

Fraser William Alexander

The Three Sapphires



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PART ONE

Chapter I

From where they were on the marble terrace that reached from the palace to a little lake – the Lake of the Golden Coin – Lord Victor Gilfain and Captain Swinton could see the intricate maze of Darpore City's lights down on the plain, six miles away.

Over the feather-topped sal forest behind the palace a gorgeous moon was flooding the earth with light, turning to ribbons of gold the circling ripples on the jade lake, where mahseer and burbel splashed in play.

Rajah Darpore was leaning lazily against the fretwork marble balustrade just where the ghat steps dipped down under the water. He was really Prince Ananda, the *shazada*, for down in the city of glittering lights still lived his father, the maharajah; but it had become customary to address the prince as rajah.

A servant came and took their empty sherry glasses.

Prince Ananda was saying in his soft Oriental voice that the Oxford training had set to truer rhythm: "After that gallop up in the tonga I always find it restful to come out here and have my sherry and bitters before dinner."

"It's ripping; I mean that." And Lord Victor Gilfain stretched his slim arm toward the blinking lights of Darpore.

"I hope you're comfortable in the bungalow," the prince said solicitously. "I hadn't time when you arrived this morning to see just how you were placed. I haven't any bungalows up here, either; they're all in the cantonments."

"We're fitted up regal," Lord Victor answered; "horses, servants – everything."

"Well, I'm very glad you came," Ananda said. "At Oxford we often talked about the shooting you were to have here, didn't we?"

"Rather."

"But I never thought Earl Craig would let you come. Having lived in India in his younger days, I fancied he'd be gun-shy of the country."

Lord Victor laughed. "I got marching orders from the gov'nor."

The prince tapped a cigarette on the marble rail, lighted it from the fireball a watchful servant glided into range with, blew a puff of smoke out toward the little lake, and, with a smile, murmured dreamily: "I wonder if I knew the girl?"

"You didn't, old chap; though you've pipped the gov'nor's idea all right. Swinton here is my keeper; he's supposed to be immune."

"Well, you're safe at Darpore. There's absolutely nobody here just now. Everybody's in Calcutta."

"I fancy the gov'nor cabled out to ask about that before he packed me off." And Gilfain chuckled, a tribute to his reputation for gallantry.

"I should say you're in good hands, too." Ananda's white teeth showed in a smile that irritated Swinton. When Prince Ananda had met them at the train Swinton had seen his black eyes narrow in a hard look. He had been wondering if the prince knew his real position – that he was Captain Herbert, of the secret service. But that was impossible. Probably the prince was mistrustful of all Europeans.

Then Ananda resumed, in an introspective way: "That's England all over; they're as much afraid of breaking caste by marrying lower down as we are here. In fact" – Darpore raised his hand and pointed to the distant city – "the maharajah is sitting yonder, probably in his glass prayer room, listening to some wandering troubadour singing the amorous love songs of 'Krishna and the Milkmaids,' and his mind is quite at rest, knowing that the Brahman caste is so strong that it protects itself in the way of misalliance."

"But you?" Lord Victor blurted out boyishly. "Damn it, prince, you put your caste under the pillow at Oxford!"

Ananda laughed. "Personally it is still under the pillow. You see, when I crossed the 'black water' I broke my caste. When the time comes that it is necessary for the welfare of Darpore state that I take it on again – well, I may. To tell you the truth, the maharajah is not a Brahman at all; he's something very much greater, if he'd only think so; he's a rajput of the Kshatri caste, the warrior caste."

Swinton, sitting back in his chair, had closed his eyes, experiencing a curious pantomimic effect in listening to the English voice leisurely drawling these curiously startling sentiments; then when he opened them suddenly there was the lithe figure of the Oriental, the Indian prince. It didn't ring true; there was a disturbing something about it that kept his nerves tingling. Perhaps it was that he had come to delicately investigate.

"And this," Ananda continued, indicating the palace and the sal forest beyond. "I mean my desire for this and not that" – and the ruby point of his cigarette enveloped with a sweeping gesture the city in the plain – "is because of a Raj Gond cross away back. They were primitive nature worshippers – tiger gods and all that. Listen!" He held up a finger, his eyes tense, as from high up on the hills, deep in the forest, came the hoarse, grating call of a leopard. Immediately from just behind the palace the call was taken up and answered by another leopard.

"By Jove!" Gilfain sprang to his feet.

The prince laughed. "That's one of my captives; I've got quite a menagerie. We'll see them in the day, first time you're out. That's the Raj Gond taint. I couldn't stand it down there, so the maharajah let me build this bungalow up here. This whole plateau we're on contains a buried city. Who built it or who lived in it nobody knows. The marble you see in the palace was all taken from the buildings beneath the roots of these sal trees. I'll show you something; we've got time before the others arrive for dinner."

He led the two men down wide, marble steps to the water's edge, and indicated a cable, the end of which, coming up out of the lake, crept into the bank beneath a large marble slab.

"What's it attached to?" Lord Victor asked.

"This lake is artificial. If it were daylight, and we were up on the bank, we could see seven of them. The story of this cable runs that when the king of this city that is buried was dying he commanded that all his jewels and weapons and his body be placed in a golden boat and sunk in the centre of this lake. They say the boat is attached to the other end of this cable; I don't know."

"Has anybody ever tried to pull it up?" Swinton asked, still feeling that he was helping on the pantomime.

"Yes; once an avaricious nawab got together several elephants and many men, and, fastening to the cable, started to pull the boat up. It came easily at first, but just when they all got very careless and were starting to rush it the magic thing slipped back, pulling them in, and they were all drowned. There's a legend that if a holy man stands here at midnight of a full moon when the mhowa tree is in bloom, with the three sacred sapphires of our mythology in his hand, the king will rise in his golden boat if the holy man has been ordained of the gods to be a leader of his people."

Back on the terrace, Prince Ananda asked: "Were you in the service out here, captain?" Very inconsequential was the tone of this query that was so pointed in reality.

"I was on the Bombay side for a time; my health petered out, and I had to go back to Belati."

"I see the lights of Major Finnerty's dogcart coming up the hill," Ananda announced.

"Coming to dinner with us – any ladies, prince?" Lord Victor queried.

"No; this is what I call a *pilkana* or play dinner. After we've dined I'm going to show you some Indian *tamasha*. I asked Finnerty because he's great on these jungle friends of mine – should be able to find you some tiger; I don't shoot."

The moon showed an apologetic smile curving the lips clear of his brilliant white teeth as Ananda, turning to Swinton, added: "I never kill any of them myself; I'm a Buddhist in that way."

"Do you believe in reincarnation, prince?" Gilfain questioned.

"I'm afraid I don't believe in anything that's not demonstrable; but I do know that it is a good thing to not take life. Finnerty is the government keddah sahib here, and I'm going to ask his help in giving you some sport, Gilfain. My private archæologist, Doctor Boelke, is coming for dinner also. The trouble about him is the more he drinks the more Teutonically sombre he becomes."

The prince excused himself, saying: "I think they're pretty well coming together."

The two men could hear a heavy tonga clatter up, followed by the light, whirring grind of dogcart wheels and a medley of voices. As a group came through the palace, Swinton could hear the heavy guttural of a German's "*Ach, Gott!*" about something displeasing.

There was a brief introduction and an immediate departure to the dining room.

After dinner, as they sat at little tables on the moonlit terrace over their coffee and cheroots, Major Finnerty, taking from his pocket an oval stone the size of a hen's egg, said: "I've got a curiosity, prince; I wonder if you can read the inscription on it."

"What is it, major?" Darpore asked as he held it toward an electric lamp on the table.

"It's a very fine sapphire in the rough. Where the end has been cut it is of the deepest pigeon blue."

"I can't read the characters because they are Persian, and I only know the Devanagari, but Professor Boelke can," and Ananda passed it to the German.

"Yes, it is Persian," Doctor Boelke said. With a pencil he wrote on a piece of paper some strange-looking characters. "It means *Rikaz*, and is nothing of mystery."

Swinton, who was watching the German's eyes, felt that they were passing some hidden meaning to the prince.

"*Rikaz* means a mine," Doctor Boelke continued; "a place where stones or metal are found; dot's all."

Swinton intercepted the stone on its way back, and after examining it passed it on.

"Dot is a big sapphire, major," Boelke said; "where did you get it? And for vat is der hole on der other end from der inscription?"

"It's a curious story," Finnerty answered. "A jungle *hethni*– female elephant – came down out of the forest and walked right in on us, by Jove! I'll describe Burra Moti; that's what we call her, the Big Pearl. She's a female with large tusks; she has four toes on each hind foot, and I haven't another elephant that has more than three. She's different in other ways; has two fingers on the end of her trunk instead of one; she has immense ears and a hollow back; she never lies down."

Doctor Boelke leaned forward, adjusted his big glasses, and said: "My friend, you haf described an African elephant."

"Yes," the major answered; "that's what Burra Moti is."

"I admit it's some mystery," Finnerty said slowly; "it has bothered me. All I know is that Burra Moti, who is undoubtedly an African, came down out of the jungle to the keddah because she was going to calve. What taught her that she'd be safe with her calf in the keddah I don't know; where she came from I don't know. Around her neck was a strap of sambur skin to which was attached a bell, and morning and evening, at a certain hour, Burra Moti would reach up with her trunk and ring the bell. Last evening the mahout didn't hear it at the usual hour – eight o'clock – so he went down to where Burra Moti stood under a big tamarind tree and found a native – looked to be a hillman – crushed flat where she had put her big foot on him. Beside him lay the bell, and the strap had been

cut with a sharp knife. The bell was flattened out of shape, Moti in her rage evidently having stepped on it. The clapper of that bell was this sapphire, hung by the little hole in the end."

"By Jove!" Lord Victor ejaculated. "My gov'nor would give a few sovs for that Sapphire; he's entirely daffy on the subject of Indian curios."

"If it's for sale I'll give a thousand rupees for it, major," the prince added.

"I've got to fix that bell up again for Burra Moti," Finnerty answered; "she's been in a towering rage all day – keeps slipping her trunk up to her neck like a woman looking for a necklace she has lost."

"Oh, I say!" Gilfain expostulated. "Rather tallish order, old chap, don't you think? Almost too deuced human, what?"

Major Finnerty turned in his leisurely way to Gilfain: "If a chap spends several years with elephants he'll come devilish near believing in reincarnation, my young friend." Then, addressing Darpore more particularly, he added: "I want to tell you one extraordinary thing Burra Moti did when her calf was born. The little one was as though it were dead, not breathing. With her front foot the mother pressed the calf's chest in and out gently – artificial respiration if you like, gentlemen – and kept it up until the calf breathed naturally. But I'm sorry to say the little one died next day."

Swinton waited for some comment on the sapphire-clappered bell. He now asked: "Do you suppose, major, it was just a bell that the thief wanted?"

