

THE THREE FIRES

A Story of Ceylon





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THE THREE FIRES

A Story of Ceylon

BY

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To
SIR ANTON BERTRAM
HIS LORDSHIP
THE KING'S CHIEF JUSTICE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I BROOKLAND ROAD	1
II THE FLOWER OF LIFE	11
III HOPES	23
IV A FEAR	32
V THE ROSE OF YESTERDAY	43
VI SO THEY WERE MARRIED	49
VII FIREFLIES	56
VIII NOT TUAN NOOR	69
IX THE GODDESS ANSWERS	80
X PUBLIC SPIRIT	93
XI DREAMS	107
XII SUCCESS	116
XIII THE CURSE OF FIRE	123
XIV SOME DAY, PERHAPS	140
XV MISFORTUNES OF A PRUDENT MAN	152
XVI UNDERSTANDING	173
XVII THE TEMPLE IN THE ROCK	181
XVIII GOD THE CREDITOR	191
XIX WOMEN TOGETHER	201
XX THE OPAL TESTIFIES	212

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXI TUAN NOOR'S MARK	224
XXII THE COST OF PEACE	232
XXIII HOW DREAMS COME TRUE	247
XXIV THE BRIDE'S LIGHT	254

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CHAPTER I

BROOKLAND ROAD

HAMILTON tried dazedly to remember how it had all begun. Half an hour ago he had been taking his tea in solitary comfort in the one shady corner of the Galle Face lawn, watching the long white rollers break on the palm-fringed beach and idly debating whether to return to his plantation to-morrow or to give himself a day or two more by the sea, beyond whose sapphire immensities lay England. He said England now, not home. Home, for him, had come to mean the wild green heart of Ceylon. Stridently into his musings had come the talk and laughter of a party of American tourists. He had watched them with amused wonder; travelers of this type never climbed the jungle-bordered roads that led to his hills. Then, as they were obviously disappointed by their failure to find a place on the lawn sheltered from the tropic sun, it had seemed inevitable that he should give up his patch of shade and retire to the verandah. There his memory blurred. In some mysterious way that simple bit of courtesy had resulted in his introduction by strangers to strangers

whose names rebounded from his consciousness and left no trace. Now he found himself established in the group like an old acquaintance, murmuring at intervals "Extraordinary! Most extraordinary!" as a sort of refrain to their recital of things seen.

"And we haven't missed a bet, either. Not much we don't know about India now. We took five weeks going down through, all the way from Calcutta to Trichinopoly. Broadening? I'll say it is. Do you know, a year ago I couldn't have told you whether Trichinopoly was a perfume or a disease."

"Interesting place, Trichi," observed Hamilton with admirable gravity, though his eyes wrinkled a little at the corners. "You picked the best time—must have been there just about Tamil New Year."

The tourist shook his head.

"I don't know about that. Likely you're right—the whole town was hopping with natives, most unpleasant."

"They come in from the jungle all about," said Hamilton. "My *kangani* was there, looking for new coolies." He saw the question coming and hastily forestalled it. "I meant my foreman. I grow cacao in the high ground above Kandy."

"Kandy"—the man who found travel broadening consulted the itinerary. "Tuesday, Peridenya Gardens, lunch at Queen's Hotel, Kandy, night at Anuradhapura. These names are the limit."

"Jove!" the Englishman exclaimed. "Unless

you do it by aëroplane that won't give you more than an hour in Kandy, and you'll spend that eating."

"How's the table at that hotel?" inquired another member of the party, waking from lethargy to interest.

"Topping," said Hamilton, "but the city!"

"That's all right. These Oriental burgers are pretty much alike unless there's the Taj or something of that kind. But good food—well, all I can say is, lead me to it."

"Ah, but we feed our souls with beauty," sighed the intense lady with the green veil on her pith helmet. "The spicy breezes blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle."

"Where every prospect pleases and we make the natives smile,"

Hamilton turned with a start at the new voice, then rose. A girl was standing on the edge of the group, her hands boyishly in her pockets, from one of which protruded a sketch-book. A wide felt hat was pushed back from the little pointed oval of her face. Her smile was ingenuously friendly, but imps that laughed in her eyes belied its simplicity. Hamilton involuntarily straightened his collar.

"Well, the late Miss Gray! You nearly missed tea. Miss Gray, Mr. Hamilton."

