as though something was going to happen. The thought came, as such thoughts do come, out of nowhere in particular, and yet Hartley waited with a sense of discomfort.

When he turned away angry at his own momentary folly, he stooped and picked up a stone and threw it into the motionless beauty of the water, breaking it into a quick splash, marring the clearness, and confusing the straight, low band of gold cloud which broke under the widening circles. As he stooped, a man had come into sight, walking with a slow, heavy step, his eyes on the ground and his head bent. He came on with dragging feet and a dull, mechanical walk, the walk of a man who is tired in body and soul. He did not look at the lake, nor did he even see Hartley, who turned towards him at once with sudden relief.

When Hartley hailed him cheerfully, Joicey stopped dead and looked up, staring at him as though he were an apparition. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead.

"Where did you spring from, Hartley?" he asked. "I did not see anyone just now." There was more irritation than warmth in his greeting of the police officer.

"I was moonstruck by the edge of that confounded lake. It was so still that it got on my nerves."

"Nerves," said Joicey abruptly. "There's too much talk of nerves altogether in these days."

Joicey, like all large men with loud voices, was able to give an impression of solidity that is very refreshing and reviving at times, but, otherwise, Joicey was not looking entirely himself. He passed his handkerchief over his face again and laughed dully.

"You're going to the Club, I suppose?"

"I was going there, but now I'll join you and have a walk, if I may. It's early for the Club yet."

He turned and walked on beside the Banker, who appeared, if anything, less in the humour for conversation than was usual with him. They left the lake behind them, now a pallid gleam flecked with wavering light in a circle of deep shadows that reached out from the margin.

"Any news?" asked Hartley without enthusiasm.

"Not that I have heard."



Silence fell again, and they walked out on to the road. Pools of afternoon rain still lay here and there in the depressions, but Joicey took no heed of them, and splashed on, staining his white trousers with liquid mud.

“By the way,” he said, clearing his throat as though his words stuck there, “have you heard anything more in connection with the disappearance of that boy you were talking of the other evening?”

Hartley did not reply for a moment, and just as he was about to speak, Mrs. Wilder’s car passed, and Mrs. Wilder leaned forward to smile at the Head of the Police; a small buggy followed with some more friends of Hartley’s, and then another car, and the road was clear again.



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"I believe I am on the right track, but I don't like it, Joicey. I'm damned if I do."

"Why not?"

"It comes too close to home,"—Hartley spoke with a jerk. "A hateful job—I thought I'd tell you—" He spoke in broken sentences, and his words affected the Banker very perceptibly.

"Can't you drop it?"

Joicey came to a standstill, and his voice was lowered almost to a whisper.

"I wish to Heaven I could, but it's a question of duty,"—he could hardly see Joicey's face in the gathering gloom. "I suppose you guess what I'm driving at, Joicey, though how you guess, I don't know."

"I think I'll say good night here, Hartley,"—the Banker's voice was unnatural and wavering. "I can't discuss it with you. It's got to be proved," he spoke more heatedly. "What have you got? Only the word of a stinking native. I tell you it's monstrous." He stopped and clutched Hartley's arm, and seemed as though he was staggering.

"What has come over you, Joicey; are you ill?"

"I'll sit down here for a moment,"—Joicey walked towards a low wall. "Sometimes I get these attacks. I'm better after they are over. Better, much better. Leave me here to go back by myself, Hartley. You need have no fear, I'm over it now; I'll rest for a little and then go my way quickly. Believe me, I'd rather be alone."

Very reluctantly, Hartley quitted him. He felt that Joicey was ill, and might even be beginning the horrible phase of "breaking up," which comes on with such fatal speed in a tropical climate. He went back after he had gone a mile along the road, but Joicey was no longer there. It was too late to think of going to the Club, for the road that Joicey and Hartley had followed led away from the residential quarter of Mangadone, and he disliked the idea of going back to his own bungalow and waiting through the dismal hour that lies across the evening between the time to come in and the time to dress for dinner.

Had there been a friendly house near, Hartley would have gone in on the chance of finding someone at home, but as there was not, he made the best of existing circumstances and took his way along the road towards his own bungalow. He could not deny that his walk with Joicey had only served to depress his spirits, and he was sorry to think that his friend was so obviously in bad health. The world seemed an uncomfortable place, full of gloomy surprises, and Hartley wished that he had a wife to go back to. Not a superb being like Mrs. Wilder, who was encircled by the halo of High Romance, but just an ordinary wife, with a friendly smile and a way of talking about



everyday things while she darned socks. Somewhere in his domestic heart Hartley considered sock-mending a beautiful and symbolic act, and yet he could not picture Mrs. Wilder occupied in such a fashion.

A man with a wife to go back to is never at the same loose end as a man who has no need ever to be punctual for a solitary meal, and Hartley walked quickly because he wanted to get clear of his depression, rather than for any reason that compelled him to be up to time.



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The gathering darkness drew out the flare over the city, and, here and there, lamps dotted the road, until, turning up a short cut, he was into the region of trams once more. The lighted cars, filled with gay Burmese and soldiers from the British Regiment, and European-clad, dark-skinned creatures of mixed races, looked cheerful and encouraged to better thoughts. Hartley crossed the busy thoroughfare below the Pagoda steps and went on quickly, for he recognized the outline of Mhtoon Pah on his way to burn amber candles before his newly-erected shrine. He was in no mood to talk to the curio dealer just then, and he avoided him carefully and plunged down a tree-bowered road that led to the bridge, and from the bridge to the hill-rise where his own gate stood open.

It pleased him to see that lamps were lighted in the house, and he felt conscious that he was hungry, and would be glad of dinner; he made up his mind to do himself well and rout the tormenting thoughts that pursued him, and to-morrow he would see Francis Heath and have the whole thing put on paper once and for all. He even whistled as he came along the short drive and under the portico, where a night-scented flower smelt strong and sweet. His boy met him with the information that there was a Sahib within waiting. A Sahib who had evidently come to stay, for a strange-looking servant in the veranda rose and salaamed, and sat down again by his master's kit with the patience of a man who looks out upon eternity.

Hartley hardly glanced at the servant. Visitors, tumbling from anywhere, were not altogether unusual occurrences. Men on the way back from a shoot in the jungles of Upper Burma, men who were old school friends and were doing a leisurely tour to Japan and America, men of his own profession who had leave to dispose of; all or any of these might arrive with a servant and a portmanteau. Whoever it was, Hartley was predisposed to give him a welcome. He had come just when he was wanted, and he hurried in, a light of pleasure in his blue eyes.

Near the lamp, a book of verses open on his knee, sat Hartley's unexpected guest. He was slim, dark, and vital, but where his arresting note of vitality lay would have been hard to explain. No one can tell exactly what it is that marks one man as a courageous man, and another as a coward, and yet, without need of any test, these things may be known and judged beforehand. The man whose eyes followed the lines:

“They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep”—

was as distinctive as he well could be, and yet his face was not expressive. His dark, narrow eyes were dull, and his finely-cut features small and perfect, rather than bold and strong; his long hands were the hands of a woman more than those of a man, and his figure was slight to boyishness.

When Hartley let his full joy express itself in husky, cheery words of surprise, his visitor said very little, but what he did say was spoken in a pleasant, low voice.



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“Coryndon,” said Hartley again. “Of all men on earth I wanted to see you most. You’ve done what you always do, come in the ‘nick.’”

Coryndon smiled, a languid, half-amused gleam of mirth.

“I am only passing through, my job is finished.”

“But you’ll stay for a bit?”

“You said just now that I was here in the ‘nick’; if the nick is interesting, I’ll see.”

“I’ll go and arrange about your rooms,” said Hartley, and he appeared twice his normal size beside his guest, as a St. Bernard might look standing by a greyhound. “We will talk afterwards.”

Coryndon watched him go out without change of expression, and, sliding back into his chair, took up his book again.

“They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep.”

Coryndon leaned back and half closed his eyes; the words seemed potent, as with a spell, and he called up a vision of the forsaken Palace where wild things lived and where revels were long forgotten—solitude and ruin that no one ever crossed to explore or to see—with the eyes of a man who can rebuild a mighty past. Solitude in the halls and marble stairways, ruin of time in the fretted screens, and broken cisterns holding nothing but dry earth. Nothing there now but the lion and the lizard, not even the ghost of a light footfall, or the tinkle of glass bangles on a rounded arm.

Coryndon had almost forgotten Hartley when he came back, flushed and pleased, and full of a host’s anxiety about his guest’s welfare.

“I hope you haven’t been bored?”

“No,” said Coryndon, touching the book, “I’ve been amusing myself in my own way,” and he followed Hartley out of the room.

XI

SHOWS HOW THE “WHISPER FROM THE DAWN OF LIFE” ENABLES CORYNDON TO TAKE THE DRIFTING THREADS BETWEEN HIS FINGERS

Very probably Hartley believed that he knew “all about” Coryndon; he knew at least, that the Government of India looked upon him as the best man they had to unravel the most



intricate case that murder or forgery, coining or fraud of any sort, could tangle into mysterious knots. Coryndon had intuition and patience, and once he undertook a case he followed it through to the ultimate conclusion; and so it was that Coryndon stood alone, a department in himself, possibly aided by the police and the shadower, but capable of discovering anything, once he bent his mind to the business of elucidation.

Beyond the fact that he had been born somewhere in a jungle clearing in Upper Burma, and that at ten years old he had gone to India to a school in the Hills, then had vanished for years to reappear in the service of the Government, his story was not known to anyone except himself. No one doubted that he had "a touch of the country" in his blood. It displayed itself in unmistakable physical traits, and his knowledge of its many tongues and languages was the knowledge that first made him realize that his future career lay in India.



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Colonel Coryndon, his father, died just as the boy was leaving school, and left him a little money; just enough to keep him from the iron yoke of clerkship, and to allow of his waiting for what he wanted. Behind his dark eyes lived a brain that could concentrate with the grip of a vise upon any subject that interested him, and he puzzled his masters at his school. Coryndon was a curious mixture of imagination and strong common sense; few realize that it is only the imaginative mind that can see behind the curtain that divides life from life, and discern motives.

He saw everything with an almost terrible clearness. Every detail of a room, every line in a face, every shop in a street he walked through, every man he spoke with, was registered in his indelible book of facts. This, in itself, is not much. Men can learn the habit of observation as they can train their minds to remember dates or historical facts, but, in the case of Coryndon, this art was inherent and his by birth. He started with it, and his later training of practising his odd capacity for recalling the smallest detail of every day that passed only intensified his power in this direction. With this qualification alone he could have been immensely useful as a secret agent, but in addition to this he had also his other gift, his intuition and power of altering his own point of view for that of another man, and seeing his subject through the eyes of everyone concerned in a question.

His nervous vitality was great, and there were plenty of well-educated native subordinates who believed him gifted with occult forces, since his ways of getting at his astonishing conclusions were never explained to any living soul, because Coryndon could not have explained them to himself.

His identity was well known at Headquarters, but beyond that limit it was carefully hidden from the lower branches of the executive, as too wide and too public recognition would have narrowed his sphere of action. As Wesley declared the whole world to be his parish, so the whole of Asia was Coryndon's sphere of action, and only at Headquarters was it ever known where he actually might be found, or what employment occupied his brain. He came like a rain-cloud blown up soundlessly on the east wind, and vanished like morning mists, and no one knew what he had learnt during his silent passing.

Men with voices like brass trumpets praised and encouraged him, and men who knew the dark byways of criminal investigation were hardly jealous of him. Coryndon was a freak, an exception, a man who stood beyond competition, and was as sure as he was mysterious. He was "explained" in a dozen ways. His face, to begin with, made disguise easy, and the touch of the country did much for him in this respect. He had played behind his father's up-country bungalow with little Burmese boys and talked in their speech before he knew any English; the Bazaar was an open book to him, and the mind of the native, so some men said with a shade of contempt, not too far from his own to make understanding impossible.

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Besides all this, there were those other years, after he left the school under the high snow ranges, when Coryndon had vanished entirely, and of these years he never spoke. And yet, with all this, Coryndon was unmistakably a “Sahib,” a man of unusual culture and brilliant ability. He had complete powers of self-control, and his one passion was his love of music, and though he never played for anyone else, men who had come upon him unawares had heard him playing to himself in a way that was as surprising as everything else about Coryndon surprised and astonished.

He had dreamed as a boy, and he still dreamed as a man. The subtle beauty of a line of verse led him into visionary habitations as fair as any ever disclosed to poet or artist. He could lose himself utterly in the lights and shadows of a passing day, while he watched for a doomed man at the entrance of a temple, or brooded over painted sores and cried to the rich for alms by a dusty roadside; a very different Coryndon to the Coryndon who looked at Hartley across the white cloth of the round dinner-table.

The truth about Coryndon was that he read the souls of men. Mhtoon Pah had boasted to Hartley that he read the walk of the world he looked at, but Coryndon went much further; and as Hartley talked about outward things, whilst the Boy and the *Khitmutghar* flitted in and out behind them, carrying plates and dishes, his guest was considering him with a quiet and almost moonstruck gravity of mind. He knew just how far Hartley could go, and he knew exactly what blocked him. Hartley was tied into the close meshes of circumstance; he argued from without and worked inward, and Coryndon had discovered the flaw in this process before he left his school.

When they were alone at last, Hartley pushed his chair closer to Coryndon and leaned forward.

“One moment.” Coryndon’s voice was lowered slightly, and he strolled to the door.

“Boy,” he called, and with amazing alacrity Hartley’s servant appeared.

“Tell my servant,” he said, speaking in English, “that I want the cigar tin.”

“Do you believe he was listening?”

“I am sure of it.”

Hartley flushed angrily, and he was about to speak when Coryndon’s man came into the room, salaaming on the threshold, carrying a black tin.

“Would you like a little stroll in the garden?” said Coryndon. “It would be pleasant before we sit down,” and Hartley followed him out.

“Did you bring any cigars down?”

Hartley spoke for the sake of saying something, more than for any reasonable desire to know whether Coryndon had done so or not, and his reply was a low, amused laugh.

“In ten minutes Shiraz will do a little juggling for your servants,” he said placidly. “There are no cigars in the tin. I hope you didn’t want one, Hartley? He will probably tell them that I am a new arrival, picked up by him at Bombay. Whatever he tells them, they will find him amusing.”



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A misty moonlight lighted the garden with a soft, yellow haze, and the harsh rattling of night beetles sounded unusually loud and noisy in the silence.

“You said that you had just finished a job?”

“I have, and now I am on leave. The Powers have given me four months, and I am going to London to hear the Wagner Cycle. I promised myself that long ago, and unless something very special crops up to prevent me, I shall start in a week from now.”

They took another silent turn.

“Did your last job work out?”

“Yes. It took a long time, but I got back into touch with things I had begun to forget, and it was interesting. Shall we go back into the house?”

“Come in here,” said Hartley, taking his way into the sitting-room. “I have some notes in my safe that I want you to look at. The truth is, Coryndon, I’m tackling rather a nasty business, and if you can help me, I’ll be eternally grateful to you. It has got on my nerves.”

Coryndon bowed his head silently and drew up a chair near the table. All the time that Hartley talked to him, he listened with close attention. The Head of the Police went into the whole subject at length, telling the story as it had happened, and leaving out, so far as he knew, no point that bore upon the question. First he told of the disappearance of the boy Absalom, the grief and frantic despair of Mhtoon Pah, and his visit to Hartley in the very room where they sat.

“He was away from the curio shop that night, you say?”

“Yes, at the Pagoda. He is building a shrine there. His statement to me was that he went away just after dark, and the boy had already left an hour before.”

Coryndon said nothing, but waited for the rest of the story, and, bit by bit, Hartley set it before him.

“Heath saw Absalom, and admitted it to me,” he said, pulling at his short, red moustache. “Even then he showed a very curious amount of irritation, and refused to say anything further. Then he lied to me when I went to the house, and there is Atkins’ testimony to the fact that he is paying a man to keep quiet.”

“Has the man reappeared since?”

“Not since I had the house watched.”



Coryndon's eyes narrowed and he moved his hands slightly.

"Next there is the very trifling evidence of Mrs. Wilder. It doesn't count for much, but it goes to prove that she knows something of Heath which she won't give away. She knows something, or she wouldn't screen him. That is simple deduction."

"Quite simple."

"Now, with reference to Joicey," went on Hartley, with a frown. "I don't personally think that Joicey knows or remembers whether he did see Heath. My Superintendent swears that he did go down Paradise Street on the night of the twenty-ninth, but Joicey is ill, and he said he wasn't in Mangadone then. He has been seedy for some time and may have mixed up dates."



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“You attach no importance to him?”

“Practically none.” Hartley leaned back in his chair and lighted a cheroot.

Coryndon touched the piece of silk rag with his hand.

“This rag business is out of place, taken in connection with Heath.”

“I don’t accuse Heath, Coryndon, but I believe that he *knows* where the boy went. The last thing that was told me by Mhtoon Pah was that the gold lacquer bowl that was ordered by Mrs. Wilder was found on the steps of the shop. Though what that means, the devil only knows. Mhtoon Pah considers it likely that the Chinaman, Leh Shin, put it there, but I have absolutely nothing to connect Leh Shin with the disappearance, and I have withdrawn the men who were watching the shop.”

“Interesting,” said Coryndon slowly.

“Can you give me any opinion? I’m badly in need of help.”

Coryndon shook his head, his hand still touching the stained rag idly.

“I could give you none at all, on these facts.”

Hartley looked at him with a fixed and imploring stare.

“In a place like this, to be the chief mover, the actual incentive to disclosing God knows what, is simply horrible,” he said in a rough, pained voice. “I’ve done my share of work, Coryndon, and I’ve taken my own risks, but any cases I’ve had against white men haven’t been against men like the Padre.”

Coryndon gave a little short sigh that had weariness in its sound, weariness or impatience.

“What you have told me involves three principals, and a score of others.” He was counting as he spoke. “Any one of them may be the man you are looking for, only circumstances indicate one in particular. You are satisfied that you have got the line. I could not confidently say that you have, unless I had been working the case myself, and had followed up every clue throughout.”

Hartley got up and paced the room, his hands deep in the pockets of his dinner jacket.

“I am convinced that Heath will have to be forced to speak, and, I may as well be honest with you—I don’t like forcing him.”



Coryndon was not watching his host, he was leaning back in his chair, his eyes on a little spiral of smoke that circled up from his cigarette.

“I wish that damned little Absalom had never been heard of, and that it was anybody’s business but mine to find him, if he is to be found.”

If Coryndon’s finely-cut lips trembled into an instantaneous smile, it passed almost at once, and he looked quietly round at Hartley, who still paced, looking like an overgrown schoolboy in a bad mood.

“I wish I could help you, Hartley, but I have not enough to go on. As you say, the case is unusual, and it makes it impossible for me to advise.” He got up and stretched himself. “There is one thing I will do, if you wish it, and, from what you said, you may wish it; I will take over the whole thing—for my holiday, and the Wagner Cycle will have to wait.”



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Hartley came to a standstill before his guest.

“You’ll do that, Coryndon?”

“The case interests me,” said Coryndon, “otherwise, I should not suggest it.” He paused for a moment and reflected. “I shall have to make your bungalow my headquarters; that is the simplest plan. Any absences may be accounted for by shooting trips and that sort of thing. That part of it is straightforward enough, and I can see the people I want to see.”

“You shall have a free hand to do anything you like,” said Hartley. “And any help that I can give you.”

Coryndon looked at him for a moment without replying.

“Thank you, Hartley. Our methods are different, as you know, but when I want you, I will tell you how you can help me.”

He walked across the room to where two tumblers and a decanter of whisky stood on a tray, and, pouring himself out a glass of soda water, sipped it slowly.

“Here are my notes,” said Hartley, in a voice of great relief. “They will be useful for reference.”

Coryndon folded them up and put them in his pocket.

“Most of what is there is also in my official report.”

Coryndon nodded his head, and, opening the piano, struck a light chord. After a moment he sat down and played softly, and the air he played came straight from the high rocks that guard the Afghan frontier. Like a breeze that springs up at evening, the little love-song lilted and whispered under his compelling fingers, and the “Song of the Broken Heart” sang itself in the room of Hartley, Head of the Police. Where it carried Coryndon no one could guess, but it carried Hartley into a very rose-garden of sentimental fatuity, and when the music stopped he gave a deep grunting sigh of content.

“I’ll get some honest sleep to-night,” he said as they parted, and ten minutes afterwards he was lying under his mosquito-curtains, oblivious to the world.

Coryndon’s servant, Shiraz, was squatting across the door that led into the veranda when his master came in, and he waited for his orders. He would have sat anywhere for weeks, and had done so, to await the doubtful coming of Coryndon, whose times and seasons no man knew.



When he was gone, Coryndon took out the bulky packet of notes and extracted the piece of rag, which he locked carefully away in a dispatch-box. He then cleared a little space on the floor, and put the papers lightly over one another. Setting a match to them, he watched them light up and curl into brittle tinder, and dissolve from that stage into a heap of charred ashes, which he gathered up with a careful hand and put into the soft earth of a fern-box outside his veranda door. This being done, he sat down and began to think steadily, letting the names drift through his brain, one by one, until they sorted themselves, and he felt for the most useful name to take first.

“Joicey, the Banker, is a man of no importance,” he murmured to himself, and again he said, “Joicey the Banker.”



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It was nearly dawn when he got between the cool linen sheets, and was asleep almost as his dark head lay back against the soft white pillow.

XII

SHOWS HOW A MAN MAY CLIMB A HUNDRED STEPS INTO A PASSIONLESS PEACE, AND RETURN AGAIN TO A WORLD OF SMALL TORMENTS

By the end of a week Coryndon had slipped into the ways of Mangadone, slipped in quietly and without causing much comment. He went to the Club with Hartley and made the acquaintance of nearly all his host's friends, and they, in return, gave him the casual notice accorded to a passing stranger who had no part or lot in their lives or interests. Coryndon was very quiet and listened to everything; he listened to a great deal in the first three days, and Fitzgibbon, a barrister, offered to take him round and show him the town.

Coryndon was "shown the town," but apparently he found a lasting joy in sight-seeing, and could witness the same sights repeatedly without failing interest. He climbed the steps to the Pagoda, under the guidance of Fitzgibbon, the first afternoon they met.

"Won't you come, too, Hartley?" asked the Barrister.

"Not if I know it. I've been there about sixty times. If Coryndon wants to see it, I'm thankful to let him go there with you."

Fitzgibbon, who had a craze for borrowing anything that he was likely to want, had persuaded Prescott, the junior partner in a rice firm, to lend him his car, and as he sat in the tonneau beside Coryndon, he pointed out the places of interest. Their way lay first through the residential quarter, and Hartley's guest saw the entrance gate and gardens of Draycott Wilder's house.

"The most interesting and certainly the best-looking woman in Mangadone lives there, a Mrs. Wilder. Hartley ought to have told you about her; he is rather favoured by the lady. Her husband is a rising civilian. Mrs. Wilder has bought Asia, and is wondering whether she'll buy Europe next."

Coryndon hardly appeared impressed or even interested.

"So she is a friend of Hartley's?" he said carelessly. "I hadn't heard that."

Fitzgibbon laughed.

"It's something to be a friend of Mrs. Wilder—that is, in Mangadone."



They sped on over the level road, and the car swung through the streets that led towards the open space before the temple.

“That is the curio dealer’s shop. Don’t get any of your stuff there. The man’s a robber.”

“Which shop?” asked Coryndon patiently.

“We’re past it now, but it was the one with a dancing man outside of it, a funny little effigy.”

Coryndon’s eyes were turned to the Pagoda, and he was evidently inattentive.

“It strikes you, doesn’t it?” asked Fitzgibbon, in the tones of a gratified showman. “It always does strike people who haven’t seen it before.”

“Naturally, when one has not seen it before,” echoed his companion, as the car drew up.

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Coryndon stood for a moment looking at the entrance, and surveying the huge plaster dragons with their gaping mouths and vermilion-red tongues. They were ranged up a green slope, two on either side of the brown fretted roof that covered the steep tunnel that led up a flight of more than a hundred steps to the flat plateau, where the golden spire towered high over all, amid a crowd of lesser minarets.

Surrounded by baskets of roses and orchids, little silk-clothed Burmese girls sat on the entrance steps, and sold their wares. Fitzgibbon would have hurried on, but Coryndon, in true tripper fashion, stopped and bought an armful of blossoms.

“What am I to do with these things?” he asked helplessly.

“Oh, you’d better leave them before one of the *Gaudamas*, and acquire merit. If you let them all plunder you like this, we’ll never get to the top.”