"No; that native had never been seen around the lines before. It's not likely he would slip into a strange place and take chances of being killed for a thing of not much value – a bell."

"Perhaps it's one of those bally sacred things," Lord Victor interjected.

Swinton saw Ananda's eyes send a swift glance to the German's face.

"Well," Finnerty said meditatively, "I think the thief knew of the sapphire stone in that bell, and it may have belonged to some temple; I mean Burra Moti may have been a sacred elephant."

"If that were the case," Darpore objected, "they'd come and claim the elephant."

"The stone being in the rough, there must be a mine near where the elephant was equipped with the bell," Swinton suggested.

"I had an idea," Finnerty said, "that if I rode Burra Moti off into the jungle and let her drift she might go back to where she came from; I might find the mine that way."

As Finnerty ceased speaking the high-pitched voice of a woman singing floated down to them from higher up on the hill. Ananda clapped his hands; a servant slipped from a door in the palace, and, salaaming deeply, listened to an order from the prince. When he re-entered the palace the row of lights that had illumined the terrace went out, leaving the sitters in the full glamour of a glorious moon.

Ananda made a gesture toward the hill from which the weird chant came. "That is the Afghan love song," he explained. "The girl represents a princess who was in love with a common soldier. After a great battle she went out on the plain, searching for him among the wounded and slain; so now this girl will come down in her singing search."

The listeners could now make out the weird music of the many-stringed fiddle that a companion played as accompaniment to the girl's voice. The prince swept his hand toward the great disk of silver that had lifted above the sal trees, saying: "My people believe that luminous, dead planet up there is the soul, *purusha*, of Brahm the Creator; fitting light for the path of a princess who is singing out of the desolation of her soul."

Nearer and nearer came the wailing plaint of the girl looking for her dead soldier. Once its vibrant tone stirred the leopard in his cage, and he called: "Wough-wa, wough-wa, wah!"

"That's 'Pard's' mating call," the prince explained. "Even he, jungle devil, feels something in that love song – in the sorrowing voice that does not anger him."

A peacock, wakened from his sleep by the leopard, sent out a warning call to jungle dwellers that a killer was afoot. "Meough, meough, meough!" he cried in shrill discordancy.

The song of love-search drifted in from the sal trees, through the mango tope beyond the palace, along the banks of the Lake of the Golden Coin, and up the ghat steps to the terrace.

In the moonlight the girl's face, as she came slowly up the steps, was beautiful; her grace of movement was exquisite. Followed by the musician, she passed along the terrace with no notice of the prince or his guests. At the far end, she dropped to her knees beside a figure that had lain there – her slain soldier lover. She lifted his head into her lap, and the song rose in an intensity of lament; then it died down to a croon; the desolate woman's head drooped until her luxuriant hair shrouded the soldier's face. Suddenly the crooning chant was stilled; the girl's face thrust up through its veil of hair, and the eyes, showing a gleam of madness in the moonlight, swept the vault above.

"She has become crazed by the death of her lover," the prince explained softly. As the girl commenced a low chant he added: "She now asks of the gods what she must do to receive back his life. She thinks, in her madness, they answer that if she dances so that it pleases Krishna the soldier will be restored to life."

Tenderly the girl laid the head of her lover down, kissing him on the staring eyes, and then commenced a slow, sinuous dance, the violin, with its myriad wire strings, pulsating with sobs. The soft, enveloping moon shimmer lent a mystic touch of unreality to the elfin form that seemed to float in rhythmic waves against the dark background of the sal forest. Faster and faster grew the dance, more and more weird the wail of the violin, and the plaint from the girl for her lover's life became a frenzied cry. Now she had failed; her strength was gone; death still held in its cold fingers the heart of her lover; she reeled in exhausted delirium, but, as she would have fallen, the lover rose from death and caught her to his breast.

But the gift of the gods – his life – had been but transitional – a bitter mockery – for the princess lay dead against his pulsing heart. Smothering the unresponsive eyes and lips with kisses, he gently placed the girl upon the ground, and, standing erect, defied the gods – called them to combat.

Prince Ananda interpreted the words and gestures of the gladiator as the moonlight painted in gold and copper his bronze form.

In answer to his challenge a sinister form glided from the shadow of the wall.

"Bhairava, the evil black god, who rides abroad at night," Ananda explained, adding, as the combat began: "They are two Punjabi wrestlers. The lover is Balwant Singh, which means 'Strong Lion;' Bhairava, whom you see is so grotesquely painted black, is Jai Singh, 'Lion of Victory.'"

The struggle was Homeric, as Balwant Singh, the muscles on his back rising in ridges, strove to conquer the black god. In vain his strength, for the god, sinuous as a serpent, slipped from the lover's grasp with ease. At last Jai Singh's black arm lay across the lover's throat, anchored to the shoulder by a hand grip; there was a quick twist to the arm, a choking gasp from Balwant Singh, and, with startling suddenness, he was on his back, both shoulders pinned to the mat.

The tragic drama was at an end. The lover, slain by the gods he had defied, lay beside his dead princess.

"Ripping!" Lord Victor cried. "In Drury Lane that would cause no end of a sensation as a pantomime. Hello! By Jove! I say!"

For even as the young man cackled, some heavy shadow, some mystic trick of the Orient, had faded from their eyes the three figures of the drama.

Prince Ananda, with a soft laugh at Gilfain's astonishment, said: "Bharitava, the evil god, has spirited the lover and the princess away."

"My friends, dot to me brings of importance a question," Doctor Boelke commented. "How is it dot a few Englishmen rule hundreds of millions, and we see dot der Hindus are stronger as der white man; no Englishman could wrestle those men."

"I fancy it's hardly a question of what we call brute force where England governs," Swinton claimed.

"Oh, of course!" And Doctor Boelke laughed. "England always ruling people because of philanthropy. Ah, yes, I hear dot!"

"Do you mean to say, sir" – and Lord Victor's voice was pitched to a high treble of indignation – "that we have no wrestlers at home as good as these Hindu chaps? Damn it, sir, it's rot! A man like Fitzalban, who was at Oxford in my last year, would simply disjoint these chaps like wooden dolls."

The doctor puffed his billowy cheeks in disdain, and Finnerty contributed: "Don't underrate these Punjabi wrestlers, my young friend; there are devilish few professionals even who can take a fall out of them."

"The major should know," and Darpore nodded pleasantly; "he has grappled with the best that come out of the Punjab."

Gilfain, his spirit still ruffled by the Prussian's sneer at England, declared peevishly: "I wish there was a chance to test the bally thing; I'd bet a hundred pounds on the Englishman, even if I'd never seen him wrestle."

Boelke, with a sibilant smack of his lips, retorted: "You are quite safe, my young friend, with your hundred pounds, because, you see, there is no Englishman here to put der poor Hindu on his back."

"I'm not quite so sure about that, Herr Doctor."

Boelke turned in his chair at the deliberate, challenging tone of Finnerty's voice. He looked at the major, then gave vent to an unpleasant laugh.

"There is one thing a Britisher does not allow to pass – a sneer at England by a German." Finnerty hung over the word "German."

"Vell," the doctor asked innocently, "you vil prove I am wrong by wrestling der Punjabi, or are we to fight a duel?" And again came the disagreeable laugh.

"If the prince has no objection, I don't know why I shouldn't take a fall out of one of these chaps. It's a game I'm very fond of."

"And, Herr Doctor, I'll have you on for the hundred," Lord Victor cried eagerly.

"Just as you like, major," the prince said. "There'll be no loss of caste, especially if we sit on our sporting friend over there and curb his betting propensities."

"Right you are, rajah," Finnerty concurred. "We wrestle just to prove that Britain is not the poor old effete thing the Herr Doctor thinks she is."

Prince Ananda sent for his secretary, Baboo Chunder Sen, and when the baboo came said: "Ask Jai Singh if he would like to try a fall with the major sahib."

Balwant Singh came back with the baboo when he had delivered this message. Salaaming, he said: "Huzoor, the keddah sahib has his name in our land, the Land of the Five Rivers. We who call men of strength brothers say that he is one of us. No one from my land has come back boasting that he has conquered the sahib. Jai Singh, in the favor of the gods, has achieved to victory over me, so Jai Singh will meet with the sahib."

"Fine!" Finnerty commented. "I'll need wrestling togs, prince."

"The baboo will take you to my room and get a suit for you."

Finnerty put the sapphire in a silver cigarette box that was on the table, saying: "I'll leave this here," and followed Chunder Sen into the palace.

"Devilish sporting, I call it; Finnerty is Irish, but he's a Britisher," Gilfain proclaimed. "He'll jolly well play rugby with your friend, Herr Boelke."

"In my country ve do not shout until der victory is obtained; ve vill see," and the doctor puffed noisily at his cheroot.

But the fish eyes of the professor were conveying to Prince Ananda malevolent messages, Swinton fancied. The whole thing had left a disturbing impression on his mind; Boelke's manner suggested a pre-arrangement with the prince.

The doctor's unpleasing physical contour would have furnished strong evidence against him on any charge of moral obliquity. He sat on the chair like a large-paunched gorilla, his round head topping the fatty mound like a coconut. His heavy-jowled face held a pair of cold, fishy eyes; coarse

hair rose in an aggressive hedge from the seamed, low forehead, and white patches showed through the iron-grey thatch where little nicks had been made in the scalp by duelling swords at Heidelberg. He was a large man, but the suggestion of physical strength was destroyed by a depressing obeseness.

A tall, fine-looking rajput came across the terrace toward Darpore.

"Ah, Darna Singh," the prince greeted, rising; "you are just in time to see a *kushti* that will delight your warrior heart. This is my brother-in-law, Nawab Darna Singh," he continued, turning to Swinton and Gilfain and repeating their entitled names.

The rajput salaamed with grave dignity, saying the honour pleased him.

"Have a seat," Ananda proffered.

"I have intruded, rajah," Darna Singh explained, "because there is trouble at the temple. The mahanta is at the gate – "

"Show him in, Darna. I can't see him privately just now; the keddah sahib and Jai Singh are going to make *kushti*."

While the rajput went to the gate for the mahanta, Prince Ananda said apologetically: "Even a prince must show deference to the keeper of the temple."

Darna Singh returned, accompanied by an animated skeleton of mummy hue. Draping the skin-covered bones was a loin cloth and a thread that hung diagonally from one shoulder to the waist.

With a deep salaam, the mahanta, trembling with indignation, panted: "Dharama comes in the morning with his Buddhistic devils to desecrate the temple by placing in it that brass Buddha – accursed image! – he has brought from the land of Japan."

"Ah!" The exclamation was from Lord Victor as Finnerty appeared.

"Here, Darna," Ananda cried, "hold the mahanta till this is over; I don't want to miss it."

Darna Singh led the Brahmin beyond the table at which the sahibs were grouped, explaining that Prince Ananda would speak to him presently.

Now Finnerty, coming into the light, slipped a robe from his shoulders and stood beside Jai Singh, looking like a sculptured form of ivory.

