

# Death Is a Far Country

By BARY BORU

This is a tale of the sinister lure of the East in a white man's veins, gripping him, carrying him relentlessly toward his doom. It is also one of the strangest stories we have ever read

I am a brother of dragons

... Job, xxx 29

## Prelude

“ONLY once before had a sight hit me as that one did,” said the District Officer; “I mean to say, left my mind benumbed, quite floored for the moment by a sort of mental solar-plexus blow.”

It was a strange tangent the talk had taken as the upshot of a casual afternoon on the links. But this was also perhaps the strangest nineteenth hole any foursome had ever finished at, with the players sitting soberly grouped about a great plinth of basalt from which upreared a giant King Cobra poised to strike. They went on with their talk in quiet unconcern for they were seated in the Vishnu temple dedicated to Serpent Worship that stands on the golf course at Simla; and King Cobra, though a god, remained mercifully immobile, for he was likewise carved of basalt.

The foursome had been sent scuttling for shelter in the temple when their game was drowned out by one of those swift seasonal storms of the uplands of India's summer capital. The lofty gloom of the place put a quick

damper on the usual round of lie-swapping whimsies of the links.

Such chatter was as unthinkable here as smart-cracking in a cathedral. And for much the same reason. Something more than mortal was in the air, a haunting inkling of other-worlds darkly mysterious. At least it had the effect of subduing a set of ordinarily garrulous golfers. Sitting there mutely twiddling their thumbs they reminded him, the D. O. dryly observed to his companions, of a Tibetan coolie twirling his prayer-wheels—curiously similar defense mechanisms to propitiate the unknown.

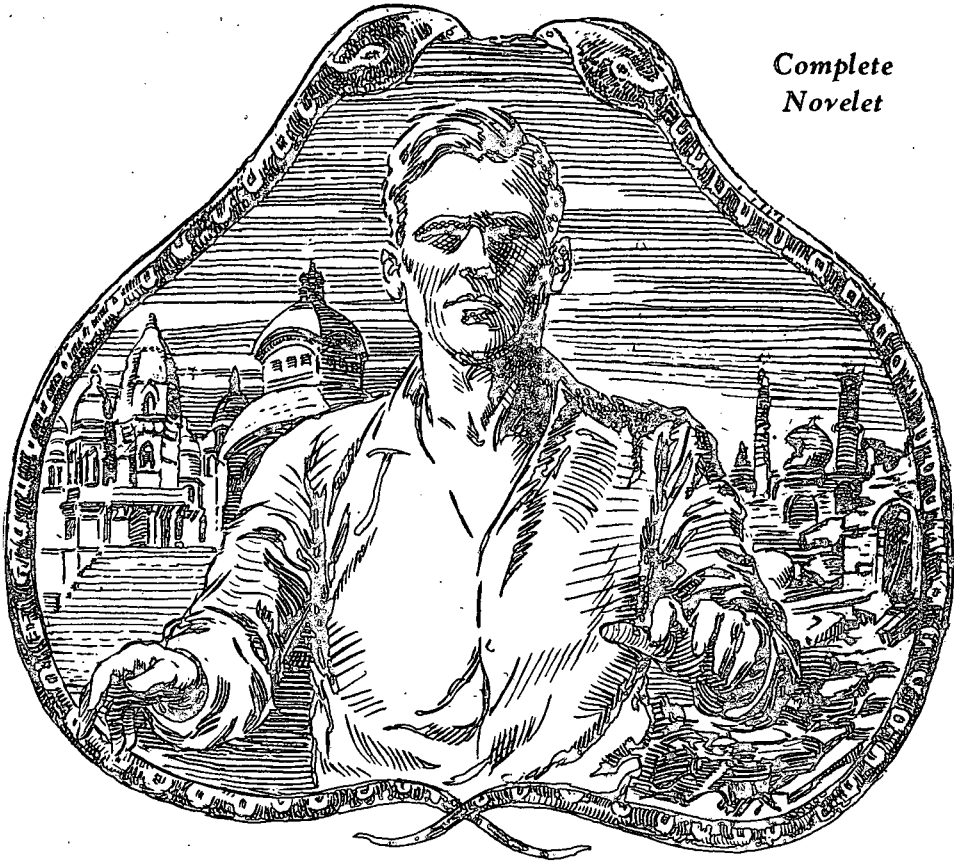
Unknown be damned! and the same to all the sundry of its benighted gods, they chuckled in reply—a bit of a hollow chuckle.

Which prompted their host to relate to these newcomers to India an experience out of his own. It would help wile away their marooned hour if it did not shock them somewhat out of their easy conceit—the conceit of the West, still in its teens as centuries go, laughing off the hoary riddle of the East, of unnumbered centuries back to the beginnings of man.

The mounting storm rocked the temple bell in a panicky tolling and whined about the tomblike dome with a touch of monsoon madness while the towering King Cobra seemed astir beneath the play of the lightning's shadows. It was ominous of India at its worst.

“THE first time I was stumped in this odd way was, as it chanced, off on the other side of the world.” the

*Complete  
Novelet*



D. O. was saying by way of prolog. "In California, one night at the bottom of a deep canyon of the Sierra Madres when I looked up through this immense natural shadow-box and had my first sight of Halley's Comet. It was uncanny. But that's not the word. Nor does awe-struck convey it. It was a sudden stunned sense of coming face to face with unearthly forces beyond our ken, outside our grasp.

"So it was with this girl—my first sight of her, that is, taken together with the setting. I had been out of India long enough, I admit, to be wide open for it. Our P. & O. steamer was headed hard for Bombay and the old spell of the land of the lotus was closing in on me like the fog when I saw her, alone

on deck, the Southern Cross filling the night behind her. I stood there staring, and looking silly enough, as I suppose it appeared.

"It was not the sky-show that halted me, for after all that is a commonplace of down-under; but the two taken together, this stunning creature radiant in the reflected light of that sparkling marvel pulsing in the heavens—it left me with the same baffling feeling I'd had that night in the California mountains, of having a rather disconcerting vis-a-vis with uncommon forces, unfathomed powers.

"Looking back on it I can understand the way it was. Much as the white cliffs of Dover meant England to me, the Southern Cross stood for

India. I suppose the sight of it started a kind of nostalgia for what we call the grand old Mother of mankind, the rather mixed emotions of one returning to her embrace, never being certain whether her heart was of Lilith spawning demons or of Eve rearing a race; more likely, something of both. And in such a mood I walk squarely in upon this revelation, of her standing there at the foot of this sign in the heavens, a living Lilith or was it Eve?

"I kept staring, I know, at this girl there before me having the look of Lilith and the loveliness of Eve. That may sound like a flight of fancy. But they were images as real to me as any we envisage out of the past; perhaps more so, for I used to think of one or the other as the very embodiment of the deep evil of the jungle and the sublime reaches above the snowline.

"You see, India affected me that intimately—like a woman, or a witch! Other fields of my service—Canada, South Africa, Australia—remain prosaic matters of geography and government, strictly impersonal; with Egypt, perhaps escaping that dull category as the romantic scene of the queen of vampires. Cleopatra is only a legend now of an ancient lover. India is a Presence. Imminent, inescapable. Its breath always close upon one, whether foul with septic swamp or sweet with the air of the hills. It wraps itself about you—everlasting arms—a phantom thing—lifting you to the heights or dragging you down—"

THE wailing of the storm made his quiet words hardly audible as his glance went nervously to the overshadowing effigy of the King Cobra. "Down—down into the bottomless pit!" With lowered eyes as if the recollection were too terrible he breathed

rather than uttered—"God 've mercy on him."

"But this girl—" one of his listeners pressed, after a discreet silence.

"Yes, this girl," from another of the foursome, fearful they would be denied any further revelation as too personal for the speaker.

"Oh yes, of course," resumed the D. O., quickly covering his lapse; "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I was anticipating—Well, this girl appeared, as I was saying, as if these twin images of mine had suddenly taken flesh. I could never have sketched nor attempted a description of their features, had never noted any likeness either living or portrayed that suggested any, yet she filled out completely, and it seemed most naturally, the abstractions I'd been carrying around in my mind's-eye. The look was Lilith's, the loveliness Eve's.

"She wore a dark tweed travel suit with beret to match and was comfortably though not unbecomingly shod in true English fashion; but with the first glance I could see she was assuredly not English. Her hair, a rich auburn and in wavy abundance, offered no clue, for it is the one color common to all races. Her clear brown skin was equally ambiguous in these days of universal sun-tan. Her features were pure Caucasian, so far as could be seen, her nose straight and pleasingly prominent, her head nicely proportioned, her height rather above average and figure slender except that she was full-breasted. Her age? The East has a word for it: lovelyhood.

"I could not type her. Not English or European or Hindu or any of the congeries of tribes and tongues that abounds in India. Indeed under the shimmering heavenly lights she seemed hardly earth-bound.

"The skyline of Bombay now show-

ing attracted her notice where I had failed. She moved past me, her eyes fixed ahead, as if to hurry her passage through the Gateway and, as she brushed close, I saw that look of Lilith—malign, venomous—and heard in syllables strangely half understood what could be only a malediction of deepest damnation, that carried death in it.