He got that name quite clearly. A vivid gleaming bit of life like that to be named Gray! Preposterous. One of her jokes, of course. The imps probably selected her parents just for that.

"No tea, thank you." She acknowledged the introduction with a nod. "I came for your crusts. The crows want them."

"Disgusting creatures! They come right into my room." "Why will you encourage them?" But as they protested, they gave the crusts, and she replied placidly over a heaped plate, "I like them. They're so funny and noisy and curious—just like us in feathers."

Blue, thought Hamilton. What blue! The soft depth of the sky, the daring sparkle of the sea—and something more than lay in either sea or sky—all at once he realized that the glance which had impressed him with the color of her eyes had been flung backward over her shoulder as she turned away, and that she was going out of sight around the corner of the verandah. Courteously but firmly, he excused himself from the party and took a short cut through the hotel. Even a prosaic woman-shy bachelor finds upon occasion that inspiration supplies the lack of experience.

He found her under a clump of palms where the green terrace shelves down abruptly to the white sand of the beach, surrounded by the loud impudence of her glossy pensioners. She did not seem surprised to see him.

"Don't frighten this one," she warned him. "He has a broken beak and if I don't give him his share the others rob him. How long have you been here?" she went on, when the disabled crow had been duly fed.

"Here in Colombo?"

"No, I mean in the East. Were you born here?"

Hamilton shook his head.

"I'm Sussex. But I came to Ceylon fifteen years ago, when I wasn't much more than a kid, and I'll end my days here."

"You like it?"

"Not always, but it—it takes you."

"I know. Tell me about it. The country, I mean."

"About what part of it? Elephants? Orchids? Pearls?"

"No, no. People."

Hamilton frowned in droll perplexity.

"That's a large subject. I don't know where to begin. The Tamils are the most picturesque, I think. Their women wear a lot of jewelry——"

"I can see that," she interrupted, "and I don't much care what they eat. What are they like—inside?"

"Rather like you and me, you know."

She looked at him gravely. He decided that her eyes were more like the sky.

"I thought I knew, but I lost my bearings. These people in the party—you heard them! They seem to think they are looking at a troupe of performing fleas, or something. Not humans like themselves, at all events. There in Trichinopoly, at the temple, I was so ashamed! To go stamping and staring through them, pushing them out of the way, as if they had no feelings—and that woman who quotes poetry kept saying, 'East

is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' She would, you know."

"Yes, I would expect her to. She should quote it all, though:

" 'There is neither East nor West, border nor breed nor birth, when two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.'

"It isn't fair to stop halfway through."

They were sitting together on the grassy slope now.

"I suppose that's the trouble, really. We don't go far enough," Miss Gray mused, her hands clasped about her knees, her eyes fixed on the sea.

"Kipling said another thing about that. Remember? 'God has made many heads, but there is only one heart in all the world among your people or my people.' "

"And the heads are what we see."

"Yes, and it's the heads that make the differences. The big unities lie far below, out of sight. Two men have the same feeling, but you wouldn't recognize it for the same when they have worked it out into action. That is according to the thousand factors which make their background—race, creed, country, perhaps wealth or poverty. Many heads, but one heart in all the world. Doesn't that make the whole thing simple?"

"Everyone has times when life and the world are simple. Everything is clear as that sky to me now, but what will it be when I go on tomorrow?"

"You are going on—to-morrow!"

"Early." She sighed. "And they will sniff and snicker and patronize and sentimentalize and blunder—why, what else am I doing myself? Sniffing at them—I am as bad as they are."

"You can never forget the one heart under the many heads," he said. "You will always say to yourself, 'That's I,' or, 'That might have been I.'"

She tilted up her chin with a wistfully defiant little laugh. "Do you often meet creatures like us?"

"I never met anyone quite like you before." He did not look at her as he spoke, but with all his self-control he stressed the pronoun a little. "Is it cheeky if I ask to look at your sketches?"

She gave him the little book.

"I say!" he broke out after a moment. "These are simply ripping."

"You think I can draw?"

"Rather. I wish——"

"What?"

"I wish you were going to be in Kandy long enough to come up to my plantation. You would like my *kangani's* face, I think. I know I'd like to see what you make of him."

"That's the one who has gone to Trichi. I was standing there a few minutes before I spoke. I wonder if we saw him."