Swinton caught his breath in a gasp of admiration; he had never seen such a superb being. Jai Singh, that a moment before had seemed of matchless mould, now suffered by comparison. Each move of the Irishman was like the shifting of a supple gladiator. The shoulders, the loins, the overlapping muscles of his arms were like those of Hercules.

Lord Victor was muttering: "My word! Poor old decadent England – what!"

Several times as he sat there Swinton had felt vibrant thrills, as if eyes that blazed with intensity were on him, and always as he had turned in answer to the unseen influence he had instinctively looked to a jalousied balcony above them. Now he caught the glint of white fingers between the leaves of the lattice as if a hand vibrated them. He could have sworn Finnerty's erect head had drooped in recognition.

From the first grapple there was evident savagery on the part of Jai Singh. He had toyed leisurely with Balwant; now he bore in like a savage beast.

"By gad!" Lord Victor growled once, "that Hindu bounder is fighting foul!"

Finnerty had gone to his hands and knees in defence. The Punjabi, lying along the arched back, thrust his right hand under the major's armpit as if seeking for a half-Nelson; but his hand, creeping up to the neck, straightened out to thrust two fingers into Finnerty's nostrils, the big thumb wedged against the latter's windpipe. In a flash the white man was in a vise, for Jai Singh had gripped the wrist of his fouling arm with his left hand, and was pressing the forearm upon the back of his opponent's neck.

In his foul endeavour Jai Singh had lost defence. A hand took him by the left wrist, a corkscrew twist broke his hold, and he commenced to go over forward in tortured slowness, drawn by the wracking pain of his twisted joints. One of his shoulder blades lay against the mat when, by a mighty wrench, he freed his wrist and pirouetted on his round bullet head clear of Finnerty's clutch.

Again, as they stood hand to shoulder, making a feint as if to grapple, Jai Singh tried a foul. The heel of Finnerty's palm, thrust with dynamic force upward, caught him under the chin with such power that he all but turned a complete somersault backward.

This was too much for Lord Victor. With a cry of "Well bowled, old top!" he sprang to his feet, in his excitement careening his glass of whisky and soda, the liquid splashing across the fat legs of Doctor Boelke.

Like a hippopotamus emerging from a pool, Boelke reared upward; the table, at a thrust from his hand, reeled groggily on its frail legs and then volplaned, shooting its contents over the marble floor.

"Never mind," Prince Ananda admonished; "leave it to the servants."

Finnerty was wrestling with caution – waiting for the inevitable careless chance that would give him victory.

Jai Singh's foul tactics confirmed Swinton's suspicion that the bout was a prearranged plot; the Punjabi was acting under orders. The captain had served in the Punjab and knew that native wrestlers were not given to such practices. He watched Prince Ananda, but the latter's immobile face gave no sign of disapproval.

A startled gasp from Lord Victor caused him to look at the wrestlers. He had seen enough of wrestling to know what had happened. Jai Singh's weight rested on one leg he had crooked behind Finnerty's knee joint, and he was pulling up against this wedge the major's foot by a hold on the big toe. It was a barred hold in amateur wrestling; a chance to administer pain, instead of an exhibition of strength or agility. The captain felt, with a sense of defeat, that Finnerty must yield to the pain or have his leg broken.

There was a hideous grin of triumph on the face of Jai Singh. Then, almost before Swinton's brain could register these startling things, the leer of victory vanished; the Punjabi's lips framed some startled cry; his hands fell to his side; his torso drooped forward, and he collapsed as though his legs were paralysed.

Finnerty half rose and turned the Punjabi over on his back, pressing his shoulders to the mat; then he took the black nose between finger and thumb and tweaked it.

"Topping! Ripping!" Gilfain shouted the words. "It was coming to the cad!"

The others sat numbed to silence by the extraordinary suddenness of the collapse. Each one understood the debasing retribution the keddah sahib had meted out to his foul-fighting opponent.

Swinton, watching, saw consternation pall the heavy-jowled face of the Prussian. The debonair air had fallen away from the prince. To hide his chagrin he called Darna Singh to bring the mahanta to him. He spoke rapidly in a low voice to the priest, and when he had finished, the latter departed, accompanied by Darna Singh.

When Finnerty came back to them Prince Ananda had regained his sangfroid; he smiled a greeting, holding out his hand, and said: "You deserve to win."

"I should say so!" Gilfain added. "That rotter would have been mobbed at a bout in London."

Boelke mumbled: "You are very strong, major."

Finnerty, peeping into the silver box that had been replaced by the servants on the table, asked: "Any of you chaps got that bell clapper? I left it here."

Nobody had; nobody knew anything about it. Instinctively each one felt his pockets to be sure that, in the excitement of the struggle, he hadn't put it away; then each one remembered that he hadn't seen it since the major deposited it in the silver box.

"The table was upset," Swinton said. "Look on the floor."

Even Prince Ananda joined in the search. Then the servants were questioned. They knew nothing of its whereabouts; all denied that they had seen the keddah sahib put it in the box.

A little constraint crept into the search. Prince Ananda's brother-in-law and the temple priest had been there and had departed; the prince's servants had been going and coming.

"It may have rolled off the terrace into the water," Prince Ananda suggested. "In the morning I'll have the lake searched at this point."

"It doesn't matter," Finnerty declared.

"It does, my dear major," Ananda objected. "I'll put pressure on the servants, for I'm very much afraid one of them has stolen it. At any rate, you've been looted in my house, and if I don't find your sapphire you shall have the finest jewel Hamilton Company can send up from Calcutta."

"My young friend was too enthusiastic," Doctor Boelke said with a mirthless grin; "he has also soaked my legs."

The savage wrestling bout and the mysterious loss of the sapphire brought a depressing vacuity of speech. The guests were soon waiting in the courtyard for the tonga.

Swinton stepped over to where Finnerty waited in his dogcart while a servant lighted the lamps, saying: "Prince Ananda has arranged that we are to call on the maharajah at ten o'clock to-morrow, and I'd like to ride over to see your elephants later on."

"Come for tiffin," the major invited.

As the tonga carrying Lord Victor and Swinton was starting, Ananda said: "I've told the driver to show you the Maha Bodhi Temple and a pagoda on your way; it is there that Prince Sakya Singha attained to the Buddha. Good night."

Halfway down the tonga stopped, and their eyes picked up, off to the right, a ravishing sight. A gloomed hill, rising like a plinth of black marble, held on its top a fairy-lined structure. Like a gossamer web or a proportioned fern, a wooden temple lay against the moonlit sky; beside it, towering high to a slender spire, was the pagoda, its gold-leafed wall softened to burnished silver by the gentling moon. A breeze stirred a thousand bells that hung in a golden umbrella above the spire, and the soft tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of their many tongues was like the song of falling waters on a pebbled bed till hushed by a giant gong that sent its booming notes reverberating across the hills as some temple priest beat with muffled club its bronzed side.

"Devilish serene sort of thing, don't you think?" Lord Victor managed to put his poetic emotions into that much prose banality.

The driver, not understanding the English words, said in Hindustani: "There will be much war there to-morrow when they fight over their gods."

As if his forecast had wakened evil genii of strife up in the hills, the fierce blare of a conch shell, joined in clamour by clanging temple bells, came across the valley, shattering its holy calm.

"My aunt! What a beastly din!" Lord Victor exclaimed.

"War," the driver announced indifferently.

Human voices pitched to the acute scale of contending demons now sat astride the sound waves.

"Gad! Dharama has stolen a march on the mahanta and is sneaking in his Buddha by moonlight," Swinton declared.

The tumult grew in intensity; torches flashed and dimmed in and out about the temple like evil eyes.

"Shall we take a peep, old top?" Lord Victor asked, eagerness in his voice.

Swinton spoke to the driver, asking about the road, and learned that, turning off to the right at that point, it wound down the mountainside and up the other hill to the temple.

Just at that instant there came from down the road the clatter of galloping hoofs and the whirling bang of reckless wheels. In seconds the keddah sahib's dogcart swirled into view; he reined up, throwing his horse almost on his haunches.

"That mongrel Buddhist, Dharama, is up to his deviltry; I've got to stop him!"

He was gone.

At a sharp order from Swinton the tonga followed, the driver, eager to see the fray, carrying them along at perilous speed. At each sharp turn, with its sheer drop of a hundred feet or more on the outside, the tonga swung around, careening to one of its two wheels, the other spinning idly in the

air. The little ruby eyes in the back of the dogcart's lamps twinkling ahead seemed to inspire their driver with reckless rivalry.

When they arrived at the temple the battle had reached its climax. The brass Buddha, its yellow face with the sightless eyes of meditation staring up in oblivious quietude to the skies, was lying all alone just within the temple gate. Without, Dharama and his Buddhists battled the smaller force of the mahanta, who led it with fanatical fervour.

They saw the keddah sahib towering above the fighting mob, his spread arms raised as if exhorting them to desist from strife. The combatants broke against his body like stormy waves, his words were drowned by the tumult of the passion cries.

Swinton and Lord Victor dropped from the tonga, and as they ran toward the riot something happened. A native close to Dharama struck at Finnerty with a long fighting staff, the blow falling on an arm the Irishman thrust forward as guard. Like an enraged bull bison, the keddah sahib charged. Dharama and the man who had struck were caught by the throats and their heads knocked together as though they were puppets; then Dharama was twisted about, and the foot of the big Irishman lifted him with a sweeping kick. He catapulted out of the fray. Then the keddah sahib's fists smote here and there, until, discouraged by the fate of their leader and the new re-enforcements – for Lord Victor and Captain Swinton were now busy – the Buddhists broke and fled.

"Faith, it's a busy night, captain!" Finnerty exclaimed as he wiped perspiration from his forehead. He turned to the mahanta, and, pointing to the yellow god, said: "Roll that thing down the hill!"

In a frenzy of delight the temple adherents laid hands upon the brass Buddha. It took their united strength to drag and roll it to the edge of the sloping hillside a hundred feet away. The sahibs stood on the brink, watching the image that glinted in the moonlight as it tumbled grotesquely over and over down the declivity till it plunged into the muddy waters of Gupti Nala.

"There'll be no more trouble over installing that idol in the temple for some time," Finnerty chuckled.

Then they climbed into tonga and dogcart, and sped homeward.

Chapter II

The bungalow Swinton and Lord Victor occupied was in a large, brick-walled compound, in the cantonments, that was known as the Dak Compound, because it contained three bungalows the maharajah maintained for visiting guests.

The tonga, finishing its clattering trip from the Maha Bodhi Temple, swung through the big gate to a circular driveway, bordered by a yellow-and-green mottled wall of crotons, here and there ablaze with the flaming blood-red hibiscus and its scarlet rival, the Shoe flower. Swinton took a deep draft of the perfumed air that drifted lazily from pink-cheeked oleander and jasmine; then he cursed, for a brackish taint of hookah killed in his nostrils the sweet perfume.

