THE GREEN ENIGMA

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STRANGE ADVENTURES OF
AN ALIEN CREATURE IN
THE TIME OF BUDDHA
(500 BC)

THE GREEN ENIGMA

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By Stewart Caven

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CONTENTS

I

PRELUDE

A MOVEMENT was seen upon the face of the image as if a tremor had been suffered there, and over the billowy breast of stone slid down a lithe human form. It came pressed against the polished surface serpent-wise, raising no echo of sound, and with the same swift, gliding motion, like the rippling of a muscle, passed over one of the great thighs, and vanished within the dark crevice which separated the lower limbs of the colossal statue. The same figure was next dimly to be discerned walking upright between the idol's feet, until it reached the edge of the low pedestal, from which it sprang on to the wide altar.

It was a youth, and he approached the wavering circle of light with such strange suddenness that he seemed but another of the encroaching shadows that were gathering round the expiring lamp. His skin was of the very hue of those shadows, for it was a livid green where it met the light, and took a tawny tinge in the gloom. His rapid crouching movement brought him like a flicker well within the coloured glow, but even then his unhuman colour and his huddled, indistinct contour, when the exceeding rapidity of his movements gave place to as startling and utter a motionlessness, would have rendered an onlooker altogether uncertain as

to the reliability of his vision, and caused him shudderingly to count this noiseless apparition amongst the illusions naturally occasioned by the vague terrors of the place.

However, the youth was soon astir again, rising to his knees to tend the floating wick of the lamp. As he bent over the brightened flame, other characteristics, further eerie details, could be seen in the person of this weird attendant of the Goddess. His nose, mouth and chin were small, regular, and of exceeding delicacy of cast, while his countenance as a whole, drawing strength and dignity from the broad, sloping brow, was suffused by an expression of the utmost placidity and gentleness.

Nor could the unearthly dark-green tint of his flesh, as of mildewed bronze, lessen his exceeding attractiveness; and this although his unnatural eyes aroused something almost of terror in the minds of those who met their gaze, for they were wide-staring and luminous, even in the dark, with the yellowish-green gleam of phosphorescent lights. The hand, too, that he was dipping into the fragrant oil induced a feeling of sheer repulsion, and even fear, at first sight, by its strange exaggeration of human form. It was abnormally narrow, the palm being no broader than the wrist, which itself was slender, whilst the tapering fingers were far beyond proportionate length, and possessed of astonishing deftness of touch and facility of movement. And the white light which thus lit up his countenance and hands revealed also the bizarre colour of his mane of hair. It was of the hue of pure clay, but, as if sun-scorched, there was in it a prevailing yet elusive shade of deep purple.

In response to his touch the lamp now gave forth a flood of brilliant light, and spread upon the white alabaster flags of the altar a dazzling carpet,—the reflection of the myriad colours of which its sides were composed, at the same time throwing an unsteady shaft of yellow rays high aloft, so that sometimes they rested upon the ferocious face of the idol.

Folding his long arms over his chest, the youth bent forward until he was resting his breast and chin flat along the smooth surface of the altar, and with his knees gathered in under his flexibly-curved body, which was quite naked save for a band of black cloth fastened around his loins, he began to gaze fixedly into the brilliant crystal lozenges and circles of the lamp. Whilst he did so his wide, yellow-green eyes caught and reflected the changing glow with no motion of eyelid; only the pupils contracted and dilated with a curious regularity, as if in conformity with his deep breathing.

Then, with the grace and sinuosity of a panther, he began to turn on his side, and thence to his back, stretching his long limbs with a kind of voluptuousness. Hither and thither he turned, restlessly, with soundless movements, the soft, flexible muscles on every part of his body appearing uncontrollable in their independent delight in their own activity. Occasionally he would lie quite still, only to roll suddenly out of the rim of light again, disappearing momentarily into the rich-hued gloom, to return with eel-like motion to gaze into the lamp.

He sat upright, his face turned expectantly towards the darkness of the vast temple, as a low, hollow sound broke up the silence, a sound as if an

immense, heavily-muffled gong had been set vibrating by a soft blow. There succeeded a shuffling patter of light, sandalled feet, and soon a very soft, pleased laugh of a girl, as someone began to climb the altar-steps. The youth stretched out his hand into the dark, but the newcomer passed him, and went to stand on the farthest edge of the lighted circle.

It was a woman who had approached, young, indeed of no more than sixteen years, small, but with full round limbs, and a deep bosom where jutted forth, with glorious curves, twin hillocks of dusky pearl from beneath her hair. She was fair-skinned, even beyond the paleness of Kshatriya women, and her black tresses of hair hung to her waist in smooth, silky waves.

There was no single fault in her face, the pale olive of which was deeply tinged with crimson on her cheeks. Her eyes of liquid brown were set wide apart, and had not the slight slant common to women of her race; her dainty nose had something of piquancy added to its perfection, and the bright red lips could not but part a little to reveal a glistening row of tiny teeth. Her expression was one of absolute innocence; yet there was mischief, too, in her look, an effect due, perhaps, to the contrast of her pointed chin with the wide brow, perhaps to her manner of meeting the youth's level gaze with slightly inclined head; and a smile seemed ever to be gathering upon her face, or just departing.

Her only covering was a large, much-folded shawl of sable silk web. It was, indeed, her sleeping apparel, and it now lay negligently across her arms, not always hiding the quick limbs that were

ever exaggerating the necessity of her least movement, as if eager to answer the rhythm of some unheard song.

'Why do you stand there away from me?' asked the youth.

He spoke slowly, languidly even, yet with much almost imperceptible motion of his curved, colourless lips, as if caressing the consonants of the words, which he nevertheless uttered with a peculiar soft distinctness, and always with a timbre and musical tone such as only great singers attain in their choicest singing.

The girl sank to her knees slowly, and then assumed a reclining attitude, half-turning her gleaming back to him.

'You are late,' went on the youth. 'And yet you know that the hours of your absence are for me as jewels cast into a bottomless well.'

The girl's head was turned away from him, and bent in thought. She made no answer. The youth sighed, and stretching himself full length, his hands beneath his chin, he watched her closely.

'Hide your eyes from me if you will,' he said, 'and be silent. Only first tell me,—why did you not come yesterday?'

The girl turned quickly, and remained supporting herself upon her elbows, her hands hidden in her hair.

'What if I never come again, Gwali?' she asked with a serious air, scrutinising him earnestly, but without emotion.

Gwali's body twitched along its whole length, yet the expression of untroubled reflection did not leave his face.

'I think I would die,' he replied simply, his musical voice conveying no trace of his feeling.

The girl's eyes grew mild, and her lips trembled. Still she smiled.

'Poor Gwali!' she murmured.

She crept round to him and, resting her head and shoulders across his back, upstretched her arms above her head to fondle his hair and face, smiling the while up at the image whose horrible countenance appeared and disappeared intermittently in the unsteady light.

'Your hair is as soft and as fine as his, and your skin is much smoother,' she said thoughtfully. 'But his skin is the colour of young cedar wood, like mine, while yours——'

She turned so that now her bosom was set upon his shoulders, and with her arms around him she was nestling her head close beside his, and gazing with him into the flaming jewels of the lamp.

'And mine?' queried Gwali.

'Oh, yours is like that of the little Shiva in the Queen's grove, and that is made of green basalt,' answered Seti, rubbing her cheek against his.

'And his lips are red,—a deeper red than mine even,' she went on. 'And big, and very soft, and hot. Yours are cold and hard and thin, and they are without colour, as my father's were the morning he died.'

She was feeling his lips with her fingers as she spoke.

'He kissed you, then?' asked Gwali.

'Yes,' answered Seti, not masking her delight. 'He put his lips against mine, and a mist came over my eyes, and I was thrilled,—oh, like loud cymbals.'

Gwali slipped to his side and folded her in his arms, and thus they lay for a moment together, silently, with no sign of passion from either. Gwali's hands were caught loosely together behind her back, and she was smoothing aside the strange purple hair from his forehead. The youth's eyes had been closed; he now opened them, and fixed their gaze upon hers.

'His eyes are like sheltered pools of black, warm water.' She laughed at her description. 'Yours are like opal stones. His made friends with mine.' Again she laughed. 'Yours are always silent, and never let me know them.'

Gwali smiled now for the first time, and his ashen, beautifully curved lips opened sufficiently to disclose his gleaming teeth. He raised his arms until his hands held the girl's head, and then he drew her face to his, and pressed his lips to hers. She laughed, a loud, short peal, and broke away from him, but when he sighed and closed his eyes, she came back to him, rolling upon the polished alabaster.

'Your lips feel like soft marble,' she said. 'Is that why you have never kissed me?'

'I never before had the desire to kiss you, Seti,' he answered.

'When I heard the women speak of men's kisses, and when women kissed me, Gwali, I desired your lips. But I do not desire them now.'

It was a strange thing, stranger even than the appearance of the youth Gwali, more unlikely than the presence of the girl in that great cave of stone, that, although in his restless, and her wilder, movements to and fro in that one circle of light, sur-

rounded by abysmal gloom, their bodies constantly touched, and although she unceasingly caressed him with her hands and arms, and he as often responded, still no sudden heat of passion chilled their playing; nothing occurred to alarm her innocence, or to stir his desire. In her languorous gambolling he seemed no more to her than a favourite musk-fawn, and Gwali himself was abstracted in manner, his thoughts seemingly straying far away from her, and his responsive caresses were such as a troubled father might bestow upon an unheeding child.

'Seti,' said the youth musingly, 'Prince Nassur will doubtless seek you, for there is no one so fair in this land,—not one, except only your sister, Dhula.'

'But Dhula is not as beautiful as I am,' asserted Seti, arising to her feet, and looking aggressively upon her companion.

'She is more beautiful,' said Gwali. 'She is two years older than you. She has, therefore, two years of increased perfection.'

'Dhula is often unwell,' said Seti, with a suspicion of spitefulness. 'I have never suffered pain.'

She stiffened the muscles of her arms and body, and did not relax them until she trembled.

'Dhula can conceal her ailments,—who then will be the wiser?' responded Gwali with a smile.

'In the rainy season, when Dhula raises her left arm above her head she calls upon the gods, it hurts her so,' declared Seti, triumphantly raising her own strong, rounded arms to their utmost extent, with magnificent energy.

In doing so she allowed the black web shawl to slip from her body, and it fell about her feet.

'Well then, Dhula will not raise her left arm in the rainy season,' answered the youth. 'Come, sit down, Seti, and I will try to foretell your future.'

Seti, ill-satisfied, sat down, squatting on her heels, and drew the shawl about her waist.

'Dhula shall not marry Nassur,' she murmured.

There was anger in her face, but it did not darken its child-like fairness.

'Dhula will marry the Prince if she so pleases,' said Gwali. 'What difference will that make to you? One young prince will be very like another young prince to you for many years to come.'

He did not say this directly to the girl. He was lying prone, his eyes close against a ruby crystal in the lamp. Seti brought her head near to him.

'I love him,' she said, with quickened breath.

'No, Seti, you love me,' answered the youth, unprovoked.

'Love you! I!' laughed Seti, derisively. 'Why, I did not know of love until this very noon. The Queen was sleeping, and just as I was running to catch a glimpse of the shaven men of the new doctrine, Nassur took me in his arms and kissed me. Then I discovered love. Do you believe that?'

Her eyes grew still as she endeavoured to recapture the delight of that moment.

'Nevertheless, you love me, and not Prince Nassur,' replied Gwali, the unemotional tones of his low vibrating voice mocking the import of his words.

The fierce light flashed back into Seti's eyes as she fixed their gaze for some seconds upon the averted head of the youth before she spoke.

'I love you!' she repeated jeeringly. 'Cold like a fish, green like a snake, lizard-eyed——'

Gwali sat up facing her, with his legs crossed, his arms folded, and his long hands hidden in his arm-pits. Although there was no change in the settled calm of his countenance, Seti perfectly understood that she had wounded him deeply. Therefore she took on at once her original manner of easy affection, and with her hands worked herself along the smooth stone closer to him, until her knees touched his. Then she rested her fingers upon his shoulders.

'I will never say such things again,' she pleaded, as she had said pleadingly before. 'I don't want ever to make you sad, Gwali.'

'Cold, green, lizard-eyed—what matter?' answered the youth. 'I am sad, not for my own sake, but for yours. You do not yet know the power that binds you to me.'

Whilst he was speaking, Seti gazed at him in amused wonderment, and when he ceased, she clasped her hands, which had been lying lightly upon his shoulders, fervently around his neck, and bending her head to his breast, resting it in the hollow of his folded arms, she laughed long and quietly.

Then Gwali's arms with slow motion unfolded, and laying his long, thin hands upon Seti's smooth brow, he commenced to move them with a gentle stroking action. From the middle of her forehead to her temples, slowly his fingers coursed, to draw swiftly back until they met again in the midst of her brow, and once more the regular sweep of his hands was repeated, in a kind of rhythm.

Seti, her head relaxed in his hands, leaned heavily against him, and her arms and hands, with

out-turned palms and listless fingers, she had let fall, as if in abandonment to their own weight. Her eyes were closed, and an enchanted smile paused on her lips.

From time to time the rhythmic motion of his hands ceased momentarily while the girl, seeming to sleep, stirred slightly, as if wishful to consort her posture more completely to his ease. Otherwise for an hour or more there was no movement between them.

It was clear that Gwali, in some mysterious way, was sharing in the girl's trance, but his mask-like face gave no sign either of his purposes or emotions.

At length he freed her head, only supporting her until she recovered consciousness. The instant his hands paused, Seti opened wide her eyes, which at first were dull and sightless. Sitting upright, she seemed for some minutes to be waging a breathless struggle against her bemusement, until, with a great sigh, she all at once returned to her normal state, and smiled upon Gwali, who was watching her impassively.

Full of sleep now, she arose, and, draping herself from head to foot in the shawl, began to descend the altar steps into the impenetrable dark. Gwali followed her, and, reaching her side, took her hand, assisting her with accustomed gentleness down the many steep stairs, guiding her along the Temple aisle, between rows of immense pillars, which were only recognisable to the girl as she passed as bars of intenser gloom.

They reached a wall hung with some thick woven material in motionless folds, and the youth placed

his hand upon a hidden spring. Immediately a line of bright light drew itself in the darkness, broadened, by imperceptible degrees, to a crack, when it could be seen that a ponderous door of metal was slowly opening.

When the aperture had widened sufficiently, Seti, holding the shawl about her with both hands, touched Gwali on the breast with her head in a pretty action of farewell, and slipped through.

The place she entered was a long, low corridor, arched, and paved in dark, rich-hued marble, hung with cloth of gold and pictured tapestries, and bathed in a dull, roseate light from tiny coloured lamps, which were suspended from the arches on golden chains.

The youth waited until she had passed through a succession of gauzy blue curtains, which blurred her image like the dusk, and had disappeared, leaving behind her a movement as if the mists of evening had been disturbed.

Then he touched the secret spring again, and the door of steel and brass began to swing to. It closed without shock, and yet a hollow, gong-like sound trembled upon the still air of the Temple, grew louder, with a slower vibration, and ceased.

II

RETROSPECT

GWALI remained for some moments standing thoughtfully, with bowed head, before the door that had closed upon the Princess, and when he turned, and began to make his way back towards the idol and its altar, there was great despondency in his lagging step, raised shoulders, and drooping head. Viewed from the utter darkness of that remote part of the Temple, the sanctuary was in comparative brightness. The entire outline of the statue was plainly visible, and even the colour, a red-brown, of its pillar-like legs could be discerned. It possessed a female form, triple-breasted, but in the countenance the semblance of a woman was merged, and all but lost, in the blunt likeness of a cobra, while the head was distended by the wing-like structure of that dreaded reptile's hood.

Far above this hood, from time to time, according as the lamp upon the altar flared or grew dim, parallel lines of gleaming porphyry shone out of the black background,—the polished pillars of a stupendous reredos. In front, forming a kind of terrace, the altar-top glowed a warm-white, patterned by the faint, unsteady colours thrown from the lamp.

Many other objects, pilasters of rare marbles, massive gilt candlesticks, and numbers of lesser idols dimly formed themselves and receded in the neighbourhood of that single bright spot, suggesting their presences, hinting at the wealth of shape and colour that daylight would reveal.

Gwali returned to his place beside the lamp upon the altar, and threw himself down just beyond the radius of its many-tinted glow. He slept intermittently, if at all, for at intervals, all through the short night, even after the lamp had burnt itself out, his yellow eyes glittered like a tiger's in the dark.

The origin of a being so strange was, fittingly, a mystery, even to himself. The faculty of memory, properly speaking, he could not be said to possess, for the least of the scenes and incidents of the past were just as ready to the call of his attention as were immediate objects and occurrences.

But in that preternaturally complete purview of his history he could find no trace of either father or mother. He could recollect his first attempts to stand upright, and to walk, but he could not remember that a woman's arm assisted him. From the very first he was alone; living, like a lizard, in a cranny under a rock.

Not that his earliest days were spent in solitude; on the contrary, he was a member of a closely-knit brotherhood or community. But it was a community of ascetics, holy men and holy women who practised *tapas*, torture of the body, and had thereby maimed themselves, often beyond recognition as human creatures; and even in the least advanced cases they were but poor company for a child.

But quite apart from abnormality of bodily shape and colour, and the strangeness of his upbringing, alike in the powers and peculiarities of his mind as well as in the deficiencies of his senses, Gwali was from birth a being apart.

With regard to sense perception, he could see only the forms of things, his vision was entirely denuded of colour. He knew the sun but as a disc of lead upon a leaden sky, the moon as an ashy circle, the stars still more colourless dust in the colourless grey firmament. It was more than mere colour-blindness; there was a positive quality in his affliction, for on the darkest nights he saw what was given to him to see with equal clarity and acuteness as in the brightest noon.

He welcomed the Spring when he saw the young buds swarming like bees upon the branches; he recognised the Summer by the perfection of flower and leaf, and he was sad with the declining year when the flower crumbled and fell, and the leaf grew wrinkled and formless. But bud and flower and sear leaf were never more than outlines upon the grey jungle walls. The poppy in the fields, the flamingo on the river, the striped tiger in the grass were only duller shapes in his ashen world.

To his ear was given one note, and one only. With the same sound, in its degrees, came to him the laugh of children, the shout of anger and of pain, the song of birds, the night-cries of beasts, roaring of the wind, the beat of the rains, the whisper of women. To his nostrils was given no distinguishing power whatever.

But he was more than compensated for the limitations of mind that naturally followed from such

deficiency of sense by a certain power, which, though as yet, for lack of exercise, only vaguely realised, nevertheless enabled him to view his aloofness from normal mankind with pride and disdain.

And even as regards the ordinary uses of the intellect, although he was at first altogether incapable of experiencing any of the purely physical emotions, he had passed wonderful years pondering with a keen delight upon the obscure results of his limited powers of observation, finding happiness in the abundance of the ideas, and the fertility of imagination which came as a consequence of these undistracted meditations. The few dim sensations that were permitted him by the nature of his physical conformation he had learnt to make the most of, fostering the faint and tardy thrilling of his nerves, collecting each tremulous impression of sense for food for his eager brain, as a bee collects honey, stealing the essence of a thousand flowers to distil one scarcely visible bead of the precious nectar.

Ten years had passed since he first set foot within the Temple, and in all that while he had not once dared to pass beyond its bounds. Only three people knew of his existence there, the High-priest, Shaho, the High-priest's attendant, a neophyte named Lalhk, and the Princess Seti, second daughter of the reigning queen, Dhrasovah. Of the three, Seti alone in those ten years had actually seen him, and this although Lalhk brought him food every second day, and Shaho occasionally conversed with him, addressing him where he lay invisible in some dark niche.

This extraordinary shyness was the outcome of the terrifying experience that marked his coming to the city of the Kurus. It happened when he was eight years old. At that age he left the Sacred Rock in the Great Wood, against the counsels of Arvela, the much-mutilated Guru of the ascetics, and wandered on until he came to the banks of the Yamuna, whose course he followed until one evening he beheld the walls and towers of Prastha. In the night-time, astride a log, he crossed the river, and began to explore the maze of narrow streets.

He had never forgotten his astonishment when the sun dawned on the city, and the countless inhabitants swarmed out to their occupations. Where he was not stained with all the juices of the jungle he was caked with Yamuna mud, and was, withal, so small that he escaped notice. But he was as intelligent as a grown man, and was, moreover, full of the strange wisdom of the people among whom he had come to life, so that no sooner had he recovered from his first bemusement than he commenced to listen and to pry, filled with interest and excitement. The language these people spoke was his own, but the things that were said were altogether new, and not one of the sights had he ever before seen or imagined.

At sundown on that memorable day, when the fires were lit and the stew-pans brought forth, he felt hungry, and seeing three women engaged in making a broth before a hovel in the meanest quarter of the city, right under the shadow of the Temple, he went and squatted near them, holding out his hand.

He recalled how silent and uneasy those women

became, and the strange questions they asked him as soon as they had recovered the use of their tongues. But they gave him a share of the broth, and afterwards one of them, an aged, toothless, almost blind crone, taking him within the house, cleansed him from head to foot, and he fell asleep. That night he was awakened by a woman's moaning, and he heard them say that the child was born.

At daybreak he wanted to depart, but they prevented him, the aged woman seating herself close beside him as a guard. All that morning men and women went in and out visiting the sick woman, whose complaining voice he could hear; but none would look in his direction.

Then, suddenly, a great tumult was raised in all that quarter, and the old woman's hand fastened upon his shoulder, so that he still remembered the pain of her nails in his flesh. Warned intuitively, he darted out of the gloomy hovel into the fierce sunlight, to find himself in the centre of a wide circle which had been marked with charred sticks upon the ground. In regular formation around the black line were ranged the foremost of the crowd of townsfolk, who, armed with sticks and stones and implements of their trade, were making pandemonium with shrieks and yells and curses, and the beating of metal pots.

Although he stood but an instant, stones had already struck him ere he dived among the legs of the infuriated Kurus, and, quite unaccountably, got free. Fiercely pursued, he sped away from place to place with the swiftness of a whiplash, or a startled viper, escaping with ease from the hail of missiles, and would surely have got beyond

reach of harm had not fresh legions of tormentors appeared from every court and alley-way, until at length he found himself at bay in a deep recess of the Temple porch with a mob, by this time numbering hundreds, at his heels.

To the great stones that hurtled by him and resounded upon the bronze doors was attributable his salvation, for, attracted by the noise, a tall priest issued forth from the Temple, and silenced the rabble by his presence. That priest was Shaho, not at the time High-priest, but still an important dignitary of his Order. He glanced once at the slim green child at his feet, and then turned and sternly demanded of the ringleaders the reason of the disorder and desecration.

'It is an imp who twists the legs of new-born infants,' they answered him in chorus.

When Shaho looked again he discovered that the lizard-like boy had slipped by him, and had vanished within the Temple. The priest, therefore, quieted the people, and sent them away. Afterwards he talked long with Gwali, although he could not induce him to show himself in the light.

From that day Shaho brought food for the boy, at first with his own hands, but in after years delegating the task to a young novice, and while keeping the secret of his presence, he never entered the Sanctuary without acknowledging with a gesture Gwali's just-audible greeting.

That was how Gwali came to live in the Temple and to be Shaho's friend; the manner of his meeting with the Royal child Seti was as follows:

Seti, then a toddling babe straying from her nurse, one afternoon came upon Gwali where he

lay coiled along the cornice-ledge of one of the squat pillars in the crypt-like interior of the vast altar, securing concealment, as was his wont, by adjusting his body faithfully to the fantastic stone forms that surrounded him, and he betrayed his presence by a movement of amazement that anyone but himself should have ventured within that holy of holies.

Seti, thereat, in spite of her terror, set herself to temper the anger of this living creature of stone by prattling of some coloured crystals which lay in the tiny velvet palm of her outstretched hand.

At that instant Gwali was inspired with the knowledge of her value to himself. He descended from his hiding-place, took the child in his arms, and with marvellous cunning began to tempt the baby mind to utter its impressions of everything around. Over and over again he carried her to this spot and to that where lay some gaudy tile or square of jasper shining in the wall, or where a trick of damp had coloured the dun marble fantastically. And Seti lisped her name for the colour, and standing up in his arms, her hands clutching his head, she thoroughly enjoyed her swift passages to and fro, and crowed with laughter.

On his part Gwali became dazed with the effort of his mind to perceive through the child's eyes. Sometimes it seemed as if one of the subtle gradations of grey had become sharply defined, and bright with a light hitherto unknown to him; he looked again, and the light was gone. Then he would spring with Seti to the place, and get her to repeat the name and character of the colour, adding, in answer to his patient, eager questions,

'Yes, it is like the sky—a little.' Or, 'No, not a bit like the night sky. It is like the day sky.' And so on, he making her use her child-notions of the sun, the moon, the stars, the river, trees, and everything she had ever seen, until at length weariness closed her eye-lids.

Reluctantly then he stole with her, and laid her in a gallery in the path of the searchers, for long before this the Palace, the Temple and the whole city had been in an uproar at the news of the loss of the Princess.

Still he was loth to part with her. Crouching at her side, he stayed until a crowd of women, together with priests and soldiers began to draw near, bearing torches. When they were almost upon him, he swung himself aloft, and hid among the giant flowers of a stone festoon ornamenting a wide arch. From this perch he was able, himself unseen, to peer down upon the crowd, as, searching every nook and corner, and rushing hither and thither with wild cries of distress and pleadings to the Goddess,—for many would suffer if the child were lost — the strangely-mixed concourse of guards in gleaming armour, long-robed priests and Royal women, their garments all awry, came at last upon the subject of their panic.

Shaho was the first to descry the child, and it was he who, with raised arm, brought the crowd to silence with a single stern command. Imperiously, then, he took the still-sleeping princess from the clustering arms of the women, and held her forth on outstretched hands, as if offering sacrifice.

'This child has been with the Goddess,' he said, in slow, strident tones, 'Naga has called her, to

Naga she must come, and with the Goddess stay. Henceforth she will live in the shadow of the Temple, learning all things from the lips of priests, and tended only by sanctified hands. It is the will of Naga.'

Thereupon he strode away, carrying Seti, and followed at a respectful distance by the soldiers and women, the latter sorrowfully. The three or four priests and their attendant neophytes went off in another direction, whispering eagerly.

Such was the occasion of the meeting of Gwali and Seti; and afterwards it was through the curious chance of Shaho's subtle designing that Seti grew up from childhood to girlhood, and from girlhood to the first blossoming of rich womanhood in the closest communion with the strange outcast.

Shaho, indeed, persevered in his scheme with complete success. It is true it was found impossible for the babe to remain always within the Temple precincts, but, as a compromise, a corridor of fairest marble was constructed joining the holy place to the palace, and this passage became forbidden to all but Seti and the priests deputed to keep it beautiful. Also, a hole was cut in the Temple wall, and a mighty door of brass hung, controllable by means of a secret spring which the child was taught to touch.

So ecclesiastical cunning prospered, and in this new jointure of altar and throne Shaho found a seat of power. Soon the King died, and the priest, omnipotent now, ruled the realm through the medium of a superstitious Queen. Kahlil, the High-Priest, an aged man, had laughed to scorn

the notion of the Goddess's desire for the child; but when it was pointed out that Seti wished to spend, not only her days, but her nights also, away from her mother, sister and nurses, lost to view somewhere in the lightless, echoing, terror-inspiring Temple, and wept noisily if her wish was gainsaid, Kahlil was deposed by the Queen as a blasphemer, and soon afterwards he died.

Seti came, of course, because Gwali allured her. And amazing were the allurements he found it necessary to contrive to draw her away from the charms of the Palace, and from the tendernesses of the women who greatly loved the beautiful child. He used to carry her to a trough of stone, which was in fact a colossal ornament, swinging like a hanging cradle from a corner of the cupola of the highest tower, and hidden there, overhanging, it seemed, the whole world, he would produce puny, shy animals, which he had caught for her, and when she tired of these, and tossed them down into the sea of tree-tops hundreds of feet below, he would call birds through a reed pipe, so that they came and let the girl touch them; even birds of prey alighted there, and swift birds that keep far away from the homes of men.

Then when the sudden night fell he would tell her stories of a world quite unlike the one they lived in, which he described as if he had seen it, until her eyes grew large with a vision of unearthly cities, and her ears were filled with the murmurous life of dim peoples. He would tell her, too, the history and habits of the stars, which seemed so near, until they became living folk to her.

For several months he suffered a wild enthu-

siasm in the company of the child, and lived sleepless in a fever of wonder and curiosity. One day whilst experimenting in an occult art, he discovered that he was able, by clasping Seti's forehead with his fingers and concentrating his attention on one individual thing or sound around them, actually to share in the vivid sense-impressions imprinted upon the child's mind. He trembled, and was intoxicated with pleasure when, as he held Seti thus, a bird of brilliant plumage came near, or by some cloud-land alchemy, liquid crimson was poured out upon the mauve mists surrounding a setting sun of burnt-out iron, and the child would break off her careless chatter to cry aloud her delight. At such moments he felt himself caught in a whirlwind of colour.

And thereafter she began to paint on his mind the colours of the splendid night and the golden day. With her eyes he saw that eternal space is blue, that the stars are radiant, and that the moon is a lamp of silver light. In the daytime she gave the sun his splendour; she dyed the distances of the earth in purple and brown, and set white snow upon the mountain tops; she tinted the forest in all its myriad shades of green; she gave each flower its hue.

With her ears he learnt the songs of birds, and could name every rustle in the city. With her nostrils he learnt to separate and to name the thousand scents that come as the breath of the morning, that lie in the lap of the evening. With her sweet body he understood heat and cold, and felt the subtle degrees by which they pass from pleasure to pain. The child became his interpreter, and he loved her for his dependence upon her.

At first he was content to drink deep of the new-found sensuous pleasure; but soon he accustomed himself to remove his hands from Seti's forehead in these rich and crowded moments, and, reduced at once to his sad normal state, he began to learn how to light the dim shades of grey, which was his own eyes' reproduction of the gorgeous scene, with the vivid memories he brought from his mysterious association with the child's mind.

Scrupulously and tirelessly during nine years he worked in this way to gain a knowledge of sound and colour and sweet odours, and above all, to set up in his being that state of complex sensation which is the ordinary background of common human experience. In the course of time so wonderful was the change wrought in him that a complete return to his former insensible state seemed unthinkable.

Yet he was fully aware how precarious was the basis of his happiness. Three times during those nine years the child, through various causes, had been taken from the Temple and the city, and it was in those periods of her absence he learnt with a horror that turned him dizzy that, bereft of her aid, in spite of agonising efforts of attention, the precious elusive knowledge at once began to fade, —perceptibly, hourly, the hues of brilliancy began to depart from the objects of his vision, and the myriad sounds of life began to merge into the ominous single, dull murmur. But at the first touch of Seti his world lit up afresh, and burst into song and laughter.

Certain limitations, however, he could never overcome. His sense of smell remained completely

dormant save when he was actually in bodily contact with the child, and it was only when her fair soft skin lay pressed against his that his cold, callous flesh was awakened to keen sensibility.

In this fashion Seti grew up to young womanhood, completely fascinated by the half-human youth, always filled with the desire for the strange amusements to which he had accustomed her, and entirely engrossed in the fanciful world he had conjured up around her,—yet fascinated by an influence so beneficent and restrained that her will, health and spirits suffered no harm from it, while, on the other hand, her powers of understanding waxed, and her store of knowledge increased, without any conscious effort, but to a degree and a depth that, though she little suspected it, far surpassed the powers and attainments of any of the grown women about the Court.

This, however, was true of her only while she was under the direct, immediate influence of Gwali; among the girls of the Palace she was no wiser than they, was different, indeed, only in her wilder gaiety and lawlessness,—characteristics long since pardoned in this chosen hand-maid of the Snake Goddess.

III

CHIAROSCURO

THE Monastery of the priests of Naga the Snake lay only forty paces away from the Temple which it served, and the space between the buildings was enclosed by two steep walls in height about four times the length of a tall man.

The windows of the Monastery were few and small, and its smooth, sheer face, like that of the walls, while in the shadowy corners toned a pallid grey, was for the most part bleached by the sun to a silvery, leprous white, in violent contrast with the fourth side, where was the Temple door leading into the Sanctuary, the hollow porch and flanking pilasters here being of a black stone resembling rough-cast iron. The courtyard thus formed was covered with fine red sand, beaten smooth.

The sun had set; the rusty glare had faded from the Temple's loftiest course, and filmy, violet shadows were attaching themselves to the white walls of the Monastery, the red carpet of sand had already turned dun-coloured, when Shaho, the High-priest, emerged, and stalked across the quadrangle towards the Sanctuary door.

He was exceedingly tall, and his long, straight gown added greatly to his apparent size. His shoulders, however, were very undeveloped in

proportion, and that peculiarity, combined with the exceptional girth of his paunch, the outline of which was fully revealed by the cut of his robe, together with a rolling, difficult gait, rendered his person gross and ungainly.

Nor were his corporal shortcomings in any way counter-balanced by any fair quality of countenance, and this although the large aquiline nose, the sunken eyes, the wide, flexible, thin-lipped mouth, and notably the chin, which he carried half-embedded in his swollen neck, evinced considerable strength of personality, and power of command.

Upon this remarkable countenance he was wont to display, openly, with much curling of mobile nostrils and lips, expressions of every degree of cunning and contempt, though signs of other and nobler feelings were not uncommon. His lengthy head was almost conical in form, and this height of brow, together with the hawk nose set between bright, quick-moving eyes that lurked like sparks in their deep recesses, gave sufficient warning of his ability.

When he reached the Temple door he made as if to open it, but changing his mind he sat himself down upon the wide steps, placing beside him a black bowl of polished earthenware, from which came a thin steam, and the odour of pungent condiments.

He lolled, with knees apart and hands hanging between them, his head bending forward inertly, as artisans lolled in the bazaars while they smoked the last pipe of the day, and dozed, or gossiped, or dreamed. But whatever his attitude, Shaho's brain was in no indolent humour.

He was the chief mediator and channel of propitiation between the Kuru people and their Goddess; he was the sole spiritual and the sole temporal adviser of their Queen, Dhrasovah, who was mad; he was the guardian and tutor of Dhula, the eldest-born princess and next to reign, and, as High-priest, he had also under his charge Seti, the second princess, who was dedicated to Naga.

This was a burden heavy enough for any old man's shoulders, but great as were the responsibilities of his high station, they were as nothing compared with the labour involved in maintaining his position there.

The Queen's madness had of late taken to breeding suspicions, and all the insane ingenuity of her mind was concentrated in the fabrication of intricate plots, which, to clear his own character, Shaho was obliged to spare no pains in unravelling to her satisfaction.

The two princesses were grown up, and showed more than a mere disposition to question his authority. The distant governors were lax and insubordinate; the home officials were corrupt, and, moreover, were all in collusion against him.

The army, if not properly speaking mutinous, was inclined to regard itself as an entity apart from the state, and quite beyond the jurisdiction of a High-priest, and he fancied it waxed enthusiastic somewhat too easily and too frequently in honour of a certain young general, Iskanaar, who was, in truth, a son of the late king, by a concubine.

To increase his anxiety, the townspeople were growing every day more irreligious, and were vehemently disaffected towards the Government, particularly as represented by himself.

Numerous and urgent as were the problems that faced him, Shaho had overcome as many, and as great, perplexities in the past, until he had come to regard such affairs as no more than the proper occupation of a ruler. He felt able to cope with them, too, since they were, after all, matters of internal and domestic policy; while to prop him up he had behind him the weight of tradition, and the awe attaching to his sacred status.

It was the latest eruptive factor, an alien intrigue dating back no further than twenty-five days, which had given him pause, threatening as it did to converge all things to a crisis, of which he himself would by no means be the centre.

Prince Nassur, a younger son of Pasenadi, King of the Kosalas, whose capital was Savatthi, had come to Prastha seeking an alliance with the Kurus against Bimbasara, King of Magadha. Incidentally, during his stay at the Palace, he was enslaved by the beauty and grace of Dhula, and she being as tinder to his flame, he now sought her hand in marriage. It was whispered that already, in secret, the pair had plighted troth.

Queen Dhrasovah, for insane reasons of her own, was favourable to the foreign prince's suit on both counts, love and politics, and Shaho, (almost in despair, beheld the immediate possibility of the ancient Crown of Kuru passing into the family of old Pasenadi, which would be tantamount to reducing the Kingdom to the position of a vassal-state in the new empire which the crafty and ambitious Kosala king was forming in the North, in opposition to Bimbasara's hegemony in the South.

After many days and nights spent in close scrutiny of the various forces which were working to the ruin of his cherished schemes, only one hopeful project occurred to Shaho's mind, and even that was of a nature delicate and subtle, and entirely dependent upon certain whims and humours not usually obedient to a priest's beck and call.

Nevertheless he judged his idea worth pursuing, and with it in view he was about to enlist the aid of one who, at first sight, would seem to be the very least likely of any to meddle with success in affairs of state,—Gwali.

Therefore the High-priest was this sundown carrying a bowl of rice in his own hands to the Temple, to feed the strange outcast, and to talk with him. It was not for mere advice that he came; he was practically certain that, if he chose, Gwali could potently influence the trend of things.

Seated on the Temple door-step, he pondered so deeply that he became oblivious of the passage of time, and it was not until the night chills sent a shiver through his spine that he lifted his head and saw the bowl of now congealed rice at his side. Thus reminded of his errand, he struggled to his feet, straightening his stiffened joints warily.

The heavy door swung open before the weight of his arm, and when he closed it behind him he stood in the utter dark of the Hall of Vestments, or Sacristy. Passing down a flight of stairs, each step two paces in width, but in depth not half a span, he entered the Temple proper, where the sound of his heavy soft-shod feet thudding upon the marble flags was magnified by the echoes in the lofty roof until it seemed a whole train of camels

was invading the holy place, while the old man's breathing and occasional grunts were exaggerated to the resemblance of feeding lions.

A double row of glowing beads of light now came upon his sight, marking the nave, and suggesting, by the convergence of their perspective, the vast length of the building. These were the lamps of Perpetual Adoration, but being faint flames behind thick crystals and precious stones they only succeeded in revealing their own beautiful globes, and in no way dispersed the thick surrounding gloom.

Arrived at the stairs leading to the summit of the High Altar, Shaho squatted down at their foot, having first set the bowl on one of the steps behind him. Almost immediately could be heard the sounds of a man eating ravenously. In a few minutes the licking of lips, mastication and swallowing ceased to be heard, and the High-priest plunged at once into his subject.

'Nassur the Kosala has betrothed Dhula,' he said. 'It is hard to say whether or not the Queen is in the secret. Affairs are at an ebb.'

Although he spoke quietly, his words were echoed in remote domes and galleries like the growling of an angry multitude. Gwali made no reply.

'Somehow or other that marriage must be prevented.'

He waited for a remark from his invisible companion; in vain.

'But how?' he demanded, with emphasis, according to his habits as a preacher.

The query was reverberated by deep cavernous

voices. Shaho turned on his haunches, and addressed the dark with sincerity.

'Gwali,' he said, 'you owe much to me. I have protected you and fed you, and have asked no service in return.'

'I owe you much, Shaho, my master,' answered the youth. 'I owe you life, and many years of great sweetness of living. Your aims are my aims, and your enemies mine.'

'Let it be so,' grumbled the High-priest. 'What little we can do must be done at once. This is what I ask from you: The Princess Seti—she is in your power. Persuade her—bewitch her—use any influence you have, so only you cause her to look with greedy desire upon Nassur. Who can say how things would come about then? If he marries Seti, he takes her away to Savatthi—so! But if he marries Dhula he stays here! What I dread is to awake one morning and be told that Nassur and Dhula were married in the night. Anything but that. Seti has fire, and temper, and little shame,—should she love and her love be not appeased, be sure of confusion, and, above all, delay.'

'Well enough I knew *that* thought would come to you,' said the voice of Gwali, with a single low exclamation of laughter, like a sob.

'Well?' queried Shaho.

'My power over Seti is at an end,' continued the youth. 'She runs unchecked—without rein. And who will check her now,—she who never knew the waywardness of impulse or felt the craving of desire until those desires full-grown and all her pent impulses have, like a torrent that was held back by a barrier of ice, surged in a flood over her soul?'

Shaho grunted.

'What torments has she put upon you to make you speak of her so?' he said.

'She has not tormented me,' answered Gwali. After a pause, with a slight falter detectable in his low monotone, he added: 'It has dawned ten times since last Seti came here to me.'

'Why? Why is that?' demanded the old High-priest, stretching his head towards where Gwali sat above him in the dark.

'You ask why? Go to where Seti is, my master, and watch her,' replied the youth. 'You will see how your wish has been gratified even before it was born!'

Without another word, Shaho took the emptied rice-bowl in his hand, and departed.

Long after he was gone Gwali remained on the Altar-top, listening for the sound that would tell him of Seti's approach. When the accustomed hour had passed, and hope had to be relinquished, sighing, he descended the stairs to the Sanctuary.

At the foot of the Altar he turned away to the left, and after penetrating many shrines, began to mount a narrow, winding stairway, so narrow and steep, indeed, that the spirals coiled round his body as he arose. At length he was faced by a small, massive door, which, without effort, he thrust open.

He was obliged to crouch double in order to pass through, and once beyond, found himself upon the main roof of the temple, a vast paved court which shone snow-white in the light of the moon, save along two sides, where fell the clear-cut shadow of the rampart by which the whole area was enclosed.

Shutting the door behind him he crossed towards the farthest corner of the roof, walking slowly, with his face raised to the moon, who, at her full, was dominating heaven and earth, and was the only object, save the masses of subdued stars, that met his gaze, for the sky curved like a dome of amethyst crowning the rampart-wall, and concealed from the youth, as completely as if he had been in a well, the outline of the horizon.

He walked leisurely to an iron ladder fixed in the stone, and by means of it climbed to the top of the rampart, a level causeway five paces across. Unhesitatingly, as though following an accustomed route, he walked to the edge of the rampart, swung his body over it, and holding now only by the ends of his long fingers, stretched his body and legs to their utmost, until his toes touched a narrow ledge. Then he released the hold of his hands, and began to work his way forward, his arms and body seeming to adhere to the smooth stone, his feet performing a kind of rapid dance in order to pass one another along a six-inch projection of bevelled stone.

A hundred feet below him were the tops of tall trees, motionless as if bearing a foliage of bronze, and at frequent intervals he passed close above the points of pinacles and the carved ends of buttresses; but he betrayed no sign of anxiety or trepidation, and the pauseless motion of his legs and feet as they strode and hopped to give one another place was swift and methodical, and bore him along his perilous path at a quicker than ordinary walking pace.

At the end of the wall, around the rectangle that

was formed, the ledge broadened considerably, and became flat, being now, as it were, the cornice of an immense pilaster, ornamenting and supporting the facade.

Here Gwali sat down in a squatting attitude, exposed to the full glare of the moon, and resting his back in a hollow niche cut in the stone behind him. The wide expanse of earth at the great height from which he viewed it, lost its few inequalities of rise and depression, and appeared as an immense desert of terra-cotta cut by the broad river, which gleamed to the moon like a serpent of quicksilver.

To the right the desert spread its one parched hue until the eye could no longer pursue its monotonous lines, and beyond the range of ordinary landscape objects, cheating the eye by a magical illusion of propinquity, arose a chain of lofty peaks, their jagged snow-capped tops brightly defined, like pale steel, against the deep-toned sky. Above and beyond them rose in ranks other white, indistinct shapes, like the milk-white crests of waves,—the snowy apices of the Himalayas. To the left in a mighty arch that swept to the very gates of the city and bent its curve till it skirted the horizon was the border-line of Maha Vana, the Great Wood, and beyond that line was a darkness more absolute than the blackest night.

The city was circular and enclosed by high walls which were towered and ramparted, and although it was extensive, its true proportions were dwarfed by the mightiness of the Temple in whose uppermost cranny Gwali was sitting.

Within the walls were massed thickly, with no sign of arrangement or order, the plain cube dwell-

ings of the people. These were simply-planned, undecorated buildings of brick and wood, plastered with fine clay, and were, for the most part, mere cabins, with here and there a more pretentious house of two, or even three, stories. Seen from above, in that clear light and sharp shadow, the city presented the appearance of an irregular chequer-board of multitudinous squares.

Gwali's yellow, expressionless eyes moved restlessly as, with chin fixed between his knees, and wrists locked about his shins, he let loose upon himself a flood of thoughts and emotions. From time to time there appeared and lingered upon his lips the smile of placid peace, while his expression of gentleness and kindness remained unaltered, so that he had something in his face of the look which passes over the countenance of proud men when, helpless in the presence of bitter humiliation, they seek to smile.

The strong silver light of the moon seemed to gather with more intensity upon his slender body, marking out in vivid contrast of pallid green and black shade, the ranges of small knotty muscles which gave him his marvellous strength and activity, illuminating the shapely head, now slightly bowed, accentuating the strange purple cast in his mossy hair, and gleaming upon the smooth, statuesque face.

Hitherto, in some obscure sense, he had possessed Seti; now, with equal vagueness of meaning, she was lost to him. She was about to give to another that in herself which he, Gwali, had never desired from her, which he had striven to keep dormant in her as being a faculty predisposed to the

dissolution of quiet communions, a disquieting force altogether fatal to such companionships as theirs.

He saw in her the restlessness that would inevitably destroy the friendship that was so profitable to both, that had become, indeed, he was beginning to realise, indispensable to his very being. He now knew that he loved her, but he guessed that his love was wholly unlike that which man bears woman. Forgetful himself of love, he had unconsciously hidden the fatal secret from the child. What could he do to prevent her becoming the willing slave of a sentiment which, it appeared, was the main motive in a woman's existence?

He had had hopes, too, with the far-sighted knowledge peculiar to him, of what Seti would be to him in her more perfect maturity. But now her quick senses were about to break away from his guidance and control, with what result to herself he could not guess, although he could not hide from himself the knowledge that, bereft of her, he was doomed to relapse despairingly into his old-time, frozen twilight-land.

He began to speak, raising his monotone to clearness, sometimes to loudness, as if to make himself heard by the moon, which he addressed, half-whimsically.

'Never before have I felt as other men feel, and shall I complain?' he asked. 'This is the ecstasy that makes the world sing,—joyfully for a little while, but always in the end with melancholy,—shall I refuse to abandon myself to it? I have had my joy,—fool, I did not know it! And now in the time of melancholy why should I not solace myself

with the plaints of poets, after the fashion of all other young men?

'Other young men! Surely I am a young noble of high lineage, and should conduct my affairs circumspectly! What high thing is it men ask of women? Still I do not know. What is it I ask of Seti? It is life I ask. But are you not living, Gwali? No, I am thinking only. Like an imp in a glass bell, I see life and mock at it, or long for it, or muse upon it.

'Is that not well worth while, Gwali? End it then; it is an easy thing to take company with the dead. No, it is well worth while. Something spurs me on, —it is hope, perhaps. Another theme of the poets!

'O Seti, the eye, the ear, the nostrils, the fingers of my soul, come back to me, for without you I am shut blind in this prison of senseless flesh.

'And is this the speech of lovers? Surely not!'

Though the words broke from him with irregular pauses, the tone of voice was always the same, and his eyes moved rapidly from side to side, but grew neither dull nor flame-like, having always in them the one cold light as of stones that, while attracting all rays, admit none into their depths.

Nor did the gentleness vanish one instant from his face, even while his thoughts dwelt on suicide. By one sure sign alone he betrayed his poignant emotion,—his flesh twitched and heaved as if waves of pain were chasing one another along the length of his body, and his long fingers moved ceaselessly, entwining and knotting themselves together, like a brood of young serpents he was clasping in his palms.

'Perhaps she will come back to me, but it will be too late,' he continued. 'She will not come to me as one spirit to another, as a weak soul to a strong soul. She will think that what I desire of her is what others have desired of her. She will fancy she has still something to give!

'O Seti, Seti, I have tuned your senses till they respond to every breath and touch of beauty and pleasure. I have made you as a harp that can speak, interpreting for me the wonder of the world. And now you will lie in the arms of a stranger, and he will rend all your finenesses in one mad moment of passion!'

He lapsed into silence, and the restless movements of his hands, and the nervous twitchings of his body ceased. Calm settled upon his mind as suddenly as had come the distress that had shaken him, and he was able to look back at that brief storm in his soul, and to marvel at it.

The great tumult of spirit which he saw reflected in men's faces and in their actions, in the conduct of crowds and of armies,—such upheavals he had never shared. With no passions, estranged from all human-kind save for his daily contact with a girl-child, he had no occasion for anger or hate. Ambition he knew only by name, not knowing how to detect it in conduct, but confounding it with greed, and the desire to hoard costly things. All irrational, complex outbursts of feeling such as people displayed whilst under the influence of intoxicants or in stress of excitement were to him merely subjects of speculation, and in these musings he called indiscriminately upon his knowledge of the denizens of the city and of the jungle.

But love, the brooding madness that hung like a miasma around every human being save the very old and the very young, he understood, yet, while comprehending it, could not conceive it as a motive force, for in him animal longing was transmuted to a passion of the soul alone, and this unsullied desire as far transcended and rendered ineffectual the human craving as passion itself surpasses and destroys the slight affections from which it is born.

That his austere mind should be troubled by an overmastering longing for so frail an object as Seti was in no wise inconsistent, for he held her in earnest of what she would grow to be under his charge. The loss of one of such incalculable value to him in his endeavour to enjoy the wonders of the sensuous life was not the main source of his grief.

IV

STRANGERS

WHEN Gwali arose to his feet, all signs of his suffering had passed from him, except for a slightly quickened breathing, and a gleam of perspiration upon his body.

'Gwali, an outcast, a cleaner of the Temple, whose father, they say, was a serpent, whose mother assuredly was a witch, this Gwali has lost the love of a royal princess!'

In murmuring this, his voice lost no trace of its even softness. It might have been that of a lover gently chiding his beloved.

He covered his eyes with his long fingers, and stood swaying irresolute. Then he dropped his hands, and the peculiar suggestion of latent aggressiveness, which had been absent, returned to his manner.

'Nevertheless,' he said, 'I would like to behold this prince who can do so much by the most distant eddies of his will.'

He left the comparative security of the platform, and began again to follow the perilous path of the sloping ledge, crossing another face of the Temple. He walked rapidly, his arms and body sliding against the marble, until the roof of a lower, adjoining building appeared beneath his feet. He at

once dropped down upon it, and commenced, at a more leisurely pace, to cross its length.

The roof he now traversed was curved, had heavy, overhanging eaves, and was covered entirely with thin plates of bronze. At short intervals, along the centre, rose up a line of dwarf, fantastic spires gilt with pure gold. Four other such roofs formed a shining rectangle enclosing a mazy park of rare trees and shrubs, whose foliage, from the height above, looked like an arrested sea of purple, silver, pale-green and yellow waves. Below him, on the outer side, were the roofs, spires and eaves of many irregular buildings,—shrines, summer-palaces, and the like.

Parallel to one of these latter, the largest of them, he was now standing, judging the distance separating him from the great carved head of a dragon that jutted forth from the pointed eave of a pagoda-like structure of wood which reared itself up almost as high as the Palace. From this building emanated a glow, duller and richer than the moon's blue-white light, betraying the wakefulness of those within.

Gwali had been standing in a relaxed attitude, and now, without any apparent tautening of the muscles of his limbs, he sprang out, diving headlong down, until he gripped with his hands the dragon's lower jaw, and hung momentarily thus suspended. Then, seizing upon any slight projection, he swung from point to point, until he was curled up like a snake under the curving eave. Below him was a wide balcony, brightly illumined by light streaming out of the main upper apartment, from between half-drawn curtains, whose

arrangement likewise afforded the stealthy visitant an undisturbed view of the interior of the chamber and its occupants.