"These things I have given you at the beginning because she must become the main interpreter of what follows—as she was for me, and much more besides. . . ."

## I

\*THE landing of the solitary girl at Bombay is also solitary, except for a black cat she carries in her arms; and she hurries through the motley street throngs to the temple-like railway station. Hurries, that is, save for a significant pause to watch the *pukka* street fakirs with their well known feats of growing mango trees before one's eyes; making a rope or even a boy on a ladder disappear in mid-air; and most uncanny of all, the *sappa wallahs* squatting within a few inches of their deadly cobras which rear and sway in rhythmic response to the Indian flutes. The cat at sight of the cobras sets up a great fuss, spitting vigorously and trying to escape.

When the girl offers the address on a letter to indicate her destination, the ticket-seller expresses surprise that some advance arrangements had not

\* "When you can tell me where superstition ceases and the supernatural begins, I will define superstition to you," saith the Brahmin."

This was the D. O.'s reply to the query as to how much of the superstitious might have entered into this running account, made up in part of hearsay from the other characters concerned.

The District Officer of the Indian Civil Service, it may be said, fulfills a confidential and paternal office similar to the traditional role of the Canadian Mountie, in the remote districts particularly combining both the judicial and executive functions as well as any others for which he is qualified—in this case, the medical part played by the D. O., who for the purposes of this narrative shall be known as Major (Dr.) Mac.

been made through the addressee, Sir John Stafford, for an escort on her hazardous journey to the wild recesses of the Punjab. When the grim young lady suggests that she can probably get a horse to take her there if the railway won't, the ticket sale is promptly effected and she boards the fast Frontier Mail.

Word of the mystery girl's coming creates a one-day sensation at the ramshackle buildings of the Stafford Rock Salt Mining Corporation, Ltd., when Sir John's native bearer announces the report he has gotten over the mystifying natives' "grapevine".

"You'll quit talking that sort of eye-wash if you want to 'scape a slanging!" Sir John explodes. Then curiously: "Besides, how do you know all this?"

To which the servant makes only the typical natives' evasion, "God knows"; persisting, however, as he bows himself out with *gránd salaams* that it is true; it is "in the air."

Sir John turns from puzzling over this baffling natural radio to puzzle over the questions as to who the woman could be and what could she possibly be wanting in that God-forsaken spot where no white woman had ever set foot. "India is altogether a puzzling country," he observes philosophically with his stock phrase for all such perplexities.

As his father's namesake and heir, Sir John Stafford patriotically carried on for the Crown and profitably for himself in this rock-salt mining concession in northernmost India. He was a blunt hunting-squire type of honest-hearted Britisher, turned fifty; in strong contrast to the second son Harry, a philandering vagabond, at this time off on his amorous adventures somewhere in England.

The third surviving member of the

family was the youngest son, Paul, who returned to India as to a refuge after the World War. As a young medico in the thick of the shambles, he had come out of it shattered in body if not in mind—the past a nightmare of killing, the future bereft of faith or ambition in anything. He turned from this chaos of the West to the peace of the East, from Mars to Nirvana—to India, where he was born; which he had known as a boy as the land where to kill no living thing was the greatest virtue, the *Ahimsa*.

AT THE bungalow where the brothers keep bachelors' hall on the "next-door side" of the sub-Himalayas Paul hears the bearer's word about the girl's coming in silence; but the hapless messenger is held trembling under his stormy-browed stare.

The still-young face was marked like a tragic mask that hid some hell which had not ceased to haunt him; though such a condition would hardly explain the weird power of the spell he seemed to cast upon his servant merely by the glance of his glazed, uncanny eyes.

Paul's resentment of any such intrusion is emphasized as he makes his way down a wild ravine, flanked by fantastic colossal forms carved in the sheer cliffs, to the crumbling ruins of a *stupa*—a towerlike temple of unknown antiquity. (A massive tree older than Christianity had grown out of the top of the pile.)

Furtively the curiously excited man crawls through the matted jungle undergrowth to a boulder, likewise bearing age-worn carvings, which is balanced to the touch of the hand; and swinging it open and closing it behind him, he goes underground.

An ancient arrangement of reflected daylight from the upper temple throws

into spectral view the hideous details. It is the typical cave or tunnel of such temples, as high as a man and twice as long; alive with sounds and glimpses of unearthly creatures; scorpions, serpents, giant lizards, enormous toads, blind bats.

Paul has to dodge and pick his way through the evil mass to reach the inner circular chamber, about twenty feet in diameter, which instead of the crumbling earthen walls is fitted with walls and ceiling of highly polished marble.

The marble surfaces have kept out the reptilian brood and the shadow of Paul remains motionless in the center until a vibrant rustling is heard, with growing intensity; then sharp sneeze-like hisses. He tilts a movable slab to deflect the dim light until the rays fall upon the repellently grotesque head and multi-armed torso of one of the Vishnu gods given over to Serpent Worship; the mammoth figure sitting, as customary, in a carved coil of serpents, when momentarily the most monstrous of the lot moves with life, among its carved replicas; and the light falls full upon the gleaming diamond-like head, black as jet, to reveal the most dangerous of all wild living creatures, the King Cobra, or rather, in this case, the Queen Cobra; with golden spangles speckling each side like earring pendants; the magnificent if terrible body unwinding slowly onto the carpeted floor a length of eighteen feet of shimmering sable, which is now seen to be confined within a glass fence.

In the manner of the *sappa wallahs* Paul chants the incantation:

*Bifadl, Bismalla we bi 'lla  
Aksantu alek ya dabia. . . .*

A tremor runs along it and the ample folds of the ophidian beauty's wide hood or mantel dilate and palpitate.



"Don't be angry with me, my Queen, if I seem to slight you today," he addresses her, almost fondly. "I've had disturbing news, and your serenade will have to wait—till some necessary tasks are attended to."

**H**E LIGHTS an oil lamp, disclosing a portion of the chamber fitted out as a modern laboratory. He puts on some milk to heat over a Bunsen burner and busies himself with the preliminaries to an experiment.

The reptilian type of the specimens and equipment indicates researches of an antivenin character, for a specific serum for the fatal bites of snakes. Charts and graphs show figures of more than twenty thousand deaths in India annually from such cause.

The milk being warmed to just the right touch, Paul slips the bowl under a front glass-panel, lifting like a gate.

"To the Queen's dinner!" he says, mock-heroically; "for after all there is something royal in your power of instant death, my Saprani! It was the same power that made great kings of old; and when they lost it they lost their thrones. The thing that fascinates, in outlaws and desperadoes.

"Only one thing excites the imagination of men even more than this power that destroys life; and that is the mastery, the defeat of the power of death; in nothing do men approach so nearly to the gods', as the old Roman remarked!"

And with a sweep of his hand he refers to his experiments and turns back to them. "My own calling," he goes on with grim humor as he works, "possesses neither of these qualities—that is, as it is generally practiced; neither the devilish or the divine. For although, no doubt, a physician may often be fatal to his patient, that is not

his ostensible business. And as for defeating death, the patching and mending of worn-out bodies can hardly be called that; only a useless postponement of it. Patched people do not make good ancestors; our brave Norse forefathers saw to that when they set their old and disabled in the front line of battle, for a quick, glorious riddance. If I had my choice of a future incarnation I should choose to be a Central African despot—or a King Cobra!"

He turns impatiently from his work, again to contemplate the giant serpent. "Men are stupid! They know only how to conquer by destroying. They would kill you, my lovely Saprani—even as you, being only a serpent, thought to destroy me!"

He slips back the broad leather band of his wristwatch and regards intently the cicatrix of a snake bite—the two telltale scars of a giant viper's fangs marking his wrist.

Again carefully concealing the brand of the serpent under the leather watch-band, he speaks with an odd intensity, his eyes unwinking. "But you failed me, my Saprani—or was it failure? Till you touched me, Saprani, I despised myself and my way of life. I was nothing; a physician without a practice; a scientist without a discovery; a man without a love—without even a sense of the brotherhood of man. Flanders and the Marne and Verdun, they had taken even that away from me!" He laughs sardonically.

"But then you touched me, your fangs pierced my very veins! Was it the torch to inflame my being? whether it be lighted in the higher or the nether fire, I care not! I was a pygmy—I have become a Titan!"

"Let those men whose gods are machines destroy themselves with their Flanders and their Verduns. Together

you and I shall find the great secret—the brotherhood of all creation. The ancients lived in peace with you, wisest of creatures; many of this land, indeed, who preserve the ancient truths which we have lost, do still move among your serpent broods unharmed and giving no harm.

"We have blood-ties, Saprani, by that night when the Moon was ringed with the silver crown, when your fangs mingled with my veins! Alien bloods make strange currents when they mingle! It is destined!"

He whirls about as if a little touched by madness and strides across to his test-tubes and plunges deep into his formulae. "If I prove myself great in no other way," he mutters, "I shall prove myself the greatest of fools!"