To his right lay one of the guest bungalows, and a light, hanging on the veranda, showed a billowy form of large proportions filling an armchair. Somebody must have arrived, for the bungalow had been empty, the captain mentally noted.

In bed, Swinton drifted from a tangle of queries into slumber. Why had the German drawn Finnerty into wrestling the Punjabi? Why had some one stolen the uncut sapphire? What was behind the prince's pose in religion? Who was the woman behind the lattice – yes, it was a woman – Then Swinton drowsed off.

It is soul racking to awaken in a strange room, startled from sleep by unplaceable sounds, to experience that hopeless lostness, to mentally grope for a door or a window in the way of a familiar mark to assist one's location. When Captain Swinton was thrust out of deep slumber by a demoniac tumult he came into consciousness in just such an environment. Lost souls torturing in Hades could not have given expression to more vocal agony than the clamour that rent the night.

Swinton was on his feet before he had mentally arranged his habitat. He groped in the gloom for something of substance in the sea of uncertainty; his hands fell upon the table, and, miraculously, a match box. Then he lighted a lamp, pushed out into the passage, and saw Lord Victor's pajamaed figure coming toward him.

"What a bally row!" the latter complained sleepily. "Must be slaughter!"

Out on the veranda, they located the vocal barrage; it was being fired from the bungalow in which they had seen the bulky figure in white. Perhaps the vociferous one had seen their light, for he was crying: "Oh, my lord and master, save me! Tiger is biting to my death! I am too fearful to explore across the compound. Heroic masters, come with guns!"

"Oh, I say! What a devilish shindy!" Lord Victor contributed petulantly. "Is that boulder pulling our legs?"

"It's a baboo, and a baboo has no sense of humour; he doesn't pull legs," the captain answered. "But he does get badly funkyed."

Another voice had joined issue. Swinton knew it for a "chee-chee" voice, a half-caste's.

"Yes, sar," the new pleader thrust out across the compound; "we are without firearms, but a prowling tiger is waiting to devour us."

He was interrupted by a bellowing scream from his companion, an agonised cry of fright. As if in lordly reproach, the clamour was drowned by a reverberating growl: "Waugh-h-h!"

"Gad, man! Devilish like a leopard!" And the captain darted into his room to reappear with a magazine rifle. A bearer came running in from the cook-house, a lighted lantern in his hand, at that instant.

"Here, Gilfain," Swinton called, "grab the lantern. If it's a leopard he'll slink away when he sees the light, so we may not get a shot. Come on!" He was dropping cartridges into the magazine of his rifle. "Pardus is probably sneaking around after a goat or a dog. Come on; keep close behind me so the light shines ahead."

"I'm game, old chappie," Lord Gilfain answered cheerily. "Push on; this is spiffen!"

The gravel was cruel to their bare feet, but in the heat of the hunt they put this away for future reference. As they neared the other bungalow the captain suddenly stopped and threw his gun to his shoulder; then he lowered it, saying: "Thought I saw something slip into the bushes, but I don't want to pot a native."

They reached the bungalow, and as Swinton pushed open a wooden door he was greeted by wordy tumult. Screamed phrases issued from a bedroom that opened off the room in which they stood.

"Go away, jungle devil! O Lord! I shall be eaten!"

"Don't be an ass! Come out here!" the captain commanded.

The person did. One peep through the door to see that the English voice did not belong to a ghost, and a baboo charged out to throw his arms around the sahib, sobbing: "Oh, my lord, I am safe! I will pray always for you."

Pushed off by Swinton, he collapsed in a chair, weeping in the relief of his terror.

The baboo's prodigal gratitude had obliterated a companion who had followed him from the room. Now the latter stood in the radiancy of Lord Victor's lantern, saying: "Baboo Lall Mohun Dass has been awed by a large tiger, but we have beat the cat off."

The speaker was a slim, very dark half-caste clad in white trousers and jaran coat.

"It is Mr. Perreira." And Baboo Dass stopped sobbing while he made this momentous announcement.

"What's all the outcry about, baboo?" the captain asked.

"Sar," Baboo Dass answered, "I will narrative from the beginning: I am coming from Calcutta to-day, and Mr. Perreira is old friend, college chum, he is come here to spend evening in familiar intercourse. We are talking too late of pranks we execute against high authority in college. Kuda be thanked! I have close the window because reading that mosquito bring malaria – ugh!" With a yell the baboo sprang to his feet; Perreira, leaning against the centre table, had knocked off a metal ornament. "Excuse me, masters, I am upset by that debased tiger." He collapsed into a chair.

"What happened?" Swinton queried sharply, for his feet were beginning to sting from the trip over the gravel.

"We hear mysterious noise – tap, tap; some spirit is tickle the window. I look, and there, masters, spying at me is some old fellow of evil countenance; like a *guru*, with grey whiskers and big horn spectacles. But his eyes – O Kuda! Very brave I stand up and say, 'Go away, you old reprobate!' because he is prying."

"Oh, my aunt!" Gilfain muttered.

"Then that old villain that is an evil spirit changes himself into a tiger and grins at me. Fangs like a shark has got – horrible! I call loudly for help because I have not firearms. Then I hear my lord's voice out here in the room and I am saved."

"Yes, sar, that is true," Perreira affirmed. "I am not flustered, but hold the windows so tiger not climbing in."

Lord Victor, raising the lantern, looked into the captain's eyes. "What do you make of these two bounders?"

"You'd better go back to bed, baboo," Swinton advised; "you've just had a nightmare – eaten too much curry."

But Baboo Dass swore he had seen a beast with his hands on the window.

"We'll soon prove it. If the tiger stood up there, he will have left his pugs in the sand," Swinton declared as he moved toward the door. He was followed by the baboo and Perreira, who hung close as they went down the steps and around the wall.

As Gilfain passed the lantern close to the sandy soil beneath the window, Swinton gave a gasp of astonishment, for there were footprints of a tiger, the largest he had ever seen; their position, the marks of the claws in the earth, indicated that the great cat had actually stood up to look into the room.

"Well, he's gone now, anyway," the captain said, turning back to the driveway. "You'd better go to bed, baboo; he won't trouble you any more to-night."

But Mohun Dass wept and prayed for the sahib to stay and protect him; he would go mad in the bungalow without firearms.

"I say, Swinton," Lord Victor interposed, "these poor chaps' nerves seem pretty well shimmered, don't you think? Shall we take them over to our bungalow and give them a brandy?"

The captain hesitated; he didn't like baboos. But when Perreira acclaimed: "Yes, sar, a peg will stimulate our hearts – thank you, kind gentleman; and his highness, the rajah, will thank you for saving me, for I am important artisan," his dead-blue eyes glinted.

"Come on, then!" he said, picking his way gingerly over the gravel.

Inside the bungalow, Swinton tossed his keys to the bearer, saying: "Bring – " He turned to Perreira: "What will you have, brandy or whisky?"

The half-caste smacked his bluish lips. "Any one is good, sar."

But Lall Mohun Dass interposed: "Salaam, my preserver, I am a man because of religious scruples teetotal, and whisky is convivial beverage; but brandy is medicinal, prescribed by doctor."

Swinton nodded to the bearer, and when the latter, unlocking the liquor cabinet, brought the brandy and glasses, he said: "Put it on the table and go." Then, at a suggestion, Perreira poured copious drafts for himself and Baboo Dass.

As the water of life scorched its way through the thin veins of the half-caste he underwent a metamorphosis. The face that had looked so pinched and blue grey with fear took on a warmer copper tint; his eyes that had been lustreless warmed till they glowed; his shoulders squared up; the jaran coat sagged less.

"Ah, sahib, you are kind gentleman." Without invitation, he dragged a chair to the table and sat down. At a nod from Swinton, the baboo drew up another. The captain and Lord Victor sat down, the latter rather puzzled over his companion's mood. He knew Swinton's rigid ideas about association with the natives; particularly what he called the "greasy Bengali baboo."

The brandy had quieted Mohun Dass' terror. His eyes that had constantly sought the open door with apprehension now hovered benignantly upon the bottle that still graced the centre of the table.

"Yes, sar, kind gentleman," Perreira said; "if I'd had a hooker of brandy like that and a gun like that 'Certus Cordite'" – he pointed to the weapon Swinton had deposited on the floor – "I would go out and blow that fool tiger to hell."

Baboo Dass gave a fatty laugh. "Do not believe him, kind gentlemen – he make ungodly boast; he was crawled under the bed."

"And you, baboo?" Perreira questioned. "Major sahib – "

"I am not a major," Swinton corrected; "we are just two Englishmen who have come out here for some shooting."

This statement had a curious effect on Mohun Dass. All his class stood in awe of the military, but toward the globe-trotting, sporting Englishman they could hardly conceal their natural arrogance. A look of assured familiarity crept into his fat countenance; he showed his white teeth with the little, reddish lines between them, due to *pan* chewing. "You are globe-trotter gentlemen – I know. Will you writing book, too?"

The captain nodded.

"You will get Forbes Hindustani dictionary and spell bungalow '*bangla*,' and the book will stink like the lamp because of academic propensity. Never mind, kind gentleman, the publics will think you know about India and caste, too."

The captain noting Perreira's eyes devouring the bottle shoved it toward the half-caste. Gilfain, with a sigh of not understanding, rose, went along to their rooms, and returned with slippers and some cheroots.

Perreira had helped himself and the baboo to another generous drink, the latter protesting weakly.

"I see you know about guns, Perreira," Swinton said, lifting the rifle to his knee. "How do you happen to know this is a Cordite?"

"Cordite? Ha, ha!" And the half-caste's cackle was a triumphant note. He put a pair of attenuated fingers into the top pocket of his jaran coat and drew from beneath a very dirty handkerchief a lump of something that resembled an unbaked biscuit. He flipped it to the table as though he were tossing a box of cigarettes. "Yes, sars, that is cordite – dynamite, whatever you like to call him."

"Good God! I say, you silly ass!" And Lord Victor, pushing back his chair, stood up.

Baboo Dass, who had been sitting with his feet curled up under his fat thighs, tumbled from the chair, and, standing back from the table, cried: "*Mera bap!* Tigers eating and explosives producing eruption of death. O Kuda, my poor families!"

Swinton checked an involuntary movement of retreat, and the compelling void of his eyes drew from the half-caste an explanation:

"Take seat, kind gentlemen and Baboo Lall Mohun Dass. This thing is innocent as baby of explosion. It is cordite not yet finish. I was in the government cordite factory here in – " He checked, looked over his shoulder toward the front door, and then continued: "Yes, sar, I was gov'ment expert man to mix cordite. If you don't believe, listen, gentlemen. Cordite is fifty-eight parts nitroglycerin, thirty-seven parts guncotton, five parts mineral jelly, and, of course, acetone is used as solvent. Now all that is mix by hand, and while these parts explode like hell when separate, when they are mix they are no harm. And I was expert for mixing. I am expert on smokeless powder and all kinds of guns because I am home in England working for Curtis & Harper Co. in their factory. That why Rajah Darpore engage me."