The articles of furniture were few, but of great richness and beauty, and consisted of a low table, spread with fruit, and wine in lacquered jars, a couch of uncushioned ebon-wood, minutely carved, inlaid and gilt, three stools, and two giant ivory vases. A cluster of hanging lamps, of red and amber crystal, lit up the sombre hues of the carpet and hangings, and shone through the gayer fabric of the curtains. All these latter were partly drawn back, so that the chamber was practically open to the night on three sides. In spite of this, however, one at anyrate of the two occupants plainly found the temperature hardly suited to his purposes.

This was a young man, less than thirty years in age, of no more than medium height, yet powerfully and heavily built. He was stripped to a narrow, silken loin-cloth, and had fastened his long black hair into a tight knot. A scarcely visible thread of silk was hanging from one of the lamps, and, balancing a scimitar in shape like a hillman's knife, but thrice its size and weight, he was preparing to attack the slender objective.

Suddenly his body stiffened, the great muscles of shoulder and flank bulged, embossing the hitherto smooth, dusky surface of his flesh, his left arm became rigid, displaying the deeply engraved runnels between the powerful sinews, and the sword began to flash to and fro with a movement of wrist and forearm quicker than the eye could follow.

He commenced his strokes waist high, and cut

off about an inch of the thread at each passage of the weapon, until, at the close of the exercise, his wrist was on a level with his eyes. But so marvellously swift was the feat that it was accomplished within the limits of a single deep breath, which, at the last sweep, the swordsman exhaled with a deep laugh, and, tossing the sword to a youth who stood watching him, threw himself panting upon the couch.

It could then be seen that though his features were rugged, and bore evident signs of past physical stress, they were also singularly attractive in their expression of heartiness, good-humour and friendliness. His short, crisp beard and moustache were so cut as to reveal fully his red smiling lips, and, when he smiled, his large white teeth.

But it was upon the person of the young attendant that Gwali's eye fixed itself with keenest interest. White men and white women were not by any means unknown to him, yet this youth struck him with astonishment,—not, perhaps, on account of the milk-white pallor of his face, with the glow of crimson on the cheeks, and the marble whiteness of his bared neck, arms and legs, for this almost escaped his dimming perception, but by reason of his blue eyes, and the great flame-like mass of his red curls. He was clothed in an armless tunic of white linen, edged with scarlet embroidery, reaching to his knees, and bound at the waist by a broad belt of scarlet leather. The soft camel-hide sandals on his feet were likewise dyed scarlet, and edged with fur.

While the Prince was nearing the completion of his exercise, this youth, while still intent upon the

trembling line of silk, unfolded an arm in readiness to receive the sword, which, when it was tossed to him, he caught by the handle with precision and perfect nonchalance.

'Now that's a little trichotomy somewhat beyond the capacity of the subtlest of all philosophers, Uluan,' said the bearded athlete.

'You have cut a thread a hundred times in less than thirty days,' answered Uluan weariedly, as he turned to hang up the sword on a column of carved cedar. 'I wonder you don't think of something new, Prince.'

'Beware!' responded Nassur, laughing. 'You are being infected by your Greek comrade, who is always saying that novel errors are finer than stale perfections in order to excuse his own numerous shortcomings. And where is he now? He ought to have been back long before this!'

'Paphos never hurries,' said the youth. 'And you are growing altogether too impatient, Prince. Neither Paphos nor I have had any rest since this latest humour of yours began.'

Prince Nassur, already harbouring some dream, permitted himself to smile at his thoughts, paying no heed to watchful Uluan's undisguised derision. He arose to a sitting position, and, in an abstracted manner, held out his arm to the youth, who, at the sign, gathered up from a stool a tunic similar to that he himself was wearing, and slipped it over his master's head.

Whilst the latter was lazily settling himself into this garment, Uluan arranged a light, but voluminous robe of wine-coloured silk, and this the Prince stood up to receive. He wore it as the Romans

wore their togas, but, unlike a toga, this robe was draped in fixed folds, which were secured by several jewelled clasps. Moreover, it reached but little below the knees, and was caught up at the waist by a tubular belt of plaited gold wire fitted with a small jewelled dagger, and heavy buckles to which to attach a sword.

He then bent his head whilst Uluan uncoiled his knot of hair, arranging it in thick tresses in their natural order, which having done the youth unveiled a long narrow mirror of polished steel. Whilst he glanced therein at the reflection of his magnificent person, the Prince reassumed his manner of gaiety and ease.

'Still, Paphos is too long away,' he said. 'Something has happened.'

'I can hear him coming,' answered Uluan. 'I can always tell his step, it is so wary and direct,—so unlike his tongue.'

Just at that moment a curtain was drawn back disclosing a doorway. Paphos entered and walked with light, swift step to the centre of the apartment, where he stood staring in feigned anger at the laughing youth and the amused Prince.

The new-comer was wearing a tunic of silk, worked with silver thread. Bright gold circlets banded his smooth, olive wrists and ankles, and around his neck was strung an extraordinary mass of precious stones, mainly pearls, diamonds and sapphires. A vestment, similar to the Prince's, but dyed crimson, draped him flowingly, and set upon his abundant black curls was a little cap of gold with a star of diamonds in the centre.

He was taller than the Prince, and his neck and

limbs fell little short of a kind of rounded perfection. His features, too, were without a fault, even that of character, though intelligence had stamped signs of its presence plainly enough in the contour of his brow, and in the expressions of his mobile mouth, and quick, black eyes. His slightest movement seemed the outcome of a series of conscious poses, each pose deliberately statuesque. His voice was low, clear and musical, and his general manner, which was nothing but the exaltation of conceit to the dignity of a fine art, was pleasing, nevertheless, to the degree of actual charm.

'I heard that remark, young Uluan,' said he, and he was careful to vary his tones, and to make each sound delightful to listen to.

'I intended you should,' answered Uluan.

'Who but a barbarian would ever think of judging a man by his tongue,' remarked Paphos, addressing himself in the mirror.

'Certainly one ought not to judge a Greek so,' laughed Uluan. 'You Greeks have deceived one another so much in the past that speech has long since lost its true service, and has become a kind of music to tickle the ear—everlastingly.'

'Now Paphos,' said the Prince, 'do let us have the message you were sent to bring. What kept you so long?'

Paphos made an obeisance with the air of one amusing himself rather than performing an obligation.

'Straying in the women's apartments, I'll be pledged,' murmured Uluan.

'Sleeping, rather,' suggested the Prince.

'No, Prince,' answered Paphos, 'I never sleep in

the night in this baneful country. I went to my couch this morning at the first sign of dawn, and I ordered your servants to awaken me at sunset. I asked them to be particular to see that no portion of the fiery sphere was in view when I opened my eyes. I resolutely refuse to live in the same world as that mad sun.'

'O Greek,' cried Nassur with affected weariness, 'remember you have a message to deliver.'

'Her Highness will walk as far as the sacred banyan tree in ten minutes' time,' answered Paphos. 'And why, may I now ask, do you choose that absurdly noisy tree as a trysting-place? I stood beneath its branches for one minute only, and it seemed as if a whole populace, with horny palms, was applauding me. Now nothing annoys me so much as applause. True appreciation is always silent, or at anyrate rational in the mode of its manifestation. I remember at Athens——'

'Yes, yes,' interrupted the Prince, arising, 'but those ten minutes are surely past. Come with me. You may stay, Uluan, and sleep. You look weary.'

Paphos lifted the curtain, and Nassur passed out, followed by the Greek. Uluan immediately arranged some cushions on the floor, and throwing himself down upon them, closed his eyes, and sank into sleep.

Under the eave, where he was still lying rigidly, along a narrow beam, Gwali made a slight movement as if about to follow the pair. He resettled himself, however, and waited.

The worst form of despair is that which fully recognises its own validity. With the contemplation of the Prince's magnificent person had been re-

vived the sense of his own extraordinary physical peculiarities, and Gwali, had he been able, would now have relinquished for ever his hope of retaining, or regaining, Seti.

While he was thus struggling with his despair, Seti herself glided into the room before him. A smile of expectancy was gathered upon her lips, and her eyes were bright with shy mischievousness. But the smile resolved itself into a pout and her eyes gleamed with anger when she discovered the couch vacant and the room apparently deserted. Her head had been bent coyly; it was now stiffly erect, and she clenched her hands tightly.

'So! He ignores my wishes!' Gwali heard her mutter. 'We shall see!' she added, nodding a menace to the night outside.

Just then she caught sight of Uluan among the cushions, and her cry of delight awakened him. He sat up and, resting back on his hands, gazed at the girl as if he imagined he was still dreaming, wondrously.

For there was always a certain unreality about Seti. Living among a race of which even the lowly-born girls were remarkable for their stately demeanour, the impression of sheer wildness in this Princess's manner when she was off her guard was all the more enhanced. When surprised by strangers she seemed to crouch, and according as her eyes flamed or were soft, so she appeared to be shrinking in modesty, or about to spring upon the intruder.

Moreover, her apparel was novel and mystifying, her chief covering being the voluminous shawl of silken gauze, which floated irregularly about her

head and limbs, like a black mist. On this occasion, to please the Prince, she had donned beneath it a cuirass of strung pearls.

And her eyes were flaming now. Indeed, no sooner had she fixed her glance upon him than she sprang suddenly at the astonished youth, and forcing him back to a recumbent position, buried her brown hands in his red curls. Kneeling beside him she held him down thus, and examined, with unabashed delight, his eyes and face, uttering at the same time a succession of inarticulate cries and exclamations.

Uluan's was not the nature to resist such caresses, and soon, in spite of his astonishment, his hands clasped one another around her waist, whilst he endeavoured with his forehead to part the filmy material of the shawl where it hung between his lips and hers.

'Tell me who you are,' demanded Seti, after many playful words.

'I am a slave,—Prince Nassur's favourite slave,' answered the youth.

'Will Nassur give you to me, do you think?' questioned the girl eagerly.

'I don't know. I will ask him, if you wish it,' laughed Uluan.

'You do not ask me who I am,' pursued the girl. 'Listen. I am Seti, the second Royal Princess.'

'I know you. I have often watched you,' answered the youth. 'You are the princess who loves Nassur so well.'

'Whom Nassur loves also,' corrected Seti, defiantly.

Uluan laughed and drew her down until she lay on his breast, her cheek touching his.

It was at that instant that a fury of jealousy,—a hitherto totally unknown passion, entered Gwali's heart. He slipped from his perch to the verandah, and thence stole noiselessly and unperceived into the chamber. In a moment he was hidden behind the arras, though his passage around the room could be traced in the flowing motion of its folds.

The Princess and her companion were already becoming serious-faced and quiet in their surprise at the intensity of their sudden affection, when a thin green hand crept out from beneath the tapestry, and fastened with the action of a thing of steel upon Uluan's white throat, which became at once blotched and swollen under the fearful grip. The youth made no struggle, only his hands clutched feebly at the jade-like fingers embedded in his flesh, and his knees drew up to his body convulsively. Seti sprang to her feet at the first sight of the hand, and stood motionless, watching Uluan's agony, with interest rather than in terror or pity.

As soon as the slave's staring eyes became glassy, and the tense muscles of his frame relaxed, the green hand slowly came away from his throat; Gwali issued from behind the arras, and squatted, looking at Seti.

'You are cruel,' said the girl, petulantly. 'Why have you killed him? He had not finished giving me pleasure.'

At these words Gwali unexpectedly began to laugh.

'Truly I am no longer wise,' he said.

He stepped to Seti's side, and placed his hands on her forehead, resting her head back on his shoulder.

'Tell me—who is that leaning against a trunk of the sacred banyan tree?' he murmured.

'It is Nassur,' cried Seti, the pupils of whose eyes had dilated. 'His Greek is with him, sitting on a low bough.'

'What is Nassur doing?' Gwali asked.

'He is admiring the stars. Paphos is laughing at them,' answered the girl. 'Let me go to him,' she added impatiently, making a feeble movement of resistance.

Gwali released her, and sat down on his heels, his yellow eyes resting fixedly upon her.

'Why is Nassur there, Seti?' he asked.

'Perhaps he is waiting for me. I am going to him,' cried Seti.

'He is waiting for Dhula, your sister, whom he loves,' said Gwali.

It was as if the demons of hate, anger, and all the fiery passions leapt into the body of the young girl. She writhed and bounded in her rage, gnashing her dainty, glistening teeth, and flinging out her beautiful arms in wild paroxysms of utterly uncontrollable fury.

'She shall not have him. She shall not have him,' she kept saying in a kind of stifled, hissing scream. 'He is mine. He shall kiss no other lips but mine,—I swear it. The gods gave him to me. O Gwali, my brother, my master,' she flung herself down before the impassive figure, and stroked the expressionless face between her hands, staring into the meaningless, onyx eyes. 'Gwali, bring him back to me, and preserve him for me, my brother, my master!'

'Your lover also,' said Gwali.

Seti, who had long ago learnt to read the secret

emotion under that apparent impassivity, now crouched away from him with a new look of terror in her face. Then, on an impulse, with a passionate gesture, she darted past him, swept aside the tapestry before the door, and disappeared.

Gwali approached, and stooping over Uluan's shuddering form, began to massage the neck where his fingers had gripped so terribly, from time to time kneading, with the knuckles of his left hand, the flesh over the youth's heart.

After a few minutes of this treatment, Uluan, with a vigorous, painful effort, while still unconscious, drew a long full breath.

Then Gwali left him, and began to climb down from the verandah into the garden.

V.

SCARLET AND SILVER

HIS descent to the ground was literally headlong in its agility and daring. Once among the trees, treading the soft earth, he strode rapidly and soundlessly towards the most remote corner of the park.

By cutting across the regular paths he soon arrived at the trysting-place,—the precincts of a not unusually enormous, but carefully cultivated, specimen of the wonderful banyan tree, whose gnarled and twisted parent stem was surrounded by a whole grove of offspring trunks. A breeze so faint as hardly to lift the hair on Gwali's brow rustled among the lightly-balanced, fan-like leaves, causing them, in their friction with one another, to emit a soft, multitudinous, clattering sound.

Viewed from within, this mammoth's myriad branches and dense foliage interlocked to form a vast bee-hive dome, with supporting walls thick enough to turn noon-tide into twilight, save at one spot, where now the moon's beams, piercing through, fell upon the bright persons of Nassur and the Greek.

The former was striding up and down the confined place, while Paphos, seated dejectedly on a branch almost level with the ground, was resting

his neck on his hands, and propping up his elbows with his knees.

Gwali saw them through a small rupture in the area of leaves, and this aperture was being held open by Seti, over whose shoulder, unperceived by her, he was looking.

The young girl, though in complete obscurity, was plainly visible to his unnatural eyes. He looked at her keenly, and saw that she was in physical anguish through the intensity of her rage, and that she was breathing like a young wolf that had been hunted. She did not appear to be listening to what the Greek was saying, only to be watching the Prince, who spoke little.

'Now in the towns of Ionia,' Paphos said, reminiscently, 'there is never this bother. We have women to love, and women to marry, and it is only when men have drunk too much wine that they confound the one with the other sort. We woo a beloved to arouse desire; we possess a wife to satisfy it. It is quite simple and entirely rational. Only you barbarians will persist in believing that she who is the object of your passion alone can soothe it. It is the one thing she cannot do. Indeed, she cannot fail to augment it. It is the wife always who supplies the cold water.'

'I wonder how the women like that idea!' remarked Nassur.

'The women don't treat it as an idea,' explained Paphos. 'They don't know that it is an idea. Women don't deal in ideas. An idea in a woman would be a positive disfigurement. In my travels I have met only one woman who had an idea. She had an idea she was a man, and even she in the course of a few months grew to know better.'

'How wonderful the stars are, now the moon is waning,' said the Prince, pausing to gaze out through the rift overhead, through which the moonbeams were falling.

Paphos sprang to his feet with a dramatic gesture of repudiation.

'Prince,' he said with tuneful emphasis, 'the stars are never wonderful,—they are abjectly futile. They are, as a matter of fact, indifferently bright points of light very untidily set out. Of course if you bring your imaginative intelligence to bear upon them they become planets, suns, and the like, but then it is the thought that is wonderful,—the stars remain futile, as is all greatness that is too remote. That, by the way, is also the fatal error of the better class of your quaint gods.'

'Your mouth is ever full of ill-omened speech,' said Nassur in anger. 'Remember that the gods chastise blasphemer and listener alike!'

'I crave pardon,' answered Paphos, with the gesture of one who empties a goblet upon the ground. 'I have none but sentiments of sincerest friendliness towards any and every god. My blasphemy, if such it be, is, believe me, a form of compliment. What truly grieves me is my prescience of the day when blasphemy shall have lost its salt and flavour by reason of the decay of faith. Footsteps and sweet words!' He hushed his voice and held his hand poised after the manner of mimes. 'The Princess Dhula comes, and Love is leading her by the hand. In the presence of Love even the shadows should turn their backs. Therefore, sweet Mowela——'

While he was thus speaking two tall ladies came

into the shaft of filmy light, walking hand-in-hand. The foremost, who was completely wrapped in a shawl of rose-colour, at once proceeded to give her hand to Paphos, who, smiling and gazing into her eyes, conducted her into a recess among the boughs, where both were lost to view. The second of the ladies was clad in a plain long robe of a shimmering material woven of silver and silk, which revealed in light and shadow every line of her limbs and bosom, and she remained standing, with bowed head, before the Prince, who had become pale and trembling.

Seti's dark, lithe body shuddered strongly, so that the leaves against which she was leaning stirred noisily. Gwali drew aside, away from her, to where, lying prone, he had an unrestricted view of what went on under the tree, as well as of the outward effects upon Seti of the scene.

'Dhula,' murmured the Prince at length, falteringly, 'it is unkind of me to entice you from your couch, but the night seemed interminable.'

'And I also,' sighed the Princess. 'Hardly had the last flush of sunlight died out in the west, when I was turning to the east, praying for the dawn.'

'What—have you not slept at all, sweet Dhula?' asked Nassur, earnestly.

'How could I sleep, Nassur?' responded Dhula in a troubled tone. 'See,—my eyes are hollow, my cheeks, too, and my lips bloodless. So with longing that you should love my beauty more I have grown ugly!'

She glided to the Prince, and placing her hands upon his shoulders, leaned against his breast. Nassur held her head between his hands, and looked

long and silently upon her face. Then he kissed her several times upon the lips, and eyes and brow.

'You have rent my soul in twain, and stolen one half,' he whispered. 'Dhula, beloved, I cannot live away from you.'

'Nor I from you,' said Dhula. 'Nassur, you must over-ride the delay. Why do you not demand that our betrothal be made public? This secrecy is only a whim of my mother's, who wishes to spare the feelings of that jealous child Seti——'

Gwali heard Seti utter a short, whining cry, and saw her burst through the wall of foliage, to dart like a wild thing into the presence of the lovers.

'Am I jealous of a breather of lies,' she screamed fiercely. 'Do I love a pig, who has hair in his nose, and is squat like Chul, the butcher? Marry him! My feelings! Oh—oh!'

Her fierce cries turned to a heart-piercing wail, and she sank to the ground, moaning, and clasping her hands behind her head in a posture of utter despair and grief. Low groans began to break from Gwali in unison with hers, but he stifled them immediately.

For a moment Dhula and Nassur remained holding each the other's hand, looking down upon the girl who had thus rudely surprised them. Seti was rocking herself gently in her anguish, so that the jacket of pearls which clothed her sinuous back glimmered to the moon. Nassur bent, and laid his hand upon her shoulder, gently.

'Seti, child, soothe yourself,' he said. 'You will make yourself ill.'

The effect of his words alarmed him, for Seti, sitting stiffly upright, stared at him for an instant, and then burst into peals of wild laughter.

'Child!' she screamed mockingly. 'Oh, I am a baby that is crying to be played with! No, do not think I am a child,' she added, in a more coherent manner, but with the more poignant grief. 'You have caused me to love you—if you do not understand the seriousness of *that* it is you who are a child. If you intend to cast me off now you should do so weeping, as I am weeping, and not smiling, for you will suffer, if I suffer.'

She became beseeching in her attitude, clinging feverishly to the Prince's knees, and clutching at his waist. Dhula drew away a pace, showing signs of fear and doubt.

'Nassur, love me only for a little while,' moaned the younger girl, passionately, dragging herself close to the Prince, her knees marking the soft soil. 'Listen! I shall be more beautiful in another year, and in a year after more beautiful still. And while I grow fairer Dhula will fade. It is true. Do you laugh at me?'

Her manner changed again, and became strangely calm and rational, although tears still glowed at intervals upon her cheeks. She stood up, and flung back her hair that had fallen in dishevelled masses over her breast.

'But I am asking what is impossible,' she said simply. 'If you love Dhula, you cannot do otherwise. Love cannot be banished, it must die.'

'Seti, has a kiss, a few chance words, and a little playing been the cause of all this grief?' asked Nassur gently. 'I am sorry. I felt so much older than you. I thought you were no more than a child.'

'Indeed that is all she is,' said Dhula, caressing-

ly and pityingly. 'Come, Seti, come back with me, and we shall sleep away all sorrow in each other's arms.'

Seti, sobbing, and with bent head, unresistingly obeyed the gentle pressure of her sister's arms, and came close to her side. Dhula made a slight gesture of farewell to the Prince.

'I will come with you,' said Nassur.

Dhula shook her head significantly.

'But where has Mowela gone?' asked the Prince.

'I told her she might return to sleep when we had found you,' answered Dhula, smiling.

'Ah!' sighed Nassur, gazing at her with great tenderness.

'It is quite true,' corroborated Paphos, who at that moment reappeared, and was looking with puzzled interest at Seti, clasped tightly to her sister's side. 'I have just come from conducting Mowela to her couch. That is to say, I left her at some considerable distance from that hallowed spot. Certain insolent soldiery insisted it should be thus. Yet she was very sleepy, and almost slept on her way thither. And I also, she said, was dreaming.'

Dhula and Seti had now departed, and Nassur, seated on a bough, bent forward thoughtfully. Gwali remained prone, his face buried in the loose, warm soil, and his body stretched out convulsively.

'Paphos,' he heard the Prince say, 'that child Seti has the passions of a woman.'

'That *was* Seti, of course,' responded the Greek, yawning. 'Yes, I understand that certain tales are current. Her person is sacrosanct, I believe? Rumour hath it she has been dedicated to yon ill-proportioned stone myth?'

'Yes, she is regarded as a kind of prophetess,' answered Nassur. 'I myself have heard her utter things which expressed a sort of whimsical wisdom very puzzling coming from one so young.'

'She seems to be somewhat interested in you?'

'I kissed her a few days since, because she was Dhula's sister.'

'And made her Dhula's rival thereby,' laughed the Greek. 'Luckily in this quaint land you may wed them both.'

'The thought of such a thing is horrible to me,' said the Prince in a tone that left no doubt as to his repugnance.

'Oh, if it is only the thought that is horrible, my dear Prince,' answered Paphos, 'I take it upon myself, as a task for which I am peculiarly fitted, to dissolve that thought into a crystal fantasy, which, half-veiled in a mist of sensuous delight, will be an object to dwell upon continually. What else do you pay me so generously for? Come, Prince, sleep I must, though all the princesses of this realm fret and pine.'

Nassur arose, and the two began to move away.

'I feel unusually sad to-night, Paphos,' said the Prince. 'That child Seti had a look in her eyes that no man sees more than once in the eyes of a woman. That look seems to have imprinted itself on my brain.'

'I must admit,' remarked the Greek, 'that is a mystic experience I have not yet suffered. You are becoming wiser than myself in this cult of love, Prince. I shall soon be forced to live in earnest, or to lose my spiritual ascendancy over you.'

They passed out of earshot. Gwali crept from his

hiding-place to the spot they had left. He was beginning to abandon himself to a wild, but nearly silent, expression of sorrow,—a new habit, contemporaneous with the departure of Seti from his companionship.

He walked bent, with lingering steps, and his hands clasped tightly to his heart, as if to staunch a wound, emitting the while from his drawn lips a low, continuous moan. His large yellow eyes, normally steadfast, so that they appeared to be set in marble sockets, now roamed ceaselessly from side to side. He seemed to be trying to implant his feet in the foot-prints Seti had made, and doubtless he was able to detect them, for he began to follow slowly, with his gaze fixed on the ground, the way she had gone.

He had not gone far when he drew himself up erect, his grief fell away from him, and his manner became alert and interested. Two voices reached him through the quiet of the garden, although the words were inaudible, one low, gentle and persuasive, the other shrill and angry. The latter he hardly recognised as belonging to Seti, so maddened and distraught was its tone.

As he stood listening, Seti's words ended in a shriek, and her gentle sister's voice at once answered with a long, agonised cry, low, with a note in it as if it came from between lips gathered in horror, but it expressed, too, to Gwali's ears, fear, and pain, and accusation, before it altogether ceased.

He ran and leapt in the direction of the sound, and within a few seconds came upon Seti bending over the prostrate body of her sister. He stretched

out his hands to grip her by the waist, but uttering a little nervous gasping cry, she eluded him, and after standing for one instant peering at him through the semi-darkness, she tossed a long, fine dagger at his feet, and laughing blithely, raced away among the trees.

He understood in a glance what she had done. He had read in her face triumph and relief, fading anger and some pity; but no shadow of evil had marred the innocence of her look. When she broke into laughter, her expression was that of a child merely, and her lips had curved in real gladness. Her manner was that of a child who had won a game.

He picked up the wet dagger, and bent down to examine the three red slits in the silvery shining cloth drawn smoothly over the full bosom of the dead girl. Far from being numbed by the shock of this discovery, his brain was excitedly gathering a riot of words, incidents and examples; his own words, his own examples, incidents of cruelty in which he had had his share, which rose up now to acclaim him the true perpetrator of this deed, and to make the drops of blood that stained his fingers typical of a real blood-guiltiness.

Not that a sense of guilt actually troubled the conscience of the outcast; it was on Seti's account, rather, that a vague uneasiness began to oppress him.

The night seemed to have grown quieter after Dhula's dying cry, and the attention of the myriad animate things, and to his startled intelligence, of the semi-animate also, seemed to be concentrated upon this fair, dead body, which stood out against

the dark earth spectrally, its shimmering silver-worked covering appearing to attract and to hold the flickering starlight. There was something minatory in the pallid face, with rigid lips, which she had reached upwards so desperately for one last breath, stretching her neck to its utmost. It seemed to him impossible but that Seti should suffer for this deed, if not at the hands of men, then beneath the wheel of some law of just retribution, which, in the very nature of things, could not fail to extort a penalty for such an act.

To the actions of men, their consequences and rewards or punishments, Gwali had never given thought; he was even now amazed to find himself attaching a supreme importance to this crime. For the first time in his life he had some understanding of the community of feeling and sentiment that underlies the life of the human race, and with this came a new realisation of his own strangeness.

A yearning filled him to fly back to his old life of twilight peace; but the thought of Seti, and all that she meant to him of sensuous pleasure, knowledge, and, perhaps, later, power, too, held him bowed in abstraction over the corpse, the dagger still held loosely in his fingers.

In his profound abstraction of thought, the earth seemed to recede from beneath his feet, falling away into space until its rounded shape became apparent, its mountains mere nodules and ridges, its rivers no more than threads, its oceans coloured glass, and he was left alone in the void with the warm corpse.

In his imaginings he began to change the lineaments of those stricken features into a resemblance

of Seti's face, and shuddered when he was succeeding, giving vent to a quickly-passing pleasureless laugh as his dreamings ceased.

A sudden ease followed, and all his vague yet poignant suffering gave place to an unreal self-possession of mind, and he began to plot out the future feverishly. Seti was alive and close to him, —little seemed to be lost so far. With his powers, which he had only half fathomed, he might learn a new way of drawing her to himself, or of approaching near to her again. She had been too intimate a part of his being to withdraw herself now completely. He had seen that she was still largely responsive to his influence when she was in personal contact with him; he had, then, only to enlarge the radius of that influence in order to recover control. To free her was unthinkable; a single forethought of the solitariness that would ensue left him sick with real fear.

Once more, as he dropped the jewel-hilted blade by the side of the murdered Princess, and turned away shuddering, mankind became for him an impersonal myriad with which he had no concern, and the whole panorama of life lost all purpose but to minister to the delight of two spectators,—himself and Seti.

Nevertheless, the sighing moan broke out afresh from between the set lips; the panorama of the world had already lost its glow, and his being was haunted by half-memories of the sweet pleasures of all the senses, which his imagination could no longer reproduce.

Whilst he stood motionless, with sunken head and shoulders high haunched, Shaho, clothed in his

long white robe, drew up to him cautiously. On any other occasion Gwali would have exerted his amazing rapidity of movement to vanish before the very eyes of the High-priest; now, for the first time since their strange friendship commenced, being swayed by a kind of despairing anger instead of the usual shy shame that the presence of normal folk induced in him, he remained to allow the old man's gaze to rest upon him. He was plainly enough to be seen, for Dhula's body lay exposed on a wide path among the shrubs, and he, standing close beside it, made a livid figure upon the grey-green earth under the silver-blue light of the stars.

Shaho drew up well beyond dagger stroke, staring inquisitively at the youth's mask-like face. Sweat stood upon the old man's forehead, and his fat hands were wringing a black-felt skull-cap into a shapeless rag. He was speechless, stunned, and at a loss, and for some seconds could only glance rapidly from Gwali to the corpse at his feet, and back again at Gwali. At length he spoke, abruptly, in a thick, tremulous voice, and his small eyes sparkled in their setting as he bent his head to the level of the youth's.

'You are Gwali?' he demanded.

Up to this the strange youth had made no movement, he seemed, even, not to breathe. A complete rigidity of flesh and muscle was apparently his normal state of rest. But though he kept his head lowered, he had never once removed his gaze from the old man's brow. He straightened himself, and nodded in reply.

'Murderess! An evil spirit is in her!' said the High-priest in subdued tones and panting with

emotion. 'O what a loss! What an irreparable loss! The she-cobra!'

He folded his arms, and staring down upon the ground, began to meditate gloomily, swaying his body to and fro, like an elephant. Gradually a change came over him; he became stationary and intent, and a look of hatred and ferocity fixed itself upon his dark countenance. He stooped laboriously, and picked up the fatal dagger.

'It is Nassur's,' he said, handing it to Gwali. 'She must have stolen it.'

Gwali received the weapon, and with the same action, looking straight into Shaho's eyes, allowed it to fall beside the body again. The old priest gave vent to a frothy chuckle, and stepping forward, laid a heavy hand upon his companion's shoulder.

'By the god of cunning, you are right!' he said. 'It is improbable, but an improbability is just the thing that will appeal best to our mad old Queen. It will mean war, too, and war is a dreadful thing, yet this, or something very like it, has got to be done. The risk is enormous,—Nassur's life or mine. But that is the ultimate alternative as matters stand at present, so nothing can well be worse. Good! I shall have the whole people with me in this. They will believe readily enough. And that Seti——' He raised his arm—'She will not strike again, the she-cobra,—be sure of that!'

'Ah beware! Seti must suffer nothing. See you that no harm befalls her,' warned Gwali in unemphatic monotone, drawing near, and extending his set, livid face until it was quite close to the priest, who felt, with a nameless horror, that his breath was cold.

Shaho started back, visibly afraid. This kind of fear, however, was foreign to the nature of the man; he took the youth by the arm, and lead him away.

'You are right! Again you are right,' he declared vehemently, still without raising his voice above a vigorous whisper. 'We must protect the reigning family from the taint of scandal at all costs,—that is the first principle of good government. Come with me now. We must leave the body here where the gardeners will find it at dawn. Poor Dhula! I had great hopes of her. She followed my guidance in every step except the last, her surrender to Nassur. Nassur shall not get a foothold on this throne. He is the enemy,—he and Pasenadi his father, who dreams of empires—empires that rise out of one ocean of blood only to sink back into another! I hate these eternal wars. I would kill all war-makers—have them poisoned—strangle them in their sleep!'

The big priest raised aloft his thin arm, and clenched his huge, loose fist as he repeated these words, striding ahead of Gwali the while, along the winding paths, in the direction of the Temple.

They soon arrived at a low, windowless annexe behind the apse of the main-building. At the moment Shaho opened the narrow door of solid brass, the smooth limestone of which the building was formed shone out in radiant reflection of the sudden dawn. Simultaneously the leaves of the thickly populated trees began to dance to the movements of the gaudy inhabitants, and a sweet-throated clamour broke out, now and again overtopped by the shrill cries of parrots, and accom-

panied continuously by the startling song of tiny ventriloquists, who seemed to be perched in the very ears of the listeners.

But the coming of morning no longer brought exhilaration to Gwali; no glad rays of the dawn reached his brain through his opaque vision, nor could the cool waves of mountain air, sweet with the first breath of the flowers and the first songs of the birds, cause any enlivenment in his dull senses.

To Shaho these things were but the accustomed heralds of another term of daylight, that part of the twenty-four hours, namely, which he very much preferred, since it dispelled much of the obscurity surrounding the movements and countenances of his rivals and adversaries.

He held the door open whilst Gwali entered, and then he shut and locked it, using a great key that swung like a sword from his girdle.

VI

HIGH-PRIESTCRAFT

WHEN the door closed upon Gwali and the priest they were sealed up in a large square cell, in utter darkness, save for a tremulous, bluish light which came from a wick floating in a bowl of oil. Shaho at once seized this wick in his fingers, and moving swiftly round the cell, illumined several lamps, which, quickly gathering strength, threw an increasingly brilliant light upon their surroundings.

Gwali had never before visited Shaho in his private quarters, and as, by the nature of his mind, he was quite unable to observe without at the same time contemplating, the idea now occurred to him of the peculiar fittedness of the sanctum to the outward and inward characteristics of the priest.

The simple, austere beauty of the chamber seemed to bestow an air of physical refinement upon Shaho's uncouth person, and the something of real nobility in his presence, the aspect of dominance and intellectual vigour in that rugged black head, gained a heightened definition against the walls of polished, pure-white marble.

Blocks of the stainless stone were shaped, also, to compose the domed ceiling and soundless floor,

while heavy pillars of the same material stood in each corner,—in measurement out of all proportion to the size of the chamber, but by that fact lending the place a meretricious, yet pleasing, effect of spaciousness.

To the height of a man's shoulder the walls were clothed in a wainscot of rare, scented woods of a light colour, arranged in mosaics of involved geometrical design. Silver arms and chains held, at regular intervals along the cornices, six bird-shaped lamps of silver, from the beaks of which protruded unfaltering bulbs of white light.

The furniture of the room was of solid ivory, massive in design, and intricately carved. It consisted of four large oblong chests, set one against each wall, and a long, narrow bench, about a foot in height, placed in the centre of the room.

In a corner was a slender silver tripod bearing the bowl of oil and the lighted wick Shaho had used, whilst on the side of the bench farthest from the door was stretched a mattress of tiger skin. Upon this Shaho squatted, and commenced to eye his companion musingly. During all the years he had known the youth, only once, the day on which he saved him from the mob, had he viewed him face to face in the light, and even then he had beheld him only in the dusk of the Temple porch.

At this moment Gwali's unnatural appearance was most unmercifully disclosed in the bright, somewhat garish, light. His skin, where it was unshaded, was more livid in hue than ever, and in the hollows more decidedly green, in contrast with the milk-whiteness of the walls, floor and ceiling.

His thick wad of hair looked like purple-tinted stone. As he stood there, at once rigid and easy, as uncommunicative, as immutable, as beautiful in his way as a grotesque in bronze, the eye at once left the person of the seated priest to fix itself upon the youth, who might have been the god for whom this shrine was raised.

Gwali replied to Shaho's gaze with a fixed stare of his yellow, wide-set eyes, the pupils of which were expanding and contracting slowly and regularly, a sign with him of extreme impatience or excitement.

'By the Holy Hood of Naga, who are you? What are you?' muttered the old man in a low voice, and he turned away his eyes, and shifted himself uneasily.

Gwali squatted down and bent his head, so that his forehead rested upon his knees, and his face was hidden.

'Who but Gwali!' he answered softly, with a sigh. 'An intellect and a will! What more am I? A passionless intellect; an aimless will.'

'Enter then my service,' said the priest. 'I will give you aims enough and to spare.'

Gwali in reply stretched forth his clenched hand, and opened it palm downwards, which was the gesture of one taking an oath.

'Of the matter of the Kosali,' went on Shaho, 'I spoke in haste and as a fool when I threatened the Princess Seti with punishment. In her alone resides the integrity of the Kingdom, and our safety. There is, indeed, Iskanaar, her father's son, whose mother was a slave. He is bold and cunning, but he hates me, and conspires against my life.'

He paused, breathing angrily under the sway of the thoughts which the name of Iskanaar had aroused in him. But with the grunt of a harried boar he dismissed them from his mind, and resumed.

'And for Seti's love of Nassur,' he said, 'which an hour ago would have served us so well, —there is one way, and one way only to make an end of *that*. The Kosali must be removed from her sight,—by the screen of justice and the laws if may be; if not, in some more hidden fashion.'

Thus, and much more in the same vein, with gathering emphasis, Shaho the High-priest spoke to Gwali touching the problems of government, bringing forth his sentences in short gusts, according to the measure of wind in his stomach. And for a long time the youth uttered not a word, merely nodding his head from time to time, or silghtly lifting a hand in agreement.

By and by, however, when Shaho had completely unfolded his plans, and had gone far to betray his most secret ambitions, the youth began to traverse the old priest's ideas, and with subtle and inevitable logic to shift the needle of his purposes, giving them an entirely new meaning and direction.

Afterwards it was the youth alone who spoke, ever in the curiously thrilling, unimpassioned monotone, crowding, as it were, that shadowless cell with dreams almost visible and tangible, clothed in the dress of possibility and immediacy he gave them.

He quoted the sayings of men whose names Shaho thought he recognised in the corrupt titles of obscure gods. In his argument he brought to bear in-

stances of states of culture so advanced that in them the least of men had completely outgrown all human instincts, and in language of amazing fancy and imagery gave bold outlines of the history of whole generations that had become as gods, refusing to obey nature, ultimately to be banished from her green bosom.

He drew vivid pictures of vanished civilisations, telling of superb arts, miraculous sciences and unbounded wealth and luxury, which, nevertheless, had been engulfed in some mighty convulsion of the earth, or hidden by the unceasing fall and drift of the invisible dust of time, and blotted out as completely as though they had never been.

Soon Shaho, overwhelmed, lowered his brow. While he listened to the youth the white spaces of the walls became filled with a blazing, indistinct pageantry as mighty, strange-faced kings passed, surrounded by blurred throngs of their subjects, or great teachers and thinkers were conjured up to live again for one dazzling moment, embodying in gesture and expression the doctrine or theory Gwali was ascribing to them.

And when in the sequence of his thought the youth spoke of abstract ideas and ideals, it seemed to the half-hypnotised priest as though angelic presences, impersonating the abstractions, were stirring round him, until at last his own aims. great as he had thought them to be, began to show themselves to be nothing but the intrigues of expediency, and one by one his most treasured ideals shrank, as dwindled in the spring those snow-gods which the mountain-people fashioned for themselves in the winter.

After a while, with no change in his demeanour or in his tone of voice, Gwali commenced to suggest the course of action to be taken with regard to the immediate problem.

'This night,' he said, 'just before the hour when Nassur goes to rest, gather at the entrance of his lodge a score of your most trustworthy guards. Wait there with them. You will hear music played. Maintain utter silence. As soon as the sound of the strings has ceased, hasten with your men to the Prince's apartment, and fetter him without delay. He will offer no resistance. Then hurry him off to some obscure place,—there is one such place that I know, and that you know, under the foundation of the Temple. After that we shall wait. It may not be necessary to slay him.'

'And the Queen—what of her?' asked Shaho, looking up through his eyebrows, anxiously.

'It may be that the Queen has not long to live,' answered the youth, softly.

Shaho let fall his gaze, and sank into a reverie in which the fear reflected in his countenance had a chief share; indeed at Gwali's sudden laugh an exclamation of terror broke from him.

The youth might easily have subdued the old man by the magic art he controlled, but it was to his purpose to set up as far as possible an ascendency that was human and natural in its origin. At last, feeling confident he had achieved his purpose, he set to work to remove any element of mystery in the new relation between himself and the priest, and subtly, yet with the utmost certainty of effect, began to restore self-confidence to the old man, and to minimise,

until it became no more than a memory, the sense of wonderment and awe which had fallen like a spell upon him.

To attain this end it was his artifice to lessen his own personal impressiveness, and with this design he assumed a natural manner, and moving about along the walls of the cell, commenced to speculate as to the significance of the mosaic designs, and to betray a quite human curiosity as to the contents of the ivory chests.

The effect of this conduct was immediate and remarkable, indeed, in this regard, in his dealings with all living things, the directness and completeness of his mastery over them never appeared to be the outcome of the sometimes trivial means he employed, but rather of some atmosphere or radiance surrounding him, which induced a kind of apathy in those who came within its fateful radius. Shaho almost at once threw off his oppression, and was soon aroused to a condition bordering on light-heartedness by his companion's fantastic gaiety.

With a return to his former manner of half-amused patronage, he offered some rambling interpretation of the circles and triangles in their many colours. The true secret of the symbols had been read by Gwali at his first glance, but he now held his peace, and by his attitude of subserviency, put the old priest completely at his ease.

'Will you not open these chests, Master?' he asked. 'I hate all shut things.'

'Well, I will open them,' answered Shaho, with some hesitation. 'Though it is a new peril that anyone else should know the secret.'

He released the lock of one of the chests by setting his fingers in the hollows of several carved lotus leaves and pressing the hidden springs in a certain succession. He drew up the lid, and showed the chest to be full to the brim of cut and polished gems, all of great size and superb brilliancy, lying crowded together, without arrangement, just as they had been poured into the receptacle. Could the choicest sunbeams of the summer have been imprisoned, they would not have sent forth half the blaze of beautiful light that issued from the wide mouth of the box. The priest glanced at the youth to note the impression it made upon him, and was astonished at the utter absence of wonderment in his expression.

Nor could he understand the sad sound that broke from Gwali's bosom as he buried his slender green hand among the jewels, just as he might have dipped it into liquid sunshine, and then raising it, let the faceted gems slip from his palm. Gwali knew that the stones possessed a ravishing beauty, but his mind, working feverishly, could not paint the faintest glow upon the dull, sharp shapes,—for that was all his vision was able to present of them.

Leaving the lid of that chest thrown back, Shaho turned to the others, and disclosed, first, a lake of blood-red rubies, in which the colour seemed to seethe in its intensity, then a foaming surface of pearls, which, gathered in such a concourse, had something of evil in their beauty, and a glimmering miasma exhaled by them seemed to hang apparent a few inches above.

The contents of the last chest had no such homo-

geneous beauty, for it was filled by superb examples of every precious stone, all exquisitely cut and polished, and many of them engraved with symbols and images. Emeralds predominated, but there were also opals in abundance, amythysts and sapphires, and one immense diamond was tossed up by the rummaging hands of the priest, cylindrical in form, of absolute purity, and cut with myriad facets.

When the priest drew Gwali back to the centre of the cell, perhaps what was the true purpose of the total effect of whiteness, and the somewhat garish quality of the light was revealed, for around the ivory chests, on walls and floor and ceiling, was reflected in a marvellously beautiful manner, the distinctive radiance of the gems contained in each, whilst over the chest where lay the unsorted stones was produced the magical effect of a shifting corona of brief-glancing shafts of pale, and deep-toned light, and above that a haze of dappled splendour. It was as if rare perfumes had become visible; one seemed to feel on the forehead the hot mist of colour. Of all this Gwali saw nothing, and Shaho had seen it all too often.

'I do not know how it is,' remarked the priest, 'but wealth in this form can work little but evil. Now if I went to a builder of bridges, and offering a handful of pearls said, "Build me a bridge, and here is your payment," he would not unlikely stab me in the night and turn robber. It is the way—I cannot explain it. Trickle gold, and you will set a trail that men will follow, but hold up a jewel like this, and they will snatch at it blindly, madly.'

He picked up the great lustrous diamond.

shaped and shining like a lamp, and held it before Gwali's gaze. The youth stared fixedly at it, and gradually his body became half-crouching, his neck craned forward, his clenched hands and stiffened arms pressed fiercely against his sides, his ashen lips drew back, stripping his gums, and he displayed in every lineament of his form an intense, tragic strain.

'It has passed—without a memory,' he muttered, and Shaho heard him murmur the name of Seti.

'What! Are you blind?' asked the priest, recoiling.

Gwali resumed his calm of manner.

'No, I can see—its shape,' he answered. 'Tell me,—is it very beautiful?'

'It is pretty enough,' responded Shaho. 'And worth a king's head. For myself, I prefer gold, and of that, too, I shall show you plenty later.' He tapped the marble floor with his soft sandal, significantly. 'And now to eat, for the sun is well up.'

He sat down heavily, and produced, from a drawer in the ivory bench, some white bread, a skin of liquor, and a small silver bowl. The bowl he filled with the creamy liquid from the skin, and breaking off half the bread, set it with the drink before Gwali, who began at once to eat, quickly and methodically. The priest, too, ate and drank greedily, throwing back his great head, and opening to its full his cavernous mouth. The potent liquor had an instantaneous effect upon him; his eyes became restless and fiery, his voice more guttural, and his gestures frequent and violent.

'What!' he cried, at the end of a narrative of disappointments. 'Shall I submit to be deposed from my place by the first chance-comer? Oh no! You are right, crazy demon, whoever you are! I must crush Nassur,—crush him at once, without fear. What have I to fear? I am an old man, and old men should be braver than young ones. Braver? More desperate, more careless of life—of what dregs and leas of life are left. In the end my will has always prevailed. I will not live to see myself overborne. Nassur shall die, and I shall reign.'

'Seti will reign,' spoke the low, even voice of the youth.

Shaho stiffened angrily for a moment, and stared at Gwali; then finding his confidence waning, he turned his attention to the skin, and drank again, deeply.

'Seti will sit on the throne,' he growled. 'But I shall mould this realm and people. No longer will I be gain-said. Henceforth my life joins issue with my will, and I shall fulfill my ambitions, or——'

He gesticulated, and drank again, being now in a greatly excited mood. He then arose, and strode to one of the pillars, behind which swung a chain. This chain he pulled, and a marble block turned noiselessly in the ceiling, letting in the air and sunshine.

With the song of birds came also another sound. A woman close at hand was wailing, her voice rising from a long, low tremulous note, through a keening crescendo, to a shriek. In the regular intervals between her cries, another, and yet another voice echoed the soughing lament, while in

the distance could be heard a hubbub of the same swelling wail. The whole world seemed filled with lamentation.

'The city is weeping for Dhula,' said the priest, in a quietened manner. 'Come, I have more to show you.'

He closed the aperture in the roof, and by a similar contrivance caused a narrow opening in the floor to appear, a hole just large enough to allow a man's shoulders to pass through, disclosing the topmost of a flight of granite stairs.

He went the round of the room extinguishing all the lamps, after which he came back to where Gwali was standing, and taking the youth by the wrist, led him down into the utter darkness of the place below.

VII

THE PRAYER

IN the wane of the day, Queen Dhrasovah began to tend the body of Dhula. Since morning, when the trembling women had received the dead Princess from the hands of the guards, and borne her, their clustering arms scarcely feeling the weight, into the inmost sanctuary of the Palace, the royal sleeping-apartment, the afflicted mother had not ceased to weep. Now she was preparing to fulfill the last offices for the beloved dead.

Dhula, disrobed, lay enshrined, her pale form, framed by the massive jewelled posts of the bed, resting upon dark-hued silk.

Everything within the chamber was dark-hued and fantastic. Thick carpets, and tapestries, with giant embroidered figures crowding upon one another in the many folds, muffled every sound, and the atmosphere was heavy, almost to suffocation, with the odours and smoke of incense and unguents. Through a small window, high up in the wall, fell a square, slanting shaft of the flaming sunset, like an ingot of transparent gold that was melting its end at a charcoal brazier on the floor, wherein a black, tar-like substance was smouldering, and giving off a pungent, stupifying vapour.

Dhrasovah herself was standing in a corner, watching the corpse, with her naked arms folded tightly across her breast. Her features were large and gaunt, but in spite of the tragic, downward-drawn mouth, wide, red-rimmed, circular eyes, and hollow cheeks, they told plainly enough their tale of a beautiful youth prematurely wasted and burnt up in the fevers of an insane mind. Her skin of pallid olive looked white as it caught the glow of the sun-shaft, and the straggling wisps of iron-grey hair that fell over her eyes and large forehead, and matted thickly upon her sunken neck, gave the final touch of wildness to her aspect.

When she moved her walk was reminiscent of Dhula's lissom gait, and this although her tall, thin, straight body was swathed narrowly from bosom to ankles in bands of purple silk. She drew near to the corpse, and bending over the bed sank slowly down, until she rested upon the cold bosom. Then with the fingers of both hands she commenced to touch lightly the three dark slits above the heart,—the fatal wounds.

'Dhula, awake,' she whispered. 'You have slept long enough, and my poor old heart is beginning to grow still with too much sorrowing.'

A thin whimpering crying broke from her puckered lips as she moved them aimlessly upon her daughter's face, searching for some warmth of life.

'How can I die now? What is the death of a mother whose children are dead?' She spoke in a quick, faltering whisper. 'Like an apple tree struck by lightning, I have seen my fruit decay. Ramana, my son, slain in battle. Dhula, whose life has been

sucked from her heart by a demon. Seti,—I had forgotten Seti!'

She stood upright, and turned slowly, gazing affrightedly into every corner of the room.

'But Seti is not mine,' she went on. 'I suffered the birth-pangs, but she came from a demon's womb. I saw it, I saw it, though they hung a veil of blood before my eyes, and filled my mouth with screechings. Seti is not mine! No, no. She looks at me as a stranger looks, and runs from my approach. But you, Dhula, were given to me in happiness, and the memory of the pains of your bringing forth is a great joy for ever. You used to come to me when the invisible spirits afflicted me, and when Shaho caused my people to taunt me. Dhula, Dhula, awake, and live until I die!'

Answering a sudden impulse she darted to a little hidden shrine, and drew back the curtains along the rod. A block of ebon wood was disclosed, carved, in deep, bold lines, to suggest, roughly, a crouching, female form with a huge head. With hurried, inaccurate actions she lit a taper at one of the saucers of smouldering gums, and applied the light to a mass of waxy substance heaped up on a stone slab in front of the image. It was some time before the greasy pile kindled to the unsteady flame, and all the while Dhrasovah, becoming more and more excited, muttered rapidly, rehearsing her prayer.

At length a fuming flame hissed up, and began to wreath itself before the face of the puny idol. Then it was that the cunning of the forgotten carver was made apparent, for, beyond the thin veil of flame, which was transparent, like a flare

of phosphorus, the image took life, and what had been a scarcely human likeness now came to possess a subtle power of change that seemed able to span the whole gamut of facial expression.

Dhrasovah approached her head as near as she dared to the flame, and spoke exactly as if a living being were present. She gripped the sides of the shrine, and sometimes caused the goddess to rattle upon her pedestal in her vehemence, while each swift mood was depicted upon her haggard face, which was at one time pursed up mockingly, and at another so drawn as to strip her teeth like a snarling wolf, and betrayed in the tones, plaintive or passionate, of her high cracked voice.

'This is the last time I shall beg of you, O Sri,' she said. 'The very last time. Oh, I am not afraid. glower you ever so! Will you give me back the spirit of Dhula? Will you or will you not? There is no time to lose. Can you bring her back? Ah, can you! You cannot. O Sri, the miserable, the powerless, who are you that I beg favours of you? Deservedly are all your shrines in ruin, making a nest for cobras. I alone worship you in all the world, and never yet have you answered one prayer of mine! But this last thing will you do? Give my child back to me. Find out where they have taken her, and bring her back. She was not driven out by disease. Her house of flesh is clean and whole, save only where the teeth of the demon bit her. Bring her back before her body festers and grows foul. Quick! Answer. Will you do this?'