Flight after flight, the two men climbed slowly, and Coryndon stood at intervals to watch the crowd that came up and down. The steps were so steep that the arch above them only disclosed descending feet, but Coryndon watched the feet appear first and then the rest of the hurrying or loitering men and women, and he sat on a seat beside a little gathering of yellow-robed *Hypogyis* until Fitzgibbon lost all patience.

“There is a whole town of piety to see up at the top. Come on, man; we have hours of it yet to get through. Don’t waste time over those stalls. Every picture of the Buddha story was made in Birmingham.”

Progressing a little faster, Fitzgibbon piloted Coryndon past a stall where yellow candles and bundles of joss-sticks in red paper cases were sold at a varying price.

“I must get some of these,” objected Coryndon, who added a rupee’s worth of incense and a white cheroot to his collection.

When they passed through the last archway and gained the plateau, he looked round with eyes that spoke his keen interest. Even though he had been there many times before, Coryndon looked at the sight with eyes that grew shadowed by the dreaming soul that lived within him.

Twilight was gathering behind the trees; only the gold-laced spires of a thousand minarets caught the last light of the sun. On the plateau below the great pillar, that glimmered like a golden sword from base to bell-hung *Htee*, lay what Fitzgibbon had described as “a little town of piety.” A village of shrines and Pagodas, each built with seven roofs, open-fronted to disclose the holy place within; some large as a small chapel; some small, giving room only for the figure of the *Gaudama*. Here and there, the votive offerings had fallen into decay, and the gold-leaf covering the Buddha was black and dilapidated by the passing of years, for there is no merit to be acquired in



rebuilding or renovating a sacred place. From innumerable shrines, uncounted Buddhas looked out with the same long, contemplative eyes; in bronze, in jade, in white and black marble, in grey stone and gilded ebony, the passionless face of the great Peace looked out upon his children.

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Near to where Coryndon and the Barrister stood together, in the peach-coloured evening light, a large shrine with a fretted roof was thronged with worshippers, and Coryndon stood on the steps and looked in. The floor of black, polished marble dimly reflected the immense gold pillars that supported a lofty ceiling, lost entirely in the gloom, and before a blaze of candles and a floating veil of scented grey smoke a priest bowed himself, and prayed in a low, chanting voice. The face of the Lord Buddha behind the rails was lighted by the wind-blown flame of many tapers, so that it almost looked as though he smiled out of his far-away Nirvana upon his kneeling worshippers, who could ask nothing of him, not even mercy, since the salvation of a man is in his own hands.

Before the rails, a settle with low gilt legs was covered with offerings of flowers, that added their scent to the heavy air, and on a small table a feast of cakes and sweets was placed, to be distributed later on among the poor. Coryndon disposed of his burden of pink and white roses and little magenta prayer-flags, and lighted a bundle of joss-sticks, before they came out again and wandered on.

As the daylight faded the lights from the shrines and the small booths grew stronger, and the rising night wind, coming in from the river, rang the silver bells around the spires, filling the whole air with tinkling sound, and the slow-moving crowd around them laughed and joked, like people at a fair. His eyes still full of dreams, Coryndon followed with them, keeping one small packet of amber candles to light in honour of some other Buddha in another shrine.

“Funny devils, these Burmese,” remarked the Barrister. “They never clean up anything. Look at the years of tallow collected under that spiked gate that is falling off its hinges. That black little Buddha inside must once have been a popular favourite, but no one gives him anything now.”

They turned a corner past a booth where bottles full of pink and yellow fluid, and green leaves, wrapped around betel-nut, appeared to be the chief stock-in-trade, and a noise of hammering struck on their ears. Here a new shrine was being erected and was all but completed. A few Chinamen, who had been working at it, were putting their tools into canvas bags, preparatory to withdrawing like the remaining daylight.

“This is Mhtoon Pah’s edifice,” said Fitzgibbon, coming to a standstill. “He doesn’t seem to have spared expense, either. Shall we go in?”

The shrine was not a very large one, and the entrance was like the entrance to a grotto at an Exhibition. Tiny facets of glass were crusted into grass-green cement, shining like a thousand eyes, and, seated on a vermilion lacquer dais, a Buddha, with heavy eyelids that hid his strange eyes, presided over an illumination of smoking flame. The smell of joss-sticks was heavy on the air, and the filigree cloak worn by the Buddha was enriched with red and green glass that shone and glittered.



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"They say the caste-mark in his forehead is a real diamond," remarked the Barrister. "I don't suppose it is, but at least it is a good imitation."

Coryndon was not listening to him; he had gone close to the marble rails, and was lighting his little bunch of yellow tapers. He lighted them one by one, and put each one down on the floor very slowly and carefully, and when he had finished he turned round.

"Mhtoon Pah is the man who has the curio shop?" he asked.

"The very same. It gives you some idea of his percentage on sales, what?"

Coryndon joined in his laugh, and they went out again into the street of sanctity. Fitzgibbon was now getting exhausted, for his companion's desire to "do" the Pagoda was apparently insatiable; and he asked interminable questions that the Barrister was totally unable to answer.

Coryndon seemed to find something fresh and interesting around every corner. The white elephants delighted him, particularly where green creepers had grown round their trunks, giving them a realistic effect of enjoying a meal. The handles off very common English chests-of-drawers, that were set along a rail enclosing a sleeping Buddha, pleased him like a child, as did the bits of looking-glass with "Black and White Whisky," or "Apollinaris Water," inscribed across their faces.

"That sort of thing seems to attract them," explained Fitzgibbon. "In one of the shrines there is a fancy biscuit-box at a Buddha's feet. It has got 'Huntley and Palmer' on the top, and pictures of children and swans all around it. Funny devils, I always say so."

At length he had to drag Coryndon away, almost by main force.

"I'd like to have seen Mhtoon Pah," he objected. "He ought to be on view with his chapel."

"Shrine, Coryndon. You can see him in his shop," and they began the descent down the steep steps.

"Look," said the Barrister quickly, "there is Mhtoon Pah. No, not the man in white trousers, that's a Chinaman with a pigtail under his hat; the fat old thing in the short silk *loongyi* and crimson head-scarf."

Coryndon hardly glanced at him, as he passed with a scent of spice and sandal-wood in his garments; his attention had been attracted by a booth where men were eating curry.

"It is a curious custom to sell food in a place like this," he remarked to the Barrister.



“It’s part of the Oriental mind,” replied his guide. “No one understands it. No one ever will; so don’t try and begin, or you’ll wear yourself out.”

When they got back to the Club it was already late, and the hall of the bar was crowded with men, standing together in groups, or sitting in long, uncompromising chairs under the impression that they were comfortable seats.

“Hullo, Joicey,” said the Barrister, as he fell over his legs. “I’m dog-beat. Been doing the Pagoda with Coryndon. Do you know each other—?” He waved his hand by way of introduction, and Coryndon took an empty chair beside the Banker, who heaved himself up a little in his seat, and signalled to a small boy in white, who was scuffling with another small boy, also in white, and ordered some drinks.

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"I am new to it," explained Coryndon, and his voice sounded tired, as though the Pagoda had been a little too much for him.

Joicey did not reply; he was looking away, and Coryndon followed his eyes. Near the wide staircase, and just about to go up it, a man was standing, talking to a friend. He was dressed in an ill-cut suit of white, with a V-shaped inlet of black under his round collar; he held a *topi* of an old pattern under his arm, and the light showed his face cadaverous and worn. Joicey was holding the arm of his chair, and his under-lip trembled.

"Inexplicable," he muttered, and drank with a gulping sound.

"What did you say?" asked Coryndon politely.

"Say? Did I say anything? I can't remember that I did." The Banker's voice was irritable, and he still watched the clergyman.

"What strikes me about the Pagoda is the strong Chinese element in the design. I am told that there are a lot of Chinamen in Mangadone. I should like to see their quarter."

"Hartley should be able to arrange that for you."

Joicey was evidently growing tired of Coryndon's freshness and enthusiasm, and he passed his hand over his face, as though the damp heat of the night depressed his mind.

"Hartley is very busy," said Coryndon, with the determination of a man who intends to see what he has come to see. "I don't like to be perpetually badgering him. Could I go alone?"

"You could," said Joicey shortly.

"I want to miss nothing."

Coryndon turned his head away and looked at the crowded room, fixing his gaze on a whirring fan that hung low on a brass rod, and when he looked round again, Joicey had got up and was making his way out into the night. Fitzgibbon was surrounded by several other men, and there was no sign of his friend Hartley, so he got up and slipped out, standing hatless, until his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness.

The strong lights from the veranda encroached some way into the gloom, and, here and there, a few people still sat around basket tables, enjoying the evening air. Coryndon looked at them, with his head bent forward, a little like a cat just about to emerge through a door into a dark passage. For a little time, he stood there, watching and



listening, and then he turned away and walked out along the footpath, as though in a hurry to get back to his bungalow.

XIII

PUTS FORWARD THE FACT THAT A SUDDEN FRIENDSHIP NEED NOT BE BASED UPON A SUDDEN LIKING; AND PASSES THE NIGHT UNTIL DAWN REVEALS A SHAMEFUL SECRET

Some ten days after Coryndon had taken up his quarters with Hartley, he informed his host that he intended to disappear for a time, and that he would take his servant, Shiraz, with him. He had been through every quarter of Mangadone before he set out to commence operations, and the whole town lay clear as a map in his mind.



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Hartley was dining out, "dining at the Wilders'," he said casually, and he further informed Coryndon that Mrs. Wilder had asked him to bring his friend, but no amount of persuasion could induce Coryndon to forgo an evening by himself. He pointed out to Hartley that he never went into society, and that he found it a strain on his mind when he required to think anything through, and, with a greater show of reluctance than he really felt, Hartley conceded to his wish, and Coryndon sat down to a solitary meal. He ate very sparingly and drank plain soda water, and whilst he sat at the table his long, yellow-white fingers played on the cloth, and his eyes followed the swaying punkah mat with an odd, intense light in their inscrutable depths.

He had made Hartley understand that he never talked over a case, and that he followed it out entirely according to his own ideas, and Hartley honestly respected his reserve, making no effort to break it.

"When the hands are full, something falls to the ground and is lost," Coryndon murmured to himself as he got up and went to his room. "Shiraz," he called, "Shiraz," and the servant sprang like a shadow from the darkness in response to his master's summons.

"To-night I go out." Coryndon waved his hand. "To-morrow I go out, and of the third day—I cannot tell. Let it be known to the servant people that, like all travelling Sahibs, I wish to see the evil of the great city. I may return with the morning, but it may be that I shall be late."

"*Inshallah, Huzoor,*" murmured Shiraz, bowing his head, "what is the will of the Master?"

"A rich man is marked among his kind; where he goes the eyes of all men turn to follow his steps, but the poor man is as a grain of sand in the dust-storm of a Northern Province. Great are the blessings of the humble and needy of the earth, for like the wind in its passing, they are invisible to the eyes of men."

Shiraz made no response; he lowered the green chinks outside the doors and windows, and opened a small box, battered with age and wear.

"The servant's box is permitted to remain in the room of the Lord Sahib," he said with a low chuckle. "When asked of my effrontery in this matter, I reply that the Lord Sahib is ignorant, that he minds not the dignity of his condition, and behold, it is never touched, though the leathern box of the Master has been carefully searched by Babu, the butler of Hartley Sahib, who knows all that lies folded therein."

While he spoke he was busy unwrapping a collection of senah bundles, which he took out from beneath a roll of dusters and miscellaneous rubbish, carefully placed on the top. The box had no lock and was merely fastened with a bit of thick string, tied into a series of cunning knots.



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When he had finished unpacking, he laid a faded strip of brightly-coloured cotton on the bed, in company with a soiled jacket and a tattered silk head-scarf, and, as Shiraz made these preparations, Coryndon, with the aid of a few pigments in a tin box, altered his face beyond recognition. He wore his hair longer than that of the average man, and, taking his hair-brushes, he brushed it back from his temples and tied a coarse hank of black hair to it, and knotted it at the back of his head. He dressed quickly, his slight, spare form wound round the hips with a cotton *loongyi*, and he pulled on the coat over a thin, ragged vest, and sat down, while Shiraz tied the handkerchief around his head.

The art of make-up is, in itself, simple enough, but the very much more subtle art of expression is the gift of the very few. It was hard to believe that the slightly foreign-looking young man with Oriental eyes could be the pock-marked, poverty-stricken Burman who stood in his place.

Slipping on a light overcoat, he pulled a large, soft hat over his head, and walked out quickly through the veranda.

“Now, then, Shiraz,” he called out in a quick, ill-tempered voice. “Come along with the lamp. Hang it; you know what I mean, the *butti*. These infernal garden-paths are alive with snakes.”

Shiraz hastened after him, cringing visibly, and swinging a hurricane lamp as he went. When they had got clear of the house and were near the gate, Coryndon spoke to him in a low voice.

“Pull my boots off my feet.” Shiraz did as he was bidden and slipped his master’s feet into the leather sandals which he carried under his wide belt. “Now take the coat and hat, and in due time I shall return, though not by day. Let it be known that to-morrow we take our journey of seven days; and it may be that to-morrow we shall do so.”

“*Inshallah*,” murmured Shiraz, and returned to the house.

By night the streets of Mangadone were a sight that many legitimate trippers had turned out to witness. The trams were crowded and the native shops flared with light, for the night is cool and the day hot and stifling; therefore, by night a large proportion of the inhabitants of Mangadone take their pleasure out of doors. In the Berlin Cafe the little tables were crowded with those strange anomalies, black men and women in European clothes. There had been a concert in the Presentation Hall, and the audience nearly all reassembled at the Berlin Cafe for light refreshments when the musical programme was concluded.

Paradise Street was not behindhand in the matter of entertainment: there was a wedding festival in progress, and, at the modest cafe, a thick concourse of men talking and singing and enjoying life after their own fashion; only the house of Mhtoon Pah, the



curio dealer, was dark, and it was before this house, close to the figure of the pointing man, that the weedy-looking Burman who had come out of Hartley's compound stopped for a moment or two. He did not appear to find anything to keep him there; the little man had nothing better to offer him than a closed door, and a closed door is a definite obstacle to anyone who is not a housebreaker, or the owner with a key in his pocket; so, at least, the Burman seemed to think, for he passed on up the street towards the river end.

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From there to the colonnade where the Chinese Quarter began was a distance of half a by-street, and Coryndon slid along, apologetically close to the wall. He avoided the policeman in his blue coat and high khaki turban, and his manner was generally inoffensive and harmless as he sneaked into the low entrance of Leh Shin's lesser curio shop. A large coloured lantern hung outside the inner room, and a couple of candles did honour to the infuriated Joss who capered in colour on the wall.

All the hidden vitality of the man seemed to live in every line of his lithe body as he looked in, but it subsided again as he entered, and he stared vacantly around him.

There was no one in the shop but Leh Shin's assistant, who was finishing a meal of cold pork, and whose heavy shoulders worked with his jaws. He ceased both movements when Coryndon entered, and continued again as he spoke, the flap of his tweed hat shaking like elephants' ears. He informed Coryndon, who spoke to him in Yunnanese, that Leh Shin was out, so that if he had anything to sell, he would arrange the details of the bargain, and if he wanted to buy, he could leave the price of the article with the trusted assistant of Leh Shin.

It took Coryndon some time to buy what he needed, which appeared to be nothing more interesting than a couple of old boxes. The Burman needed these to pack a few goods in, as he meditated inhabiting the empty, rat-infested house next door but one to the shop of Leh Shin. Upon hearing that they were to be neighbours, the assistant grew sulky and informed Coryndon that trade was slack if he wished to sell anything, but his eyes grew crafty again when he was informed that his new acquaintance did not act for himself, but for a friend from Madras, who having made much money out of a Sahib, whose bearer he had been for some years, desired to open business in a small way with sweets and grain and such-like trifles, whereby to gain an honest living.

The assistant glanced at the clock, when, after much haggling, the deal was concluded, and the Burman knotted the remainder of his money in a small corner of his *loongyi*, and stood rubbing his elbows, looking at the Chinaman, who appeared restless.

"Where shall I find Leh Shin?" The Burman put the question suddenly. "In what house am I to seek him, assistant of the widower and the childless?"

The boy leered and jerked his thumb towards the direction of the river.

"Closed to-night, follower of the Way," he said with a smothered noise like a strangled laugh. "Closed to-night. Every door shut, every light hidden, and those who go and demand the dreams cannot pass in. I, only, know the password, since my master receives high persons." He spat on the floor.

Coryndon bowed his head in passive subjection.

“None else know my quantity,” he murmured. “These thieves in the lesser streets would mix me a poison and do me evil.”

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The assistant scratched his head diligently and looked doubtfully at the Burman.

“And yet I cannot remember thy face.”

“I have been away up the big river. I have travelled far to that Island, where I, with other innocent ones, suffered for no fault of mine.”

Leh Shin’s assistant looked satisfied. If the Burman were but lately returned from the convict settlement on the Andaman Islands, it was quite likely that he might not have been acquainted with him.

To all appearances, the bargain being concluded, and Leh Shin being absent from the shop, there was nothing further to keep the customer, yet he made no sign of wishing to leave, and, after a little preamble, he invited the assistant to drink with him, since, he explained, he needed company and had taken a fancy to the Chinese boy, who, in his turn, admitted to a liking for any man who was prepared to entertain him free of expense. Leh Shin’s assistant could not leave the shop for another hour, so the Burman, who did not appear inclined to wait so long, went out swiftly, and came back with a bottle of native spirit.

Fired by the fumes of the potent and burning alcohol, the Chinaman became inquisitive, and wished to hear the details of the crime for which his new friend had so wrongfully suffered. He looked so evil, so greasy, and so utterly loathsome that he seemed to fascinate the Burman, who rocked himself about and moaned as he related the story of his wrong. His words so excited the ghoulish interest of his listener that his bloated body quivered as he drank in the details.

“And so ends the tale of his great evil; he that was my friend,” said Coryndon, rising from his heels as he finished his story. “The hour grows late and there is no comfort in the night, since I may not find oblivion.” He passed his hand stupidly over his forehead. “My memory is lost, flapping like an owl in the sunlight; once the road to the house by the river lay before me as the lines upon my open palm, but now the way is no longer clear.”

“I have said that it is closed to-night, so none may enter. There is a password, but I alone know it, and I may not tell it, friend of an evil man.”

“There are other nights,” whined the Burman, “many of them in the passing of a year. When I have the knowledge of thee, then may I seek and find later.” He rubbed his knees with an indescribable gesture of mean cringing.

The Chinese boy drank from the bottle and smacked his lips.

“Hear, then, thou convict,” he said in a shrill hectoring voice. “By the way of Paradise Street, along the wharf and past the waste place where the tram-line ends and the



houses stand far apart. Of the houses of commerce, I do not speak; of the mat houses where the Coringyhis live, I do not speak, but beyond them, open below to the water-snakes, and built above into a secret place, is the house we know of, but Leh Shin is not there for thee to-night, as I have already spoken.”



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He felt in the pouch at his waist for a rank black cigar, which he pushed into his mouth and lighted with a sulphur match.

"Who fries the mud fish when he may eat roast duck?" he said, with a harsh cackle that made the Burman start and stare at him.

"*Aie! Aie!* I do not understand thy words." The Burman's face grew blank and he went to the door.

"Neither do you need to, son of a chained monkey," retorted the boy, full of strong liquor and arrogance. "But I tell thee, I and my mate, Leh Shin, hold more than money between the finger and the thumb,"—he pinched his forefinger against a mutilated thumb. "More than money, see, fool; thou understandest nothing, thy brain is left along with thy chains in the Island which is known unto thee."

"Sleep well," said the Burman. "Sleep well, child of the Heavens, I understand thee not at all," and with a limp shrug of his shoulders, he slid out of the narrow door into the night.

Coryndon gave one glance at the sky; the dawn was still far off, but in spite of this he ran up the deserted colonnade and walked quickly down Paradise Street, which was still awake and would be awake for hours. Once clear of the lessening crowd and on to the wharf, he ran again; past the business houses, past the long quarter where the Coringyhis and coolie-folk lived, and, lastly, with a slow, lurking step, to the close vicinity of a house standing alone upon high supports. He skirted round it, but to all appearances it was closed and empty, and he sat down behind a clump of rough elephant-grass and tucked his heels under him.

His original idea, on coming out, had been merely to get into touch with Leh Shin, and make the way clear for his coming to the small, empty house close to the shop of the ineffectual curio dealer, and now he knew, through his fine, sharp instinct, that he was close upon the track of some mystery. It might have nothing to do with the disappearance of the Christian boy, Absalom, or it might be a thread from the hidden loom, but, in any case, Coryndon determined to wait and see what was going to happen. He was well used to long waiting, and the Oriental strain in his blood made it a matter of no effort with him. Someone was hidden in the lonely house, some man who paid heavily for the privacy of the waterside opium den, and Coryndon was determined to discover who that man was.

The night was fair and clear, and the murmur of the tidal river gentle and soothing, and as he sat, well hidden by the clump of grass, he went over the events of the evening and thought of the face of Leh Shin's assistant. Hartley had spoken of the bestial creature in tones of disgust, but Hartley had not seen him to the same peculiar advantage. Line by line, Coryndon committed the face to his indelible memory, looking



at it again in the dark, and brooding over it as a lover broods over the face of the woman he loves, but from very different motives. He was assured that no cruelty or wickedness that mortal brain could imagine would be beyond the act of this man, if opportunity offered, and he was attracted by the psychological interest offered to him in the study of such a mind.



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The ripples whispered below him, and, far away, he heard the chiming of a distant clock striking a single note, but he did not stir; he sat like a shadow, his eyes on the house, that rose black, silent, and, to all appearances, deserted, against the starry darkness of the sky. He had got his facts clear, so far as they went, and his mind wandered out with the wash of the water, and the mystery of the river flowed over him; the silent causeway leading to the sea, carrying the living on its bosom, and bearing the dead beneath its brown, sucking flow, full of its own life, and eternally restless as the sea tides ebbed and flowed, yet musical and wild and unchanged by the hand of man. Coryndon loved moving waters, and he remembered that somewhere, miles away from Mangadone, he had played along a river bank, little better than the small native children who played there now, and he saw the green jungle-clearing, the red road, and the roof of his father's bungalow, and he fancied he could hear the cry of the paddy-birds, and the voices of the water-men who came and went through the long, eventless days.

Even while he thought, he never moved his eyes from the house. Suddenly a light glimmered for a moment behind a window, and he sat forward quickly, forgetting his dream, and becoming Coryndon the tracker in the twinkling flash of a second. The inmates of the house were stirring at last, and Coryndon lay flat behind his clump of grass and hardly breathed.

He could hear a door open softly, and, though it was too dark to discern anything, he knew that there was a man on the veranda, and that the man slipped down the staircase, where he stood for a moment and peered about. He moved quietly up the path and watched it for a few minutes, and then slid back into the house again. Coryndon could hear whispers and a low, growled response, and then another figure appeared, a Sahib this time, by his white clothes. He used no particular caution, and came heavily down the staircase, that creaked under his weight, and took the track by which Coryndon had come.

Silhouetted against the sky, Coryndon saw the head and neck of a Chinaman, and he turned his eyes from the man on the path to watch this outline intently; it was thin, spare and vulture-like. Evidently Leh Shin was watching his departing guest with some anxiety, for he peered and craned and leaned out until Coryndon cursed him from where he lay, not daring to move until he had gone.

At last the silhouette was withdrawn and the Chinaman went back into the house. He had hardly done so when Coryndon was on his feet, running hard. He ran lightly and gained the road just as the man he followed turned the corner by Wharf Street and plodded on steadily. In the darkness of the night there are no shadows thrown, but this man had a shadow as faithful as the one he knew so well and that was his companion from sunrise to sunset, and close after him the poor, nameless Burman followed step for step through the long path that ended at the house of Joicey the Banker.



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Coryndon watched him go in, heard him curse the *Durwan*, and then he ran once more, because the stars were growing pale and time was precious. He was weary and tired when he crept into the compound outside the sleeping bungalow on the hill-rise, and he stood at the gate and gave a low, clear cry, the cry of a waking bird, and a few minutes afterwards Coryndon followed Joicey's example and cursed the *Durwan*, kicking him as he lay snoring on his blanket.

"Open the door, you swine," he said in the angry voice of a belated reveller, "and don't wake the house with that noise."