Swinton's eyes twitched three times, but he gave no other sign.

Baboo Dass drew himself into the conversation. "This mans, Perreira, been at school in Howrah with me, but I am now B. A., and trusted head krannie for Hamilton Company, jewel – "

With a gasp he stopped and thrust a hand under his jacket; then explained: "Sahib, I forgetting something because of strict attention to tiger business. You are honourable gentleman who has save my life, so I will show the satanic thing, and you can write story about some ghost jewels."

He unclasped from his neck a heavy platinum chain, and, first casting a furtive glance toward the door, drew forth a pear-shaped casket of the same metal, saying: "You see, sar, not so glorified in splendour as to seduce thieves, but inside is marvel of thing."

He thrust the casket toward Swinton, and laughed in toper glee when the captain explored vainly its smooth shell for a manner of opening it. "Allow me, sar," and, Baboo Dass touching some hidden mechanism, the shell opened like a pea pod, exposing to the startled captain's eyes an exact mate to the sapphire Finnerty had lost.

Lord Victor, his unschooled eyes popping like a lobster's, began: "Oh, I say – " Then he broke off with a yelp of pain, for Swinton's heel had all but smashed his big toe beneath the table.

"I am bringing for the maharajah," Baboo Dass explained. "The old boy is gourmand for articles of vertu."

"Articles of virtue!" And Perreira leered foolishly. "Prince Ananda is the Johnnie to collect articles of virtue; he imports from Europe."

"Mr. Perreira is gay young dog!" Baboo Daas leaned heavily across the table. "Perhaps Shazada Ananda is in big hurry to sit on the throne."

"There's always a woman at the bottom of these things, sir," and Perreira twisted his eyes into an owllike look of wisdom.

"You see, sar," the baboo elucidated, "Prince Ananda has give this to the maharajah, and it is accursed agent of evil; because of it I am nearly eated of a tiger."

On the sapphire was the same inscription Swinton had seen on the stolen stone.

"That is Persian characters, sahib," Baboo Dass declared ponderously. "It is used for 'mine,' but in learned way *madun* is proper name for mine, and *Rikaz*, this word, means buried treasure. I am learned in dead languages – Sanskrit, Pali. It is sacred stone. If you possessing patience, sahib, I will narrative obscure histories of Buddhism."

"Oh, my aunt!" The already bored Lord Victor yawned.

But Captain Swinton declared earnestly: "If you do, baboo, I will place your name in my book as an authority."

Mohun Dass' breast swelled with prospective glory.

"I say, old chappie, if we're to sit out the act I'm going to have a B. and S.," and Gilfain reached for the bottle.

"We'll all have one," declared the captain to the delight of Perreira.

"Kind sar," Baboo Dass pleaded, "do not speak these things to-morrow, for my caste frowning against bacchanalian feast."

"We promise, old top!" Lord Victor declared solemnly, and Swinton mentally added: "The Lord forbid!"

"Now, sar," began Baboo Dass, "in Buddhist book '*Paramamsa Maju*,' is describe the Logha, the earth, telling it rests on three great sapphires, and beneath is big rock and plenty oceans. And according to that book is three sacred sapphires knocking around loose. If any man have them three together he is the true Buddha and rules all India. Prince Sakya Singha got those sapphires and became Buddha; that was up on the hill where is Maha Bodhi Temple. The sapphires got hole because one is to hang in the temple, one hangs on a sacred elephant that guard the temple, and one round the Buddha's neck."

Baboo Dass lifted his glass, his heavy ox eyes peering over its top at Swinton, who was thinking of Finnerty's elephant that had the sapphire.

Baboo Dass resumed: "And here, kind gentleman, is the hell of dilemma, for one sapphire is Brahm, the Creator; one Vishnu, the Preserver; and one Siva, the Destroyer. So, if a man got one he don't know if it is loadstone for good fortune or it brings him to damnation."

"But, baboo," Swinton objected, "those are Brahman gods, and Buddhists have practically no gods."

"Sar, Buddhism is kind of revolted Brahmanism, and in the north the two is mixed."

The baboo pointed gingerly at the sapphire in its platinum case: "That is the Siva stone, I believe. Maharajah Darpore is sending to my company in Calcutta by special agent for them to find other two stones like it. See, sahib, he is foxy old boy. We make that chain and casket – his order. That special agent disappeared forever – he is vanish the next day; the workman that fitted the stone in the case died of cholera; some devil tried to steal the sapphire; all the workmen get a secret it is evil god and they strike. The manager, Rombey Sahib, swear plenty blasphemy and command me: 'Baboo Dass, you are brave mans, take the damn thing to old Darpore and tell his banker I must have rupees twenty thousand; they owe us sixty thousand.' Rombey Sahib knows I will give the dewan a commission, and the old thief will write a money order."

"What did the maharajah want of the three sapphires?" Swinton asked innocently.

Baboo Dass leaned across the table, and in a gurgling whisper said: "Because of this foolish belief that he would rule all India. The Buddhists would think he was a Buddha. That word *Rikaz* means, in theologic way, that in the man possesses the three sapphires is buried the treasure of holy knowledge."

Swinton, turning his head at a faint sound, saw his bearer standing in the back doorway.

"Did master call?" the servant asked.

"No. Go!"

Trembling with apprehension, Baboo Dass slipped the case back in his breast. A revulsion of bibulous despondency took possession of him; he slipped a white cotton sock from one of the feet he had pulled from their shoes in his exuberancy, and wiped his eyes.

"Baboo Dass is right," Perreira declared, thrusting into the gap. "On the hill I am working like mole in the ground, but I got my eyeteeth looking when I am in the light. I am Britisher – Piccadilly Circus is home for me – if I work for native prince I don't sell my mess of pottage."

Perreira tapped the breast pocket of his jaran coat. "I got little book here – " The half-caste gulped; a wave of sea green swept over his face; he gurgled "Sick," and made a reeling dash for the verandah. At the door, he recoiled with a yell of terror. The baboo dived under the table.

Thinking it was the tiger, Swinton grabbed his rifle and sprang to the door, discovering a native standing against the wall.

"What do you want?" the captain asked in rapid English.

"Sahib, I am the night *chowkidar* of the compound."

"Sit on the steps there!" Swinton commanded.

Back at the table, he said: "Baboo, you and Perreira go back to your bungalow now with the *chowkidar*, but I warn you he understands English."

Trembling, Perreira whispered: "That man spy. Please lending me rupees two."

Baboo Dass revived to encourage the deal, saying: "Mr. Perreira is honest man; I endorse for him rupees five thousand."

Suspecting that the requested loan had something to do with the eavesdropping *chowkidar*, Captain Swinton went to his room, returning with the silver, which he slipped quietly into Perreira's palm, saying in a low voice: "Come to see me again." He stood watching the three figures pass down the moonlit road, and saw Perreira touch the *chowkidar*; then their hands met.

Going to their rooms, Lord Victor said: "Don't see how the devil you had the patience, captain. Are you really going to do a book and were mugging up?"

"I may get something out of it," the captain answered enigmatically.

Chapter III

Captain Swinton had told his bearer to call him early, his life in India having taught him the full value of the glorious early morning for a ride. Lord Victor had balked at the idea of a grey-dawn pleasure trip on horseback, and Swinton had not pressed the point, for he very much desired to make a little tour of inspection off his own bat, a contemplative ride free from the inane comments of his young charge.

At the first soft drawn-out "Sah-h-i-b!" of his bearer, the captain was up with soldierly precision. His eyes lighted with pleasure when he saw the saddle horse that had been provided for him from the maharajah's stable. He was a fine, upstanding brown Arab, the eyes full and set wide. When Swinton patted the velvet muzzle the Arab gave a little sigh of satisfaction, expressing content; he liked to carry men who loved horses.

The bearer, officiously solicitous, had rubbed his cloth over the saddle and bridle reins, and, examining the result, said: "Huzoor, you have clean leathers; it is well. Also the steed has lucky marks and his name is Shabaz."

Shabaz broke into a free-swinging canter as the captain took the road that stretched, like a red ribbon laid on a carpet of green, toward the hill, whereon, high up, gleamed a flat pearl, the palace of Prince Ananda.

On the hillside was a delicate tracery of waving bamboos, through which peeped cliffs of various hues – rose-coloured, ebon black, pearl grey, vermilion red; and over all was a purple haze where the golden shafts of the rising sun shot through lazy-rising vapours of the moist plain. The cliffs resembled castle walls rising from the buried city, mushrooming themselves into sudden arrogance. To the north a river wound its sinuous way through plains of sand, a silver serpent creeping over a cloth of gold. Back from either side of the river lay patches of wheat and barley, their jade green and golden bronze holding of grain suggesting gigantic plates of metal set out in the morning sun to dry.

To the westward of the river lay Darpore City, looking like a box of scattered toys. Beyond the white palace the sal-covered hills lay heavy, mysterious, sombre, as if in rebuke to the eastern sky palpitating with the radiancy that flooded it from the great golden ball of heat that swept upward in regal majesty.

Yawning caves studding a ravine which cut its climbing way up the hillside shattered the poetic spell which had driven from Swinton's mind his real object in that solitary ride. The cave mouths suggested entrances to military underground passages. He was certain that the pearl-like palace was a place of intrigue. The contour of the great hill conveyed the impression of a stronghold – a mighty fort, easy of defence. Indeed, as Swinton knew, that was what it had been. Its history, the story of Fort Kargez, was in the India office, and Prince Ananda must have lied the night before when he said he did not know what city lay beneath the palace.

Fort Kargez had been the stronghold of Joghendra Bahi, a Hindu rajah, when the Pathan emperor, Sher Ghaz, had swept through India to the undulating plains of Darpore.

Gazing at the formidable hill, Swinton chuckled over the wily Pathan's manner of capturing Fort Kargez by diplomacy. He had made friends with Rajah Bahi, asking the favour of leaving his harem and vast store of jewels in that gentleman's safe custody till his return from conquering Bengal.

Such a bait naturally appealed to the covetous Hindu. But the palanquins that carried the fair maids and the wealth of jewels had also hidden within enough men to hold the gate while a horde of Pathans rushed the fort. But Rajah Bahi and many of his soldiers had escaped to the underground passages, and either by accident or design – for the vaults had been mined – they were blown up, turning the fort over like a pancake, burying the Pathan soldiers and the vast loot of gold and jewels. Then the jungle crept in, as it always does, and smothered the jagged surface beneath which lay the ruined walls. Many of the artificial lakes remained; they were just without the fort.

Climbing the zigzag roadway, Swinton fell to wondering if all the prince's talk of a desire for removal from the bustle of Darpore City was simply a blind; if his real object weren't a systematic exploration for the vast store of wealth in the buried city and also the preparation of a rebel stronghold.