Shrieking, she shook the uprights of the canopy until one tug more vigorous than the rest caused

the tottering idol to lurch forward, and it fell, hiding its grinning face in the molten wax, and extinguishing the flame. Then, stretching her long arms above her head, interlocking her fingers, the mad queen began to wail an inarticulate song, gradually turning herself the while in a slow pirouette.

When she faced the window she stayed transfixed; her shrieking voice halted abruptly, her mouth remaining contorted with the effort of her crazy singing, and a new horror and fear flushed into her eyes.

Filling up the deep, narrow window, excluding from the room the last reflections of the sunken sun, were the head and shoulders of Gwali. He was leaning into the room, framing his face with his long hands, and only dimly perceptible as incense burner glowed or a smouldering wick sputtered, when was lit up the unchanging half-smile that lately seemed frozen upon his lips.

'I know you. Why are you here?' said Dhrasovah, in a loud low voice, but without stirring. 'You are the demon who sucked the life from Dhula's heart.'

The glare died out of her eyes, which became dark and gentle, and in that instant a frightful gurgling sound issued from her throat, and she swooped forward as a swimmer dives from a height, her arms still upraised. Her brow struck the carpeted floor a heavy, dull blow, her body straightened, and she lay motionless.

Even as the Queen fell, beyond an increased restlessness of his quick-moving eyes, Gwali gave no sign that he knew he was participating in a

tragedy; but when the old woman's body sank flat in an unmistakable way, he sighed heavily, and slid into the room.

'What has happened?' the voice of Shaho was heard asking from outside.

'She is dead,' answered the youth in a low tone; yet such was the strange quality of his voice that the words reached Shaho with distinctness, and the sounds lingered in the draped chamber as though the walls were of resonant brass.

'Hah!' the priest could be heard to ejaculate, and it sounded very much like a sigh of relief. 'Wait there. I am coming.'

Alone with the two dead women, Gwali suffered again that shudder of inexpressible horror which he had first experienced when he stood in the presence of Dhula's lifeless form. It seemed to afflict only one half, the more physical, of his being; the cool faculty of observation and analysis he retained giving him the sense of being a disinterested spectator of his own acute agony.

This near presence of death bewildered and overwhelmed him. Each of those two corpses in their different aspects of beauty and decreptitude, youth and decay, was the centre of a dinning problem which raised a tumult in his soul until he felt as if a great temple gong was being beaten in his brain with ever increasing rapidity.

Each of the bodies appeared as if poised in the mouth of an unfathomable pit, and he had again the beginnings of the sensation of being abstracted from the universe of sensible things, and drawn into a black, boundless sky with the dead for sole company. He silently questioned the still

forms whither had they flown, and the shape his question took was the one common to all strongly imaginative natures—his whole soul made short, frantic flights in all the thousand possible directions in the pathless void.

He became breathless as he ran, before his time, the myriad risks of death, and the shuddering sighs came frequently at the thought of one ultimate circumstance that would close his lonely destiny. The strong blast that blew all so pitilessly out of life gave at least assurance of crowded haunts somewhere beyond the grave. The dead, at any rate would have companionship. But in life he was a stranger and an outcast—what new thing was Death reserving for him?

During the minutes he had stood thinking these thoughts, evening had advanced swiftly, and now only the dull glow of charcoal embers, smouldering scent-gums, and the fitful light of tiny floating wicks broke into the compact gloom of the death-chamber.

A knock was heard, but so heavy was the door, and muffled with hangings, that the sound came as if from afar. A glance discovered to Gwali the place of the spring, and at a touch the door opened noiselessly; Shaho entered stealthily, and closed it behind him.

'You are quite sure she is dead?' he whispered, peering about in the darkness. 'By all the gods don't let us make a mistake on that point.'

'She is dead,' answered Gwali. 'Sorrow had weakened her, and terror struck the blow. She looked upon me in the treacherous light. I had forgotten my strangeness.'

He broke into his mirthless laugh, but immediately was silent.

Shaho came warily forward until he found the body of the Queen. When he came upon it he dropped to his knees, and, with some reluctance of touch, turned the head round so as to view the face. Gwali in the meanwhile had blown into a brazier of charcoal, and sprinkling upon the embers some powder from a bowl caused a bright light.

'Quite dead,' commented Shaho, after he had applied certain simple tests. 'Sorrow and terror doubtless as you say, but madness had a large share.'

'When we pray too much for happiness the gods sometimes give madness,' said Gwali. 'And who is wiser than the gods? And yet, for one instant, as her eyes met mine, that woman was sane. Perhaps it was she died of her understanding.'

'So be it,—so that she be dead,' said Shaho, rising from his knees, one leg at a time, camel-wise. 'No longer shall the fate of the people lie in wait upon her whims and frenzies. Now to trap the Prince. And you—you must leave this room the way you came. Can you?'

'I can,' answered Gwali, and then added warningly, 'Remember Shaho. Gather your men at the entrance of his lodge at the sound of the harp, but do not approach until the music has ceased. And remember also that without my help you will fail, and Nassur will kill you. For a little while only he will lie helpless at your feet. Be ready to take him, or this is the last of all your plottings.'

'Whatever your magic is, I will trust it,' replied

the High-priest. 'Put it into action at once. I must have my grip on Nassur this night, before he has time to act on the news of Dhrasovah's death. I have twenty years' work yet to do—in how many? Five, perhaps. And when old steps hasten there's soon a fall, they say. As the gods will. I go to announce the Queen's death.'

He threw open the door, and the dull light of swinging lamps penetrated to half-way across the gloomy room, falling full upon Dhula's pale form, and touching the shrivelled arms and hands of the dead Queen. He strode into the passage, and as he did so, hushed, startled cries broke out, curtains moved and rustled on every side, and there was a noise of light, hurrying feet.

'The Queen is dead!' Shaho cried out, in a booming voice.

After a frightened silence, a rich young voice answered him with a low, doubtful wail.

'The Queen is dead!' thundered the High-priest, already some distance away.

This time a great clamour of women's voices took up the mournful and terrifying death-wail, and it grew rapidly nearer and louder.

When the women were at the very threshold, Gwali roused himself from his reverie, and, showing for an instant against the square of blue-velvet sky outlined by the window, without a sound, was gone.

VIII

CHAINS AND ENCHANTMENTS

THOSE who found the body of Dhula had set up a loud wail of horror and grief, and that wailing had been caught up and re-echoed along every corridor of the Palace. Soon the townspeople heard of the woeful death, and, all toil and pleasure being suspended, the morning hours were given up to public lamentation, for Dhula had been charitable to many.

Towards night-fall, however, their own insistent trouble began to distract their attention from the royal affliction, and public demonstrations of grief ceased, for those who had no trouble of their own had long since dried their tears. Humanity is only bruised into tenderness.

Certain hand-maidens were still stricken with the loss of their mistress, and the old, eccentric Queen had ere this locked herself in her apartment with the body of her eldest daughter. Apart from these, real sorrow made itself apparent in only one other, Nassur, Prince of the Kosalas.

Cushions had been laid upon the ebon couch in his favourite chamber, and thereon he had reclined all day, becoming paler under the torture of his thoughts as evening drew on, and from time to time moistening his parched mouth by dipping a

silver spoon into a crystal bowl wherein slowly melted a square of mountain ice.

Beside him, upon a stool, sat Seti, watching him intently. She had been among the first to bring the evil news to him, and as she wept bitterly, and clasped him around the waist, like a stricken child, he had held her to him whilst he struggled with his own anguish. When he lay down upon the couch she had huddled up to him as if for sympathy, and he, not looking at her eyes, did not see the wary watchfulness of them, nor the gleam that broke from behind her tears. As the hours went by he neglected her, and she had slipped from off the couch, and taken a stool by its side, whence she could see every shade on his face.

No one dreamed of suspecting her, or had a thought of questioning her tearful story of how she had run from her sister at the sound of pursuing footsteps; how she had fancied she heard Nassur's voice speaking to Dhula, and therefore, had felt no alarm at her absence. She looked so child-like and frail and frightened as she repeated this tale that the women of the Palace felt moved towards her, and tried to soothe her. Did they but see her face as it now appeared, turned fiercely upon the heedless Prince, they would undoubtedly have questioned her more closely.

Paphos also was present, seated upon cushions placed against the wall, and eating grapes. He looked neither sad nor sorrowful, but very impatient, with that complex form of annoyance which people feel who do not share the emotion of the environment in which they find themselves,

being, at the same time, too intellectually honest not to admit that the emotion in question ought certainly to take precedence of their own more trivial humours. He also displayed that air, so conducive to restlessness in its beholders, as of a man who has many excellent things to say, and is combating with his sense of tact whether or not he will say them, regardless of their effect upon his audience.

Uluan was out on the verandah, leaning against a pillar, so turned towards the room as to have a clear view of Seti, whose every look, and half-repressed gesture he was endeavouring to interpret.

The night was luminous with moon and stars, the blue atmosphere seemed filled with silver powder, and light, too, from the room fell upon him, revealing the bruises upon his throat, the marks having now taken a shape so definite that Gwali's hand might have been branded into the white skin.

The expression of contented nonchalence had departed from his face, as had also the pose of weariness from his manner. Hot, despairing, angry passion was written on his flushed face and in his restless eyes, giving him a mien of fierceness and intentness altogether new to him.

Seti was drumming her little pale fingers upon her knees and looking closely at Nassur's strong hand hanging over the head of the couch,—that hand alone being sufficient testimony of the extreme lassitude of its owner in his grief.

'When you have quite forgotten Dhula will you love me again? Nassur,' she asked with child-like naiveté.'

Nassur apparently did not hear the question.

'You will forget Dhula, won't you?' persisted the girl, laying her palm upon the Prince's hand, and surveying the contrast.

'Yes, yes,' answered Nassur, mechanically, withdrawing his hand.

'But you won't, Nassur,—at least not for some weeks,' declared Paphos. 'You don't know how to forget. It's an art, and one you haven't learnt. In Athens people train their memories, and as a result one-tenth of the population are insane. When I think of some of the things men constantly carry about in their minds I shudder as I pass them in the street. The brain of a man was designed to be a judge; instead it has become a merchant in second-hand bric-a-brac. No mind can think in a crowd of disorderly facts. A man ought to be ashamed of the things he knows; it is a sign of weakness. The collecting of information is the last refuge of a disillusioned intelligence. It is also the sole function of the vulgar mind.'

Paphos was talking at random in a charitable endeavour to distract the attention of the Prince from his sad thoughts. He had seen a look in that dauntless warrior's eyes which, as he told himself, he had never beheld but in the eyes of a girl in the first flush of the realisation of her betrayal, and although he gave full value to the incongruity —for it was the incongruities of life which made special appeal to his intelligence—he nevertheless quelled the thought, with an unusual sense of irreverence, and understanding much of the awful tension of mind which alone could produce that expression, as of wonderment at its own endur-

ance of its suffering, he set himself the task of arousing the Prince from this trance of agony,—a condition of ill-being which, though he fancied he could well comprehend it, he found it impossible to excuse.

'Nassur, do you take your hand away from me?' asked Seti, softly, in tones ill-sorted to the malevolence which was playing upon her features like the reflection of flames.

Uluan, who had not ceased for an instant to watch her, caught his breath in amazement.

'There! Leave me now, child,' murmured Nassur, in accents of grief and weariness. 'But come and see me in the morning. I shall be better then, perhaps.'

There was a change in his manner as he spoke as if the thought of Seti's sensitive feelings had occurred to him.

He tried to smile, but his lips closed again tremulously, and the hand he had raised to touch Seti's downcast head fell back feebly. Paphos, eating his grapes with unappreciative rapidity, now sat erect, a suspicion of anxiety clouding his placid brow. He called out to Uluan, sonorously.

'Uluan, bring your harp, lad,' he cried. 'Music! The foe of gloom, the decoy of happiness! Sing the wailing anthems of your country, boy, and let us chase away melancholy by confronting her with her own image. Thus, thus, by displacing our real emotions by artificial sensation does Art make life tolerable.'

Uluan, in customary obedience, because since childhood he had been used to respond to the call for music, stepped from the verandah into the

room, and took from its place beside Nassur's sword a small, gilded harp of many strings.

At the preparatory touch of his fingers, declining octaves of pure notes filled his listeners' ears. Each note was full and clear, and had the enchanting effect of the music of bells coming over quiet waters, of being born perfect, with no shock of beginning and no obscurity of ending.

'I cannot sing to-night,' said the player, who, in the opinion of Paphos, was sullen, and, therefore, unyouthful and unpleasant to gaze upon.

'I do not wish you to sing,' said the Prince.

'Then play,' begged Paphos.

The Greek was on his feet, pacing restlessly across the angle of a corner, turning his head at every other step to glance at Nassur. Although during a long companionship with the Prince he had helped to soothe many brief, and at least one prolonged, and anguished, turmoil of the heart, he now fancied there were reasons for grave disquiet on his behalf, and he felt almost angry with Uluan in that he appeared not to share his alarm.

But the auburn-haired youth was leaning against a cedar pillar, holding the harp to his breast, his attention fixed upon Seti, who was turned towards him and smiling.

At the look on the girl's face as, with downcast head, she peered at Uluan eerily, and beholding the attitude of her crouched body, Paphos came to a halt with a start. When he followed her gaze to Uluan, who was transfixed, and, save for his fingers, as motionless as a statue, he grew really uneasy.

'That girl is a hundred years old,' he muttered

enigmatically. 'I wonder how she came by it. Uluan, play man,' he added briskly. 'Stir this atmosphere which seems to my all-too sensitive nerves to be clotting with dewy woe.'

'Yes, play, Uluan,' said Seti in Gwali's monotone.

Paphos had heard yellow-faced mesmerists from the hills speak in that very tone to the victims whose wills they were subduing.

Uluan began at once to touch the strings, and there were emitted sounds utterly discordant, although even then the effect was not altogether unpleasing, so sweet was the instrument. However, Paphos, who had heard the youth play a thousand times before, at once voiced his grievance.

'By the Bride you worship!' he cried to Uluan, 'This is an atrocity! A troop of jackals, a pair of squalling infants would seek the true relation of harmony with more address. Please cease. It is better to expire of ennui in a tragic silence than allow such clownish chords to burlesque grief.'

But Uluan, still in a dream, was no longer touching the strings aimlessly. He was repeating over and over again a short, wild melody, curiously broken by unnatural pauses. At each repetition he added a few notes, and somehow the mind at once became engrossed in this music-building. Paphos found himself eagerly anticipating the completed whole of the melody, feeling no slight degree of impatience at the seemingly senseless delay caused by the repetitions.

Nassur, too, was drawn into a state of extraordinary tension. His jaws were rigid, making the

veins stand out upon his temples. He had half arisen, and was craning his neck towards the abstracted musician.

Paphos began to feel faint and dizzy. He was sure he was rocking unsteadily as he stood, and was about to fall. Seti had sprung to her feet, and was running hither and thither, excitedly calling out the name of Gwali. The Greek heard her voice dimly, for there was a buzzing in his head as if his ears were covered. He fancied also, he heard the low, regular beat of a scarcely human laugh close beside him.

He did not turn to look, for just then Nassur fell back heavily on the couch in a swoon, and the music at once ceased. Uluan let fall his harp and interlocked his hands upon his forehead, crushing his temples with his wrists. His mouth was wide open, and he appeared for the moment crazed. Seti was squatting on the floor, her face resting upon her knees and her hair tossed wildly around her.

Still with a belief in the unreality of it all, Paphos saw Uluan, starting violently, turn towards the door, and with a loud cry of 'Treachery,' hastily take Nassur's great sword from where it hung, and endeavour to force the haft into the Prince's nerveless hand.

Struggling now against the numbing drowsiness, the Greek himself looked towards the door, and saw Shaho, the High-priest, standing there with an arm raised to hold back the tapestry, and behind him the shining helmets and mail of men of the Queen's Body-guard. The priest appeared sorely perplexed and hesitating, but he took a step

into the room, and a file of soldiers ranged themselves on either side of him, their long curved swords drawn, and their round brazen shields held to their breasts.

Uluan, unable to arouse the Prince from his mysterious lethargy, allowed the sword to fall to the ground beside Seti, and drew away from the couch. His eyes were staring and red-rimmed. and although he did not look to be afraid, he trembled perceptibly.

Paphos had the feeling that he was recovering a fuller command of his faculties, but very gradually. He tried to speak, to question Shaho, and failed.

'Captain, your duty,' commanded the priest.

An officer stepped from behind the men bearing broad steel manacles chained closely together. Displaying no sign of trepidation at the magnitude of his task other than a blanched face, he slipped the fetters upon the resistless wrists of the Prince, and a powerful spring locked them. From his belt were slung other bonds, and he took from amongst them a set designed for the ankles, being fitted with a longer chain, and in them imprisoned Nassur's legs. Shaho pointed silently to Paphos, and the officer approached and bound him similarly.

'Nassur, Prince of the Kosalas,' said Shaho, solemnly, 'you are captive on suspicion of having murdered the Princess Dhula. And you likewise.' He levelled a finger in the direction of Paphos.

In a flood of consciousness Nassur and Paphos at the same instant awoke to a full realisation of their condition.

'Unbind me,' roared Nassur in a fury. 'Do you know what you are doing? I will destroy you. I will burn your city. Release me, I command.'

He strove mightily to break the links that held his wrists together, and did not desist until the blood had burst from beneath the abrased skin. He sprang to his feet to hurl himself upon the priest; then the chains upon his legs tripped him, and he fell. Two soldiers, at a sign from Shaho, slipped their swords into their scabbards, and entwining their arms warily with those of the Prince, raised him, and conducted him, dazed and infuriated, slowly from the room.

Paphos thought it best to laugh at the whole affair.

'I admire your sense of comedy, Shaho,' he said lightly. 'A most effective cure for a broken heart is thus to pour foul accusations into the crevices. It is, of course, perfectly fitting that I, above all people, should be arrested. Please do not release me on any account. Murder with me has become a habit. Your deepest dungeon for me, sir, and double my chains, for my vigorous imagination might easily burst these adornments. Priest, you are stupid!'

Two soldiers approached him, but he disregarded them, and followed, of his own accord, the way Nassur and his captors had taken. The remaining soldiers filed out again, leaving Seti and Uluan alone together.

For some minutes the jangling of Prince Nassur's chains continued to reach Uluan's ears. Caught by an anxious eagerness, the youth went to the door to listen to the sound, as if fearful lest

by some mighty effort his erstwhile beloved friend and master might burst his bonds and return.

A reckless hope was stirring in his heart, that this maddening desire for the love of Seti might reach its consummation. This impulse of his nature had already grown so strong that he, a youth, and more than half a slave, now dared to regard the powerful prince, his master, as a rival whom it was possible to outreach, and, if need be, as a foe to be destroyed. At length the ominous sound of the fetters died away; he turned and looked at the girl.

The vest of pearls that sheathed her slim back was his price as a slave a hundred times over. She was virtually the queen of a vast, thickly-populated territory. But last night, in a moment of half-wakefulness, his body had been pressed by her full weight, he had felt her heart throbbing, and her soft breasts yield as, with growing boldness, he had begun to enfold her in his arms.

Her limbs had lain along his, her breath was upon his mouth, her hair in his eyes, a delirium of perfect joy was mounting to his brain when that cold, irresistible, mysterious hand had seized his throat, bringing pain and darkness.

With the return of consciousness he had found himself still in a condition of interrupted delirium of sensuous delight, and ever since his whole being was haunted by Seti with an intolerable intimacy, a spectral shape of her seeming to be ever in front of him wherever he turned, and his nostrils to be filled with the sweet aroma that sprang from her body.

Fierce, unreasoning hatred of Nassur was consuming his soul. It mattered nothing that the

Prince paid no regard to the tender caresses Seti showered upon him; that he, indeed, quite plainly since the news of Dhula's death reached him, held them in some abhorrence. The youth projected into Nassur the joy that those touches and glances would have fired so fiercely in himself, and jealousy so preyed upon him that he could not trust them to be alone together for an instant.

On the other hand, he had made many attempts to draw her away from the Prince's side, and when at last, during the heat of the afternoon, he had found himself alone with her, to his amazement the wild girl, throwing off her counterfeited grief, had proved herself as amorous in his regard as she had been the night previously. She had flung her arms about him, holding him tightly, and laying her head against his breast, sighed happily.

But he, overcome by blind, ravening jealousy at the very ease of her surrender to him, had unfastened her arms, and put her from him, a sullen, angry look on his fair face, and a misty, sightless expression in his eyes, as if he were trying to behold all her past loves and all her future embraces in a vision.

At this conduct she had regarded him with simple, wide-eyed wonderment, and without speaking—indeed, neither had spoken for the greater part of the scene—she sat down in the peculiar crouching attitude she had been wont to adopt during her daily intercourse with Gwali, and viewed him in smiling interest.

Then the vague unhappiness he suffered flared into a common anger when Nassur reappeared, and Seti had once more commenced to tease him with

her caresses. And teasing it was, for she had a half-amused manner of meeting the gentle rebuffs of the heart-broken Prince, which Uluan was too overcome with passion properly to interpret, which, nevertheless, revealed plainly enough that she was merely seeking the inhuman pleasure of prying acutely into the inmost recesses of Nassur's stricken soul, and was deriving a subtle enjoyment from touching incongruously his jagged nerves of feeling.

Uluan now took a step towards the girl, imagining her, from her attitude, to be weeping. At the first movement his passion took control of him; he darted to her, and fell upon his knees at her side, spreading his arms about her so that he held her knees and shoulders in his embrace. Seti raised her head, and through the thick, black meshes of her hair, by the gleam of eyes and teeth, he saw that she was smiling.

'I love you, oh, I love you, Seti,' the youth almost wept, breathlessly.

'Well, I will let you love me, red-head,' cried the girl, laughing gaily. 'Loose me a minute,—can't you see—you have made me sit on my hair, and it hurts me!'

Uluan missed altogether the response of feeling he so greatly desired. He felt instinctively that she regarded her relation with him as a purely physical one, no more than the desire of hot lips and all the tremors of the barren fever of the affections. There was nothing in the tone of her voice or in the vigour of her arms to satisfy the craving that was consuming his soul. His heart was twisted, and he felt sick, and dismayed. He groaned, and would have drawn away from her had she allowed him.

'Uluan,' she whispered, 'don't please run away again. Keep very, very near to me. No,—entwine your fingers—so. And I'll hold them, and now you can't get away. I don't ever want to be alone again, for there are great, black thoughts all around me that I cannot understand. Gwali can take those thoughts away from me, and make laughter of them, but you cannot. Yet Gwali is as cold as ice, and one might as well kiss the idol Sri, who sits waist deep in the water, guarding the spring. He could never make me shut my eyes fast, and feel as though I were flying in the arms of the lightning, up to the very stars, or again as though I were lying in a lake of sweet music, drifting, drifting. Oh, that is how I want to be for ever. Gwali could never cause me to feel like that, but you can, and Nassur better still. And Nassur—he is a fool. He sighs after dead women!'

'Then do you love me?' asked Uluan eagerly.

The girl shook her head, smilingly, yet decisively.

'Not a little—not the beginnings of love?' pleaded the youth, making an effort to catch her air of gaiety, without success.

'No, not a little,' answered Seti. 'If I love anybody I love Gwali,—at least I am always thinking of him. Whenever I am sad, and begin to dream, it is always of him. I do not think of you or Nassur except when you are near me, and your eyes flame into mine. Ah! that pleases me! Or you touch me and make me thrill. Gwali lives *in* me—do you understand? If I shut my eyes I can see him.'

She became thoughtful. Uluan was biting his

lip, and he asked in a voice the fierceness of which he failed to conceal:

'And where is Gwali now?'

'Ah, no,' cried Seti, 'you could not kill him. But he could kill you, easily.'

She touched significantly the bruise on his neck, and the youth started back with blanched cheek. Seti drew him to her again, and kissed him.

'You needn't be afraid,' she said, 'he won't hurt you again. Don't ever think of him. Just love me. I want you to love me. Don't mind if I do not suffer for you,—I cannot. Gwali has all my thoughts. And why should you grieve? What can any girl give you that I cannot?'

'Seti, my whole spirit is yearning towards your spirit,' answered Uluan. 'Only when in return your spirit yearns back towards mine shall I have peace. That is love, Seti, the union of souls.'

'Yes, I know all that, red-head,' responded the girl, 'but I have had enough of the spirit and the soul—for a little while. That is how Gwali loves me, and sometimes I could make him happy, and often I could not. Even when he was happy he sighed, and when he was unhappy he wept—as much like weeping as he could. And that is always the way with the soul and the spirit—it is all sadness and brooding and melancholy. For the spirit by itself has no feelings, Uluan, and so cannot forget itself. But the spirit joined to the body has wonderful feelings, and it can forget itself and be happy. Gwali's spirit is never joined to his body,—though it can join itself to mine, he says,—how, I do not know. And he can draw my spirit away from my body, and then *I* am very melancholy. I do not

want to be melancholy, only happy always, and to keep feeling, feeling, and never thinking. Can you be like that? Try. Do not think about me, just—enjoy me! Can you do that?'

'No,' answered Uluan, in a low voice.

Whilst they were speaking, the tiny, coloured lamps had one by one flickered and gone out. Only one, a pale amber globe, now sent forth any light, and that one glowed unsteadily. When Uluan answered 'No,' Seti laughed a short laugh of derision, and holding the youth feverishly around the neck with her left arm, she tore at her cuirass of pearls with her right hand.

Uluan heard the snappings of the silken threads and silver wire, and the stream of jewels that spilled itself among the soft cushions.

He felt Seti's body begin to tremble like the deepest chord of his harp. A sudden wild joy took possession of him, and he laughed loudly.

Seti, too, laughed, from time to time.

Just then the amber lamp shuddered, and died out.

IX

REVELRY

ON the death of the old Queen, Shaho had hopes, with good reason, of enjoying a prolonged period of undisturbed sway as Regent. Within a very few days, however, his hopes were all dispersed.

A host of young nobles, men and women, whom he had passed by previously as being unworthy of serious regard, began, cautiously and tentatively at first, and soon with amazing audacity, to discover, by experiment, to what extent they dared contravene, with the countenance of their new and youthful ruler, the rigid principles of the former reign.

Their success exceeded their most joyous expectations. Seti urged them to unfold further ideas for more and still more extravagant escapades, and herself was foremost in the wildest assaults upon revered tradition, her quick tongue ever adding contumely to outrage.

With one accord, with no more explicit understanding than was conveyed to one another by visages and gestures of dismay, Dhrasovah's old Court vanished from the Palace purlieus, until one day, discovering himself in the midst of a crowd of youthful and brilliant strangers, Shaho the Re-

gent, with his title undisputed, came to understand that his power was forever gone.

Seti was Queen indeed, and she at once inaugurated a reign of pleasure the most sensuous. For several successive nights she sat enthroned, with Uluan at her feet, the president of sumptuous feasts, whereat, gorgeously draped or dazzlingly fair, the youngest, most beautiful of her court reclined before trays of rare viands, or quaffed Grecian wines and maddening native drinks, strangely fermented, from goblets which youths held to the lips of maids who were lying in their encircling arms, or maids offered wildly, and spilled in offering, to the dazed men whose heads they were pillowing.

Crowded into those banquets was everything that could bewilder or excite the senses. In her arrangements the Queen exercised the utmost art, and so wrought upon the desires, perceptions and sensations of her guests as to lead them bound from delight to intenser delight and further delirium, until a final orgie, bestial and magnificent, left them, exhausted, to the care of waiting slaves.

Music was perhaps her most powerful agent in perfecting these trances of pleasure, for, with intuition marvellous to one of her age and inexperience, she set hidden bands of players around the hall, and from the scarcely audible brushing of strings which accompanied the first murmurs of expectant joy, to the shouting of trumpets and the clangour of cymbals which seemed to light up the banquetting-hall in a blaze of red fire, inciting hilarity to frenzy, the sequence of soft melodies, wild dance tunes, and maddening fanfares never

ceased from strings, reeds, or instruments of silver.

Troops of dancers, too, came within the circle of joy, and in the centre of the loop of that human garland, where man and maid were linked so blissfully, danced, with postures and gestures at first all of grace and stateliness, but at each reappearance, with increasing voluptuousness and abandon, until they were finally seized by the flushed young men as they sought to flee, and pulled down to join the revelry.

Outbidding all in her manner of excess was the Queen herself. Her seat was on a platform away from, and slightly above her courtiers, and beside her was set a stool for the enthralled Uluan. She drank little wine, but an overflowing cup was always at her side, and this she would raise, with inciting cries, at any slight abatement in the wildness and enthusiasm of the scene. She seemed at these moments to have power to centre upon herself all the reckless joy that burst forth in look, posture or cry from the assembled banqueters.

Sometimes she sat upon Uluan's low stool, causing him to recline on a cushion, with his head between her knees, and then over his face and among his red curls her hands played restlessly. Her vesture was most frequently an armour of precious stones; on the occasion of the last feast, however, she chose a single robe of black silk gauze, a favourite guise of hers, which floated in light folds, a tangible shadow, about her slender form.

At that last banquet a melancholy, demoniac in its outward show, appeared to trouble her. She was from the first abstracted, sad, and silent, and the

hand that Uluan, from time to time, coaxed to caress him was chill and lifeless. The very soul of the youth shivered, and seemed to grow small when, turning back his head into her lap, he invited her to some frolic, and, for the first time, she did not heed him.

He had never been altogether happy in his possession of her. Night and day she kept him at her side, nevertheless, save only in the wild transports that ushered in the last blind fury of those riotous hours, discontent and uneasiness preyed upon his mind. In his yearning, as well as in the unutterable distress of love's completeness, when he looked into her eyes, it was always with suspicion and inquiry. Instinct and intuition told him that all that was most precious in the wayward, unfathomable girl, that which he really loved in her, was, in some mysterious way, withheld from him. And Seti was plainly conscious of this, and seemed always to desire it to be so,—once only she was clearly wishful it should be otherwise, and even then the tender consummation of a spirit-union for which he was vaguely yearning was denied him.

'Your thoughts are far from us to-night, O Queen,' he said now, sadly.

'Yes, very far,' answered she, still unaroused from her brooding abstraction.

'Mistress, the feast is waning,' said the youth. 'All are remarking your despondency.'

'Uluan, you are a fool,' said Seti, a fury of impatience tossing her. 'Do you think I care if the feast wane? Do you imagine all this is for their pleasure, or mine? Look at them—so they could live for ever. A blind horse that turns a water-

wheel would be less patient of their round of life. How much longer could *you* endure this before you shrieked at its recurrence?'

Uluan cast up at her a look of adoration. He was seated at her feet, and so turned now that his breast was between her knees. He took her hands in his.

'With you at my side, Seti——' he commenced passionately.

'With me at your side!' she mocked, and snatched her hands away. 'And what can you do to keep me at your side? You can do nothing. Look, you have a whole kingdom at your service—can't you keep me amused? You have no wits. I am tired of you. Leave me.'

She sprang to her feet, and when the roisterers, mistaking her mood, greeted her action with joyful cries and a general lifting of goblets, she wrapped her black shawl about her, and turned her back to them all. Uluan remained on his knees beside her.

'Seti,' he implored, 'you are killing me!'

'Well, slaves have often died and queens not mourned them,' Seti replied.

He clung to her knees.

'Can you speak like this to me?' he said, speaking rapidly and low, so that those revellers nearest them, who had ceased their gay talk, catching something of the meaning of the scene, should not overhear his sorrow. 'A few hours ago I held you in my arms——'

'I don't remember,' said Seti.

'Oh, don't torture me,' he moaned. 'My whole life hangs on your least word.'

'A slave's life should,' she murmured.

'Seti, I have told you,' Uluan said piteously, 'I was born noble in my own country.'

'Very good, noble,' said the Queen. 'Take your hands from me, or you shall be whipped.'

'You shall not cast me off,' he said mournfully. 'I shall follow you always and everywhere, until you have me slain.'

Then Seti's mood changed completely, and playful mischievousness shone in her face. The aspect of care that made her a woman departed, and she was a child again.

'Follow, then,' she said, and on the sudden sped away.

He caught at her; she escaped him, and laughing loudly, ran from the hall. He followed close behind, but the door of her chamber shut fast in his face, and though he waited all through that night, there was no sign from within, but darkness and silence only.

X

THE BERRY

FIVE days had passed since that memorable last feast, and Queen Seti had, an hour ago, sprinkled upon her little vivacious tongue the grains of a certain berry which she herself crushed, and by virtue of them had relapsed into a kind of half-doze, during which, while her soul wantoned at that banquet of all the pleasures desired of eaters of hashish, more fortunate than the devotees of this latter drug, she experienced by her corporal senses all the concomitant thrills of her dream of joy.

Thus, low murmurs of wonder, and sighs of exquisite pleasure, issued from between her parted lips, her arms tossed with slow motion to and fro, her dream-stripped limbs were drawn up or made rigid, her body undulated, in the sweet agony of excess. Only her head remained motionless, her eye-balls working beneath the fast-shut lids, as if she suspected and dreaded the unsubstantiality of her vision.

By and by the exhausting tension of her frame relaxed; her arms made a cradle for her head, she opened her eyes, which seemed at first glassy and sightless but rapidly recovered their depth and limpidity, and yawned with abandon.

When a complete sense of reality had returned

to her, a cloud of utter discontent settled upon her youthful face. She abused a lesser god in her disgust, sprang from the low couch, and after standing swaying for a moment, her fingers pressed on her eye-balls, as the last malignant fumes of the drug wrought upon the highly-strung nerves, staggered to the casement, and threw back the heavy curtains of beads, letting into her close chamber the flaming yellow light of afternoon. A sensation, as of a stinging mist passing across her brain, soon vanished, and in a low, listless voice she called:

'Avrah.'

Two young girls at once entered in response; one, short and slim, was habited in a sleeved garment of Mongol design, but betraying by her hair and complexion her Southern origin. There was something in this girl's manner of hanging her head, as well as in the expression of fleeting shyness, wistfulness and slyness which played upon her child-like face, that caused a certain resemblance to Seti herself. It was the Bengali maid, Avrah.

Mowela, her companion, an Egyptian, with finely cut, expressionless features, was naked to the waist, save for a closely-fitting net-work of delicate silver chain with a few immense jewels fastened symetrically upon it; and the slight garment of wine-coloured gauze she had knotted around her beautiful hips was no more efficient a covering than would have been a measure cut from the transparent dusk of evening. Still it served to magnify powerfully the charm of the ravishing limbs by supplying just that shadow of uncertainty without which the nude loses its mystery.

As they approached, an excitement latent in their manner made itself apparent to Seti, careless and uninterested though she was, to judge by her posture and wearied manner.

'You have been playing with men again,' she remarked.

'Only talking to them, O Seti,' answered Avrah, her quick hands fluttering for a moment to her breast, like doves, as she gave vent to the deep, guttural laugh, which is the first sound a woman's soul utters when it fully awakens.

'Oh, I do not forbid you,' said the Queen carelessly. 'I envy you a little, that is all. It quickly passes, and it never returns, I think—all that.'

She made a gesture meant to take in all the half-formed, eruptive emotions which were delighting the bosoms of her slaves. She was reclining again upon the couch of plainted silver wire, strewn with a layer of sweet-scented moss as soft as coiled silken thread, and as cool as the stream from whose banks it was torn. Although each of the girls was some years older than herself, by comparison she looked the eldest of the three, for a new air of experience sat upon her face, quaintly, as if wit were given to a child to depict disillusionment.

'It is all so new,' said the Egyptian, still impassive, but drooping the lids over her flashing eyes. 'To walk in the day, and beneath the moon, whithersoever we will, to feel the gaze of men upon us as we dance—to dance for their gaze; to meet full the looks of one who loves us, to watch love come, gradually come—it is beyond our hopes! Mistress, we never cease to thank you with all our hearts for this freedom. Your praises are for ever

in our mouths. A thousand songs are being made to you, who have released—love!'

'And Shaho and his priests never cease to curse you—and me. Does that not trouble you?' Seti laughed languidly.

'Shaho's god is not my god,' answered Mowela, decisively.

'Nor mine either,' added Avrah, dipping her head between her shoulders, impishly.

The slaves had begun to tend Seti. They were anointing all her body with an oil that turned to milk beneath the ripple of their fingers, cleansing each part afterwards with fragrant water. As their busy hands played upon the frail, lithe form, glowing an almost orange hue beneath the skilful massage, the girls chatted freely, for the most part revealing the extreme awkwardness of love when it is born mature. Seti slept, or seemed to sleep.

When the quick-patting hands of the two met, in a kind of ordered dance, upon the brow and cheeks of the young Queen, the girls drew them back involuntarily, whilst they exchanged looks of much significance. It was no more than a narrow, bluish puff under the nether eye-lids that showed when they pressed their fingers gently upon the outer corners of the eyes, but both were only too familiar with the warning sign of the subtle poison.

Seti, awakened by this sudden interruption of the pleasureful toilette, at once divined their thoughts, and she began immediately to weep, unrestrainedly. At first, startled and amazed at the sight of tears from one whose nature had come to be regarded as almost non-human in its indif-

ference to the common shows of feeling, the girls drew away in silence, but when the young Queen, with a pitiful gesture, called them to her, they flung their arms about her, and wept with her.

'Oh, what has tempted you to do this?' sighed Avrah, when her tears had ceased. 'When all the world is so lovely, why have you wished to escape from it?'

'You have loosed joy upon the city,' murmured the Egyptian, 'and all the while in your heart you were lonely. Oh, had we guessed it!'

But now, in a manner that quietened the slaves with fresh amazement, low laughter began to mingle itself with the last straggling sobs of Seti's weeping, and in an instant two belated tears were lit up like tiny lamps by the radiance of her smile.

'What! Am I dead that you must weep over me!' she cried, sitting upright. 'I shall suffer no harm if I never touch it again,—that is true, isn't it?'

The girls shook their heads, sadly.

'When the craving comes it cannot be resisted,' said the Egyptian, despondently. 'You have eaten it—oh, how often! But once more, and you will never awaken.'

'I shall not eat of it again,' responded Seti, laughing lightly. 'Come, Avrah, clothe me,—and smile. Smile, Mowela. What! Do you want me to weep again?'

Thereupon Avrah arrayed the Queen in a voluminous robe of gossamer, catching up its many folds with hollowed jewels as light as feathers, while in and out the dark cloud of her hair the beautiful Egyptian was coiling a string of black

pearls. Then Seti's mood changed again, and she became very sad.

'I have been a Queen just twenty days,' she sighed, 'and already I am wearied to death. I have swept aside every obstacle to pleasure——'

'O Seti, you have, indeed,' cried the girls, together.

'And what is the result?'

It was as if an invisible hand was drawing lines of age along her cheeks, or that she was staring into the ancient pit of evil, and bore the reflection of eternal misery upon her fair face.

'And what is the result?' she said. 'True the music of pipes and strings has never ceased, and all day long there is merriment and singing, and the nights are full of whisperings and soft laughter, but my own heart has grown sick, and has driven me away, alone. Can you endure pleasure for ever? Are you never cloyed with love and wine and song? Will none of you ever grow tired of it all—as I am?'

'So soon!' murmured Avrah as she turned away to smile to herself.

'I shall never tire of this,' said the calm-faced Egyptian, in her low, cooing voice that seemed ever to threaten some burst into emotion. 'It is what I used to dream might be among the gods. I am happy—quite. I shall never tire.'

'Ah! I felt like that for three days—or was it four?' sadly laughed Seti, after envy had held her silent for a breath. 'Then I saw too clearly. If you are wise, turn once in every hour to your gods lest you also see and understand.'

She ceased speaking as the tapestry before the

door was raised and held so, in a manner that suggested some hesitation on the part of the unseen visitor. Then Uluan came moodily into the room, his arms folded, his head drooping. The two slaves slipped past him and hurried away. Their eager laughter broke forth ere they were out of ear-shot.

There was written upon the youth's face just that expression of quelled anger which all men wear whose lust of love is denied where once it ruled. He went across the centre of the room and approached the casement, against the trellised alabaster of which he pressed his brow, looking out.

He had passed quite close to Seti without glancing at her. She followed him, and stood near to him, watching his face in a manner of simple disinterested curiosity.

'I told you never to come here again,' she said, and her head moved forward the fraction of an inch as she waited for the effect of her remark.

Uluan did not stir.

'I am sulky,' then said Seti, in a taunting singsong. 'A woman who once loved me no longer delights in my white hide, and has ceased to bathe her fingers in the stiff flames of my hair! How shall I hold up my head among the young men of the city and say, "She has ceased to love me while I yet love her." Surely here is ignominy!'

Uluan drew a quick breath, and held it. Seti abandoned her mockery and showed her weariness and vexation. She flung herself down, and huddled among a pile of cushions.

'I do not want to be oppressed by your melan-

choly,' she said. 'Go away and recover your joy and your songs, then perhaps I shall begin to desire you again. Oh, go, go, go.' Her body darted from side to side, and her voice squeaked with impatience. 'Do you want me to have you slain that you come casting shadows?'

Uluan came towards her, all anger driven from him. In the guise of pitifulness and pleading he was no longer a passionate man, but a mere wistful youth once more.

'Seti, have mercy,' he begged, and his voice whined, as do the voices of cunning beggars. 'I have given you all my love—have mercy—have pity.'

He sank to his knees, his face wrinkled in physical anguish. His body drooped forward, and his forehead beat heavily upon the ground. Seti, after a moment's reflection, stretched out her hand, and let it rest lightly upon his head.

'Now *this* you have never done before,' she said, in a manner of pleased interest. 'Come! If your love can think of new things like this I will try to endure it a little longer.'

'What then? I shall be nothing but a toy to you,' said Uluan, in the muted accents of despair, raising his tear stained face.

'Yes, that's all. Try only to be a whimsical toy, so that I don't weary playing with you,' answered the young girl.

'O cruelty! O fiendish cruelty!' muttered the youth, as, still upon his knees, he clenched his hands, and stared at her in wonder and terror.

'It is cruel, I suppose,' said Seti carelessly, turning her gaze away from him. 'But then,—I myself

am suffering—suffering I don't know what. Yet I will let you make a toy of me also. Is that no reward?'

She fell suddenly into a reverie, and Uluan felt that his presence was forgotten. He approached her, drawn irresistibly, and reclining beside her on the cushions, put his right arm around her shoulders, his hand touching her breast.

'Seti,' he said mournfully. 'Though I have lain in your arms all through feverish nights, and awakened beside you in cool dawns, yet you have always been a stranger to me, unknown, and little caring to know. And now your sweet body has grown careless of my kisses. I have lost you, and my soul is sick with its loss.'

'When a babe has eaten its sweetmeats it cries that it is robbed,' answered Seti, showing some of her former impatience, and fiercely tossing Uluan's arm from her shoulders. 'I have been generous to you in my folly. I have given you a full pleasure and a rich sorrow,—go, make songs out of both. What more do you want? Is your person so wonderful that I must contemplate it with joy for ever? For my part I have neither pleasure nor sorrow, nor the remembrance of them. Empty and desolate I am, like a river that has dried up in the sun.'

She turned on her face, burying her head beneath the soft cushions, and her voice came muffled from among them.

'O Gwali, Gwali, come back to me. Though you warned me I fled from you, clutching at joy, and now, behold—my hands are full of sand! My mind is blind without you, and my senses void, echoing

emptiness like a shell of the sea. Gwali I have sought you many nights in the dark Temple, calling your name everywhere. Oh, let your presence overshadow me again, guide me, take possession of me, for I am a child set down alone in the midst of the jungle.'

She spoke intimately and directly, so that Uluan looked about him involuntarily, half expecting to find the mysterious being she addressed present in the room. When her voice ceased she seemed to fall into a slumber, for her quivering form grew still, and her breathing became deep and regular.

The youth's hand stole towards her smooth, slender neck; he drew it back, however, without touching her. Instead, he arose from her side, and with sorrowful, averted head, hurried from the chamber.

At the door he was met by Avrah, who, with her finger to her lips, cautioning silence, led him along a winding, scent-laden alley, at right angles to the main passage.

He followed her moodily. Like most of the other courtiers, he was already beset by melancholy and ennui, the certain aftermath of untrammelled delight, or, as in his own case, of desperate pleasure-seeking.

The men of the Palace, satiated to disgust, would ere now have forborne the very pretence of revelling, but that the womenkind, in whom the appetite for pleasure is enduring and unquenchable to a degree men rarely appreciate (perhaps because in women this appetite, once lulled, is with difficulty quickened again) lured them nightly by expedients increasingly shameless,

until the banquetting lost its every grace and delicacy, and became a mere drunken carousal, finally to be abandoned as the women, striving to enjoy to its full extent their new freedom, withdrew at that hour to the thickly wooded gardens, and enticed their partners thither.

As well as the rest, Uluan, in despair at his separation from Seti, had, on occasion, followed indifferently any slave or princess born, for in this new commonwealth of love, beauty alone gave rank, and pursued to her haunt whoever, half-hidden among the fern, gave the bird-like call that had become the recognised signal, and further enhanced desire by graceful mock flight.

Thus it was that Uluan followed Avrah dull eyed and melancholy from many causes.

XI

PLENIPOTENTIARIES

ONE result of the licence prevailing in the Palace was the general breaking down of all barriers, not alone those in the moral, but also those in the material order. Doors designed for the greater convenience of precautious statesmen and intriguing queens, and hitherto kept triply locked and barred, now swung jauntily ajar, and in the angles and frequent porches of the Harem, only empty niches and worn marble stools were left to show where gorgeous, emasculated giants had until recently held drowsy yet unceasing guard over the frail virtue of the inmates.

Avrah, therefore, had no misgivings when she came to the exclusively regal exit to the gardens, but at once, like a tossed bouquet, danced down the steep steps, until she leapt, clapping her hands, into the faded-gold sunlight. Uluan followed, notably less exalted in temper.

'Oh, sad-face, hurry,' cried the girl, seizing the youth's arm, and exerting all her slight strength, daintily. 'We have discovered Paphos, your Greek, locked up in the hole where they used to keep the bear. And dirty—ough. I wouldn't go near him. But Mowela did—she always was fond of him. She it was discovered him. She saw Lalhk,

the neophyte, carrying food to the hole, so she thought there was a new bear. Ha, Ha! He asked for you, and was angry indeed when we told him.'

'And the Prince—with him?' gasped Uluan.

'Prince Nassur? Surely he has gone back to his people? Shaho sent him, didn't he?' asked Avrah, wonderingly. 'That is what we cannot understand.' She came close, and spoke in an awed voice, 'Uluan, is the great Prince chained up somewhere, too? Mowela thinks he may be.'

'Chained up,' echoed Uluan, horror in his look. 'Quick, take me to Paphos. By the sun and the moon and the stars, this must not be.'

A robe of a yellow dye so vivid that it shone with a brilliancy of its own amongst the incense-burdened shadows of the Harem became naturally a vestment of wonder and amaze when fluttering upon the serpentine body of an excited girl, herself enchanting enough to lend countenance to any such fantastic notions as might strike upon an astonished mind.

Certain it is that as Avrah nimbly skirted the green-stained marble of the Palace wall, her chief garment vanishing and re-appearing in the shimmering sunshine, and splashes of gorgeous colour glancing and hiding among the mystifying drapery that was folded upon her dainty limbs, so slight and exquisite a thing looked she, she had not the semblance of a mortal.

And there was, too, something in the pallor and delicacy of her hands and face, as well as a quality in the tone of her hair, that made her seem foreign to the daylight itself, so that in that shapely garden, where every leaf upon the cream and pale

green shrubs and pippolas looked as if it had been newly washed and curled, as she tripped away over shorn turf that might have been laid on by the tender brush of a Japanese artist, even these fine objects were coarse and crude in comparison with her frail, exotic person.

Uluan, following, viewed her unmoved. He thought of her as a flower too easy to spoil by the harsh usage of love; of a texture to be withered and burnt up by one night or one hour of the hot passions that were the breath of life to Seti, and, since he had drunk in her fever with his kisses, to himself, also.

Nor did she, it was clear, dote overmuch upon his milk-white skin and flaming hair, for the dancing eye she turned upon him from time to time as she chattered and hurried along had no yearning or trouble in it. She clapped her hands again, and laughed shrilly, when, rounding the angle of the Temple that abutted into the Palace gardens, near to a partly bricked-up entrance to the crypt, they came upon two figures in charmingly incongruous conjunction.

One was Lalhk, the young priest, emaciated, and clothed from neck to heel in the white robe of his order. He was seated perfectly erect on a block of disturbed masonry, his knees and feet close together, his arms hanging by his sides, and his big, dull eyes fixed upon space,—a presentment of transfixed, ecstatic amazement impossible of improvement.

Perched serenely upon his narrow knees, her splendid limbs gleaming a dusky-rose to the sun from beneath her scant diaphanous covering, was

the Egyptian, Mowela. Her arms hung loosely upon the young priest's shoulders, and she was whispering pleadingly into his ear, a faint smile of amusement disturbing the usually stern composure of her face. Lalhk's discomfort sensibly increased on the appearance of Uluan. Mowela, however, showed no dismay, indeed, her display of affection became much more decided.

'Oh Lalhk, can you refuse her,' cried Avrah, dancing before the pair.

'He will not refuse.' The voluptuous, guttural voice of the Egyptian came muffled from the priest's hallow shoulder, and he shrunk perceptibly from the warm breath. 'You have not heard; almost he has promised to wed me.'

'I will not. Please go away. No, no,' the priest kept reiterating in a nasal tremolo.

Avrah's piping laughter broke out afresh, and she also encircled Lalhk's neck with her arms, and nestled her face against his.

'Oh do give it to us. Do, do, do let us have it.' The girls poured their petition into each ear of their reluctant lover.

Lalhk strove earnestly to rise, but though of perfect modelling, Mowela's form was massive, and her dead weight, as she dropped amorously upon the ascetic's breast, was considerable. This piquant union of the beautiful and the ludicrous made the group a spectacle of wonder and delight, and Uluan's soul forgot its sorrow as he gazed upon it.

'What is it you want from him?' he asked.

'The key of Paphos's chains,' answered Avrah. 'We are going to set him free,—Mowela and I.'

'He has it here,' murmured the Egyptian.

Her hand strayed to the breast opening of the priest's robe, which was laced with white cord. Lalhk's hand at once pursued hers, and clutched his vestment alarmedly. Mowela desisted from the attempt, and, instead, interlocked her fingers with his, while, on the other side of him, Avrah renewed her demonstrations of affection. All unexpectedly Lalhk's face was contorted by an amazing smile of acute enjoyment. But it departed as suddenly as a spasm, and again he resisted feebly.

'I dare not,' he protested despairingly. 'You don't know what you are asking. His Eminence, Shaho the High-priest, gave me this charge personally. I am obliged to report to him each evening—to him personally.' His knees shook causing Mowela to tremble. 'They would smother me for disobedience. It is the rule.'

'We wont let them smother you,' responded Mowela, soothingly. 'Aren't we the friends of the Queen? She will reward you, even.'

She made a sign to Avrah, and that mirthful lady, discarding all show of persuasion, straightway began a vigorous assault upon the fastenings at the priest's neck. Her twinkling, brown hands withdrew the lace, and thrusting apart the opening of the robe, she revealed a small, intricately shaped key slung upon a cord, and reposing upon the chaste, shirted bosom of the young man.

Lalhk made what for him was a violent effort to preserve his trust, but found that the fingers of his right hand were entangled lovingly and inextricably with Mowela's, and that when he endeavoured to use his left hand he only succeeded in

pressing her soft, buxom person the more endearingly to his own ribs.

However, the struggle was momentary. Avrah neatly slipped the cord over her victim's head, and, beckoning to Uluan, ran precipitately into the dark passage. Uluan followed more slowly and warily, in spite of the encouragements Avrah called out to him from the darkness ahead. Thus it was that as he went forward, carefully feeling the sides of the passage with his hands, he heard Mowela approaching in the rear chiding the pursuing priest the while.

'Follow if you like,' she was saying. 'And then, when we have freed him he will beat you.'