THE centuries tumble away—from the twentieth to primitive times—past the train-window of the solitary girl as she speeds north from the modern seaport capital; finally to survey, from the deck of a flat-bottomed river boat, nearly-nude tribesmen breaking the soil with plows hewn of trees and pulled by pony buffaloes.

"In the beginning . . ." she muses. For these were identical with the first plows used by man, somewhere in this cradle of the world. It was their quaint triangle shape that suggested in the dawn of time the first written sign, *alpha*, of the earliest alphabet, with which she seemed somehow to be familiar.

On the marshy shores of the great stream that gives the land its name, the Indus, she finds the headquarters of the Stafford salt works.

When she presents her letter to Sir John her easy composure and perhaps the sudden apparition of her peculiar beauty in that unbeauteous place leave

him less assured than ever before the opposite sex.

The letter is from his Uncle Ned, in England. It identifies the girl as his daughter—of the odd name, Sinfire; strangely drawn to India, "she wishes no more than I to be a burden to you; only that she may, until she finds her footing, have the shelter of your hospitality."

With a little gust of feeling, the girl dabs at her nose with her kerchief. "It was his last wish," she says.

"My poor child," Sir John responds, almost with paternal affection. Then he holds out his broad hand into which she puts hers. "I am glad that you are—our cousin," he says with a deep-drawn breath.

Answering her surprise, he explains that his father, to whom the letter was addressed, had likewise recently passed away. "Strange that the two brothers who had been so separated in life should be leaving this world almost together."

"But in that case," she starts to say, but Sir John overcomes her qualms with the assurance that he and his brother will deem it a privilege to do what their father would gladly have done.

"Your brother?" Sinfire asks pointedly.

Her interest droops as he explains that it is Paul, who has come to him since the War. "He was pretty hard hit; he's hardly himself yet. Living like a hermit in the hills. That's where a woman comes in. Without her, men left to themselves just naturally drift back into barbarism."

"But there was another brother?" she says.

"Oh, yes. Harry," he replies heartily. "If he were only here now! He's the talented one of the family when it

comes to—well, entertaining the ladies as should be. But he's off roaming, mostly; in England, from latest reports. Wonder he didn't look up Uncle Ned—that's to say, while your father—or the family, at any rate. There were other children besides? But really it's a little shocking, the way we families too often lose track of each other—what with scattering to far ends of the Empire—"

Sinfire interrupts the other's embarrassed moment with another pointed query: "But this other brother—Harry—he'll be back?"

"Yes, indeed. Perhaps in seven years; maybe in as many days. But Harry always comes back, the scamp; like a bad penny, you know, when they won't have him elsewhere."

THE roar of a motorcycle outside indicates that the native servant (with a sly smile for "Lady Sahib's" arrival according to prediction) has anticipated his master's desire that she should be conveyed by side-car to bachelors' hall.

Sir John adds a postscript to the letter, bespeaking for "Cousin Sinfire" a cordial welcome, and gives the servant the missive for delivery to Paul.

As the side-car whirls off, the servant beaming with its first Lady Sahib passenger, Sir John goes inside, patting one of his coolies abstractedly; at length, to his white assistant, saying abruptly, "Do you think her pretty?"

"Do you, sir?" comes the other's respectful echo.

"I don't know," says Sir John, more to himself; "I've never seen anyone like her."

And standing at the window he follows her departure in the vanishing whirl of dust until it fades into nothingness on the horizon.

After their exciting dash over the narrow hill trails with the puffed up bearer strutting his driving skill for benefit of his most honorable passenger, the side-car is parked at the bottom of the footpath by which they must make their way to the bungalow in its aerie perch on the slope.

Stopping to look at the ruins of the *stupa* near the ravine, Sinfire remarks the faint notes of a flute.

The servant, startled, exclaims: "No Burra Sahib, no white lord's ear can ever hear that *toumril* before, which Hindu ear have heard in the *stupa*. Lady Sahib hears like Hindu *ranee*!"

"The same flute that *sappa wallahs* play for their cobras," remarks Sinfire casually.

But the servant with a gesture to his lips begs silence.

Sinfire advances in the direction of the sound, when he stops her with grave warning: "*Bhut! Bhut!*"

"But no ghost will hurt me," she says unconcernedly.

"Lady Sahib understand Hindustani talk!" he further exclaims. "Born in India maybe?"

She shakes her head.

"Lady Sahib understand Hindustani talk, hear Hindu sounds, but not born in India!" the servant repeats, baffled for once by one as inscrutable as his own kind.

Resuming his way along the footpath, he saves his face by delivering himself of his master's stock phrase covering such situations:

"India altogether puzzling country!"

## II

SINFIRE, on her arrival at the bungalow, is entrusted to the care of the servant, Jagwant, Paul's personal bearer dubbed Jaggy, for short.

Jaggy makes it clear that most bad



for him Hakim (Doctor) Sahib Paul has not yet returned, being unbeliever when his poor servant tells him of Lady Sahib's approach.

Whereupon she is led to the guest room, made ready with little touches worthy of the shrine for a goddess. Her letter, with Sir John's postscript, is placed in Paul's bedroom by Jaggy.

Morning finds Jaggy timorously arousing his master; timorously, because the letter, lying crumpled into a ball on the dresser, is evidence to the sly Asiatic's mind as to what his master's temper will be. He informs Paul that Cousin Lady Sahib has rising up.

"Well, what of it?" grumbles Paul from beneath his covers.

"Will Hakim Sahib have breakfasting with Cousin Lady Sahib?"

"Get the devil out of here!" explodes Paul; "and give Lady Sahib my compliments."

When Jaggy returns Paul is scraping off his days' old beard with vocal discomfort. He blurts out that Cousin Memsahib Red-fire, or whatever that wild name is, be informed that he will breakfast with her at her convenience.

"Cousin Lady Sahib have already having breakfasted," is the servant's response.

"In that event she's no lady!" exclaims Paul with a gratified, "Thank the Lord!"

He hustles through his ablutions, his curiosity now piqued in his hurry almost forgetting the wrist-watch, which he carefully buckles over the serpent's scars.

As Paul enters the living room Sinfire is standing, her back to him, studying the portrait of a young man among the older family faces hanging on the wall.

A polite cough failing to obtain

recognition, "I beg your pardon," Paul says from the doorway, "but this, I take it, is Cousin—Cousin—?"

"Sinfire, perhaps," she says; and while provokingly keeping her back to him: "And you—may be—Cousin—?"

"Paul," he says.

While he is studying his next approach, she continues, still absorbed in the portrait: "And this maybe—is—?"

"Harry," he answers. "Brother Harry."

The girl gives the canvas one swift intensive glance and turning abruptly advances directly on Paul, extending her hand.

High-strung and jumpy at best, he is taken off balance by her sudden move, then by the full view of her odd old-gold kind of beauty, heightened now by a gypsylike scarf flowing softly about her superb throat, which is circled with a fine necklace of tiny golden spangles.

He looks, at length, to her feet. "I had almost expected to find spangles about your ankles too," he says.

Then, suddenly realizing, he begins a stumbling apology for the tardiness of his hospitality; when she turns again abruptly to the portrait, remarking abstractedly, "Harry. That's the one who's away just now."

"It's a pity," he answers, "the portrait scarcely does him justice."

"There are some people," she says, "whose portrait is to be preferred to themselves."

"It would need to be a very handsome portrait to make that true of Harry."

"Oh, I mean a portrait can do no harm."

"Has anyone done you any harm—?" Paul blurts out, in quick question. Then, "You'll excuse me. I'm a bit on edge. And you see, I have never met a lady so direct, so forthright."

"Yes," laughs Sinfire, for the first time. "I fancy I'll never grow into—exactly—a lady."

"My compliments!" exclaims Paul, as he takes both her hands, with a little bow.

"WHERE is she? Where is she?" is Sir John's first question on arriving at the bungalow from the salt works; a question which becomes habitual with him later, as he comes to seek her instant presence with his every arrival.

Jaggy fetches her, trailed by Paul, out to the veranda.

"Ah, Cousin Star-fire!" Sir John exclaims.

"Not *Star*-fire, brother dear," Paul interrupts with mock seriousness. "An even more attractive name—*Sin*-fire!"

"Well, I should say *Star*-fire is more apt, being associated with something heavenly," responds the elder; then suddenly abashed with the rare boldness of his own speech, he stammers: "I already see I need not ask, Paul, how you like our new cousin."

Paul answers with a quiet intensity: "Why, she's a—a—savior-by-meresight!"

"Hmm! Hmm!" Sir John coughs at the intimate trend of the talk. "Come, cousin, let's get out and about. Don't let Paul make a shut-in of you, like himself, mooning around in the gloom and the shadows. I want to show you my hobbies—that can't be matched I daresay in the finest manors back home."

And as he talks Sir John has whisked the girl off, around the side of the house; while Paul stands in the doorway, smiling through tightened lips at this flare of gallantry—quite extraordinary for his elder brother. Then stepping to the corner of the veranda, he

watches after her as she walks with the grace of that lithe sinewy motion from the hips that's to be found only in the women of the East.