On the plateau, he took a road that forked to the right, leading between hedges of swordlike aloes to the palace gardens. At a gateway in a brick wall, his guide dropped to his haunches, saying: "There is but one gate, sahib; I will wait here."

Turning a corner of an oleander-bordered path, Swinton suddenly pulled Shabaz to a halt. Twenty yards away a girl sat a grey stallion, the poise of her head suggesting that she had heard the beat of his horse's hoofs. A ripple of wind carried the scent of the Arab to the grey stallion; he arched his tapering neck and swung his head, the eyes gleaming with a desire for combat. A small gloved hand, with a quick slip of the rein, laid the curb chain against his jaw; a spur raked his flank, and, springing from its touch, he disappeared around a turn. Piqued, his query of the night before, "Who was the woman?" recalled to his mind, Swinton followed the large hoofprints of the grey. They led to within six feet of the garden wall, where they suddenly vanished; they led neither to the right nor to the left of the sweeping path.

"Good old land of mystery!" the captain muttered as, slipping from his saddle, he read out the enigma. Back, the greater stride told that the grey had gone to a rushing gallop. Here, six feet from the wall, he had taken off in a mighty leap; two holes cupped from the roadbed by the push of his hind feet told this tale. Swinton could just chin the wall – and he was a tall man. On the far side was a fern-covered terrace that fell away three feet to a roadbed, and just beyond the road the rim of a void a hundred feet deep showed.

"No end of nerve; she almost deserves to preserve her incognito," Captain Swinton thought, remounting Shabaz.

On his way out the captain passed a heavy iron gate that connected the garden with the palace. And from beyond was now coming a babel of animal voices from the zoo. Mingling with the soft perfume of roses a strong odour of cooking curry reminded him of breakfast. At the gate he picked up his man, and, riding leisurely along, sought to learn from that wizened old Hindu the horsewoman's name.

There came a keen look of cautious concealment into the man's little eyes as he answered: "Sahib, the lady I know not, neither is it of profit for one of my labour to converse about fine people, but as to the grey stallion we in the stables allude to him as Sheitan."

"He jumps well, Radha."

"Ha, sahib; all that he does is performed with strength, even when he tore an arm out of Stoll Sahib – he of the Indigo."

"How comes the lady to ride such an evil horse?" the captain asked.

"The stallion's name is Djalma, sahib, which means the favour of sacred Kuda, but to the mem-sahib he comes from the maharani's stable, which is a different thing."

"To bring her harm, even as Stoll Sahib came by it?"

But Radha parried this talk of cause leading to effect by speech relating to Djalma. "It might be that the matter of Stoll Sahib's hand was but an accident – I know not; but of evil omens, as twisted in the hair of a horse, we horsemen of repute all know. The grey stallion carries three marks of ill favour. Beneath the saddle he has the shadow maker, and that means gloom for his owner; at the knee is a curl, with the tail of the curl running down to the fetlock – that means the withdrawal of the peg. That is to say, sahib, that his owner's rope pegs will have to be knocked out for lack of horses to tie to them."

"He seems a bad lot, Radha," Swinton remarked as the attendant stopped to pick a thorn from his foot.

"Worst of all," the little man added dolefully, "is the wall eye."

"Has the grey stallion that?"

A smile of satisfaction wreathed the puckered lips of Radha. "The sahib knows, and does the sahib remember the proverb?"

"That not one will be left alive in your house if you possess a horse with one white eye?" the captain said.

They now slipped from the hill road to the plain, and the Arab broke into a swinging canter.

The captain's breakfast was waiting, so was Gilfain and also – which caused him to swear as he slipped from the saddle – was Baboo Lall Mohun Dass.

In the genial morning sun the baboo looked more heroic in his spotless muslin and embroidered velvet cap sitting jauntily atop his heavy, black, well-oiled hair.

"Wanting to speak to master, sar, this morning," he said. "After debauch, in the morning wisdom smiles like benign god. I am showing to master last night property of maharajah, and he is terrible old boy for raising hell; I am hear the sahib will make call of honour, and, sar, I am beseeching you will not confide to his highness them peccadillos."

"All right, baboo. But excuse me; I've got to have a tub and breakfast."

When Lord Victor and Captain Swinton had finished their breakfast a huge barouche of archaic structure, drawn by a pair of gaunt Waler horses, arrived to take them to the maharajah. On the box seat were two liveried coachmen, while behind rode the syces.

As they rolled along the red road through the cantonments they overtook Baboo Mohun Dass plugging along in an elephantine strut beneath a gaudy green umbrella. When they drew abreast he salaamed and said: "Masters, kind gentlemen!" The coachman drew the horses to a walk, and the baboo, keeping pace, asked: "Will you, kind gentlemen, if you see a vehicle, please send to meet me? I have commanded that one be sent for me, but a humbugging fellow betray my interest, so I am pedestrian." His big, bovine eyes rested hungrily on the capacious, leather-cushioned seat alluringly vacant in the chariot.

"All right, baboo!" Then Swinton raised his eyes to the coachman, who was looking over his shoulder, and ordered: "Hurry!"

The big-framed, alien horses, always tired in that climate, were whipped up, and a rising cloud of dust hid the carriage from Baboo Dass' glaring eyes.

Indignation drove a shower of perspiration through the baboo's greasy pores. He turned toward the sal-covered hills, and in loud resentment appealed to Kali, the dispenser of cholera, beseeching the goddess to punish the sahibs.

Baboo Dass was startled by a voice, a soft, feminine voice, that issued from a carriage that had approached unheard. He deserted the evil goddess and turned to the woman in the carriage. She was attractive; many gold bangles graced her slender arms; on her fingers were rings that held in setting divers stones, even diamonds. A large mirror ring indicated that she was coquettish, and yet a certain modesty told that she was not from Amritsar Bazaar.

Her voice had asked: "What illness troubles you, baboo?"

Now, as he salaamed, she offered him a ride into Darpore town.

Baboo Dass climbed into the vehicle, expressing his gratitude, explaining, as they bowled along, that he was a man of affairs, having business with the maharajah that morning, and that by mischance he had been forced to walk. In reciprocal confidence the lady explained she was the wife of a Marwari banker.

The baboo's resentment welled up afresh; also a little boasting might impress his pleasing companion. "To think, lady," he said, "last night we are roystering together, those two sahibs, who are lords, and me, who am a man of importance in Hamilton Company, and now they are coming in the maharajah's carriage and they pass me as if I am some low-caste fellow in their own country that works with his hands."

"That is the way of the foreigners," the Marwari woman answered softly; "they will put the yoke on your neck and say 'Thank you.' On their lips are the words of friendship, in their hand is the knotted whip."

"When they see I am important man with his highness they will not feel so elegant."

"I will take you to the drawbridge where it crosses the moat to the gate in the big wall," the Marwari woman offered.

"It is undignified for a man of my importance to approach the palace on foot," declared Baboo Dass.

The Marwari woman smiled, her stained red lips parting mischievously. "But also, Baboo Dass, it would not be proper for you to arrive with me. I have a way to arrange it that will save both our good standing. We will drive to my place of banking, then my carriage will take you to the palace, and the sahibs will not see you walk in."

The baboo was delighted. In India opulent people did not call on rajahs afoot; also the carriage was a prosperous-looking vehicle, and the two country-bred horses were well fed.

As they neared the palace, that lay hidden behind massive brick walls, they left the main thoroughfare, and, after divers turnings, entered a street so narrow that their vehicle passed the mud-walled shops with difficulty. A sharp turn, and the carriage stopped in a little court.

Four burly natives rose up from the mud step on which they had been sitting, and, at a word from the Marwari woman, seized her companion. The baboo struggled and sought to cry out for help, but the lady's soft hand deftly twisted a handkerchief into his mouth, hushing his clamour. He was torn from the carriage none too gently, hustled through an open door, and clapped into a chair, where he was firmly held by his four attendants.

A little old man seized a cup wherein was a piece of soap, and with his brush beat up a lather, saying softly: "Do not struggle, baboo; it is for your good. These fevers burn the liver and affect the brain; in no time I will have taken the accursed fever from your head."

Then with a scissors he nimbly clipped the profuse locks of the baboo's head, the latter, having managed to spit out the handkerchief, protesting that it was an outrage, that he was a jewel merchant from Calcutta waiting upon the rajah.

"Yes, yes," the little man told the four stalwarts as he whipped at the lather, "it is even so; his wife spoke of a strange fancy he was possessed of that he was a dealer in jewels, whereas he is but a clerk. And no wonder, with a fever in the blood and with a crown of hair such as a mountain sheep wears."

Then he lathered the scalp, stroked the razor on the skin of his forearm, and proceeded to scrape.

The baboo yelled and struggled; the razor took a nick out of his scalp. At last the blue-grey poll, bearing many red nicks, was clear of hair, and he was released. His first thought was of the jewel. His searching palm fell flat against his chest; it was gone! With a cry of despair he made for the door; the carriage had vanished.

Whirling about, he accused his captors of the theft. The barber, to soothe the fever-demented one, said: "Of a surety, baboo, your wife has taken the jewel because it was an evil stone that but increased the fever that was in your blood."

The plot dawned upon Baboo Dass. He flung out the door and made for the palace.

"It does not matter," the barber said; "his wife is a woman of business, and this morning when she spoke of bringing the sick man she paid in advance." He put in the palm of each of the four a rupee, adding: "The afflicted man will now go home and sleep, his head being cooler, and the fever will go out of his blood, for so the doctor told his wife, who is a woman of method."

Chapter IV

Prince Ananda had welcomed Lord Victor and Captain Swinton on a wide, black-marble verandah from which two marvellously carved doors gave them entrance through a lordly hall to a majestic reception chamber.

"This is the 'Cavern of Lies,'" Ananda said, with a smile, "for here come all who wish to do up the governor – and he's pliant. That, for instance" – he pointed to a billowy sea of glass prisms which hid the ceiling – countless chandeliers jostling each other like huge snowflakes.

"No end of an idea, I call it – fetching!" Lord Victor acclaimed.

Prince Ananda laughed. "The governor went into a big china shop in Calcutta one day when Maharajah Jobungha was there. The two maharajahs are not any too friendly, I may say, and when the governor was told Jobungha had already bought something he took a fancy to, he pointed to the other side of the store, which happened to be the lot of glass junk you see above, and told the shop manager to send the whole thing to Darpore. Ah, here comes the maharajah!" the prince added.

At the far end of the reception room heavy silk curtains had been parted by a gold-and-crimson uniformed servant, who announced in a rich, full voice: "His highness, the Maharajah of Darpore! Salaam, all who are in his noble presence!"