'You don't know what you are doing,' answered the half-weeping voice of Lalhk. 'You are offending against the High-priest——'

'Tush your High-priest,' said Mowela.

'Let me pass. Let her not meddle. It is death for us all. Let me pass.' The nasal sound was taking on a note of effective desperation.

'Take your hand from me, priest,' spoke the Egyptian, and uttered a single quaver of guttural laughter.

'Let me pass, woman,' cried Lalhk. 'There is still time to stop her.'

Uluan heard the noise of a scuffle quite near to him, and then:

'If you pass me I'll stab you in the back.'

Mowela whispered the words with such extraordinary fierceness that Uluan himself, although up to that he had been listening amused, was startled at them. Lalhk, also, was persuaded of their sincerity, for he groaned through his nose,

and his muttering voice and shuffling footsteps began at once to recede.

Uluan felt Mowela brush against him, and immediately afterwards, at a sharp turn in the passage, the reflection of the dancing light of a torch fell upon them both, and ahead of them, where the passage, at its end, widened into a kind of vaulted chamber, they beheld, as if gazing through a hollow cylinder at a picture on illuminated glass, in the centre of a circle of murky, yellow light, which mingled smokily with the surrounding gloom, the radiantly clad figure of Avrah bending busily over a duller recumbent form.

They hastened their steps, and reached the end of the passage just as the Bengali girl, with an exulting cry, turned the key in the lock of the fetters upon Paphos's wrists. They saw the Greek shake off the sadly tarnished irons whose fall sent an echo tinkling through the crypt, and they approached just as, his lower limbs freed, he got to his feet, and set to work stretching himself, joint by joint, stiffly.

His white tunic and crimson cloak were much stained, for he had lain down in them upon unclean goat-skins, night and day, since his arrest. A black stubble of beard, too, detracted materially from the charm of his countenance, lending it an air of real masculinity which, shaven, it could not claim. Otherwise his state was not so forlorn as, to judge by a bowl of discoloured water at his side, it had been prior to the advent of his fair saviours. A comb of carved horn, also, had assuredly but lately come into his

possession, for even in this hour of his deliverance it was engaging his chief attention.

He affected not to notice the presence of Uluan, and addressed himself exclusively to the two beautiful slave girls, pointing the while at a little heap of his discarded jewellery. He adhered to his old manner of humorously exaggerated loftiness, and it was only in the dark, restless eyes that his anger and desire for vengeance was betrayed.

'Avrah and Mowela,' he said—'for it is quite apparent now you are mortals, since I detect in your glances the charming secret of conscious evil-doing which true goddesses envy in vain, having no laws—sweet ministresses of my salvation, take and divide these trinkets. Take them freely and unabashed, for they are not mine.'

The two girls made a simultaneous dart at the jewels. Mowela on the instant flung herself recklessly into the laughing struggle, but her habitual restraint of demeanour overcame her, or perhaps she was thinking of a reward of a different kind; at anyrate she hesitated, and Avrah reached the prize first, casting herself upon her knees to gather the heap greedily in her hands. The Egyptian came back to Paphos and took hold of his girdle, turning him to face the darkness of the passage.

'This place breathes of death like a tomb,' she said, 'Let us hasten back to the sun. There is a reign of pleasure—you will marvel at it. Everything is changed. Come. Waste no more time,—you have been here long enough.'

'Long enough,' repeated Paphos, wearily. 'My dear girl, in terms of suffering—for pain is, after

all, the shadow on the dial of life, and by it alone must we reckon time—I have been in this malodorous drain ten years. I have exhausted the remnant of my youth here, my pretty,—those precious last hours of my youth which I was shedding one by one, like tears of joy.'

The natural finish to the graceful flourish of the hand with which Paphos beat the rhythm of his sentiment was upon the outermost point of the curve of Mowela's smooth shoulder, and there, accordingly, his long, soft fingers rested, while the Egyptian, who had, with grave difficulty be it confessed, up to these days been cruelly starved of the affection she craved, drew a little closer to him, and the breaths she took were short and irregular. Watching her Avrah valued her jewellery less, and, with some meanness of intention, at once caused a diversion.

'It seemed there was not a moment to lose when you sent me running in the sun to fetch Uluan,' she said, her underlip protruding crossly. 'And now he is here you have not looked at him.'

It was true, and for his part Uluan was not too anxious to meet the Greek's gaze. The youth had remained withdrawn somewhat from the released captive, with something of shame as well as of moody defiance in his bearing. Paphos turned to him in mock surprise.

'Oho, King Uluan,' he exclaimed, eyeing him angrily. He had the complete tale from the girls, of course. 'Almost am I overborne by Your Majesty's presence—but not entirely.'

Changing his manner he rapped out:

'And the Prince,—where is he?'

'I don't know,' answered Uluan, turning sullenly away. 'Neither did I know you yourself were here. There was a report that Shaho had put you both across the border.'

'O Shaho, wait.' Paphos made an elegantly vicious motion with the comb. 'And you—there used to be much talk of love of our master—you were satisfied with that?'

'Poor Uluan. What could he do,' murmured Avrah. 'What could he do? Seti has him . . . so.'

She dilated and fixed her eyes until they almost squinted, while she swayed her body from side to side, as the hooded cobra sways. At that Paphos looked at the youth keenly, and observing great change in him, was for a moment silent.

'Strange,' he then remarked. 'I never have met a man yet who when accused of what-not has pleaded love. "I was intoxicated," they will say, or "I was angered," but never "I was infatuated by a woman." We like to think we are not mad when we are in love, Avrah. We hate to think we are ever irresponsible, yet during the nicest periods of our lives we are entirely beside ourselves. Personally I intend, later on, cultivating delirium in every branch as a quite virgin field of pleasure. Will you join me in that, Mowela?'

'Tell me what has become of the Prince,' demanded Uluan, fiercely, yet with tearful voice.

'True, true. An interesting problem, surely,' answered the Greek, ironically eager. 'My last recollection of him is of his voice in the darkness, when, ringing his chains most musically, he blasphemed gloriously. Curious that he should have blasphemed—my own godlessness used to trouble his mind so.'

Uluan lost control of his feelings, and wept, not hiding his contorted face, but standing erect, his hands clenched.

'Paphos,' he said, brokenly, 'have pity. If I had known you were prisoners I would have searched for you day and night.'

'Oh, would you. Not *all* nights,' shrilled Avrah.

'For myself I pardon you,' said Paphos, with a wave of the comb. 'That may or may not lessen your very necessary remorse; on behalf of Nassur, however, I promise nothing. Indeed if he leaves you your head you ought to be thankful to forfeit the other parts of your body. Now ladies, for how long may I expect to remain unmolested?'

'Oh, for a few minutes only,' answered Mowela. 'A very few minutes. Lalhk the neophyte will go straight to Shaho to tell him we stole the key. Then——'

Almost roughly, cursing and exclaiming in the Greek idiom, Paphos thrust the girl aside and started to run down the passage. Swift-moving Avrah, however, seized him at his first hesitating step in the comparative darkness.

'Idiot,' she cried. 'Do you fancy you will be safe for one instant if you leave us? We have a plan,—be obedient and we shall save you.'

'No, let him run on,' murmured the Egyptian sweetly. 'He's struck me. Let him die, or rot.'

'That way leads to the garden—there is no way out of that except through the Palace,' warned Uluan.

The quick-thinking Greek changed his manner on the instant.

'If to remain means death,' he said placidly, 'I

will not take another step until I have made peace with Mowela, and have kissed the bruise that marks the tender breast where my rough cloak brushed against it.'

Mowela laughed delightedly. It was by no means completely dark where they stood, so the Greek was able to see to approach the beautiful slave. Avrah, not well pleased at the lack of attention to herself, came and peered at Uluan to find out what chance of consolation lay in his direction. The youth's tear-stained face gave no promises, however.

'Mowela, tell your Greek the plan that will save him,' said the Bengali girl, pointedly.

'I? I have no plan,' answered Mowela. 'You said you had one.'

'I? Oh did I? Then I have forgotten it,' returned Avrah.

The note of deadly disinterestedness in her voice brought Paphos to her side at once.

'Try to remember, O Gust of Beauty,' he pleaded sweetly, at the same time stamping his foot in angry impatience. 'Was it a disguise? A disguise as a woman, perhaps? Let it not be as an Egyptian girl; that were altogether too immodest. O Virgin! Here comes the festering mass of treachery himself. Sweetheart, have you a weapon concealed in some part of you? The thorn of a rose would do, or the sting of a bee. O Nassur!'

The final request, and the subjoined apostrophe was occasioned by the appearance round the bend in the passage of Shaho, the High-priest, guided by Lalhk, who held aloft a flaming torch, and pro-

tected by a captain and six men of the Queen's Body-guard, approaching with hurried step.

'It's quite simple. Don't be alarmed,' whispered Avrah, rapidly. 'We were sent by Seti to set you free—do you understand? We are now leading you to her.'

'There's nothing to fear,' murmured Mowela. 'Shaho's a great coward.'

As she spoke she drew from its inconceivable hiding-place, and slipped into his hand, a dagger two fingers in length, as fine as silk, and having in place of a hilt a tiny inverted cup and ring. Paphos thought of its probable secretion of poison, and hid it in the folds of his cloak with extreme care.

Shaho halted a few yards off, and gave a command in a loud voice which just appreciably trembled with uncertainty upon the last syllable.

'Captain, take three men, arrest, and bind that Greek.'

A soldier took the torch from Lalhk's nervous hand, and with two others advanced behind his captain, all with drawn swords. Uluan felt for his own dagger, and found it gone; Avrah had stolen it. The Bengali girl was now standing just in front of Paphos, and as soon as the light of the torch betrayed where she was, she broke into her shrilling derisive laugh.

'O Soldier-man, do you not know that Seti is Queen?' she cried. 'And who is her chief councellor? Avrah, the Bengali. And who is her second councellor? Mowela, the Egyptian.'

The bearded captain had merry eyes, and appeared quite ready to bow before such grave

authority, although somewhat dubious as to its validity.

'This change in Her Majesty's government has not yet been announced to us, Your Excellency,' he answered seriously.

'Don't talk. Arrest the Greek,' commanded the High-priest, hastening forward. 'And you slaves —run off, or be whipped.'

'Slaves! Listen to him,' murmured Mowela.

'Slave himself,' cried Avrah, shrilly, and Shaho gasped. 'We are the Queen's ministers—do you hear? And we are on our way to Her Majesty now,—taking with us this prisoner who is no longer a prisoner. Do you hear?'

The merry captain and his men sheathed their swords. For them there was no law beyond the Sovereign's wishes, through whatever channels they came.

And never had Shaho's chin been so embedded in his neck. A considerable amount of vitality seemed visibly to ebb from his large, ill-connected person. Ten days ago he would have thundered, and by his masterful anger terrified all into submission. But he had been suffering a score of affronts each day, on every side, during the last two weeks, and had come painfully to realise that when anarchy and folly reign by grace of a tyrant, small reverence is shown to the person of law and religion, however long-established.

Wilder claims than this of Avrah's he had already more than once withstood obstinately in the presence of the Queen, only to be outfaced at the last by laughing courtiers, and thoroughly humiliated by her unmanageable Majesty. He had no

desire to risk the experience again in this instance. He drew aside, therefore, and motioned with his hand for the soldiery to do the same.

'Let them pass,' he growled.

The Greek strongly desired an interview with the old priest. Judging the moment to be inauspicious, however, he maintained silence, under sore temptation, while his three rescuers led him away.

Avrah, at once openly triumphant and dignified, set the pace, and there was an uneasy rustle of gilt mail and accoutrements as Mowela brushed sublimely past the guards.

'Follow,' was the command Shaho gave the captain, 'and see they go to the Queen. If they attempt to go elsewhere, arrest them all.'

That appealed to the soldier as a reasonable course, and he marched off in obedience. Shaho remained behind in dejected thought. Lalhk, wishing to avail himself of the light of the rapidly receding torch to get safely out of the dark tunnel, dared at length to interrupt his superior's meditations.

'Does Your Eminence desire my further attendance upon Your Eminence?' he faltered huskily.

A growl no more or less communicative than that of an angry bear was the reply he received. He therefore transformed himself momentarily into a right-angle in token of respect, and hastened off at a shuffling trot—his will troubled by some vague temptation to induce Mowela once again to take up her place upon his knees under happier conditions.

XII

INTERLUDE

IN the very heart of Maha Vana, the Great Wood, the outcome of causes altogether mysterious, there is an extensive, circular-shaped tract of level, treeless, shrubless grassland.

On the borders of the place throng greedily the hordes of the giant bamboo, and beyond these, over-topping them, the mightier, long-lived people of the leafy tribes crowd together, forming a tawny, myriad-tinted wall, the outward face of which bulges over the forbidden line, like the foremost rank of a multitude pressed to the edge of an abyss, and poised there for the instant before the fall.

And crouching at the feet of the towering trunks and stems lie matted clumps of coarse jungle-grass as rigidly withdrawn from the hallowed spot as though a gigantic hoe dealt drastically day by day with lawless encroachments, while tangled masses of parasitic creeper hang, rotting or bloated, festooning the wall gorgeously, and binding and enmeshing the whole jungle together in a vast web of suckers and tentacles, distended, unsubstantial leaf, and pale, malodorous bloom.

In the centre of this lake of tender greenland is an islet of rock, brown on its surfaces, grey and

moss-grown in its hollows, black in its crevices, but spired and pinacled and sharply-defined,—in all ways a prefigurement of the cathedrals men were to build in the cold north at a later day.

For lack of comparison with any accustomed object the scene appears miniature. The distance from the jungle-edge to the first terrace of rock seems no greater than a man might run in a breath, and looking down upon the spot from the summit of that high mountain whither the imagination, the false tempter, leads all fasting souls, to unroll before them the glory of the world, one could readily fancy that should a man clamber upon that fantastic edifice he might easily embrace in the extent of his arms the two loftiest of its notched spires.

It was only when the eye, attracted by the least stirring in that immense stillness, perceived a human form at the instant it came into view between the bamboo stems, and took note of its puny proportions, and its laborious traverse of inches, that the astounded mind became aware of the real magnitude of its view.

However, to Gwali, whose person it was that made the timely entrance upon this setting of illusion, the sudden breaking into an expanse of unshadowed day signified no more than that he was at the beginning of the last stage of a toilsome journey.

For many days together he had breathed the reeking miasma of hot swamps and jungle, and thereafter, day and night, had cut a path through thickets of thorns, or had toiled across volcanic furrows where his hardened feet were pierced by

the spiky teeth of rocks protruding through the thin covering of sandy soil. Not once before had he emerged from the oppressive gloom which overhung this region of festering abundance, wherein morning and evening were indistinguishable save only as intervals of greater and lesser darkness, to him altogether indistinguishable, by any such interval or degree.

Nor, in truth, did the gloominess of the forest oppress him, for his sense had, by this time, lost completely the last haunting memory of the radiance of the visible world, and again, after many years, it was for him as if an epidermis of tint and bloom had been peeled off the universe, leaving for his perception only the naked, stark shape of things, all which shapes were vividly defined by the contrasting gradations of the one slate-hued light, which shone as shadowless and as unvarying as the tropical sun at noon, yet as dim as the everlasting twilight in the countries beneath the sea.

He suffered poignantly on account of the renewed poverty of his sense of sight, but only less keenly did he miss the richness of sensation which might have come to him through the channels of his other senses. Poignantly he suffered, yet vaguely and aimlessly, as a lover suffers who kisses the lips of his dead mistress. He did not feel as they must who lose their hearing or the sight of their eyes, for he saw everything within a superhuman range, in the night as well as in the day, and as he passed through the crowded jungle there was not a sound that escaped his ears. Furthermore these impressions of sight and sound an-

swered the call of his memory unerringly; yet while thus serving the practical needs of his life and thought, his soul was left saddened and dissatisfied, devoid, even, of the poor relief of dwelling on its loss.

But if he could not understand the loss of that of which his memory could reproduce no trace, it was given to him to drain to the dregs the bitterness of his severance from Seti. With every swift recurring thought of her, his heart, and each vital organ in his body, seemed to tremble in its proper house, and to sink fainting, causing him pangs of a new pain, not in itself intolerable, as being akin to the exquisite anguish of ecstacy, nevertheless wasting him by the accompanying fever which alternately burnt and chilled his frame, while the torment itself held his mind darkened, benumbed and stupified.

It was to free himself from this malady of love that he had undertaken the long pilgrimage into the jungle. That lonely hill of rock was his goal. By what physical resources he had withstood the rigours of the journey, by what baleful powers he had warded off the perils which beset his every step, by the exercise of what bird-like faculty he had come hither to this spot, unwaveringly through leagues of maze—these are problems to explain which would demand a type of knowledge such as may be acquired, perhaps, by a later race of earth-folk, unless, indeed, it has once already been in the possession of earlier peoples, and has with them been engulfed in the maw of general catastrophe.

Unwearied still, the youth, without pause, flung

off the last strings of decaying fibre that clung to his body, and began the long march up the gentle incline, across smooth, open country.

He had made no preparations for the journey, save only to fasten a sword to his girdle. This weapon he had used to hack and hew his way through the dense undergrowth, and it was now hidden in its sheath by his side. His skin, much stained by red clay and clotted dust, bore many scars and scratches, some of the latter having dark rims of dried blood around them; but his demeanour was unchanged. His long-limbed frame possessed a certain grace by reason of its lithe erectness and loose suppleness, still, on account of the unnatural livid colour of his skin, in the light of day, just as among the shadows of night, it was the grotesque in his appearance that appealed, and not what was beautiful.

The rapid, ambling walk, too, in which he appeared to pause momentarily upon the pads of the toes of one extended foot ere descending to the heel of the other, gave him a jaunty, jolting motion altogether unfitted to the fine, lightly-poised head. Daylight, however, only made more pronounced the beauty of his hard face, with its frequent, mysterious half-smile, and perpetual calm—the calm now belied somewhat by the haunting yellow eyes, which flashed hither and thither, always suggesting something of sightlessness, of deadness even, in their bright surfaces.

It was late dawn when he stepped through the jungle-wall; it was noon when he entered the fantastic shadow of the rock. A few steps further, and he was amongst its caves and crevices.

Evidence of patient human labour was now abundant. Winding and branching in every direction was an ascending path, the loops of which were connected at certain points by short flights of smoothly-cut stairs, thus giving access to all quarters of the hill, and at intervals, on the species of terraces in this way formed, could be seen the narrow entrances of caves hewn out of the solid rock.

Like one thoroughly at home in his surroundings, Gwali hastened to where water bubbled from the smooth surface in a large silent globule, to flow with a low, pleasing sound into a cauldron-like reservoir. Squatting, he drank deeply from the spring, making a goblet of his hands, and then, with the peculiar directness characteristic of him when in a normal state, by which he was wont to pass from one act to another quite unlike, without the slight pause that would have been natural, thus giving to all his actions an air of spontaneity and even haste, he unfastened his girdle, dropped down into the pure water, and began to cleanse his body. This finished, he placed his hands on the edge of the trench, and with effortless sleight drew himself out of the basin.

He stood awhile in the rich, hazy sunlight, squeezing the water out of his hair, and flicking the shimmering drops from his skin's glassy surface. He went next to squat on his heels close beside the entrance of the cave nearest the spring, and sank at once into an attitude of absolute calm and quietude.

Evening advanced with such suddenness that it seemed as if the sun had fallen precipitately down

the last curve of his decline; a tidal wave of purple mist rolled out of the east, and behind that, others of blue and black began to form themselves to make a night.

Simultaneously with the sun's disappearance strange, guttural murmurings issued from the mouths of the caves. They were undoubtedly human voices, broken frequently by loud ejaculations, pleading or laudatory, and rapidly increasing in number and volume until the whole hill became a many-mouthed instrument of sound.

And now terrifying, brute-like men and women appeared, one out of each cave, creeping toilsomely, like creatures thrown up by the sea. They proceeded no further than a yard beyond their dwellings, but at this distance halted, and assumed each one his or her habitual attitude of self-immolation.

It was still light, for the purple vapour had not yet overcome the silver radiance of the after-glow, so that lit by this tender light there were plainly visible, silhouetted against the pearly sky, nearly a hundred crouched and knotted human figures, shrivelled and withered into every imaginable ugliness and horror of shape. Many were sightless, having by constant effort succeeded in turning the pupils of their eyes into their sockets, exposing, beneath twitching lids, the yellow under-parts of the eye-balls. Some held their jaws perpetually open and rigid; others protruded narrow, black, shrunken tongues, rotting through inertia.

All were sitting in cramped, unnatural postures, and, by reason of a general mode of mortification, all, without exception, displayed the stump or rib-

bon-like remnant of at least one limb which, held unused until drained of blood, or perhaps buried night and day beneath slow embers, had dried up or decayed. All were filthy with the prized and amassed ordure of decades. Some were quite hidden under a growth of dirt-encrusted hair which hung over them like grey, unclean garments; the countenance and scalps of others were scarred and pocked in a terrible baldness. A nauseous stench exuded from them and pervaded the hill, an exhalation that was like no other from man or beast, or rotting vegetation.

Although Gwali's dull sympathetic-imagination was only faintly stirred even by the perception of this agglomeration of utter, unrelieved misery, his reasoning soul was sickened. He turned his gaze away steadfastly to the dark rim which to other eyes was the blue-canopied brake; nor, when hoarse, gutteral cries broke out in the cave beside him, and he heard the wretched dweller working his body hideously along the pebbly floor until he drew level, would he turn his eyes to him or to those other awful victims of their faith.

The last comer could scarcely be called a man, to such an extent had he been withered and shrivelled and pruned by the excesses of his penance. Four horrid out-jutting, blackened stumps at the angles of his flattened twisted trunk alone marked the place of his limbs, and his scorched skin was notched and slashed in every direction by deep, grey scars. Fire was plainly his mode of self-torture, as could be seen by the nature of the scars upon him, particularly by his encindered scalp. No more human was his appearance than the black

boles of trees left upright after a forest fire, which keep their shape even to the rugged surface of the bark, but crumble to dust at a touch of the foot.

This man's neck was so contorted that his head was turned perpetually over his left shoulder, partially concealing his face, the aspect of which destroyed the last trace of humanity in his block of charred, grisly flesh. Earless, almost noseless, with lips clipped, revealing the toothless, clenched gums, the scarred and twisted countenance was yet saved from utter horror by a pair of large eyes which stared mildly from beneath their whitened, trembling lids, suggesting, unimaginable though it seems, the imprisonment behind their filmy shields of an intent and even noble mind.

With ghastly struggles and writhings, and after twice toppling over in a helplessness at once terrible and ludicrous, this grub-like man reared himself up, balancing himself by pitiable strivings of the stumps of the thighs, and uttered a resonant call.

'We praise Thee, O King of All the World.'

Stillness succeeded. Gwali, drawn to gaze upon the men and women around and above him, sank his head upon his breast, closed his eyes and listened. Again the man beside him cried aloud, howling his words from his gaping, lipless mouth.

'O Lord of Fire, we have breathed Thy Essence through the long day.'

The chorus of croaking bass and quavering treble answered him:

'Praising Thee, praising Thee always!'

So began the short litany, the hermits at each pause in their leader's chant breaking in with their own responses.

'O Lord of Fire, in Thy rays we have bathed, through the long day'—

'Praising Thee, praising Thee always!'

'O Brander of Sin, to Thy greater glory we have taken to ourselves Pain, through the long day'—

'Praising Thee, praising Thee always!'

'O Spirit of Light, we have overcome our flesh, hateful to Thee, through the long day'—

'Do Thou in Thy Kingdom reward us always!'

'O Lord of Fire, in Thy down-going'—

'We praise Thee.'

'O Sovereign One, in Thy sleep in the Gardens of Paradise'—

'We praise Thee.'

After several moments of silence there followed a renewal of the guttural murmurings and ejaculations, after which the gruesome saints commenced their passage back into their burrows. In a few minutes every near sound was hushed, and the rustlings and cries of the wild beasts in the distant jungle were borne faintly to the ears of Gwali and his fearful companion.

It was now full night, and the stars seemed to be audibly exploding and fusing into their brilliant, pale fires. Without raising his head, Gwali spoke.

'Avila,' he said, 'my soul is trapped in love of a woman.'

'Fool, fool, fool,' Avila replied testily. 'What then are you doing in that world? What place have you in cities where, when men have loved and eaten, they have lived? Years ago you chose life, and left me,—have you come now to embrace death?'

'With death I have no concern,' said Gwali. 'Rather would I live for ever.'

'But death is most sure,' said the hermit, and Gwali felt upon his back the rush of breath that accompanied the difficult articulation. 'And after death—have you no fear of that?'

'I have no fear,' answered the youth.

'And what of hope?'

'None.'

'To you then this living is a great boon!'

The jeering tones proceeding out of such mutilated organs was frightful to listen to; a skull that had been picked clean by vultures might have mocked and laughed as joyfully.

'I am living—all else is included in that. When I die a most strange universe will fade into annihilation,' responded the youth, and the smile which had been absent from his lips returned.

'But you love—and Love transcends all! Is not that how the young men and maidens speak?' added the ghastly mocker at his side.

'I have come to you now to be cured of the fever of love,' replied Gwali. 'You have remedies for all the ills of the spirit, and for this also.'

'Ha! And what has love to do with the spirit?' cried Avila. 'Stay on this rock a winter and a summer—especially a summer—and you will be purged of love, and all uncleanness.'

'You know my sluggish flesh, and the icy stream that runs in my veins,' answered the youth. 'Even now your own body is more rebellious to your will than is mine to my will.'

'Yet you say you have been trapped by love!'

'I said my soul is trapped by the love of a woman,' said Gwali.

'Ho! Ho! Since when have women begun to

trap souls!' cried Avila in mockery. 'When I was young I led the armies of a great king; into many countries I led them, and I spoke to women of all races. But it was my body they trapped, always; my soul they never desired. So you have offered your soul to a woman?'

'I have given it.'

'Then receive it back again,—she will not feel the loss. Listen. I will mock no longer.' Avila now spoke tensely and earnestly, as he had at first. 'The soul of a woman is a drop of dew,—she mingles it with a man's soul and is happy. But the soul of a man is a river, and unless it empty itself into the ocean of Brahm, it will run in devious ways, forming foul lakes and stinking morasses, breeding filthy creatures in its slime for ever. Peace do you crave? Return then to the bosom of the Great God from whence you came. Nothing on earth will give you rest—least of all the soul of a lustful woman.'

'Have you no cure for love?' asked Gwali.

Avila made no reply on the instant, but called out the name of a woman, loudly. Immediately, from a neighbouring cave, Gwali heard one of these unhappy beings issuing forth. A woman's voice answered, and she approached, crawling upon the stumps of her four limbs with a motion resembling partly that of a crab, and partly of a worm.

'Do not look upon me!' she kept crying in a quavering shriek. 'I am a naked bride of the Sun. Do not look upon me!'

A succession of shudders swept along Gwali's frame, and he bent his head to his knees.

'Amalil,' asked the man ironically, when the wo-

man had come as near as she intended, 'have we a cure for love on this rock?'

'Yes, we have a cure,' answered the woman.

To judge by her utterance her jaws were fixed rigidly open.

'Tell me the cure of love, O woman,' muttered the youth.

'It is easy,' answered she. 'Go to your love with a knife and searing irons, and lop off a limb from her body and burn a feature of her face. Then draw back and gaze upon her, and ask yourself, do you love her. Perchance you do not. Ask her then does she love you still, and when she answers "Yes," hack off a limb from your own body, and sear a feature from your face. And if you still love her, cut from her another limb, and burn her face again; and since she will still love you, do to yourself likewise. Then if you still love her, burn out your eyes, and that will cure you of your love. But let that woman retain the sight of her eyes, and her love.'

She sighed, and somehow in the moment of that sound the intuitive understanding of her too horrible unsightliness that had kept his head bowed departed from Gwali, and he came near to turning towards her. The scraping of her body upon the sand restrained the impulse, and he felt he dared not stir until the loathsome sound had ceased.

After that Avila's log of flesh heaved over on to its side, and began to roll and jerk its way back into the noisesome den.

When all was silence again, Gwali arose to his feet, and, heedless alike of the wonders of the heavens and perils in his path, set his face towards the jungle.

XIII

CREPUSCULE

THE priests of the Goddess Nâga were a celibate Order, and their celibacy was indubitable. This ideal state was assured chiefly by what may be termed the publicity of their monastic life. They had no secret hours; at no period of the day or of the night were they hidden from the general gaze of the community. There were, too, formulæ in their Rule to guide each thought, word and deed, while behind that Rule lay a very strong tradition, and it was further upheld by a code of penalties wherein death itself was not accounted too great a cost at which to enforce obedience.

During Shaho's long abbacy there had been few difficulties, and no scandals whatever. He found the Order a little morbid, but feverishly chaste, and afterwards he could invent only one improving addition to the rigorous bye-laws which bound his congregation of shavelings. All those he suspected of the possibilities of animal vitality he took and divided into companies, and over each company he placed a sapless saint. The result was perfection. The atmosphere became so pure that an evil thought would have played through it like a flash of black lightning.

But that was before the reign of Seti; by this time that austere atmosphere had been tossed and riven by a hundred conflicting elements, and was settled into a condition that was, at a most charitable estimate, no more than commonplace.

It was Mowela who, first of the slaves, discovered the subtle charm that lies in tempting ascetics. Love, the spiritual attachment that fain would never quicken to sensual passion, but always does so, was an experience reserved by the condition of things for freewomen only; for slaves, in the place of that sweet illusion, there was substituted, inadequately, what little glamour could be gleaned from a slight insecurity of tenure. No one ever wooed a slave; rivals for famous beauties met in the market-place, and there, after much impassioned haggling, and some rending of purse-strings, proprietorship was duly acclaimed. As a consequence of this the bond-woman always began her spiritual life where a freewoman expects to end hers—in marriage.

The great saving of emotional force that was attained in this way was, however, altogether outweighed by the excessive tedium that followed. The deadly monotony of a woman's wedded life is somewhat relieved only if she is able to glance back at the hazy confusion of romance from which her husband issued; indeed, without some such radiance to conceal the naked fact of her nuptials no woman can ever be quite happy, and, if opportunity offers, she will infallibly kindle at some passing flame the torch that should have been consumed at her espousal. Mowela was searching for love.

It may be that long after the epoch of these

events, priests of strange cults will be found to decry as shameful the natural preference of men to take to themselves as wives virgins hitherto undefiled; by that time mankind shall have long since ceased to follow unerring instinct, and shall be enslaved by statistics and theories. For this craving for virginity, which is especially strong in those who are not themselves virgin, has its rise in the instinctive knowledge that there can be no real love unless, at any rate, one of the principals possesses that special kind of imaginativeness which is the outcome solely of sexual inexperience. And that is why Mowela, with wisdom literally unutterable, preferred to exercise her charms among chilled, ascetic celibates.

It is the crowning glory of the Order of Nâga, and the fact is, without doubt, duly inscribed in its lost annals, that for long, young and old alike, priest and neophyte, resisted with entire success every assault upon their virtue. It was only when the Egyptian incited a troupe of her compeers to follow her daring example, and the ethereal atmosphere of the cloisters became enriched by the scents of women, and troubled by the whispered laughs and broken songs of love, that here and there a youngish monk began to think irreverently of his shaven pate, and thenceforth his downfall was sure and rapid.

Therefore strange and dismaying it was, to those skilled in discerning the marks of a true ascetic, that Lalhk should be one of the number to succumb. These elder doctors of the Rule, however, had naturally never been made aware of what had happened at the releasing of Paphos, when the

beautiful Mowela, by the warmth of immediate contact, had thawed Lalhk's marrow, setting the blood coursing riotously throughout his meagre frame, so that for a week afterwards his extremities tingled with astonishment, and the mud-brown of his skin was changed to the hue of cedar, miraculously.

Nor did those who had his future in charge rightly interpret the fever of his sleep, his abstraction, his unwonted laziness, his transient moods. In these days of trial and besetting evil they thought first to stretch out admonitory arms to the weaker brethren, and they troubled little on behalf of the Abbot's familiar, leaving him to his well-known strength of purpose, and, as it happened, sadly, to his fate.

Of Mowela's early depredations in the hallowed fold little is known beyond the simple facts. At first she ignored Lalhk altogether, but as he spent most of his waking hours watching her from afar off, it was plain he was not making proper use of her contempt for him, and was not regarding those precepts of his Rule which would have aided him in disentangling himself from the toils of his infatuation.

His practice was, from some high alcove, to behold the daily ingress of the slaves as they came dancing and gambolling, beating tambours and uttering shameful cries which hushed the prayers upon the lips of aged ascetics, and afflicted the young with most unholy tremors.

Always at the head of the troupe, in their incoming, paced the Egyptian, by her mien portraying a serene scorn. Lalhk's knees would tremble at the

sight, and although in no danger of being seen, nevertheless he would hide, and reappear, and hide again, until the last of the slaves had passed within the Monastery gates out of his view. Then he would sit erect, perspiring and gasping, staring affrightedly at the blue basin of heaven, which, to his disordered fancy, was become an overwhelming, relentless eye, wide opened, with brow uplifted beyond the horizon in amazement and horror at his surprising extravagance of emotion.

Beneath him the echoing corridors magnified every laugh and whisper enormously, repeating and enlarging even the tinkle of sandal-bells, and the gentle din of innumerable, minute, tambourine-cymbals, until an indescribable hubbub filled his ears, like the sounds that are rather seen than heard in dreams.

What actually used to take place, he never more than guessed, for he dared not stir from his narrow refuge until he had seen the girls depart, singly or in groups, more often than not accompanied by one of the brethren, the familiar person of the fallen man barely recognisable to the anguished watcher, so quaintly were they each transformed by scraps of female bedizenments which had been tied upon their pure white ephods, and by a new un-monkish swagger in their gait. Fearfully would he wait until he judged that even the most abandoned had departed from the monastery, and then descending, he would make inquiries, furtively, from this brother and from that, taking each apart, as to what had occurred, the exact nature of the most outrageous assaults, the precise details of the most pitiful fall.

In all this it was the conduct of Mowela he was endeavouring particularly to trace, for jealousy was gnawing his heart, and gradually possessing him, so that he was more than once terrified by a sudden rage in his brain when a certain wan priest was droning out aloud, in the pious faith that by public confession he might be able to absolve himself from his unwilling share in the deeds of shame, his mournful narration of the blandishments Mowela had showered upon him, by the grace of the Goddess, in vain.

But on the whole he learnt little. The monks were curiously reticent on the subject,—the extent the invasion was disturbing their lives being considered,—when they gathered to squat down before the meal-bowls at the fall of evening.

But criminals, released from the torture-chamber, could not confess more plainly, by its effects upon them, the rigours of their trial. Instead of the downcast gaze prescribed, brightened, restless eyes roved in abstraction, ever meeting, and as quickly evading, the glances of those opposite; instead of the ordered gestures of eating, there were to be found lean, trembling hands that lifted too much at a time from the lacquered bowl, or that forgot their mission and lifted none at all; instead of the counted breaths, there were narrow chests heaving convulsively on every side, and stifled sighs.

Shaho's command was that each monk should hold his cell as a fort, surrounding himself with the instruments of prayer, and using every means he had acquired by the practice of his rule to raise his mind into unassailable heights of meditation.

The Abbot himself, engaged upon affairs of state, was absent from the scene, but the community obeyed his wishes unfalteringly, and though it suffered loss, the Order, they deemed, would but be the holier for the purge, and, truth to tell, in the main, their Superior's methods were justified by results.

Lalhk, it has been seen, hid himself in the hours of stress, and for that reason many of his more scrupulous brethren held aloof from him in the refectory, and viewed him askance. And the soul of the neophyte, well aware of its guilty hopes, misread the motives of this treatment, seeing in it only the beginnings of his just punishment.

His doom was deferred until one maddening dusk when all the colours of the day were clustering to pour themselves into the narrow, golden slot down which the red disc of the sun had fallen, while the cool airs from the mountains enlivened the senses without dispersing the vaporous dreams engendered in the brain by the fierce heat of noon.

Lalhk was squatting behind the balcony of his favourite alcove, his body hoisted upon his fingertips, and his long neck stretched ludicrously to bring his eyes to the level of the balustrade. He was peering down into the white-walled, tan-spread court-yard in a state of complex uneasiness that left no opportunity for self-analysis. All the unwelcome messengers of love had left the monastery an hour ago, all save one, and she—Mowela.

He dreaded to descend to his cell lest he should meet her, and, alternately, he gnashed his teeth at the fancy that she might not be haunting the corridors after all, but dallying in the cell of one of the

monks, perhaps in that of the holy man with the face of wrinkled honey who had already twice confessed her importunities.

And yet to himself the fear and the fury were alike inexplicable. Indeed, so far from being directly concerned about Mowela's well-being, he had with the rest of the community frequently and vehemently implored the Goddess Nâga to destroy her; and as for the fear, he was quite willing to believe that she had forgotten him, and would again pass his unbeautiful person unheeding, or with more positive disdain. It was his own state, the possibilities of his present hysterical condition that alarmed him. The simple idea of Mowela's nearness gave him the anguished sensation of falling from a height; actual collision, he was persuaded, would culminate in stark insanity.

Strained and twisted, in mind and body, he was struggling incoherently with such reflections as these, when some flash of colour behind him troubled the surface of his pale, bulging eye; his head veered jerkily of its own accord, and, forthwith, his brain was numbed by its perception of the proximity of the knees of the Egyptian herself.

Throughout the partial blindness caused by the passing dizziness that came over him, Lalhk continued to see those knees and nothing else, beholding them glowing in the black encompassing void, lovely, soft-textured, and something the colour of smooth red clay. Then his stupor was lifted from him, and he saw the whole majesty of Mowela standing over him.

She was looking down upon him past her right shoulder, which was drawn up and curved flexibly

inwards, hollowing her breast and rounding her back. She held her arms straight down before her, and altogether there was an air of tautness and rigidity in her attitude itself sufficiently terrifying.

'So, Lalhk, you have been hiding from me—from *me*?' she said.

'I—I—haven't,' gasped the neophyte.

He turned on his haunches with a monkey-movement, and his lips were voluble for some seconds, but no sounds came.

'Do you know, Lalhk,' said the girl, with an air of disinterested criticism, 'if you were well fed, and allowed your hair to grow, and cast away that ugly sack——'

'My Rule, my Rule! Let me be,' cried Lalhk, holding up his hands with their backs to his forehead, to ward off evil.

'You would soon be plump, and very acceptable,' continued Mowela's level, thrilling contralto.

Blood rushed so strongly to the neophyte's face, particularly to his ears, that he felt sure the latter were exuding it in gouts at the rims. He resisted an inclination to bury his head between his knees, so to shut out all sight and sound of the temptress, and mustered sufficient effrontery to arise to his feet. Any least action beneath her powerful gaze seemed difficult and unusual; to arise steadily, and at the same time to draw back to the remotest corner of the narrow balcony proved beyond his powers. The lower part of his back, as he arose, struck against a projecting carving, and he was thrust precipitately upon the immobile Egyptian.

During that interval of lost equilibrium his mind worked with the extraordinary intensity which is,

they say, the especial privilege of drowning men in the moment of their last agony. He neither spoke nor exclaimed, only his frantic eyes endeavoured to convey to her the explanations, pleadings, and protestations his brain was shouting. Then he lurched against her bosom, and she held him there and smiled over the top of his stubbly pate.

'I knew you could not resist me,' she said.

'Loose me. Accidental!' was all he could say at the moment, for his face was most sweetly buried.

'Now, little black priest, don't speak like that,' murmured Mowela, still smiling at the sky. 'You should be happy. Why do you complain?'

'My vows,' answered Lalhk's stifled voice. 'O Queen of Mothers, protect me!'

Nevertheless his position was undignified rather than perilous. He had wriggled partly free, but Mowela had entwined her broad, soft arms around his head and face, blind-folding him, and, incidentally, turning back the lobe of one of his large ears in a very painful manner. Otherwise the unhappy religious made of himself a stiff line which receded from the upright form of the woman at the widest possible angle.

Although his arms were free he preferred not to take advantage of that—he had tried, but found the purchase to be obtained by seizing her yielding waist was rendered altogether useless on account of the temporary paralysis induced by the succession of thrills which ran up his arms. Therefore, when he had exhausted his pleadings in vain, and had twisted his neck grievously once when his body pivotted round upon his toes while his head remained stationary in the fragrant vice, he aban-

doned the unequal struggle, signifying his submission by a lamb-like quietude and a plaintive whimper.

'O why do you persecute me?' he cried. 'There are plenty of others that—that—like it. Can't you leave me in peace?'

Mowela, without replying, imprisoned his arms. He felt he was being borne in the arms of a gale, so irresistibly her strength over-ran his inertia, and when she brought her face to the level of his own, and their eyes met, his very bones seemed to liquify, and his veins became a fiery mesh.

'Young priest,' said the slave, 'there is now no one else in the world but you and I. When that happens the woman is the lord. Do you understand that? You must obey me.'

'What do you want me to do?' Lalhk quavered.

'Follow me to the ramparts, and I will tell you,' answered Mowela. 'Don't attempt to run away. If you do I shall follow you. Now come.'

She freed him, and herself passed through the narrow door, to descend the steep stone stairs leading to the cloisters. The idea of disobedience did not occur to Lalhk. He grasped the skirts of his ephod, and followed.

To him there was nothing real about that journey through the city. Night was near, and every shop-keeper had already illuminated his own quaintly-garbed, high-turbaned, dignified person, as well as his low stall, heaped with gaudy merchandise, or rich fruits and sweetmeats, over which he was sitting enthroned, by means of brass oil-lamps, the yellow, smoky jets of which were sheltered within screens of stained glass or painted paper.

Mowela took the main thoroughfare, and Lalhk kept her in sight as best he could. The road was more than usually crowded, and he was dimly aware of an unwonted turbulence and excitement among the throngs. The Egyptian, on account of her practical nakedness, caused a commotion wherever she passed, but the people were already accustomed to the sight among them of many of the foreign beauties who, until lately, had never been seen outside the Palace grounds. Moreover, Mowela's superb presence was sufficient of itself to silence the tongues of rough men.

No street scene was complete without the white robe of a priest; so Lalhk himself escaped comment, although an occasional guffaw from groups of gossiping artizans, and certain ribaldry on the part of the infant population, gave further proof of the strong anti-religious bias which, latterly, had made itself apparent among the people.

When Mowela reached the tract of waste-land between the outskirts of the city and the walls, and was some distance along the wide, embanked road leading to the chief fortress, she stood and waited for the young man. When he beheld her standing a chilling fear came over him again, and his pace slackened. Yet he continued to draw near to her, displaying much the same look and attitude a man would wear who trod a perilous bridge in utter dark.

'O come along, come! It is a poor thing to have to ask a man twice to walk in the dusk,' cried the girl impatiently.

And when he started forward, involuntarily, at the command, she seized his cold, loose hand, and hurried him along.

A new sensation now overcame him. His will no longer resisted, but neither did it concede; it was, as it were, annihilated, leaving him with the strange conviction that he was no longer a person, but an appendage, merely, to this monstrously beautiful being. In this state of morbid preoccupation he passed under the arched entrance of the fort.

He remarked, but his mind was too dulled to comment upon the fact, that this important place was apparently unguarded, and then he allowed himself to be guided up a flight of wide, uncovered stairs to the rampart heights.

The summit of this immense fortification was no less than a broad road, whose outer edge was protected by a crenellated wall, itself of such thickness that sentinels could pace along its top without risk. The customary sentinels were absent here also, however, and Mowela climbed the wall, dragging the submissive man behind her, and took possession of one of the stone benches set at intervals for the use of the guards. Lalhk sat down beside her, and with head hanging forward, and mouth half-agape, stared, in a state of stupid expectancy, into her face.

She was turned away from him, and he could see only her profile. She had put off her mock passion now, and was sitting rather apart from him, leaning forward with her elbows upon her knees, gazing out at the darkening scene.

Darkness was surging across the level plain, surging and curling in visible waves, like black smoke, gradually encroaching upon a tawny expanse at her feet. Masses of cloud of the blackness of charred wood were piled up in the sky above the

horizon, which was outlined by a single narrow streak of luminous crimson.

While he studied her abstraction, Lalhk's own bewilderment gave place to a sudden recklessness, that was itself, such being the nature of his mind, as quickly appalled at the daring of its own appearance. Nevertheless it dawned upon him that perhaps he was arrived at the very instant of the consummation of those secret desires that had long been torturing him, and with that thought came a new boldness.

He sighed heavily, and drawing nearer, placed his hands upon Mowela's shoulders, seeking to attract her gaze. After a while she looked at him, and was plainly astonished at his transfiguration. Her expression changed to one of pity, and she displayed something of tenderness even, in that subtle softening of the whole person which is one of the finer shades of human action, too often hidden by overmuch covering. Lalhk was curiously enflamed by her manner.

'I have been a fool,' he said, in a voice so strong and vibrant that he did not recognise it as his own. 'I have been wrong and blind. There is no prayer so fine as the words of love, there is no ecstasy in heaven to match the joy that lies upon a woman's breast. Listen to me—oh, no, no, no.'

He was talking slowly, with a regularity of intonation foreign to him, and ill-suited, also, to the feverish movements of his arms about Mowela's neck, as he sought to draw down to him her full, handsome face. It was as though he was speaking under the compulsion of an invading spirit.

On her part, Mowela resisted him—not strenu-

ously, in fact rather weakly, and she seemed deeply moved, and even a little frightened. She had broken the clasp of his hands about her neck, but he renewed it passionately.

'No, no. Listen to me,' he pleaded. 'I have been a fool, thirsting for wine, and not recognising the full grapes in the vineyard. Now are my eyes opened, and I behold the treasure of your beauty.'

A feeling of utter repulsion came over the girl. She stood up and freed herself of him, tossing him aside, like a lioness, scenting danger, shaking off a playing cub. Lalhk remained crouching, intent upon her, a terrible, primitive figure, with pursed face and arms extended in a wrestler's attitude.

Mowela was not now looking at him. She had caught the glimpse of a soldier's helmet glinting above the level of the parapet, and knew that an armed man had climbed the light iron ladder that hung down the face of the wall. Lalhk, whose back was turned that way, noticed nothing. He put his hands upon the girl, and drove her back, gently yet forcefully, upon the couch of stone.

Reluctantly she obeyed his strength, delaying her resistance of her own will, it seemed to her, until a strange, delightful tremor of feeling that was controlling her should pass. Suddenly, with a loud laugh, she seized him in her arms, straining him to her bosom.

'A miracle!' she cried. 'A priest has become a man! Ha-ha! Mean, ugly shaveling that you are, yet I do not despise you so very much after all!'

'Despise me!' gasped the priest, wriggling to free his arms which she was enfolding tightly.

'Yes, despise you!' mocked the girl. 'Do you

still fancy you are not being befooled? Do you think you have overmastered me?'

'He-ha! Yes, I have overmastered you,' cried Lalhk in reply, grinning fiendishly.

His face was so close to hers that when he spoke their chins collided. Uttering something between a groan and a grunt, he tore first one, and then the other arm free, and wound them like tentacles around the slave. Mowela seemed all at once to have grown quite powerless; she spoke, but her lips were infected with her lassitude, and she babbled merely. Her eyes, however, were strangely eloquent, deeply human and kind they grew, and closely examining, as if they had discovered some minute wonder in the round, shaven, monkey-head of the priest.

As for Lalhk, he was losing all sense of his surroundings. He felt he was being transported into the heart of an all-encompassing flower, he and Mowela, with the rest of the universe fading into annihilation, to the accompaniment of strains of delicious music . . .

He felt Mowela's form struggle vigorously. He saw her frenzied eyes staring over his shoulder. He saw her lips drawn back, stripping her teeth, and the night was shattered by her indrawn, horrible shriek . . .

Then he had the sensation of a tremendous woolly blow falling upon his neck. A star sprang into being in his brain, and exploded into a myriad constellation . . .

The merry-eyed, bearded captain, his eyes not at the moment merry, hacked three or four more slashing blows at the quivering corpse, and then

held up the brown, grinning ball by a large, bat-like ear.

'A dirty job,' he said, watching the slow blood drip upon the white linen ephod of the priest, 'and one not at all suited to my talents. Yet I never gave a man his quietus with greater zest. Take your last look at him, mistress.'

He spun the fearsome object before the gaze of the Egyptian, who was sitting back across the low stone arm of the bench, speechless and aghast, and then he tossed it over the parapet, into the dry foss below.

After which, having with great unconcern cleaned his sword upon the priestly gown, he seized the corpse by its lank ankles, and hauled it to the edge of the wall. With his foot, then, he completed the deed.

Just as he gave the final lunge of his brass-studded sandal that sent the dead man hurtling into space, he heard Mowela utter a grievous cry, and he turned just in time to see her speeding away, her hand clutching her heart.

The captain, with a puzzled expression, straightened himself, and marched heavily to the narrow stairway down which the girl had disappeared. He stood there listening to the tinkling of her flying sandals.

'Unreckonable cattle!' he muttered. 'One might have thought—such a thing as *that*!' He pointed ditchwards. 'And *me*!' He glanced at his own expansive cuirass.

He strode to the inner edge of the wall, from thence to follow with his eyes Mowela's track. In the darkness, from such a height, the girl was dis-

tinguishable only as a tiny, moth-like creature of shadowy colour, fluttering alone along the wide causeway, hastening towards the Palace.

The captain took careful note of her exact route, and marched off in pursuit.

XIV

ANARCHY

THE great moon hung far down beneath the crown of the dome of space, and if an atmosphere of pale lavender is imaginable, then it was such a light that lit up the white ramparts and towers of the city wall. Inside the arch of the central gate were massed shadows of royal blue, and in the obscurity, catching a little of the outside light upon their helmets, greaves and breast-plates, sat two guardsmen upon a long stone bench, playing dice, and telling soldiers' stories.

Suddenly one of them, with an oath, jumped to his feet, seized his spear, and ran at the charge to the other end of the archway. His companion laughed, yawned, and called after him.

'What, mate!' he cried, 'do you go bat-sticking, or have you the heat-madness?'

The other returned, trailing his spear, and looking vexed and puzzled.

'If I had your belief in old women's tales,' he answered, 'I would swear a demon darted past us then.'

'Oh ho!' laughed the second guardsman, 'and how do you account for the fact that you saw it, and that I did not, since we were both facing the one direction?'

'I tell you I saw it,' protested the other, becoming vehement, and all the more so as he recognised the dubious nature of his claim. 'It made not a sound—just passed—like that.'

He swept his hand across his eyes.

'Come, comrade, it's too hot for such exercises,' said the incredulous one in a soothing manner that annoyed. 'Have done with hunting moon-shadows, and finish your tale.'

Nevertheless Gwali had indeed gone through the archway. To do so he was obliged to pass within a few feet of the guardsmen, but he hesitated not a second. Trusting to a rapid, flickering run that cheated the eye by its irregularity, he slipped round the corner, joined himself to the shadows, and in the instant the astonished soldier turned to grasp his spear, had sped through the lofty tunnel, and was away among the tortuous streets and alleys of the city, hastening towards the Temple.

The vast house of the Goddess Nâga seemed to overhang the city like a low-lying thunder-cloud. In its main outline it was an immense cubular block, and its many spires, minarets and domes, though themselves of great size, had the appearance of mere ornamentations placed haphazard. So lofty and extensive was it that the observer lost his grasp of the structure as a whole long before he was near enough for his eye to distinguish the architectural details. The hovels of the people, which lay not more than a hundred paces from its walls of black stone, were too insignificant in comparison to detract from its aspect of grandeur and remoteness; they seemed only the refuse material left to lie there by the builders.