"A lame chap with big eyes and a winning sort of smile. I haven't heard him laugh—not for a long time—but he never looks glum."

"I believe I did see him in the temple court. He was with a tall man and a lovely little girl. It's rather a sad sort of smile, and sometimes he looks as if he had gone away and left the smile on guard, like the locked door of an empty house."

"That's it. You saw him. I say—didn't you take a try at drawing him when you could understand him like that?"

"No. It was too big for me, and anyway there wasn't time. But I wish I had tried, if you care so much about it. Your men must like you, Hamilton Sahib."

Hamilton thought how easy it would be for a man to make a fool of himself.

"Sahib belongs to the North," he said. "We say Dorai. And it's more than liking with Motu Rayen and mè. He saved my life once."

"Motu Rayen—that's music."

"It means Pearl Chief. All their names mean something, you know."

"Well—Hamilton Dorai—when I come back I'll stay long enough in Kandy to come up to your plantation, and I'll be artist enough to draw Motu Rayen for you."

"You are coming back? When?"

"I don't know when—or how—or why. Only, I don't see how it can be possible for anyone to want a thing so much and for it not to happen."

"You want to come back?" Hamilton spoke seriously. "Then you will. You belong here. The East has something to say to you that you

will have to hear. Those people with you—never mind their names, I don't care about them—have found nothing, have left nothing. They just blow through. They will forget and be forgotten. They don't matter."

"I have found—oh, so much! but what have I left? How can I have left anything, running through like this?"

"Perhaps you will know, sometime—when you come back. It's something to understand, a little, isn't it? The East marks the people who understand it. And when you come back—you will stay."

She looked hastily at her watch.

"I wonder. I can't stay now, that's certain. We're dining at Mount Lavinia. Good-by."

She held out her hand and he took it silently. He could not have told himself why it seemed to him unthinkable that he should say good-by to her. Some time after she had gone, he realized that he was still holding fast the sketch-book. He hurried after her, but she had disappeared. There was nothing to do but leave it at the office with his card. As he walked away from the desk toward his room, he found his steps keeping time to the rhythm of "Brookland Road":

*"I was very well pleased with what I knewed,
I reckoned myself no fool—
Till I met with a maid on the Brookland Road
That turned me back to school.
Low down, low down!
Where the kiddie green lanterns shine"—*

He shook his head impatiently and began to shave with austere determination, but the haunting little tune persisted.

*"She only smiled and she never spoke,
She smiled and went away;
But when she'd gone my heart was broke"—*

"Ass!" He applied a towel to a cut. "You unspeakable ass!"

CHAPTER II

THE FLOWER OF LIFE

WHILE Hamilton and Miss Gray were talking of Motu Rayen, he sat with the tall man and the pretty little girl of the temple court on the ferry crossing from India to Ceylon. Hamilton had said less than truth when he called him lame. The Tamil foreman was bent and misshapen, as if a giant had crumpled his body in cruel play, but his deformity did not give the impression of weakness. There was rather the sense of an inner power that mastered the crippled limbs and lighted the worn face with that indomitable smile. Very gentle that smile was now as he watched the twelve-year-old girl who stared in awed fascination at the new miracle of the sea. Her father's eyes also were fixed on her, and he sighed inaudibly. Slight as was the movement of his broad chest the quick eye of the lame man saw.

"You will not be sorry that you have done this, Vyapuri," he said. "It will be better for the child."

"I know. That is why I come with you," the older man replied. "She has been unhappy since her mother died. For me, my grief is with me whether I go here or there, and the place of my

memories is sweet. But with a child it is different. If Nila can be happier in another place——”

“Did you call me, father?” The girl turned and came to her father with eager fondness.

“No, my jewel. I only spoke your name in talk with our new friend here.”

“He hoped—as do I—that you will be happy where we are going.” Motu Rayen looked down tenderly at her. “It is very pleasant, a cacao plantation. It is all shade and coolness under the trees, even at midday, not like the tea estates where one walks only waist high among the bushes under the burning sun. Rubber trees are shady, but not so pleasant. I worked with rubber for a time till Hamilton Dorai changed to cacao. Nothing is quite so pleasant as the cacao trees.” Nila’s dark eyes had widened to shining wonder, as when first he showed her the sea. He touched her smooth hair gently, and his voice unconsciously took the cadence with which one tells a fairy tale to a child. “The leaves are always falling, loosening softly from the branches, floating down without sound, quietly, as the dream one outgrows and loses without pain. The flowers you would hardly notice, little white blossoms like tiny strands of wild cotton caught on the bark as they drifted on the wind, but from each of them there grows a pod, small too, at first, and green, growing and growing till at last it hangs among the leaves, perhaps crimson, perhaps gold. The women pick these. They are very beautiful in the

baskets. I have seen my little sister, a child like this, walking down a path between the trees in a red and yellow sari with a basket of cacao pods on her head, the leaves falling all about her, and I thought the world could show me no lovelier sight."