A king had stepped into the room; a reawakened, bronze-skinned Roman gladiator was coming down the centre of the room, his head thrown up like some lordly animal. He was regal in the splendour of his robes. Above the massive torso of the king, with its velvet jacket buttoned by emeralds, the glossy black beard, luxuriantly full, as fine as a woman's hair, was drawn up over the ears, its Rembrandt black throwing into relief a rose tint that flushed the olive-skinned cheek. Deep in the shadow of a massive brow were brilliant, fearless eyes that softened as they fell on Ananda's face. In the gold-edged head-dress a clasp of gold held blue-white diamonds that gleamed like a cascade of falling water. A short sword was thrust in a silk sash, its ruby-studded hilt glinting like red wine.

When Prince Ananda presented Swinton and Lord Gilfain, the latter as the son of Earl Craig, the maharajah's face lighted up; he held out his hand impulsively with simple dignity, saying in Hindustani: "Sit down, sahibs. The young lord's father was my brother; at court his ear heard my heartbeat."

A turmoil of vocal strife fell upon their ears from without. The baboo had arrived.

"Oh, murder!" Swinton groaned, recognising the Dass voice demanding admittance.

The rabble sound was coming down the hall as ineffectually two attendants clung to the ponderous Bengali, mad with his affliction. The words: "The maharajah's jewel is stolen!" caused Prince Ananda to dart to the door. Seeing him, the servants released their grasp of Baboo Dass, and the prince, not daring to leave the king's presence, allowed the half-crazed man to enter the room, where he groveled before the maharajah, bumping his forehead to the marble floor and clawing at the royal feet.

When, at the king's command, the baboo rose, Lord Victor clapped his hand over his mouth to smother his mirth, gasping: "Oh, my aunt! That head!"

Like the rattle of a machine gun, Baboo Dass poured out his tale of wo. When he had finished, the maharajah said calmly: "It doesn't matter," and with a graceful sweep of his hand suggested that Baboo Dass might retire.

Once more the baboo's voice bubbled forth.

"Begone!" And the handsome face of the maharajah took on a tigerish look. For a second it was terrifying; the change was electric. Baboo Dass recoiled and fled.

Then the maharajah's voice was soft, like a rich-toned organ, as he said in Hindustani: "India has two afflictions – famine and the Bengali."

Beside the rajah was a magnificently carved teakwood chair, a padlocked gold chain across the arms indicating that it was not to be used. The carving was marvellous, each side representing a combat between a tiger and a huge python, the graceful curve of whose form constituted the arm. At a question of interest from Gilfain, Prince Ananda spoke in Urdu to his father. The latter nodded, and Ananda, crossing to a silver cabinet, unlocked it and returned bearing a gold casket, upon the top of which was inset a large pearl. Within the casket was a half-smoked cigarette.

As if carried away by the sight of this the maharajah, speaking in Hindustani, which he saw Swinton understood, said: "That cigarette was smoked by the Prince of Wales sitting in this chair which has since been locked. He shook hands with me, sahib; we were friends; he, the son of the empress, and I a king, who was also a son to the empress."

His voice had grown rich and soft and full; the fierce, black, warlike rajput eyes were luminous as though tears lay behind. The maharajah remained silent while Swinton translated this to Lord Victor. "Ah, sahibs, if kings could sit down together and explain, there would not be war nor distrust nor oppression. When your father" – he turned his face toward Gilfain – "was a councillor in Calcutta, close to the viceroy, I had honour; when I crossed the bridge from Howra as many guns would speak welcome from Fort William as did for Maharajah Jobungha. But now I go no more to Calcutta."

If Swinton had been troubled in his analysis of the prince's motives and character, he now swam in a sea of similar tribulation. The maharajah was big. Was he capable of gigantic subtlety, such as his words would veil? He could see that Prince Ananda was abstracted; his face had lost its jaunty, debonair look; worry lines mapped its surface. The loss of the sapphire had hit Ananda hard, but if the robbery had affected the king, he was subtle in a remarkable sense, for he gave no sign.

The maharajah now rose, clapped his hands, and when a servant appeared gave a rapid order. The servant disappeared, and almost immediately returned with a silver salver upon which were two long gold chains of delicate workmanship and an open bottle of attar of rose. The maharajah placed a chain about the neck of each sahib, and sprinkled them with the attar, saying, with a trace of a smile curving his handsome lips: "Sometimes, sahibs, this ceremony is just etiquette, but to-day my heart pains with pleasure because the son of my friend is here." He held out his hand, adding: "Prince Ananda must see that you have the best our land affords."

Chapter V

Swinton was glad when he saw his dogcart turn into the compound to take him to the keddah sahib's for tiffin. Lord Victor had been hypnotised by the splendour of Maharajah Darpore; he went around the bungalow giving vent to ebullitions of praise. "My aunt, but the old Johnnie is a corker! And all the tommyrot one hears at home about another mutiny brewing! Damn it, Swinton, the war chiefs who want every bally Englishman trained to carry a gun like a Prussian ought to be put in the Tower!"

An hour of this sort of thing, and with a silent whoop of joy the captain clambered into his dogcart and sped away, as he bowled along his mind troubled by the maharajah angle of the espionage game.

After tiffin with the major, and out on the verandah, where they were clear of the servant's ears, Swinton asked: "Who is the mysterious lady that rides a grey Persian?"

He was conscious of a quick turn of Finnerty's head; a half-checked movement of the hand that held a lighted match to a cheroot, and as the keddah sahib proceeded to finish the ignition he described the woman and her flight over the brick wall.

"She's Doctor Boelke's niece; she has been here about a month," Finnerty answered, when Captain Swinton had finished.

"I wonder why she risked her neck to avoid me, major?"

"Well, she's German for one thing, and I suppose she knows there's a growing tension between the two peoples."

Captain Swinton allowed a smile to surprise his always set face. "Do you know why I am here, major; that is, have you had advice?"

"Yes," the major answered.

"Very good," Captain Swinton declared. "I'll give you some data. Lord Victor's father, Earl Craig, is under-secretary to India. There was some extraordinary jumble of a state document intended for the Viceroy of India. Whether its misleading phraseology was carelessness or traitorous work on the part of a clerk, nobody knows, but it read that the sircar was to practically conscript Indians – Mussulman and Hindu alike – to fight against the Turks and Germans in the war that we all feel is about to come. This paper bore the official seal; had even been signed. Then Earl Craig's copy of it disappeared – was stolen from Lord Victor, who was acting as his secretary. A girl, with whom the young man was infatuated, was supposed to have taken it for the Prussians for use in India. The girl disappeared, and Lord Victor was sent out here for fear he would get in communication with her again. Neither Lord Victor nor the earl knows I am a secret-service man. Maharajah Darpore is marked 'low visibility' in the viceroy's book of rajah rating, and, as Earl Craig wanted an Anglo-Indian as a companion to his son, this seemed a good chance to investigate quietly. There's another little matter," the captain continued quietly as he drew from his pocket a sapphire in the rough.

"Where the devil did you get that, captain? I thought that old professor pirate had stolen it," Finnerty gasped.

"That's not the stone you lost last night, major."

Finnerty looked at Swinton incredulously as the latter handed him the sapphire, for it was exactly like the stolen stone, even to the inscription.

"Let me explain," Captain Swinton said. "Some time since one Akka, a hillman, came down out of Kululand into Simla leading a donkey that carried two bags of sapphires in the rough. Nobody knew what they were, so, of course, he found it hard to sell his blue stones. That night the stones disappeared, and Akka was found in the morning at the bottom of an abyss with a jade-handled knife sticking in his back. He must have dropped over the rocks so quickly the killer hadn't time to withdraw his knife. About Akka's neck, hidden under his dirty felt coat, was hung this sapphire,

and it was given to me, as I was put on the case. I took a trip up into Kululand with a hillman who claimed to have come in with Akka as guide. I got a very fine bharal head – almost a record pair of horns – and a bullet in my left leg that still gives me a limp at times, but as to sapphires in the rough I never saw another until last night."

Finnerty laughed. "India is one devil of a place for mystery."

Swinton related the incidents of the night before, and Baboo Dass' story of the three sapphires, adding: "Of course that's Hindu mythology up to date, the attributing of miraculous powers of good and evil to those blue stones."

Finnerty shifted uneasily in his chair; then, with a little, apologetic smile, said: "I'm getting less dogmatic about beliefs and their trimmings – absolute superstition, I suppose – and if a sapphire, or anything else, were associated in my mind with disaster I'd chuck the devilish thing in the river."

"At any rate, major, the main thing, so far as my mission is concerned, is that if Prince Ananda happens to get possession of the three sapphires every Buddhist – which means all the fighting Nepalese – will believe the expected Buddha has arrived."

"By gad! And the three sapphires are in Darpore – the one that was stolen from me last night, the one stolen from Baboo Dass, and this one."

"Prince Ananda has yours; I saw Boelke purposely tip over that table. But who stole the one from the baboo I don't know; it couldn't have been a raj agent, for it belonged to the maharajah."

"Where did they come from?" Finnerty queried.

"Yours, of course, was on Burra Moti's neck, and she must have been attached to some temple; Akka probably murdered some lama who had this one about his neck; where Prince Ananda got the third one I don't know."

"By Jove!" Finnerty ejaculated. "It was a hillman that Moti put her foot on. He had been sent to steal that bell, as he couldn't carry the elephant."

"Here's another thing," Captain Swinton said. "In the United States there has been arrested a clique of Hindus who have sold a great quantity of rare old jewels, gold ornaments, and sapphires in the rough. Machine guns and ammunition were bought with the money obtained, and quite a consignment is somewhere on the road now between China and India."

"Great Scott! Up this way – to come in through Nepal?"

"The stuff was shipped from San Francisco to Hongkong, and though the British government had every road leading out of that city watched, they never got track of it. Our men there think it was transshipped in Hongkong harbour and is being brought around to India by water."

"Does the government think the maharajah is mixed up in this?"

"I'm here to find out. He mystified me to-day. Gilfain thinks he's magnificent – as natural as a child. But he's too big for me to judge; I can't docket him like I can Ananda. He was as regally disinterested over the disappearance of that sapphire as the Duke of Buckingham was when his famous string of black pearls broke and scattered over the floor at the Tuileries; but the prince was seething."

Finnerty waved his cheroot in the direction of the palace hill. "The trouble is up there. Ananda is wily; he's like a moon bear he has there in a cage that smiles and invites you to tickle the back of his neck; then, before you know it, the first joint of a finger is gone."

A little lull in the talk between Swinton and Finnerty was broken by a turmoil that wound its volcanic force around the bungalow from the stables. Finnerty sprang to his feet as a pair of Rampore hounds reached the drive, galloping toward a tall native at whose heels came a big hunting dog.

"Faith, I was just in time," Finnerty said as he led the two hounds to the verandah, a finger under each collar; "they'd soon have chewed up that Banjara's dog."

The Rampores were very like an English greyhound that had been shaved; they were perhaps coarser, a little heavier in the jaw. A panting keeper now appeared, and the dogs were leashed.

Seeing this, the native approached, and in a deep, sombre voice said: "Salaam, Sahib Bahadur!" Having announced himself, the Banjara came up the steps and squatted on his heels; the long male-bamboo staff he carried betokened he was a herdsman.