In the narrow streets, striped in white moonlight and blue shadow, there were many bizarre happenings in the hot, breathless stillness as Gwali passed flitting from obscurity to obscurity for concealment. Here he heard a few words of an impassioned dialogue between two white-shrouded figures, a man and a woman, standing close together; further, two huddled women, one wizened and old, the other in young motherhood, and from her a snatch of a horrible complaining. He saw six or eight men in a motionless, silent circle, their heads touching as they craned them to gaze at an object upon the ground; even as he looked the group sundered, with discordant exclamations, as if an explosion had occurred in their midst, revealing for a second, amid a fluttering of vivid rags, a frightful, evil thing; herding together again, then, they hid the sight.

Arrived under the Temple walls, the youth skirted them until he reached a place where two neighbouring buttresses, gigantic split cylinders in shape, formed at their conjunction a deep cleft. Into this he wedged himself, and with a wriggling action in which were concerted the efforts of every muscle in his body, began to ascend between the two faces of smooth stone at an extraordinary rate of speed. At the summit of the buttresses he found a series of stone courses, each breast high, and climbing these, and achieving an even more perilous ascent between two pilasters, he reached a second line of stone ledges.

The next stage of his journey took him up the sheer face of the wall, with no other assistance than that afforded by ridges of rough carvings, and

certain crevices in decaying stone. This brought him to the bevelled ledge immediately below the rampart.

Apparently the joints of his fingers were capable of bearing the whole weight of his body, otherwise the manner in which he drew his feet up between his hands until they secured foothold upon that narrow, slanting shelf is entirely inexplicable. This done he risked his life once more in a fearful leap to the top of the rampart, and in the same motion had vaulted down upon the roof. He crossed at once to the narrow door, and descended, with the same composed haste, the interminable spiral stairway.

Although, of course, everything in the Temple was plainly visible to his preternatural sight, he knew well how utterly dark the place would have been to normal eyes, for, robbed of his care, the big lamp on the altar beneath the idol had gone out, and in his glancing survey he saw that certain ventilating slits, distinguishable only to those who beforehand were aware of their existence, but which, nevertheless, did in some minute degree render the gloom less impenetrable, had been closed. He was vaguely sensible, too, of a change in the atmosphere, of something sepulchral in it, and he imputed it to the fact that for some reason worship having lapsed, the doors were no longer opened at morning and evening as of old.

He passed down the length of the nave until he came to the great door that Shaho had had made for Seti. He touched the spring, and when the gradual opening permitted, slipped out into the corridor leading into the Palace, directly to that quarter

of it devoted to the royal women, and through that to the Queen's apartments.

On every side in the connecting passage he found evidences of disuse and neglect, gathering dust, withering flowers, curtains awry, and, at the entrance of the Harem itself, the cowled seats of the eunuch watchmen vacant.

On the other hand, in the Palace proper, where he found many more people than usual, strolling and idling in pairs and groups in every room and corridor, were scenes of a magnificence and gaiety altogether unusual, and all the while light ripples of laughter and sudden rises of delighted voices in converse kept breaking in upon the low, continuous crooning of the oboes, sighing of strings, and soft clashings of silver cymbals.

The greater part of the concourse was made up of beautiful slaves, male and female, children, youths and maidens, fair and blond and dusky, who had been picked out from all the races of the world on account of some individual charm, and who were now luxuriating in an unheard-of freedom. All were flushed with the excitement of an intercourse hitherto forbidden and impossible, finding exquisite delight in feasting their eyes upon the comely persons of those around them, and in displaying to the answering gaze their own flower-like faces, until now too harshly veiled, and in stripping entrancing busts and limbs once religiously hidden from all but the eyes of one master or mistress, who had, probably, long become satiate and unfastidious. And there were a smaller number of nobles and royal women, easily distinguishable by their mien and dress.

A rosy light filled all the Palace, and at frequent intervals, upon an air already burdened by the odours of flowers, hung a translucent, varied-coloured smoke from scents being burned in braziers, which to breathe as one passed roused dulled senses, and exalted those that were keen to a delirium of joy.

Gwali picked up a grey gossamer robe, discarded, apparently, by some girl who deemed it no longer of service to her, and enveloping himself in its folds, went boldly through the careless throngs unmolested.

On approaching the gallery leading to the royal apartments he feared he would have, at last, to contend with the scruples or cupidity of a guard, for a young man was leaning against one of the square cedar pillars, and staring moodily, with unseeing eyes, at the laughing troops of slaves, who, with some remaining customary dread, halted their festivity many yards beyond the doors of the Queen's chamber. He then recognised the young man as Uluan, and slightly hastening his steps, and drawing his silk covering closer about his face, he prepared to pass. Uluan, however, took a step forward, and barred the way.

'This way leads to the Queen's bed-chamber,' the latter said. 'What do you seek there?'

His mass of fiery curls were matted and damp, and were plastered over his forehead and ears, overhanging his eyes, and giving him a wild, unpleasing appearance. His white tunic was torn and soiled, and his bare arms and legs were stained with dust and sweat. His whole body was much worn and emaciated, and dark rims encircled his

insanely bright eyes. His face was uncleansed, so that the white channels of tears showed plainly through the grime on his hollow cheeks. Though he made the demand gruffly, his voice sobbed as he spoke.

'Do not stand in my way, Uluan,' answered Gwali, 'unless perhaps the Queen has bidden you guard her slumbers.'

'A man in woman's clothes!' cried Uluan fiercely.

He darted out a hand to snatch off the disguise, but Gwali drawing back, let fall the robe from his head and face. Uluan's body stiffened with fright, and his breath issued from him with the exclamation a swimmer gives vent to when he plunges out of noon-tide heat into ice-cold water.

'I have seen you! O where have I seen you!' he muttered, and his hand went up involuntarily to his own throat.

'Yes, in *that* dream you saw me,' answered Gwali, nodding his head. 'I am Gwali. Has Seti never spoken to you of me?'

'She still speaks of you often.'

Uluan appeared to answer in spite of himself as he cowered back against the wall away from the green youth.

'And you—have you lost your happiness so soon?' asked Gwali.

Uluan felt as if a figure he knew to be of bronze was questioning him. There was nothing at all familiarly human in that carven face.

'I have not been happy,' answered the pale youth, his gaze roaming wildly beyond Gwali's head. 'Seti never loved me—she cannot love. But she has bewitched me. Though I am dying, and she

mocks at the wounds she has given, yet I must wait here always—wait and watch her evildoing.'

'You are not strong enough to break the spell?' murmured Gwali.

'I would rather die than cease to love her,' answered Uluan, tremulously. 'I wish only to die loving her.'

'And yet you have the full gift of living? What wondrous thing has Seti to give *you* that any young girl in the fields might not bestow?'

Quietly as Gwali spoke, almost whispering, the words seemed to din upon Uluan from all quarters, like a voice from heaven.

'I forever dream of a way she might greet me,' answered the other. 'I am haunted by a rapture she withheld, and might have given.'

He clasped his hands, and wept openly whilst he spoke.

'So little!' murmured Gwali.

And turning away, he passed up the gallery to the door of the Queen's bed-chamber.

XV

THE RIFT

ARRAYED in a fresh glory of crimson and white, Paphos the Greek lay at his graceful ease upon a multi-coloured couch, where the soft, cloud-like cushions seemed alive in their perfect aptness to fit themselves into every chance interstice between man and his bed, thus to lend support to languorous flesh without incommoding it.

Many of the strange appurtenances and queer, twisted objects of art which reflected the somewhat baleful humours of the late Queen Dhrasovah, still occupied their places in the Royal bedchamber; all trace of the customary gloom, however, was gone. Concealed lamps, placed close to the ceiling, filled all the apartment with a pure, equal light, as if a rosy dawn were held captive there, while the many pungent odours of old had given place to a single sweet scent, which seemed in some way to be in harmony with the light, and breathed indefinably of the morning.

The Greek lay on his left side, and so thrown upon him that the hollow of her waist was filled by the joint of his right hip was Seti, the Queen. Her face was at his breast, and her arms entwined his neck, as his locked hands rested upon her back—

the wondrous, slim back of dusky pearl, divided by a dark, sinuous shadow, which could be traced from the nape of her neck to the rise of her full flank, for she had an ingrained dislike of all habiliments.

Paphos had the air of being exhausted by too great a pleasure. His face was flushed, his eyes were intensely bright, and he rarely smiled. Seti's face could not be seen.

'I don't like being called a child,' she was saying, pettishly.

'Very well, O Woman, I shall "child" you no more,' responded Paphos. 'Though I may tell you there comes a look upon that face of yours at moments which makes it absurd to believe that you know any more about love than you have heard in your nurse's lullaby, or that any desire could issue from between your pouting lips other than a pleading for sweetmeats. Still, have your way, O Woman of Experience.'

'Tell me, do I look like a child now?' asked the girl, leaning back her head for him to gaze at her face.

Whatever expression he saw thereon came as a shock to the Greek.

'No, by the thigh of Bacchus you do not,' he muttered.

'And I—I do not believe you are altogether human, do you know that?' said Seti simply.

'But human I am,—I vow I am no god,' protested Paphos. 'A thing of clay merely,—shaped in a finer mould undoubtedly, and fired in a diviner flame, I hope, than all these troops and hordes of men, yet on a last analysis dross of earth,— I can claim to be no more.'

'I did not mean that,' said Seti laughing. 'I mean you are lacking in something.'

'Oh,' ejaculated Paphos.

'There is nothing in you can touch my soul,' said the girl. 'When I am tired of you I shall be able to just let you—drop.'

'That's not a pretty thought, my babe,' said the Greek uneasily. 'Chase it away.'

'But I have caught your soul by the roots,' continued Seti.

'Yes, if I have a soul, and it has roots, you have, certainly,' answered Paphos.

'And I have found it worthless,' said Seti calmly, and when the Greek started with surprise of the announcement, she laughed.

'I am not astonished at that,' said Paphos. 'That soul of mine must be in a very neglected condition if it has been depending on me, for I confess I have never seen it.'

'Perhaps I shall make you see it,' murmured the girl.

'Now tell me, who taught you to play with abstractions, little one, when there were so many pretty things to feel and taste?' asked her lover, and he inquired in earnest.

'A god taught me,—a nice stone idol come to life for love of me. Gwali he calls himself,' answered Seti, laughing quietly.

'Then, considering the leisure a statue must have at his command in which to think,' said Paphos, 'he ought to have been wiser than to spin his cobwebs in an angel's brain.'

'Oh, you look ugly when you are serious,' cried the Queen. 'Whisper to me why you did not fall in love with me the instant you beheld me?'

'It is one of the most hopeful peculiarities of man that he is only able to love one woman at a time,' answered the Greek, evasively. 'He can, however, passably simulate simultaneity by a very rapid succession.'

'Do you mean you loved someone else?' asked Seti.

'How bright my Wonder is,' replied Paphos. 'You are wrong, nevertheless. My attention may have been fixed elsewhere; I know now I have loved but once.'

Paphos had gradually drawn the girl until she was lying close beside him, and he was in the act of bending his head to kiss her when a look of grave disquiet came into her face. Without apparent cause she shuddered, and the shudder left her trembling.

'What was that,' she whispered affrightedly.

She put a hand behind her, and unlocking his fingers, broke from his embrace, sat up, and stared around the room.

'What was it?' asked Paphos, dully.

'A cold blast fell upon me—struck through me,' said the girl in a hushed whisper.

'Impossible,' responded her lover, somnolently. 'There is not a cool thing within a hundred miles—a breeze least of all. The heat, in fact, is overpowering.'

His head nodded helplessly.

'Paphos,' whispered the girl, seizing the curls on his brow to shake his head vigorously.

'Yes,' answered he, his eyes half closed.

'Paphos, I am afraid.'

The beginnings of a smile of assurance fell

asleep on the Greek's face; his eyes shut fast, and his head fell forward again.

'Paphos, don't sleep,' hissed Seti, frantically shaking him.

'Sleep? I am not so sure,' the Greek just managed to articulate.

He made one last effort to arouse himself, in which attempt his bowed head took no part, and then subsided into absolute unconsciousness. As he did so, Gwali stepped into view from behind the door curtains; seeing him, Seti, with a low, frightened cry, sprang to her feet, and went to crouch in the furthest corner of the room, shivering.

Gwali remained standing for an instant only, when with swift steps he approached the end of the couch where rested the head of Paphos. In his right hand was the heavy knife, still stained with the juice of the jungle herbage he had hewn to clear his path on his journey. Taking the Greek's listless head by the hair with his left hand he jerked it back, stretching the neck, and the knife whirred as he swung it aloft.

He let it hang loosely over the back of his hand, as if it were not his intention to stab, but to cast it into the broad, white throat of the sleeper; his fingers were sending ripples of tendons along his arm as they felt on the haft to direct the downward stroke—in that scarcely perceptible pause Seti arrested him by the calm, even, careless tone of her voice.

'What need has Gwali to be a murderer of sleeping fools?' she asked.

Uttering an exclamation that might have been

a laugh, Gwali released Paphos's head, and at the same moment flashed the knife deep beside it into the hard wood of the bed. He turned to Seti, who was now just behind him, and smiling at him in a manner very little different from her former blend of innocence and mischieviousness.

'I have been longing to see you again,' she said, 'and at last you have come back to me. I knew all the time you would. And after all, why was I so afraid of you just now?'

'I was filled with anger against you, and might have slain you,' answered the youth.

'Surely you never thought of killing me—me?' said Seti.

'Great anger had hold of me,' answered Gwali.

He squatted down, and she came and nestled against him, as of old, half-reclining across his knees, resting the back of her head against his breast, so that he could with the more ease lay both hands upon her forehead.

He commenced the rhythmical stroking motion of his hands, and she spoke quickly the while, evincing sincere pleasure in the re-appearance of her eerie lover, and a look of happy playfulness, which had been absent during the wilder transports of her recent pleasures, returned to her.

'I understand now what your words of warning meant, Gwali,' she said. 'Everything has come as you said. More than twice of any pleasure, and I am wearied until I ask the gods to let me die. Never again shall we part, O Peace and Comfort of my soul. Now I am very near to happiness. O I could weep—I could weep. Thus shall we sit for ever, Gwali, you shielding the wind from the fire

of my too much love, and I giving to you whatever it is you ask of me.'

In a sudden anxiety the blood left her cheeks. She understood that Gwali was not drawing her into the half-trance necessary if he was to obtain command of her faculties, with the usual ease. To shake off the rising fear, she spoke again, making an impulsive movement as though to cleave closer to the man who would master her so subtley.

'To be with you like this, Gwali, with dreams and visions, and wide thoughts,—this is nearest to that for which I have hungered. O Companion to me, I have grown very old and weary in a few days, and my heart is sick and casting about for a cause to weep, among many causes.'

She turned to embrace the youth, but in silence he restrained her, compelling her to resume her former position, while his hands never paused in their passage backwards and forwards, from brow-centre to temple. More swiftly they passed than ever formerly, and the touch of the smooth, cold fingers was less sure.

Words formed themselves no more in Seti's brain, and cold, and too intensely conscious for their purpose, she waited, in an increasing agony, for the first sign of the re-welding of the mystic link that should bind them.

A groan from Gwali, and a slight hopeless raising of the hands brought the beginnings of a frightened sob, in an audible trembling of the breath, from the girl. After a few passes more the youth took his hands from her forehead, and placing his hands upon her waist, lifting her, he freed himself from her weight. He went, then, a

few paces away, and sat down, looking at her all the while, but with thoughts that were of himself only.

Seti, leaning back upon her elbow at the angle at which she had been lying across his knees, turned her head to follow him with her gaze as he slowly drew away. One might think, to look at her face, that great grief was being withheld momentarily by curiosity, or that she feared to interrupt the consummation of the crisis of her sorrow by her tears.

'Gwali, what is the matter?' she asked, in a whisper that hardly arose above her breathing.

'In my despair I nurtured vain hopes; must I rail now at their emptiness?' murmured Gwali.

Looking upon his placid face, and listening to the unfaltering note of his voice, Seti, her own face rigid, read, by some less obvious signs, his hopeless grief. She came gradually forward to her knees, and thence her body bowed until her forehead lay on the floor.

'A chord was strung in you that gave instant meaning to the medley within me,' proceeded the youth. 'A light you possessed that lit up the darkness surrounding me. You have no cause to grieve. More than a woman were you then; a woman you wished to be, and a woman are you now. But I—more than a man have I been; far less than any man am I now.'

Seti did not stir, and they both remained silent and motionless for a full minute. Then Seti's shoulders began to shake with sobbings, and, sighing heavily, Gwali arose. The sound of tremulous, arousing music penetrated into the room; the musicians were massing together somewhere

close by, preparing to lead the procession to the feasting-hall.

Seti arose also. She had ceased to weep, but sadness was so kneaded into her face that it seemed it must endure there while she lived. With the utter annihilation of her joy grew in her a new sense of physical shame; at anyrate, with bent body and shielding hands she drew near to the bed, and took from behind Paphos, who was still white and cold in his trance, her black shawl of silken gauze, and with it draped her head and form.

Then with the lively recollection of her sovereignty, came pride. Gwali was standing underneath the small square window, from over which he had drawn a heavily embroidered cloth. She came to him, erect and stately.

'Till now I have been a child and a girl,' she said. 'Sorrow and pleasure have made me a woman.'

'Pleasure and sorrow—that is the life of a woman,' answered Gwali, murmuring.

'Speak only of you and me for a moment, not of all the world together,' said the Queen.

There was sufficient irony in her tone to prove the reinforcement of spirit, and Gwali became more intent upon her than he had been during the last few minutes of his disappointment and despair.

'Why my senses cannot give what you ask from them I do not know,' she continued. 'Through the night and the day, through the hot season and the cold I will lie in your arms while you seek afresh, —if you desire it.'

Panic and despair were threatening again, as

evinced by the sudden emphasis of her gestures and the feeling in her voice; she quelled them, however.

'Something else I can offer you—power,' she said. 'The power to rule—to rule this kingdom, if only you will remain at my side.'

'The power to live is what I am seeking,' answered Gwali.

'What greater thing has life than to sit in the glory of a throne, controlling the destiny of a people,' said the Queen, pride and pleading displaying themselves together in her manner.

'The glory of a throne,' responded Gwali, slowly, 'Would you deck me in rich robes, and lead me about like Hanuman the Monkey, or dress me fantastically as a minister of folly?'

'I ask only for your companionship—to be to one another what we have always been,' said Seti, drooping her head. 'And for that I will make you a king. O Gwali, do not refuse.'

'Hush. Do not weep again,' responded the youth. 'Remember this, I shall always be on the watch to protect you; and much protection will you need, for the throne you offer me is tottering beneath your slim weight, and will fall. I have seen. A woman are you now indeed; therefore cast me out from your heart, who am—a shadow.'

High-spirited children, and women on rarer occasions, when opposed by a power whose all-sufficiency they recognise without understanding it, often prelude their sobs and tears by a curious out-bursting of the breath.

One such short cry broke now from Seti's lips; but the tears did not follow. Instead, unnaturally, over her woman's passion she cast the false guise

of a child's alluring charm. It was, with her, second nature to do this, and always with a completely deceiving effect. On this occasion she failed. Her straining emotions were plainly apparent along with her adopted wilfulness of manner, causing her actions to be wild and hysterical.

Gwali had already stretched up one long, green arm to the ledge of the window through which he intended to make his departure, and like that he stayed, for the imminence of emotional collapse obvious in the girl's conduct and appearance held him bound.

A dried berry hung on a thread around Seti's neck; without breaking the fastening, she raised it in her fingers, and held it up to the youth's gaze.

'Five berries of that size may one eat and be taken into heaven for the length of a day or a night,' she said. 'That much you know. I have eaten four, and soon the desire for this will tempt me, and this time I shall not come back from my dream. That you have not guessed.'

Gwali was close upon her on the instant. When he hastened, his movement was as swift as the panther's spring; and yet he did not leap, and was able, if he wished, to approach thus rapidly without causing either terror or alarm. But he hesitated to snatch at the berry, lest she should cheat him, and be driven into eating it for fear of being robbed of it.

Seti mistook the meaning of his return to her, and spread out her arms, throwing back her head rapturously to receive him.

'You are sorry for me?' she said. 'I would not have eaten them had you not gone. And you can

help me to resist the desire for this last to the very end, can't you? So why need I despair?'

The youth raised his hand and laid a finger upon the corner of her eye, bringing into view the narrow vein of blue, as Avrah and Mowela had done. Then his hand dropped, and closed upon the fatal berry dangling among the girl's nervous fingers. She made no resistance, instead she smiled, as if discounting the importance of it all now that Gwali was not departing from her.

'It is no use. Leave it to me. I have seen where they grow,' she said. 'What does it matter. You will protect me always.'

'If I watched you by night and day I should succeed in warding off the temptations during the hours in which they will recur,' answered Gwali. 'But if one of those hours found me absent or sleeping you would eat the berry.'

'But you will watch by me, Gwali,' pleaded the girl, and all that appeals to a man in a child and in a woman was combined and magnified in her marvellously.

'You have eaten the poison of illusion. Falser and less real will life henceforth be to you than it is to me even,' said the youth. 'Never again shall we see one vision together—you and I.'

His words ended in a moan. He bowed his head, raising his hands to cover his face to weep. His hands fell back to his sides, however, and without casting another glance upon the girl, who remained standing in silence, transfixed with anguish, he hurried to the window, and with two slight pauses, one as he lifted his hands to the ledge, and another while he squeezed through the narrow opening, vanished from her sight.

XVI

PENUMBRA

HE was obliged to slide down the face of the wall for several feet to gain a foothold upon the protruding ledge of a stone course, and there he retained his balance miraculously. While he rested momentarily he heard the sound of Seti's voice floating out upon the hot, still air. She was calling his name, over and over again—weeping the word.

There was no other sound. The revellers had all repaired to the feasting hall, which was an annex of the Palace, and outside the area of the quadrangle. The moon lay hidden behind the Temple, but the world was full of her light.

He was some forty feet above the Royal pleasure grounds, perched perilously half way up one of the walls of the Palace. His left side was pressed against the smooth marble, and thus turned he could see an angle of the dark bulk of the Temple which broke into one of the corners of the square. In that direction he began to move. very cautiously, for along this path each step was a matter of the loss and recovery of poise where a single mistake would inevitably result in terrible injury or, more probably, death.

Occasionally he was brushed by the outermost

twigs of tall trees uprising near the wall, and before his journey was half completed he came to where one of the arms of a pippola, a delicate, golden-leaved giantess, had stretched out to the building, along which, bent into a kind of elbow, it grew pressed against the shining stone. On this happily-formed joint Gwali sat and listened.

Seti's intolerable crying was no longer borne to him. It was too low, the chamber deadened the sound, and the distance from the narrow window was too considerable. Accountable though it was, nevertheless the silence filled him with dread. Seti, he knew, would be weeping still.

With his clasped hands pressed between his thighs, his narrow, supple shoulders gathered up, and his carven head moving from side to side jerkily as his ears intently sought a sound, he searched that silence with exactly the mental and physical anguish he would have suffered had he been forced, helpless to aid her, to listen to the girl's shrieks under torture.

A groan and some rapidly muttered words, a prayer, perhaps, or curses against fate, coming from immediately below him, from somebody standing in the shelter of the golden-leaved tree, surprised him into rigidity. Wary self-possession followed; he gradually assumed a normal attitude, and began to peer through the boughs into the absolute darkness under the tree.

Whoever it was, was leaning against the farther side of the tree-trunk, a corner of white garment alone attesting his presence. Gwali at once guessed the lonely sufferer to be Uluan, and as if to confirm this opinion the almost articulate

whispering of harp-strings being lightly swept by an aimless hand came up to him.

The music of some instruments is like wine, mounting at once to the brain, obscuring, or contorting, or enhancing the vision of things; other sounds, like overbold courtesans, seize upon the limbs, arresting them, or setting them in involuntary motion; it is given to the harp alone, although a certain reeded pipe has the power in a lesser degree, to strike direct to the heart, remorselessly affecting its normal pulsation, or masterfully controlling its turbulent leaping. It was perhaps the secret of Gwali's unhappiness that the colour and sound of life did affect, and that, too, intensely, his nerves of impression, but that through some fault of structure the *stimuli* were not carried to the mysterious caverns of the brain where sensations are forged into understandable shapes.

At anyrate it is certain that when he found himself in circumstances that wrought strongly upon the senses of ordinary men, Gwali, too, was perturbed; but vaguely, and without being able to assign a definite cause—he felt just as the inhabitants of one zone might feel at the time the earth was quaking in a neighbouring region.

So whilst, with fingers adept since the day their full use grew in them, and with a mind that had babbled in music long before it attained to a knowledge of words, Uluan enlarged upon his theme of grief, exhausting every change and variation of it, lifting it into the diverse moods of joy and anger, in a word, using his art to probe his pain, Gwali only knew that a harp was being played by the nature of the streak of sound which was

joining itself to the multitudinous noise of life that beat everlastingly, in a complex murmur, in his brain. But his heart was beating tumultuously, each rise and fall, had he known it, being in unison with the throbbings in Uluan's breast, and both were in consonance with the wild complainings, pleadings and accusations of the strings.

After a short break there was an envoi of despair so dire, and expressed with such absolute finality that, at its close, it seemed, the strings must fittingly rend themselves. Then the musician's arm drooped until the instrument rested upon the ground, and he himself sank down to a squatting position at the foot of the tree, and folding his arms across his knees, bent his face upon them.

Gwali had in the meantime so moved that he could see every action of the player, and now, at the close of this outburst he lay along a bough, among the pale-gold leaves, his narrow body extended, and appearing black by contrast, save for a shade of deep green, reminiscent of the glimmer on the surface of stagnant pools, which ran along him when he stirred.

When Uluan fell, apparently, into slumber, his unseen companion, causing only a slight rustle amongst the leaves—no more than a dreaming bird might make, or a marauding serpent—climbed along the bough, and sliding down the wide trunk, stood at the white youth's side.

'It is the end of that love,' he said. 'And you will be troubled no more by the malady until, when the memory of it has faded, out of curiosity you seek to renew the suffering.'

Gwali at the moment was undoubtedly exercising a control over Uluan's weakened will, for when the latter, bruised and broken-spirited, raised his head, and stared stupidly into the glowing yellow eyes that shone so horribly in the gloom out of the dim head, he showed no alarm at the apparition. After a while he appeared to recognise Gwali, and together with the recognition came the perception of a strange peace and collectedness of soul.

Even then he felt almost ashamed at this entire and unexpected absence of grief, as if he were being disloyal to his own love, and when he wished to speak he was conscious of an endeavour to frame fit words to suit his proper melancholy—words which, a short while ago, were crowding to his lips. But before he could speak, Gwali, bending his smiling face down close to his, forstalled him.

'Let it pass,' he said, 'love never yet killed man or maid, though it has deceived many into seeking death. You owe service to a master who has been kind to you. Go to him. Near the passage wherein Paphos was imprisoned is another, leading to the Temple crypt—Nassur is there.'

There was no magic in the manner of Gwali's withdrawal, and yet he seemed to dissolve into the dark. Uluan leapt to his feet—changed! His very limbs had recovered their vigour and alacrity. His mind turned to Seti, of course, but he noticed that the image of the girl which always followed close upon the thought of her, had grown less brightly tinted, and all that vivid recollection, which was half a physical fact, of close bodily com-

pact was effaced; he could think of her serenely, he found, already taking delight in the kind of sorrow attached to her memory.

He felt free, but still insecure. The transition had been too slight and easy; he was afraid lest the sudden remembrance of some one glad incident of the past would overwhelm him afresh.

Nevertheless all his attention was now bestowed upon the plight of Nassur, and hiding his harp in a niche between two boughs, he hurried away in search of him.

XVII

CONSPIRATORS

ALTHOUGH, constituting a patch of glaring white standing out against the dark stones of the Temple, it arrested any casual glance, there was something of *blindness* about the exterior of Shaho's dwelling that dulled curiosity.

The High-priest, too, exercised the utmost caution in his comings and goings, always choosing a time when the garden was deserted, or, if there were slaves or women there, preferring to use the secret door, which he reached through devious tunnels under the foundations of the main edifice.

And as, in addition to these precautions, he never allowed anyone to visit him, or answered a knock on the door, his cell became in fact a hermitage, more remote and secluded than many a zealously-guarded jungle sanctuary.

Gwali, however, gave a pre-arranged signal, and Shaho at once admitted him; seemed, indeed, very glad of his coming.

The High-priest had, in the last few weeks, grown perceptibly older, and this was noticeable most plainly in his gait. Walking had always appeared burdensome to him, yet as a burden vigorously and cheerfully borne, with an energetic

stamping of flat feet, and much wagging of the head; now the soft sandals shuffled somewhat, and the great head sagged forward.

When Gwali entered, the priest locked the door, and let himself fall into a reclining attitude upon the tiger-skin couch. The skin flask was beside him on the ivory bench, and a cup full of the liquor stood at his hand. Only one of the bird-shaped lamps was alight, and that being badly trimmed, its flickerings filled the place with shadows, and made black channels and cavities of the wrinkles and hollows of Shaho's worn visage.

'You have been too long away,' he said, obviously wishful for speech. 'I have wanted you badly. There is disaffection, insubordination, and decay everywhere. The revenue has ceased to come in—ceased entirely. It is being diverted openly for revolutionary purposes. Think of that! All the generals and officers of the army are in it. I am helpless. I go to the Queen, and I find her shut up with a paramour. Or she receives me only to ridicule me in front of her drunken rabble. Old Dhrasovah was mad, but good. This Seti is mad, and bad. I foresee ruin and chaos. Nothing else. This kingdom will be blotted out, mark my words—it will be blotted out.'

'Ah! Despair at last, old Shaho!' murmured Gwali.

'Despair! Not I!' answered Shaho, tossing off his cup of liquor, and filling it again. 'For look! Despair is the negation of hope, and what has an old man like me to do with hope? Hope is for youth—ineffectual, blundering youth. Age like mine is the time of accomplishment—that or sur-

cease. Every act of mine that is futile is just so much irreplaceable life-blood poured and wasted. Irreplaceable life-blood. And all my acts are futile!'

'At present there is little to be gained by it,' remarked Gwali. 'But later on, Shaho, we can regain control of the Queen. I can do that much. I have just come from her, and she offers me the seat beside her throne. Ha-ha!'

Shaho was in the act of raising the cup to his lips again, but he set it down, and stared at his weird councillor. Then he pushed the liquor-skin towards the youth.

'It might be!' he said, with a laugh at the absurd possibility of the thing. 'She has her mother's whimsies, and—if only we could introduce a supernatural element! You don't happen in any way to be supernatural, do you?'

Gwali shook his head.

'I like it. I like it!'

The old priest sat up, and beat his thighs in approbation, as his quick-thinking brain sent out radiations of probabilities from this single bright spot in his darkened circumstances. For a moment he was animated with new fire and energy; but he soon sighed, and lay back.

'Anyhow it's too late,' he said. 'Matters have gone too far. The Queen is of little more consequence than myself.'

'We might gather the people round her. She has only to show herself, and homage will be paid —out of custom,' said Gwali.

'Homage!' ejaculated Shaho. 'I'll tell you how it stands. She has lost her army and her revenue,—

the honey of the realm, two of the three chief products of any kingdom, the third being the priesthood.' A malicious glimmer shone in his eye as he said this. 'And as to my priests—one of those damned heaven-sent missionaries is leading the people out of the true fold, and the air is so full of metaphysics that I can see nothing in front of our Holy Order but apostasy or starvation. Come with me. I am going my round to feel the pulses of the city.'

He arose, and pulled the lever that moved the marble block hiding the stairs. It was Gwali who now led the way, Shaho pausing to take up a bundle of black cloth from a corner.

Although, judging by the form of the domed roof, the dimensions of this lower chamber were the same as those of Shaho's cell, the space at the foot of the stairs was very closely confined, for as high as a man could reach, wall after wall had been added until the place was built solid, save for a passage the width of a man's shoulders, with layers of bricks of pure gold, all of equal size and shape.

Gwali had not lived closely enough to men to suspect the risk that waited upon a knowledge, even, of such a store; he passed through without a thought of it. Shaho also made no conscious reflection upon the unreckonable wealth at his command, but in his case the danger and responsibility attached to it had become a part of his inmost life. That hidden gold alone, and no natural aloofness of soul, had made of him the solitary man he was.

They followed a long tunnel which wound and

turned endlessly, finding themselves sometimes between walls of fungus-grown stone, and at other times passing through corridors cut out of the sweating clay, until they were brought up at last by a barrier of solid masonry. Another of Shaho's secret springs caused two cunningly-jointed stones of immense size to draw apart, and squeezing through the aperture, the High-priest and his satellite stood in the burial-place of the Kings.

Here, upon ceremonial couches of different height and design, wrapped in armour and cloths in every state of magnificence and decay, typifying the fashions of a decade of generations, lay the Royal Skeletons.

Here, if anywhere, the scion of a ruling house could satiate his pride. Here was the line direct, each ancestor in regal panoply, complete with jewels and purple, albeit the fabric had withered as it must, baring the white bones of granddaughters to the grinning skulls of their father's sires, and, worse to think upon, sometimes betraying where exigences of space had caused forebears and posterity to be piled upon one another in most unnatural conjunction.

Gwali had already satisfied his curiosity in this gruesome place. He did not stay even to look again at Dhrasovah, lying in all her new splendour,—indeed he hurried past her, for in spite of a potent balm that at once ate the flesh and perfumed the air, there were certain processes natural to decay in hot regions which it was beyond the power of any chemical confection to disguise.

When Shaho crossed the crypt, and opened the

deep-sunken door at the further side, they beheld before them the line of hovels which marked the limit of the city in this direction.

The High-priest untied his bundle, displaying two cloaks, one of wool dyed black, such as women of the poorest class wore in the cold seasons, and the other of linen stained an indescribable brown, the garb affected by fakirs while on pilgrimages. The woman's garment he flung to Gwali, who enshrouded himself completely within it, his unquestioning attitude showing clearly enough that this was not the first time he had used the disguise.

Shaho meanwhile drew up his long, narrow robe, and knotted it about his thighs, revealing a pair of hairy legs which tapered from buttock to ankle in a most extraordinary fashion. He then slipped into the brown cloak, drawing a corner of it over his head, and allowing an angle of its folds to hang over his forehead to his nose. In this way he effectively shaded his features. Gwali's face was entirely hooded, a single vertical slit alone affording him the means of seeing his way.

The moon was now very low, and on that account the roofs and upper storeys of the taller houses shone out in white, or in delicate shades of terra cotta suffused by the slanting shadows of slate-blue which were thrown by neighbouring buildings, whilst the narrow courts and thoroughfares remained in deepest obscurity.

Nevertheless, here and there, streaming through a break in the roof line, the moon's light dispersed the gloom, and in such places Shaho would undoubtedly have been recognised had it not been

for his disguise, and Gwali as certainly would have been the cause of a midnight riot had he, a marvel of green flesh and yellow eyes, burst upon the sight of homeless waif or wandering gallant.

Not that they passed none but waifs and gallants,—Shaho could hear the snuffles and breathings of sleepers who, plain to Gwali's eye, were coiled up in every doorway. In the hovels of the poor the doors were open, and the outside sleepers seemed only the natural overflow of the welter of raucously-somnolent humanity within. Motley and unsavoury sleep was also to be found in clusters in the halls and courtyards of the rich, where slaves and beggars lay down together to dream of bounty and sustenance in the stifling air.

Naturally enough insomnia, from its various causes, was rife among these lines of recumbent figures, and the hasty, wordless march of the two was punctuated at every step by oaths and grumblings, sometimes directed at themselves by a startled dozer, though most frequently it was the venomous abuse of a dreamer who was slaying his master in a world of joyous unreality, to the great pain of his neighbours, or a curse hurled at the head of one whose evil conscience was tossing and rolling him out of his allotted place. Several times Shaho drew up warily when some wide-eyed sleeper sprang to a sitting position in order to resist more strenuously the demands of a more than usually voracious parasite; the action, indeed, was not unlike the searching at the hip for a dagger.

They cut diametrically through the city until they came beneath the walls, and Shaho pointed

out a tall house, resembling a tower, of three storeys, which stood alone, built close up against the ramparts. It was apparently deserted, for there was a large gap in the roof, and it had reached the state of ruin and decrepitude which ownerless houses alone fall into, a condition so forlorn that the neighbouring householders who, as boys cast brickbats through the gaping windows, felt justified later on in shooting refuse into the noisesome interior.

'There's my nest of hornets!' said the High-priest. 'In a room just under the roof is seated the future government of this country, in high conclave. Iskanaar, the King-to-be, is there. He is the son of one of the late king's lesser wives. He is a very capable young man—one whom I thought of pitting against Nassur if the worst came to the worst. He took a dislike to me, however. A nearly fatal dislike. He tried to poison me. Since that day I eat alone, and procure my own food. All the ministers of the Crown are there in state, lacking nothing, not even their salaries now, except scope for their talents.'

'Have you not twenty men you can trust, to take or kill them. Once rid of the heads——'

Gwali's slow, measured monotone made such propositions seem simple of accomplishment. Shaho always felt his confidence revive somewhat when in the youth's company. But the High-priest's fortunes were broken beyond repair.

'Twenty men!' he exclaimed. 'No, nor two. Nor one! And yet this is the night I have been waiting for. I could have had them throttled singly and in pairs months ago. I wanted the whole brood together. And there they are!'

He seated himself, a shapeless mound, upon a stone at the threshold, and sighed. Gwali gauged the height and examined the face of the building.

'How do you know they are there?' he asked.

'Lalhk, a servant of mine, knew every movement of them all,' answered Shaho with an air of increasing unconcern that was very melancholy to note. 'A weasel, he was, who would do anything save face a man in the broad day. A thorough coward—as all good spies must be. They found his remains this morning in the trench outside the walls.'

He sighed again. Gwali did not know it, but it was an accepted tradition in the Temple that Lalhk was the son of the High-priest,—sent down from heaven without the aid of woman, it was said, to comfort his lonely Eminence.

'Do you wish to know what is being said up there?' suggested the green youth.

'I doubt if it be worth while,' answered Shaho. 'I did intend asking you to climb up——'

Without a word Gwali let fall the cloak from around him, and commenced the ascent of the bulging fissured wall. His progress was rapid, for the inequalities of the surface afforded him abundant hold. Nevertheless it was a sheer rise of fifty feet, without any considerable projection to make the deed seem humanly feasible.

He directed his way to a door on the topmost storey which opened on to a small railed platform jutting out at right angles to the wall. To climb this platform he was obliged to make a short leap through mid-air, and this he did unhesitatingly; although at the moment of his spring he was

pressed flat against a rough but unbroken surface, literally adhering to it by limbs and chin, and also, it would appear from their lively exercise, by the muscles of his breast and abdomen.

As he sprang he turned and seized a wooden rod of the railing, and when it turned to rotten shreds in his grasp, he only just succeeded in gripping a ledge beneath. Thus he hung for a perilous instant, swinging in under the platform, until, using the backward motion of his body, he gained a securer hold, and hoisted himself into safety.

Whilst approaching the platform he had remarked the total absence of light. Hearing the murmur of voices, however, he knew that Shaho's information was sure. Once on the verandah, a glance between the gaping panels of the door explained the darkness and the imperfect audibility of the speakers. Practically the whole interior of the chamber was filled by an officer's field-tent, spread with military precision, leaving only the space of a foot between its strong fabric and the wall.

He had to make half a circuit before he found a parting sufficient to permit the entrance of his slender frame. Inside his danger was for the moment no greater. He was still in darkness and unseen, for an inner chamber had been formed within the roomy tent by means of heavy mats and curtains slung from the roof, and nailed to the floor. He examined these cautiously until he discovered a slack of material between two of the nails. Laying his cheek to the ground, he raised the cloth, and a shaft of dull light lit up his eye and part of his face.

He was just in time to see the head of a man disappearing through a trap door, which was so close to him that, raised, it concealed from his gaze the rest of the scene. The departing man, who wore the helmet of a chief officer, drew down the trap after him, and Gwali had an uninterrupted view of the room.

He saw two men, one reclining and the other squatting upright, smoking in silence from a many-stemmed water-pipe. Before the semi-recumbent figure, that of a young man, was a low writing-desk, and set thereon a small brass lamp. That was the only furniture and light in the tent, although it was carpetted and hung with expensive mats.

The young man, Gwali at once concluded, was Iskanaar, Seti's half-brother. He was habited in a long, parti-coloured robe of crimson and emerald, and a dainty shell of chased steel pressed upon his abundant hair. His companion, a man beyond middle age, was bearded, scarred and rugged—plainly a man from the hills.

A council had just broken up. The blue fumes filling the interior, so thickly that grey-streaked strata, set in motion by the opening and closing of the trap, blurred the orange-coloured flame of the lamp, and gave evidence of the presence, a few minutes ago, of many smokers.

Gwali's aspect became terrible. He laid his chin upon the ground between his hands, and his body humped itself with a gathering energy until it seemed that he must spring like a panther across the length of the tent.

His staring eyes became quite still, his mane of hair bristled. He became fixed in an intense rigidity

that would have induced in an onloooker a sense of exhausting, intolerable strain, a feeling of increasingly acute expectancy, as if the interval between the perceived flash of lightning and the reverberation of the thunder was being unnaturally prolonged.

For the time he shed completely his few human characteristics, and assumed an air that answered totally to the intuitive conception of a demon from another state of existence.

For some seconds nothing happened, and then, without any gesture or exclamation of warning, the elder man fell forward, and lay prone and still, his legs remaining still bent in the attitude of squatting.

In the very act of sitting up in alarm, Iskanaar was himself transfixed. His expression became troubled and dazed; he raised his hand to his brow, aimlessly, as a man might who had received a heavy blow on the head, and then he collapsed into unconsciousness.

Simultaneously Gwali's frightful tension came to an end, and for some minutes he abandoned himself to violent writhings and convulsions. Throughout this brief agony the statuesque calm of his features never relaxed, and when at length he stood up there was no sign of his tremendous exertion of mysterious force beyond a passing trembling, and a slight perspiration.

He went out on to the insecure platform, and called Shaho. He did not raise his voice, yet the High-priest, who had fallen into a reverie, heard the first syllable in a pitch that made him start as if it had been shouted into his ear.

'Iskanaar is here, at your mercy,' said Gwali, 'and one other with him. Will you ascend?'

'Huh! Don't tell the whole city,' hissed Shaho, in a whisper that would not have reached ordinary ears a dozen feet away. 'Talk gently. Is it safe to come up? Are there any sentinels?'

'There are no sentinels,' answered Gwali, and laughed. 'Come.'

Shaho never refused to take the risks incidental to his precarious state. He passed through the ruinous breach that had once been an entrance, and stumbled his way boldly over the heaps of indescribable rubbish within.

He found, by collision with it, an exceedingly rickety ladder, which, with grunts of gravest apprehension, he began to mount. He passed through the remnants of a first floor to come to a second ladder no less rickety, but lashed securely to the wall. He climbed this successfully, and was next mounting up a shute of canvas, upon a ladder of rope, much safer, though less easy to the feet and balancing powers of a man of his age and build. He had plenty of light, for Gwali had opened the trap, and his final effort was considerably facilitated by the youth.

Ludicrously entangled in his fakir's robe, Shaho at once sat down, his legs astride, his heaving belly at ease, to recover breath, and his pig's eyes glinted angrily as they fastened upon the unconscious form of Iskanaar.

'That's the fellow!' he panted. 'That's the sort of brainless swashbuckler who gets hold of kingdoms to play with! His idea of government—war! And the people—they accept it! I have done every-

thing I could to distract attention from fighting—and the result? I have become the object of scorn and contempt to every able-bodied man above the age of sixteen. One of the direct causes of this revolution was my attempt to reduce expenditure on army millinery. *That* brought on the crisis!'

'You must not strip War of her drapery,' said Gwali, 'she is too old.'

'And what have you done to these?' asked the High-priest, sweeping his hand over the two conspirators.

'They will sleep a little while—that is all,' answered the youth. 'Occasionally afterwards a red mist will trouble their eyes.'

'It's a very long time since either of them slept so soundly in the night,' growled the High-priest. 'Take that knife there, and let the life out of them.'

'I cannot slay. Even those I hate I cannot slay,' answered Gwali. 'I have tried!'

'Well, I'm an apprentice at the game myself,' said Shaho.

Still sitting, he leant forward, and took from beside the prince a heavy, double-edged weapon, half dagger, half sword, and released it from its skeleton-scabbard of black leathern thongs. He held it horizontally, grasping the hilt in his right hand, and resting the point upon the fingers of his left, while he bent his face closer to Iskanaar's throat.

Gwali watched him with interest. The import of human action was, he knew, in exact ratio to the width and reflective vigour of the particular intelligence concerned. This was to be no ordinary crime, for speculative beliefs and superstitious fears were

conflicting strongly with the common impulse to kill, delaying it until it was losing its very character as an impulse indeed, and making the priest gradually aware that in this act, should it be consummated, his whole being would be eternally implicated.

Gwali was rightly interpreting Shaho's thoughts. Had the old priest only allowed the point of the weapon to fall from his fingers, the work had been done on the instant, for he was holding it immediately above the main artery of Iskanaar's neck.

But the conflict of forces within him was too severe to allow such a compromise; he would stab fiercely, or let the man live. Twice he set his jaw, and stiffened himself for the fatal blow—only to be swayed from his purpose by some sentiment that changed his look of ferocity to one of abstracted thought, when it was unimaginable that such a man should ever commit the act. At length he straightened himself, drew his legs in under him, and began to turn the knife over in his hands with the air of a connoisseur.

'The deed is too evil to be borne,' he remarked. 'And, besides, I can't see what good it would do. It is too late. Iskanaar, or Iskanaar's rival—what matters it now to me? I won't do it.'

'You will not do it, but not for that reason,' said Gwali. 'It is Fate—Fate that you have often seen in things that are done; here you have felt its hand resisting a deed that would have been contrary to its law. This man lies at your mercy by the will of a power, other than Fate, that works in me. But you are untouched by that power. The sequence of *your* life remains unchanged.'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' answered Shaho, scrambling to his legs. 'Yet he would have dispatched *me* with a flourish, Fate or no Fate. But I will not split logic with you on what may be the very vigil of my downfall. You have no feelings. I have, though you often cause me to forget them. I have ruled for ten years. To-morrow, perhaps, I shall be hunted like a jackal in a bazaar. Let me remember that. Come.'

Gwali at once commenced the descent, but Shaho, finding the terrible knife still in his hands, paused, and looked down upon Iskanaar with some re-awakening of his murderous design. Ultimately he threw the weapon aside, and sitting with his legs hanging down the trap, felt with his feet until they settled upon a convenient rung of the ladder.

When he re-joined Gwali he found the youth, again closely veiled in his woman's robe, lying in an attitude of grief. He arose, however, when the High-priest approached, and as he did not speak of his sorrow, Shaho forgot the impression, and made no comment.

XVIII

SMITHS IN CAMERA

PERHAPS it was because, with so many enemies abroad, he feared assassination; perhaps he shrank from surroundings that spoke too insistently of his vanished omnipotence; or it may have been that the instincts of vagrancy (never entirely dislodged from the Oriental bosom) had taken possession, and, unchidden, were swaying him; certainly Shaho was very reluctant to return to the Temple that night.

Perhaps, again, the spirit of wandering had lain mysteriously in a fold of the fakir's robes which he was wearing; on the other hand his mood might as easily be ascribed to a much more natural cause.

It is no uncommon thing for old men to mistake the impulse towards the grave for a reflowering of the aspirations of their departed youth, and in their age, suspecting that their youthful wisdom, and cowardice, had cheated and narrowed their lives, to strive to obey what they fancy is a renewal of the old hopeful lawlessness. Like many another merciful error, this also has been glorified by religion, and a frequent figure on the high roads has always been the old man performing a pilgrimage, a vagabond in a cloak of piety, completely broken at last with grasping sons or shrewish wife, and facing the world afresh, destinationless.

At all events the High-priest wandered for more than an hour in an aimless, disconsolate manner round about the belt of broken land that fringed the city immediately within the walls, often stumbling and slipping over the ridges and drains, and crossing and re-crossing his tracks.

Gwali, his head freed from veil and hood, followed unquestioningly. He thought he understood that just this ardous marching was binding the old man in a mood or trance, or holding him to a line of thought that was giving him ease. So he strode along in silence, walking with a stealthy tread in Shaho's shadow, and obliterating himself from the old man's consciousness,—a thing, it seemed, he could do at will.

At last, when they came to the military road leading from the chief fort through the centre of the city, Shaho unexpectedly squatted down in the dust, and his eyes roved along the moon-lit vista between the parallels of irregular dwellings until they reached the place where the white lath of road was embedded in velvety shadow, to appear again much farther off, ascending the rising ground to the gates of the fantastically-silhouetted Palace. Gwali remained standing.

In all that city there was not a light to be seen, save only in one quarter; on the left side of the road, just before it was lost in the shadow, was a vivid scarlet patch.

'Sayi Givul, the blacksmith,' growled the High-priest, nodding towards the glow. 'There are two classes of dangerous fools; one draws wrong conclusions, the other draws right conclusions, but too many of them, and pushes them too far. A

dangerous man, this Sayi Givul,—one who preaches pride to the people. I also would have the people proud, but not at first. Not until they are fit to be proud,—until they have something to be proud of.'

'Can the people ever be proud? Who will be left for them to despise?' murmured Gwali laughing. 'Let us return that way. Never have I seen a proud blacksmith.'

'There is much fine talk around that anvil this night, I'll warrant,—the simple fools!' muttered Shaho.

A small storm of anger rose to his head, but was broken against a new wall of despair and resignation, and ended in a rush of air down his nostrils, and a growl.

'Let us mingle with them, and listen,' said Gwali.

'They all know me,' objected the High-priest. 'And though they bear me no malice, they won't talk before me. You they'd kill at sight, young man.'

'You remain outside, and let me go among them alone,' said Gwali. 'Don't fear for me,' he laughed. 'Come.'

Shaho went through the complicated performance that brought him to his feet, and with Gwali by his side, set off down the road at the steady pounding gait in which he appeared to throw his weight from side to side in lieu of exercising any of the ordinary muscles of ambulation.

While still some distance off, the busy tinkle of hammers was borne to them with a pleasant sound, and after a few minutes they were able to

distinguish the fierce beat upon tempered steel from the traditional tapping upon the ringing anvils, while the glow resolved itself into a high, square porch, high and wide enough to admit a mounted man.

It was not until they heard the laughs and free talk of men, and a giant shadow obscured the yellow and scarlet glow, throwing a shadow of itself down the smooth, white road to their very feet, that Shaho paused. Gwali went on, and when the black, womanish figure, cowled and veiled, appeared vividly against, and was then swallowed up in what looked like a vat of flame-lit steam, the High-priest proceeded warily, curious to see what would follow.

By the time he reached a point of vantage, those within the forge were just recovering from their surprise and alarm, and all faces were still turned suspiciously towards their mysterious visitor, who was sitting erect well within the glare of the heap of charcoal which was giving off a roaring mass of white flame under pressure of a huge, howling bellows.

The well-plastered walls and arched ceilings of the place were ochred-stained, and upon the clear spaces, and out through the wide door, upon the square of illuminated road, played a gigantic phantasmagoria, as Givul and his three assistants plied before the furnace. For the most part, however, the walls were hung with a tapestry of chain-mail, fringed by rows of shapely swords and small embossed shields, while all descriptions of weapons filled the corners in stacks, or lay in heaps upon the floor.

There were at least a score of men ranged

around, all fellows of the one type, men of size and sinew, clad for the most part in scant habiliments of raw hide, which covered abdomen and breast like an armour, making a great display of bronzed, massive flesh, well set-off by the sharp blue of turbans, or the yellow, white, or particoloured linen shawls which many were wearing upon their shoulders against the dews of night.