Even when he was in his room and delivered himself over to the ministrations of Shiraz, he did not go to bed. He had something to think over. He knew that he had established the connection between Joicey the Banker and the spare, gaunt Chinaman who kept a shop for miscellaneous wares in the dark colonnade beyond Paradise Street. Joicey had a short memory: he had forgotten whether he had met the Rev. Francis Heath on the night of the 29th of July, and had imagined that he was not there, that he was away from Mangadone; and as Coryndon dropped off to sleep, he felt entirely convinced that, if necessary, he could help Joicey's memory very considerably.

XIV

TELLS HOW SHIRAZ, THE PUNJABI, ADMITTED THE FRAILTIES OF ORDINARY HUMANITY, AND HOW CORYNDON ATTENDED AFTERNOON SERVICE AND CONSIDERED THE VEXED QUESTION OF TEMPERAMENT.

The day following Coryndon's vigil outside the lonely house by the river was dull and grey, with a woolly sky and a tepid stillness that hung like a tangible weight in the air. Its drowsiness affected even the native quarter, but it in no way lessened the bustle of preparations for departure on the part of Coryndon, who ordered Shiraz to pack enough clothes for a short journey, and to hold himself in readiness to leave with his master shortly after sunrise the following day. His master also gave him leave to go to the Bazaar and return at his own discretion, as he was going out with Hartley Sahib.

It was about noon, when the sun had struggled clear of the heavy clouds, that Shiraz found himself in the dark colonnade locking an empty house behind him with his own key, and, being a stately, red-bearded follower of the Prophet, with a general appearance of wealth and dignity, he walked slowly until he came to the doorway of Leh Shin's shop. His step caused the Chinaman to look up from the string bed where he lay, gaunt, yellow and unsavoury, his dark clothes contrasting with the flowing white garments of the venerable man who regarded him through his spectacles.

"The hand of Allah has led me to this place," said Shiraz in his low, reflective tones. "I seek for a little prayer-mat and a few bowls of brass for my food; likewise, a bed for

myself, and a bed of lesser value for my companion. Hast thou these things, Leh Shin?"



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Leh Shin went into his back premises and returned with the bowls and the prayer-mat.

“The bed for thyself, O Haj, and the bed of lesser value for thy friend, I shall make shift to procure. Presently I will send my assistant, the eyes of my encroaching age, to bring what you need.”

“It is well,” said Shiraz, who was seated on a low stool near the door, and who looked with contemplative eyes into the shop.

Leh Shin huddled himself on to the string couch again, and the slow process of bargaining began. Pice by pice they argued the question, and at last Shiraz produced a handful of small coin, which passed from him to the Chinaman.

“I had already heard of thee,” said Leh Shin, scratching his loose sleeves with his long, claw-like fingers. “But thy friend, the Burman, who spoke beforehand of thy coming, and who still recalls the mixture of his opium pipe, I cannot remember.” He hunched his shoulders. “Yet even that is not strange. My house by the river is a house of many faces, yet all who dream wear the same face in the end,” his voice crooned monotonously. “All in the end, from living in the world of visions, become the same.”

Shiraz bowed his head with grave courtesy.

“It was also told to me that you served a rich master and have stored up wealth.”

“The way of honesty is never the path to wealth,” responded Shiraz, in tones of reproof. “So it is written in the Koran.”

Leh Shin accepted the ambiguous reply with an unmoved face.

“Thy friend is under the hand of devils?”

He put the remark as an idle question.

“He is tormented,” replied Shiraz, pulling at his beard. “He is much driven by thoughts of evil, committed, such is his dream, by another than himself; and yet the *Sirkar* hath said that the crime was his own. The ways of Allah are veiled, and Mah Myo is without doubt no longer reasonable; yet he is my friend, and doth greatly profit thereby.”

“Ah, ah,” said the Chinaman, placing a hubble-bubble before his guest, who condescended to shut the mouthpiece in under his long moustache, while he sat silently for nearly half an hour.

“Dost thou sell beautiful things, Leh Shin?” he asked. “I have a gift to bestow, and my mind troubles me. The Lady Sahib of my late master suffered misfortune. She was



robbed by some unknown son of a jackal, and thereby lost jewels, the value of which was said to be great, though I know not of the value of such things.”

Leh Shin curled his bare toes on the edge of his bed and looked at them with a great appearance of interest.

“Was the thief taken, O son of a Prophet?”

“He was not. I have cried in the veranda, to see the Lady Sahib’s sorrow, and I have also prayed and made many offerings at the Mosque, but the thief escaped. Now that my service with the Lord Sahib is finished, and as he has assisted my poverty with small gifts, I would like to make a present to the Lady Sahib. Some trifling thing, costing a small sum in rupees, for her grief was indeed great, and it may avail to console her sorrow.”



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“For which sorrow thou, also, wept in the veranda,” added Leh Shin.

“The Lady Sahib had many bowls of lacquer, some green, some red, some spotted like the back of a poison snake, but she lacked a golden bowl, and, should I be able to procure one for a moderate price, it would add greatly to her pleasure in remembering her servant, for, says not the Wise One, ‘a gift is a small thing, but the hand that holds it may not be raised to smite.’”

Shiraz, all the time he was speaking, had regarded the Chinaman from behind his respectable gold-rimmed spectacles, and he noticed that Leh Shin did not seem to care for the subject of lacquer, for his face darkened and he stopped scratching.

“I deal not in lacquer,” he said quickly. “Neither touch thou the accursed thing, O Shiraz. Leave it to Mhtoon Pah, who is a sorcerer and whose lies mount as high as the topmost pinnacle of the Pagoda.” The Chinaman’s lips drew back from his teeth, and he snarled like a dog. “I will not speak of him to thee, but I would that the face of Mhtoon Pah was under my heel, and his eyeballs under my thumbs.”

“Yet this golden bowl has been in my thought,” the voice of Shiraz flowed on evenly. “And I said that here, in Mangadone, I might find such an one. Thou art sure that lacquer is accursed to thine eyes, Leh Shin? That thou hast not such a bowl by thee, neither that thy assistant, when he seeks the bed for myself and the lesser bed for my friend, could not look craftily into the shop of this merchant, and ask the price as he passeth, if so be that Mhtoon Pah has such a bowl to sell?”

Leh Shin spat ferociously.

“There was a bowl, a bowl such as you describe, O servant of Kings, and I thought to procure it, for word was brought me that Mhtoon Pah had need of it, and I desired to hold it before him and withdraw it again, and to inspire his covetousness and rage and then to sell it from my own hand, but he leagues with devils and his power is great, for, behold, Honourable Haj, the bowl that was mine was lost by the man from the seas who was about to sell it to me. Lost, in all truth, and after the lapse of many days, Mhtoon Pah had it in his shop, and sold it to the Lady Sahib.”

“The hands of a man of wealth are more than two,” said Shiraz oracularly.

“Nay, not so, for all thy learning, Pilgrim from the Shrine of Mahomet. The hands of this merchant, at the time I speak, were as my hands, or thine,” he held out his claws and snatched at the air as though it was his enemy’s throat. “For his boy, his assistant, the Christian Absalom, who served him well, and whom Mhtoon Pah fed upon sweets from the vendor’s stall, was suddenly taken from him, and has vanished, like the smoke of an opium pipe.”



Shiraz expressed wonder, and agreed with Leh Shin that sorcery had been used, shaking his head gravely and at length rising to his feet.

“The shadows lengthen and the hour of prayer draws near. It is time for the follower of the Prophet to give a poor man’s alms at the gate of the Mosque, and to pray and praise,” he said. “Thy assistant tarries, Leh Shin; let him go forth with speed and place my purchase in thy keeping, since I met thee in a happy hour, and shall return upon the morrow from the *Serai*, where it is Allah’s will that I pass the night in peace.”



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Walking with a slow, regular pace, he left the native quarter, and taking a tram, got out on the road below the bungalow where Hartley's servant waited in the veranda.

"Thy Sahib has cursed thy beard and thine age, and says that he will replace thee with a younger man if thy dealings in the Bazaar are of such long duration."

"Peace, owl," said Shiraz. "The Sahib can no more travel without my assistance than a babe of one day without his mother. Presently, when the Sahib has drunk a peg, he will return to reason."

"The Sahib is not within; he has but now gone out once more, asking from my Sahib for the loan of a prayer-book. Doubtless, there is a *Tamasha* at the 'Kerfedril,' and Coryndon Sahib goes thither to pray."

"I shall place the buttons in his shirt, and recover an eight-anna piece from the floor, which the master dropped yesterday, to deliver to him when he shall return. Seek to be honest in thy youth, my son, for in later life it will repay thee."

Hartley's boy had not been mistaken when he heard Coryndon ask for a prayer-book and saw him go out on foot. The small persistent bell outside St. Jude's Church was ringing with desperate energy to collect any worshippers who might feel inclined to assemble there for evensong, and the worshippers when collected under the tin roof numbered nearly a dozen.

It was a bare, barn-like Church, for the wealth of the Cantonment had flowed in the direction of the Cathedral. The punkah mats flapped languidly, and the lower part of the church was dark, only the chancel being lighted with ungainly punkah-proof lamps, and the two altar candles that threw their gleam on a plain gold cross, guttered in the heat. A strip of cocoa-nut matting lay along the aisle, and the chancel and altar steps were covered in sad, faded red. The organist did not attend except on Sundays or Feast Days, and the service was plain, conducted throughout by the Rev. Francis Heath.

Coryndon took a seat about half-way up the nave, and when Heath came into the church, he watched him with interest. He liked to watch a man, whom it was his business to study, without being disturbed, and Heath's face in profile, as he knelt at the reading desk, or in full sight as he stood to read the lesson, attracted the fixed gaze of, at least, one member of the small congregation. There was no sermon and the service was short, and as he sat quietly in his place, Coryndon wondered what frenzied moment of fear or despair could have driven this man into the company of Joicey and Mrs. Draycott Wilder, unconscious perhaps of their connection with him, but linked nevertheless by an invisible thread that wound around them all.

Beyond the fact that he had seen Mrs. Wilder, he had not taken her under the close observation of his mental microscope. She stood on one side until such time as he



should have need to probe into her reasons for silence, and he wondered if Hartley was right, and if, by chance, the earnest face of the clergyman, with its burning, stricken eyes, had appealed to her sympathy. Could it be so, he asked himself once or twice, but the immediate question was the one that Coryndon gave his mind to answer, and just then he was forming an impression of the Rev. Francis Heath.



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He looked at his hands, at his thin neck, at the hollows in his cheeks and the emotional quiver at the corner of his mouth, and he knew the man was a fanatic, a civilized fanatic, but desperately and even horribly in earnest. A believer in torment, a man who held the vigorous faith that makes for martyrdom and can also pile wood for the fires that burn the bodies of others for the eventual welfare of their souls. Unquestionably, the Rev. Francis Heath was a man not to be judged by an average inch rule, and Coryndon thought over him as he listened to his voice and watched his strained, tempest-tossed face. Whether he was involved in the disappearance of Absalom or not, he recognized that Heath was a strong man, and that his ill-balanced force would need very little to make him a violent man. It surprised him less to think that Hartley attached suspicion to the Rector of St. Jude's than it had at first, and he left the church with a very clear impression of the clergyman put carefully away beside his appreciation of Leh Shin's assistant. He had caught just a glimpse of the personality of the man, and was busy building it up bit by bit, working out his idea by first trying to fathom the temperament that dwelt in the spare body and drove and wore him hour after hour.

The Rev. Francis Heath had paid some Chinaman to keep silence, but though he might pay a Chinaman, he could do nothing with his own conscience, and it was with a hidden adversary that he wrestled day and night. Coryndon's face was pitiless as the face of a vivisectioning surgeon. Had she known of his mission, Mrs. Wilder might have beaten her beautiful head on the stones under his feet, and she would have gained nothing whatever of concession or mercy.

Atkins and the Barrister were dining with Hartley that night, and as Coryndon never cared to hurry over his dressing, he went at once to his room and called Shiraz.

"All is well, my Master," said Shiraz, in a low voice. "But it would be wise if the Master were to curse his servant in a loud voice, since it is expected that he will do so, and the monkey-folk in the servants' quarter listen without, concealing their pleasure in the Sahib's wrath."

When the proceedings terminated and Coryndon had accepted his servant's long excuse for his delay, the doors were closed, Shiraz having first gone out to shake his fist at Hartley's boy.

"Thus much have I discovered, Lord Sahib," said Shiraz, when he had explained that the house was in readiness and the necessary furniture bought and stored temporarily at the shop of Leh Shin, the Chinaman. "There is an old hate between these two men, he of the devil shop, and the Chinaman, a hate as old as rust that eats into an iron bar."

Coryndon lay back in his chair and listened without remark.

"Among many lies told unto me, that is true; and again, among many lies, it is also true that he had not, neither did he ever possess, the gold lacquer bowl, on the subject of



which my Master bade me question him. He knows not how Mhtoon Pah found it, but he believes that it was through a sorcery he practised, for the man is as full of evil as the chatti lifted from the brink of the well is full of water.”



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Coryndon smiled and glanced at Shiraz.

“And you think so also, grandson of a Tucktoo, for though you are old, your white hairs bring you no wisdom.”

“I am the Sahib’s servant, but who knoweth the ways of devils, since their footprints cannot be seen, neither upon the sand of the desert nor in the snows of the great hills?”

“Did he speak of Absalom?”

“He told me, Protector of the Poor, that the boy, though of Christian caste, was to Mhtoon Pah as the apple of his eye, and that he fed him upon sweets from the vendor’s stall. Let it be said, for thy wisdom to unravel, that therefore Leh Shin felt mirth in his mind, knowing that the heart of his foe was wrung as the *Dhobie* wrings the soiled garment.”

Shiraz fell silent and looked up from the floor at the face of his master, who got up and stretched himself.

“Is my bath ready, Shiraz?”

“All is prepared, though the *pani walla*, a worker of iniquity, steals the wood for his own burning; therefore, the water is not hot, and ill is done to the good name of Hartley Sahib’s house.”

When he was dressed he strolled into the drawing-room, and sat down at the piano, playing softly until Hartley came in.

“Shall you be away long, do you suppose?” he asked, looking with interest at Coryndon’s smooth, black head.

“I may be, but it is impossible to tell. If I want you, I will send a message by Shiraz.”

The dinner passed off without incident, and not once did Coryndon open the secret door of his mind, to add to the strange store of facts he had gathered there. He wanted nothing from Atkins, who knew less of the Rev. Francis Heath than he did himself, and he had to sustain his role of ignorance of the country. The two men stayed late, and it seemed to Coryndon that when men talk they do more than talk, they tell many things unconsciously.

Perhaps, if people realized, as Coryndon realized, the value of restrained speech, we should know less of our neighbours’ follies and weaknesses than we do. There was a noticeable absence of interest in what anyone else had to say. Atkins had his own foible, Fitzgibbon his, and Hartley, who knew more of the ways of men, a more interesting, but not less egoistic platform from which he desired to speak. They seemed



to stalk naked and unashamed before the eyes of the one man who never gave a definite opinion, and who never asserted his own theories or urged his own philosophy of life.

Coryndon listened because it amused him faintly, but he was glad when the party broke up and they left. What a planet of words it was, he thought, as he sat in his room and reflected over the day. Words that ought to carry value and weight, but were treated like so many loose pebbles cast into void space; and he wondered as he thought of it; and from wondering at the wordy, noisy world in which he found himself, he went on to wonder at the greater silence that was so much more powerful than words. "The value of mystery," was the phrase that presented itself to his mind.



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During the evening, three men had enjoyed all the pleasure of self-betrayal, and, from the place where he stood, unable ever to express anything of his own nature in easy speech, he wondered at them, with almost childlike astonishment. Fitzgibbon, garrulous and loose of tongue, Atkins, precise and easily heated to wrath, conscious of some hidden fear that his dignity was not sufficiently respected, and Hartley, who had something to say, but who oversaid it, losing grip because of his very insistence. Not one of them understood the value of reserve, and all alike strove to proclaim themselves in speech, not knowing that speech is an unsound vehicle for the unwary, and that personality disowns it as a medium.

Out of the mouth of a man comes his own condemnation: let him prosper who remembers this truth. The value of mystery, the value of silence, and above all things, the supreme value of a tongue that is a servant and not a master; Coryndon considered these values and wondered again at the garrulity of men. Talk, the fluid, ineffectual force that fills the world with noise, that kills illusions and betrays every latent weakness; surely the high gods laughed when they put a tongue in the mouth of man. He pinched his lips together and his eyes lighted with a passing smile of mirth.

“In Burma, there are no clappers to the bells,” he said to himself. “Each man must strike hard before sound answers to his hand, and truly it is well to think of this at times.” And, still amused by the fleeting memory of the evening, he went to bed and slept.

XV

IN WHICH THE FURTHERING OF A STRANGE COMRADESHIP IS CONTINUED, AND A BEGGAR FROM AMRITZAR CRIES IN THE STREETS OF MANGADONE

Trade was slack in the shop of Leh Shin, the Chinaman. He had sat in the odorous gloom and done little else than feel his arms and rub his legs, for the greater part of the day. His new acquaintance, Shiraz, had taken over possession of his goods, scrutinizing them with care before he did so, in case the brass pots had been exchanged in the night for inferior pots of smaller circumference, and in the end he had departed into his own rat-burrow, two doors up the street, where his friend the Burman was already established in a gloomy corner. Leh Shin heard of this through his assistant, who had followed the coolie into the house, and investigated the premises as he stood about, with offers of assistance for his excuse.

“They have naught with them, save only a box that has no lock upon it, and also the boxes bought from thy shop, Leh Shin, but these are empty, for I looked closely, when they talked in the hither room, where they are minded to live. Jewels, didst thou say? Then that fox with the red beard has sold them and the money is stored in some place of security.”



“Ah, ah,” said the Chinaman, his eyes dull and fixed.

“And ‘ah, ah’ to thee,” retorted the assistant, who found the response lacking in interest.

“I would I knew where it was hidden.”



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With a sudden change of manner he squatted near the ear of Leh Shin and talked in a soft whisper.

“Is not the time ripe, O wise old man, is not the hour come when thou mayst go to the house of the white Sahib and demand a piece for closed lips?”

He pursed up his small mouth and pointed at it.

Leh Shin shook his head.

“I am already paid, and I will not demand further, lest he, whom we know of, come no more. Drive not the spent of strength; since the price is sufficient, I may not demand more, lest I sin in so doing.”

The assistant glared at him with angry eyes.

“Fool, and thrice fool,” he muttered under his breath, but Leh Shin did not heed him, and did not even appear to hear what he said. For a long time the old Chinaman seemed wrapped in his thought, and at last he got up, and leaving the shop, went towards the principal Joss House that faced the river.

Coryndon had chosen the empty shop in the Colonnade for two reasons. It was near Leh Shin, and near the strange assistant, who interested him nearly as much as Leh Shin himself, and also it had the additional advantage of being the last house in the block. A narrow alley full of refuse of every description lay between it and the next block, and the rickety house had doors that opened to the front, and to the side, and by way of a dark lane directly from the back, making ingress or egress a matter of wide choice.

The shop front was shuttered, and left to the rats and cockroaches, and up a flight of decrepit and shaky stairs, Shiraz had made what shift he could to provide comfort for his master in the least dilapidated room in the house. The walls were thin, and the plaster of the low ceiling was smoke-grimed and dirty. The “bed of lesser value” was stored away in the garret that lay beyond, and the prayer-mat was placed alongside the toil-worn wooden *charpoy*, that was at least fairly clean and had all four legs intact; and under this bed, the box that held a strange assortment of clothing was put safely away. At the bottom of another box, one of those bought by Coryndon himself from Leh Sin’s assistant, Shiraz had laid a suit of tussore silk, a few shirts and collars, and anything that his master might require if he wished to revisit those “glimpses of the moon” in the Cantonments; for Shiraz neglected nothing, and had a genius for detail.

A hurricane lamp, that threw impartial light upon all sides, stood on a round table, and lighted the small room, and at one corner Coryndon sat, clad in his Burmese *loongyi* and white coat, thinking, his chin on his folded hands. He had taught himself to think



without paper or pens, and to record his impressions with the same diligent care as though he wrote them upon paper. He could command his thoughts, and direct them towards one end and one issue, and he believed that notes were an abomination, and that, in his Service, memory was the only safe recorder of progress.



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He was fully aware that he was hunting what might well be a cold line, and he thought persistently of Leh Shin, putting the other possible issues upon one side. Hartley had allowed himself to be dominated by a predisposition to account for everything through Heath, and Coryndon warned himself against falling into the same snare with Leh Shin. He thought of the Chinaman's shop, and he knew that it was built on the same plan as his own dwelling. There was no basement, and hardly any room beyond the open ground-floor apartment and the two upper rooms. Nowhere, in fact, to conceal anything; and its thin walls could not contain a single cry for help or prayer for mercy. It was possible to have drugged the boy and smothered him as he lay unconscious, but unless the murderers had chosen this method, Absalom could not have met his end in the Chinaman's shop. There remained the house by the river to investigate, and there remained hours and days, and possibly weeks, of close watching, that might reveal some tiny clue, and for that Coryndon was determined to wait and watch until it lay in the hollow of his palm.

Acting the part of a man more or less astray in his wits, he wandered out either late or early, with the vague, aimless step of a dreamer, and stood about, staring vacantly. Leh Shin's shop attracted him, and he would squat on the ground either just outside the narrow entrance, or just within, and, with flaccid, drooping mouth, stare at the hanging array of secondhand clothes, making himself a source of endless entertainment for the boy, who found him easy to annoy and distress, and consequently practised upon him with unwearying pleasure.

"Wise one, where are the jewels stolen by thy Master?" he asked, throwing the dregs of his drink over the Burman's bare feet.

"Jewels, jewels? Nay, friend, jewels are for the rich; for the Raj and the Prince; I have never seen one to hold in my hand and to consider closely. As for the Punjabi, he is no master of mine. I did him a service—nay, I have forgotten what the service was, as I forget all things, save only the guilt of the evil man, once my friend."

"Tell me once more thy story."

The Burman cowered down and whimpered.

"Since I put it into speech for thy ears, my trouble of mind has grown, like moonlight in the mist. I may not speak it again. They, yonder, would hear," he pointed at the clothes, that napped a little in the hot, heavy wind that came in strong with the scents and smells of the Bazaar.

"Oh, oh," said the boy, with a crackling laugh. "I will tell them not to speak or stir. I have power over them, and they shall repeat nothing. Tell me the story, fool, or I will drive thee from thy corner, and the children shall throw mud upon thee in the streets."



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Again and again the drama was repeated, and as Coryndon became part of the day's amusement to Leh Shin's assistant, he grew to know exactly what both the boy and his master did during the hours of the day. Unknown and unsuspected, the Burman went in and out as they went in and out. He appeared at the house by the river, he sat with his legs dangling over the drop from the Colonnade into the streets, and he wore out the hours in idleness, the dust of the Bazaar powdering his hair and griming his face, but behind his vacant eyes, his quick brain was alive and burning, and he felt after Leh Shin with invisible hands.

Coryndon was never at the mercy of one idea only, and he began to see, very soon after he had investigated the two houses—the ramshackle shop and the riverside den—that if he intended to progress he could not afford to sit in the street and drink in the cafe opposite Leh Shin's dwelling for an interminable space of weeks. He had limitless patience, but he was quick of action, and saw any flaw in his own system as soon as a flaw appeared. Leh Shin was suspicious, and took precautions when he went out at night, and this in itself made it dangerous to be continually upon his heels in a character he knew and could recognize. So long as there was anything to gain by remaining in his Burmese clothing, Coryndon used it, avoiding the Chinaman and cultivating the society of his assistant, but he soon began to realize that if he were to follow as closely as he desired, he could not do so in his present disguise.

All day he sat watching the crowded street, shivering, though the sun was warm, and breaking his silence with complaints that the fever was upon him, and that he was sick, and that he could not eat. He whimpered and whined so persistently that the assistant drove him off, for he feared infection, and fancied he might be sickening for the plague.

“Neither come thou hither, until thou art fully recovered,” he added, “lest I use my force upon thee.”

If a certain beggar who had sat for a whole month outside the Golden Temple at Amritzar was to become reincarnated in the person of the idiot Burman, the Burman must have a reason to offer to the inquisitive for his temporary absence. Sickness is sudden and active in the streets of any Bazaar, and when Shiraz learnt that he was to keep within the house and report the various stages of the fever of his friend, he salaamed and drew out the battered box from under the bed, and folded away the *loongyi* and coat with care.

Coryndon explained his plan of coming and going when the streets were silent, and when he could do so without being noticed. If he came in the daytime and asked for alms, Shiraz was to open and call him in to receive food, but he would only do this in great emergency, as the beggar did not wish to establish any connection with the Punjabi. If, on the other hand, it was a matter of necessity for the Burman to reappear, Shiraz was to walk along the street and bestow alms in the beggar's bowl; and on the first opportunity Coryndon would return and make the necessary change. The first

difficulty was to get out of the house, and to be in the street by twilight, when the close operation of watching would have to begin.