"You have a little sister like me?" Nila laughed outright for joy. "Is she there now?"

Motu Rayen's hand went up to his bent chest with a gesture of pain. It was only a moment before he answered her, however.

"You look as she did when I said good-by to her at the train. She went to Kandy for a visit. So like her—she was older, a little older, but just such a childish eager face, just such clear eyes! And I said good-by to her like this——"

Motu Rayen touched the young girl's eyes lightly, then pressed his fingers to his lips. It is the tenderest of Tamil caresses. Nila nestled closer to him with the unconscious trustfulness of a happy child. She thought it must be very pleasant to have a kind elder brother. Perhaps the girl in red and gold, when she came back from the visit, would like the new playmate so well that some day Motu Rayen would call Nila "little sister" as if she were his own. Perhaps—the subject slipped into the background of Nila's mind, for Motu Rayen had begun one of the stories of heroes, gods, and demons that he could tell so absorbingly, and it lasted till the bustle of landing engrossed the child's attention. They never spoke

of the little sister again but once. That was when Nila, after patient waiting, ventured to ask Motu Rayen whether she would soon come home.

"Never to me. Her home is with the gods," he said gently. Then, all at once, he raised his joined palms above Nila's head and prayed with a hoarse deepening of his voice that almost frightened her. "My little one was as sweet, as beautiful, as innocent as this. Spare this child, Lord of Life and Death! Let one sacrifice be enough, O Destroyer!"

After that she never spoke of the little sister, but thought much of her, sometimes as meeting her own mother among the happy dead, sometimes as a gay little ghost in scarlet and gold swaying down the shady path between the cacao trees, but always as a holy secret for Motu Rayen and herself, not to be shared even with Ponamma.

Among the new figures in Nila's world, this last-named was the most vividly assertive. Hamilton Dorai was a vague beneficent demigod to be saluted with reverence and admired with covert upward glances. Motu Rayen—by this time, Motu Rayen was no longer new. It seemed to Nila that his gentle kindness had always been a part of her life. But the girl's experience had never included anything quite like the warm-hearted, sharp-tongued old woman whose little house was next to theirs in the settlement of the high-caste Tamil workmen. Nila turned to her neighbor the more readily because Vyapuri had opposed her taking any part, however light, in the work of the estate.

He felt that the care of his house was enough for her. This would have meant many idle and lonely hours for the girl, had it not been for Ponamma, who was a notable housewife, and hailed such a pupil as a gift of the gods. It was not long before she loved her young neighbor like the child of her old age. Her own sons and daughters were married and gone to homes of their own, her husband was a silent man away all day at work, so that much loneliness and heartache had gone to the polishing of her brass pots, whose splendor was the talk of all the lines. After Nila's coming, Ponamma's pots were brighter than ever, but now no tears were mixed with the sand that scrubbed them.

When there are no rocks in a river one does not notice how fast the current flows. Time passed. Hamilton stopped watching for an American stamp among his letters and Motu Rayen saw that the child whom he had brought from India was growing up like a flower in a lovingly tended garden, but to Vyapuri, intent upon his memories and the comfortable routine of his work, it came as a shock when Ponamma took it upon herself one day to tell him it was high time he set about finding a husband for Nila.

"A husband? You are talking foolishly. She is too young."

"She is sixteen," said the old woman severely. "You are like all men, blind unless a woman helps you to see. Sixteen—a child, I grant you, at heart, but any day may see her a woman. Choose

her a husband, I tell you, before she takes the matter into her own hands. We have wisdom, we old ones, but we can remember the days before we were wise. At least, I can."

She chuckled reminiscently, but sighed in the middle of the chuckle.

"But Nila has no eye for young men," Vyapuri objected. Of course he knew it was his daughter's duty and destiny to marry, and his to find a fitting match for her. By Hindu custom this should have been settled at least a year ago. Still——

Ponamma would allow no temporizing.