"As she walked her body undulated like a flame—the flame of life," he murmurs, when he hears behind him a sharp spitting—to discover the black cat brought by the girl now backing into the doorway at sight of Paul and arching its back and uttering "*Pffts!*" precisely as it did for the cobras of the street snake-charmers.

Paul unconsciously claps his hand over the place of the snake-scars on his wrist under the watch-band, muttering with a bitter smile, "I can't keep my secret from you, wise little demon."

With a serpentlike lunge he catches the cat and is attracted to the peculiarity of its paws. "Double-toed!" he says darkly; then with sardonic humor, toward the disappearing girl: "Not the sign of the witch, surely?"

The cat squirms and escapes from his arms, and with an epithet flung after it Paul hurries down the veranda steps and off in the direction of the ravine where the *stupa* stands.

"YES, they're my one hobby; the blooded ones, that is," Sir John is saying as he leads Sinfire to the stables. "I keep telling Paul, you know, 'A canter is the cure for every evil,' but the poor boy—"

With that they arrive at the stalls and he steps over quickly and throws open the upper doors; at which the heads of two magnificent white steeds are thrust out.

Sinfire stands transfixed, while her escort remarks: "Aren't they beauties—pure Arabians!"

One of the animals turns in her direction and whinnies, and with a transport of delight she runs to it and

throws her arms about its neck and holds it nose to nose. "This one—he's mine!" she virtually squeals, hugging it.

"My word, but we're going to get along famously!" exclaims her host, infected with her rapture: "I prided myself as a horse-lover; but, but—you!"

She stands dancing impatiently while he throws open the lower door to admit her into the stall, and she goes quickly over every point of the high-strung animal with all the confidence and skill of an amateur of horseflesh, and again turns to pet its nose affectionately and work little braids into its forelock.

"I say," Sir John chuckles, "but you do have a heart for horses."

Sinfire tosses her head back, with her arms about the neck of the animal and says with high spirit: "A horse—and freedom of air and soil to wander about—and free fire and iron for their smithy!"

"Sounds like gypsy talk!" he interrupts.

"Oh a *mallee* has his land—but a gypsy has his horse—that is his treasure!" she answers.

"And '*mallee*,' that's Hindustani! What sort of child are you?"

For answer she starts leading the horse out of the stall, saying simply, "The saddle," while he shouts to the native groom, "Hi! Sapees!"

"Burra Sahib," the servant fearfully addresses his master, "Hakim Sahib Paul not ride Ghoola long time; Ghoola very wild, maybe."

Sir John looks to Sinfire, who only says quietly, "I am not afraid—of anything living—out of doors."

**P**AUL in his underground *penetralia* is serving Saprani her bowl of milk. He leans against his work-bench

and observes her with a sort of fascination. "She has come, Saprani," he says. She is a queen among women as you are queen of all wild living creatures. Her heart is hidden from me as by a veil, as is yours. She is an angel—or a witch!"

He turns to engage in his experiments; experiences a growing lassitude; clasps the wrist with the snake-scars on it, as if tormented with it; and finally yields to the impulse, gets down the Indian flute and, lifting the front glass-panel, squats before it, intoning the eerie notes of the snake-charmer. As Saprani turns her glittering head towards her master a slow continuous shifting takes place throughout its glistening coils, and the forward part of its body is pushed through the opening and held poised in the air, the head and neck as if proudly upright.

**C**IRCLING the hill trails, Sinfire and Sir John stop for a view of the *stupa* ruin in the ravine below them. Again she catches the faint sounds of the flute, unheard by her host, while the groom attending them shows the same fearful reluctance as the other servant to advance further, muttering likewise, "*Bhut! Bhut!*"

"Ghosts! Ghosts!" blusters Sir John, quite out of patience. "My dear cousin, let me warn you—if you listen to these Hindus you'll be seeing and hearing ghosts everywhere—in the old rotting temples, the trees, the very air! They claim, you know, there are so many different steps or stages of seeing and hearing (smelling, too, for all I know) between their 'enlightened' senses, if you please, and those of a mere Englishman, or any Occidental. How many are there, Sapees?"

"Bapees!" replies the groom.

"Only twenty-two?" laughs Sinfire.

Sir John flashes a quick glance at her, both for her understanding of the Hindustani numeral and a certain acceptance of the statement of the native—when their horses suddenly shy and rear.

"The Great One!" exclaims the groom, as an enormous serpent peers out of the sweet *dhut*-grass.

Before his master can strike at it with his sword-cane, the servant has shoo'd it out of danger with an excited "*Hut! Hut! Hut!*"

"There you are!" fumes Sir John. "A cobra—a deadly King Cobra—and he—"

The servant salaams deeply and attempts an explanation.

"I know," his irate master interrupts, "I know all of them: 'Even your enemies are friendly when at a distance.' 'If you kill the Great One there are still so many others.' The fact remains, he's got away scot-free, to search for another victim; for they'll do that, they'll stalk a man, these King Cobras!"

He directs Sinfire's attention to the *stupa* ruin below: "There's their breeding ground. In fact, it was in its day the center of the Serpent Worship of the god Vishnu. On festival days the natives put out saucers of milk for their crawling divinities to regale themselves on! Though there is one idea that may have something to it. *Mar-Ashakh*, it's called, Serpent-Love. The principle, as I see it, has something in common with that of the rabies in the case of being bitten by a dog; except perhaps that it's carried a step further. The human victim, who is bitten by a female serpent and has chanced to survive—as rarely happens, it's true—this victim experiences a regular periodical ferment of the venom in his blood; say, with the changing phases of the moon.

At such periods the victims are subject to extreme morbid restlessness, a kind of fever, and mental upset; and a German physician has recorded that they are possessed with a craving to be bitten by the serpent—a cobra, I mean—as the only thing that will allay their torment. A Hindu of the Punjab University cites cases of where this habit has grown, the venom acting like dope, from the need of one or two bites a year to one every month or so, till in the end their moral faculties take on the appetites and traits of these deadly reptiles!"

Sir John shudders and stirs Sinfire out of her horrified fascination of the scene below them. "I'm sorry, my dear. I shouldn't have afflicted you with this—it's too dreadful—but you'll find sooner or later that—that—" and again he is rescued by his philosophical adage.—"that India is a very puzzling country."

"It's stopped now," Sinfire muses, preoccupied, when she no longer hears the sounds of the flute and the trio spurs its horses along the trail.

### III

AT THE first opportunity Sinfire seeks to solve the mystery of the ghostly flute. In her search for a clue among the *stupa* ruins she comes upon deserted pools of savage alligators, murderous-looking ancient wells, till with a showing of exceptional woodcraft she traces the course made by Paul through the matted jungle-undergrowth, to discover the swinging boulder, which, as she touches it, swings open to her.

She penetrates the fearsome tunnel to the entrance of the inner chamber, there to encounter one of the strangest experiences ever undergone by human eyes and ears. Paul sits squatting on

his heels, after the manner of the snake-charmers, playing the soft plaintive serenade of the Oriental flute.

Looming higher than his head appears what seems to be at first sight a mammoth candlestick of lustrous ebony, but as it sways with sinuous grace to the measures of the music, is revealed as the Queen Cobra, now aroused to an intoxication of sensuous delight; the eyes almost incandescent in their unholy glow, the dark membranous hood expanded and agitated on either side of her delicate, deadly jaws from which the arrowlike tongue strikes fitfully.

Sinfire sinks against the wall, her hand upon her pounding heart, as she contemplates the Satanic scene; its two actors entirely oblivious of her presence.

The notes die away and the flute is lowered as the charmer pronounces the incantation:

*Bi izn sheikhi Ahmed er Rifaia  
We saad u Din nur u Din  
We araba el mudarakin*

On the fading words the serpentine beauty sinks nerveless to the Indian carpet; with caressing tones the man soothes her and gently places his hands at a precise spot just back of the head and as she yields herself, obedient and drooping, he lifts her and rests her length over his shoulder, her chilly coils touching his cheek and her head, drowsy yet deadly, hung down upon his forehead.

Sinfire advances into the scene, as if drawn by its power.

Paul hears and slowly turns. The shock of the sight of her rouses him from the spell and he faces her fiercely.

"Yes, you have conquered death!" she says, hardly breathing; and the words puff up his strange conceit.

He cautiously unwinds the somno-

lent great cobra from his neck and gestures graciously about the chamber with the word to her, "You have the key to all things—even to my innermost secret."

"But such power—" the girl starts to say, and he interrupts with that morbid pride: "I can delegate the power," he says, "Sapraní is the friend of all who are friends to me."

"Is she my friend?" the girl asks in a low voice.

"That is known to you better than to me," he says.

She throws back her silken shawl and stretches her hand out and lays it unhesitatingly upon the serpent's folds as it lies in its master's arms.

AT THE touch a strong quiver runs through Sapraní as a woman might shudder at contact of something she feared or hated, her black neck rises and draws back to launch itself at Sinfire's bosom. But the expert hand of the charmer merely exerts a pressure at that vital spot just behind the head and the fatal stroke is thwarted. The next moment Sapraní was in her cage and the screen of glass had slid into place.

"You were not touched?" Paul asks the girl quickly.