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“The doors of the merciful are ever open to the poor; yet there is great danger in going out by the way of the Bazaar.”

“There is a closed door at the back that I have well prepared,” said Coryndon, pulling a bit of sacking over his bent shoulders. “Remember that an oiled hinge opens like the mouth of a wise man.”

The addition of one to the brotherhood of vagrancy that is part of every Eastern Bazaar calls the attention of no one, and being a newcomer, Coryndon contented himself with accepting a pitch in a district where alms were difficult to obtain and small in value, but his humility did not keep him there long, and he made a place for himself at the top of Paradise Street, in the shadow of an arched doorway, where a house with carved shutters and horseshoe windows was slowly mouldering through the first stages of decay. From here he could see down the Colonnade, and also watch the shop of Mhtoon Pah, as he alternately cursed or blessed the passers, according to their gifts or their apathy.

The heavy, slouching figure of the assistant went by to take up his master's place in the waterside house, and the beggar wasted no time in glancing after him. He knew his destination, and had no need to trouble about the ungainly, walloping creature, who kicked him as he passed. It was fresh, out in the street, and pleasant, and in spite of his musty rags and his hidden face, Coryndon enjoyed the change of occupation.

He saw the place much as it had been on the evening of July the 29th. Mhtoon Pah came out and sat on his chair, smoking a cheroot, and observing the street. In a good humour it would appear, for when the beggar cringed past and sent up his plea for assistance, the curio dealer felt in his pouched waist-sash and threw him a coin.

“Be it requited to thee in thy next life, O Shrine-builder,” murmured the beggar, and he squatted down on the ground a little further on.

He saw Shiraz come out and stand at the door, preparatory to setting forth to the Mosque. Saw him lock it carefully and proceed slowly and with great dignity through the crowd. He passed close to the beggar, but took no notice of him, lifting his garments lest they should touch him, and for this the beggar cursed him, to the entertainment of those who listened.

Blue shadows like wraiths of smoke enfolded the street at the far end, and the clatter and noise grew stronger as the houses filled after the day of toil. In one of the prosperous dwellings a gramophone was set near the window, and the song floated out over the street, the music-hall chorus from the merchant's house mingled in with the cry of vendors hawking late wares at cheap prices.



A hundred years ago, except for the gramophone and an occasional *gharry*, the street might have been the same. The same amber light that held only a short while after sunset, the same blue misty shadows, the same concourse of colour and caste, the same talk of food, and the same idle, loitering and inquisitive crowd.



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Coryndon watched it with eyes of love. Half of his nature belonged to this place and was part of it. He understood their idleness, their small pleasures, their kindness and their cruelty; and though the dominance of the white race was strongest in him, he loved these half-brothers of his because he understood them.

Two young *Hypongyi* came past where he sat, and as they had nothing else to give, gave him their blessing and a look of pity.

“He did ill in his former life,” said the elder of the two. “The balance is adjusted thus, and only thus.”

“Great is the justice of the Law,” replied the other, rubbing his shaven crown reflectively, and then some noise of music or laughter attracted them and they ran up the street to see what it might be, for they were young, and there was no reason why they should not enjoy simple pleasures.

Coryndon knew that Leh Shin would certainly go to the Joss House that night, and he knew that upon these occasions the Chinaman prayed long, and that it would be dark before he entered the place of worship. For another hour his time was free to watch the street, and without attaching any particular consequence to the fact, he saw Mhtoon Pah get up, rub his hands on his knees and lift his chair inside the door, which he closed with a noise of dragging chains and creaking bolts.

Slowly the last gleam withdrew, and the dust lost its effect of amber, and the trees grew dark, and little whispering winds clapped the palm leaves one on another with a dry, barking sound. Children still screamed and played, and dogs yelped and offered to show fight, and still people on foot came and went, and the dusk drew down a veil and the greater noise subsided into a lower key.

The beggar was no longer there, his place was empty and he had gone.

XVI

IN WHICH LEH SHIN IS BREATHED UPON BY A JOSS, AND EXPERIENCES THE TERROR OF A MAN WHO TOUCHES THE VEIL BEHIND WHICH THE IMMORTALS DWELL.

Of all the savage desires that riot in the hearts of men, the lust of revenge is probably the strongest. Civilization has done its best to control and curb wild impulse; but as long as a cruel wrong rankles, or a fierce longing to square an old account remains, there will be hands thrust out to take the naked sword of the Lord into their own finite grasp, and there will be men who will be content to pay the price so that they may see the desire of their eyes.

The Oriental has above the white races an illimitable patience in awaiting his hour for retribution, for the heart of the East does not forget and can hold a purpose silently through the dust-blown, sunlit years, waiting for the dawn of the appointed day.

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When Leh Shin set out towards the Joss House, he was repeating a procedure that had become constant with him of late. He knew that a Joss was revengeful and terrible in matters of hate, therefore his prayer would be understood in the strange region of power where the Great Ones dwelt. His religion was a mixture of the teachings of Buddha, Confucius, and Shinto, for long absence from his own country and constant association with the Burmese and Japanese had blended and confused the original belief that he had learnt in far-away Canton. To this basis was added the grossest form of superstition, and the wildest fancies of a brain muddled with the fumes of opium, but the one thing clear to him was, that a Joss, though an immortal being, was able to comprehend hatred.

The gods punished terribly, slaying with plague and pestilence, destroying life by flood and years of famine, and so Leh Shin knew that they were very like men, taking full advantage of their fearful power and punishing the smallest neglect with the utmost rigour. He could appeal to a great invisible cruel brain and demand assistance for his own limited desire for revenge, knowing that it was an attribute of those whose help he sought, but he went in fear, with pricking nerves, because his belief was strong in the power of the monsters he worshipped.

The Joss House stood in a wide street near the river; a stone courtyard separated it from the thoroughfare, and the building itself was raised on a terrace, led up to by two shallow flights of steps. The roof was a marvel of sea-green mosaic, coiled over by dragons with flaming red tongues and staring glass eyes, each dragon a wonder of fretted fins and ivory teeth and claws. Upon each of the three roofs was set relief mosaic, of beautiful workmanship, representing houses and ships and bridges, with tiny men and women, and little trees, all as small as a child's plaything, but complete, proportioned and entire. Huge stone pillars covered with devils and crawling lizards supported the long portico that ran the full length of the building, and between each pillar an immense paper lantern gleamed like a dim moon.

Leh Shin stood outside for a few moments and then plunged in, like a man who is not sure of his nerve and cannot afford to wait too long lest his determination to face what lay inside should fail him. On feast days the Joss House was a gay place, full of lights and people crowding in and out, and there was no room for fear, for even a Joss is not alarming in company with many men, but when Leh Shin went in, the place was deserted, and it seemed to him that the unseen power was terribly near in the darkness.



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It was a vast, lofty building inside, supported by gold pillars and black pillars, and in the centre near the door was a tank-shaped well where pots of flowering plants and palms were set with no particular eye to regularity or effect. As they shivered and rustled in the dark, they were full of a suggestion of the fear that made Leh Shin's heart as cold as a stone in a deep pool. Raised on a jade plinth, a low round pillar stood directly in front of the rose-red curtains that were drawn across the sanctuary space, and on the top of the pillar a bronze jar held one scented stick, that burned slowly, like a winking, drowsy eye, its slow spiral of incense creeping up into the air and losing itself in the high arches of the pointed roof. Between the pillar and the sanctuary itself, was a small table covered with an embroidered shawl, worked in spangles that glittered and shone, and beneath the table were a number of smooth stones.

Leh Shin locked his hands together and passed up the aisle, close to where the palm trees rustled and stirred, and fear was upon him like that of a hungry dog. He crossed a line of light cast by some candles, and it seemed to him that the curtains moved as he approached. The Joss House was apparently empty, and yet it did not seem empty. Invisible eyes watched behind the carved screens that shut out the priests' houses on either side, invisible ears might easily catch the lowest whisper of his prayer. Soundless impressions of moving things that had no shape haunted his consciousness, and he started in panic as his own shadow fell before him when he stepped across the burning candles and slid into the close alley between the table and the shrine.

He bent down suddenly and, feeling on the cold marble of the floor, took up two of the stones and beat them together with the loud clapping noise which proclaimed a suppliant. Bowed in the close space, he repeated his prayer the requisite number of times, and it seemed to Leh Shin that the Joss heard and accepted: the Joss who took visible shape in his mind, with a face half-human and half-bestial, and who capered with a drawn sword in his hand.

Over his head the heavy curtains swayed again, and the tittering noise from a nest of bats sounded like ghostly laughter. His prayer had drawn power to his aid, out of the unknown place where the gods live, and loosed it in response to his cry. He was only Leh Shin, a poor Chinaman who kept a miserable shop in the native quarter and an opium den down where the river water choked and gurgled at night, but he felt that he had touched something in the terrible shadows, and once more he beat the stones together, his face pouring with sweat. As the noise echoed up again, the last candle fell dying into a yellow pool of melted wax, and went out with an expiring flicker; and Leh Shin beat his hands against the darkness that shut upon him like a wall. He sprang to his feet and ran, and as he went wings seemed to bear down behind him. There was terror alive in the Joss House, and before that terror he fled panting and trembling, fearful that hands would close upon his black garments and drag him back, holding him until he went mad. As he made for the door he fancied he saw a shadowy form move in the gloom and clear his path, and it added the last touch of panic to his mind.



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He leaned against an outer pillar for support, and gradually the noise of the street drew him back again to reality and to the solid facts of life once more. He had been badly scared, for in some cases when nothing that can be expressed in words takes place, an infinitely greater thing, that no words can express, has occurred mentally. To Leh Shin's bewildered mind it was clear that he had actually felt a Joss breathe upon him, and that he had heard its footsteps follow him across the marble floor; the Joss who had shaken the curtains and extinguished the candles.

Still bewildered, Leh Shin crossed the courtyard and sat down on the kerb; his head swam and he felt along his legs with shaking hands. A belated fruit seller went by, and he bought a handful of dates, stuck on a small rod and looking like immense beetles, and as he ate his confidence in life gradually returned. The Joss was at a safe distance in his house and there was the street to give courage to his heart; the street where men walked safe and secure, and where a worse fear than the fear of death did not prowl secretly.

After a little while, he got up from the stifling dust and walked slowly on. The streets flared with lights and the gold letters painted large on signboards in huge Chinese characters shone out, making a brave show. There were open restaurants where he could have gone in, and there were houses of entertainment, hung with paper lanterns, that invited passers with a sound of music, but Leh Shin continued his mechanical walk, having another purpose in his mind.

He turned out of the lighted glare of the shops and struck along a back alley, where one street lamp gave the sole illumination, and stopping at a low, arched door cut deep in a wall, he knocked and was admitted. Inside the entrance was another door heavily clamped with iron, which gave admission down a long, narrow passage to a room beyond. It was a small room, not unlike a prison, with heavy iron bars against the corridors, and it was quite bare of furniture except for two deal tables, around which a crowd of men stood playing for money with impassive faces and greedy, grasping hands. There was no mixture of race among the men who gambled; they were all Chinese, most of them clad in indigo-blue trousers and tight vests, though some of them wore white shirts and rakish straw hats. The young men had close-clipped hair and looked like clever bull-terriers, but the older men wore long pigtails wound round their heads in black, rope-like coils. The noise of dominoes thrown out by the man who held the bank and the rattle of dice were almost the only sounds in the room.

Under one table there was a small shrine, where a diminutive Joss presided over the fortunes of Chance, but Leh Shin did not go to it as was his usual habit before he began to play. He even eyed it uneasily and kept at the further end of the room.



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He played with varying success for an hour, for two hours, and the third hour was running out before he shuffled off down the close passage, his scanty winnings tied in the corner of a rag stuffed into his belt, and was let out through the heavily barred doors into the street. The alley-way was deserted, and Leh Shin went down the kennel into the open place with the walk of a man who has something definite to do. A beggar, who had been sitting huddled under the wall of a house opposite, craned his neck out of the shadows, and followed him quickly.

Leh Shin had passed this last hour deliberately, so as to bring himself to some appointed place neither earlier nor later than he desired to get there, and Coryndon woke to the excitement of the chase again as he followed along the Colonnade. It was easy to walk quickly under the roof that ran from the entrance down to the turn that led into Paradise Street, and Leh Shin did not even pause as he passed his own doorway but made on rapidly until he came out at the far end. The hour was very late, and the street silent. A drop in the temperature had driven the sleepers who usually preferred the open to the closeness of walls, within, and the whole double row of houses slept with gaping windows and open doors.

Mhtoon Pah's curio shop was entirely closed. Every window had outer shutters fastened, and no gleam of light showed anywhere, up or down the high narrow front. When Leh Shin stopped in front of the doorway the beggar sat down opposite to him a little further down the street, his head bowed on his bosom. He watched Leh Shin prowl carefully round and climb with monkey-like agility from the rails to the window-ledge, where he peered in through the shutters, raising a broken lath to see into the interior.

Coryndon watched him with intent interest. The night was moonless, he knew that if a match were struck in the interior of the shop it would shine through the raised lath, and it was for that sight that his eyes strained and ached with intense concentration. The patience of the Chinaman made Coryndon feel that he was watching for something definite to happen, and at length a yellow bar cut suddenly across the dark. Coryndon's heart beat so loud that he feared its sound might be heard across the narrow street, and he gripped his hands together. The curio shop was no longer dark, for someone had come in with a lamp; Coryndon crept forward, his eyes on the Chinaman, who had slipped back on to the ground and had raced up the steps, beating against the door violently.

"Come out, father of lies, come out and speak with me. I have news of thy Absalom."

The beggar was at the foot of the steps now, close beside the dancing image, who smiled and called his attention to the rigid figure of Leh Shin.

"So thou hast news for me, unclean one? Of this shall the police hear full knowledge two hours after dawn. Where hast thou hidden the body of the boy who was the light of mine eyes, who was ever eager and honest in business?"



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"Thou knowest, traitor," said the Chinaman, his voice hoarse with passion, "what is dark unto others is clear unto me. Have I not the tale of thy years written in the book of my mind?"

For a moment there was dead silence, and then a voice full of smooth malice and cruelty made answer to Leh Shin.

"Get thee to thy bed, fool."

"I wait," Leh Shin's voice cracked and trembled, "and when the hour that is already written for thy destruction comes like the night-bat, it is I who shall proclaim it to thee; thus I have demanded, and thus it shall fall out."

"O fruitful boaster, O friend of many years, thy words cause me great mirth. Get thee to thy kennel, lest I do indeed come forth and twist thy vulture's neck."

A laugh of scorn was the only response to Mhtoon Pah's threat, and the Chinaman turned and came down the steps.

"Alms, alms," whined a sleepy voice. "The poor are the children of the Holy One. I am blind and I know not the faces of men. Alms, alms, that thy merit may be written in the book."

"Ask of him that is in that house," said Leh Shin, pointing to the curio shop. "Strike him with thy pestilence that his fatness fall from him and his bones melt, and I will give thee golden rewards."

The secret passion of the words was so intense that the beggar was silenced, and Leh Shin passed on. He went from Paradise Street to a small burrow near the Colonnade, and turned into a mean house where the paper lantern still burned in token that the owners were awake. It was quite clean inside, and divided into large cubicles. In each cubicle was a table, covered with oilcloth, at the head of which was placed a red lacquer pillow and a little glass lamp that gave the only light needed in the long, low room. On the tables lay Burmen and Chinamen, some rigid in drugged sleep, and some smoking immense pipes with small, cup-like receptacles that held the opium. The proprietor was alert and wakeful as he flitted about, an American cigarette between his lips, in this strange garden of sleep.

"I am weary," said Leh Shin. "Let me rest here."

"It is great honour," replied the small, wizened old man, with the laugh. "What of thine own house by the river?"

"My limbs fail me. To-night my assistant supplies the needs of those who ask, for I had a business."



“And I trust thy business hath prospered with thee?”

Leh Shin stretched himself out on a table near the door.

“I await the hour of prosperity,”—he twisted a needle in the brown mass that was offered to him and held it over the lamp. “Evil are the days of a life whilst an old grudge burns like hot charcoal in the heart.”

“It is even so,” agreed the proprietor, and he hurried away from the noose of talk that Leh Shin would have cast around him.

The beggar, having followed Leh Shin as far as the opium den, returned along the Colonnade and knocked at the door of the house where Shiraz waited anxiously for his master.



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“Is my bath prepared, Shiraz? I must wash before I sleep, and I shall sleep late.”

Coryndon was weary. No one who has not watched through hours of strain and suspense knows the utter weariness of mind and body that follows upon the long effort of close attention, and he fell upon his bed in a huddled heap and slept for hour after hour, worn out in brain and body.

XVII

TELLS HOW CORYNDON LEARNS FROM THE REV. FRANCIS HEATH WHAT THE REV. FRANCIS HEATH NEVER TOLD HIM.

When Coryndon sat up in his bed, and recalled himself with a jerk from the drowsiness of night to the wakefulness of broad daylight, he called Shiraz to give to him instructions.

After dark, his master told him, he was going to return to the Cantonments, and during his absence there were some matters which he had decided to leave unreservedly in the hands of Shiraz. He was to cultivate his acquaintance with Leh Shin, the Chinaman, worming his way into his confidence and encouraging him to speak fully of the old hatred that was still like live fire between him and the wealthy curio dealer. Revenge may or may not take the shape and substance of the original wrong done, and the limited intelligence of the Chinaman would suggest payment in the same coin, so it was necessary for Coryndon to know the actual facts of the ancient grudge. Further than this, Shiraz was to go to the shop of Mhtoon Pah, and discover anything he could in the course of conversation with the Burman.

“Mark well all that is said, that when I return it may be disclosed to mine eyes through thy spectacles,” he concluded, tying the ragged ends of his head-scarf over his forehead.

He went down the staircase with a slow, dragging step, leaning on the rail of the Colonnade when he got out into the street, and halting, with a vacant stare, outside the shop of Leh Shin.

“So thy devils have not yet caught thee and scalded thee with oil, or burned thee in quicklime?” jeered the boy, as he watched a coolie sweep out the shop.

He was chewing a raw onion, and he swung his legs idly, for there was nothing to do, and, on the whole, he was glad to have the mad Burman to bait for half an hour’s entertainment.

“The sickness is heavy upon me, my legs are loaded as with wet sand, and my mouth is parched like a rock in the desert,” whined the Burman plaintively.



“Nay, nay, not *thy* legs, and *thy* tongue. The legs and the mouth of the evil man, thy friend, O dolt.”

The Burman shook his head stupidly.

“The will of the Holy Ones is that I shall recover, and my friend has said that I shall go a journey. I go by the terrain this night at sunset.”

“Whither doth he send thee, unclean one?”

The Burman smiled with a sudden look of cunning.

“That is a word unspoken, and neither will I tell it. Thy desire to know what concerns thee not is as great as thy fatness.”



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With a doggedness that is often part of some forms of mania, the Burman squatted in the dust, and under no provocation could he be induced to speak. After midday he indicated by lifting his fingers to his mouth that he intended to go in search of food; having worked Leh Shin's assistant into a state of perspiring wrath by the simple process of reiterating in pantomime that he was dumb. It must be admitted that Coryndon got no small amount of pleasure out of his morning's entertainment, and he doubled himself up as though in pain as he dragged himself back to the house.

The vanished beggar's tracks were entirely obliterated, and when the Burman went off in a *gharry* in company with Shiraz, the whole street knew that he was being sent away on a secret mission of great importance.

To know something that other people do not know is to be in some way their superior. It is a popular fallacy to believe that we all of us are gifted with special insight. The dullest bore believes it of himself, but when it comes to the possession of an absolute fact superiority becomes unmistakable, particularly in circumscribed localities, and Leh Shin's assistant remembered how the sudden dumbness of the crazy Burman had irked his own soul. He told a little of what he professed to know, and having done so, refused to admit more, and so it was current in the Bazaar that the friend of the rich Punjabi was gone to receive money paid for jewels, and that the place of his destination was known only to Leh Shin's assistant, who, having sworn on oath, would by no means divulge the name of the place.

Even Leh Shin, who awoke late, appeared interested, and asked questions that made the gross, flabby boy think hard before he replied; and the mystery that attached itself to the departure of the Burman lent an added interest to Shiraz, who returned after the usual hour of prayer at the Mosque, and paced slowly up the street, meditating upon a verse from the Koran. The evening light softened and the shadows grew long, making the Colonnade dark a full hour before the street outside was wrapped in the smoky gloom of twilight and the charcoal fires were lighted to cook the evening meal, and by the time that the first clear globes of electric light dotted Paradise Street Coryndon was back in his room and dressed ready to go out to dinner.

Hartley received the wanderer with enthusiasm, and began at once by telling him that he had an invitation for him which was growing stale by long keeping. Mrs. Wilder was giving a very small party and both the Head of the Police and his friend were invited.

"I accepted definitely for myself, and conditionally for you," said Hartley cheerfully. "Now I will ring up Wilder and tell him that the prodigal has reappeared, and that you will come."

Coryndon submitted to the inevitable with a good grace; it was one of his best social qualifications, and arose from a keen sensitiveness that made it nearly impossible for him ever to disappoint anyone. He had hoped for a quiet evening, when he might

expect to get to bed early and have time to think over every tiny detail of his time in the Mangadone Bazaar; but as this was not possible, he agreed with sufficient alacrity to deceive his kind host.

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His face was drawn and tired, and his eyes were heavy; he noticed this as he glanced into his glass, but after all it did not matter. His social importance was small, and for to-night he was nothing more than an adjunct of Hartley, a mere postscript put in out of formal politeness. He was not going in order to please Mrs. Wilder—though, as she appeared on his mental list of names, she had her place in the structure that filled his mind—but to please Hartley. Any time would have done for Mrs. Wilder, she was but a cypher in the total, but if he had begged off to-night he would have had to hurt Hartley. Coryndon could never get away from the other man's point of view; it dogged him in great things and in small, and he was obliged to realize Hartley's pleasure in seeing him, and his further pleasure in carrying him off to a house where he himself enjoyed life thoroughly. Coryndon could as easily have disappointed a child, or been cruel to a small, wagging puppy as to Hartley in his present mood.

He knew that he would have to shut the door upon his dominating thought, unless something occurred to open it during the evening. Women liked to play with fire, and he wondered if Mrs. Wilder would show any inclination to fiddle with gunpowder, but he hardly expected that she would, though she had played some part in the extensive drama that reached from Heath's bungalow to the Colonnade in the Chinese quarter, leaving a gap between that his brain struggled with in vain.

It was like the imaginable space between life and death, where both conditions existed, and one was the key to the other. Something was lacking. One small master touch wanting to lay the whole thing bare of mystery. Coryndon's weary eyes reflected the state of his mind. He felt like an inventor who is baffled for the lack of a tiny clue that makes the impossible natural and easy, or a composer who hears a refrain and cannot call it into birth in clear defiant chords. To think too much when thought cannot carry the mind over the limiting barrier is to spend substance on fruitless effort, and Coryndon deliberately shut the door of his mind and put the key away before he started out with Hartley.

The night was clear as the two men went off together hatless through the soft moonlight. Neither Coryndon nor Hartley talked much as they walked by a short cut across the park to the Wilders' bungalow, a servant carrying a lantern going before them like a dim will-o'-the-wisp; the yellow lamplight paling into an ineffectual blur against the clear moonlight.

"I think it is only ourselves," said Hartley after a long pause. "You are looking a bit done, Coryndon, so you'll be glad if it isn't a late night."

Coryndon agreed, and conversation flagged again. They crossed the road, turned up the avenue and were lost in the shadows of the trees, coming out again into a white bay of light outside the door.



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Everyone, man or woman, who is endowed at birth with a sensitive nature is subject to occasional inrushes of detachment that without warning cut him off from realities for moments or hours, converting everyday matters into the consistency of dream-life. It was through this medium that Coryndon saw Mrs. Wilder when he came into the large upstairs drawing-room. It would have annoyed her to know that she appeared indefinite and shadowy to his mind, just as it annoyed Alice when she was told that she was only "Something in the Red King's dream," but Coryndon could not help his sensations. Mrs. Wilder was smiling with her careless, easy, confident smile, and yet he saw only an unaccounted bit of the puzzle, that he could not fit in. She was dressed in the latest fashion, and talked with a kind of regal amiability, but nevertheless, she was not a real woman, a real hostess, or a positive entity; she was vague, and the touch of her floating personality added to the baffled sensation that drained Coryndon's mind of concentrated force, and made him physically exhausted.