"A woman's eye has always room for a handsome rascal till it is filled by a good husband and his children. And a young girl does not know how to choose."

"A young girl does not presume to choose," Vyapuri corrected decidedly.

"No?" She took a fresh chew of betel and enjoyed it at her leisure while Vyapuri fumed. "How wise men are about women! Well, have it your own way. One of these days she will sigh and look far away and pick at her rice like a butterfly. Then you will question her, and after a great deal of urging she will admit that she has dreamed of a fine young man who asked for her hand in marriage."

Ponamma was describing the formula by which a Tamil girl who has made her own choice breaks the news to her family. Vyapuri recognized it and protested, but she went on relentlessly.

"And when you ask her whether she recognized

this dream suitor, what will she say? The name that you would choose for her?"

"You mean?"

"You know very well the man I mean. He is the husband for her, but a young girl does not dream of one like Motu Rayen, good as he is, unless some older and wiser person takes a hand."

"He has said nothing. How do you know that he——?"

"Any fool can see that, and can see too that he would never venture to ask for her, a cripple as he is, though he can care for her as well as you and better. He is a rich man. He has saved all these years from his *kangani's* wages and his commissions in the boutique, and now that he lends money!"

"I wish he had never begun that. They call him a money-lender now."

"Well, where is the shame in that?" Ponamma retorted with spirit. "There must be money-lenders—the gods know that an estate cannot live without them, and it is the same in a village."

"I grant it, but it isn't the trade I would choose for my son-in-law. Money-lenders are always getting into trouble."

"Because bad men have given the trade a bad name. Let a few like Motu Rayen take it up and see how the tune will change. He has grown rich just because he asks such a low rate of interest that everyone goes to him—and you never hear one word about him that is not praise."

"I admit all that," Vyapuri conceded. "He is

a known man through all this district—I could get no better for my daughter. But—surely there is time enough—she is only a child.”

“Child—humph!” said Ponamma.

She would have said something stronger than “humph” if she had seen Nila at that moment. We say that our fortune turns on a slight pivot of chance. It may be, and it may be that those who believe in the inexorable march of fate have the clearer vision. Destiny or chance, Nila had felt lonelier than usual that day, and had whimsically gone out in the cool of the afternoon, wearing her new red and gold sari, to walk under the cacao trees playing that she was Motu Rayen’s little sister. Laughing at her own fancy, she plaited two palm-fans into a little basket and began choosing the most richly colored pods to fill it. In her pleasant search she went on from tree to tree until she was near the edge of the plantation that bordered the road. She walked along singing softly to herself, the basket balanced on her head, one round firm arm with its silver bracelets raised to steady it. Suddenly she spied one specially beautiful pod, glowing purple. Setting down her basket, she reached up, but the prize hung too high for her. As she stood on tiptoe, happily eager, an arm reached over her shoulder, plucked the purple pod, and laid it in her hand. Turning amazed, she found herself looking into the face of a stranger—and not all the training of a modest Hindu maiden could make her look away.

The whole atmosphere of the man was that of

a magnificent wild creature and the stiff uniform of the Ceylon Police emphasized this by its very incongruity. He had pushed back his smart cap, clear of the crisp heavy black curls about his forehead, and the loosened collar of his tunic showed the thick shapely column of his throat. The close-fitting blue serge had taken the lines of a body lithe and powerful as a black panther. He was smiling when she turned to him, and his strong white teeth gleamed between full red lips—teeth so strong and so white as to suggest the panther's fangs. Gradually, as he held and was held by the girl's wide eyes, his smile faded. So they stood for one of those moments that are like eternity.

It was he who broke the silence with a soft musical Tamil greeting. Nila was not surprised to hear him speak that language—she had never even wondered whether he were one of her own people or not. Suddenly, irresistibly as dawn, he had come to her, and she accepted him as unquestioningly as she did the rising of the sun. Now she knew the answer to questions that Ponamma had asked in some of their talks—questions that she had but half-understood. He was the answer.

She gave back his greeting shyly, and thanked him for the cacao pod. Then for the first time she realized that he was still holding it, that the purple fruit linked their hands. Suddenly her heart beat strangely, stormily, so that the red and gold folds of the new sari stirred. His eyes moved down lingeringly from her face, and their glance on the shaken muslin was like a soft but infinitely

troubling touch. Her lids drooped now, but their belated decorum veiled glowing eyes. Her fingers relaxed—as they did so, his clasped them, and the fruit rolled unnoticed on the ground between them.