"No; but in that moment I made a long journey over the 'black waters', to and fro. Death is a far country—to be so near! Well, Sapraní—as you call her—does not like our friendship."

"I will not ask you to forgive her. If there is anyone to blame it is me, who foolishly exposed you to such danger."

"Danger is life," flashes Sinfire, eyes kindling; "and jealousy, that too. Sapraní is jealous of her master."

"She has shown that I am not her master."



"Perhaps she sees danger in me, danger for her master. Serpents are wise—mysterious."

"There is one more mysterious than Saprani," says Paul.

"A serpent?" Sinfire parries.

"It is you—whatever you are," he answers impetuously, taking her hands swiftly in his; "you are no blood cousin of mine. You pick up the speech of this old land and sense the hidden things that only natives know. Your ancestors were of the Old East—" He pauses to consider; then came the clear thought. "Those same ancestors who spread from India twenty, thirty, maybe forty centuries ago—to wander over the face of the earth—and keep their speech pure, like their blood, the only true Aryan! Sinfire, you are a gypsy!"

As he finished he felt the pulse leap in her wrists; and she sensed his discovery. "You are a magician," she says, lightly and noncommittal; "I do tell fortunes."

"You are a gypsy," he repeats, "a true Romany rye! Now I wish I knew them as my brother does; he lived among them for a time."

"He has lived among them?" she fences, leading him on; "he never told me so. And I thought," she adds, with a touch of seeming irony, "that he had told me everything."

Paul feels a flush of pity for Sir John. The elder brother had evidently been making vain suit for the elusive Sinfire. He answers quickly, to catch her unaware. "We are not speaking of the same person," he says; "I expect him here any time now."

"You expect—him?" she replies, and he detects a sudden stirring in her.

"My brother Harry."

"Oh—yes," she says, haltingly. But her pulses fell and her hands slipped from his clasp.

"We'd better be getting back—before we're missed," he says, leading her out.

A WALL-MAP of the heavens and a finger tracing its constellations, to pause on Serpens, then move slowly to the moon. . . . Paul, in his room at the bungalow, checking up the Moon's phases with almanac tables, calendar data; marking the findings with disturbing forebodings.

He seems battling with some down-drag and clasps fitfully at his tormenting wrist, at the snake-scars. He starts out, when the rich notes of her voice drift in; Sinfire singing, in some alien tongue strangely half understood:

*Ay-y- . . . . Na janav ko dad m'ro as,  
Niko mallen mange as,  
Miro gule dai merdyas,  
Pirani me pregelyas. . . .*

After the first surprise, he finds comfort in it; and eagerly he goes out, following the direction of her song down to the brook.

He discovers her sitting silently, her eyes moist with a tear. He says gently, "You are sad—what was it?"

Impersonally she sings:

*I've known no father since my birth,  
I have no friend alive on earth;  
My mother's dead this many a day,  
The girl I loved has gone her way. . . .*

"Tell me, you must tell me," he says, stooping toward her.

She leaps lightly to her feet, dodging under his outstretched arms and goes into the *frishka* movement of the gypsy dance; provocative, sensuous, with fiery passion; singing as she dances:

*Free is the bird in the air,  
And the fish where the river flows;  
Free is the deer in the forest,  
And the gypsy wherever she goes,  
Hurrah!  
And the gypsy wherever she goes.*

"You little witch!" he exclaims as she whirls about and throws herself into his arms: "you'll give me heart failure with your mad moods—"

"Beware the mad moods of a—"

"—of a Romany *chai*!" Paul interjects. "'Of one whose blood has rolled through gypsies ever since the flood.'"

There is conviction in his voice.

He takes her face firmly between his hands and scans it. "There's no drop of Stafford blood there," he says. "And the bird-peaked eyes, peaked at the corners—there's mischief there, for someone. Tell me," after a moment, "what thing sent you to this end of the world?"

"Stealing a horse," she banters.

He addresses her seriously: "Come now, how did you get here? Why did you come?"

She answers seriously, with a nod in the direction of the *stupa* ruin in the ravine: "The Romany *chai* can keep a secret—yours—as well as her own."

With a word she has disarmed him; and bound him to silence concerning herself.

He sinks back into his morbid mood as his thought goes to that other thing. "Can you like me—since—?" he says, referring to the scene of their meeting in the cobra's chamber.

"I don't dislike you," she answers, in a tone that conveys much more; then with smoldering feeling: "I dislike no one. There is only one, and him I don't dislike, I hate!"

"Who is he?"

"Some day," she abruptly closes the discussion, "you will know—maybe." And she turns away.

As they move back toward the house she absently hums the first haunting air, touched with sorrow as she pronounces the line: "—the girl I loved has gone her way—"

HIS "thunder-and-lightning girl," as Paul has come to call Sinfire, brightens the darkness of his spirit with happy spells, until for the first time he dons his riding togs with her and together they race each other to the stables.

Sinfire is greeted by the excited neighing of Paul's horse; but as he approaches, the animal shies and lunges as it did for the King Cobra on the trail.

Paul hesitates, sensing the cause of its disturbance; then tries to quiet it for a mount, but without success.

While Sinfire goes for her mount he quits the stables unnerved, sick with despair: "It seems all creation knows it—all except stupid man," he says, hopeless; and he places a soothing hand on his burning wrist.

When Sinfire rides out with the groom she finds Paul making it down the ravine toward the *stupa* ruin with mad strides.

Dismissing the groom with her horse, she heads Paul off; finding him racked with some fearful inner torment; some mounting unnamed passion that seeks surcease only in the secret chamber below.

"Please, dear heart, please leave me, just for a little while," he asks of her, "and I will soon come back to you my old self."

Her elemental nature blazes forth; flings itself into fierce conflict with the evil thing rising in his veins; whips, cajoles and gradually leads Paul away from the ravine, down to the scene of their rendezvous at the brook.

With a swift impulse he sweeps her off her feet. "Devils and vipers hate water," he says sardonically and carries her across the stream.

He throws himself down, exhausted from his experience. At length, he says:

"You still—still—don't dislike me?"

She rests his head in her lap, stroking it. "*Aficionado*," she says from her heart.

He presses his lips to her hand.

"It is our best word," she says. "It is for him who has not the *Kaloratt*—our 'black blood'—but who has the true Romany soul."

He looks up to her with all love; then the haunting fear of that other thing prompts him to speak. "Oh help me, help me, my sweet, to escape this life—this halfway house to Hell!"

She is undergoing some crisis of the heart. The race instinct of the gypsy strain within her battles with her overwhelming love for him—the love for which his heart calls almost with a death-cry—and she places her right hand in his.

"It is good fortune," she says simply.

He looks at her, not understanding.

"You have carried me over the waters, *Aficionado*," she goes on. "I give you my right hand. By the Romany law we two are now one!"

He searches her eyes, hardly believing. "You mean, my precious, you give all your heart to me—forever!"

A tear stands in her eye: "*Ava*," she affirms, and drops her head shyly. "When you take me to your tent, *Aficionado*!"

AS PAUL and Sinfire separate at the bungalow to go to their respective rooms he holds her and whispers: "Tomorrow—tomorrow I shall take you, my sweet."

They kiss.

"Together we shall take the Romany road!" he says.

"And freedom of air, and soil to wander about!" she joins, with ardor.

"And free souls—tomorrow," he adds; and they part.

"Tomorrow!" he muses in his room, in the gathering darkness. "What a gulf night is, between one day and another! Sometimes it may mean the difference between this life and another. The night that separates the maiden from the woman, the wife from the mother, innocence from guilt—"

A shaft of the evening's early moonlight edges in from the window. He hurries over to look up at the moon now hazy with an enveloping mist.

Alarmed he consults his almanacs and charts. He is bitterly plagued by the offending wrist. He turns back to the window to behold—the silver Crown that rings the moon! A dreadful look, a stony look of horror and despair: "Oh God!" he utters, "it's come—it's come!" and falls upon his face.

Presently when he lifts his head a frightful change has come over his countenance. The nose is pinched, the eyes sunken and unwinking, the temples drawn hollow, the ears retracted, the whole color livid, the lips pendent and relaxed; every feature twisted to give the shocking effect of the reptile as he stares with the glazed "look of the viper!"

Flitting his tongue fitfully, he half crawls, half clammers to the door, and out.

He races headlong down the ravine, in through the entrance tunnel to the cobra chamber.

He lights the oil lamp, dashes over to the Indian flute, as if he feared a failure of his strength, and breaks it over his knee.

"Who is master now?" he cries out in full frenzy at the excited serpent. "Queen of Vampires, Daughter of Hell!" he exclaims as he tosses the broken pieces against the glass panel. "For the last time our bloods have

mingled! Go find another victim, from which the very vultures turn away."

Enraged seemingly with hate the aroused monster rears and strikes again and again at him, behind the glass, while two streams of the deadly venom filter down harmlessly.

Stealthily the hardly human figure winds his way back from the *stupa* ruin to the bungalow, slithering up the veranda steps.