Wilder had something to say to Hartley, and Coryndon handed himself over like a coat or an umbrella to Mrs. Wilder, who, he knew, was placing a low valuation upon him, and was already a little impatient at his lack of vitality. She was calling him a bore, behind her fine, hard eyes, and having exhausted Mangadone in a few sentences, wondered what sort of bore he really was. There were golf bores, fishing bores, and shooting bores, but Coryndon hardly appeared to belong to any of those families, and she began to suspect him of "superiority," a type of bore aggressive to others of his cult. Mrs. Wilder did not tolerate a type to which she herself undoubtedly owned to some slight connection, and she gave up all effort to awaken interest in the slim, weary young man, who looked half-asleep.

"Mr. Heath ought to be here directly," she said, in her loud, clear voice. "Draycott, don't forget to ask him to say grace."

If she had got up and taken Coryndon by the shoulders and shaken him, the effect could not have been more marked and sudden. All the dull feeling of detachment cleared off at once, and he knew that his senses were sharp and acute; his bodily fatigue fell away, and as he moved in his chair his eyes turned towards the door.

"I wish he would hurry," growled Wilder, a prey to the pessimism of the half-hour before dinner. "He is inexcusably late as it is."

As though his words had summoned the Rev. Francis Heath, footsteps mounting the staircase followed Wilder's remark, and the clergyman came into the room. Immediately upon his coming, conversation became general, and a few moments later the party was seated round a small table kept for intimate gatherings, and placed in the centre of the large teak-panelled room. An arrangement of plumbago and maidenhair, and pale blue shaded candles casting a dim light, carried out the saxe blue effect that Mrs. Wilder had evolved with the assistance of a ladies' paper that dealt with "effective and original table decoration."



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In spite of Mrs. Wilder's efforts, assisted as they were by Hartley, conversation flagged for the first two courses. Heath was not exactly awkward, but he was conscious of the fact that he and Hartley had had an unpleasant interview, buried by the passing of a few weeks, but by no means peaceful in its grave. There was just a suggestion of strain in his manner, and he was evidently carrying through a duty in being there at all, rather than out for pleasant society.

Coryndon observed him carefully, particularly when he talked to his hostess. If she was helping to screen him, the clergyman was too honest not to show some sign of gratitude either in his manner or in his deep-set eyes, and yet no such indication was evident. Coryndon disassociated his mind from the history of the case, and saw austerity flavoured with a near approach to disapproval. Judging by externals, the Rev. Francis Heath held no very exalted opinion of his hostess.

"She has done nothing for him," he said to himself. "If obligation exists, it is the other way round," and he proceeded to watch Mrs. Wilder's manner towards her clerical guest with heightening interest.

Usually she was very sure of herself, more especially so in her own house, and surrounded with the evidences of her husband's official rank. When Mrs. Wilder talked to the poor, insignificant Padre who could be of no real social assistance to her, she changed her manner, the manner that she directed pointedly towards Coryndon, and became quelled and softened.

Mrs. Wilder, propitiatory and diffident, was, Coryndon felt, Mrs. Wilder caught out somehow and somewhere; perhaps on the night of the 29th of July, and as he considered it, Coryndon knew that the shoe was on a much smaller foot than Hartley had measured for it, and that the secret understanding between Heath and Mrs. Wilder was one-sided in its benefits.

Hartley had recounted the story of the fainting fit as a landmark by which he remembered where he was himself, and, adding this fact to what he observed, Coryndon put Mrs. Wilder on one side and mentally drew a red-ink line under her total. He knew all he needed to know about her, and she had no further interest for his mind. He talked to her husband when once he had satisfied himself definitely, and as dinner wore on the atmosphere became more genial and less strained than when it had begun.

"By the way," said Wilder carelessly, "was it ever discovered how that fellow Rydal got clear of the country?"

He spoke to Hartley, but Heath, who had been talking across the table to Coryndon, lost his place, stumbled and recovered himself with difficulty, and then lapsed into silence. Hartley had a few things to say about Rydal, but chief among them was the astounding

fact that he had dodged the police, who were watching the wharves and jetties, and, so far as he knew, the man had never left Mangadone.

“Do you suppose that he got away disguised?”



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"Impossible," said Hartley, with decision. "He was a big, fair Englishman with blue eyes. Nothing on earth could have made him look anything else. It was too risky to attempt that game."

Mrs. Wilder was not interested in Rydal, and she sprayed Coryndon with light, pointless conversation, leaving Heath to his meditations for the moment. Hartley would have enjoyed a private talk with his hostess because he loved her platonically, and because it was impossible he was distraught and jerky, trying to appear cordial towards Heath. It was one of those evenings that make everyone concerned wonder why they ever began it, and though Coryndon was of all the invited guests the one who found least favour in the eyes of his hostess, he was the only one who felt glad that he had come, and was perfectly convinced that it had been worth it.

The Rev. Francis Heath rose early to take his leave; and there was a distinct impression of relief when he had gone.

"That Padre is like wet blotting-paper," said Wilder, when he came back into the drawing-room. "No more duty invitations, Clarice, or else wait until I am out in camp."

"He is a bore," said Mrs. Wilder, throwing her late guest to the sharks without remorse. "But I suppose he can't help it. He may have something to worry him." She just indicated her point with a glance at Hartley, who murmured incoherently and became interested in his drink.

"Parsons are all alike," said Wilder, who fully believed that he stated an obvious fact. "I feel as if I ought to apologize for not going to church whenever I meet one."

"He *is* a bore," repeated Mrs. Wilder. "But he is finished with for the present."

Coryndon looked up.

"I suppose one is inclined to mix up a man with his profession, as people often mix up nationalities with races, forgetting that they are absolutely apart. Heath is not my idea of a clergyman."

"And what is your idea?" asked Mrs. Wilder, with a smile that was slightly encouraging.

"A man with less temperament," said Coryndon slowly. "Heath lacks a certain commonplace courage, because he feels things too much. He is not altogether honest with himself or his congregation, because he has the protective instinct over-developed. If I had a secret I should feel that it was perfectly safe with Heath."

A slow red stain showed itself on Mrs. Wilder's cheek, and she gave a hard, mechanical laugh.



“Are these the deductions of one evening? No wonder you are a silent man, Mr. Coryndon.”

If Coryndon had been a cross-examining counsel instead of a guest at a dinner-party, he would have thanked Mrs. Wilder politely and told her that she might “step down.” As it was, he assured her that he was only attracted by certain personalities, and that, usually speaking, he did not analyse his impressions.

“He is a bore,” said Mrs. Wilder, making the statement for the third time that evening, and thus disposing of Heath definitely.



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"It wasn't up to the usual mark," said Hartley, half-apologetically as he and Coryndon walked home together. "I felt so awkward about meeting Heath." He paused and looked at Coryndon, longing to put a question to him, but not wishing to break their agreement as to silence.

"Tell me about Rydal," said Coryndon in the voice of a man who shifts a conversation adroitly. "I don't remember your having mentioned the case."

Hartley had not much to tell. The man had been in a position of responsibility in the Mangadone Bank, and Joicey had given information against him the very day he absconded. Rydal was married, and the cruel part of the story lay in the fact that he had deserted his wife on her deathbed, fully aware that she was dying.

"She died the evening he left, or was supposed to have left. At all events, the evening he disappeared."

"And the date?"

Coryndon's eyes were turned on Hartley's face, and he heard him laugh.

"You'll hardly believe it, but it happened, like everything else, on the twenty-ninth of July."

"Can your boy look after me for a few days?" Coryndon asked quietly. "I was not able to bring my bearer with me, and I may have to be here for a little longer than I had expected."

"Of course he can."

They walked into the bungalow together, and it surprised and distressed Hartley to see how white and weary the face of his friend showed under the hanging lamp.

"I ought not to have dragged you out," he said remorsefully.

"I am very glad you did."

There was so much sincerity in Coryndon's tone that Hartley was satisfied, and he saw him into his room before he went off, whistling to his dog and calling out a cheery "Good night."

XVIII

THE REV. FRANCIS HEATH UNLOCKS HIS DOOR AND SHOWS WHAT LIES BEHIND



When Coryndon made up his mind to any particular course of action and time pressed, he left nothing to chance. Under ordinary circumstances, he was perfectly ready to wait and let things happen naturally; and so greatly did he adhere to this belief in chance that he always hesitated to make anything deliberately certain. Had he felt that he could allow time to bring circumstance into his grasp, he would have preferred to do so, but, as he sat on the side of his bed, his *chota haziri* untouched on a table at his elbow, he knew that every minute counted, and that he must come out of the shadow and deliberately face and force the position.

If he could always have worked in the dark he would have done so, and no one ever guessed how unwillingly he disclosed himself. He was a shadow in the great structure of criminal investigation, and he came and went like a shadow. When it was possible he vanished out of his completed case before his agency was detected, and as he sat thinking, he wondered if Hartley could not be trusted with the task that lay before him that day, but even as the thought came into his mind he decided against it. Opportunity must be nailed like false coin to the counter, and there could be no question of leaving a meeting to the last moment of chance. He had to make sure of his man; that was the first step.

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During the course of an idle morning, Coryndon wandered to the church, and saw that at 5.30 p.m. the Rev. Francis Heath was holding service. After the service there would be a choir practice, and Coryndon, having made a mental note of the hour, went back to luncheon with Hartley.

The afternoon sunlight was dreaming in the garden, and the drowsy air was full of the scent of flowers. Coryndon had something to do, and he was wise enough to make no settled plan as to how he would do it, beforehand. He put away all thought of Absalom and the other lives connected with the disappearance of the Christian boy, and let his thoughts drift out, drawing in the light and colour of the world outside.

Yesterday has power over to-day; to-morrow even greater power, for to-morrow holds a gift or a whip, and Coryndon knew this, thinking out his little philosophy of life. To be able to handle a situation which may require a strength that is above tact or diplomacy, he knew that all those yesterdays must give their store of gathered strength and knowledge.

As there was no running water to watch, Coryndon watched the shadows and the light playing hide-and-go-seek through the leaves, through his half-closed eyes. They made a pattern on the ground, and the pattern was faultless in its beauty. Nature alone can do such things. He looked at the far-off trees of the park, green now, to turn into soft blue masses later on when the day waned, and the intrinsic value of blue as colour flitted over his fancy. The music that was part of his nature rippled and sang in obligato to his thoughts, and because he loved music he loved colour and knew the connection between sound and tint. Colour, to its lightest, least value, was music, expressing itself in another way.

Hartley went out with his dog; went softly because he believed his friend slept, and Coryndon did not stir. Somewhere in the centre of things actual, Hartley lived his cheerful, happy life, dreaming when he was lonely of the woman who darned his socks and smiled at him. In Coryndon's life there was no woman either visionary or real, and he wondered why he was exempt from these natural dreams of a man. He was very humble about himself. He knew that he was only a tracker, a brain that carried a body, not a healthy animal body that controlled the greater part of a brain. He was given the power to grip motives and to read hearts, and beyond that he only lived in his fingers when he played. He had his dreams for company when he shut the door on the other half of his active brain, and he had his own thrills of excitement and intense joy when he found what he was seeking, but beyond this there was nothing, and he asked for nothing. Blue shadows, and a drifting into peace, that was the end. He pulled himself together abruptly, for it was five o'clock, and time for him to start.

When Coryndon had drunk some tea, he started out on foot to St. Jude's Church. He knew that he would get there in time to find the Rev. Francis Heath. The choir practice did not take very long, and as he walked into the church they were singing the last

verses of a hymn. Heath sat in one of the choir pews, a sombre figure in his black cassock, listening attentively.



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“Happy birds that sing and fly
Round Thy altars, O Most High.”

The choir sang the “Amen,” and sang it false, because they were in a hurry to troop out of the church; the girls were whispering and collecting gloves and books, and the boys were already clattering off with an air of relief. Heath spoke to the organist, making some suggestion in his grave, quiet voice, and when he turned, Coryndon was standing in the chancel.

“Can I speak to you for a moment?” he asked easily.

“Come into the vestry,” said Heath quietly. “We shall be undisturbed there.”

He went down the chancel steps and opened a door at the side, waiting for Coryndon to go in, and closing the door behind them. A table stood in the middle of the room with a few books and papers on it, and a square window lighted it from the western wall; there were only two chairs in the room, and Heath put one of them near the table for his visitor, and took the other himself.

He did not know what he expected Coryndon to say; men very rarely came to him like this, but he felt that it was possible that he was in search of something true and definite. Truth was in his eyes, and his dark, fine face was earnest as he bent forward and looked full at the clergyman.

“What can I do for you?”

Heath put the question tentatively, conscious of a sudden quick tension in the atmosphere.

Coryndon’s eyes fixed on him, like gripping hands, and he leaned a little over the table.

“You can tell me how and when you got Rydal out of the country.”

For a moment, it seemed to Heath that the whole room rocked, and that blackness descended upon him in waves, blotting out the face of the man who asked the question, destroying his identity, and leaving him only the knowledge that the secret that he had guarded with all the strength of his soul was known, inexplicably, to Hartley’s friend. He tried to frame a reply, but his words faltered through dry lips, and his face was white and set.

“Why should you say that I helped Rydal?”

“Because,” Coryndon’s answer came quickly, “you told me so yourself last night at dinner.”



He heard Coryndon speak again, very slowly, so that every word came clear into the confusion of his throbbing brain.

“I knew from Hartley that you were in Paradise Street on the evening of the twenty-ninth of July, and that you saw and spoke to Absalom. I am concerned in the case of finding that boy or his murderer, and anything you can tell me may be of help to me in putting my facts together. I had to come to your confidence by a direct question. Will you pardon me when you consider my motive? I am not concerned with Rydal: my case is with Absalom.”

He looked sympathetically at the worn, drawn face across the table, that was white and sick with recent fear.

“Tell me the events just as they came,” he said gently. “You may be able to cast light on the matter.”



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Heath looked up, and his eyes expressed his silent acceptance of Coryndon's honesty of purpose.

"I will tell you, Mr. Coryndon. God knows that the case of this boy has haunted me night and day. He was my best pupil, and when Hartley accused me by inference, of complicity, I suffered as I believe few men have had to suffer because I could not speak. I may not be able to assist you very far, but all I know you shall know if you will listen to me patiently."

Heath relapsed into silence for some little time, and when he spoke again it was with the manner of a man who gives all his facts accurately. He omitted no detail and he set the story of Rydal before Coryndon, plainly and clearly.

Rydal had been a clerk in the Mangadone Bank, and had been in the place for some years before he went home and returned with a wife. He was an honest and kindly young fellow and he worked hard. There was no flaw in his record, and Heath believed that he was under the influence of a very genuine religious feeling. He frequently came to see Heath, who knew his character thoroughly, and knew that he was weak in many respects. He talked enthusiastically of the girl he was going to marry, and Heath saw him off on the liner when Rydal got his leave and, full of glad anticipation, went away to bring out his wife.

When the clergyman had reached this point in his story, he got up and paced the floor a couple of times, his monkish face sad and troubled, and his eyes full of the tragic revelations that had yet to be made.

Coryndon did not hurry the narrative. He was engaged in calling up the mental presentment of the young happy man. Heath had described him as "fresh-looking," and had said that his manner was frank and always kindly; he was friendly to weakness, kindly to weakness, his virtues all tagged off into inefficient lack of grip; but he was honest and he found life good. That was how Rydal had started, that was the Rydal who had gripped Heath's hand as he stood on the deck of the *Worcestershire* and thought of the girl whom he was going home to marry.

"I still see him as I saw him then," said Heath, with a catch in his voice. "He was so sure of all the good things of life, and he had managed to save enough to furnish the bungalow by the river. I had gone over it with him the day before he sailed, and his pride in it all was very touching."

Coryndon nodded his head, and Heath took up the story again, standing with his hands on the back of the chair.

"Rydal came back at the end of three months, his wife with him. She was a pretty, silly creature, and her ideas of her social importance were out of all keeping with Rydal's



humble position in the Bank. She dressed herself extravagantly, and began to entertain on a scale that was ridiculous considering their poverty. Before their marriage, Rydal had told me that it was a love match, and that she was as poor as he, as all her own people could do for her was to make a small allowance sufficient for her clothes.”



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Coryndon sat very still. Heath had come to the point where the real interest began: he could see this on the sad face that turned towards the western window.

“In the early hours of one morning towards the end of July,” went on Heath wearily, “I was awakened by Rydal coming into my room. I could see at once that he was in desperate trouble, and he sat down near me and hid his face in his hands and cried like a child. There was enough in his story to account for his tears, God knows. His wife was ill, perhaps dying; he told me that first, but that I already knew, and then he made his confession to me. He had embezzled money from the bank and it could only be a matter of hours before a warrant was issued for his arrest. I must not dwell too long on these details, but they are all part of the story, and without them you could not understand my own place in what follows. It is sufficient to tell you that I returned at once with him, and his wife added her appeal to mine to make her husband agree to leave the country. If she lived, she could join him later, but if he was arrested before she died, she could only feel double torment and remorse. In the end we prevailed upon him to agree to go. The sin was not his morally”—Heath’s voice rose in passionate vindication of his act—“in my eyes, and, I believe, in the eyes of God, the man was not responsible. I grant you his criminal weakness, I grant you his fall from honour and honesty, but then and now I know that I did right. The one chance for his soul’s welfare was the chance of escape. Prison would have broken and destroyed him. A white man among native criminals. His life had been a good life, and an open, honest life up to the time that his wife’s constant demand for what he could not give broke down the barriers and made him a felon.”

He wiped his face with his handkerchief and drew a deep breath. This was how he had argued the point with himself, and he still held to the validity of his argument.

“That was early on the morning of July the twenty-ninth?” asked Coryndon.

“Yes, that was the date. There was a small tramp in port, going to South America. I had once been of some little assistance to the captain, and I knew that he would do much to serve me. I went on board her at once, and saw him, disguising none of the facts or the risk it entailed, and he agreed willingly to assist Rydal. He was to be at a certain point below the wharves that evening, and the *Lady Helen* was to send a boat in to pick him up.”

“I understand,” said Coryndon, “the warrant was issued about noon the same day?”

“As far as I know, Joicey gave information against him just about then, but he had already left the bungalow. I went down Paradise Street to make my way out along the river bank at a little after six o’clock. I passed Absalom in the street and spoke a word to the boy, but time was pressing and I did not dare to be late. It was of the utmost importance that there should be no hitch in any part of the plan, for the *Lady Helen*



could not delay over an hour. I got to the appointed place by the river just after twilight had come on—”

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“Were you seen by anyone?”

Heath paused and thought for a moment.

“I would like to deal entirely candidly with you, Mr. Coryndon, but, with your permission, I must avoid any mention of names. As it happened, I was seen, but I believe that the person who saw me has no connection with either my own place in this story or the story itself so far as it affects Absalom. I saw Rydal go. He went in silence, an utterly broken-hearted and ruined man, and only ten months divided that day from the day that he stood on the deck of the *Worcestershire* filled with every hope the heart of a man knows. Behind him, his wife lying near death in the little house his love had provided for her, and nothing lay before him but utter desolation. I watched the boat take him away into the darkness, and I saw the lights of the *Lady Helen* quite clearly, and then I saw her move slowly off, and I knew that Rydal was safe.”

He paused and stared into the darkness of the room, seeing the whole picture again, and feeling the awful misery of the broken man who had gone by the way of transgressors. The man who had once been light-hearted and happy, who had sung in his choir, and who had read the lessons for the Rev. Francis Heath and helped him with his boys.

Coryndon’s face showed his tense, close interest as the clergyman spoke again.

“I was standing there for some time, how long I do not know, when I saw that I was not alone, and that I was being watched by a Chinaman. I knew the boy by sight, and must have seen him before somewhere else. He was a large, repulsive creature, and appeared to have come from one of the houses near the river, where there are Coringyhis and low-caste natives of India. At the time I remarked nothing, but when the boy saw that he had attracted my attention, he started into a run, and left me without speaking. The incident was so trifling that it hardly made me uneasy. No one had seen me actually with Rydal—”

“You are quite clear on that point? Not even the other person you alluded to?”

“I can be perfectly clear. I passed the other person going in the opposite direction, before I joined Rydal. On the way back I saw Absalom again, and he was with the Chinaman whom I already mentioned; they did not notice me, and they were talking eagerly; my mind was overful of other things, and you will understand that I did not think of them then, but, as far as I remember, they went towards the fishermen’s quarter on the river bank. I cannot be sure of this.”

Coryndon did not stir; the gloom was deep now, and yet neither of the men thought of calling for lights.

“And the Chinaman?”

Heath flung out his arms with a violent gesture.



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“He had seen and recognized Rydal, and he had the craftiness to realize that his knowledge was of value. Next day everyone in Mangadone knew that the hue and cry was out after the absconded clerk. He had betrayed his trust, cheated and defrauded his employers, and left his wife to die alone, for she died that night, and I was with her. That was the story in Mangadone. It was known in the Bazaar, and how or when it came to the ears of the Chinaman I cannot tell you, but out of his knowledge he came to me, and I paid him to keep silence. He has come several times of late, and I will give him no more money. Rydal is safe. I have heard from him, and the law will hardly catch him now. I know my complicity, I know my own danger, but I have never regretted it.” Again the surging flood of passion swept into Heath’s voice. “What is my life or my reputation set against the value of one living soul? Rydal is working honestly, his penitence is no mere matter of protestation, his whole nature has been strengthened by the awful experience he has passed through. How it may appear to others I cannot say, and do not greatly care. In the eyes of God I am vindicated, and stand clear of blame.”

He towered gaunt against the light from the window behind him, and though Coryndon could not see his face, he knew that it was lighted with a great rapture of self-denial and spiritual glory.

“You need fear no further trouble from the boy,” he said, rising to his feet. “I can tell you that definitely. I am neither a judge nor a bishop, Mr. Heath, but I can tell you honestly from my heart that I think you were justified.”

He went out into the darkness that had come black over the evening during the hour he had sat with Heath, and as he walked back to the bungalow he thought of the man he had just left. There had been no need for Coryndon to question him about Mrs. Wilder: her secret mission to the river interested him no further. Heath had protected her and had kept silence where her name was concerned, and yet she chose to belittle him in her idle, insolent fashion.

He thought of Heath sitting by the bed of the dying woman, and he thought of him following the wake of the *Lady Helen* down the dark river with sad, sorrowful eyes, and through the thought there came a strange thrill to his own soul, because he touched the hem of the garment of the Everlasting Mercy, hidden away, pushed out of life, and forgotten in garrulous hours full of idle chatter.

Yet Mrs. Wilder had announced with her regal finality no less than three times in the hearing of Coryndon the previous evening that the Rev. Francis Heath was “a bore.”

XIX

IN WHICH LEH SHIN WHISPERS A STORY INTO THE EAR OF SHIRAZ, THE PUNJABI; THE BURDEN OF WHICH IS: “HAVE I FOUND THEE, O MINE ENEMY?”



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A man with a grievance, however silent he may be by nature, is, generally speaking, voluble upon the subject of his wrongs, real or imaginary; but a man with a grudge is intrinsically different. An old grudge or an old hate are silent things, because they have deep roots and do not require attention, and it is only in flashes of sudden feeling, or when the means to the end is in view, that the man with a grudge reveals details and tells his story. Shiraz paid several visits to, and spent some time in the shop of, Leh Shin before he arrived at what he wanted to know.

He went also to Mhtoon Pah's shop, but came away without discovering anything. Into the ears of Hartley, Head of the Police, the Burman raged and screamed his passionate hate, because he believed it promoted his object; but to the Punjabi he was smooth and complaisant, and refused to be drawn into any admission. Leh Shin, the Chinaman, was Bazaar dust to his dignity, and he knew naught of him, save only that the man had an evil name earned by evil deeds, and Shiraz, who was as crafty as Mhtoon Pah, saw that he had come to a "no thoroughfare" and turned his wits towards Leh Shin.

Little by little, and without any apparent motive, he worked the Chinaman up to the point where silence is agony, and at last, as a river in flood crashes over the mud-banks, the whole tale of his wrongs came bursting through his closed mouth, and with the sweat pouring down his yellow face he put it into words.

The meanest story receives something vital in its constitution when it is told with all the force and conviction of years of hatred behind the simple fact of expression, and the story that Leh Shin recounted to Shiraz was a mean story. The Chinaman had the true Eastern capacity for remembering the least item in the long account that lay unsettled between himself and the Burman. His memory was a safe in which the smallest fact connected with it was kept intact and his mind traversed an interminable road of detail.