Plainly they were smiths, tanners, horse-breakers, and the like, men who followed the more robust crafts, calling for an exercise of qualities which, becoming engrained, made real character. Not theorists, these, nor men given to arguing nice points. They learnt their moral and civil codes in the form of saws and adages, and the few abstract principles which had been precipitated out of the conduct of ordinary life were repeated as witty epigrams. Reasoning was none of their business. They were habituated to receive the doctrines of rival schools of theology in the shape of aptly-worded cries and mottoes, and from these they chose an assortment according to taste, or chance, or temperament. But such party-cries, once adopted, it was with them a matter of personal honour to uphold all they stood for, without reservation, and by the stern logic of silence and the flail-like hand. Obstinate, fearless and strong, these were the very stuff of rebels, wanting only a man of their own mould, but of finer temper, to concentrate and direct their force.

And just such a man was Sayi Givul. To challenge the intellects of his comrades meant, sooner or later, to irritate them to the point of physical violence; Sayi Givul's mind seized upon opposi-

tion as a stimulus and an incentive to joyous activity. Their eyes were steely and slow-moving; his were dancing and bright. At the least tension of excitement their voices were stilled, mouths were set, and teeth gritted; Sayi opened out in such an atmosphere like a lotus to the sun, his thick red lips moved more volubly, and more easily gaped to laugh a lion's roar.

But through it all he was deeply and intently serious. He was voluble, but with a flood of bitter truths about the lives of poor people, and he threw back his head only to direct his laugh at the highest places.

While he talked he worked, squatting before his low, brass-mounted anvil of steel, and beating upon a curved sword—a fine weapon of pale azure, discoloured, by the heat, at its extremity into a beautiful aurora of purples and blues. His nose was more fleshy, his face generally more rugged than the aquiline visages of his comrades, but in all essentials he was a smith, with characteristic red-bronze skin glinting beneath its web of wiry, black hair, with his pincer-like hands, and wrinkled eyes and cheeks. Small part of these latter were to be seen, however, being mostly covered by a heavy, bristly beard, and a touzled mass of the same quality of hair enlarged his giant head.

What made him conspicuous was the look, quite ordinary among educated classes, but strikingly unusual in men of his stamp, of intellectual self-confidence, an indefinable steadfastness of gaze. He was the first to address the stranger.

'When the dam bursts queer fish get into odd corners,' he remarked. 'Why has a respectable

woman—one very vigilant against the straying of her glances—come among stranger men at such an hour?'

'A straying wife and a streeling robe gathereth filth,' said a youngish giant at the door, squinting.

'Words of ill-omen!' said Gwali, softly. 'Evil shall dog you for that—you, and your wife and your child, unless this night you find a bat, and eat its entrails.'

Shaho, curiously, noticed for the first time that Gwali's voice was not like that of man or woman. A contagion of uneasiness passed perceptibly tnrough the gathering,—even Sayi Givul hung his head thoughtfully, and beat clamourously with his short, heavy hammer. The young man who had brought the curse upon himself slipped out into the night—surely to search for a bat without further delay.

'Let not the wise woman take heed of the indiscretions of unthinking youths,' muttered an elderly man, and he stirred on his buttocks.

Gwali laughed, and the sound seemed to freeze his listeners. The laugh had some reassuring effect upon Givul, however, for the hammer at once ceased its vigorous bouncing, and subsided upon the anvil in a diminishing tremolo as the smith peered inquisitively at the narrow slit in the hood.

'Has the wise woman brought messages from—beyond?' he asked, nodding his head towards the door.

'I have come to listen to the words of the hatcher of treason, that is all,' replied Gwali.

'Then you have come late, old warlock,' said Sayi Givul. 'Words! We have done with

words! Enough brave words have been spoken here to free the whole world of tyrants and imposters. But my bellows have gathered them all, and blown them into the night. And that's the end of them.'

'Your bellows have gathered them, and breathed them upon the fire, and the fire has tempered good steel,—is that not so, Sayi Givul?' said Gwali.

'Ha-ha! Yes, that is so, wise woman,' cried the smith, plying his hammer afresh. 'Good steel, and not lacking good men to swing it. Look!'

A wild-looking man had appeared at the entrance, and stood blinking at the fire. Under a loose turban of non-descript hue, his matted hair, dyed a bluish-grey, hung around his face, mingled with his unshorn beard, and lay thickly upon his shoulders. A rough armour of hide, with squares of rusty iron fixed here and there upon it, was buckled unevenly upon his breast, leaving his belly naked. His only other covering was a twisted loin-cloth. In his hand he carried a small piece of scraped sheep-skin, on which were burnt certain symbols. Sayi Givul arose and greeted him, and he advanced into the room, having first made a signal to someone behind him. Then he came and handed to the smith the inscribed sheep-skin.

'Ay, and more!' said Sayi Givul, when he had deciphered the inscription. 'As many as you can carry you shall have. See! There they are, counted and tied, in each bundle a score. I have done my part. Do yours.'

He pointed to one of the corners heaped with swords and spears, and the new-comer, who com-

bined a strange energy with an appalling emaciation in his unkempt person, like a long-starved beggar whose newly furnished blood has not had time to nourish his limbs, darted in the direction indicated, with an exclamation and a monkey-grimace.

Gwali, gratefully absorbed in these mysterious doings, was watching them with so much interest as not to notice two very similar beings who had followed in, and were standing immediately behind himself, making lewd gestures for the amusement of the company at the back, as they thought, of a female of no very high standing.

These men were from the remote villages of the campaign, and did not possess that toleration, and respect even, for the acknowledged courtesan, which the townsman comes unconsciously to acquire. The tattered jester, therefore, felt he was acting well within his rights as the assured proprietor of a wife in performing a silent, expressive dance behind the veiled figure, leering the while with demonic hideousness, and further emboldened by the alarmed silence of the spectators, which he was mistaking for evidence of complicity.

Contorting his limbs astonishingly, he edged closer and closer to the unsuspecting youth. By this time the first countryman had swung a jingling burden of weapons across his shoulders, and was turning in the act of directing his comrades to follow suit; at that instant, also, Gwali became conscious of what was passing behind him, and he arose to his feet with the action of a bow suddenly unstrung.

But it was too late. The yokel's fingers had already gripped a corner of the veil, and startled now, he tore the material from the youth's head.

The effect was magical. With a simultaneous yell every man present leapt to his feet, and immediately cowered as far away as he was able, each clutching his fellow, and treading upon one another blindly, their eyes being rivetted upon Gwali's unhuman semblance, and a chorus of frightened howls broke out like the yelping of a kennel of whipped hounds.

The offending countryman remained where he was, leaning back at an angle so acute that it was clear to Shaho that some unhallowed power of Gwali's alone was upholding him, and this was proved when, a moment later, the youth shut his glassy, yellow eyes, for then the culprit fell heavily upon his back, as if a suspending, invisible cord had snapped.

Just then his leader threw down his burden of armaments with a ringing clatter, and the townsmen, who by this had ceased all movement, and were merged in a terrified herd, gave vent to loud and unified yell, and with one accord, accompanied by the yokel who had crawled to a safe distance, hurled themselves from the forge. There was an instant's congestion in the wide doorway, a vision of two score of slipping, straining, kicking brown legs, and Gwali was alone—with Sayi Givul. The youth turned and faced the smith.

The deserted silence of the place contrasted in a dream-effect with the crowded animation of a moment before. There was no glare now of roaring, incandescent furnace; the only sound was a

slight wheezy breathing as the abandoned bellows collapsed of its own weight.

With the failing fire-light, Gwali's aspect became more and more terrifying and fantastic in the eyes of the smith, for the glow of the rapidly reddening embers brought out a strange refulgence upon the smooth, green face, and was reflected in the form of tiny, bursting sparks in the yellow eyes, which seemed not to have the power of sight.

Sayi Givul, in the pride of his manhood, had overcome the panic that beset him along with his fellows; as he stood shrinkingly, with his arms raised instinctively in defence, and his beard bristling with fright, could he have concentrated his ideas to the formation of one coherent desire, it would undoubtedly have been to join his panting companions in whatever place of refuge they had reached.

The mysterious faculty which Gwali exerted on these occasions was, in a manner, separated from the direct control of his will at the moment of its exercise. He was lately growing accustomed to seeing men rendered wholly subservient to his most preposterous demands upon their liberty of action, while he himself had no experience at all of personal mastery, nor was he able to perceive any direct connection between his desire and its fruition beyond a vague sensation of intense mental activity somewhere outside the area of consciousness.

It was as if a man's angry curses, or casual benedictional civilities, were being made good before his eyes. Real surprise was unknown to the

youth, nevertheless he had moments of great wonder and awe at this tremendous, hidden power over men.

With nothing to gain more than a transitory distraction from his own incohate woe in the converse of a man of an unusual type, he now exerted this power to calm and reassure the trembling smith, and with complete success. Some trouble continued to linger in Sayi Givul's eyes; he had at first the look of a man newly awakened from a dream of realistic terror to find himself safe among familiar surroundings. But that passed. He made a gesture of amused pity, and smiled as he re-seated himself.

'Superstition!' he said, his own recent terror completely forgotten. 'A child conceived in its mother's fright holds a whole town aghast, and a wandering star strikes an army to the dust! Superstition! Ignorance it is that makes slaves,—that and nothing else. Man or woman—which are you?'

'Man,' answered Gwali, shivering at this recoil of attention upon himself.

'And you smell unrest, and have come from your hiding-place in tomb or jungle,—is that not so?' continued Sayi Givul. 'Lepers I have seen, with silver scales from crown to toe, and twisted, speechless creatures in the streets in the broad day. When the keg is turned the dregs appear.'

Shaho had remained too far off to hear anything that had been said. He had seen all, however, had, indeed, only narrowly escaped being trampled upon in the stampede from the forge. At this point he came pounding and shuffling in,

and squatting down slowly and stiffly, he addressed the smith in a very gruff voice.

'The applause of fools has made you vain, and overmuch loud speech has defiled your judgment, Sayi Givul,' he said. 'Will it be a great gain to upturn the keg? You have taught lawlessness, and now you are arming it. Have you any purpose or policy beyond destruction?'

'None,' cried Sayi Givul. 'There is a Palace of lust and a Temple of lying to be destroyed—good enough work for an oldish man. Let the young build.'

From time to time he pressed his hand upon the bellows-handle, thus preserving a licking tongue of yellow flame in the heart of the black ashes.

'Hear him! O listen to the fool,' growled Shaho. 'Some particular arrangement of words has got hold of him which he nicknames a principle, and for that he would smash up a polity!'

'That not one man in this city shall be stunted in body or darkened in mind—that is my only principle,' answered Sayi Givul, growing sullen.

'And what have you done to bring that about?' demanded Shaho. 'I asked you to work with me, I at the Altar, you in the Market-place, and gradually——'

'You asked me to delay, to compromise, to sacrifice such and such rights,' interrupted Sayi Givul, hotly. 'I had to preserve the purity of my principle. What say you?'

He turned to Gwali, growing suddenly afraid of the latter's silence and statue-like stillness. He worked the bellows strongly until the place was bright.

'Principle is a woman of whom our first demand is not purity but fruitfulness,' murmured the youth. 'It should be as a sword in the hand, not as a fetish in a shrine.'

'Exactly!' said Shaho.

'I am not gifted for pretence and shuffling,' said Sayi. 'Without the plain, straight-forward truth a man like me is lost.'

'Truth,' said Gwali, 'should be infinite and eternal in its aspirations, but politics strictly temporal.'

'That's it,' said Shaho. 'Theory and practice. Nothing to do with one another. Come Gwali. Kings and priests have failed at this governing of men, perhaps after all it is the business of a smith and his hammer!'

He arose with great weariness in his manner, and proceeded out upon the road.

Gwali remained looking intently at the smith, who, on his part, with fear surging up within him afresh, was working furiously at the bellows.

Then the youth drew the torn hood over his head, and followed out after the old priest.

XIX

COBRA-NIGHTS

AFTER following for more than two hours, in complete darkness, the labyrinthine course of subterranean passages, Uluan's first fervour cooled considerably, and although his desire to find Prince Nassur was not lessened, he began to grow sorely anxious on his own behalf. His stumblings were so numerous, his collisions with sharp angles so frequent, the windings and intersections of his unseen path so utterly confusing, that at last a crowd of gruesome terrors and shamefaced fears that had been gathering at the back of his brain burst tumultuously into consciousness, and he was brought to a halt by a sudden panic.

He at once overcame his dread, and set out anew, only to be petrified an instant later by a furious hissing at his feet, a well-known, fearsome sound that seemed to split asunder and depart in fragments in various directions, whilst his naked legs were lashed hideously, or caught momentarily by the cold coils of the quick-darting cobras upon whose brooding ground he was intruding.

When the low sibilation, which to his terrified senses was a shrieking uproar, died away, he had

not the nerve to stir, so sure was he that his lower limbs bore a dozen fatal bites. He groaned aloud, and the sound awakened a response that made him forget even the deadly reptiles that swarmed at his feet.

'Was it I who groaned?' said the voice of Nassur, speaking in broken tones. 'I must have groaned in a dream and heard it. Misery! Misery! When this awful numbness breaks I shall go mad.'

Uluan heard a rustle of straw, and the faint clinking of chain links. He started forward.

'Nassur! Prince!' he cried.

'Uluan! You!' the Prince barely articulated, emotionally. 'Come, boy. Let me touch you. You are real? This is not an illusion of madness. O gods! The cobras! Uluan, are you safe? Have you escaped them? Is it possible? This way. This way. Here!'

The words came mixed with frantic laughter and weak tears to guide the youth to his master's side. He found the Prince upon his knees, chained to the floor by such short chains that he was unable to stand upright. Weakened as Nassur must have been, Uluan, nevertheless, felt those stout links drawn as taut as bowstrings as the strong man strove to meet him.

They remained kneeling side by side for some minutes, Uluan, speechless, endeavouring to fight down the misgivings that would not allow him to accept the praise of his tardy loyalty, nor even to give expression to his gladness.

Nassur on the other hand was as demonstrative as a child. He ran his hands over Uluan's features, and made the youth feel the circles of callous

flesh already raised upon wrists and waist, where the steel had galled him at every movement. And he talked all the while with a feverish incoherency, revealing a relief in this renewal of human companionship that to Uluan was intolerably poignant.

'I had faith in you, Uluan,' said the Prince, over and over again. 'It has seemed very long—I have ceased to think of time—but I never lost faith in you. Paphos they took. Poor Paphos! Have you heard of him?'

And before Uluan had time to decide how best to commence upon the shameful narrative of the double betrayal, Nassur went on:—

'I have been living in fear,—nerveless, quivering dread. I have begged mercy and pity of the dark when it seemed to move. And the cobras! I have heard them talk, and quarrel, and rave endlessly, until I was robbed even of the courage to lift food to my starving lips. I have felt them upon my face and breast, with skins of wet silk, or dry and brittle. I have shrieked in fear of them, Uluan, afraid as I have never before been afraid of death. Danger in the day—I was made for that, but this slimy peril—Uluan, I am afraid of them, deadly afraid.'

'All that is over,' said Uluan, 'I will keep the cobras from you. They are perhaps snakes of a harmless breed. I walked among them, trod upon them, and am unscathed. This place is a maze, but somewhere there is an outlet into the Royal Gardens. That is certain, and we shall find it.'

'Have you brought a file, Uluan?' asked Nassur, after a while, when he had gathered calm.

He shook his fetters, and his negligence ap-

peared in a fresh form to Uluan, who beat his brow with his clenched hands.

'Oh Prince, I have not brought one,' he cried, and bowed his head before the expected anger.

'Never mind. We shall find a way,' said Nassur.

He spoke in a manner of strength and purpose that was in odd contrast to the babbling talk of his first outbreak. His old calm was gone, however, and in its place waxed a fierceness and bitterness that boded ill for his enemies should he ever reach them.

'Feel this!' he said, thrusting into the youth's hand one of the huge links of the chain that fastened his steel girdle to a staple in the rock floor.

Uluan put his fingers upon it and felt a slight cut, not much more than a scratch, in the hard metal.

'I did that in the short time before I grew afraid,' Nassur went on mournfully. 'I rubbed it against the edge of the clasp upon my wrist. But I dared not go on. The sound angered the cobras.'

'I will finish it, Prince,' cried Uluan. 'And I forgot—I have my poignard. I shall roughen the edge of the blade, and with a little patience——'

'Patience!' muttered Nassur. 'O gods of heaven!'

Already trembling with dread in anticipation of his master's anger when the truth of his disloyalty came to light, Uluan, nevertheless, at once set to work to jag the razor-edge of the dagger, and soon he was filing vigorously at the link.

Whilst he worked Nassur talked to him, for the most part narrating his horrible sufferings, mental and physical. The questioning as to his doings during the past weeks Uluan easily evaded with-

out untruth, for Nassur seemed to take it for granted that his main occupation was the quest of his master.

When the youth's arms grew powerless with fatigue, the prince took up the work, until after a long period, which they were unable to reckon in hours, they both had to seek a respite.

The effects of their toil was appreciable, and the Prince became ebullient with strength and hope. But the horror of the noisesome place, which was passing from him altogether, seemed to cleave the closer to his companion. Uluan shivered at every recurrence of the almost articulate hissings of the cobras that surrounded them.

The stench of the hole was horrible in the extreme. They were breathing a stinging miasma, which from time to time gave place to sulphurous and mephitic vapours emitted from the many crevices in the slimy rock.

A malignant fungus-life overspread everything, and crawling abominations settled silently and mysteriously upon his flesh, so that he shuddered, and barely withheld a shriek. His imagination, spurred by these conditions, created fresh terrors, tracing the reek to putrifying corpses which hung before his darkened mind, ghastly luminous, and he pictured the air that filled his mouth and nostrils as a suffocating, jelly-like substance, myriad-eyed, and tentacled. He laboured again at the link to shield his mind from these images.

. . . . . .

Sitting upright, supporting one another, they must have slept, for a commotion above their

heads that sounded thunderous, brought a startled cry from Uluan.

'The jailors have come with the day's food, that is all,' remarked Nassur.

Soon, at what appeared to Uluan to be an immense height above them, a small circle of blackness was lifted like a lid, displaying, apparently, a shaft filled with swirling, smoky red flames. That evolved into nothing more terrible than a flaming torch held in a man's hand, and soon a priest came into the light in the cavity beyond, and when he knelt down, his head and white-clad shoulders half-filled the circle.

The light of the torch had little effect upon the obscurity of the dungeon, yet enough of its rays penetrated to enable Uluan to note the funnel shape of his prison, and, what was more important, to detect a heavy beam lying at an angle the whole length of the cell. Into this beam, at intervals, down its sides, stout pegs had been driven, making a serviceable enough ladder.

The youth's attention was rivetted upon this to the exclusion even of the actions of the jailer-priest, so that when there was a rattle of a chain within a few inches of his face, and a heavy object struck the rock at his knees, he sprang up to defend himself. Nassur with a touch restrained him.

'It is food and water,' he whispered. 'Cover it with your cloak. The place is full of filthy pests.'

Uluan put out his hand upon a small wooden barrel, standing on end, which he found was divided vertically into two compartments, one filled with water, the other half-filled with some food,—rice he judged. He snatched off his cloak, and threw it over the open end.

In the meantime the priest had withdrawn the chain, and his head disappeared. Another head, bearded and helmetted, and aureoled by the torch's flame, stooped down, and then the heavy lid was drawn across, leaving, at the first effort, a narrow crescent of brightness, and instantly afterwards total darkness was resumed.

'Prince!' whispered Uluan, eagerly.

'It is the routine,' said Nassur. 'They feed me—the gods alone know why. I have learned to welcome that break of light. I used to speak to the former priest, a younger man than this, who sometimes answered a few words. This man answers nothing.'

'But the ladder? Did you see the ladder, Prince?' cried the youth.

'Yes, and often before,' replied Nassur, mournfully. 'The sight of it has made me pluck at these chains until the skin was burst. We need not think of that now. You made your way here from the open air. That is enough. We shall find that path again.'

'We cannot. The cobra's nest guards it. I walked through them,' answered Uluan, and shuddered.

'You shall tread them underfoot again with me, my brave Uluan,' said the Prince. 'Or, cut these links, lad, and I will carry you over them. Let there be no more fear. Ah, Shaho, old priest, you will be paid in full for this!'

Without replying, Uluan shook his head sadly in the darkness, and began afresh upon the tempered steel of the chain link.

It was the toil alone that lessened the fearful

suffering of Nassur and himself during the subsequent days,—periods measured regularly by the lowering of food, and interrupted irregularly by the dropping down of the chain, with a brief command from above to attach the empty barrel. Except during these moments there was hardly a pause in the screeching rasp made by the notched teeth, which were already embedded deeply in the thick link.

At first both shrank from slumber, dreading voluntary helplessness in the midst of so many unseen enemies, loathsome, or poisonous, or both, but they soon found that the labour, combined with the reeking gases of the place, induced a drowsiness which could not be shaken off, and frequently they had awakened simultaneously from a long stupor, bitten and stung and sucked by vile creatures which clotted their bodies like sores, defiling their very eyes and nostrils with their pestiferous excrement. To avoid this they worked and slept in watches, he who was working from time to time tending his sleeping comrade.

One by one the chains were snapped, until at last, with an exultant cry, Prince Nassur staggered to his feet, and raising his arms, adorned with their lengths of broken chain, he offered a prayer to his god, pledging a vow, and swearing an oath. He begged that god to grant him the sight of the dawning sun, and in return he, a Prince of the Kosalas, would build a temple of teak, and cedar, and the most precious woods. On the summit of a high hill he would build it, planting a shady grove on the slopes. And in the minaret of the temple he would hang a sweet-tongued bell, and

before the altar would be a succession of priests singing praises and offering gifts without end.

To the same god, changing his pleading voice to loud, angry tones, he swore an oath to take and torture a certain old priest with inflictions which it would be left to the humour of the moment to chose.

Uluan listened to the savage outburst with acute apprehension, so that he could hardly overcome the impulse to make his confession, and to crave forgiveness on the spot.

'And now—daylight, Uluan! Or is it night?' cried the Prince. with a terrible gaiety. 'You had better lead,—your instinct may guide you back the way you came. Ah! I forget. The cobras. Well, *I* will make a trial of their temper. Take my hand, lad, but don't follow too closely.'

He turned towards the passage, the direction of which could be judged, roughly, by a slight, yet steady draught of foetid, pungent air. He strode forward boldly—for four paces, and then he drew back, colliding violently with the youth behind him.

The intermittent hissing of the cobras had become concerted, and had swelled with a frightfully plain intimation of increasing anger at each step forward Nassur had taken, until at last it broke into swift, fierce sounds that told as clearly as sight of innumerable blunt heads, with wide-puffed hoods, beating backward and forward like flails.

It was one thing to walk in upon that fearful people unawares; it was something different to tread down their angry, expectant phalanx. To advance meant certain death.

Nassur knew how close he had been to destruction, and he drew away from the terrible sounds, for the moment quite unnerved. Uluan heard his strong teeth beat together violently as he strove to set his jaws, and the hand the youth held had grown cold and damp.

After a short silence, he laughed, a little shakily, yet a true laugh.

'Pah! This is fear indeed!' he said.

The fierce hissing had sunk to a low, gentle, almost attractive sibilation, which somehow gave to the awe-struck listeners the impression of quiet, indulgent laughter.

'You give fair warning, my friends,' said Nassur, then. 'On the whole I think the second plan the less hazardous. Let us see how far the ladder will reach, Uluan.'

Still holding hands, they stepped warily to the ladder, and raised it aloft. It soon collided with the sloping roof, but when they shifted the position so that it was, they judged, immediately under the trap, the ladder-top met with no resistance. Thus it was impossible to say how far it fell short.

'Now, Uluan, here's a chance to take your heels well beyond the range of snakes' teeth,' cried the Prince, with forced gaiety.

Until now something minatory and intimately oppressive in the thick darkness had been causing them to converse in hushed whispers; this sudden shout of Nassur's, instead of rending the spell, seemed to Uluan to redouble the terrors around them. His master's unnatural gaiety, too, alarmed him, betokening as it did intense nervous strain.

A kind of dream-like excitement, which had up

to this bemused the youth's mind, was now passed, and he was awakening to a new and fuller realisation of his extreme danger. Death took on a very understandable shape in that pest-ridden tomb.

He felt with his foot for the lowest inset peg, and climbed the ladder, which, in Prince Nassur's embrace, was held as rigid as if it were sunk in the rock.

On nearing the top he found himself in a kind of chimney, or chute, of considerable diameter. Another peg climbed, and his head came in contact with the trap-door. He pushed with all his strength against this, but without any effect, yet a coolness, and comparative freshness of the atmosphere thereabouts filled him with a lively hope. He descended rapidly, and communicated the good news to the Prince.

With the ladder resting against the side of the shaft, steadied by Uluan below, the Prince with arms free, could wait immediately below the trap until it was opened, and then—a sufficiently bold bid for freedom, one might be sure.

Such was the plan of action, and the moment of its accomplishment was already at hand.

The first of the heavy sounds that preluded the opening of the heavy trap startled them into activity.

'I'll seize the priest and throw him down here,' whispered Nassur excitedly. 'Do you steady the ladder. Use all your weight and strength,—from the *under* side, or he will fall upon you.'

Uluan obeyed, clasping the stout beam in his arms, and between his knees and feet, and leant

back beneath its slight incline. Nassur's robes brushed against his face, and afterwards he felt the shock of the Prince's weight at each reckless step upwards.

There was a pause, and he listened to the grating sound and the ringing blow as the stiff bolts were drawn back. He commenced to tremble at the moment when, he guessed, the men above were in the act of uniting their strength to lift aside the lid; then, with magical suddenness, the round hole of ruddy light shot into the shapeless gloom.

Against this light was silhouetted in a now familiar manner, the round head and narrow shoulders of the priest-jailor.

Then Nassur's bearded, strained face, moved, it seemed slowly, into view, hanging, apparently, bodiless in space, and, to the youth's darkened eyes, very vividly coloured. An irregular shadow obscured the disc, and in the same instant a tremendous blow was struck upon the ladder, just above his hands and the unmistakable soft thud of flesh beat upon the rough rock at his feet.

Was it the priest or Nassur? The youth dared not look to determine. His knees were pressed with painful force upon the sharp edges of the ladder, and he found that in a spasmodic movement he had flattened his mouth against the wood. His arms seemed turned to inflexible steel.

The body that had fallen moved,—stirred, his over-quickened perception told him, pitifully, like a cut worm, without leaving the spot it had struck.

But it was the priest that had fallen,—a little, old man, so slim and alert with strict living, that at some views he seemed a youth. Nassur had

grappled his neck, and though a mere jerk would have brought him pitching headlong, the prodigious effort hurtled him like an arrow down the narrow funnel. Up above a deep bass roared out an exclamation of dismay.

'Holy Cow!' it cried. 'He's tumbled in!'

Nassur was so near that when the soldier's hand, holding the torch, descended to the edge of the trap a spark of tow bit into his arm. Then the man's hairy face, with extended chin was thrust between his hands over the rim of the opening, and his eyes looked straight into the eyes of the Prince.

Fiercely Nassur gripped that bearded chin with his right hand, his fingers hooking upon the distended tendons, lacerating the flesh, while, heaving himself up until his foot barely touched the peg which supported him, he flung his left arm over the helmetted head to fasten his grasp upon the back of the man's neck.

The wary soldier had advanced his head cautiously, and it would have been a simple, albeit painful, matter for him to resist Nassur's attempt to drag his bulky, armoured frame through the narrow trap, but the flaming torch proved his undoing.

When the bull neck curved beneath the giant pressure of the Prince's arm, the soldier's cheek was brought into close contact with the torch, which he was still gripping,together with the edge of the trap. For a few seconds he endured the torture. The hair sizzled on his face and head, and the skin rose in white blisters, and these were charred, and burst. Then with a bubbling cry of despair he

slightly raised his hand, and the released torch slipped through the hole.

But the act was fatal. Watching for it, Nassur exerted his whole strength upon the weakened purchase of the man's arms; the wretched man's hands strove vainly to recover their clutch, he overbalanced, and his shoulders plunged into the chute. Nassur had only to beat off the wildly groping arms, and his victim had dived, screaming, into the pit.

Below, Uluan saw all the details of that short, titanic struggle until the moment when the falling torch swept past his eyes and dazzled them, preventing him from beholding the fall and impact of the doomed soldier. He saw him now, a huddled mass of gaudy robes, glinting panoply, and bronzed limbs, weakly illumined by the half-extinguished torch which lay beside him.

There was another sight also, one that threatened to paralyse his power of movement. Around the edge of the circular floor of the prison arose a fringe of swaying cobras, aggressively erect, obviously rendered furious by the turmoil of the last few minutes. They were dim, grey shapes, several of them of enormous size, and were only distinguishable from their hovering shadows by their red eyes reflecting the torch's glow. They were already lunging forward and lashing back viciously.

With the feeling that the whole brood were about to bury their fangs in his legs, Uluan sprang madly up the ladder into safety.

At the top Nassur was still stationed to steady the beam—but for him Uluan would never have completed his frantic flight—and it was he who assisted the half-swooning youth into the freer air.

They stood up in the house of the Dead Kings. The torch had gone out in the pit below them. Before them was a door ajar, revealing the brilliant sunlight, and beyond that a glimpse of white-walled, red-roofed houses.

XX

THE LORD BUDDHA

FOR half a mile along each of the three roads leading to the city there was an enormous crowding and confusion, and as the dense medley of peasants, bullock-carts, oxen, women and children converged upon the narrow gates, from it all issued, in a stunning clamour, the howls of children who were separated from their parents, the shouts and screams of owners who were parted from their property, and the bellowings of beasts that stamped in pain and impatience beneath swaying hills of oddly-assorted beds and chattels.

The hot season was at its height, and it was the noon-tide of the day. The low-lying sky of blue steel seemed to be discoloured by a heat which increased in intensity towards the furnace-like heart of the slight concave wherein lay hid the sun surrounded by an intolerable glare.

To the troubled eye the usual wide bounds of the flat landscape were narrowed by a magic fence of scarlet and yellow flares which anguished the sense; and the parched mouth opened, and the lungs panted before the fanning currents of hot, sandy air that dried the baking skin, and choked the nostrils.

In this light, and shaken by this cheating breeze,

the gaudy rags, shawls and turbans of the peasants flickered like points of flame, and made of the plaited cord of tattered humanity and burdened cattle a picture of indescribable liveliness.

Irruptions such as this had occurred before, but never one of equal magnitude. And the cause of it? The Kosalas, in quest of their prince, had crossed the border. Hence the absence of elephants from the scene, every available animal having taken its place in the line of battle, far away.

The peasants had learnt, traditionally, that in the face of an invading army, it was better on the whole to seek the shelter of their city's walls at the very onset of hostilities, carrying with them their portable effects, and reconciling themselves to the abandonment of their homes and crops to the meagre mercies of war—better to do that than to delay in the hope of escaping altogether the paths of the pillagers, or to stand their ground in order to parley with marauders who, on these occasions, were like to claim most strange tribute.

When all forward movement of the ragged column was ceasing, and there seemed every likelihood of the greater part of the swarming mass being trampled to death or suffocated, the head of a squadron of gorgeously plumed and caparisoned cavalry suddenly burst out of the city, and cleaving a ruthless furrow through the appalled throngs, thrusting man and animal headlong down the short declivity that bordered the highway, trotted away gaily at a rapid rate.

Before the cavalcade, the ringing of their accoutrements sounding loud above the hubbub, had disappeared behind a curtain of sparkling, tinted

dust, frenzied men and wailing women were already stumbling to and fro among the wreckage of household furniture and instruments which was strewn upon the broken ground, each one trying to single out of the heaving welter, here a half-buried infant, there an overturned, kicking beast weighed down by its mountainous load. The less damaged remnant of the disorderly host passed into the city.

This had been a scene of hourly occurrence during the last few days, and that being understood, the state of things within the walls is more imaginable.

It was as if the city were one vast private dwelling, wherefrom the roof had been ripped, laying naked to the view all the quaint mysteries of family life, the thousand circumstances which, within a lidded box, pass for the natural conditions of human cohabitation, but exposed to the sun are seen to be sordid, and degrading, and startling.

For the refugees, tentless and often screenless, just spread their beds and carpets in the streets and upon the flat roof-tops, and went on with their living as best they could.

In and out among this amazing population passed Shaho, the High-priest, and Gwali. The latter, of course, was still cloaked and hooded in his black, female apparel, while the former had, in addition to his fakir's dress, assumed a more complete disguise, smearing his face with chunam paste, and wearing a broad, plate-like hat of straw.

The old priest was now practically in hiding. He knew there were several plots to assassinate or kidnap him; therefore, with the exception of a

few ceremonial occasions, he spent all his nights and most of his days in this novel form of retirement.

At last, in a kind of miniature piazza, the pair found that in order to advance ahead or to either side they would be obliged to disturb, and probably to step upon, serried lines of single individuals and pairs, who, in profound stages of noon-slumber, had fallen into attitudes which, although supremely natural, seemed to demand, above all things, privacy.

They turned to retrace their steps, therefore, only to find that the several branches of a peculiarly obstreperous family that had been treading upon their heels, had already spread their mats and belongings across what remained of a path, and were now sprawling picturesquely thereon, while they prepared, lazily, to smoke themselves to sleep.

As to pass through them would almost certainly create a brawl, and it really was of no great moment where they spent the period of heat, Shaho and his eerie follower, thus enclosed, squatted themselves in the narrow space that fortune had so provided for them, and the old man, as usual, proceeded to ease his mind in speech.

'If they who have unseated me only knew their business, I might be more easily reconciled,' he said. 'They don't know it. They've allowed this city to be overcrowded, for one thing, and there's not one full day's victuals within the walls. And they are massing the army in one place, too, though they know very well they are fighting hordes of irregulars. They are too young, that's the trouble with our fine new masters!'

'Young men, Shaho, are the natural superiors of old men,' murmured Gwali.

'Yes, perhaps they are,' assented the old priest, with a bitter laugh. 'How can we hide it any longer —we old ones? Old brains halt and stumble as readily as old feet. Young men know it. Young wits hurry old wits in arguments and plans, and then have to stand and wait for us until we hobble to our conclusions. We disguise our weakness. We call it prudence, care, thought—what not, but *we* know, and *they* know. Yet they have difficulty in wresting power from us, and when they have power they abuse it! And why?'

'Perhaps because they have the more ambitious designs,' suggested Gwali.

'No,' said Shaho, emphatically. 'It is because their designs are too vague, and their energies too diffuse. As a man gets older his sphere gets narrower. Old men who have had brains never swerve. They can't see far, but as far as they can see—that's their goal. Singleness of purpose. Short-sightedness. That's how the old man wins.'

Gwali then began, in his own half serious, half mocking vein, to paint similes on the theme, likening youth to the kite which soars proudly in the heavens only to swoop down upon a carrion rat, and age to a purblind panther slinking along through slime and dust to prey upon the roe, the swiftest thing in the jungle.

But Shaho was already tired of the subject. Besides, the meditative mood, always somewhat alien to his nature, was being driven from him by thoughts of a far different complexion, thoughts that caused his underjaw to grind with a curious

circular motion that was at once comic and ferocious, whilst his little eyes flashed angrily from side to side, as if searching for an enemy to fasten upon, to begin anew the struggle he had so lately abandoned in despair. Then he grunted, and partly covering his face with his linen robe, composed himself to slumber.

Gwali, sleepless as ever, drew wider the slit in his veil to study his companion. The fakir's robe covered the old man in patches only. His narrow, hairy breast was half-stripped, as was also the whole of his globular paunch as far as the loins, where he was girt around by a cord fastening an end of the shapeless garment. Around this cord hung a fold of his immense, soft belly in the way the full water-skin pleats over the strap of the carrier.

His tapering legs were twisted bonelessly under him, and huge as they were, seemed ill-designed to balance the bulky trunk. His flat, horny, grimy feet, in their present posture, were like nothing so much as the flappers of some amphibious monster. Of his face only the lower part of the jaw was revealed.

That jaw exercised upon Gwali an attraction that amounted almost to fascination. It, too, was immense, but embedded in the pulpy mass of his neck it did not appear to be so. It was more than square, for the angles of its corners were behind the line of his ears, and, when its owner was awake, it possessed such extraordinary powers of mobility that it seemed, reversing the impression in common humanity, to take complete control of the flexible mouth, although it closed each period of activity

by a trap-like rigidity that considerably shortened his upper lip.

Gwali had seen one other such jaw. They had that very day watched a tumbler, who, seizing in his mouth a stout bamboo rod, which was slung horizontally between two strong uprights planted in the earth, and hanging thus suspended had dared, by the offer of a coin, any two of the spectators to break, by any means short of actual blows, the grip of his teeth. A pair of brawny young men had tried earnestly, and failed, though they twisted him, and jerked him, and hung their weight upon his shoulders. Shaho had grown excited over tne contest, and surreptitiously rewarded the grinning tumbler at its close.

Gwali imputed a sovereign worth to that priestly jaw. To his mind it was this feature alone which gave the clue to the essential difference between himself and the High-priest, and with a whimsical, girlish action he was caressing his own well-defined, symmetrical, but narrow face-bones when a violent movement on the part of one of the sleepers near by drew him from his abstracted regard of Shaho's countenance.

One of the younger men of the quarrelsome party, a short wiry-haired fellow, had turned over on his stomach, and raising himself upon his elbows, was staring at Gwali's face.

The look on this man's face in turn rivetted the attention of the youth. Half-stupified by some drug, and drowsy still, he had started up from a fevered sleep, and the first object to catch his eye had been the youth's beautiful, mask-like face looking out, coquettishly, from behind the maidenly veil.

Following close upon one knows not what nameless, sottish, sun-fostered dream, his mistake was explicable enough; it was the sudden and complete domination over him of the purely animal instinct, as depicted in his whole person, that struck Gwali, and aroused his curiosity.

It was not that the fellow leered lewdishly—that degree of animalism could cause no astonishment, being at least as common as a boor's honeymoon. Neither had he the sullenness of conscious evil, nor the distraught grimace of ordinary lust; it was simply that every trace of intelligence was erased from his face and attitude, and there was substituted, not the cold stoniness that was Gwali's peculiarity, nor a more than common vacancy, but an all-devouring purposefulness and force that incited the youth to the keenest interest by reason of the utter absence of any sign of selfishness.

Gwali knew that some workings of his mysterious personality had affected the sleeping consciousness of the man; he divined that the man was in reality not fully awake, but was being controlled by a profounder law than ever appears on the surface of life, perhaps that ultimate will in things, which had been touched and surprised into operation out of its due order. Full of curiosity, and himself guided by instinct, he smiled in a certain way, and gestured like a woman.

The response of the man was swift, almost violent in its energy. He at once plunged forward until his head and the upper part of his body rested upon Gwali's legs. Then, alternately fawning upon the youth and exerting rough meaningless effort, he kept speaking in a deep, stirring voice, expressing

himself in a phraseology, not merely devoid of all the uncouthness in word and accent that was to be expected from the mouth of a raw countryman, but actually in his tones imparting an effect of something like sublimity.

'Though you sit motionless, as beautiful and as forbidding as a moon of ill-omen, yet I do not fear you,' he said. 'You beckoned and I have come to you unafraid. O quiet woman, what will you do to me? You will awake to fury and rend my bosom. Yet I do not fear you. O my sister, my sweet one, I am strengthless in your terrible presence. I implore you—encompass me in your rage, and crush my life from me!'

It seemed to Gwali that he was listening to the murmur of that infinite ocean of seething energy which in its eruptions through the filmy crust of propriety, itself made up of caution, fear and error, is named, according to the chance nature of its manifestations, love, passion, lust, power,—Will.

He knew he was face to face with that really tremendous spectacle—the final throes of a man's overmastering desire. Never before, probably, since humanity was completely evolved, had a man looked thus save into the face of the woman who had evoked his passion, and even then only when hidden alone with her.

Never before had this greatest of all mysteries, the fount indeed of all mystery, unshrouded itself to such a searching, musing gaze, for in natural cases the woman's ecstasy, whatever form it took, would undoubtedly be at least co-equal, blinding her too, and dispersing in her the conditions of individuality, which are also the essential conditions of judgment and memory.

'So!' murmured Gwali, regarding the man askance, through eyes almost closed, for fear of working upon him any less subtle change than chance had wrought. 'So it is true—only by becoming utterly base can a man draw near to the divine.'

These things passed through his mind, not in slow meditation, but fully formed and associated in the one flash of understanding during the very first words of the countryman's unexpectedly profound pleading.

Thus it was that there was no interval of silence or inaction, but immediately the possessed man ceased to speak, some other limiting faculty awoke in him, his inspired look changed to one of stupidity, and the restless, fondling play of his hands upon Gwali's knees ended abruptly.

Without effort, the latter forced the man's still rigid body a few feet away from him. He then drew himself back to his station beside the priest, and assuming an attitude of deep sleep, watched, through his drawn veil, the outcome of his curious experiment.

Even while being pushed away through the dust, the man had kept his sightless eyes upon Gwali's face, and it was mainly by the change in them that his hardly perceptible return to a normal state could be followed.

What exactly it was of nobility, infinitude, and grandeur that departed at the same time out of his whole countenance was at any rate beyond the definition of the youth's strange philosophy. Certainly it came to be no longer imaginable that this boor could ever have been an object of wonderment, the living symbol, the very embodiment, of

life's largest mystery, which, deluded perhaps by the chance contact with Gwali's twilight soul, had seemed on the point of revealing itself, welling up through the gates of this peasant's sub-consciousness.

Gwali watched him. He rubbed his eyes, and then, struck by a sudden suspicion, plunged his hand beneath his garment in search of his purse. This he drew out and examined, at the same time turning a slant-wise, cunning regard upon the woman asleep in the fakir's shadow.

'She's been at me, all the same,' he muttered.

He arose, and came and stood over Gwali.

'Bitch!' he said. 'What were you doing to me in my sleep to make me dream of green angels?'

'Come on, come on. Out with it. Your sort don't sleep like honest women,' he continued, after a pause. 'Stop nuzzling at your lousy priest, and tell the truth, or——'

A string of artfully inter-related curses, and an angry spurning with his foot of Gwali's body warned the latter that he must find at once some means of quieting the fellow, or a scuffle would ensue, leading to the inevitable disclosure of himself, and then, in that excitable, superstitious multitude, a dangerous riot.

Yet he was, for some reason, loth to use unnatural methods, and he was in the act of arousing Shaho, to see what a fakir's curse could effect, when . . .

A word, sweeping like a wind over the drowsy concourse in the piazza, brought the whole swarm to tip-toe, and all, Gwali, Shaho, and the troublesome rustic with the rest, craned their necks to

catch a glimpse of a small group of men, six in number, who were entering the square from one of the four narrow alleys.

'Gautama. The Buddha,' whispered the folk to one another. 'The Enlightened One. The Saviour.'

Shaho, towering a span above the tallest in the crowd, had a clear view along the sea of bobbing turbans, and he made eager use of his advantage.

He saw a young man of medium height, of a graceful, rounded mould, with that pale brown, almost saffron, complexion of smooth skin which distinguished the noble-born. He was meagrely garbed in three linen cloths of a bright orange yellow which he wore arranged around the loins, waist, and over the left shoulder in the beggar's traditional style. The significance of the costume could not be missed—it was the glorification of beggary, the apotheosis of the beggar.

But it was not until later that the eye was free to examine the dress of this splendid mendicant, singular and bright-hued though it was, for his countenance drew and held the attention tyrannously.

In themselves his features were remarkable only on account of a more than ordinary beauty and delicacy, without, however, the fineness ever suggesting the loveliness of a woman; it was the expression that played upon them, the personality that shone out through them, that held the gaze enthralled with wonderment and love.

He was smiling as he walked slowly down the narrow lane which opened out before him through the swaying, rapidly gathering crowd, and, as men were wont to recall, of all the godlike qualities he displayed, of power and attraction, subtle and

overwhelming, none was so potent to win the world as his smile. It was a quick smile of pleasure and intimacy, and he nodded his head as a friend, singly, to each one of those nearest him, holding out his hands in order that those who could reach them might touch them, since all were striving, with reverently dissembled violence, for the mystic privilege.

Casually, it might seem that there was an element of shyness in that smile, of nervousness, even, of self-consciousness, as if it were not quite spontaneous. But to a hostile or loving inspection, a deeper complexity was discovered. Such a one, enemy or disciple, would be led to believe that there was a part of the man's nature that could not smile, that there was a province of his soul sequestered from all human commerce. Thus, though love and kindness radiated from him so plenteously that the multitude exclaimed at the halo they thought they saw illumining his brow, there remained something mask-like in his face, an underlying tone of expression that caused a distant, yet undeniable, resemblance, so Shaho meditated, to Gwali's rigid, carven countenance.

Majesty suffused his whole person, drawing cries of adulation and awe from those who pressed upon him, and many fell upon their knees, striking their foreheads in the dust, and kissing the place where his feet had trodden. He seemed as he went to be rendering with both hands invisible gifts of sweetness and gentleness and peace, for the rude faces of slaves and rustics were transfigured and exalted as he passed.

The High-priest, with an uneasy comment to

express, turned to address Gwali, and found the youth gone. He looked hither and thither, and soon espied the tall woman's form channeling with extraordinary ease and directness through the clamorous mob, making straight for a point where the Sakya prophet must pass.

In the youth's wake the crush was loosened considerably as man and woman alike forgot the greater curiosity in their dumbfoundedness at the inexplicable manner in which they had been handled and unplaced, and before they had time to close their ranks again Shaho was plunging an elephantine way through their midst. When the Buddha drew near, and the crowd fell away on either side, in profound respect, the High-priest was by that time immediately behind Gwali, who was himself within an arm's length of the prophet.

Shaho had for long been aware of this man's existence, and if he was ignorant of the nature of the doctrine that was being spread, he was, at any rate, very much alive to the social changes that were following his gentle iconoclasm. Under the influence of the new teaching, the provincial governors had reported, the sudras, peasant-slaves, were assuming the airs of nobles, while their masters bowed their heads in meekness and obedience.

'Speak to us, O Holy One.'

'O Sovereign One, I have a swelling on my neck.'

'My little daughter is wasting away unto death.'

'Look upon this fester on my eye, O Healer of the Poor.'

'Teach us Truth, O Master.'

'Pity me—behold!'

'Stay with us, O Son of Heaven.'

'This one, my son, is darkened in mind—touch his head, Protector.'

'She is dumb, this poor little one.'

'Let Thy Teaching enlighten us.'

Such were the words arising above the hubbub of petitions and praises, and the Buddha stretched out his hands to rest them lightly upon the heads of idiot children, to touch quivering sores, and twisted or withered limbs, all the while murmuring (Shaho heard the words only when Gautama was directly opposite to him):

'Be kind, my children, be kind always. To one another, to the beasts that serve you, to everything that lives, visible and invisible, be kind.'

In his voice, too, though he was no more than whispering these words, Shaho thought he detected among the delicate, persuasive modulations, a prevailing suggestion of Gwali's own penetrating monotone,—and indeed there was much of the timbrous quality of the youth's speech in the Buddha's tones, inducing in the breasts of his hearers something of the same half-pleasureable excitement that Gwali was able to arouse at will.

The High-priest saw Gwali raise his hands to widen the slit in his veil, and simultaneously Gautama came to a startled halt, all his placidity gone, and in its place, troubling his wide, soft eyes, came fear and bewilderment. He lifted his head expectantly, like a stag to whom, unawares, a breeze is borne full of the scent of its enemies.

Thus he remained for several seconds, and the crowd around, astonished at the change in him, was quietened. Then the smile curved his lips again,

and his spirit visibly recovered its deep tranquillity. He resumed his way, speaking more loudly:

'Bow before the mighty ones like grass in the wind and their strength will pass over you, my children. Be as water before the dart of evil, not uplifting and strengthening yourselves like shining targets. Be like the light clouds of summer which admit the rays of the sun, and are brightened thereby; be not like the clouds of winter, adding illusion to illusion until no sun can pierce the darkness, and you are riven by the lightning, which is anger, and tossed by the winds of desire.'

Behind him, at a short interval, walked five disciples, similarly garbed and with humble mien. Four of them were at mid-life, and bore the unmistakeable scars of past asceticism. The last was a very young man, fair in skin like Gautama himself, whose features had been so moulded by pride that the new expression sat most quaintly upon them.

At the heels of these the crowd closed, hiding the preacher, and Shaho and Gwali were for some time carried along by the tide of humanity that was following him. The old priest, gyrating and plunging like a cork in an eddy, was at once swept away from Gwali, while the latter was for the moment hampered by the attentions of two soldiers who were using the confusion to molest women. However, by a characteristic employment of strength combined with anatomical knowledge, the youth eventually left his chief tormentor, in a temporarily crippled condition, to the care of his comrade, and made haste to rejoin Shaho.

The crowd was thinning, the vast majority hav-

ing succeeded in squeezing through the passage down which the Buddha had gone. It was no longer a single, hydra-headed entity, therefore, but a press of distinguishable individuals, and Gwali was finding it a comparatively simple matter to follow Shaho's slackening course, when another figure was suddenly and violently jammed against him, and although he was immediately bustled away again the youth had recognised him.

It was Uluan, soiled and dishevelled, looking ill, and plainly at a loss. While Gwali was watching him he saw another man burst rudely through the throng and join the lyrist, whispering in his ear, and in spite of the extraordinary change that the Prince had lately suffered in his outward appearance, Gwali recognised Nassur. He noted too that he was excited by a furious anger, and guessed the cause.

Nassur began directly to make his way through the crowd towards Shaho, who, save for an occasional jostle, was no longer being harried, and was standing wiping the perspiration from his brow with his hand, in a very ill-humour.

Heedless, now, of himself, Gwali, with the action of a powerful swimmer, clove his way through the people, who cursed him and struck him as he passed. Nassur and Uluan were already close beside the big priest, who had seen Gwali's approach and was waiting impatiently, suspicious of danger, but quite unconscious of its actual nearness.

Uluan's duty was, apparently, to screen the blow, and to do this he was spreading out his cloak under the pretence of searching at his belt. He was in immediate contact with the priest, standing in

such a way as to hide Nassur, who, slightly in the rear, and well within striking distance, was awaiting an opportunity to deliver the dagger-thrust unnoticed by those around.

The moment came. A new stampede, half a panic, was started, and Nassur's elbow and wrist bulged out of the folds of his cloak behind him.

Leaping forward from the rear, Gwali seized the protruding elbow with his right hand, and tightened his grip upon it with all his strength, burying his long fingers between the muscles, whilst his other hand slipped under the Prince's left arm, and fastened fiercely upon the flesh over his heart.

Nassur did not turn. He threw up his head, speechless with agony, and at the same moment the dagger fell at his feet.

Gwali released his grip, and leaving the Prince hanging in a fainting condition upon the shoulders of Uluan, who, his back being turned, had not observed the deed, hurried away with the still unsuspecting priest.

'Do you know, Gwali,' said Shaho, as they neared the Temple, 'unless we have a plague very soon we may as well close the doors of yon puppet-show. There's no despising that Gautama. He has the people's ear.'

After some further thought, he continued, breathlessly, for Gwali was hurrying him:

'What we must have is a miracle. It is high time we had a miracle. We haven't had one since the big drought, nearly two years ago, and we did wonderfully well out of that,—wonderfully well. Splendid head for miracles had Lalhk, poor fellow.'

He sighed. Beneath the gigantic porch of the edifice he paused, caught by an idea.

'I saw a man in the crowd extraordinarily like Nassur,' he said. 'Older, but extraordinarily like. No, much too old. Still, it reminds me,—it is high time to get rid of Nassur.'

He plunged into the hot gloom of the vast interior, and Gwali, making no answer, followed. The youth's thoughts were all with the Buddha, towards whom he felt an almost irresistible attraction. Apart from that, he was disturbed by this discovery of a man, who, beyond a slight initial shock and alarm, had proved himself to be altogether outside the range of the mysterious power at Gwali's command, a power which Gwali had already begun to think was, as far as the subjugation of human beings was concerned, omnipotent.

XXI

A NOCTURNE

THE vast group of buildings, comprising the Temple, the Monastery, the Palace, and its attendant summer-houses, lay on that outskirt of the city most remote from the three chief gates, and the edifices formed in their ensemble a chord, breaking the circle of the city walls.