Inside he hesitates, flicking his tongue ominously. He starts for Sinfire's room, when a challenging "*Pfft! Pfft!*" is heard and the black cat backs up against the door, body arched and claws unsheathed for the defense of its mistress. He curses it under his breath, or is it a sharp sneezelike hiss? Swift as a whiplash he has seized the animal, while momentarily out of the darkness comes the cat's death-cry. When his face is again thrust back into the light two telltale red flecks show conspicuously upon its sudden pallor, red flecks about the mouth. His body and spirit have been utterly drained by the mad storm of his terrible affliction and he is barely able to get back to his own room, where he collapses.

**P**AUL is in an evident coma when discovered next morning. In this out of the way place the only available medical help, as it happens, lies in the person of the District Officer.

It is the tradition of the Indian Civil Service, particularly in the remote "non-regulation territories," that any special qualifications of its officers are at the disposal of the District; and in this way Major Dr. Mac, the local District Officer, is summoned.

Sir John ushers Major Mac in to Paul.

As the former retires, the physician swiftly sets about checking on what

were his immediate suspicions that here at last might be one of those cases of which he had heard among native authorities but had never personally verified; the malady of *Mar-Ashkh*, so-called—the dread visitation, Serpent-Love.

He gives Paul a hypo and rouses him from his stupor.

With the passing of the paroxysm the more extreme effects suggesting a reptilian metamorphosis of some kind have practically vanished; but the patient is plainly in an utterly debilitated state as from some long fever.

Before Major Mac can address him directly with his questioning, Paul pleads piteously with him to keep his secret; swearing he will break off this terrible liaison with "her", with "Saprani"; did so in fact last night; it was "their anniversary," when the silver Crown ringed the moon, as upon that first night when her fangs pierced his veins!

The physician finds Paul's body branded again and again with the blue pits of what might as well be serpent bites as the hypo marks of the dope addict. In either event, "I'm afraid it's too late, my friend," he says.

"I'll quit this land of serpents," Paul avows; "go where I couldn't satisfy that craving even if I wanted to. I'll go tomorrow!"

The Major goes out of the room.

"Tomorrow!" Paul repeats and as the thoughts of his promise of last night return, of his happy word to Sinfire, he buries his head in his pillow, with heartbreak.

Major Mac disguises the uncertainty of his diagnosis to Sir John. "It's one of those strange fevers peculiar to the Indian jungle," he says. But he finds himself prescribing the treatment followed by native physicians for *Mar-*

*Ashakh*. "It's a desperate fight," he goes on, "a fight to be won by 'temperatures,' if at all."

The elder brother is hard hit. But about this matter of temperatures?

"I mean to say," responds the other, "under no circumstances must he be allowed to get 'hot-blooded'—whether from temperatures without or from disturbances or emotional upset from within. Any such ferment may well be, well—fatal. Fatal—or worse!"

"Or worse?" queries Sir John puzzled.

But his question is interrupted by an outcry from Sinfire, who enters carrying what was Blackie, the cat.

The physician announces there are some appearances of death from a cobra attack; and yet—

"I found her by my door, as if protecting me from the horrible creature," Sinfire says distressed.

"A cobra—in the house!" remarks Sir John. "That doesn't happen often."

"No! No!" Jaggy insists, "No cobra in the house. Not one!"

Major Mac looks pointedly from the cat toward Paul's room, but with a shudder as if trying to avoid the thought; he says:

"No, that doesn't happen—often," he says, as he takes his leave.

"OUR tomorrow . . . it's a long time coming," says Paul to Sinfire, who has devotedly watched over his convalescence, now progressed to the invalid chair stage.

Sinfire hums a gypsy *gilli*:

Give me happiness today,  
And I shall laugh at care and sorrow;  
Bring me joy this very hour!  
Who has ever seen tomorrow?

"Are you happy?" Paul says; but it is not a question.

Her words are warm with love: "*Me*

*kamava tute*," she says. Then: "You understand?"

"Love is a pretty handy interpreter," he smiles; "it has made me understand"—and his face is crossed with afflicted memories—"many things."

Momentarily, there's a hearty "Halloo! Halloo!" from below; and Paul exclaims eagerly, "It's Harry—Harry!"

Sinfire covers her startled hearing of the name. But not before Paul's quick glance has caught it.

"You'll probably want to talk together," she says, leaving; and Paul's protesting noes fail to detain her.

Vague suspicions return to plague him over her apparent avoidance of Harry, together with her earlier unusual concern about him. He wheels himself out from the room, in his invalid-chair. But the meeting between the two has already taken place and he has lost this opportunity, at least, to discover what the possible relations between Sinfire and Harry might be.

Sinfire, in fact, has by now retired to her room.

"She's always so thoughtful—so much tact," Sir John says to Paul. "She fancied we could talk more freely with Harry; though really I look upon her as quite a member of the family, apart from her being our cousin."

Harry is as handsome as his portrait. Or better—attractive, winning. For his features are less noticed than his long rangy figure, and his easy bearing, physical and mental, is of marked appeal. The kind of chap who, whatever his years and whatever the occasion, wouldn't look out of place in Eton cap and blazer. In age, of the indeterminate forties.

An arresting trio, the brothers. There's conflict in their very types. Harry, blond and daring, the Nordic.



Paul, by turns gay and darkly dramatic, the Norman. Sir John, rugged, ruddy and hirsute, of the Picts and Scots. A British mixture.

Harry is quite shocked at Paul's pathetic condition. He covers it with a hearty brotherly handclasp and twits him: "You're sure this is not a malady of—the heart?" he says, with a nod in the direction of Sinfire's room. "Love unrequited, you know—" and finishes with a characteristic lusty peal of laughter.

Finding the pair a little ill at ease Harry follows up his advantage. "Of course, you and Jack are both in love with her," he addresses Paul and not Sir John.

"Of course," replies Paul in seeming banter, and craftily studying Harry for his reaction, "—but perhaps her heart was touched before she came here."

"When I settle down I should like to marry a girl like her," the other answers with disarming freedom; "but fancy old Uncle Ned having such a beauty in the family!"

"You saw him while you were in England, I hope, before he—" Sir John suggests.

"No. He managed to shuffle off this mortal coil before I caught up with him, drat the luck!" Harry says, again with a significant glance off towards Sinfire. "He was something of a bird of passage himself, you know. But—well, there were other circumstances; it might have been awkward. Things sometimes get—well, that's to say, 'entanglements sometimes prevent,' diplomatically speaking."

**H**ARRY moves from the veranda to the door and takes a look around the living room, turning to address the others still outside: "You

know, when I am actually here, I envy you all the comforts of a home. But I couldn't stick it. I'm no glue-pot—but then you both know that."

"No. More like a gypsy, I should say," Sir John says.

"Quite!" laughs Harry. "There's no constancy about them; that is, as to places. But they're constant to each other—to their sweethearts and wives; that's where the gypsies and I part company."

Harry turns his back on them to view the room again and not seeing him as she passes through with some changes for Paul's room Sinfire pauses, before Harry's portrait to breathe the malediction, "*Mandy'll pen leste a wafedo dukkerin!*"

Harry hears with a start the gypsy jibe and his selfassured smile gives way to a forbidding scowl.

He watches the unsuspecting girl keenly while Sir John remarks from the outside: "Aren't you afraid that this playing with fire—playing around, as you put it—will get you into a bad scrape some day?"

Harry laughs and says, observing Sinfire closely as she starts on again, "A gypsy girl once told me that I bore a charmed life"; on which Sinfire hesitates, then quickly recovering herself, continues along. His voice rises, for her to hear, as he turns back to his brothers saying, "No one that I have ever harmed can ever harm me, that was the prophecy. And as you see, so far it has turned out to be true," he finishes with a laugh.

Sinfire, inside Paul's door, has held it ajar to hear the last of the remark, and she repeats under her breath the threatening words, "*Mandy'll pen leste a wafedo dukkerin!*" The door closes on her face, with the very look of death in it.

HARRY means to take Sinfire for himself—even if he has to use the apparent secret of her true character as his weapon.

Her ill will he dismisses as arising from his untimely appearance on the scene; which in some way might interfere with her little scheme or schemes. What these may be he hasn't the least idea. He had never seen the girl nor she him, apparently, before their meeting here.

He sustains gracefully the role of a man anxious to make himself agreeable to a pretty girl, a lovely "cousin," of new acquaintance.

Evidently for purposes of her own she responds in kind—until the favorable moment, when he opens up his offensive.

"When the fruit is ripe the bird arrives," he says to her.

"—or the hawk!" she flashes back.

"Splendid!" he exclaims, thrilled at her fire. "The hawk rakes down upon the rabbit!"

"And finds the rabbit has fangs may-be," she retorts.

Casting aside further byplay he seizes her abruptly. "You little impostor," he flings at her. "Who are you—and what's your game here?"

"Bird-peaked eyes!" his breath whispers upon hers; "the smile of the serpent, walk of the panther, devilish beauty—and the gypsy's curse! A gypsy of 'blackest blood'!"

She breaks out of his arms and unlooses a wild bantering tirade: "I'll tell you the truth! I do tell fortunes! I keep a tent to take stolen goods! I help to make counterfeit money and all kinds of forgeries! I deal with thieves! I lie, swear, cheat and steal and get drunk on Sundays! And I do many other things! I am a real Romany witch!"