The two men had begun life as friends. The friendship between them dated back to the days when Leh Shin and Mhtoon Pah were small boys running together in the streets of Mangadone, and no antipathy that is a first instinct has ever the depth of root given to the bitterness that can spring from a breach in long friendship, and Leh Shin and Mhtoon Pah hated as only old friends ever do hate.

Leh Shin started in life with all the advantages that Mhtoon Pah lacked, and he appreciated the slavish friendship of the Burman, which grew with years. Mhtoon Pah became a clerk on scanty pay in the employ of a rice firm, and Leh Shin, at his father's death, became sole owner of the house in Paradise Street; no insignificant heritage, as it was stocked with a store of things that increased in value with age, and in the guise of his greatest friend Mhtoon Pah was made welcome at the shop whenever he had time to go there. From his clerkship in the firm of



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rice merchants Mhtoon Pah, at the insistence of his friend, became part partner in the increasing destiny of the curio shop. He travelled for Leh Shin, and brought back wares and stores in days when railways were only just beginning to be heard of, and it was difficult and even dangerous to bring goods across the Shan frontier. He had the control of a credit trust, though not of actual money, and for a time the partnership prospered. Mhtoon Pah was always conscious that he was a subordinate depending on the good will of his principal, and even as he ate with cunning into the heart of the fruit, the outside skin showed no trace of his ravages. Leh Shin's belief in his friend's integrity made him careless in the matter of looking into things for himself, and lulled into false security, he dreamed that he prospered; his dream being solidified by the accounts which he received from the Burman. In the zenith of his affluence he married the daughter of a Burman into whose house Mhtoon Pah had introduced him, and it was only after the wedding festivities that he became aware that he had supplanted the friend of his bosom in the affections of the smiling Burmese girl. Mhtoon Pah was away on a journey, and on his return rejoiced in the subtle, flattering manner that he knew so well how to practise, and if he felt rancour, he hid it under a smile.

Marriage took the Chinaman's attention from the shop, and Mhtoon Pah, still a subordinate in the presence of his master, was arrogant and filled with assurance in his dealings with others. Interested friends warned the Chinaman, but he would not listen to them. He believed in Mhtoon Pah and he had covered him with gifts.

"Was he not my friend, this monster of infamy?" he wailed, rocking himself on his bed. "O that I had seen his false heart, and torn it, smoking, from his ribs!"

Leh Shin was secure in his summer of prosperity, and when his son was born he felt that there was no good thing left out of the pleasant ways of life. In the curio shop in Paradise Street Mhtoon Pah waxed fat and studied the table of returns, and in the garden of the house where Leh Shin lived in his fool's paradise, the Chinaman loosed his hold upon the reins of authority.

The first sign of the altered and averted faces of the gods was made known to Leh Shin when his wife dwindled and pined and died.

"But that, O friend, was not the work of thine enemy," said Shiraz, pulling at his beard reflectively. "Even in thine anger, seek to follow the ways of justice."

"How do I know it?" replied Leh Shin. "He ever held an evil wish towards me. Her death was slow, like unto the approach of disaster. I know not whence it came, but my heart informs me that Mhtoon Pah designed it."



Quickly upon the death of his wife came the disappearance of his son. The boy had been playing in the garden, and the garden had been searched in vain for him. No trace of the child could be found, though Mangadone was searched from end to end.



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"Searched," cried the Chinaman, "as the pocket of a coat. No corner left that was not peered into, no house that was not ransacked." The Chinaman's voice quivered with passion, and his whole body shook and trembled.

Life flowed back into its accustomed current, and nearly a year passed before the next trouble came upon Leh Shin. Mhtoon Pah came back from a prolonged journey that had necessitated his going to Hong-Kong, and he came back with dismay in his face and a story of loss upon loss. He had compromised his master's credit to a heavy extent, and not only the gains he had made but the principal was swept away into an awful chasm where the grasping hands of creditors grabbed the whole of Leh Shin's patrimony, claiming it under papers signed by his hand.

"It was then that light flowed in upon my darkness, and I saw the long prepared evil that was the work of one man's hand." Leh Shin rose upon his string bed and his voice was thin with rabid anger. "I caught him by the throat and would have stabbed him with my knife, but he, being a younger man than I, threw me off from him, and, when he made me answer, I saw my foe of many years stand to render his account to me. 'Thou, to call me thief,' said he, 'who robbed me of my wife and cheated me of my son.'"

After that, poverty and ruin drove him slowly from his house outside Mangadone to the shelter of the shop in Paradise Street, and from there, at length, to the burrow in the Colonnade. The bitterness of his own fall was great enough in itself to harden the heart of any man, but it was doubled by the story of the years that followed. Slowly, and without calling too evident attention to himself, Mhtoon Pah began to prosper. He opened a booth first, where he sat and cursed Leh Shin whenever he passed, saying loudly that he had ruined him and swindled him out of all his little store, that by hard work and attention to business he had collected.

From the booth, just as Leh Shin left Paradise Street, Mhtoon Pah progressed to a small unpretentious shop, and a year later he moved again, as though inspired by a spirit of malice, into the very premises where Leh Shin had first employed him as a clerk. That day Leh Shin went to his Joss and swore vengeance, though how his vengeance could be worked into fact was more than his opium-muddled brain could conceive. Vengeance was his dream by night, his one concentrated thought by day, and he came no nearer to any hope of fulfilling it. Mhtoon Pah, wealthy and respected; Mhtoon Pah, the builder of shrines; Mhtoon Pah, who spoke with high Sahibs and had the ear of the Head of the Police himself, and Leh Shin clad in ragged clothes, and only able to keep his hungry soul in his body by means of his opium traffic, how could he strike at his foe's prosperity? His hate glared out of his eyes as he panted, stopping to draw breath at the end of his account.



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Had Shiraz known the legend of the wise wolf who changed from man to beast, he might have supposed that some such change was taking place in Leh Shin. His trembling lips dribbled, his head jerked as though supported by wires, and his eyebrows twitched violently as though he had no control over their movements. He had forgotten Shiraz and was thinking only of the tribulation he had suffered and of the man whose gross form inhabited his whole mental world. Shaking like a leaf, he got off his bed and stood on the earth floor.

“May he be eaten by mud-sores,” he said savagely. “May he die by his own hand, and so, as is the Teaching, be shut out of peace, and return to earth as a scorpion, to be crushed again into lesser life by a stone.”

“By the will of Allah, who alone is great, there will be an end of thy troubles,” said Shiraz non-committally as he got up. “Thou hast suffered much. Be it required to thee as thou wouldst have it fall in the hour that is already written; for no man may escape his destiny, though he be fleet of foot as the antlered stag.”

“Son of a Prophet, thy words are full of wisdom.”

“Let it comfort thine affliction,” said Shiraz, with the air of a man making a gift.

“Yet I would hasten the end.” He gave a strange, soundless laugh that startled Shiraz, who looked at him sideways. “And mark this, O wise one, mine enemy hath already felt the first lash of the whip fall, even the whip that scourged my own body. He hath lost the boy whom he ever praised in the streets, and suffered much grief thereby. May his grief thrive and may it be added to until the weight is greater than he can bear.” He swung up his hand with a stabbing movement. “I would rip him like a cushion of fine down. I would strike his face with my shoe as the *Nats* that he dreads caught his screaming soul.”

“Peace, peace,” said Shiraz. “Such words are ill for him who speaks, and ill alike for him who listens. In such a day as already the end is scored like a comet’s tail across the sky, the end shall be, and not before that day. Cease from thy clamour lest the street hear thee, and run to know the cause.”

He took leave of his friend and went slowly away to his own house, having achieved his master’s mission, and feeling well satisfied with his afternoon’s work.

Motive, the hidden spring of action, was made clear, and Shiraz knew enough of his master’s methods to realize that he had come upon a very definite piece of evidence against Leh Shin, the Chinaman. From the point of view of Shiraz the man was quite justified in killing Absalom, since “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” appeared fair and reasonable to his mind. The Burman had overreached Leh Shin, and now Leh Shin had begun the cycle again, and had smitten at the curio dealer through the curio

dealer's boy, for whom he appeared to have a fanatical affection. According to Shiraz, the



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house in Paradise Street stood a good chance of being burned to the ground. If this “accident” happened, Shiraz would know exactly whose hand it was that lighted the match. It was all part of an organized scheme, and though he did not know how Coryndon would bring the facts home, fitting each man with his share, like a second skin to his body, he felt satisfied that he had provided the lump of clay for the skilled potter to mould into shape.

He took off his turban, and lay down on his carpet. The day was still hot, and the drowsy afternoon outside his closed windows blinked and stared through the hours, the glare intensifying the shadows under the trees and along the Colonnade. The soda-water and lemonade sellers in their small booths drove a roaring trade as they packed the aquamarine-green bottles in blocks of dirty ice to keep the frizzling drink cool; and the cawing of marauding crows and the cackle of fowl blended with the shouting of drivers and sellers of wares, who heeded not the staring heat of the sun.

After the emotion of telling his tale, Leh Shin slept in his own small box of darkness, and, in the rich curio shop in Paradise Street, Mhtoon Pah leaned on an embroidered pillow with closed eyes. The stream of life flowed slowly and softly through the hours when only the poor have need to work; soft as the current of a full tide that slides between wide banks, and soft as sleep, or fate, or the destiny which no man can hope to escape.

XX

CRAVEN JOICEY, THE BANKER, IS FACED BY A MAN WITH A WHIP IN HIS HAND, AND CORYNDON FINDS A CLUE

It is a matter of universal belief that a woman’s most alluring quality is her mystery, and Coryndon, no lover of women, was absorbed in the study of mystery without a woman.

He had eliminated the woman.

In his mind he cast Mrs. Wilder upon one side, as March throws February to the fag end of winter, and rushes on to meet the primrose girl bringing spring in her wake. He had dealt simultaneously with Mrs. Wilder’s little part in the drama and the part of Francis Heath, Priest in Holy Orders. How they had both stood the test of detection he did not trouble to analyse. “Detection” is a nasty word, with a nasty sound in it, and no one likes it well enough to brood over all it exactly means.

Coryndon was sufficiently an observer of men and life to feel grateful to Heath, because he had seen something for a short moment as he studied the clergyman that dwells



afterwards in the mind, like a stream of moonlight lying over a tranquil sea. Hidden things, in his experience, were seldom things of beauty, and yet he had come upon one fair place in the whole puzzling and tangled story collected round the disappearance of the Christian boy Absalom.

Mrs. Wilder and Heath were both accounted for and deleted from the list of names indelibly inscribed in his mental book; but one fact that was sufficiently weighty had been added to what was still involved in doubt: the fact that Heath had seen the boy in company with Leh Shin's assistant.



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Coryndon was subject to the ordinary prejudices of any man who makes human personality a study, and he was more than half disposed to go back to the Bazaar and hear whatever evidence Shiraz had been able to collect during his absence. Two reasons prevented his doing this. One was that he would have to wait until it was dark enough to leave Hartley's bungalow without being watched, and possibly followed, and the other that there was still one name on the list that required attention, and he began to feel that it required immediate attention. A toss of a coin lay between which course he should adopt first, and he sat very still to consider the thing carefully.

In the service of which he was a member, he had learnt that much depends upon getting facts in their chronological order, and that if there is the least disunion in the fusing of events, deduction may hammer its head eternally against a stone wall. He did not know positively that Leh Shin had decoyed the boy away by means of his assistant, but he was inclined to believe that such was the case. The blood-stained rag looked like a piece of impudent bravado more than likely to have emanated from the brain of the young Chinaman. His mental fingers opened to catch Leh Shin and lay hold on him, but they unclosed again, and Coryndon felt about him in the darkness that separates mind from mind. He knew the pitfall that a too evident chain of circumstances digs for the unwary, and he fell back from his own conviction, testing each link of the chain, still uncertain and still doubtful of what course he should pursue.

He had another object in view, an object that entailed a troublesome interview, and he turned his thoughts towards its possible issue. Information might be at hand in the safe keeping of his servant Shiraz, but he considered that he must argue his own conclusions apart from anything Shiraz had discovered. Narrowing his eyes and sitting forward on the edge of his bed, he thought out the whole progress of his scheme. Coryndon was an essentially quiet man, but as he thought he struck his hands together and came to a sudden decision.

If life offers a few exciting moments, the man who refuses them is no adventurer, and Coryndon saw a chance for personal skill and definite action. He felt the call of excitement, the call that pits will against will and subtlety against force, and that is irresistible to the man of action. Probably it was just that human touch that decided him. One course was easy; a mere matter of reassuming a disguise and slipping back into the life of the people, which was as natural to him as his own life. A tame ending, rounded off by hearing a story from Shiraz, and laying the whole matter in the hands of Hartley. The proof against the assistant was almost conclusive, and if Shiraz had burrowed into the heart of the motive, it gave sufficient evidence to deliver over the case almost entire to the man who added the last word to the whole drama before the curtain fell.



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Coryndon knew the full value of working from point to point, but beside this method he placed his own instinct, and his instinct pointed along a different road, a road that might lead nowhere, and yet it called to him as he sat on the side of his bed, as roads with indefinite endings have called men since the beginning of time.

Against his own trained judgment, he wavered and yielded, and at length took his white *topi* from a peg on the wall and walked out slowly up the garden. It was three in the afternoon. Just the hour when Shiraz was lying on his mat asleep, and when Leh Shin slept, and Mhtoon Pah drowsed against his cushion from Balsorah, each dreaming after his own fashion; and it was an hour when white men were sure to be in their bungalows. Hartley was lying in a chair in the veranda, and all through Mangadone men rested from toil and relaxed their brains after the morning's work.

Coryndon went out softly and slowly, and he walked under the hot burning sun that stared down at Mangadone as though trying to stare it steadily into flame. White, mosque-like houses ached in the heat, chalk-white against the sky, and the flower-laden balconies, massed with bougainvillea, caught the stare and cracked wherever there was sap enough left in the pillars and dry woodwork to respond to the fierce heat of a break in the rains.

It was a long, hot walk to the bungalow where Joicey lived, over the Banking House itself, and the vast compound was arid and bare from three days of scorching drought. Coryndon's feet sounded gritting on the red, hard drive that led to the cool of the porch. No one called at such an hour; it was unheard of in Mangadone, where the day from two to five was sacred from interruption.

A Chaprassie stopped him on the avenue, and a Bearer on the steps of the house itself. There were subordinates awake and alive in the Bank, ready to answer questions on any subject, but Coryndon held to his purpose. He did not want to see any of the lesser satellites; his business was with the Manager, and he said that he must see him, if the Manager was to be seen, or even if he was not, as his business would not keep.

A young man with a smooth, affable manner appeared from within, and said he would give any message that Coryndon had to leave with his principal, but Coryndon shook his head and politely declined to explain himself or his business, beyond the fact that it was private and important. The young man shook his head doubtfully.

"It doesn't happen to be a very good hour. We never disturb Mr. Joicey in the afternoons."

"May I send in my card?" asked Coryndon.

"Certainly, if you wish to do so."



Coryndon took a pencil out of his pocket, and, scribbling on the corner of his card, enclosed it in an envelope, and waited in the dark hall, where electric fans flew round like huge bats, the smooth-mannered young man keeping him courteous company.



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“Mr. Joicey rests at this time of day,” he explained. “I hope you quite understand the difficulty.”

“I quite understand,” replied Coryndon, “but I think he will see me.”

There was a pause. The young man did not wish to contradict him, but he felt that he knew the ways and hours of the Head of the Firm very much better than a mere stranger arriving on foot just as the Bank was due to close for the day. He wondered who Coryndon was, and what his very pressing business could possibly be, but even in his wildest flights of fancy, and, with the thermometer at 112 deg., flights of fancy do not carry far, he never even dimly guessed at anything the least degree connected with the truth.

The Bearer came down the wide scenic stairway and said that his master would see Mr. Coryndon at once. The young man with the smooth manner faded off into dark shadows with an accentuation of impersonal civility, and Coryndon walked up the echoing staircase by the front of the hall, down a corridor, down another flight of stairs, and into the private suite of rooms sacred to the use of the head of the banking firm, and used only in part by the celibate Joicey.

Joicey was standing by a table, looking at Coryndon’s card and twisting it between his fingers. He recognized his visitor when he glanced at him, and showed some surprise. The room was in twilight, as all the outside chinks were down, and there was a lingering faint perfume of something sweet and cloying in the air. Joicey looked sulky and irritated, and he motioned Coryndon to a chair without seating himself.

“Well,” he said brusquely, “what’s this about Rydal?” He pointed with a blunt finger to the card that he had thrown on to the table.

“That,” said Coryndon, also indicating the card, “is merely a means towards an end. I have the good fortune to find you not only in your house, but able to receive me.”

The colour mounted to Joicey’s heavy face, and his temper rose with it.

“Then you mean to tell me—” He broke off and stared at Coryndon, and gave a rough laugh. “You’re Hartley’s globe-trotting acquaintance, aren’t you? Well, Hartley happens to be a friend of mine, and it is just as well for you that he is. Tell me your business, and I will overlook your intrusion on his account.”

Something inside Coryndon’s brain tightened like a string of a violin tuned up to concert-pitch.

“In one respect you are wrong,” he said amiably, and without the smallest show of heat. “I am, as you say, Hartley’s friend, but I must disown any connection with globe-trotting, as you call it. I am in the Secret Service of the Indian Government.”



“Oh, are you?” Joicey tore up the card and threw it into a basket beside the writing-table.

“It may interest you to know,” went on Coryndon easily, “that my visit to you is not altogether prompted by idle curiosity.” He smiled reflectively. “No, I feel sure that you will not call it that.”



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“Fire ahead, then,” said Joicey, whose very evident resentment was by no means abated. “Ask your question, if it is a question.”

“I am coming to that presently. Before I do I want you to understand, Mr. Joicey, that, like you, I am a servant of the public, and I am at present employed in gathering together evidence that throws any light upon the doings of three people on the night of July the twenty-ninth.”

“Then you are wasting valuable time,” said Joicey defiantly. “I was away from Mangadone on that night.”

“I am quite aware that you told Hartley so.”

Coryndon’s voice was perfectly even and level, but hot anger flamed up in the bloodshot eyes of Craven Joicey.

“I put it to you that you made a mistake,” went on Coryndon, “and that in the interests of justice you will now be able to tell me that you remember where you were and what you were doing on that night.”

Joicey thrust his hands deep into his pockets, his heavy shoulders bent, and his face dogged.

“I am prepared to swear on oath that I was not in Mangadone on the night of July the twenty-ninth.”

“Not in Mangadone, Mr. Joicey. Mangadone proper ends at the tram lines; the district beyond is known as Bhononie.”

Coryndon could see that his shot told. There were yellow patches around Joicey’s eyes, and a purple shadow passed across his face, leaving it leaden.

“Unless I can complete my case by other means, you will be called as a witness to prove certain facts in connection with the disappearance of the boy Absalom on the night of July the twenty-ninth.”

“Who is going to call me?”

The question was curt, and Joicey’s defiance was still strong, but there was a certain huskiness in his voice that betrayed a very definite fear.

“Leh Shin, the Chinaman, will call you. His neck will be inside a noose, Mr. Joicey, and he will need your evidence to save his life.”



“Leh Shin? That man would swear anything. His word is worthless against mine,” said the Banker, raising his voice noisily. “If that is another specimen of Secret Service bluff, it won’t do. Won’t do, d’you hear?”

Coryndon tapped his fingers on the writing-table.

“I can’t agree with you in your conclusion that it ‘won’t do.’ Taken alone his statement may be worthless, but taken in connection with the fact that you are in the habit of visiting his opium den by the river, it would be difficult to persuade any judge that he was lying. I myself have seen you going in there and coming out.”

He watched Joicey stare at him with blind rage; he watched him stagger and reach out groping hands for a chair, and he saw the huge defiance evaporate, leaving Joicey a trembling mass of nerves.

“It’s a lie,” he said, mumbling the words as though they were dry bread. “It’s a damned, infernal lie!”

A long silence followed upon his words, and Joicey mopped his face with his handkerchief, breathing hard through his nose, his hands shaking as though he was caught by an ague fit.



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"I'm in a corner," he said at last; "you've got the whip-hand of me, Coryndon, but when I said I was not in Mangadone that night, I was speaking the truth."

"You were splitting a hair," suggested Coryndon.

Joicey drew his heavy eyebrows together in an angry frown.

"Let that question rest," he said, conquering his desire to break loose in a passion of rage.

"You went down Paradise Street some time after sunset. Will you tell me exactly whom you saw on your way to the river house?"

Craven Joicey steadied his voice and thought carefully.

"I passed Heath, the Parson, he was coming from the direction of the lower wharves, and was going towards Rydal's bungalow. I remember that, because Rydal was in, my mind at the time; I had heard that his wife was ill, probably dying, and just after I saw Absalom."

He paused for a moment and moistened his lips.

"Was he with anyone when you saw him?"

"No, he was alone, and he was carrying a parcel. Anyhow, that is all I can tell you about him that night."

Joicey looked up as though he considered that he had said enough.

"And from there you went to the opium den," said Coryndon relentlessly.

The perspiration dripped from Joicey's hair, and he took up the threads of the story once more.

"I went there," he said, biting the words savagely. "I was sick at the time. I'd had a go of malaria and was as weak as a kitten. The place was empty, and only Leh Shin was in the house, and whether he gave me a stronger dose, or whether I was too seedy to stand my usual quantity, I can't tell you, but I overslept my time."

He passed his hand over his face with a sideways look that was horrible in its shamefacedness. Coryndon avoided looking at him in return, and waited patiently until he went on.

"Leh Shin remained with me. He never leaves the house whilst I am inside," continued Joicey. "I was there the night of the twenty-ninth and the day of the thirtieth. Luckily it



was a Sunday and there was no fear of questions cropping up, and I only got out at nightfall when it was dark enough for me to go back without risk. Since then," he said, rising to his feet and striking the writing-table with a clenched fist, "I have been driven close to madness. Hartley was put on to the track of Leh Shin by the lying old Burman, Mhtoon Pah, and Leh Shin's shop was watched and he himself threatened. God! What I've gone through."

"Thank you," said Coryndon, pushing back his chair. "You have been of the very greatest assistance to me."

Joicey sat down again, a mere torment-racked mass, deprived of the help of his pretence, defenceless and helpless because his sin had found him out in the person of a slim, dark-faced man, who looked at him with burning pity in his eyes.



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The world jests at the abstract presentment of vice. From pulpits it appears clothed in attractive words and is spoken of as alluring; and, supported by the laughter of the idle and the stern belief of the righteous in its charms, man sees something gallant and forbidden in following its secret paths. The abstract view has the charm and attraction of an impressionist picture, but once the curtain is down, and the witness stands out with a terrible pointing finger, the laughter of the world dies into silence, and the testimony of the preacher that vice is provided with unearthly beauty becomes a false statement, and man is conscious only of the degradation of his own soul.

Coryndon left the room noiselessly and returned up the steps, along the corridor and down the stone flight that led into the subsiding heat of the late afternoon. The young man with the smooth, affable manner wheeled a bicycle out of a far corner, and smiled pleasantly at Coryndon.

“You saw the Manager, and got what you wanted?”

“I saw him, and got even more than I wanted,” said Coryndon, with conviction.

Things like this puzzled the dream side of his nature and left him exhausted. The gathering passion of rage in Joicey’s eyes had not touched him, but the memory of the big, bull-dog, defiant man huddled on the low chair, his arm over his face, was a memory that spoke of other things than what he had come there to discover; the terrible things that are behind life and that have power over it. He had to collect himself with definite force, as a child’s attention is recalled to a lesson-book.

“He has cleared Leh Shin,” he said to himself, and at first exactly all that the words meant was not clear to his mind. Joicey had cleared the Chinaman of complicity, and had knocked the whole structure of carefully selected evidence away with a few words.

Coryndon was back in Hartley’s bungalow with this to consider; and it left him in a strange place, miles from any conclusion. He had sighted the end of his labours, seen the reward of his long secret watchfulness, and now they had withdrawn again beyond his grasp. Heath had seen Absalom with the Chinaman’s assistant. Joicey, whose evidence marked a later hour than that of Heath, had seen him alone, and the solitary figure of the small boy hurrying into the dark was the last record that indicated the way he had gone.

Nothing connected itself with the picture as Coryndon sat brooding over it, and then gradually his mind cleared and the confusion of the destruction of his carefully worked-out plan departed from his brain like a wind-blown cloud. There was a link, and his sensitive fine fingers caught it suddenly, the very shock of contact sending the blood into his cheeks.