"What do you want, Lumbani?" Finnerty queried.

"Yes, sahib, I am a Banjara of the Lumbani caste. The sahib who is so strong is also wise in the ways of my people."

"I wonder what this will cost me in wasted time," the major lamented in English. "I judge his soul is weighted with matters of deep import." Then, in Hindustani: "That's a true Banjara dog, Lumbani."

"Yes, sahib, he is one of that great breed. Also in the sahib's hands are two thoroughbred Rampores; they be true dogs of the Tazi breed, the breed that came from Tazi who slept by the bedside of Nawab Faiz Mahomed five generations since. The sahib must be in high favour with the Nawab of Rampore, for such dogs are only given in esteem; they are not got as one buys bullocks."

"What is it you want?" queried Finnerty.

The Banjara looked at Swinton; he coughed; then he loosened the loin cloth that pinched at his lean stomach.

"This dog, sahib – Banda is the noble creature's name – has the yellow eyes that Krishna is pleased with; that is a true sign of a Banjara." He held out his hand, and Banda came up the steps to crouch at his side.

At this intrusion of the native's dog, the patrician Rampores sprang the full length of their leash with all the ferocity that is inherent in this breed. A pariah dog would have slunk away in affright, but the Banjara's yellow eyes gleamed with fighting defiance; he rose on his powerful, straight legs, and his long fangs shone between curled lips.

"Good stuff!" Finnerty commented, and to his groom added: "Take the hounds away. He's a sure-enough Banjara, Swinton," he resumed in English. "Look at that terrier cast in the face, as though there were a streak of Irish or Airedale in him."

Indeed, the dog was a beauty, with his piercing bright eyes set in the long, flat head that carried punishing jaws studded with strong teeth. The neck was long, rising from flat, sloping shoulders, backed up by well-rounded ribs and arched loins leading to well-developed quarters. The chest was narrow and deep, and the flanks tucked up.

"They're game, too," Finnerty declared. He turned to the owner. "Will Banda tackle a panther?"

"He and his sons have been in at the death of more than one; they will follow a leopard into a cave."

"How much will you take for him?" Swinton asked.

The native looked his scorn. He turned to Finnerty as though his sarcasm might be wasted upon this sahib who thought a Banjara would sell one of the famous breed. "Perhaps the strange sahib will go to Umar Khan, at Shahpur, and buy one of the Salt Range horses – a mare of the Unmool breed. When he has I will sell him Banda."

Swinton laughed, and, taking a rupee from his pocket, passed it to the native, saying: "Food for Banda. The sarcasm was worth it," he added in English, "an Unmool mare being above price."

"All this talk of the dogs," Finnerty declared, "is that our friend has something on his mind. He was studying you, but you've broken the ice with your silver hammer."

The native salaamed, tucked the rupee in his loin cloth, and the questioning, furtive look that had been in his eyes disappeared. He turned to the major:

"Huzoor, I am a man of many buffaloes, robbing none, going in peace with my herds up into the hills in the hot weather when the new grass comes green and strong from the ashes of the fire that has been set out in the spring, and coming back to the plains when the weather is cold."

"Where is your country?" Finnerty queried.

"Where my grain bags and my cooking pots are is my country, my fathers holding that all lands were theirs to travel in. For fifteen years in this moon have I remained down yonder by the river with my herd, just where the heavy kagar grass makes good hunting for tiger, and always on good terms of friendship with him."

"Gad! I thought so," Finnerty ejaculated. "We'll get news of a kill in a minute."

"If we met in the path – that is, your slave and tiger – I would say: '*Khudawand*, pass here, for the thorns in the bush are bad for thy feet,' and if tiger was inclined he would pass, or he would turn. Often lying on the broad back of a buffalo as we crossed where the muck is deep I would see tiger lying in wait for pig or chinkara, and I would call, '*Kudawand*, good hunting!' Then what think you, sahib, if after years of such living in peace, this depraved outcast, begotten of a hyena, makes the kill of a cow?"

"A tiger, like a woman, is to be watched," Finnerty declared, quoting a tribal adage.

"And all in the way of evil temper, sahib, for the cow lies yonder with no mark beyond a broken neck, while in the jungles rajah tiger is growling abuse. A young cow, sahib, in full milk. For the sake of God, sahib, come and slay the brute."

The Banjara had worked himself into a passion; tears of rage stood in his eyes. "And to think that I had saved the life of this depraved one," he wailed.

"You saved the tiger's life, Lumbani?"

"Surely, sahib. Of the Banjaras some are Mussulmans – outcasts that lot are – and some are Hindus, as is your servant, so we are careful in the matter of a kill, lest we slay one of our own people who has returned. This slayer of my cow always took pleasure in being near the buffalo. Why, huzoor, I have seen him up in the hills looking as though he had felt lonesome without the herd. Noting that, it was in my mind that perhaps a Banjara herdsman had been born again as a tiger. That is why I saved his life from the red dogs of the jungle; nothing can stand before them when they are many. From the back of a buffalo I saw one of these jungle devils standing on high ground, beckoning, with his tail stuck up like a flag, to others of his kind."

"I've seen that trick," Finnerty commented.

"The tiger had been caught in a snare of the Naga people as he came to partake of a goat they had tied up, as he thought, for his eating; the sahib knows of what like a snare is to retain a tiger. A strong-growing bamboo, young and with great spring, had been bent down and held by a trip so that tiger, putting his paw in the noose, it sprang up, and there he was dancing around like a Nautch girl on the rope that held his wrist, being a loose bamboo too big for a grip of his teeth; it spun around on the rope. The red dogs, hearing his roars, knew he was trapped, and were gathering to settle an old dispute as to the eating of a kill. They would have made an end of him. A mongoose kills a cobra because he is too quick for the snake, and they were too quick for the tiger; so, taking pity upon him as an old friend, with my staff I drove them off; then, climbing into the bamboos, cut the rope."

"Did you tackle them alone, Lumbani?"

"Surely, sahib; jungle dogs run from a man that is not afraid."

Finnerty's shikarri, Mahadua the Ahnd, who had come to the verandah, now said: "The tiger this herder of buffalo tells of is 'Pundit Bagh;' he is well known to all."

"And you never brought word that we might make the hunt," Finnerty reproached.

"Sahib, we Ahnd people when we know a tiger is possessed of a spirit do not seek to destroy that one."

"Why is he called Pundit? Is he the ghost of a teacher?"

"This is the story of Pundit Bagh, sahib: Long ago there was a pundit that had a drug that would change him into an animal, and if he took another it would change him back again."

The Ahnd's little bead eyes watched his master's face furtively.

"One day as the pundit and his wife were walking through the jungle a leopard stepped out in the path to destroy them. He gave his wife one powder to hold, saying: 'I will take this one and

change into a tiger, and when I have frightened the leopard away give me the other that I may change back to myself.' But the poor woman when she saw her tiger husband spring on the leopard dropped the powder and ran away; so the pundit has remained a tiger, and is so cunning that it will be small use to make the hunt."

"But coming and going as he must, Mahadua, how know you it is the same one?"

"By the spectacles of the pundit, sahib; there is but one tiger that wears them."

Finnerty laughed. "Does he never drop them, little man?"

"Sahib, they are but black rings around his eyes – such as are on the back of a cobra's head – like unto the horn glasses the pundit wore."

"Baboo Dass declared the tiger that peeped in his window wore spectacles; it must have been this same legendary chap," Swinton remarked.

An old man came running up the road, between its walls of pipal trees, beating his mouth with the palm of his hand in a staccato lament. At the verandah he fell to his knees and clasped Finnerty's feet, crying: "Oh, sahib, Ramia has been mauled by a tiger the size of an elephant, and from the fields all have run away. Come, sahib, and slay him."

"Pundit Bagh keeps busy," the major said; "but by the time we make all our arrangements it will be near evening, and if we wound him we can't follow up in the dark. Go back and keep watch on the tiger; to-morrow we will make the hunt," he told the old man.

To the Hindu to-morrow meant never; when people did not mean to do things they said "to-morrow." Perhaps the sahib was afraid; perhaps he had presented the tiger in too fearful a light, so he hedged. "Come, protector of the poor, come even now, for we are afraid to go into the grass for Ramia. The tiger is not big – he is old and lame; one ball from the sahib's gun will kill him. Indeed, sahib, he is an old tiger without teeth."

Finnerty laughed; but the Banjara flamed into wrath at this trifling. "Son of filth! Skinner of dead cattle! Think'st thou the sahib is afraid? And did an old, toothless tiger kill a buffalo of mine? Begone! When the sahib goes to the hunt, he goes."

The Ahnd now said: "Have patience, man of buffaloes; perhaps another, a leopard, is the guilty one. Pundit Bagh acts not thus; in fact, in the little village of Picklapara, which he guards, more than once when the villagers have made offering to him of a goat has he driven away a leopard that had carried off an old woman or a child."

"Fool! Does a leopard break the neck of a bullock? Does he not slit the throat for the blood? And always does not a leopard first tear open the stomach and eat the heart and the liver? I say it was the tiger," and the Banjara glared at Mahadua.

"It was a small, old tiger," the Hindu declared again.

"Seems a bit of luck; evidently 'Stripes' is inviting trouble," Swinton observed.

"You'll want Lord Victor to have a chance at this first tiger, I suppose, captain?"

"If not too much trouble."

"I fancy our best way will be to make the hunt from elephants," Finnerty said musingly. "We can beat him out of the grass." He spoke to the old Hindu sternly: "Tell me the truth. Is Ramia still with the tiger?"

The Hindu blinked his eyes in fear. "It may be, huzoor, that he ran away to his home, but there is a big cut in his shoulder where the beast smote him."

"Sahib," the Banjara advised, "if the Presence will go on foot, even as he does many times, I will go with him, carrying the spare gun; the tiger knows me well and will wait till we are able to pull his whiskers."

"These Banjaras haven't a bit of fear," Finnerty commented. "Is it good ground for elephants?" he asked.

The Banjara's face clouded. "Sahib, the elephants make much noise. Perhaps the tiger will escape; perhaps if he comes out in an evil way of mind the elephant will run away."

"Well, Swinton, if you'll ride back and get Gilfain – what guns have you?"

"I've a Certus Cordite and my old .450 Express."

"Good as any. Soft-nosed bullets?"

"Yes, I have some."

"Well, use them; we'll be pretty close, and you'll want a stopping bullet if the old chap charges. What's Gilfain got?"

"A battery – a little of everything, from a .22 Mannlicher up to a double-barrel, ten-bore Paradox."

"Tell him to bring the Paradox – it won't take as much sighting as the rifle; Gilfain has probably done considerable grouse shooting. He's almost sure to miss his first tiger; nerves go to pieces generally. I'll get two elephants – you and Lord Victor in one howdah, and I'll take Mahadua in the other."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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