"Bravo! Bravo!" cries out Harry.

And swiftly he takes her and presses a kiss on her lips—when heavy steps are heard on the veranda, and she slips off to her room.

Sir John comes pounding into the living room and Harry, unconscious of his brother's humor, remarks: "Jack, you're more like a horse than a man; when I hear your step I always forget you are not a quadruped—"

"You are a thief and a scoundrel!" exclaims the older man, trying to control himself.

"That is bad enough for so noble an animal as the horse," returns Harry, quizzically, "but I withdraw the expression. It is a sufficient excuse and explanation of your proceedings that you are Sir John Stafford, Baronet, of Sappa Wallah, Punjab."

The other, heedless of the sarcasm, flares up: "You can't play with me," he shouts. "This is my house. I don't want you here!"

Paul, who has heard the uproar, wheels himself out from his room and watches silently, unnoticed by the other two.

"Do you think I'll let you insult ladies who are my guests?" Sir John rages on. "No, by the gods! I saw you in here—saw you with her in your arms; saw you take that kiss!"

A horrible look comes upon Paul's face.

"If she hadn't been there I'd have come in and knocked you down on the spot, you—you infernal rake!" Sir John exclaims.

At this Harry throws back his head and laughs out: "I begin to understand," he says. "But you're mistaken in one thing, Jack. If she hadn't been there you wouldn't have knocked me down."

The other regards him with a non-plussed expression.

"Because," Harry goes on, looking the other quietly in the eye, "if she hadn't been there you would have seen no cause to be—jealous."

Paul, with some terrible malevolence concealing the fearful fury with which he had realized his brother's act, wheels himself in between the two men just as Sir John is set to spring at Harry, who has not moved a muscle.

Paul manages to restrain the former long enough for his aroused passion to subside; then to Harry, quietly, with death-like composure, he says: "If you have anything to say I wish you'd say it."

"Why, Jack," Harry says at once, addressing the older brother with perfect geniality, "I wouldn't have annoyed you for the world. I had no idea you were seriously interested in—our cousin," and he stressed the word. "I took a cousinly privilege with Sinfire, that is all. I'm sure she considered it nothing more. But if you like I'll ask her pardon in your presence."

The older man at length haltingly says with touching simplicity that he probably would have been less angry if he had better hope of persuading Sinfire to listen to his proposals, but that he had about made up his mind that she would never accept him.

"I'm sorry if I acted like a brute, Harry," he concludes; and the two brothers presently go off amicably to smoke a pipe down at the stables.

Paul wheels himself back into his own room, like one in a trance.

Sinfire hurries to Paul's room, and he lifts up at her with a muffled cry of rage. But she grips his hands and repeats, "I hate him! Hate him!"

Her emotions overcome her. "Oh, how helpless I am," she exclaims brokenly, passionately. "I meant to 'Sovahallas me pa o chone!'"

make him pay—pay to the full the Romany oath I swore by the moon:

"What oath? What for?" he interrupts savagely.

She draws from her bosom a tiny chain carrying an oval emerald ring.

"Why—why that's an old ring of Harry's!" exclaims Paul.

"Yes. With this he betrayed her," she utters.

"Her—who?"

"Didimani!"

"Didimani?"

"Yes. That was her name. 'Sister-jewel,'" she says, with anguished memory. "My eldest sister. The treasure of all our tribe. I loved her. It was at the fair—or the races—or somewhere away from us, away from her people's tents, she met him. And she gave him all, all love. And he gave her—this!" she says with hot hate.

Her words are confused but her meaning is clear. "When he did not come back, she had to confess—it was that way. And when a Romany *chai* confesses herself *chambri* by a *Giorgio*, a Green Gentile, she is *bitchedey pawded*, what you call, banished. Buried alive, we say—buried, away from the tribe, from the tents of her people. And soon she was truly buried—buried with a broken heart."

She drops her head, weeping silently. When she lifts it, revenge—grim, unwavering—has replaced sorrow. "The Romany heart has a long memory," she says, "and vengeance is sure. From a letter I got hold of I forged his uncle's name, Uncle Ned, and came here, across the 'black waters,' to wait for the hawk, for his homecoming—But he is your brother—your brother! Oh, why did I ever see you!"

"I have no brother in him, Sinfire," he says bitterly.

She withdraws her hand and presses

her burning eyes. "I did not know I could come here after—after what you heard," she goes on; "but you seem to understand—I don't know how—"

"Because I know him—and love you," Paul says.

"I have waited, waited for you to be able to go away with me," she hurries on; "hoping, praying that we might be away before he came. And even after he came I was ready to turn my back on my oath, break the Romany law. But now he means to have his way—that was why he did not tell Sir John today what he knew, that I am a Romany. He means to keep me in his hold by that secret. He means to have me, regardless."

Weakness overcomes Paul. And she attends him.

## V

MAJOR MAC on his return call finds Paul in a highly feverish condition, which he ascribes to the trying hot spell that ushers in the monsoon time. In fact, when he is about to take his departure Sir John points out the rising storm signs and prevails upon him to stop over rather than risk being caught on the road by the death-dealing hurricane at its height.

The deepening night is filled with the disturbed cries of wild parrots and peacocks and the haunt-you-birds, as Jaggy the servant calls the owls.

All the circuslike fauna of the Punjab race down from the torrential rains that have broken over the mountains, seeking to escape through the foothill jungles into the great central plateau below—leopard, panther, jungle cat, wolves, striped hyenas, bears, wild hog, bison, wild dogs in packs that give no tongue.

The wind's fury sways the old *stupa's* tower till its long-silent bell sets

up a doleful tolling—terrifying Jaggy into superstitious fear. "Bad, bad, bad!" he chatters, eyes popping; "somebody in this house have bring down heavy god's anger. I have not done!"

As the rills and rivulets swell to torrents from the cloudburst all manner of crawling things, driven from underground by the waters, join the stampede.

A shrill neighing of a horse is heard; then an awful scream, as if its death-cry!

Sir John and Major Mac dash out for the stables, Jaggy carrying their guns.

They find a wide gap in the fence of the compound, blown out by the wind.

Dragged from the stables almost over to the gap in the fence, lies the body of one of the white Arabian horses; its neck snapped in two, a quick examination shows, by what must be the mightiest of jaws.

Jaggy has leaped to scan the pugs—the muddy molds of the great paws—that circle the spot, to shout fearfully, "*Rimau Kramat! Rimau Kramat!!*"

"The Ghost Tiger!" echoes the Major, "the king of all man-eaters!"

Jaggy runs to and fro in comical panic, if the moment were not so serious, exclaiming, "The grandfather of all the striped ones"; and as he runs he pantomimes his description, "One leg shorter than the other," as he has been able to discover from the pugs.

"That's the old outlaw, of a certainty!" chimes in Sir John. "He must have accounted for a score of human lives in this District."

Jaggy starts running for the house, shouting, "*Rimau Kramat! Rimau Kramat!*" while Sir John regards his poor Arabian fondly: "It's a price to pay," he muses, "but it's almost worth it for a shot at the old devil."

"It's the biggest game I've ever had a chance at," chuckles the Major; and the two prepare to stalk their quarry.

At the house Jaggy is retailing the news to Harry in excited jumbled fashion, and the latter exclaims jubilantly, "That's game worth tracking!" and makes for his weapons as Jaggy darts out again with reserve guns for the other two.

Harry pauses; looks upstairs toward Sinfire's room: "More to my fancy," he mutters to himself; replaces his gun and goes up and raps on her door.

No word is said as she opens to him. His look conveys his intent; and he intercepts her as she attempts to slam the door on him.

As he takes her she swings herself around and out the door and down the stairs, crying, "Paul! Oh, Paul!"

In the living room Harry catches her and holds her and presses his lips again and again on hers in a passionate frenzy, smothering her outcries—when the door of Paul's room is flung open; and over the other's shoulder Sinfire glimpses a sight that chills her blood and she utters a scream of horror that unnerves Harry, who releases his hold upon her.

She backs toward the stairs and Harry stands transfixed with amazement more than fear as Paul with a mad bound grapples with him.

**T**HE reptilian metamorphosis or whatever it might be had come upon Paul again in all its hideous aspects; and as he throttles Harry he snaps like a mad dog or rather strikes like a serpent at his wrists.

Sinfire on the stairs covers her eyes to the harrowing scene—hearing only Harry's agonized pleas, "Brother, brother Paul, please—don't. Oh, God! Not that! Not that!"

... Until the cries cease. Then only a groan, a long groan of death.

Hearing no further sound Sinfire at length comes down from the stairs, to find Paul gone and Harry apparently beyond all aid.

She drops to her knees beside the body; extracts the oval emerald ring from its chain within her bosom, drops it upon his breast and with a prayer to heaven of an avenging accomplished, says quietly, "*Sovahallas me pa o chone!*"

As her eyes travel vengefully over the body they are arrested by two livid marks upon the wrist—as of a serpent's bite; but as she examines them she sees they are crescent in shape, distinctly the imprint of human teeth, where they have pierced the veins like viper's fangs!