The picture was clear now. Absalom, a little white-clad figure, slim, eager and dutiful, hurried into the shadows of night, but Coryndon was at his heels this time. The clue was so tiny, so infinitesimal, that it took the eye of a man trained to the last inch in the habit of seeing everything to notice it, but it did not escape Coryndon.



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He joined Hartley at tea in the sitting-room, with its semi-official air of being used for serious work, and Hartley fulfilled his avocation by bringing Coryndon back from strange places into the heart of sane humdrum existence. Surely if some men are pillars, and others rockets, and more poets, professors and preachers, some are hand-rails, and only the man who has just been standing on a dizzy height looking sheer into the bottomless pit where nothing is safe and where life crumbles and fear is too close to the consciousness, knows the value and even the beauty of a hand-rail, and knows that there is no need to mock at its limitations. For a few minutes Coryndon leant upon the moral support of Hartley's cheery personality, and then he told him that he was going back to the Bazaar that night, as circumstances led him to believe that he might find what he wanted there and there only.

"That means that you have cleared Heath?"

Hartley's voice was relieved.

"Heath is entirely exonerated."

Coryndon wandered to the piano, and he played the twilight into the garden, the bats out of the eaves, and he played the shadow of Joicey's shame off his own soul until he was refreshed and renewed, and it was time for him to return to his disguise and slip out of the house.

XXI

DEMONSTRATES THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF A KNIFE EDGE, AND TELLS A STORY OF A GOLD LACQUER BOWL

The obese boy sat in Leh Shin's shop, fiddling sometimes with his ears and sometimes with the soles of his bare feet. He found life just a little dull, and had he been able to express himself as "bored," he would doubtless have done so. Peeling small dry scales of skin off wear-hardened heels is not the most exciting occupation life affords, and the assistant wished more than once that his master would return from either the gambling den or the Joss House and liberate him for the night.

It was his night at the river house, and small opportunities for pilfering from the drugged sleepers made these occasions both amusing and profitable. On the whole he enjoyed the nights in the den, and they added considerably to his bank in a box secreted behind the Joss who flamed and pranced on the wall. Meanwhile, nothing was doing in the shop, and company there was none, unless the cockroaches and the lizards could be reckoned in that category.

His master had been shaky and short of temper when he awoke from his afternoon sleep, and had struck his assistant over the head more than once in the course of an



argument. Unseen things ticked and rustled in dark corners, and the boy yawned loudly and stretched his arms, making himself more hideous as his contracted mouth opened to its full oval in his large round face. Still nothing happened and no one came, and he returned to the closer examination of a blister that interested him. He probed it with a needle, and it indicated its connection with his foot by stinging as though he had burnt himself with a match.



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He was seated on a table bending over his horrible employment, half pastime, half primitive operation, the light of the lamp full upon him, when a sound of padding feet shook the floor and he looked up, his eyes full of the effort of listening attentively, and saw a face peering in at the door. For a moment he was startled, and then he swung his legs, which hung short of the floor, over the side of the table and laughed out loud.

“So thou art back, Mountain of Wisdom?” he said jeeringly. “Come within and tell me of thy journey.”

The Burman crept in stealthily, looking around him.

“Aye, I am back. Having done the business.”

Curiosity leapt into the eyes of the Chinaman, and he dropped his attitude of contempt.

“What business?” he asked greedily. “Before thy departure thou wast mute, stricken as a dumb man, neither wouldst thou speak in response to any question.”

The Burman curled himself up on the floor and smiled complaisantly.

“None the less, the business is done, O Bowl of Ghee, and I have returned.”

The assistant ignored the personal description, and adopted a manner calculated to ingratiate himself into the friendly confidence of the mad Burman. He wriggled off the table and crouched on the floor a few inches off Coryndon’s face, and the contact being too close for human endurance, Coryndon threw himself back into the corner and retired behind a mask of cunning obstinacy.

“Thy business, thy business,” repeated the boy. “Was it in the nature of the evil works of the bad man, thy friend?” He leered his encouragement, and fumbling at his belt took out a small coin. “Here, I will give thee two annas if thou tell the whole story to my liking.”

The Burman shook his head, but he appeared to be considering the offer slowly in his obtuse and stagnant brain.

“Give the money into mine own hand, that the reward be sure,” he said, as though he toyed with the idea.

“Not so,” replied the boy. “First the boiled rice and the salt, and afterwards the payment. Thus is the way in honest dealings.”

The Burman shut his mouth tightly and exhibited signs of a return to his former condition of dumbness that worked upon the assistant like gall.



“Then, if nothing less will content thee, take thy money,” he said in frothy anger. “Take it and speak low, for it may be that eavesdroppers are without in the street.”

He dropped the coin into the outstretched palm, but the Burman did not begin his story. He got up and searched behind boxes and shook the rows of hanging garments. He was so secret and silent that the boy became exasperated and closed the narrow door into the street with a bang, pulling across a heavy chain.

“Let that content thee,” he said irritably, chafing under the delay, and sitting down, a frowsy, horrible object, in the dim corner, he prepared to enjoy a further description out of the wild fantastic terrors of the madman’s brain.



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Surprise does not hover; its coming events are shadowless, and its spring is the spring of a tiger out of the dark, and surprise came upon Leh Shin's assistant as it has come upon men and nations since the world first spun in space.

He looked upon the Burman as a harmless lunatic, and he only half-believed that he had ever been guilty of the act that had ended in a term of imprisonment in the Andaman Islands, but in one moment he realized that it might all be true and that he himself was possibly singled out as the next victim.

In one silent moment he found himself pinned in his corner, the Burman squatting in front of him, a long knife which he had never seen before pointing at his throat with horrible, determined persistency.

He opened his mouth and thought to cry out for help, but the Burman leaned forward and warned him that if he did so, his last minute had inevitably come.

"I am thy friend, thy good and honourable friend," he said pleasantly as he made play with the Afghan dagger. "I do but make mirth for both myself and thee, and I have no thought to harm thee."

The flesh of the gross body crept and crawled under the Burman's look. Fate had put the heart of a chicken in the huge frame of Leh Shin's assistant, and it beat now like pelting hail on a frozen road. He was close to a raw, naked fear, and it made him shameless as he gibbered and cowered before it.

"I have no money," he said, bleating out the words. "All that I have is already paid to thee for thy tale."

He whined and cringed and writhed in his close corner.

"I have heard a strange tale," Coryndon said, bending a little closer to him. "Old now as stale fish that has lain in the dust of the street. It has been whispered in my ear that thou knowest how Absalom came to his end."

"I slew him in the house of a seaman," said the boy, in a quavering voice. "Now take the point of thy knife from my throat, for it doth greatly inconvenience pleasant speech between thee and me."

Coryndon's watchful eye detected the lie before it announced itself in words, or so it seemed to the boy, who resigned himself to the mere paltry limitations of fact, and confessed that he and Absalom had been friends and that he had never killed anything except a chicken, and once a dog that was too young to bite his hand.

The details of the story came out at long intervals, with breaks of sweating terror between each one. Pieced together, it was simple enough. In spite of the existing feud

between their masters, Leh Shin's assistant and Absalom had struck up a kind of friendship that was not unlike the friendship of any two boys in any quarter of the globe. They used special knocks upon the door, and when they passed as strangers in the streets they made masonic signs to one another, and they also gambled with European cards in off hours.



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The desire for money, so strong in the Chinaman, grew gradually in the mind of the Christian boy, whose descent to Avernus was marked first by the sale of his Sunday school prize-books, which he disposed of at the Baptist Mission shop, receiving several rupees in return. Having once possessed himself of what was wealth to him, and having lost most of it in the gentlemanly vice of gambling, he began to need more, but being slow-witted he could think of no way better than robbing Mhtoon Pah, which suggestion the Chinaman's assistant looked upon as both dangerous and weak, regarded in the light of a workable plan.

It was inside his bullet-head that the idea of a plot that could not be discovered came into its first nebulous being. Absalom found out that Mhtoon Pah was looking for a gold lacquer bowl, and through the agency of Leh Shin the bowl was eventually marked down as the property of a seaman who was lodging temporarily near the opium den by the river, one of Leh Shin's clients. The assistant had the good fortune to overhear the preliminaries of the sale, and he immediately saw his opportunity, as genius alone sees and recognizes chances. It was he who first told Absalom that the bowl was located, and it was he who realized that chance was beckoning on the adventurer.

It was arranged that Absalom should inform Mhtoon Pah that the coveted treasure was to be had for a price, and it was also the part of Mr. Heath's best scholar, to obtain the money from Mhtoon Pah that was to be paid over to the seaman for the bowl. By this time Absalom's gambling debts had become a serious question with him, and even a lifelong mortgage upon his weekly pay could hardly cover his liabilities. Besides which, he had to live. That painful necessity which dogs the career of greater men than Absalom.

He appeared to have an almost childish trust in the craft and guile of his Chinese friend, and set the whole matter before him. Mhtoon Pah was ready to pay two hundred rupees for the lacquer bowl, as he was already offered five hundred by Mrs. Wilder, and was content with the profit. Two hundred rupees was a sum that was essentially worth some risk. To hand it over to a drunken seaman was against all moral precept. The sailor's ways were scandalous, his gain would go into evil hands. Treated in this manner, even a Sunday-school graduate could lull an uneasy conscience, and as far as Coryndon could judge, Absalom was not troubled by any warnings from that silent mentor. Out of the brain of Leh Shin's assistant the great scheme had leapt full-grown, and it only required a little careful preparation to put it into action.



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The assistant knew the sailor, a Lascar with a craving for drink, and he became friendly with him "out of hours," and learned his ways and the times when he was likely to be in the house where he lodged. The sailor, having come to know that value was attached to his bowl, guarded it with avaricious care when in a condition to do so; and Leh Shin, who trusted his assistant, through whom the news of the deal had first come to his ear, offered the man fifty rupees for what he had merely stolen from a shop in Pekin. It took the assistant a full week to arrange events so that he and Absalom could work together for the moral good of the sailor, and protect him from the snares of lucre, represented by a third of the money Leh Shin expected to receive.

He dwelt with some pride upon the fact, and his vanity in this particular almost conquered his fear of the Afghan blade that still nestled close to his bull neck. He had drunk in friendship with the sailor, dropping a drug into his cup, and waiting till his eyes grew dim and he fell forward in a heavy sleep. But even in the moment of achievement his wits were worth more than the wits of Absalom, for he ran out of the house and established an alibi while the Christian boy filched the bowl from beneath the bed of the intoxicated sailor. At a given hour he waited for Absalom just where Heath had stood after he had parted from Rydal, and so chance played twice into his hands in one night. Absalom, who appeared to have imbibed some rudimentary principles of honour among thieves, passed the boy his share, which was a hundred and twenty rupees, including his debts of honour, and having done so, sped away into the night, the bowl under his arm.

"And that is all the story," said the boy, beating his hands on the floor, and returning from the momentary forgetfulness of the narrative to the immediate fear of the knife. "Further than that, I know nothing. The hour is late and if I am not at the river house I shall feel the wrath of my master."

"It is a poor tale, a paltry tale," said the Burman, in tones of disgust. "One that hardly requites me for my patience in hearing it out."

He slipped his knife back into his belt and got up from his heels with a leisurely movement. The boy, still on all fours, watched him closely, and the Burman, his eye attracted by a bright tin kettle hanging among the other goods dependent from the ceiling, stood looking at it, and as he looked the boy dodged out with a rush, overturning a bale of goods, and tearing at the door like a mad dog, disappeared into the street.

Coryndon watched him go, and went back to his corner to wait until Leh Shin should return from either the gambling den or the Joss House. He had something to say to Leh Shin, something that could not wait to be said, and he composed himself to the necessary patience that is part of all close, careful search, and while he waited, he turned over the evidence that had arisen from the little clue that Joicey had given him. Absalom had a parcel under his arm, and that parcel was the gold lacquer bowl that had passed from Mhtoon Pah's curio shop to Mrs. Wilder's writing-table.



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Coryndon fiddled with his fingers in the dust of the floor, and took a blood-stained rag out of his pocket and spread it over his knee. Here was another tangible piece of evidence brought by Mhtoon Pah to Hartley. So the record of circumstance closed in. Coryndon thought again. A lacquer bowl and a stained rag of silk, that was all. If he handed over the case to Hartley and Mhtoon Pah was really guilty, other evidence would in all probability be found, and the whole mystery made clear.

He leaned against the wall and watched the throbbing lamp-wick, fighting his passion for completed work and his conviction that only he could see it through to its ultimate conclusion. He knew that he was dealing with wits quite as crafty as his own, and argued the point from the other side. Mhtoon Pah had given the rag himself to Hartley, and had sworn that the bowl was left on the steps of his shop. If no further proof was forthcoming, these two facts unsupported were almost worthless. Unless a complete denial of his story could be set against it, Hartley stood to be checkmated.

Coryndon had nearly decided against Leh Shin. He drew his knees up under his chin and came to a definite conclusion. He could not give up the case as it stood; he was absolved from any hint of professional jealousy, and he could count himself free to follow the evidence until it led him irrevocably to the spot where the whole detail was clear and definite.

All the faces of the men who had figured in the drama floated across his mind, and he thought of the strange key that turned in the lock of one small trivial destiny, opening other doors as if by magic. Absalom's life or death had no outward connection with the Head of the Mangadone Banking Firm, it had nothing in all its days to bring it into touch with Rydal and Rydal's tragedy—Rydal whom Coryndon had never seen. It lay apart, severed by race and every possible accident of birth or chance, from the successful wife of a successful Civil Servant, or an earnest, hard-working clergyman, and yet the great net of Destiny had been spread on that night of the 29th of July, and every one of them had fallen into its meshes.

All the immense problem of the plan that so decides the current of men's lives came over him, and he saw the limitless value of the insignificant in life. Absalom was only a little floating piece of jetsam on the great waters that divided all these lives, yet he was the factor that had taken the place of the keystone in the arch; the pivot around which the force that guided and ruled the whole apparent chaos had moved. Coryndon wandered a long way in his thoughts from the shop where he sat on the dusty floor, waiting for the return of Leh Shin. He was so still that the cockroaches and black-beetles crept out again and formed into marauding expeditions where the shadows of the hanging clothes fell dark.

He turned himself from the pressure of his thought and closed his eyes, resting his brain in a quiet pool of untroubled silence. He knew the need and the art of absolute relaxation from the strain of thought, and though he did not sleep, he looked as though



he slept, until he heard the sound of approaching feet and a hand pushed against the door.



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XXII

IN WHICH CORYNDON HOLDS THE LAST THREAD AND DRAWS IT TIGHT

When Leh Shin opened the shop door and pushed in his grey, gaunt face, he looked around as though wondering in a half-dreamy, half-detached abstraction where some object he had expected to see had gone. At length his eyes wandered to the Burman, who sat on the ground eyeing him with a curiously intent and concentrated regard.

"Thine assistant hath gone to the river house," he said, answering the unspoken question. "He left me in charge of thy shop and thy goods."

Leh Shin nodded silently and closed the door. When he turned, the Burman beckoned to him with a studied suggestion of mystery.

"What is thy message?" asked Leh Shin. He believed the Burman to be afflicted with a madness, and his odd and persistent movement of his arm hardly conveyed anything to the drowsy, drugged brain of the Chinaman.

The Burman made no reply, but beckoned again, pointing to the floor beside him in dumb show, and Leh Shin advanced slowly and took up his place on a grass mat a little distance off. Silently, and very softly, the Burman crept near to him, and putting his mouth close to his ear, talked in a rapid, hissing whisper. His words were low, but their effect upon Leh Shin was startling, for he recoiled as though touched by a hot needle. His hands clutched his clothes, and his whole frame stiffened. Even when he drew away, he listened with avidity as the Burman continued to pour forth his story.

He had a friend in the household of Hartley Sahib, so he told Leh Shin, a friend who had sensitive ears and had heard much; had heard in fact the whole story of the stained rag, and of Mhtoon Pah's wild appeal for justice against the Chinaman.

"Well for thee, Leh Shin, that I have a friend in the house of that *Thakin* who rules the Police. But for him I should not have been informed of the plot against thy life, for, 'on this evidence,' saith he, 'assuredly they will hang the Chinaman, and Mhtoon Pah is witness against him.'"

"Mhtoon Pah, Mhtoon Pah!" said Leh Shin, and he needed to add no curses to the name, spoken as he said it.

When Coryndon had fully explained that his friend, who was in the service of Hartley, had not only given him a circumstantial account of how the rag was to be used as final and conclusive evidence of Leh Shin's guilt, but that he had also stolen the rag out of Hartley Sahib's locked box, to be safely returned to him later, Leh Shin almost tore it from between Coryndon's fingers.



“Nay, I cannot deliver it unto thee. My word is pledged. Look closely at it, if thou wilt, but it may not leave my hand or I break my oath.”

He held it under the circle of lamplight, and the Chinaman leaned over his shoulder to look at it. For a long time he examined it carefully, feeling its texture and touching it with light fingers.



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Coryndon watched him with some interest. The Chinaman was applying some definite test to the silk, known to himself. At last he turned his eyes on the Burman, staring with a gaunt, fierce look that saw many things, and when he spoke his words grated and rattled and his voice was almost beyond his control.

“See now, O servant of Justice, I am learned in the matter of silks, and without doubt this comes surely from but one place.”

Again he fell to touching the silk, and his crooked fingers shook as he explained that the fragment was one he could identify. It was not the product of the silk looms of Burma, or Shantung; it could not be procured even in Japan. It was a rare and special product fashioned by certain lake-dwellers in the Shan states, and so small was their output that it went to no market.

“In one shop only in Mangadone,” he said; “nay, in one shop only in the whole world may such silk be found. Thus, in his craft, hath mine enemy overreached himself.”

“Thou art certain of this?”

“As I am that the sun will rise.”

Coryndon looked again at the silk, and sat silently thinking.

“The piece is cut off roughly,” he said, after a moment of reflection. “Yet, could it be fitted into the space left in the roll, then thou art cleared, and hast just cause against Mhtoon Pah.”

“If thy madness comprehends so much, let it carry thee further still, O stricken and afflicted,” said Leh Shin, imploring him with voice and gesture. “Night after night have I stood outside his shop, but who may enter through a locked door? A breath, a shadow, or a flame, but not a man.” He lay on the ground and dug his nails into the floor. “I know the shop from within and without, and I know that the lock opens with difficulty but to one key, the key that hangs on a chain around the neck of Mhtoon Pah.”

Silence fell again as Leh Shin wrestled with the problem that confronted him.

“What saidst thou?” said the Burman, suddenly coming to life. “A key?”

He gave a low, chuckling laugh and rocked about in his corner.

“Knowest thou of the story of Shiraz, the Punjabi?”

“I have no mind for tales,” said Leh Shin, striking at him with a futile blow of rage.



“Nay, restrain thy wrath, since thou hast spoken of a key. With a key that was made by sorcery, he was enabled to open the treasure-box of the Lady Sahib, and often hath he told me that all doors may be opened by it, large or small. It is not hard for me to take it from under his pillow while he sleeps.”

The Chinaman’s jaw dropped, and he cast up his hands in mute astonishment. If this was madness, sanity appeared only a doubtful blessing set beside it. He drew his own wits together, and leaning near the Burman laid before him the rough outline of a plan.

Mhtoon Pah’s ways were known to him. Usually he went to the Pagoda after the shop was closed, and he returned from there late; it was impossible to be accurate as to the exact hour of his return. To risk detection was to shatter all chance of success, and it was necessary to make sure before attempting to break into the shop and identify the silk rag with the original roll, if that might be done.



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There was only one course open to the Burman and Leh Shin, and that was to wait until there was a *Pwe* at the Pagoda, which Mhtoon Pah would certainly attend, as his new shrine drew many curious gazers to the Temple. It would also draw the inhabitants of Paradise Street out of the quarter, and leave the place practically deserted. For many reasons it was necessary to wait such an opportunity, though Leh Shin raved at the delay. It seemed to him that the whole plan was of his suggesting, and he did not realize that every vague question put by the Burman led him step by step to the complicated scheme.

“To-morrow I will send forth my assistant to bring me word of the next *Pwe*, so that the night may be marked in my mind, and that I shall gain pleasure in considering the nearing downfall of my enemy.”

Coryndon slipped off to his house. He was tired mentally and physically, but before he slept, he took a bundle of keys from his dispatch-box and tied them to the waist of his *loongyi*.

In the morning there was a fresh surprise for Leh Shin. His assistant refused to leave the river house, and no persuasion would lure him out to look after his master's shop. He was afraid of something or someone, and he wept and entreated to be left where he was. Leh Shin beat him and tried to drive him out, to no purpose, and in the end he prevailed over his master, whose mind was occupied with other and more weighty affairs.

Like a black shadow, Leh Shin crept about the streets, and he questioned one and another as to the festivities to be held at the Pagoda. Everywhere he heard of Mhtoon Pah's shrine, and of the great holiness of the curio dealer. Mhtoon Pah was giving a feast at the Pagoda with presents for the priests, and the night chosen was the night of the full moon.

“Art thou bidden?” asked one who remembered the day of Leh Shin's prosperity.

“It is in my thoughts, friend, to make my peace,” said Leh Shin, with an immovable face. “On the night when the moon is full, I am minded to do so.”

His words were carried back to Mhtoon Pah, who pondered over them, wondering what the Chinaman meant, finding something sinister in the sound that added to his rage against his enemy.

The day of the feast was dark and overcast, and the inhabitants of Paradise Street looked at the sky with great misgiving, but the curio dealer refused to be alarmed.

“The night will be fine, for I have greatly propitiated the *Nats*,” he said with conviction, and he lolled and smoked in his chair at an earlier hour than was usual with him.



Even as he had said, the evening began to clear, and by sunset the heavy clouds were all dispersed. A red sunset unfolded itself in a scroll of fire across the sky, and Mangadone looked as though it was illuminated by the flames of a conflagration. A strange evening, some said then, and many said after. Even the pointing man lost his jaundice-yellow and seemed to blush as he pointed up the steps. He had nothing to blush for. His master was at the summit of his power. The *Hypongyis* lauded him openly in the streets, and he was giving a feast at the Temple at which the poorest would not be forgotten.



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Yet Mhtoon Pah was not altogether easy. His eyes rolled strangely from time to time, and it was remarked by several that he walked to the end of Paradise Street and looked down the Colonnade of the Chinese quarter, standing there in thought. Old stories of the feud between him and Leh Shin were recalled in whispers and passed about.

The red of the sunset died out into rose-pink, and the effect of colour in the very air faded and dwindled. People were already dressed out in gala clothing, and streaming towards the Pagoda. The giver of the feast did not start with them. He sat in his chair, and then withdrew into his shop. A light travelled from thence to the upper story, and then with slow hesitation, Mhtoon Pah came out by the front of the house and locked the clamped padlock. He stood still for a few minutes, and then he gasped and shook his fist at the empty air, and he, too, took his way across the bridge and was lost in the shadows.

Still the stream from Wharf Street and the confluent streets flowed on up Paradise Street, and gradually only the maimed and the aged, or the impossibly youthful, were left behind, to hear of the wonders afterwards at secondhand, a secondhand likely to add rather than detract from what actually took place. Even the Colonnade was empty and silent. Shiraz had gone with the crowd to see what might be seen, and Leh Shin's assistant, furtive and watchful, and in great terror of the Burman's knife, was also in the throng that climbed the Pagoda steps.

The moon that was to have shone on Mhtoon Pah's feast rose in a yellow ring, and clouds came up, hazy, gaudy clouds that dimmed its light and made the shadows in the silent streets dense and heavy. Usually there was a police guard at the corner where Paradise Street met the Colonnade, but that night Hartley considered the police would be more necessary in the neighbourhood of the Pagoda. Mhtoon Pah did not think of this. His conscience was easy, he had propitiated the *Nats*.

The Pagoda was one blaze of light, and a thousand candles flamed before every shrine; even the oldest and most neglected had its ring of light. Small coloured lamps dotted the outlines of some of the booths, and the whole spectacle presented a moving mass of brilliant colour. Sahibs had come there. Hartley Sahib had agreed to appear for half an hour, and he too looked at the crowd with curious, travelling eyes. Coryndon might be among them, and probably was, he thought, but in any case there was little chance of his recognizing him if he were.

Mhtoon Pah had not spared magnificent display, and the crowd told each other that it was indeed a night to remember in Mangadone. Whispering winds came out and rang the Temple bells, but even when the breeze strengthened, the rain-clouds held off. It became a matter for compliment and congratulation, and Mhtoon Pah accepted his friends' flattery without pride. He was a good man, a benefactor, a shrine-builder who followed "the Way" with zeal and fervour, and besides, he had propitiated *Nats*; *Nats* who blew up storms, caused earthquakes and were evilly disposed towards men.