On that segment there was no need for defences, for here a deep backwater of the Yamuna lapped the mossy marble of Palace and Temple with soft, velvety wavelets; or, in the silent fullness of the river's flood, if it were night, the lake-like expanse swelled a shining, inky bosom to the stars; if day, spread a glittering mirror of gold or silver,—to the very horizon, an occupant of one of the shallow, shell-like boats might be led to fancy.

It was now neither night nor day, and there were many such boats rocking at the foot of the stairs leading to the Palace. The coolness that came without the motion of a breeze was as delightful to heat-wearied flesh as the touch of a lover's hair, and the soft grey and blue of the water-mists curtaining the tender, blurred green upon the river-banks was balm to eyes dulled and strained by the merciless glare of noon.

In the central position at the end of the stairs lay a large, round boat, or, rather, raft, shaped like a

water-lily, but, on account of the glorious colour of the cloths that lined it, and trailed upon the water by its side, more nearly resembling the distended petals of a great crimson rose.

A fleet of frail craft of the same fashion, and similarly bedecked, surrounded it, and in the prow of each, with gilt paddles across their knees, sat youths clad in uniforms of silver silk, who were steadying the larger boats with their hands, and waiting in expectant silence.

Night drew on. A ruby stain, washed irregularly across the darkening blue of the sky, lingered reminiscent of the day's burning heat, and through it the stars sparkled with a reddened fire. The amber waters of the Yamuna became a livid purple. The distant murmur of the fierce life in the city seemed only to exaggerate the tense local stillness.

There was a small islet a quarter of a mile away, the smallest of a string of such, shielding this lagoon-like place from the turbulence of the great river. It stood away from its sister-isles, and in its centre arose a tall temple of fairest white stone, whose graceful, slender spires over-topped the grove of lofty palms which surrounded it. Towards this island the eyes of the youthful boatmen were directed.

Soon, from a hidden harbour, stole forth a large, white barge. It emerged into view spectrally, a white blur upon the filmy mists, and it seemed not to approach, but to condense into definite shape, and to enlarge. About mid-way between the island and the Palace stairs an anchor slid into the smooth waters, and the vessel hove to—a spotless, mastless coffin-thing.

At first the only movement discernible was in the changing folds of the vast white pall that shrouded the ship from end to end, and hung down over the side to the water's edge. After a while, however, a number of white-gowned female figures that had been lying prostrate before a platform upon the unsheltered deck, arose, and stood in a motionless line watching one of their number, who walked with solemn step to the prow. This one raised a long thin trumpet to her lips, the flash upon the metal giving the first intimation that the new moon had arisen, and a single, faint, melancholy call rang out, and died quaveringly away.

At the top of the stairs was a wide terrace, and beyond that, obscure and deserted, a semi-circular court-yard, which was masked by a screen of tapering pillars surmounted by fantastic and ornate arches.

At the sound of the trumpet a door at the back of the court-yard was thrown open, and a double line of slaves, carrying crystal lamps swinging from chains, issued forth, and, separating into single files, ranged themselves round the semi-circle.

The double line of pillars now appeared as black lines barring a scene of extraordinarily confused colour, for mosaics of pica, topaz, and shimmering stones of yellow-green, and all hues, as well as paintings, covered every surface of walls and pavement, and they shone forth and vanished intermittently in masses of cloudy brilliance as the short-ranged, fickle rays of the lamps were caught and lost. Just inside the door, a group of youths, bending rhythmically, were kindling their censers, and

the strong light inside the Palace illumined the faint-blue clouds of incense that were floating heavily far out into the court-yard.

Then came the sound of reed-pipes, a thin music furiously played, always on the one short theme, but subtly, interminably varying it. The sounds struck the ear as weak and irritating, and out of accordance with the magnificence and elaboration of the scene. Curiously, the palpitation, apparently so artless and irrelevant, of the accompanying drums had the effect of arousing and quickening expectation. Here was the true throb of the fevered pulse; the reeds piped but meaninglessly, even as maids will in the very arms of passion.

The sounds grew louder and clearer; the musicians appeared and passed into the open air of the court. After them came troupe upon troupe of nobles and courtiers, and with them all the liberated women of the harem, as well as the host of beautiful slaves, who, by virtue of their charms, had won the right to consort with princes. With these were to be seen Mowela and Avrah.

Some among them carried lamps, and here and there soldiers posted themselves, holding flaming torches. Following an interval, during which the space in front of the door was cleared, a procession of dancing girls passed out, swaying their lissome, semi-nude forms with a skilled languor and a practised diffidence, which, like the music, seemed designed to delay, to hold in sweet abeyance, the crisis of a passion already aroused, rather than to promote the amorous fury.

Behind the dancers came a band of children bearing long garlands of flowers festooned from hand

to hand, and immediately after them, Seti, the Queen, and Paphos, the Greek, her temporary consort.

They walked side by side beneath a canopy of yellow silk, surrounded by fan-bearers, and the pageant closed with a company of the gilt-panoplied guards, who halted and formed themselves up in the entrance. The others were already proceeding, in some order, through the pillared archway, down the stairs, to the boats.

Her prodigal life during the last few weeks had had the effect of maturing Seti marvellously. Her figure had grown fuller, she walked erect, and with a certain dignity and a new disdain. Her face had lost its eager, impish look, and there was a general suggestion of ennui and nonchalance in her air. She wore a single, sleeveless robe of green, streaked with undulating silver lines to simulate, at her least movement, a cascade of moon-lit ripples.

Paphos was paler, and a trifle jaded, yet his step was light, and his smile bland and serene—the suspicion of anxiety that could be noticed in his bearing was adducible to no deep soul-trouble, being plainly the natural uneasiness of a dramatic artist whilst watching the unfolding of his ideas into material fact.

Nevertheless, as master of the revels. the Greek had already begun to dread the hour when his ingenious brain would finally refuse to serve up fresh plans for warding off the tragic and unaccountable sadness which was forever threatening the brightness of the young queen's life, chilling her often in the midst of her wildest transports of pleasure,—and these, Paphos had not been long in discovering, could be very wild indeed.

Thus far he had fulfilled his duties with magnificent success. The scope was immense, and was, therefore, entirely suited to his genius, which needed, above all things, an unrestricted area of operation, for his nature it was to conceive everything, even, in deeply despondent hours, his notion of himself, as focussed against the background of the complete universe, and ideas bred in this way are apt to brook no limitation in their outward seeming.

Yet his task, though congenial, had not been an easy one, for, after all, his medium and milieu were alike barbarian, while the taste he had to consider, the quality of pleasure he was called upon to incite, was altogether foreign to his Greek intelligence.

Moreover, Seti was exacting to a degree. A repetition, even of one of his most consummate achievements, was intolerable to her. Change—daily, nightly, hourly change—that alone soothed her strangely tortured soul. Paphos used himself unsparingly in her service. He plainly foresaw the hour when his brain would fail to respond to the inordinate demands he was making upon it, but in the meantime, with drugs and stimulants, he goaded and spurred his fainting faculties to fresh miracles of creation. And his reward? Seti herself was his reward.

Inspiration, however, was not of late moving him as readily as of yore to the discovery of fresh delights in the purely sensuous realm, and this night he was to make his first attempt to economise the Queen's small remaining store of sensual illusion by concocting a piquant dish of what there was of weirdness and mystery in the cults of the native gods.

'Alas! I am of a daylight race!' he was saying. 'You of the Orient become your true selves when the sun is hidden; we of the west, unless we sleep, become our worst selves. There is often a difference. We are secretly afraid of the dark, even yet. Our poets peopled it with fancies too tragic, too grim, too grotesque, too cruel—and such fancies, preying upon the brains of generations arrive in the end at a sort of actuality. Yes, I can believe that. We step diffidently through the darkness, with haunched shoulders, apologising to the unseen inmates for our intrusion. You are wiser. You have made friends with the night. We light fires to drive her away; you hang your lamps like jewels upon her.'

Seti, surprised into pleasure again by the wonder and novelty of the fête, threw off her pensiveness, and caught his mocking mood.

'True self or worse self, I *do* change in the night,' she said. 'Thought sleeps then, and life presses more closely upon me. Then I love myself. I love my life, and am curious to know what is going to happen. Night-time influences me like that—sometimes.'

'Indeed, indeed,' sighed Paphos. 'Without the glamour that it is the business of poesy to supply, without the mystery obscurity affords, the naked deeds of living grow tiresome, habitual, charmless. We, the spoilt children of reason, are ever asking just to be deceived. O God, deceive us! And yet even simple souls, they whose days are brightened by delightful superstitions, feel no need for religion at night. All priests sleep o' nights, for the night is without gods or creeds.

Venus herself is early to couch, and once lain down is deaf to supplication. The Moon! She is no goddess! Pale assistant of love's red shame, she sits like a blighted lover turned to mid-wifery.'

'And yet,' laughed Seti, 'you wore out my patience begging me to come and watch these priestesses worship her!'

' 'Tis a quaint ritual, and it will please you, Beloved,' answered Paphos. 'Only thrice in the year, at certain mystic concatenations of phase and season, is it performed. I chanced upon it many months ago, when, other approaches to the Palace being more carefully guarded than they are today, I came hither in a boat——'

'For Mowela!' murmured Seti.

Paphos glanced at her quickly, half-hoping she disliked the remembrance of that liaison. The Queen caught the look.

'If you are conceited enough to fancy I care,' she remarked, 'I shall make you spend the evening with her, do you see!'

'Let me tell you of this ritual,' said the Greek hurriedly. 'There are, by the way, few worships I have not seen. I have assisted at the mysteries at Eleusis, which is a very tiresome ceremonial, but very select. I have witnessed the Osiris sacrifice, which, well done, is one of the very best. And I have dozed while Jews read pig-skins interminably in an empty barn. Mechanical Molochs, whispering sunbeams, foaming prophets—I know them all! Yet this is something quite original; naîve to the point of shamelessness, profound to the degree of hysterics.'

They had by this descended the stairs. Slowly

they had moved, caressed into lassitude by the cool, fondling air; and now the boats were already filled each according to its capacity and, as far as obedience could be enforced upon that gay, unruly crowd, following the designation of the Greek, who was accustomed to arrange all the details of grouping and lighting with a care and art hitherto unimagined.

They were guided to their barge by a lovely gangway of children, holding their garlands, behind these being boys with censers, and a third line of youths held their lamps aloft. The musicians in a boat withdrawn considerably, were playing tirelessly, their pipes and drums being augmented by ponderous stringed-instruments whose buzzing note penetrated the body with curiously localized excitement. Indeed, of them, in this regard, Paphos, who, having no great liking for native instruments, had only admitted them in deference to tradition, used to affirm that their strings were surely taken from the organs of men, and that by some wizardry of sympathy their vibrations could appeal only to the parts from which they were torn.

'How sweet the children are!' cried Seti. 'Oh, I am jealous of them! I would like to have remained always like them—like this one!'

She drew from the line a little brown girl, the very counterpart of herself at that age, could she have known it, and caused the child to walk with her.

'Children have a wonderful decorative value,' said the Greek. 'If only we had the means of freezing them into immobility at the right moment.'

At his signal, according to pre-arrangement, the ranks of children and youths broke up, and descended to seat themselves around the edge of the Royal barge. this being done only after a deal of confusion and some gambolling that much annoyed Paphos. He himself then stepped down upon the carpeted deck, and, with more tenderness than ceremony, assisted the Queen to descend. Hand-in-hand they went to the dais of cushions, which, under a canopy of feathers, was raised in the centre of the barge, and there they half-sat, half-reclined, Paphos, with gentle compulsion, forcing the beautiful girl to lie back upon his breast, her head pillowed upon his shoulder, and her breath upon his cheek.

When all was ready, a bearded, merry-eyed captain of the guards, standing upon the alabaster quay, unfastened the moorings, and at once the circular craft began to drift away, and, with a swift plying of gilt oars and paddles, the surrounding flotilla kept pace with her.

The last to start was the tiny boat, shaped like a half-unrolled scroll, which awaited the merry-eyed captain. This boat seemed at first sight to contain only Avrah, and a riotous youth who evidently hailed from Phoenicia, or perhaps Judea, but when the captain had jumped into it, and was experiencing some difficulty in balancing himself, Mowela arose from her supine posture, and clasped him about the thighs, to steady him.

For some minutes Seti remained smiling and passive, quite unresponsive to Paphos's increasing ardour. Always secretly contemptuous in his wooing, cynically observant even in his passion, the

Greek would hitherto have declared that this submissiveness was on the whole the most fitting tribute that could be paid to his charm and personality.

In common with all men whose vanity leads them to collect the spoils of victory in every chance, wayside conquest, his bodily desires had been surfeited long before his soul had discovered her proper nourishment, and because in his transient flights he never more than touched upon the surface of love, he came at last to deny altogether the truth of its profundity. Love, he would say, was an appetite capable of being cultured indefinitely by a judicious selection of dainty fare,—strong condiments and piquant sauces being sternly tabooed, or permissible only in the fatal season when age and excess should have dulled irredeemably the finer edge of sensibility. A fair woman he regarded as a choice viand, the more surpassing her beauty, the greater her rarity, and the more urgent, therefore, the necessity of her immediate attainment. And if perchance she proved unattainable—and how extraordinary rare was that occurrence!—well, one must not be a martyr to fastidiousness. At any rate, the appetite must be appeased.

What broke the back of this philosophy was his discovery that, though unexpressed, or rather expressed too simply, without cynical analogies, yet eloquently enough, with smiles and gestures, this was precisely the code of Queen Seti also, and that his manhood, his refined, invincible manhood, was being ruthlessly sifted for the delight of a little, brown, whimsical fledgling! It amounted to this; he was draining himself of vitality, using himself

to the last quiver of his nerves, for a mere girl's pleasure, and no longer with any thought of his own. And when he was done, drained, exhausted, she would cast him aside. She had told him she would!

So he, Paphos, his vain-glory quite gone, was, he believed, staking his life's happiness on one issue, the winning of this wilful girl's love. Under his manner of flippancy and extravagance, a pose it cost him some anguish at times to maintain, his assumption of which, however, Seti insisted on, as being his most amusing characteristic, he was being tortured by a burning fever which he feared to think was that most commonplace of all human ailments, love. And when his jeering intellect, conquered at last, to save its face, made haste to insist upon the absolutely unique quality of his particular passion, he was alas! and knew it, only adhering still more rigidly to the eternal lowly exemplar.

Be it remembered that in these affairs the fact of Seti's being Queen carried no weight whatever, for she had never once pretended to undertake the responsibility of government, nor did she display at any time the least interest in the political storm that was raging around her, while, except for the furtherance of pleasure or folly, she exerted nothing of the tremendous despotic power vested in her.

As he mused upon her, exploring her soul, Paphos came to the conclusion that, by some gift of the gods or natal accident, the vision of her mind was too enlarged, too penetrating, for the needs of ordinary living. He thought he discovered be-

hind all her pleasures an immeasurable discontent, and below her folly and gaiety, a most profound irony. It seemed to him that by a trick of fate this beautiful girl was as keenly aware of the terrifying voids and abysses in life as were the philosophers who had sunk the plumbet of their logic into them in vain; as the poets whose intensest flashes of inspiration had been swallowed up in their depths.

But indeed the problem of the girl's mind was at once simpler and less conceivable. Her irony was unconscious, her discontent to herself inexplicable. She was unaware of the unsoundable deeps of philosophy; she only knew that robbed of the mysteriously intimate companionship of Gwali's bright and bold intelligence, life was bereft of more than half its interests and possibilities, and she was tormented by the memory of her past happiness, as well as by the completeness of its loss. She desired Gwali.

'Yes, yes, yes!' she now replied with constrained impatience to some words the Greek was whispering, his lips touching her ear. 'Only do not be thinking of love always when you are with me. I will tell you when I wish to be loved.'

Paphos withdrew his arms, and gazed at her in apprehension.

'How cold you can be!' he murmured.

'Why? Because I say, love me when you're wanted?' cried Seti, laughing. 'Isn't that what man always says to the woman—in his heart—give me love when I want it, says he, neither before nor after, and especially not after.'

His love was making Paphos very serious. At this moment he was overflowing with protesta-

tions of sincerity and undying fidelity, and he was only saved from the fatal error of uttering them by a chance breath of his sadly overwhelmed sense of humour which just then bubbled to the surface.

'By the Horns of Bacchus!' he cried, 'I am too engrossed. I grow dull. My soul is not used to being so deeply moved. When it is so stirred it shudders, and that is fortunate, because when it shudders it jingles the bells upon its jester's cap, and that reminds me.'

The flotilla had by this formed into a crescent with the Royal barge mid-way between the cusps. Less than fifty yards away lay the white-enshrouded ship, and within her the ghastly crew had obliterated all evidence of their presence by their motionlessness. The priestess with the trumpet still stood at the prow, and towards her now all eyes were turned.

She was a tall woman, and her meagre body was bound, mummy-wise, with bands of white linen. Her lower limbs were swathed separately, but were partly concealed by a long white tabard of many folds reaching from her neck to below the knee, and having in it slits for the outlet of her bandaged arms. Even her fingers were encased in a linen skin, and whether she was young or old could not be gauged; for her face was smeared with pure white chunam-powder, as was also her neck, and her scalp too, for her head was shaven.

'I have a craving to spend a night upon that island,' remarked Paphos. 'To perch me in the branches of one of those cypresses, and from thence to peer down into that chaste temple. Cypresses, however, are exceptionally awkward to

climb. And besides, I have before me the hallowed example of Orpheus and his dire fate. Beauty like mine is a source of horrible risk in the presence of enforced virginity in the mass.'

The priestess raised her trumpet to her lips, and a hush of half reverent, half amused expectancy quietened the gay people in the boats.

Day was quite departed, and in the dark blue, purple-stained, star-pocked heavens the small moon was burning with the white flare of a magnesian flame. But somehow her rays seemed not to reach the darkened earth, and the glowing tints of the countless lamps retained their full value,—illumining rich masses of dusky colour, and playing upon many a laughing countenance in the gently rocking fleet.

The mysterious ship appeared more than ever unreal as she sat heavily upon the black, sparkling waters, for, with the increase of the night, her white shroud caught the hue of the moon's own light, and became a pallid, phantom blue. The weak trumpet-note quavered forth again . . .

Immediately an extraordinary frenzy broke out on the deck of the holy ship. Several hatchways were thrown open, and out of them, from the hold, clambered streams of women, shrieking, tossing their arms, and whirling their bodies in a state of maddest excitement. All were swathed skin-tight in white, their faces and heads being painted like that of the trumpeter-priestess, but they wore no tabards, and thus presented, in their tortured writhings, a wierd and grotesque sight that was not atoned for by the exquisitely beautiful shape of many of them—a saving feature duly noted and approved by Paphos's critical eye.

The musicians had momentarily forgotten their office in their curiosity; they now set to with renewed zeal, and rendered a fitting accompaniment to the shrill clamour of the pythonesses.

The maniacal rage seemed to affect the spectators, especially the female portion of them, and Seti, as usual, displayed a consuming eagerness to catch the ecstasy, and to abandon herself to this spiritual debauch. She ran hither and thither, and short, sharp cries kept exploding from her throat. Paphos tried to restrain her, but vainly. She repulsed him, and leaning far over the bows of the boat, so far over that the ends of her hair dipped into the water, cried out:—

'Row nearer. Nearer yet. I can feel that! I want to be with them! Row! I command.'

Paphos, now thoroughly regretting the whole affair, knelt down beside her, and encircled her waist with his arms.

'Dear one!' he said soothingly. 'If we go any closer they'll inflict us with curses. And if anybody on this earth has the control of evil be sure yonder ladies have! We're much better off where we are, love. Just sit quiet, and watch them. They have a very pretty performance to go through. If we interrupt, we'll only spoil it.'

Crowded together in a solid phalanx, with arms stretched upwards entreatingly, and swaying slowly from one leg to the other, the white women were now chanting in unison.

Paphos's musicians were silent again.

Seti, trembling and perspiring, still yearning towards the ship as if she would fly across the intervening space, let her body droop into the

Greek's embrace, while her hands fell nervelessly, and were hidden by the black waters. She remained not long in this position. Suddenly and furiously she broke from the arm that held her, and seizing a gilt paddle from the hands of one of the rowers, began to beat upon the water.

'Row, dogs and slaves,' she cried. 'I am the Queen who commands you! Row,—or I will have you all skinned with whips!'

Reluctantly the rowers obeyed, and the boat moved slowly forward. Seti continued to ply her paddle, smiling triumphantly. Paphos, for the moment paralysed by horror and alarm, could conceive no other plan of saving himself from the threatened danger but to plunge overboard and swim ashore. From this discomforting expedient he was happily rescued by an apparition which had the further effect of releasing Seti from her obsession.

This was no less common an object than the dog-like nose of an immense alligator, which touched, with a rasping noise, the flimsy side of the boat immediately below the Queen's knees. Then emitting a gurgling snore, the monster opened its red jaws; they closed with the ring of a steel trap, and Seti muffling a shriek, threw herself back into the boat, grasping still the splintered handle of her paddle.

Paphos raised and held her whilst the rowers set up a great uproar of shouting and splashing, and those who had charge of the lamps waved them over the side to scare away the shoal of horrid brutes whose jagged muzzles could be seen protruding from the water on every side, pointing in the direction of the boat.

'Ptah! Where am I?' cried Seti, sitting up and rubbing her eyes like an awakened child. 'O-oh! I fancied I was out there—with *them!* It was delicious! I do hope it begins again!'

Paphos regarded her despairingly, and sighed.

'Poor child!' he said. 'Your innocent soul is set around with snares. No, don't laugh!'

'My innocent soul!' laughed Seti.

'These ecstasies,' said Paphos, with a depreciatory gesture, 'I could lay in a stock of materials sufficient to arouse a dozen different varieties of such frenzies, and all for the cost of a new pair of sandal straps. There is neither mystery nor witchery in them. They're nothing but mere derangements of the—er—system, and yet you hunger for them!'

'I know,' murmured the girl, touching a dried berry that hung upon a cord around her neck. 'Oh look!'

She leapt to her feet, and pointed excitedly towards the white ship. She was amused and interested now, and for the moment quite rid of her late extravagant emotion. Paphos arose also, and stood beside her, scarcely glancing at the scene of the ritual, but looking down upon the Queen with an expression that was strangely familiar—an expression indeed, which, had the Greek beheld it in the face of another, he would unhesitatingly have stigmatised as simply connubial.

And yet the rite that was being performed was worthy full attention. After their hymn, the women had made a solemn obeisance, sinking first to their knees, and then, in unison, bending their foreheads to the deck. In this position they

remained a full minute—just the time it took to beat off the alligators.

In the meantime the tabarded ministrants had raised from the centre of the platform a tall, thin, black mast, bearing affixed to its summit a globe of clear crystal, of considerable size. The women then raised themselves, and seated on their haunches in a circle around the platform, mutely fixed their eyes upon this faintly glimmering ball.

Gradually, by the delicate adjustment of mechanism not visible, the crystal globe was so declined as to be illumined by the reflection of the moon's light. This was accomplished in degrees so minute that almost imperceptibly all the crescent phases were mimicked, until over the ship hung—hung, for the black mast was indistinguishable in the darkness—a shining replica of the moon at her full, and as the thin bow grew to a complete circle, so did the low crooning of the women increase to wolf-like howls. The holy ship seemed now to be floating upon the darkness, it and its terrifying occupants lit from within by unhallowed flames, or catching the reflection of unseen nether fires.

Then, from the stern of the ship, three of the tabarded ministrants were seen treading their way between the ranks of the sitting women, leading with them a woman who, it could just be seen, was not clad in white linen. The group reached the platform, and the naked woman ascended it alone.

Naked she was, and young, and fair-skinned, and beautiful, too, at least in form, for her features were not yet distinguishable as she stood

with bowed head, her face and bosom veiled by her mass of black hair.

The howls of the women were redoubled at her appearance, and now for the first time, the sounds of drums, cymbals and flutes were heard from the ship. It was plain from their actions that every woman there was supplied with a musical instrument of some kind, and through the discordant hubbub that arose there could be detected the rhythm of one of those simple, interminable, Hindu melodies. This grew more and more pronounced and assured, and the girl on the platform began to dance.

Paphos at once recognised the order and art of her movements and posturings, and became intent upon her. She was depicting the old story of attraction, but her powers of allurement were supreme, and Paphos was soon conscious of forces being stirred within him other than physical desire.

Her art was perfectly restrained, and quite unsullied by any obviousness of suggestion such as marred the performances of all the mimes he had seen hitherto. He had once before witnessed dancing of this description, and was to some extent prepared for its effect upon himself and upon those with him. He became fascinated, actually and willingly mesmerised. The true sense of distance was destroyed, and the ordinary effects of light and darkness were annulled. He was deceived into the belief that the girl had crossed the expanse of waters, and was near to him, almost within reach. He fancied he could follow the quick ripple of her soft muscles, so brightly was she lit by the reflec-

tion of the crystal globe, now become the veritable satellite. And was he deceived? If so it was strange that, though every movement helped to unfold a tale of joy, it seemed to him that her features were distorted by terror.

The rubric was here most cunningly contrived. Commencing at bow and stern simultaneously, the ministrants were engaged in furling the huge shroud, the underside of which was black, stripping the oblong hull of the ship, which also was painted black. They worked rapidly, and before their advance the white women vanished unobtrusively down the hatchways.

Soon all the scene was blotted out, save only the white platform with the girl dancing upon it, the encircling group of tabarded ministrants, and the miniature moon above them all. There was no sound. The howlings of the women and their unskilful music had died away.

The dance was approaching its culmination, that culmination which words have not the reverence to express. Paphos was standing by the side of the cushioned dais supporting Seti, who one might have thought had swooned but for the brilliance of her wide eyes.

The dance was never perfected. The final posture was reached, but was broken before its full attainment by the girl throwing herself upon her knees with a shriek that pierced the silence with an effect of stark surprise. Then her weeping was heard, and some words of agonised pleading in a childish voice.

The ministrants slowly lifted her from the platform, which was at once obliterated by a black

covering. Slowly they carried her to the ship's side, she giving utterance to a low, forlorn, level crying that stung the breasts of the listeners with pity.

The crystal globe, shifted from its angle, had emptied itself of light; and now dislodged by an unseen blow, it fell with a loud crash, and was shivered to fragments.

Simultaneously the group of ministrants let the girl drop into the black, nimbly-dancing water. She gave no cry as she struck the surface, and when the silvery hand of water that had opened up around her closed again, it seemed that all was over.

There was however, another cry—a fearful, bubbling shriek, that was cut short. And Paphos, thinking of the alligators, shuddered.

Meanwhile the white priestesses had disappeared, and the ship, a shapeless, black thing was receding towards the holy isle.

Seti's arms had crept round Paphos's body, and he felt a strong tremor course through her. He laid her gently upon the cushioned dais.

A little boy approached on tip-toe, and drew the curtains along the rods that held up the canopy of feathers—as, previously, Paphos had taught him to do.

XXII

A MASTER OF CEREMONY

PAPHOS was truly a slave. He was the scion of an Athenian family which had settled in Lemnos, and when Darius the Persian conquered that island, Paphos, then a young man with the bays and laurels of the finest academies in Greece fresh upon his brow, was rudely hustled into an evil-smelling trireme, and given a third share in a stout pole which he had every reason to believe was an oar.

As the latest comer, he occupied the outer edge of the bench, and so had to contend with the butt end of the sweep, which, when the sea was rough, became, he used in later days to affirm, a living, resilient, malignant monster, whose sole delight in was to turn and batter the miserable slave who clutched its slimy tail. This impression was most acute after any attempt to snatch a few minutes' repose, resting a throbbing head upon swollen, festered and fettered hands.

In this condition, Paphos understood, he took part in several sea-battles, upon whose issue depended the ultimate fate of western civilisation. At the time, however, he afterwards grieved to confess, the conception of the magnitude of the incidents in which he was bearing his humble part

failed to allay in the slightest degree the torture of his body, or the malady of his soul.

And yet his later trials surpassed his former misfortunes, for he was bandied about throughout the length and breadth of Asia, and was compelled, in the process, to add to his Greek culture many much more practical acquirements so widely diversified as to include among them the proper management of Scythian ponies, a mastery of the confection of the choicer viands in vogue among the Jews, as well as the arts of the manicurist and the embalmer. Prince Nassur bought him in an Afghan bazaar, where a slave-dealer was recommending him as a celestial singer, and extolling him as a carver of stone idols.

After a short season of luxury and dainty fare all his great natural beauty returned to the Greek, his charm of personality re-asserted itself, and it was not long before he had won for himself the position of philosopher and chartered libertine in the Prince's household. In time of peace he and Uluan never left the Prince's side, and, as also happened in the case of the lyrist, all notion of servitude came to be forgotten, its place being taken by unalloyed affection and friendship.

Paphos, therefore, had had the opportunity of adding to his store that peculiar knowledge of the sources of statecraft which comes only to the valets of kings; that is to say, a bold, disinterested grasp of principles, unhampered by the limitations of practical expediency and untempered by prejudices, traditional, racial, or social. Only whereas a valet's wisdom is, by the nature of a valet, rendered nugatory by a lack of the faculty of con-

joining his axioms, Paphos had, bit by bit, constructed a complete science of rulership, and he never missed an opportunity of expounding thereon, quoting his unwritten authority with chapter and verse.

And behold! after years of theorising, and fruitless ironical vapouring, here was a real kingdom—not indeed within his grasp, but, at any rate, with its central nerve stripped to his touch, and, withal, the whole community in a state of elemental disorder that could not fail to delight the heart of an instinctive reformer such as himself.

In spite of his humiliating past, it did not strike Paphos as at all astonishing that he should hold sway over a people. A Hellene to the core, it seemed to him the most natural thing in the world that the government of a secondary race should fall into the hands of the only Greek on the spot. Indeed he straightway accepted the responsibilities, and began to review the problems of the hour with that cheerful abasement before the decrees of fate which was always one of the hall-marks of a Greek, especially an Athenian, when beset by too much good fortune.

His first act was to seek an interview with Shaho, the High-priest. Seti had as yet done nothing to set up a relation between herself and the people; that was a mistake to be remedied forthwith, and the best instrument was, of course, the Church. Queen Seti must show herself to the populace in the Temple, and be publicly crowned. He thought, too, incorrigible artist! that a coronation would be something entirely suited to his own genius of the theatre.

After spending several hours with difficulty consuming his impatience in the neighbourhood of Shaho's hermitage, late one evening he beheld the old giant coming through the trees of the park, walking with a heavy step, and in obvious dejection of mind.

The Greek had a moment's debate within himself how best to make overtures of amity to a high-priest who had already done him an exceeding ill-service, but instinctively, on reading the old man's face, he decided to abandon all subtleties.

'I salute you, O High-priest,' he began.

'Huh!' ejaculated Shaho, his gaze fixed ahead, and hurrying his steps as he would to pass an importunate beggar.

'Will your Eminence grant me an audience?' asked Paphos. 'I have certain propositions to make for the welfare of this realm.'

'I don't want to hear them,' said Shaho, walking past.

'You'd better, old fellow,' remarked the Greek, fondling his chin thoughtfully.

Shaho drew up at that, and surveyed his interlocutor. He had long ago formed a thorough estimate of Paphos's character and capacity, and while he contemned heartily the vanity of the Greek's motives, he had a very great respect for his cunning and resource.

'Well, what is it?' he demanded.

'He who hides his love in a wood conceals her husband,' quoted Paphos in reply, motioning gracefully towards the darkening brake. 'This much I'll say,' he stepped closer, and spoke softly into the High-priest's ear. 'A coronation!' he said.

'I've just succeeded in winning the Queen's consent. Until now she has refused absolutely to be crowned. She wanted *me* to bear the brunt of the ceremony, while she herself danced upon the altar. Oh, I agree. Yes! Quite impracticable. But now she has consented. We saw the Priestesses of the Moon a few nights ago, and the spectacle has turned her thoughts to liturgy and ceremonial. Now if you and I——'

'Come inside,' said Shaho, gruffly, but eagerly, as he shot back the heavy bolt of the hermitage door.

The tiny yellow tongue of flame rising and falling in the bowl of oil upon the high tripod was the only break in the utter obscurity of Shaho's cell, and the old priest, it was clear, had no intention of augmenting it. He sat down at the ivory bench, the end of which was illumined, as was also one half of himself, intermittently. Paphos loved light, and found the present conditions altogether uncomfortable and unsatisfactory; he adjusted the balance, however, by himself leaning back in a corner quite out of reach of even a chance ray.

'Nothing could be better,' said Shaho. 'Nothing. The people have forgotten they have a Queen. They haven't got a Queen. What is a Queen without a coronation? It will strengthen our position immensely—immensely. But it must be soon. Has she fixed a day? To-morrow I am myself going to solemnise a miracle.'

'A miracle!' cried the Greek, starting out of his corner.

'Yes, certainly,' responded Shaho. 'A gush of

blood from the mouth of the Goddess, and something else.'

'Ha-ha! The birth of the word, the living word —as it should be. Ha-ha.'

The soft voice and laugh of someone in the farther corner of the cell afflicted Paphos with the sensation of being struck on the head by a heavily-padded mallet. It was not primarily either surprise or terror he felt, but his head swam, and his skull seemed to contract upon his brain. He turned towards the corner whence the sound had come, and saw two almonds of yellow light, two shining eye-balls, glimmer as their owner's invisible lids blinked over them in amusement.

'Huh!' exclaimed Shaho, also turning towards the eyes. 'You back already!'

'I had not far to seek,' answered Gwali. 'Five lambs and a young goat—they will suffice.'

'For a gush of blood—suffice!' cried Paphos, his composure recovered. 'Zeus! This is a scale to my taste! Let's have a light, friend Shaho. I never did like breathing black air.'

'We shall be going directly,' said Shaho, thinking of his treasure. 'You have not said—when is the coronation to be?'

'That rests entirely with you,' answered Paphos. 'Soon it must be, as you say. My own staff is quite ready. But ecclesiastical paraphernalia——'

'Everything has been ready weeks ago,' said Shaho. 'Come. We want your help.'

The High-priest raised himself camel-wise, first to his knees, then to his feet, grunting the while, and Paphos, who never squatted, and always stood if there was not a divan or cushions to re-

cline upon, saw the two yellow eyes raise themselves to the level of his own, and he realised perfectly clearly that he was being minutely examined, in spite of the darkness. Then the eyes vanished, he heard a grating noise as of a heavy door being opened, and felt a rush of cold, rather foul air.

'Hold on to that,' said Shaho, putting the end of a girdle he was wearing into the Greek's hand, 'and follow me closely. There is no danger. The passages are narrow and you might get bruised, that is all. Come.'

Paphos was not by any means a coward, but it was necessary for him to know the exact seat of the danger, as well as its precise nature, otherwise his imagination was likely to run riot, when tne uneasiness of his mind would infect his body causing tremblings and perspirations. Nevertheless now, and doubtless it was due to the decomposing effect of Gwali's mere presence, the Greek, as he stepped quickly down some dozen or more steep stairs and on over level ground, through complete darkness, was more and more controlled by the nightmare belief that he was treading his way to doom down a tunnel which was closing in upon him, and would soon hold him in a vice, whilst the obscurity itself was solidifying behind his very heels. To save himself from shameful panic, he spoke, and his voice cracked ludicrously.

'By the limp of the husband of the Mother of Love, Shaho,' he cried, 'what eyes have you to trot thus through this paste of gloom? The passages are narrow, say you! Then why have we not yet beaten our noses flat against the walls?

Even if we are in a subterranean desert it is not meet to risk collision in this way! Not so fleetly, O nimble stomach. By the Horns of Pan, not so fleetly!'

'Peace! We are at the end of it,' replied Shaho with a jerk in the words which represented the limit of his indulgence in laughter these days.

Paphos also heard the soft laugh of the yellow-eyed man, and again the emotion that overcame him was so new that he bit his knuckles in order to persuade himself fully of the reality of the whole experience. Then Shaho halted, and Paphos rebounded from the folds of fat upon the wide back before him.

A narrow slit the height of a tall man opened mysteriously upon the darkness, disclosing an exceedingly dim, but marvellously beautiful light beyond. Through this slit, which to the Greek's terrified gaze seemed no wider than a man's arm, Shaho now began squeezing himself, grunting prodigiously, and Paphos had a renewal of the horrible nightmare sensation of suffocation when the old man ceased his struggles with every appearance of being inextricably wedged. Shaho was only ensuring his balance upon the limb he had forced through, however, and with one more heave and a final grunt he was free. Paphos passed through quite easily, and at once recognised his surroundings.

He was in a recess in one of the many shrines of the Temple, and he was about to hurry forward to catch up with the retreating figure of the High-priest when a movement in his rear attracted his attention. He turned, to behold what was appar-

ently a shadow of a peculiarly wavering character replacing into position a tall pilaster of granite. Then the shadow, flickering, faced him, and he saw that it had eyes of yellow light.

Gwali, of course, had known Paphos for some time, and was well aware of his exact relation to the Queen, yet on account of the change wrought in him by his discovery of the fact that, through the fatal alchemy of the berry, Seti could be of no further use to him, the idea of the girl abandoning herself to the embraces of another, which formerly filled him with fury and abhorrence, now left him quite unmoved, towards her or her lover; indeed, in his consideration for the girl's happiness, he would have been glad, rather, to believe that she was finding real joy and repose with a man of ordinary kind.

Therefore he glided ahead of the Greek with no thought of Seti to dull for a moment the enthusiasm from which he was at present deriving a fresh lease of interest in living—an enthusiasm for the quaint problems and affairs of men who hive in cities. He saw the illusion of it all,—the temporary, fictitious character of achievement, the incoherence and objectivelessness of social effort, the mimicked grandeur of little men, the transient importance of unnotable events,—nevertheless it was a game well worth the playing, he found, and, life itself, being at hazard, with much out-pouring of hot blood, and waste of real, enkindling human spirit, infinitely diverting to a self-tortured intellect.

Admitting it as remarkable that a man with eyeballs of phosphorous should wield pilasters with

as great ease and address as he himself could handle a walking-cane, while, otherwise, behaving like the most unsubstantial of shadows, Paphos, still, had seen far too many human anomalies since his advent in the East for his wonderment to be aroused by any addition to their number, no matter how picturesque. Nevertheless his curiosity was considerably piqued, and he examined Gwali as closely as he was able in the faint light. But so far he found little to admire in him, for in matters of bodily excellence Paphos judged all men according to their conformity to the statues of Athens, and he acknowledged no other standard.

They were now in the central transept of the Temple, approaching the great Idol with its terrace-like altar. The whole interior had been lately swept and garnished, and gorgeous tapestries and bannerettes adorned the vast spaces on its walls. Several crystal lamps stood upon the altar, and others were set at regular intervals upon the floor all down the length of the nave, and their rich, oily glowing had mingled, forming a suffusing light of interwoven strands of variegated hues.

Shaho, bending double, had passed through a low, gated arch into the interior of the high altar. Gwali followed, darting through so rapidly that the shaft of light that came from inside seemed to the Greek's eyes, not to be broken at all by his passage. Paphos, amused and curious, also buckled his lofty form, and crawled within.

It was in this place that Seti, straying from her nurse, had first come across the boy Gwali. It was a place of strange appearance, being low and vaulted with heavy interlacing arches, supported

by a regiment of sturdy columns. Arches and pillars alike were hung and entwined by a massive decoration of festoons in stone cunningly carved to represent every clinging growth in the jungle. Viewed from without, through the gate, the interior had the illusive effect of considerable size, an illusion similar to that contrived in their temple gardens by a Mongol race Paphos had once sojourned among.

Fastened to one of the pillars, a large, beaked lamp shot out a bright flame, and tethered to the same pillar were five lambs and a young goat. These Shaho was contemplating in an abstracted manner, much as an intending buyer would stand, making a picture incongruous enough.

But Paphos hardly glanced at him. Open-mouthed, a state of muscular uncontrol probably never before seen in his face, he was staring at Gwali. On his side, Gwali, momentarily forgetful of his own appearance, was admiring the almost perfect modelling of the Greek. The expression of amazement on the latter's countenance, however, reminded him of his own extreme perversity of form, and he turned away saddened at heart.

He was wearing no covering but the fold of black silk around his loins, and as he stood in a strong light Paphos was able to observe all the marvels in colour and shape of the fantastically beautiful being before him, and was enabled to divine, too, below the surface peculiarities, the exquisiteness of his make, poise, and muscular development.

'Claiming the right of my race to question all men,' said the Greek, with formality. 'As a wan-

derer, presuming on men's courtesy, may I ask you what is the name of your race, and from what region of this earth you have come. There is nothing I would rather know. The females of your design would be worth a journey to Saturn to behold.'

'There is none other, man or woman, of my design,' replied Gwali.

'Zeus! This is something fresh!' cried Paphos, flinging his arms aloft with growing enthusiasm. 'Nature, our mother, is still young! I worship her anew! It is clear she is not satisfied with her offspring—no more satisfied than am I. She is begetting and striving afresh, as she did in the beginning. If she can fashion one generation of you, young man, there is hope for the future. There is no god on Olympus so wonderful,—I proclaim it. With a few trifling reservations, I would say you are perfect!'

He was striding to and fro surveying the youth in the frank, impersonal manner he had learnt by much experience as buyer and vended, in the slave markets. He even felt the texture of Gwali's skin, and tested the flexibility of the extraordinarily inter-related muscles. He ran his fingers through the purple-cast hair, and drew upon the resources of many obscure dialects for exclamations of astonishment.

Imperturbable as ever, Gwali submitted to the inspection, apparently, although his smile was no less than usual inscrutable, rather amused by the experience. Secretly, however, he felt quelled and humbled under the Greek's touch, as if there was some quality in Paphos's character, some sunny,

daylight influence, which forbid the exertion of the dark powers by which the green youth was accustomed to master men, subduing them to extinction if he willed, or more subtly controlling them. But he knew this was only a passing phase, and he had no real fear for his ultimate supremacy. Meanwhile Shaho had grown impatient.

'There is a great deal to be done before dawn, and I need sleep,' he muttered. 'Let us get this matter over.'

'I must become acquainted with you,' said Paphos to Gwali. 'Come and dine with me to-morrow. You have met the one man on this continent who can appreciate you.'

Gwali, without replying, his every action watched by the Greek, untethered the goat, and one of the sheep. The heads of the animals were tightly wound about, muzzle-fashion, by a cord, the loose end of which served as a halter. The green youth gave the lamb into Paphos's charge, and himself led the way, dragging the goat. Shaho shuffled along in the rear.

Arrived at the winding stairs of sardonyx that led up to the summit of the altar, Paphos was obliged to enter into a bitter struggle with the lamb, which up to this had obeyed the slight strain upon its neck with docility enough. However, with resolution astonishing in a thing so young, it refused to mount the stairs.

Gwali's goat had proved refractory from the outset, and had suffered the penalty in being lifted bodily by the skin of its neck, and its miserable, muzzled neighing now reached them from the altar above. There seemed no way of overcoming

the obstinacy of the lamb but by serving it similarly.

Naturally Paphos was loth to take the little beast in his arms. It was filthy as only a bazaar lamb or infant could be, and his past hard usage had made Paphos fastidious to a degree, while his knowledge of lower life caused him to live in deadly terror of contagious disease. He continued his endeavour to drag the lamb up the stairs, therefore, and on its part the struggling animal threw itself upon its back, and although the Greek tugged until the cord welted his hands, his efforts were fruitful of nothing more than a storm of shrill bleats, which the echo in the lofty roof multiplied accusingly. There was a smile of grim amusement on Shaho's face as he stood watching the contest.

'Pick it up, man, pick it up,' he advised. 'If you are to go through this performance with all five we'll never be done.'

Paphos looked aggrieved.

'I'm not obliged to do this, you know,' he rejoined. 'I fail to see any reason why you should not pick it up yourself. After all, it's your miracle, and not mine.'

He let fall the cord, and folded his arms decidedly. The lamb ceased bleating, and, furtively, began to seek its feet. Shaho observed the movement, and seized the rope. The lamb exclaimed upon him. Gwali's head appeared over the edge of the altar, high above them. Distant from them though he was Paphos started at the nearness of the low laugh; it broke within the very channels of his ear, he thought.

'Here we have a god—a god obviously! cried the Greek. 'And a priest, actually a *high* priest, and the pair of you allow a lamb unshorn, unweaned, the intended victim of your own holocaust to get out of control in this way. I remember seeing a horuspex placed on the horns of just such another dilemma, but in that case he was tossed by a bull, and a disemboweled bull at that. Here we have a lamb! And a deity present in person! Veritably!'

'We shall never have done at this rate,' growled Shaho.

And without further parleying, he threw the lamb across his shoulder, and climbed, unsteadily, the altar stairs. Paphos followed, laughing to himself.

On the altar-top they found only the goat, which was lying upon its side with its hoofs tied in a bunch. Gwali had vanished. This did not seem to surprise Shaho, who, when he had thrown down his burden, and placed a heavy foot upon it, experienced some difficulty in the matter of breathing. The Greek guessed the green youth to be hidden somewhere among the dark crevices of the huge idol, whose gigantic toes, resting upon a minor pedestal, encroached upon the altar.

Standing where they did, owing to her sitting position, only the feet of Nâga, and her legs as far as the knee-bones were to be seen, and these rose up in parellel columns to the height of four men. Gwali, Paphos thought, was in all probability, lying in the Goddess's lap.

'I have yet to learn the morals of this goddess,' remarked the Greek. 'I have noticed that where

there is a female idol the code of morals imputed to the idolised has much more effect upon the lives of the idolators than in cases where the idol is a male. The very worst thing that can befall a man is to be the priest of a virgin image. Such a one is obliged to live his life on the verge of indiscretion. He is unable to sing a canticle without clapping his hand to his mouth, and he grows in the end to have such a relish for virginity that married women—Zeus! What's this?'

It was a coil of rope that, flung out into the air, fell back upon the shins of the idol, clanking an iron hook against the stone. A further length of rope was let out from above until the hook rested upon the great foot, well within reach.

'Gwali will do the blood-letting up above,' said Shaho. 'Help me to hook these.'

'How fortunate I am to be here!' said Paphos gaily, as he bent to the work. 'There has been a charming originality about every incident of this night that has freshened my soul. The sheep and the goat upon the one hook! Eternal symbols of innocence and depravity, you vanish together into the maw of the invisible. Nay, it is not my fault the hook has torn you! You kicked, my little lady.'

Shaho shook the rope as a signal, and the writhing bundle slid swiftly and evenly up the hollow between the idol's legs, jumped outwards as it struck the protuberance of the knees, and vanished.

Paphos and the High-priest then descended to the altar crypt together, and when they returned, each leading a pair of lambs which, more gently

treated than their hapless predecessors, had been induced to climb the stairs of their own accord, they discovered what appeared at first sight to be the skins of the first victims suspended from the hook close to the altar.

They were, however, the whole carcases, through whose slit throats every drop of blood had been forced from the living veins with such crushing strength as to knead flesh and bones alike into a shapeless pulp.

'Huh! That boy up there!' muttered Shaho, with a grimace.

Paphos felt himself grow pale at the thought of the scene above.

'Hoofs of Pan!' he gasped. 'What a youth!'

XXIII

CLIMACTERIC

THE litter was woven of fresh rushes, and it was adorned and fringed with precious stuffs, and garlanded with wide-petalled blooms that had no scent in them, but seemed to breathe forth air they had garnered from the cleanest winds of the morning.

It rested upon the heads of a cluster of upright slaves, tall men in green livery, and a number of men similarly habited squatted round in a circle. From time to time one of these latter stood up and stationed himself in position under the litter; and the slave whom he thus relieved took a spell of rest. This was done in silence and with order, without disturbing for a moment the balance of the bed, and Paphos regarded the manœuvre as one of his most successful innovations.

Upon the couch reclined the Greek, clothed in a voluminous robe of pure white edged with scarlet. He was wearing a crown of roses upon his head, after the fashion of his countrymen. Seti lay near him, pillowing her bosom and cheek upon a crimson cushion.

She was simply clad in a shirt of silver satin, a short, sleeveless jacket of rose-coloured silk, and wide pantaloons of the same hue, gathered at the

ankles by jewelled buckles. On her feet she wore scarlet slippers which just hung upon her daintv toes, and her hair was caught in a wide bag-net of strung pearls.

She had, in common with the wild creatures of the Orient, the power of abandoning her body absolutely to the lassitude of the moment, and the only evidence of her vividly alive spirit was in the restless curiosity of her eyes.

As far as Paphos was concerned he was lying quiet only because he thought that was the most fitting thing to do; that immobility was essential in the central group if the success of the tableau was to be assured. But his eyes, too, were busy drinking in the scene.

And there was much to see.

A barrier of high gates, beautifully wrought and gilt, ran the whole width of the Temple nave, separating off the precincts of the high-altar by a broad area. On the right of this space, looking towards the idol, was the place reserved for the Queen and her Court, and it was here, in the middle of a square of guards, and surrounded by glittering princes and princesses, and still more gorgeous slaves and attendants, the Royal litter was borne.

Behind the barrier squatted the people, reverent as they rarely failed to be in any place of worship, and, in spite of their vast number, which was being increased momentarily until it appeared as if the whole city was pouring in through the mighty entrance, they did not crowd upon one another, but contrived instinctively to preserve a space between their ranks.

Soon the entire floor of the Temple was carpeted

with folk, and the movement of the myriad turbans and shawls seemed to rise and subside in swiftly coursing billows. With a congregation so large and homogeneous, all notion of its being a collection of living and thinking individuals was lost, and Paphos and Seti were able to return the gaze of the thousands of eyes fixed upon the royal group without an emotion of any sort.

Yet even the enormous vista of humanity in the central nave represented only a third of the masses that filled the aisles and shrines, and these, though out of sight, were contributing largely to the indescribable uproar produced by many thousands of people all talking at one time, in subdued voices, beneath an echoing roof.

The effect of any sound in the Temple was enormously enhanced by the nature of the decoration of the building. Its main walls were almost entirely sheathed in metal, mostly brass and bronze, though around the altar silver had been largely used, and even gold.

The whole of this enormous expanse of burnished metal was covered with deeply-bitten engravings, depicting, in simple lines, the stories of kings and gods. Into the bronze lining of the great dome immediately above the idol had been let snakey parallels of silver, which, in the sunlight, gave the illusion of rapid, foam-tipped waves, and changed the dome into the simulacrum of a vortex swirling into the infinite distance of heaven.

At the top of the walls, all around the Temple, just below the roof, ponderous squares of the shell had been turned bodily upon swivels, and through the open casements shone the cloudless sky of a

crazy blue that held the eye fascinated, and the sunshafts, like flashing sabres, crossed one another in the lofty nave, and beat fiercely into shrines and annexes, lighting up the brilliant colours of banners and tapestries, and displaying the true magnitude of the edifice.

By the same artifice of opening panels, and by a further cunning arrangement of invisible mirrors the idol itself was bathed in radiance. It was plain to the critical eye that the sculptor of this image had, on account of its proportions, early lost grasp of his subject as a whole, yet the art exercised in the shaping of the cruel ape-head, the grasping hands, the triple breasts, and each separate part was admirable, as was also the work of the stone cutters and polishers in their treatment of tne greenish-black rock of which the whole figure was formed.

'Oh I am grateful to these priests for their unpunctuality,' murmured Paphos. 'Surely this moment, so full of significance, so rich with recent memories, and pregnant with immediate triumphs, will never be surpassed. How exquisite the delay!'

'I! I am very tired of this doing nothing,' murmured Seti, lazily, speaking with her lips resting upon her soft arm. 'Unless they come *very* quickly, I am going to dance upon that altar. I have often danced there for Gwali in the nights before Nassur came. It would be good to see all those folk's eyes upon me, and to make them catch their breath!'