With a ghastly shudder she looks from these tiny telltale stigmata of death to Paul's room; then off to the others somewhere outside; and the awful thought, what if they should discover the sign of this monstrous deed of Paul's!

She goes to Paul's room; peers cautiously through his door and finds him crawled back into bed; utterly spent, in an apparent coma. Bloody flecks show on his lips, on either side, above the canine teeth, and these evidences she carefully wipes off.

She returns to pace the livingroom, tortured with a decision she must make. At length with a frantic resolve she whips Harry's revolver out of its holster, holds it poised for a moment, with full realization of the consequences for herself; then blasts a shot through the point of the telltale marks in the wrist, to destroy the last traces of Paul's awful act. The gun drops from her hand and she falls to the floor in a dead faint.



THE hurrying pen filling out the death certificate pauses on the line *Cause of Death*. Major Mac, who has been writing in the routine facts in his dual capacity of District Officer and physician in the case, now turns to Sir John, repeating with a question, "Cause of death?"

The two men reflect a moment, gravely, silently. They find unspoken agreement as their glances meet.

"Suicide!" says Sir John in cold tones. "I should say, 'Suicide.' And in view of my personal knowledge of certain previous circumstances between them, I should say it was the only thing she could—that's to say, it's the more respectable thing to put him down for."

"Quite!" responds the Major.

The two men run in to help Sinfire control Paul, who has leaped to the window of his room and curses the storm as it threatens the *stupa* ruin.

The venerable tree that grew from the top of the ancient tower beads low before fierce blasts, when with a lightning flash it is uprooted, and the remaining ruins of the age-old pile tumble in collapse.

Paul slips to his knees at the window and buries his head in his arms with a low cry.

Suddenly the other three watching see the flash of the marauding, man-killing tiger bounding back through the fence-gap, a mighty snarling figure a full dozen feet long.

Sir John and the Major make for their guns to head off its bold return to its quarry.

The subterranean chamber in the meantime caves in with the crash of the *stupa*, to release Saprani from her glass enclosure; and with her hood flaring in swollen rage the Queen Cobra rolls the coils of her giant length swiftly along past the broken pieces of the flute

and through the outer tunnel and up the ravine, following Paul's trail like a bloodhound!

Paul and Sinfire from the window catch sight of the oncoming monster as it nimbly courses its way seemingly directly on a line for its master's room.

They stand watching motionless, as if spellbound by the ungodly menace of its onset. Accepting its challenge, Paul lashes out with curses upon it, defies it and would himself charge down on it except for Sinfire's valiant resistance.

Through the gap in the compound, into the yard, beneath the very window where they stand it whirls its wild way—when out of the darkness and into the window's shaft of light the tawny bulk of the mammoth tiger rushes to the kill of this crawling interloper, swipes at it with the notorious sledgehammer blow of its terrible foreleg, and misses!

Gouging sizeable divots out of the turf as it lurches to a stop, the tiger turns to study this alert enemy much as a dog cautiously considers the situation after having been made to look pretty awkward by some shifty cat.

FROM a respectful distance the two stare at each other, with eyes of death—the colossal eighteen-foot serpent, queen of all the deadly reptile kingdom, pitted against the unchallenged lord of all flesh-eaters, with the tremendous power and weight of his twelve-foot length.

Grace, a fatal kind of grace—this is the compelling feature beyond any other, as she holds her stance, lively though still, her proud hood distended and fluttering like a lithe mannequin flouncing her swirling skirts.

Grace too lines every bone and sinew of her heavy-framed antagonist, grace-

ful as an Irish setter frozen at point.

For this is no stupid slugging match. With cunning and craft these two and all their breed have earned their standing at the top of their divisions, reptilian and carnivora—and now it was a question of kind.

The tiger feints and lunges. The cobra weaves and feints a strike. The exchange continues, with the tiger steadily narrowing his circle about the cobra.

Ordinarily the two crafty combatants might deem discretion the better part of valor and call it a day. But each has tasted of its quarry—the tiger of the blood of the Arabian and the cobra of the veins of her master—and their blood-lust will not be denied.

Both seem to sense this. Yet they deliberately set themselves for the fatal try. The tiger with a murderous roar drives head-on into the lethal fangs of the mighty serpent.

With an audible crunching the massive jaws of the man-eater crush through the cobra's vertebrae like egg-shell but not before it has received into its own veins the mortal charge of the reptile venom.

The rest is unexciting; slow motion. Death is inevitable for both. Except that they never cease struggling to the very end.

Paul stares with eyes straining at the last expiring flutter of the Queen Cobra; a shudder runs through him that seems to shake his very being, and as he slumps limply down from the window Sinfire half-carries him onto the bed.

The other two and the servant enter from the compound, where they had witnessed the last stages of the death duel.

"Hartshorn! Some hartshorn quick!" the Major calls out to Jaggy as he

holds Paul's wrist; and turning to Sir John, "There's hardly any pulse," he says.

AS THE latter goes to hurry the servant, Sinfire's eyes widen at sight of the cicatrix of the serpent bite on the wrist: "See—see how pale they are!" she says softly to the physician.

He says, startled, "You knew—about this?"

She nods. "From the beginning."

"It's quite beyond me," he says, noting eagerly the faded traces of the once-livid marks. "They might be the blue pits of the dope addict; they die out eventually. And yet again the virus in his veins, if there be such a thing, may have died out with the death of—" and he indicates the dead cobra outside—"somewhat as the bones of the lower animals when grafted into man decay and die in their own allotted time."

Paul is muttering, in delirium: "And now—mighty Queen—great experiment—test—serum—my pure veins—your deadly venom. Will serum save? Well, doctor should try his own medicine, ha, ha! . . . If I win, thousands of lives saved. If I lose—well the best of me died on Flanders fields. There's the moon watching—moon ringed with silver Crown—maybe good omen, eh? All ready . . . there . . . there, the wrist. . . . Strike, Saprani! strike! . . ."

"Something's happened!" hoarsely whispers the physician. "It may be this terrific ordeal has carried his fever to temperatures to purge his veins—much as electro-thermal treatments lately have been used to burn out virus that had resisted everything else!"

The hurried steps of the other two halt his speech and he places a warning finger over his lips.

With the aid of the hartshorn brought in, Paul is revived, looks about

dazed. "What—what—where?" he mumbles.

"Are you all right, Paul?" Sir John asks anxiously.

"Yes, yes of course," he answers with an effort; "just one of those fool experi—fool stunts of mine. Must 've knocked me for a twister, eh?"

He looks about blankly; then is struck suddenly with the beauty of the girl by his bedside.

"You know—remember Cousin Sinfire," says his brother.

Paul happy but at a loss says, "Welcome, Cousin—Cousin—?"

"Sinfire," she says; and in that word all the realization that their precious past had died in Paul's memory.

"Well, now, this is stupid of me; I must get right—" and with a great effort he lifts himself up only to drop like lead as the physician goes quickly to him.

"Guess I've got a blighty one for certain, eh, Major?" Then in a half-whisper: "See you—see you, cousin dear—for certain—tomorrow. . . ."

And his eyes close, with a long sigh.

Major Mac places his ear on the heart; and at length ruefully shakes his head and puts his hand firmly on Sir John's shoulder, who sways a little.

"He's gone, Sir John," he says.

Sinfire drops down by the bedside.

"Tomorrow," she utters, with a cry from the heart.

\* \* \*

IT IS some little time before the storm-bound foursome seated together in the Vishnu temple of Serpent Worship at Simla make any movement or word to shake off the thrall of all these things and find that the fury of the storm has spent itself.

Returning to the links they are about to tee off, when the happy cry of a woman's voice is heard—a long-drawn odd Oriental "*U-lu-u-u!*"

The men turn as one, to discover a young woman pulling up on a white horse, a pure Arabian, drenched from the storm but riding forward in evident high spirits.

"*U-lu-u-u!*" calls back the D. O. in greeting; then to his companions: "May I interrupt the play for a moment? I want you, I'll be most happy to have you know—my fiancée—"

The others quickly take in the girl, her rich auburn beauty, a certain loveliness—the loveliness and the look of Eve!

"Sinfire!" one blurts out spontaneously, giving voice to the thought of the rest.

"Quite," says the Major.

And they say the English have no sense of humor.



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BLISTERING  
TOES  
SORE  
BURNING  
FEET

*If You Suffer Itching Burning Torture of*

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Malay Melting-Pot

# A Street in Singapore

By JOHN K. BUTLER

Author of "Reunion on River Street," etc.

I

**B**ILL BRENNAN leaned across the sooty rail of the *S.S. Malaya* and sleepily watched Chinese coolies labor up and down the gang-planks. The coolies worked in pairs, carrying baskets of cargo slung from sagging poles, and their bodies glistened naked brown under the glare of

the Singapore sun. With baskets loaded, they marched down the steep planks to the dock, only to come up again with baskets swinging empty. Like ants on a trail, they toiled in two busy lines, and like ants, no individual had identity in their constant parade of labor.

Along the waterfront, as far away as Brennan could see, work went on