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Mhtoon Pah would have been at the point where a man's life touches sublimity, but for one thing. The words of Leh Shin echoed in his ears over all the applause and adulation.

"It is in my thought, friend, to make my peace. On the night of the full moon I am minded to do so."

The moon riding clear of clouds, shone out over the concourse of men and women. Anywhere among them all might be Leh Shin, the needy Chinaman, and gripping his large hands into fists, Mhtoon Pah watched for him and expected him, but watch as he might, he did not come, neither was there any sign of him among all the crowd of faces that passed and repassed before the new shrine.

XXIII

DEMONSTRATES THE TRUTH OF THE AXIOM THAT "THE UNEXPECTED ALWAYS HAPPENS"

At the time when Mhtoon Pah was standing in the centre of a gazing group before the new shrine, and trying to forget that nothing except the news of Leh Shin's hanging would give him real satisfaction, the Chinaman, accompanied by the Burman, slipped up the channel of gloom under the Colonnade and made his way into Paradise Street.

The Burman walked with an easy unconscious step, but Leh Shin crept close to the wall and started when he passed a sleeping form in a doorway. Night fears and that trembling anxiety that comes when fulfilment is close at hand were upon him. He knew that the point in view was to effect an entrance into the curio shop, the threshold of which he had not crossed since his last black hour of misfortune had struck and he had gone out a beggar.

Everything in his life lay on the other side of the shop door; all his happy, prosperous, careless days, all the good years. Every one of them was stored there just as surely as Mhtoon Pah's ivories and carved screens and silks were stored safe against the encroachment of damp and must. His old self might even be somewhere in the silent house, and it takes a special quality of courage for a man to return and walk through a doorway into the long past. For the first time for years he remembered how he had brought his little son into the shop, and how the child had laughed and crowed at the sight of amber and crystal chains.

Even Mhtoon Pah grew dim in his mind, and he dallied with the forgotten memories as he stood shaking in an archway watching the Burman cross the street. Insensibly the Burman's mania had waned in the last few hours, and he had grown silent and preoccupied, a fact that escaped Leh Shin's notice. His owl eyes blinked with the strain



of staring through the wavering light, and his memories strove with him as though in physical combat. Mhtoon Pah was no longer in the house, and instead of his shadow another influence seemed to brood there, something that called to Leh Shin, but not with the wild cry of hate. Before the days of still greater affluence Leh Shin had lived there with his little Burmese wife.



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The Burman was on his knees, having some difficulty with the lock. He could see him fighting it, and at last he saw the jerk of his hand that told that the key had turned, and that the way was clear. Leh Shin dived out of the recess and ran, a flitting shadow, across the road. The door was open, but the Burman for all his madness was not satisfied. There was a way out through the back by which they could emerge, and if the front door hung loose, careless eyes might easily be attracted to the fact. The pointing man was not there for nothing. Almost everyone looked up the steps. Even in his fury of impatience, Leh Shin saw the reason for caution, and agreed to open a window, and admit the Burman after he had locked the door again.

The moments were full of the tense agony of suspense, and he peered cautiously out from under the silk blind. A late passer-by went slowly up the street, and Leh Shin's heart beat a loud obbligato to the sound of his wooden pattens. By craning his neck as the man passed, he could just distinguish the Burman crouching behind the wooden man, who blandly indicated the heavy padlock. The wooden man lied woodenly to the effect that all was well within the curio shop, and a few minutes later the Burman swung himself over the balustrade and climbed with cat-like agility on to the window-ledge.

The darkness of the room was heavy with scent, and Leh Shin stumbled over unknown things. Coryndon struck a match and held it in the hollow of one palm as he opened the aperture in the dark lantern he carried, and lighted it. When he had done so he looked up, and taking no notice of the masses of beautiful things, he went quickly to the silk cupboard, opening it with another key on the ring.

"Leh Shin," he said, speaking in a commanding whisper, "turn thyself into an ear, and listen for me while I search."

Leh Shin nodded silently, half-stupidly it seemed, and went on tip-toes to the door that opened into the passage. All the power of the past was over him, and though he heard the Burman's curt command he hardly seemed to understand what he meant. For a little time he stood at the door, hearing the rustling whisper of yards of silk torn down and glanced over and discarded, and then he wandered almost without knowing it up the staircase and through the rooms, until the sight of Mhtoon Pah's bed and some of Mhtoon Pah's clothing recalled his mind to the reason of his being there.

He hurried down, his bare feet making no sound on the stairs, and looked into the shop again. The Burman was seated on the floor, a width of silk over his knees; all the displaced rolls had been put back. He had worked swiftly and with the greatest care that no trace of his visit should be known later.



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Leh Shin slid out again. The passage was dark as pitch, but he knew every turn and twist of its windings, and he knew that it led down to the cellars below the house. He was awake and alert now as Coryndon himself, and as he strained his ears he caught a sound. He listened again with horrible eagerness, looked back into the shop and saw the stooping head going over every yard of a roll of fine silk faithfully; and then he gripped the knife under his belt and, feeling along the wall with his free hand, followed along the corridor. Once only he glanced round and then the darkness of the corridor swallowed him from sight.

Coryndon, busy with the silk made by the lake-dwellers spread over his knees, knew nothing of Leh Shin's disappearance. The fever of chase was in his blood, and he threw the flimsy yards through his hands. Nothing, nothing, and again nothing, and again—he felt his heart swell with sudden, stifled excitement. Under his hand was a three-cornered rent, a damaged piece where a patch rather larger than his palm had been roughly cut out. His usually steady hand shook as he put the stained rag over it and fitted it into the place.

“Leh Shin,” he called, as he rose, but he called softly.

No sound answered his whisper, and he stiffened his body and listened. He had been wrong. There was a sound, but it did not come from inside the shop: it was the slow footstep of a heavy man pausing to find a key.

Coryndon listened no longer. He closed the door of the silk cupboard, bundled up the yards of silk in his arms and extinguishing the lamp darted behind a screen. It was a heavy carved teak screen, inset with silk panels embroidered with a long spray of hanging wistaria on a dark yellow ground. As he hid himself, he cursed his own stupidity. In the excitement of his desire to enter the curio shop, he had forgotten to hamper the lock with pebbles.

After what seemed an age, the door opened slowly and Mhtoon Pah came in. Something, he knew not what, had dragged him away from the Pagoda, and dragged him back to his shop. His eyes looked mad and unnatural in the light of the lantern he held in his hand, and he shut the door and stood like a dog who scents danger, and stared round the room. He walked to the silk cupboard and looked in through the glass panes, but did not open it or discover that it was unlocked. He paced round the room, stopping before the screen, his eyes still reflecting his trouble of mind.

From behind the screen, Coryndon watched every stir he made; he saw the look on his face and noted Mhtoon Pah's smallest movement. There was no evidence of thieves, and yet suspicion made itself plain in every line of the curio dealer's body. At last, with a gasping sigh, he sat before the small figure of an alabaster Gaudama and stared at it with unwinking eyes.

“I shed no blood,” he said, in a low rattling voice. “I shed no blood. My hands are clean.”

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Over and over he repeated the words, like an incantation, his voice rising and falling, until Coryndon could have emerged from his hiding and taken him by the throat.

The thought of coming out upon Mhtoon Pah crossed his mind, but his instinct held him back. He wondered desperately where Leh Shin had gone, and if he would come in upon the Burman making his strange prayer. Still Mhtoon Pah repeated the words and swayed to and fro before the image of the Buddha, and the very moments seemed to pause and listen with Coryndon. The shop was close and the air oppressive. Little trickles of sweat ran down his neck and made channels in the stain on his skin, and still Coryndon waited in tense suspense.

For nearly ten minutes Mhtoon Pah continued to rock and mutter on the floor, and then he got up, and, taking his lantern, went out by the door into the passage. Coryndon waited for the sound of a scuffle and a fall, but none came, and he was in the dark, surrounded by silence once more.

Without waiting to consider, he followed across the room and saw the swinging light go down the passage and disappear suddenly. It seemed to Coryndon that Mhtoon Pah had disappeared, as though he had gone through the wall at the end of the passage, and he followed slowly. Silence locked him in again, the dark, motionless silence of enclosed space.

He did not dare to call out again to Leh Shin, and for all that he could tell, the Chinaman might have been an arm's-reach away from him in the darkness, also waiting for some sudden thing to happen. The dark passage was an ante-chamber to some event: Coryndon's tingling nerves told him that; and he steadied himself, holding in his imagination in a close, resolute grip.

He had no way of judging the time that passed, but he guessed that it seemed longer to him than it possibly could have been; when from somewhere far below him, he heard a cry and the noise of several voices, all raised into indistinct clamour.

"More than one man," he thought, as his heart beat quickly. "*More than two,*" he added, in wonder as he strained in the effort of listening.

The noise died out, and one low wail, continuous and plaintive, filled the blank of dark silence. Coryndon felt for his matches, and knelt on the floor, feeling before him with his hands. The crying had ceased, and he touched the edge of a step. A long, steep flight began just under his hand.

He leaned back and held the match-box in his hand, knowing that he could not venture the descent in the dark, and as he took out a match a new sound caught his ear. A man was running in the dark. He heard him stumble over the lower steps as he panted fiercely and he broke into a cry as he ran, a strange, mad, sobbing cry, and he still



gasped and gave out his wordless wail as he tore past Coryndon and on along the passage and into the shop.

Coryndon heard the door bang behind him, he heard the sound of some heavy thing being dragged before it. The footsteps and the voice were not those of Leh Shin, and Coryndon knew that Mhtoon Pah had fled like a man pursued by devils, and had barricaded himself in.



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For a moment Coryndon paused, and then lighted a match. Close under his feet was the perilous edge of a staircase leading sheer down into a well-like depth of blackness. A thin scream came up to him, and without waiting to consider, he ran down quickly. At the bottom he found Mhtoon Pah's overturned lantern, and relighting it, he followed the intermittent call of fear that echoed through the damp, cavernous place he found himself in.

A closed door stood at the end of a narrow passage, and from the further side of the door a stifled sound of terror came persistently. Leh Shin sat in a huddled heap against the door, and Coryndon stooped over him, throwing the light from the lantern he carried upon him.

"I looked into his eyes," said the Chinaman, in a weak voice, "and once more he overcame me. His knife rent my arm, and I fell as though dead."

Coryndon supported him to his feet. His mind was working quickly.

"Canst thou stand by thyself?" he asked impatiently.

The Chinaman gave a nod of assent, and Coryndon hammered on the door, throwing all his weight against it, until it cracked and fell inwards under the nervous force of his slight frame.

What Coryndon expected to see, he did not know. He was following his natural instinct when he threw aside the chase and capture of Mhtoon Pah and burst into the cellar-room. It was small and close, and smelt of the foul, fruity atmosphere of mildew. The ceiling was low, and crouching in one corner was a small boy, clad only in a loin-cloth, who stared at them and screamed with fear.

"The Chinamen, the Chinamen!" he shrieked. "Mhtoon Pah, the Chinamen."

"Absalom," the name came to Coryndon's lips, as he stood staring at him. "My God, it must be Absalom."

He had spoken in English before he had time to think, and he turned to see if his self-betrayal had struck upon the confused brain of Leh Shin, but Leh Shin knew nothing and saw nothing but the face of the boy his enemy loved. He had placed the lamp on the floor and was feeling for his dagger, his eyes fascinated and his lips working soundlessly.

Coryndon caught him by the shoulder and snatched his knife from his hand.

"Fool," he said. "Wouldst thou ruin all at the end? Listen closely and attend to me. Now is the moment to cry for the police. Thine enemy is in a close net; show me swiftly the way by which I may go out of this house, and sit thou here and stir not, neither cry



out nor speak until thou hearest the police. By the way I go out will I leave the door open, and some will enter there, and others at the front of the house.”

He turned to look at the boy, who pointed at the Chinaman and continued to shriek for Mhtoon Pah. It was no moment for hesitation, though Coryndon’s thoughts went to the shop and the front door. By that door Mhtoon Pah might already have escaped, but even allowing for this, there was time to catch him again. He followed the way pointed out by the shaking hand of Leh Shin.



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"If thou fail in aught that I have told thee, or if the boy escape or suffer under thy hand, then is thine end also come," he said, as he stood for a moment in the aperture that led into a waste place at the back of the house; and then Coryndon ran through the night.

The rain had come on, teeming, relentless rain that fell in pitiless sheets out of a black sky. The roads ran with liquid mud and the stones cut Coryndon's bare feet, but he ran on, his lungs aching and his throat dry. It is not easy to think with the blood hammering in the pulses and the breath coming short through gasping lungs, but Coryndon kept his mind fixed upon one idea with steady determination. His object was to get into the house unnoticed, and to awake Hartley without betraying himself to the servants.

Hartley's bungalow was closed for the night, and the *Durwan* slept rolled in a blanket in a corner of the veranda. Coryndon held his sobbing breath and crept along the shadows, watching the man closely until the danger zone was passed, and then he ran on around the sharp angle of the house and dived into Hartley's room. In the centre stood the bed, draped in the ghostly outlines of white mosquito-curtains, and Coryndon walked lightly over the matted floor and shook the bed gently. Hartley stirred but did not wake, and Coryndon called his name and continued to call it in a low whisper. The Head of the Police stirred again and then sat up suddenly and answered Coryndon in the same low undertone.

"Get into your clothes quickly, while I tell you what has happened," said Coryndon, sitting low in the shadow of the bed, and while Hartley dressed he told him the details shortly and clearly.

The bungalow was still in darkness, and, with a candle in his hand to light him, Hartley went into his office and rang up the Paradise Street Police Station. When he came back Coryndon was standing looking through a corner of a raised chick.

"The *Durwan* is awake," he said, without turning his head. "Call him round to the front, otherwise he may see me."

"Come on, come on, man," said Hartley impatiently, "there is no time to lose."

Coryndon turned and smiled at him.

"This is where I go out of the case," he said. "I shall be back in time for breakfast tomorrow," and without waiting to argue the point he dived out into the waning darkness of the night, leaving Hartley looking helplessly after him.

XXIV

IN WHICH A WOODEN IMAGE POINTS FOR THE LAST TIME



Before the Burman left Leh Shin in charge of Absalom, he had pinned the Chinaman by the arms and spoken to him in strange, strong words that scorched clear across the chaos in his mind and made him understand a hidden thing. The fact that this man was not a mad convict, but a member of the great secret society who tracked the guilty, almost stunned the Chinaman, who knew and understood the immense power of secret societies.



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Mhtoon Pah might be driving wildly along a road leading out of Mangadone, and though one old Chinaman and a mad Burman could not stop him, the long arm of police law would grab and capture his gross body. Leh Shin sat quite still, content to rest and consider this. Telegrams flashed messages under the great bidding of authority, men sprang armed from stations in every village, the close grip of fate was not more close than the grasp of the awakened machinery of justice, and in the centre of its power Mhtoon Pah was helpless as a fly in the web of a spider.

“He travels fast, and fear is sitting on his shoulder, for he travels to his death,” he repeated over and over, swaying backwards and forwards.

He had an opium pellet hidden somewhere in his clothes, and he found it and turned it over his tongue; weariness and sleep conquered the pain, and Leh Shin sat with his head bent forward in heavy stupor. From this condition he awoke to lights and noises and the sound of a file working on iron.

The police had come and Hartley was bending over the boy, talking to him kindly and reassuring him as far as he could. Upstairs, the heavy thud of blows on the outer door of the shop echoed through the house with steady, persistent sound.

Dawn had come in real earnest, and the street, but lately returned from the excitements of the feast at the Pagoda, was thrilled by a new and much more satisfying sensation. Three blue-coated, leather-belted policemen were on the top of the steps that led to the door of the curio shop, forcing it in. The heavy bolts held, and though the padlocked chain hung idle, the door resisted all their efforts.

Hartley was down in the cellars, and his way through to the shop was blocked . . . blocked by the inner door which was also closed from inside, and somewhere within was Mhtoon Pah. He was very silent in his shop. No amount of hammering called forth any response, and even when the door gave way and the bolt fell clattering to the ground, he did not spring out.

People had sometimes wondered at the curious destiny of the wooden man. He had been there so long and had done his duty so faithfully. In rain or shine alike, he had always been in the street, eternally bowing the passers up the steps. Americans had tried to buy him, and had wished to take him home to point at other free and enlightened citizens, but Mhtoon Pah refused all offers of money. The wooden man was faithful to him, and he in his turn was, in some way, faithful to the wooden man. He had been there when Mhtoon Pah was a clerk and had indicated his rise, he had seen him take over possession of the shop, and he had been witness to many trivial things, and now he stood, the crowd behind him, and pointed silently again. It seemed right for him to point, but it was grotesque that he still smiled and bent forward.



The closed gates of the dawn opened and let in the sun, and the pale yellow light ventured across the threshold where the policemen hung back, and even the crowd in the street were silent. The light fell on a thousand small things that reflected its rays; it fell on a heavy carved box drawn across the further entrance, on the swinging glass doors of the open silk cupboard, on bowls of silver and bowls of brass, and it fell full on the thing that of all others drew the horrified eyes of the watchers.



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Mhtoon Pah, the wealthy curio dealer, the shrine builder, the friend of the powerful, hung from a beam across the centre of the low ceiling, and Mhtoon Pah was dead, strangled in a fine, silk scarf. Fine, strong silk made only by certain lake-dwellers in a wild place just across the Shan frontier.

Perhaps the destiny which Shiraz believed a man may not escape, be he as fleet as a flying stag, had caught up with him, and it was not without reason that the image had pointed at something not there years ago, not there when youth was there, and hope and love, and when Leh Shin had lived and been happy there, but to come, certainly and surely to come.

* * * * *

Hartley and Coryndon sat long over their breakfast. Coryndon's face was strained and tired, and heavy lines of fatigue were marked under his dark eyes.

"The boy was not in a condition to give any lucid explanation when I brought him back," said Hartley, "so I left him until we could both hear his story together." He called to his Bearer and gave instructions for the boy to be brought in.

Coryndon nodded silently; his eyes lit up with interest and all his listlessness vanished as he watched the door.

Following Hartley's Bearer, a small, thin boy came into the room, dressed in a white suit, with a tight white pugaree folded round his head. He shrank nervously at every sound, and when he salaamed to Hartley and Coryndon his face worked as though he was going to burst into tears.

"You have nothing to be afraid of," said Hartley kindly. "Just tell the whole truth, and explain how it was that you came to be shut up in the curio shop."

The boy's eyes grew less terrified, and he began to speak in a low, mumbling voice. He began in the middle of the account, and Hartley gently but firmly pushed him back to the beginning.

"Start with the story of the lacquer bowl," he said, talking very slowly and clearly. "We want to hear what happened about that first."

The mention of the subject of lacquer threw Absalom once more into a state of panic, but as his story progressed he became more sure of himself, and looked up, forgetting his fear in the excitement of having a really remarkable story to tell, that was listened to by Sahibs with intent interest.

In tearful, stumbling words he admitted that he and Leh Shin's assistant had been friends, and that those evil communications that corrupt not only good manners but



good morals had worked with disastrous results upon him. With his brown knuckles to his protruding eyes, he admitted, further, that he had stolen the gold lacquer bowl from the drugged and drunken seaman, and that Leh Shin's assistant had plundered him of more than half his rightful share of the profit. What remained over, he protested, he intended to give to the "Missen," testifying to the fact that his conscience was causing him uneasiness and that his natural superstition made him adopt means, not unknown to other financiers, of squaring things by a donation to a charitable object.



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He went on to explain that Mhtoon Pah had required him to come back late by an unfrequented alley, from where his master himself had admitted him into the basement of the shop. There was nothing altogether unusual about this, it appeared, as Mhtoon Pah was very strange in his ways at times. He cooked his own food for fear of poison, and was constantly suspecting some indefinite enemy of designs upon his life. What was unusual was the fact that he had been taken at once into the small cell, and that, once there, Mhtoon Pah had behaved like a madman.

Absalom could recall no coherent account of what the curio dealer had told him. He had spoken to him of murder, and told him that the Chinamen in the Quarter, headed by Leh Shin, were looking for him to kill him, and that, for his safety, he must remain hidden away. Mhtoon Pah told him that he would protect him, and that he would produce evidence to have Leh Shin hanged, and that once he was dead he would then emerge again, but not until then. He told him how Chinamen killed their victims, and his fears and terrors communicated themselves to the boy, who delivered himself up to bondage without resistance.

For weeks Absalom dragged out a miserable existence, loose when Mhtoon Pah was in the shop, but chained to the wall whenever he went out, and only for an hour after midnight was the boy ever allowed to emerge into the dark, waste garden at the back of the house. The rest of the time was spent in the cell, and Absalom broke into incoherent wailing as he called Hartley and Coryndon to witness that it had been a hard life.

As the end of his story approached, Absalom grew more dramatic and quoted the parting words of Mhtoon Pah before he went out to attend the *Pwe* at the Pagoda.

"I leave thee in fear," said he, "for thou art the apple of my eye, O Absalom, and when I am gone some calamity may befall. From whence it comes I know not, but as men look at the heaped clouds behind the hills and say, 'Lo, it will soon fall in rain,' so does my heart look out and observe darkness, and I am ill-satisfied to quit this house."

His words rang in the mind of the boy, shut into the stifling darkness below the ground, and he remembered that he cried out for help, not once but over and over again, and that his cries were eventually answered by the voice of Leh Shin, who had called him a child of vipers and threatened to enter and break him against the wall as he would a plantain. After that Absalom had refrained from crying out, and had waited silently expecting the door to open and admit Leh Shin and his last moment simultaneously. Upon the silence came the sounds of scuffling and hoarse cries, and it seemed to Absalom that Leh Shin had called out that he had already cut the heart from his ribs, and was about to force it down Mhtoon Pah's throat, and then nothing was very clear until voices and lights roused him from stupor to fresh terror and alarm.



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He knew that the door had been unlocked and that a light travelled in, held by a strange Burman, and that his terror of Leh Shin had made him see things strangely, as though from a long way off; until, at the last, the police had come and knocked the chain off his leg, and someone had told him that his master was dead and had been found hanging in the shop.

Absalom's face quivered and he began to whimper.

"And now my master is dead, and never in Mangadone shall I find such another who will care for me and give me the pleasant life in Paradise Street."

Hartley handed the boy some money.

"Take him away," he said to the Bearer. "You have told your story very well, Absalom."

He looked across at Coryndon when the room was empty, but Coryndon was fiddling with some crumbs at the edge of the table.

"Madness is the real explanation, I suppose," he said tentatively. "Madness and obsession."

"Obsession," echoed Coryndon. "That word explains almost every inexplicable act in life." He took up a knife and held it level on his palm. "There you have the normal condition, but once one end swings up you get Genius and all the Arts, or madness and crime and the obsession of one idea: one definite, over-mastering idea that drives every force harnessed to its car."

He got up and stretched his arms, and walked out through the veranda into his room, where Shiraz was folding his clothes and laying them in an open portmanteau. The old servant stood up and made a low salaam to his master.

"When the sun is down the wise traveller hurries to the Serai," Coryndon said to him. "I leave to-night for Madras, Shiraz, and you with me."

"The end of all things is just, Huzoor," replied the old man, a strange light of reflection in his dim pebble-like eyes. "Is it not written that none may rise so high, or plunge so deep, that he does not follow the hidden path to the hidden end? For like a wind that goes and returns never, or the shadow of a cloud passing over the desert, is the destiny of a man."

GLOSSARY

Almirah A press
Babu A clerk



<i>Butti</i>	Lamp
<i>Charpoy</i>	Bed
<i>Chota haziri</i>	(Little breakfast) Early morning tea
<i>Dhobie</i>	Washerman
<i>Durwan</i>	Watchman
<i>Ghee</i>	Butter
<i>Gharry</i>	Cab
<i>Gaudama</i>	Buddha
<i>Htee</i>	Topmost pinnacle
<i>Hypongyi</i>	Priests
<i>Inshallah, Huzoor</i>	God give you fortune, Prince
<i>Joss</i>	A god
<i>Khitmutghar</i>	Footman
<i>Loongyi</i>	Petticoat
<i>Napi</i>	Rotten fish
<i>Nats</i>	Tree spirits
<i>Pani walla</i>	Water carrier
<i>Pwe</i>	Feast



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<i>Serai</i>	Rest house
<i>Sirkar</i>	Government
<i>Syce</i>	Groom
<i>Tamasha</i>	A show
<i>Thakin</i>	Master
<i>Topi</i>	Hat