'The charm of the cynosure! Yes, you are right. It is one of the real luxuries of the spiritual life,' responded the Greek. 'I myself have felt the craving again and again. But don't think of such a

thing now, little one. We are here to honour poor Nâga. She has had affronts enough of late.'

'I have been thinking,' said Seti, after a pause, 'how wonderful it would be to pave the whole Temple with living eyes, living human eyes, and to run and dance upon them.'

'Very wonderful!' assented Paphos. 'Fortunate eyes they would be! Hark! The inevitable drum!'

The quick tapping of a single, distant drum reached their ears, and magically the whole concourse settled into silence. Other and nearer drums joined in, muffled, as if they were being beaten in a low corridor; then, as the hidden procession debouched into the Temple, the throbbing of the taut parchment swelled up to the roof in a miniature thunder, and the brazen walls rang and resounded.

The procession of white-gowned priests came into view from behind the altar to the left. They walked two abreast, pacing very slowly, with long, halting strides, and they carried their heads twisted round away from one another, and looking upwards in a tortured pose. Their mouths were held open, and their eyes stared in a conventional, ritual grimace. Each man had fastened to his left hip a conical drum, and this he was beating excitedly with his finger-tips. They ranged themselves along the inside of the gilt barrier, and stood.

After an interval came a body of old priests stripped to the loins, each carrying an uncovered sword in his left hand, and with his right hand holding the cord by which he led an ewe lamb whose feet had been gilt, and the woolly coils of whose spotless fleece had been threaded with gol-

den wire. These men proceeded up the stairs of sardonyx, and appeared again upon the altar-top, which they crossed, to stand in a group at the farther side.

This was the moment Paphos had chosen to perpetrate his fatal error. From behind the altar came a blast of silver horns, tremendous and prolonged, to be answered by as mighty a blare from a distant gallery at the end of the Temple, high above the entrance. Paphos had insisted upon the admission of this incident.

'How refreshing!' remarked the Greek to Seti, when the volume of sound had died away, leaving a gigantic murmur creeping upon the walls. 'That music was as welcome as the lightning that disburdens of its storm the fevered, labouring night.'

The fanfare was to herald in the officiating priests, and they now rounded the altar, a gorgeous trio, wearing long, narrow gowns of purple, and stiff copes of crimson damask. They wore shoes of beaten gold, the soft, metallic sound of their footsteps being distinctly heard from where the royal litter stood, and their hands were covered with fingered gauntlets of the same metal, while gold mitres, horned and fantastic, weighed down their heads. Toilsomely they climbed the altar-stairs, and once on the summit, seated themselves on three ivory stools set against the footstool of the idol, and against the monstrous, realistic toes they rested their backs and necks.

Now the trumpeters themselves appeared, six priests with wide scarlet sashes over their white ephods. They stood in a line, and raised their long silver horns to their lips. Again the irregular music

crashed out, and its echoes were mingled with the answering peal from the gallery.

Their duty accomplished, the trumpeters drew aside, and in lonely magnificence Shaho hove in sight.

His attire was similar to that of the officiating priests, but was of far greater splendour. It is true his slippers and gauntlets were not of gold, these being of embroidered leather, but his headgear was a wonder of cost and majesty, being an egg-shaped frame four spans in height, entirely covered with precious stones arranged in circles. Precious stones likewise encrusted in design his crimson cloak, and a tall mace, of beautiful workmanship in jewels and enamel, he used as a staff.

The old giant looked unhappy,—physically uncomfortable, and very nervous. The lurch in his gait, lately becoming more and more pronounced, was exaggerated by the height of his mitre, and yet, because it was so obvious that he had assumed this wondrous apparel solely by the necessity of his office, the first impression he gave was not ridiculous.

'There is no excuse for a walk like that,' said Paphos. 'I shall be very glad when he comes to a stand-still. He really is a success when he is standing.'

'What has come over the people?' cried Seti, sitting up to obtain a better view of the concourse of worshippers.

Now was Paphos to behold the fruits of his stupid incautiousness in stirring so drastically, by the blare of unaccustomed trumpets, the ill-balanced natures of the natives. The patter of the

drums had to the simple people meant mystery, and its comcomitants, awe and reverence; the scarlet blast of the horns had signified war, and all the accumulated wealth of savagery in their hearts, inherited and acquired, was laid bare at the breath.

At the first glimpse of Shaho's tiara, the vast congregation had risen as one man. In the beginning they had laughed, and whispered and pointed; now, when the High-priest stood in the centre of the altar, resting upon his mace, shouts began to break forth, and certain bazaar catch-words were tossed to and fro, until at length the disturbance culminated in universal turmoil and hubbub.

The populace broke their ordered ranks, and a rush was made to the barrier, which sang under the sudden pressure. Then as suddenly as it arose, the tumult subsided, although the crowd remained massed behind the gilt gates.

'Taunting Shaho!' gasped Paphos. 'Reviling the High-priest in his own sanctuary! Bringing their miserable politics into the Temple of the Most High—at least Nâga is as high as any of them, I suppose. Politics in the Temple! The faith of your people has been undermined, Seti, that is quite clear. If they are not all insane, they are all rationalists, and that is nearly as dangerous in the proletariat.'

'Shaho is going to speak—when he has breath,' said Seti. 'How horrible the people smell when they are excited!'

'Listen! I am curious to know what our old friend can possibly find to say,' murmured Paphos.

'*My people, hear me.*'

Shaho forced his voice to a high key. His nasal

cry floated out into the quietened Temple, and seemed to rebound from wall to wall as if its sound would never cease.

Such was the peculiar acoustic effect of speaking from the altar; the words indeed could be heard in every corner of the building, but only by means of a chain of echoes, as it were, and the speaker was obliged to use short sentences, pausing considerably between each.

'*It is written in the Book of Anol the Prophet, who was the first husband of Nâga——*' said the preacher.

'The remarks of a man of two such broad pursuits were indeed worthy of record,' murmured Paphos.

'*And My Spouse said unto me: In the day wherein the people—that I have chosen—shall no longer bow down before Me—in that day shall I inflict them—with many tears.*'

'Ah! Our prophet was something of a plagiarist, I fear,' said Paphos in a whisper.

'*My dear brethren.*'

There was a renewal of the commotion beyond the barrier, and Shaho's next few sentences were lost in the uproar.

'*A man has come out of the mountains—teaching meekness,*' the High-priest was next heard crying aloud. '*And out of the same mountains—comes an army—to destroy our city.*'

'Excellent!' whispered Paphos.

'Who has brought war upon us in reaping time?' thundered the people, with sudden and surprising community of sentiment.

'Shaho!' they answered themselves.

'I have always stood for peace,' proclaimed Shaho. *'You know that. War has come upon you —as a punishment—for your want of faith—in the great Goddess Nâga.'*

'She has three dugs. How may we believe in her?' cried a peasant who had thrust his head through the bars of the barrier, and the people around laughed uproariously for some minutes.

'—And loyalty to tradition—in the person of your young queen, Seti.'

Shaho's voice was heard above the disturbance.

'Iskanaar for ever!' the people replied in a terrifying clamour.

'Down with the foreigners!'

'Do you hear, Paphos?' cried Seti, thoroughly enjoying the scene, and displaying her wonted readiness to abandon herself to the transports that were beginning to possess the crowd. 'They are asking for your head.'

'Not yet, not yet! It is not charming of you to say that,' answered the Greek. 'That barrier appears foolishly insufficient. Tell me, my queen, have those gates any holy significance attached to them? Did they fall from heaven, for instance, or were they smithied by one of the husbands of the Goddess? I knew a priestess once who slept in a grove with no other protection than was afforded by a zone which had been forged by Hephestus, the husband of Aphrodite. Wondrously beautiful that priestess was!'

'These gates grew out of the air,' affirmed Seti, with a more than usually innocent expression; 'grew visibly in front of men's eyes. The design was first woven by sacred spiders, and afterwards the metal formed miraculously upon the thread.'

'Ah! Then let us hope the people won't push,' remarked Paphos, with an affectation of being completely assured.

A mysterious silence gathered over the congregation, whose attention appeared to be distracted from the altar, and drawn towards the entrance. So complete was the hush that Shaho himself ceased the harangue he had been delivering obstinately amid the deafening noise, and waited expectantly.

The quiet grew more and more profound, and now from far out beyond the Temple, in the streets, joyous cries like those that break from a wedding cortege could be heard approaching. Shaho shook off his pre-occupation, and continued:

'That doctrine is a doctrine of cowardice, of despair—a false doctrine. Your souls are your most precious possession. Often your only possession. And I say to you, Stone him who comes with contorted reasoning to rob——'

Here the concourse within the Temple caught the cry of the processionalists, and the mighty shout they raised caused the building to ring like a gong.

'The Buddha!'

A continuous roar of welcome followed, and the crowd surged away from the barrier. Then they swayed back towards the altar, at the same time cleaving a passage in their midst.

Seti excitedly stood up in the litter, balancing herself upon the springy floor by grasping Paphos's curly hair. She saw a group of six men, clothed in yellow, appear in the sunlit entrance, and walk slowly up the Temple nave between the walls of rapturous people.

When the Buddha reached the barrier, he stood looking through. His hands were hidden in a fold of his yellow robe, and his head was thrown back for his eyes to wander from the gorgeous old giant upon the altar, who was trembling with anger, to the head of the hideous mammoth image that filled the end of the nave.

Most cynical of Greeks, Paphos nevertheless felt every fibre in his being thrill in this man's presence. The urgent desire to run and to cast himself down at the feet of the mendicant, to worship him, was clearly before him, though his mind scoffed at it. Still, for the moment carried out of himself by the violence and intensity of the crowd's enthusiasm, he raised himself to his knees, and uttered a shout.

Inexpressible grandeur and transcendant majesty were embodied in Gautama's semi-nude form; serenity and power filled him as, at supreme moments of sacrifice, deities flood their shrines with their presences. And yet in every look and gesture he was as tender as a child whose beauty had mollified her world, and as meek as a girl bride.

What composed Paphos was the conduct of Seti. She had thrown herself down, and was tossing about convulsively in the litter, her eyes closed, and her lips fast shut in a very paroxysm of wayward, ungoverned desire.

'It is no use, Seti, my girl,' said the Greek. 'You can see it in his face—that man is far beyond the reach of woman.'

Afterwards she grew still and saddened, and through all the scene that succeeded she preserved absolute silence.

Paphos fixed his attention upon the Buddha. He now saw that in addition to his five disciples, Gautama, certainly unknown to himself, possessed a vigorous body-guard in a company of leather-armoured smiths, who, mingling with the throng, and directed by a brawny fellow with thick red lips showing beneath his beard, were preserving and enlarging the area within which the Master stood.

'Blasphemy and sacrilege in the Temple itself!' cried Shaho hoarsely from his place upon the altar. *'Enemy, spy, perverter of the people,—away with you!'*

At a signal from their leader, whose name was Sayi Givul, Paphos saw the smiths gather at the gates on either side of the Buddha, yet still keeping within the shade of the crowd.

The Buddha's lips moved, but the tumult was at its climax. Again he spoke, and this time he laid his hand gently upon an embossed ornament of the gate before him.

At that moment Sayi Givul gave vent to a mighty shout, the smiths threw their weight against the barrier, and, the noise of it barely rising above the shouts, the two central gates fell clattering inwards.

'A miracle! A miracle!' Sayi Givul had cried.

And the host of people, now pressed into a solid mass, took up the cry thunderously.

Placidly the Buddha crossed the profaned enclosure, passed through the broken lines of drummer-priests, and, closely followed by the five, slowly mounted the altar stairs.

When the bend in the stairs hid him from the gaze of the multitude, and not until then had they

stirred, the concourse plunged forward until their foremost ranks were pressed against the front of the altar, and only the spears of the body-guard prevented the royal square being broken. The smiths were half-way up the sardonyx stairs, where they remained.

Shaho grasped his mace like a club and turned to meet Gautama. The latter, without apparently noticing his menacing attitude, passed the old priest, and approached the edge of the altar. Here he sat down, cross-legged, and lifted up a hand to motion for silence. His disciples, calm and abstracted, squatted behind him.

Gradually the pushing, shouting, crying and complaining ceased, and then Paphos heard the voice of Shaho uttering threats.

'Will you learn meekness, O High-priest, or must I twist your neck?' roared Sayi Givul, and the multitude added insult and abuse.

Recognising his tormentor, and appearing to realise all at once his impotence, Shaho, almost in tears, cast down his mace, seized the lofty crown of jewels from his brow, and dashed it upon the stones at his feet. Then, having flung off his crimson cloak, he withdrew to a corner among the slaughterers and their lambs, and stood there, a ludicrous, mournful figure, his narrow purple gown bulging with his gross belly, his dark shaven head sunk between his shoulders. On their ivory stools the officiating priests swayed their over-weighted heads helplessly.

One of the sacrificial lambs, released from the hand of a dismayed priest, came, dainty and adorned, browsing the polished alabaster. Gaut-

ama spoke to it, and it approached him. He put an arm over its neck, and drew it until it was nestled against him.

'*My pretty cousin,*' he said, '*in endless kalpas it has been ordained that I should come and save you and your sisters from the sword and the fire.*'

By miracle or exquisite art, Paphos dared not judge which, every tone of Gautama's low, unforced voice penetrated throughout the Temple. Its softness brought forth no resonant echoes, while the gentle cadences worked irresistibly their soothing, refreshing effects upon the minds of his listeners.

'*And not you alone, sweet helplessness, shall rejoice at my coming, for all life is one,*' he continued. '*Every creature bound to the wheel, every sentient being caught in the endless chain of birth and death, all, all, my wearied ones, striving, blindly, sorrowfully, ceaselessly amid change and decay, all are glad, because I have brought them the Law, which is deliverance.*'

'Which only shows!' whispered Paphos. 'Now I myself enjoy being on that wheel, hugely.'

Men and women were sobbing and moaning with a kind of joy in every part of the Temple.

'Teach us the Law, O Master,' whined an old man.

'*Overcome lust and illusion, my children, for with these are you bound. Conquer the craving after things unattainable, that exist not. No longer pursue the pleasures that cannot endure, abandon hope of happiness, for there is no happiness here, nor in the world above, nor in the realms below. Make peace your only destination, my troubled*

ones, think only to dissolve yourselves, your fears, your cares, in that infinite ocean upon whose bosom no winds stir, nor any ripple mars its surface. Behold, my children, the perfect end of sorrow, Nirvana.'

'Ghastly concept!' murmured Paphos. 'Just infinite boredom,—visualised!'

'Save us, O Holy One.'

'Take us with thee to Nirvana.'

Whispered petitions and prayers arose in a loud hissing volume.

'Learn the Law. Yourselves must save yourselves, each one himself and not another, yet ever assisting and encouraging, and enlightening one another, bringing the light of truth to those who sit enshrouded in darkness. Open your hearts. Drive out error and prejudice. Learn the Cause of Sorrow, and its End, and the Means thereto, that Noble Path which you must wend with knowledge and diligence, without distractions—and alone!'

'Unless this dear fellow has some peculiarly clever conjuring tricks at his finger-ends, his popularity is to me altogether incomprehensible,' said Paphos to Seti, who did not heed him.

Nor was she regarding the Buddha, but was tearing the petals of a rose, her whole attention on that, seemingly.

'Banish the Lie of Self.'

'Ha-ha! I thought that was coming!' interrupted Shaho in a stentorian shout that startled the vast audience like a thunder-clap.

The High-priest had braced up his spirit, and obviously was about to join issue with this divinity, to make an attempt to reconquer his kingdom over the hearts, if not the minds, of his flock.

'Bravo, Shaho,' murmured Paphos. 'It is there you have the pull of him, certainly, old man.'

'*Banish the Lie of Self, which is the beginning of all illusion,*' proceeded the Buddha, '*and war always against ignorance. Turn neither to the gods who dwell in other spheres, for they are powerless, nor offer cruel sacrifice to such images of stone as this——*'

'*He blasphemes. He blasphemes!*' roared Shaho.

'Now, my good folk, you must choose,' murmured Paphos. 'Metaphysics, or good, solid granite! Come, you have always chosen right hitherto!'

'*He blasphemes!*' thundered Shaho. '*Upon Her very altar, delaying the oblation of Her priests, he insults Her who puts life into the wombs of women——*'

'Shaho, you've started late, but you have the clearer course,' remarked Paphos, for Seti's amusement.

'*And makes the seed to flourish in the field,*' cried Shaho.

'Food and love! Worth a little ignorance, by Bacchus, yes,' murmured the Greek.

'*In the name of Nâga I curse you,*' cried Shaho, raising his arms above his head. '*You, the pervertor, I curse you, and all who harken to you.*'

The people shuddered. The Buddha sat placid and meditative, sure of his power, waiting for the storm to spend itself.

'*O Nâga, Great Mother!*' cried the High-priest, looking up at the face of the idol, and pleading with well-practised intonation, '*do not abandon Thy people in their sin and misery. Neither, we*

beseech Thee, prepare just punishment against us in Thy anger. Remember, O Mother, the past faithfulness of this people, from generation to generation, and speak the word that shall confute the false teacher, and draw Thy people to Thy worship again. Speak, O Great Mother, speak!'

'Ah, the miracle!' said Paphos. 'I had quite forgotten it.'

All eyes were raised to the face of the idol. The Goddess possessed a flattened skull, partly human, partly apish, with a long, protruding underjaw. The mouth was open, not to smile, but with a leer of cruelty, and the eyes were carved as being closed, the sculptor, by a marvellously dexterous handling of the eyelids, conveying, unmistakably, the idea of natural blindness.

Some movement on the Goddess's lips only discernible to those mid-way down the nave, drew forth a chorus of appalling shrieks, and superstitious terror broke, like a panic, over the assembly. Women commenced to wail, and men to howl forth protestations of faith.

'Speak, Great Mother, speak to Thy people,' implored Shaho, a note of triumph mingling with his supplication.

Paphos, who was finding the Buddha an interesting study, saw a shade of puzzlement pass into his soft brown eyes. It was clear that Shaho's confidence was leading Gautama to suspect a priestly subterfuge. The latter turned his head slowly, and fixed his eyes upon the old man's face.

The anguished cries increased ten-fold, and many among the congregation had cast themselves down, and were writhing and foaming in a frenzy of fear.

Paphos examined the face of the hideous idol, and fancied he saw a shadow flicker across the upper lip.

Then a gush of black-cast blood, flecked with foam, welled up over the lower lip, and trickled down the hollow chin, to fall in pear-shaped gouts upon the central of the three breasts. The sight evoked horn-like cries from mouths rounded and stiffened with horror. Paphos smiled, and the Buddha also, it was apparent, was relieved.

More blood, brighter hued, flushed over the great lip, springing forth with such force that it cleared the chin, unfurled like a sheet of liquid crimson glass in the fierce sunshine, and broke upon the central breast, the drops falling, thence, audibly, to the Goddess's thighs.

A red torrent now rolled out of the cavernous mouth, making a brilliant cascade over chin and breast, while long, vermilion lines streaked all the green-black neck and trunk.

'That is well enough done,' remarked Paphos. 'Still the voice is everything. Let it be inarticulate so only it be loud, my friend. Afterwards you can interpret the noises according to need.'

The audacity of what followed surprised and thrilled even him; it had an overwhelming effect upon the stricken multitude.

From the midst of a wave of blood, that leaped clear of chin and breast, and floated like a tasselled banner until it broke upon the knees of the idol, sprinkling the altar with a scarlet rain, Gwali sprang on to the wide lower lip, and sat there for a moment, motionless.

He had lain for hours steeped to the neck in blood, and in his endeavour to pour out the thick

flood in an imposing volume he had immersed himself to the crown of his head. And now his long, blood-clotted hair barred his shining, crimson-stained face, and when he raised his thin hand to push it aside, his yellow eyes shone out more sulphurously-glowing than ever.

The worshippers were almost silent. Groans broke forth, and deep breathing could be heard distinctly, but no word or cry. Many had thrown themselves down, and lay still, awaiting death; many, paralysed by fear, were only prevented from falling by the density of the throngs.

Seti sat up, and pressed her clasped hands upon her breast.

'Gwali, my beloved, my life, my god,' she murmured.

'Oho! So this is the cause of your trouble, is it!' muttered Paphos, blanching a little. 'These abnormalities! how they attract the women!'

Following, then, the course of the red tide, Gwali commenced his descent to the altar, a feat in itself altogether superhuman, yet so easily and naturally performed that the true wonder of it escaped Paphos.

Down the smooth, perpendicular surfaces he glided like a lizard. Where his course was horizontal, as under the arch of the chin, and beneath the globular breasts, he actually progressed more slowly, flattening the while his face inwards against the stone.

Instead of allowing himself to be lost to view between the thighs, he stepped at his rapid pace along the height of one of them, and finally, his body being partly freed from the coagulating

blood, there was a vision of livid green upon the dark shank of the Goddess, and the youth was standing, slim and erect, upon the central stone of the altar.

'The utterance of my lady Nâga is certainly difficult,' remarked Paphos. 'But this is a forceful phrase.'

'Words of death have been spoken in the House of my Mother, who is the Giver of Life,' said Gwali.

Only the night previously Paphos had experienced the extraordinary effect of Gwali's voice; he was prepared, therefore, to receive the physical shock of a vibrant voice speaking, as it seemed, within the very portals of his ears.

But Gwali was now using his wonderful powers to their full, and his words smote the air of the Temple like the first high rattle of thunder. Every head bowed; even the Buddha's senses were for the moment overwhelmed.

Every head, that is, save Seti's. The girl's lawless, unappeasable soul, now more than ever aware of the hopelessness of its erring, was again face to face with its true mate and complement, he who was at once the true channel and the satisfaction of her desires.

'This is the law of my Mother, and it is engraven upon the hearts of each one of you,' continued Gwali. *'Live deeply. Take the full goblet of your lives in both hands, and drink, unafraid, unquestioning, to the very dregs. What of the darkness before and after? Out of oblivion you have dawned, into oblivion you will set. One full day of life is yours to live, that and that only. Live it! Exhaust*

its fullness. Law, fear, futurity,—these things bind you, these things rob you of your only meaning. Arise! Return to the beauty of the world! Obey the great behests of your being! Crown yourselves in the glory of desire——'

'Gwali, Gwali, come back to me!'

Seti's piteous, high treble rang out like the note of a thrush through the rumblings of a receding storm.

The effect upon Gwali was instantaneous. The words humanised him. He forgot his theme. He had been standing like a pillar of basalt; his head now drooped, and he sighed sadly. The recollection of the magnitude of his loss in life was still with him, though to imagine its quality remained impossible to him. Overcome by his sorrow, he squatted down, and bowed his forehead to his knees.

And, whether as the effect of Seti's interruption, or, more probably, due to the sudden eclipse of Gwali's bewildering personality, the attitude of the vast congregation was transformed on the instant.

The spell was broken. Paphos sat up, and stared about him, astonished by the stiffness of the posture into which he had fallen. Down the nave, the people were beginning to stir, and around him the guards were slowly and tentatively raising their heads, with an expression of puzzled expectancy on their faces, as if they feared their necks would be forcibly bent down again. The Buddha had produced a rosary, and was fingering it.

Seti was crouching in a corner of the litter, hiding her face in her hands—her customary position during her lately not infrequent outbursts of grief.

'Something more than a trick of rhetoric in *this*, I fancy,' muttered the Greek. 'What a pity 'twas his father chose that pigment for him!'

'Why, of course it is,' bellowed a raucous voice from the region of the altar. 'I recognised him at sight.'

Immediately the bulky form of Sayi Givul appeared on the altar-top, and followed by a dozen of his companions he warily approached Gwali, who still squatted, blind to his surroundings and heedless of the change that had taken place. After inspecting the youth for a moment, the smith rushed to the edge of the altar, and addressed the crowd below.

'This voice of Nâga!' he cried. 'This miracle! He is a night bird, I tell you, who goes about dressed as a woman. Shaho, the High-priest, knows him well. Why, they came once to my forge, both of them together! I spoke to him. Isn't this true, comrades?'

'Yes, it's a witch, right enough.'

'He has the evil eye.'

'He cursed my child, and it died.'

The smiths, tanners, and horse-dealers behind vociferated their assurances.

'Shaho has lied to us!'

'Let us slay them all!'

'Destroy them, O Lord Buddha!'

The crowd began to foment, and it was evident that deeds of violence were being perpetrated lower down the nave.

Gwali uprose, and although his action increased the swelling anger of the multitude, all those who had crowded upon the altar were mysteriously

subdued. The youth, without regarding anyone, walked towards Shaho, who stood dumbfounded with dismay and disappointment at the turn of events. On his way Gautama intercepted him.

'Who are you?' asked the Buddha, in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice. 'Have the gods of evil sent you to tempt the people to their doom?'

'Destroy the evil one, O Teacher of the Poor,' clamoured the multitude. 'Come, let us pull down the idol and its temple.'

'You are wonderful, indeed, O Gautama,' said Gwali, hardly pausing. 'You, too, love the darkness rather than the light, but your foolishness is profounder than the abyss, and will endure for ever.'

The crowd had now aroused itself to a fury, and fierce rushes were being made by those behind to reach the altar, to ascend which the front ranks had not yet summoned up sufficient courage. One shout was rapidly gaining in volume over the others, and threatened to become general.

'Down with the idol! Down with the idol!'

Gwali whispered a word to Shaho, who at once preceded the youth to the idol's feet. Here the three officiating priests still sat, helpless under the weight of gold, their hands still imprisoned within the golden gauntlets.

Forcing a way through them, Shaho climbed the low footstool, and passed down between the gigantic feet, which rose up like walls on either side.

At the end of the alley, where the heels joined, was a low, narrow door,—and it was ajar. The High-priest struggled through, and Gwali, who

had turned as if to arrest, by his mere gaze, any intended molestation, disappeared after him, and the door shut with a resonant sound of locking steel.

'We mustn't let them escape,' cried Sayi Givul. 'Now, comrades! We may as well begin at her this way as another.'

Speaking so, and drawing a short, heavy hammer from under his apron, he commenced to pound upon the door. Hammers, picks, and pointed steel bars appeared on every side, and far in the rear, smiting upon the main pedestal, the ringing blows of ponderous sledges arose above the shouts and laughter. The systematic demolition of Nâga was begun.

The multitude ran wild through the Temple, tearing with naked hands at altar and idol, but it was only where Sayi Givul was directing the work that any real effect was being wrought upon the massive stone and metal.

For the most part the people revealed no murderous intent. The nobles were in some instances maltreated and robbed, but they escaped with their lives.

The Buddha shielded the priests, though they too had only a little rough handling to fear, and it was through their monastery that ultimately he made his exit from the scene of destruction.

XXIV

DEMISE

OF the scene upon the altar that followed the final outbreak of violence and disorder, Paphos was not a witness, and Seti, although she kept turning to observe the interesting actors in that mute drama, mute to her amid the demoniac clamour, her attention was being constantly drawn to her own immediate circumstances.

When Sayi Givul instigated the concourse to the work of destruction, in one of the final rushes that were then made, the square of guards surrounding the royal litter was broken, and peasants and townspeople came near enough to lay filthy hands upon the fine stuffs with which it was draped.

Other rushes broke the formation of the slaves upon whose heads and shoulders the bed was supported, until at length, guards and sentries being alike dispersed, the frail litter with its two occupants was heaved to and fro upon the heads of the crowd, and was only saved from overturning by the efforts of Paphos, who, with a light jewelled sword, slashed at those hands which were pulling and thrusting with hostile intent. This naturally infuriated the people to the pitch of frenzy, and several determined attempts were made to stab the Greek.

But he displayed a fine contempt for peasant sword-play, and, careless of his own life, thought only of Seti's danger while he continued successfully to right his bark by the novel means of cutting and hewing the heads and arms of the surrounding breakers.

Meanwhile, bandied from arm to arm, the litter was rocking upon the human billows in the very centre of the nave, fifty yards removed from the guards, whose gilt armour Paphos could see as they struggled to regain their royal charge.

'The white man! Kill him! Kill the white man!' roared the crowd.

'Seti, keep in the middle. Lie flat among the cushions, there's a good girl. It helps to preserve a balance,' said Paphos. 'I have no wish to bathe in *this* sea! Ah!'

A brown, bony hand had fixed itself, claw-like, upon Seti's bare ankle. Seti shrieked, and then laughed, and clapped her hands when Paphos, with a flicking stroke, half severed the offending hand from the knotted wrist.

'You remember—the pavement of human eyes!' she cried. 'Look down! It has been done—almost!'

The litter had drifted upon a backwater, as it were, of women-folk, and these, herded immovably together, and themselves terrified by the pressure, and panic-stricken by the increasing tumult, offered no violence to the hapless pair who had been dropped into their midst; indeed, such was their terror that they attempted no natural defence of themselves from injury, but, as Seti had seen through the meshes of the rushes, bore the passing weight upon their upturned, staring faces and bare

bosoms, and only groaned if they were bruised or torn.

This stopped the forward motion of the litter along the length of the nave, and after a momentary, heaving pause it was taken up again upon the arms of men, and sent bounding in the direction whence it came.

The Greek's heart gave a leap of joy. Two or three guardsmen were already at hand, stabbing murderously with their swords at the crowd, which was too tightly packed to run or to resist. There were dead and dying men on every side, held upright by the press, and stirred into a ghastly counterfeiture of robust activity. Other guards were approaching. Paphos lay back exhausted.

'How delightfully harmless these poor folk are!' he remarked. 'Now among my own countrymen I would ere this be resembling a splintered statue with deadly realism.'

'Seti, they have reached me!' he added in a changed voice, and groaned.

It seemed to him that a thin draught of hot air had penetrated his back below the left shoulder, and was blowing a burning current upon his heart and into his brain. His ears sang, and his hands felt leaden.

At the look that came over him Seti uttered a stifled cry of horror, and rising to her knees, she bent down over him, kissing him upon his face and brow. He smiled, but his lips did not seek hers in return. He was growing icy cold. Seti raised herself again, and clasping her hands upon her breast, turned her eyes hither and thither, and moaned in her terror and helplessness.

'What can I do? O what can I do? Tell me what to do, Paphos,' she sobbed.

The guardsmen had now possessed themselves of the litter, and were carrying it rapidly through the dispersing crowd, towards the door leading into the Palace. They bore it on their shoulders, and their eyes were intent upon the motionless Greek.

One of the men from time to time withdrew himself from under his burden, when it was seen that over his gilt cuirass, down his brown arm and neck ran streams of blood. He had made an attempt to staunch the wound, but his practised eye told him the vital source of that flow.

'Put me down,' murmured Paphos. 'This motion drains my veins too hurriedly. I wish to prolong death. I find it painless, and very interesting.'

The soldiers carefully lowered the litter to the ground, and stood in a circle to shield the scene from vulgar curiosity or insult. The few people who had been hereabouts had fled away on the guardsmen's approach, however, and had joined the concourse in the nave and aisles, which rang to their shouts, and to the blows of destructive implements raining upon the great idol. Seti held the Greek's hands, and gave way to her emotion.

'That is well, Seti,' said Paphos. 'Indulge those tears to the full. You will find them of a quality seldom given to women, to men never. Indeed, no man of culture should ever weep; there are words for everything.'

Seti bent down, and rested her head lightly upon his shoulder, her face touching his neck.

'You are not dying. Tell me you are not dying,' she panted.

'What, you love me, little one!' asked Paphos.

'Oh, how can I say I do!' sobbed Seti. 'I do not know. I do not know what is love. I have followed the cry within me, and have kissed many lips in a short while. But yours now. Now I kiss them. Again!'

'Poor little puzzled soul!' murmured the Greek. 'That goblin Gwali has stolen your peace! Ah! I grow faint. I am passing. Somewhat too young to die! Yet the pace of my living has been swift, and slacken it I would not. After all my soul is spent and tired—perhaps it is time! And this death is good, beyond my hopes, good. Step by step, without violence or alarm, I am descending the inclining lawn upon the hither bank of Lethe. My sense recoils from it a little—that driven murk, the earthy fumes of the nether world. Yet I can see my lonely soul, grown colossal, stalking ferrywards, moody, but unafraid.'

'Oh, what shall I do when he is gone!' moaned Seti.

'Put your arms about me, Seti,' murmured the Greek, hardly audibly. 'To love a woman beyond reason and feeling,—I came near to missing that,' he said, when the girl, sobbing faintly, embraced him.

A tremendous shout was raised by the crowds surrounding the idol.

'The old woman's leaning over a bit,' remarked one of the soldiers, nodding in that direction.

'They won't unseat her yet, *those* pigmies,' said another. 'The men that made her, and sat her there, were the finer stock, I warrant.'

'The world has faded out of my eyes,' said

Paphos, faintly. 'I had hoped to see you at the very last, little one. This death is well, but there is nothing beautiful in dying, I find. I am not satisfied. The scroll of my life winds up on its roller, hiding the past, ell by ell. I would prefer to see it whole—the long screed, fairly coloured, as I painted it,—for whose eyes if not my own? Stir upon me, Seti, that I may feel your presence, for I am callous with death.'

The whole Temple jarred as though the earth itself had collided in her starry circuit, and the appalling crash that followed smote upon the sense of hearing, and deafened it.

The group of guardsmen opened out, and Seti saw the huge image, balanced upon her knees and shattered shoulders, engulfing the demolished altar amid the debris of her thighs.

Even yet the fearful head was bounding unbroken down the length of the nave, its leering, blind face turning over and over upon the soft carpet of pulped human flesh.

Seti watched the mighty back heave as if in agony, and then the vast trunk split asunder at the waist, and breasts and buttocks rolled apart.

Seti's stricken ears conveyed no sound, and to her bewildered brain, which accepted the central figure of the Goddess as the standard of things, the dense throngs of humanity that had been crushed beneath the masses of stone, or who flung their arms aloft, and gaped their mouths, were of no more account than hordes of ants crawling frantically around their down-trodden nest, with a clamour imaginable, but unheard.

The very sun-shafts seemed to have been ground

by this ponderous pestle, for high above, and around the scene of the catastrophe a fine dust filled all the air, and the rays falling upon this gave it the appearance of powdered sunshine.

Then her ears resumed their office. She heard the rumbling echoes of the mountainous fall, and the pitiful, agonised shrieks of the maimed, the dying, and the fear-stricken.

'She's toppled over on 'em,' she heard a soldier near her cry out.

She looked at Paphos, and saw that he was dead. On his blanched face was an expression of mild annoyance, with just that joyousness upon his shapely lips which seemed to suggest than even on this incident his brain was supplying them with comments to frame in words that would be mellifluous to the ear, and charming to the fancy.

Seti arose, and, with her back bent, and her arms out-stretched before her with the gestures of a blind woman, sought the corridor leading to the Palace.

XXV

EXODE

WHAT had happened at the seat of war, the people of the city did not know; they only knew that their army was returning with unbroken ranks and in very ill-humour, and that mingled with their own regiments rode bands of the Kosalas, formless, un-uniformed squadrons, clothed for the most part in strips of chain-mail, and bearing spears of prodigious length. These men had the insolent air of conquerors, but as insolence was a racial characteristic, some room for doubt still remained.

The princes and merchants of the city had decorated the houses along the main road with gay cloths and festoons of flowers. They had had the causeway cleaned of all its familiar garbage, and fresh sanded, and every minstrel or owner of an instrument for producing sound had been requisitioned, to overbear, by their merry din, the puzzled silence of simple folk.

The history of the city told of many sieges and assaults, but record of capitulation there was none; the people, therefore were without instruction in the art of admitting foemen within their gates; yet it seemed to them that this could not be the way it was commonly done. They preserved their puzzled silence.

After many thousands of troops had passed, there came a tableau that did much to explain the position of affairs, while it did little to reassure the bolder spirits in the crowd.

This group consisted of Iskanaar, Nassur, and Uluan. The first-named was wearing a golden circlet upon his cap of steel, and a long gown of emerald green silk over his suit of graven armour. He rode a tall grey horse, almost completely hidden beneath its caparison, and his look was cloudy and over-thoughtful.

By his side rode the Kosala prince, encased from neck to waist in a heavy jacket of plain, polished steel, which was partly concealed by a cloak of white skins. Over his thighs hung a skirt of chain-mail, and greaves of brass protected him from knee to ankle. His horse, a giant of dappled grey, was unhampered by any unnecessary furniture, and he himself rode unarmed and unhelmed, his helmet and sword being in the possession of Uluan, who, in a scarlet and white tunic, was mounted on a pony beside his master.

What the crowd noted with grave misgivings was, first of all the smothered anger and discontent portrayed on Iskanaar's countenance, and, secondly, the attitude of Nassur, who rested a massive hand upon the new king's lithe shoulder with an air of patronage that was obviously and intentionally symbolical. The spectators began to fear that they were to be encumbered with the additional expenses and responsibilities of a suzerain. However, waggon-loads of food were coming in in the train of the army.

Uluan, a gleaming figure amid that dusky race,

was searching the crowd on either hand, but without either hope or expectancy in his gaze. In that multitude, compressed into banks along the route, swarming upon the flat roofs, and filling every alley that opened on to the main road, somewhere, hidden behind the veil of a woman of the respectable order, or disguised in the bold, grimy nakedness of a slave, was the young ex-Queen, Seti.

Rumour was already busy with accounts of her complete disappearance on the day when Paphos died and the Goddess Nâga was demolished, burying presumably in the ruins of herself, the High-priest of her order, Shaho, and his goblin satellite. The Queen had run weeping from the scene, they said, and had hidden herself in her apartment. From the moment the door closed upon her she had not been seen, although she had been well sought for, Iskanaar greatly desiring her in marriage, it was said.

And yet had the harpist sought with more hopeful zest he might have observed her, for he passed within a few feet of her, and she stared him in the face, laughingly. It is true she wore a white formless robe, and was veiled from below the eyes, still Uluan would have known those eyes had his gaze met theirs, and her wide, pale brow was bared.

His late fever had left the youth dull, however, and, dreaming, he noted little of his surroundings. So he passed, the procession closed, and the crowds of sight-seers broke upon the highway.

Seti remained awhile standing in her place, watching the throngs swirl past her, her thoughts so curiously confused that though she felt she

ought to weep as one who had suffered a unique loss, still the tears that welled up to her eyes came with such pleasurable emotion that every nerve was thrilled with delight, and she was obliged to join the promenaders in order to restrain a wild impulse to dance.

It was pure abandonment that filled her. She was realising that there had been a restraint and imprisonment of the spirit implicit in the over-ready accomplishment of her will, that the too facile fulfilment of her desires had robbed them of half their savour, and she was beginning to find that it needed the uncertainty and expectancy of the streets to give a natural duration to the pleasures of gratification.

However, freedom such as this, the liberty of a summer cloud, of an unmated bird, carried with it a loneliness intolerable to a girl of her instincts, and long before she had exhausted the wide, shallow measure of delight in her absolute detachment from the past, she was beginning to feel the urgent need of contracting fresh human liaisons to take the place of those she had broken, and with Seti urgent necessities were never delayed.

She saw a handsome young shop-keeper swaggering through the throng, displaying to its best advantage his new gown of green and yellow stripes, and smiling boldly into the eye-slits of feminine veils. When he came close she did not draw back to give him room to pass, on the contrary she obstructed his way, at the same time lifting her veil to show that she was in as friendly a mood.

Now this was merely a vain young man, and, it

follows almost as a conclusion from premises, not at all licentious in his habits. The attentions of harlots were distasteful to him, for this was homage to his prosperous appearance only, and did not flatter his bodily excellences; his especial delight it was to wring illicit sighs from virtuous maids.

The admixture in Seti of exceeding boldness and exquisite freshness of beauty took him completely out of his depth in point of feeling, and her nearness to him spun his shallow brain into a dizzy whirl. He raised his hand with an undecided movement to which Seti gave intention by placing her own soft, olive hand upon his reluctant palm. He felt his reputation for gallantry was at stake; harlot or no harlot, he had never seen such perfection in a woman.

'You're a very pretty girl,' he said, and the complete derangement of his organs of breathing gave a positive dramatic power to the banal remark.

'You, too, are good-looking. Will you take me with you?' replied Seti, softly.

What exactly was the secret of the distress depicted on the man's face was never divulged, for here a veiled woman, whose loose robe in a patchwork of gaudy hues, suggested a figure buxom rather than elegant, burst the forming bubble of their dream by inflicting with a practised hand a blow upon the young shop-keeper's face and ear.

'Always the same!' shrilled a voice on the verge of hysteria. 'Never a feast, or a procession, or a fire, or a prophet but you must go gallivanting off after the first huzzy that shows her gums at you. Am I to be for ever following you about the

city, and your children running wild in the bazaars!'

'Peace, wife. You are wrong,' protested the shopkeeper. 'This lady is a stranger, and was asking me the way. That's all, I swear!'

'You just tell the lady you don't know the way, and come home,' responded the wife. 'Look at her with her veil up! She ought to be whipped!'

As the lady was growing more and more demonstrative, Seti let fall her veil, and turned away, laughing delightedly at the incident.

Her next adventure had a far more serious sequel.

She spent the afternoon dozing, or listening to gossiping women, in the shade of a dyer's shop, very wistful, but afraid to venture even a remark lest her voice or manner, she being so unlike her companions in these respects, should attract curiosity, and these market women had a reputation as forceful and relentless inquisitors.

And afterwards when, in the same manner as the floating, dissolving dyes sent down streaming veils of indigo into the clean motionless water in a crystal jar beside her, so through the clear, still atmosphere evening was melting down from the empyrean, and beneath its curtain a scented coolth was disturbing the parched, sandy stratum of air wherein the drowsy, fevered inhabitants were gasping for breath, instantly revivified, she followed the example of the other young folks, who yawned and stretched themselves, and, with amorous eyes, commenced a promenade through the highways.

Being wildly impatient for social contact, for

intimacy with a human being upon whose intelligence and feeling she might play, and whose influence she might feel working within herself, she was conspicuously eager and bold in her demeanour. On this account two Kosala officers singled her out of the throng, and followed her.

In a deserted alley they accosted her, and one of them, seizing her hand, drew aside her veil, and felt at her neck. Examining this man, and thinking she preferred the looks of his younger and less forward companion, Seti tendered her other hand to this latter officer; he took it, and thus they stood.

So far they had not spoken. Conversation did not appear to be their object, and on her side Seti was soon chilled into a frightened silence by the cynical composure on the men's cruel faces. With quick movements they then bared her arms, and scrutinised closely the many armlets with which they were adorned.

'Note 'em, cousin? Didn't I tell you?' gloated the elder man. 'You could barter a pony for every blessed one of them. There are fools and clever ones in this business like any other. Slip 'em off her, cousin.'

Seti leaned back against a wall, her two arms abandoned listlessly to the thieves, her soul in utter dismay. She was on the point of losing her whole wealth, valuables, the possession of which had given her courage, and ensured her independence and security.

And it was not only this consideration that struck her with despair. With her realisation of her powerlessness to allure even coarse soldiers

like these at will came a new sense of degradation, and humiliation, and a kind of shame. She whispered Gwali's name, and moaned aloud.

'Let's leave her a couple—or one,' suggested the younger officer. 'I'll leave one on this arm.'

'Take 'em all, all, you fool, cousin,' said the other. 'She'll get others easy enough. I never saw such beauties!'

They dragged off or unfastened all the gold bands, and when they had done so the elder man at once commenced to move away, concealing his store about his person. The younger man lingered, still holding Seti's hand, and if the girl at the moment had not been so gripped by sorrowful emotions she might have conquered him. As it was a strong material interest vanquished any latent chivalry in him.

'Cousin,' he said, following after his elder. 'You took the left arm. There are always more and better ones on the left arms. Share and share alike you said at the beginning, cousin.'

So they vanished. Seti's fingers crept towards the dried berry hanging hidden between her breasts on a thread of silk passed around her neck, and sighing she walked slowly down the obscure alley towards the moon-lit, lamp-bedecked thoroughfare. As she moved a soft breeze filled out her white, loose robe, and encircled so sweetly her graceful body that insensibly her tiny leathern sandals beat more lightly and quickly upon the hard clay ground.

But, for the first time, sorrow had gained a secure seat in her heart, and Seti resisted the onslaught of smiling pleasure as formerly she had

striven against the assaults of gloom. Consciously she drooped her head, and paced with a slow deliberate step, resolved at last upon submission to that most persistent of lovers, melancholy.

. . . . . .

When she had traversed half-a-mile beyond the gates, the Queen sat down by a well, and turned her face towards her capital city. How long she gazed she did not know, but in that space of time the many roofs and towers were merged in a black, compact, crenellated silhouette against a lozenge of pellucid gold which marked where the molten sun, ere it sank, had rolled against the purple sky.

And when the cool breath of night was breathed upon the burning sear, the gold of it was transmuted to orange, dark blue bars swam across the pale expanse, grew, and joined, until all the light was hidden. Then also was the city effaced.

Seti began to weep, and she found a delicious solace in her tears. There was abandonment of spirit here too. In this way she had lived, or wished to live, engendering a fierce movement of passionate life around herself in order to surrender herself, in sensuous passivity, to the swirling eddies she aroused.

Now that the time of the end was come, she would fill herself full of sorrow, and when she was glutted to madness, then she would eat the berry. Afterwards, even while her soul was plunging through the abyss of dreams into annihilation, already the hands of death would be smoothing into everlasting listlessness her fair, fevered body. In this way she would glean pleasure from death itself.

In the moonless night the wide stretches of parched lands were hidden, and the nameless light that lingered in the atmosphere, or fell from the few, discoloured stars, enabled her to see her own form, her fair hands, the outline of the low-walled well, and the black, shining surface of its water,—that much and no more.

She unstrung the berry from the cord, and pressing it between her palms, tried to think of death.

But she could not. A pleasurable sleep full of dreams that were partly controllable by her not altogether somnolent will,—that was the only guise in which death would appear to her mind, and she knew it was a false one.

She sought earnestly to think beyond the ephemeral paradise which the drug in the berry would conjure up around her; she tried to imagine the end of the dream, some pause of agonised consciousness between sleep and death. She had no wish to be cheated out of the understanding and the fear of death; she wished at least to taste its bitterness, but her imagination failed at the task.

And mindful of the part she herself played when Paphos was dying, one other thing she desired—some one to be near her when she died, to listen to her final words, and, by speech and the touch of their hands and lips, to make her sensible to the last of the life she was leaving.

These thoughts wearied her. She broke the berry, and commenced to rub into powder the flaky substance inside the hard skin, crooning softly to the action of her hands.

Barely had her soft notes grown upon the stillness, joining rather than breaking the silence,

when they were hushed by a man's open-mouthed groan of pain, the hollow sound being immediately followed by the unmistakeable creaking of a wooden bed.

Gathering the fragments of the grain, the girl stole in the direction whence the groan had proceeded. She came to a low hut of wood covered with a rotting thatch that turned to soot at her touch. The place, whatever it was, was not designed for human habitation, being too low and confined.

At one of the openings in the planks she crouched down, and listening, detected the faint hurried breathing of a sick man. Answering an impulse which owed nothing to charity, she passed within, and in the obscurity sought with her hands for the recumbent form.

Almost at once her arms were seized and pinioned to her sides, and a tall man hissed the command into her ear:

'Begone, woman. Find another place to sleep. A man is dying here.'

It was the voice of Gwali, strangely altered, and more like the speech of ordinary men, yet easily recognisable.

'My Gwali, my Gwali!' cried the girl. 'O the kind gods who have guided me to you!'

She let fall the crumbled berry, and when Gwali had loosened the hold upon her arms, she cast them about his neck.

'Speak, Gwali, speak to me, my beloved, my master,' cried Seti, drawing his face down to hers.

'Hush! No master am I now, but only a common clod, ill-begotten,' answered Gwali, in the same changed tones.

Suddenly the girl broke her clasp from about his neck.

'Gwali! Your skin is warm, like mine!' she exclaimed.

Gwali sighed, and squatted down upon the floor. Seti, her eyes now more accustomed to the dark, could distinguish his shape and sorrowfully bowed head plainly enough. Low, exquisite gutteral laughs came from her, like the last gurgling notes of the nightingale when, answering her silvery song, her mate has come to her. She sat down beside him, and nestled her head upon his breast.

After a silence, Gwali took her hands, and carried them to his temples, pressing them there. She felt that under his turban his head was bound with a cloth, which was damp, with blood, perhaps.

'A stone fell on me,' he said. 'Shaho too is wounded,—a falling pillar crushed his chest. I carried him here, but he must die. And my wound has changed me.'

A wakeful sigh interrupted the groans and mutterings that had been coming from the dying man, and together Gwali and the Queen approached the death-bed of the High-priest.

'Gwali!' said the old man, in a feeble, muffled voice.

'I am listening, Shaho.'

'You are sure there is nothing beyond,—no god who will call me to account, no place of torment, no disembodied soul—nothing?' asked Shaho, with piteous eagerness.

Gwali made no answer.

'Speak, Gwali,' continued the old man. 'If there

is a god, I ought to placate him. It is not too late. What of Nâga? How came she into men's minds? I think I feel the winds of another world blow on my naked soul. Speak. You know how to banish these fears. I am an old man, much weakened and in pain, and to meet death is a brave thing. Prove to me again, Gwali, how matter is dissolved in thought. I have forgotten, but it was a comforting theory. What was it you said—that when thought, uttering its last behest dies—how ends that tale, Gwali?'

'I have forgotten it,' said Gwali, in a low voice.

'Forgotten it!' whispered Shaho, in husky excitement. 'Can a true thing be forgotten?'

Then a convulsion made his body leap in the bed, and in a loud, shrill voice, like the voice of a woman in direst terror, he shrieked out:

'Mercy, mercy, mercy!'

The sound of grinding teeth, a long-continued, weak screech, a final deep grunt, and nothing else broke the silence but the steady flow of blood from mouth or wound, and soon that too ceased.

Gwali withdrew from the shed, to sit outside, with his back resting against the tumbledown walls. Seti squatted near him, smiling to herself.

'I could not help him,' said Gwali. 'I know nothing now but what I have seen. I can think only for my needs. What have I been? What have I lost? What spirit used to possess me?'

After a long silence Seti called softly to him, and he did not answer; she touched his eye-lids and listened to his breathing, and found that he was fast asleep. Then, because she was very weary, she put her arms about him, and resting her head across his knees, slept also.

It was dawn when she awoke. In the east a wedge had been cut out of the brown-black sky, and the hollow filled with a bright, liquid colourlessness.

The reflection fell full upon them both, and for the moment, finding herself pillowed by Gwali, who was curled up on his side, in dead slumber, she was unable to string together the events that had brought her there.

She soon remembered, and gently forcing back the helpless head of the youth, she kissed his mouth, and examined him feature by feature.

He had painted his face, legs, arms and extremities with a brown stain, and clothed in nondescript, bright-hued cloths, his head surmounted by a wide, red turban, he looked no more than a handsome specimen of the wandering musician or conjuring class. She had to shake his shoulders, and call loudly into his ear before he awoke.

When he did so, he was stupid, and yawned and stretched himself often before he stood up, gazing the while at the girl with an expression of sleepy pleasure and satisfaction upon his face. His eyes were yellow still, but a dullness had come into them, and the pupils had grown darker, more seeing, and good-natured.

'What part of this is a dream, and what part is not, Seti,' he asked, drawing her by the shoulders to him, and kissing her lips.

'What does it matter!' she replied.

The youth went into the shed, and came forth again bearing a long rope of strung gold pieces which he wound about his waist under his clothing.

Afterwards they drank water at the well, and hand in hand shuffled along through the white dust of the road.

Everything in Gwali's manner and speech had become commonplace. Only once, when they stood to watch the pale green fingers of the morning sun take grip upon the edge of the world to draw his fiery head up into view, did any suggestion of profound thought disturb the youth's new and lazy well-being.

'Before the stone fell on me I had many fine hopes,' he then said. 'Now I have only one—to lie in the arms of a woman.'

'What more should a young man want?' cried Seti. 'We have money. Come, let us go to Kosambi, and open a shop in the bazaar to sell trinkets.'

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