“When did you come here?” he asked.

“Four years ago.”

“Four years ago! Four years! And I have been passing this road for three of them and have never seen you! What does it matter since I have found you at last?”

“Do you pass here every day?” Nila murmured.

“Not every day—I wish I did. Twice a week. I am on estate patrol duty. They gave me that work because I am a strong swift walker and can cover the ground well. Also, it may be, because I might need less help than some in case I found trouble.”

“You go about always, always watching over people, protecting them?” No wonder he had seemed like a god to her, she thought. To her training, this benevolence was the last touch of perfection. He smiled again.

“Always watching over people. These three years I have been watching over you, though you did not know it—nor I.”

“I am glad that I know.” She looked up at him again, and at the adoring trust in her eyes his own eyes widened till their dark glitter filled her world.

“I would be nearer when I watch over you”—

he stopped, breathing quick and hard. The grip of his hand hurt, but it was a happy pain. It did not seem strange to her that he should speak in this way, whom she had met but a few minutes ago. She was the child of a country of infinite leisures, but also of swift decisions. One may move slowly in matters that belong to eternity, but a man does well to pluck the flower of this life to-day, for to-morrow his hands may close upon the red blossoms of the burning ghat and be ashes strewn on the River.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Nila, daughter of Vyapuri."

"Nila—Nila!"

His eyes were larger—nearer—she was drowning in them. His grip of her hand tightened, as if all the strength of his body were in it. All at once she was afraid.

"I must go," she insisted, trying to draw her hand away. "I must go home."

"If I let you go now, Nila, will you come here again? Three days from now, at this time—will you come here again?"

"Yes."

As she fled down the path, she remembered with a little tremulous laugh that she did not know his name. Her father would think it absurd that she should not know his name—she would not speak of him yet. It would be time enough when she had seen him again, three days from now.

Three days from now—she pressed her joined

palms to her bosom as she ran. "Krishna, keep him safe!" she prayed breathlessly.

He stood by the road, looking into the green depths where the slender, brilliant figure had disappeared. He pushed his cap still farther back and drew his palm across his forehead.

"Allah!" he whispered.

CHAPTER III

HOPES

THREE days can be a very long time. Nila found them so, and yet her household tasks had never been so pleasant, never had she felt so near God in her prayers. To her gentle sheltered spirit, first love came as simply and sweetly as a lotos bud opens its rosy innocence. When she closed her eyes at night, it seemed she could hear his voice with that strange, quivering break that only made its deep music the stronger—"I would be nearer when I watch over you"—and she fell asleep smiling. Always careful for her father's comfort, she thought of new little attentions, pretty, unexpected thoughtfulnesses that made him sigh.

"How like her mother she grows!" he thought. "Ponamma was right, maybe. I will come to an understanding with Motu Rayen—for I do not doubt she was right there, too."

His opportunity came that evening when the end of working hours found them together. They walked toward the lines, and as the older and stronger man looked down on the misshapen figure of the younger, he realized how impossible it would be for Motu Rayen to offer himself as a husband for Nila. Another man would have felt

that his wealth could more than offset his infirmity, but Moto Rayen's mind did not work along such lines. As they reached the *kangani's* house, Vyapuri said, "I will stop and talk with you awhile, if I may."

"You could never be unwelcome," Motu Rayen returned cordially, but with some surprise. Usually it was he who went to Vyapuri's house. "Some comforts I have, but not so many as you."

"Why do you not marry?" was Vyapuri's deliberate reply. "A house and a man both need a woman to care for them."

"I am not the sort of man a girl dreams about." It was the first time Vyapuri had ever heard bitterness in Motu Rayen's voice.

"Why not?" Nila's father persisted sturdily.

The younger man rose and took a few steps across the room, coming to a halt with raised brows before his friend.

"That may be true of some girls," said Vyapuri, "but not of the sort that you would want for a wife. She would think more of your mind and heart." He took a long breath and plunged. "My own child, for instance—Nila—is very fond of you. Surely you know that."

Motu Rayen's thin hands clenched.

"Yes," he answered evenly, "I know that she is fond of me—as she would be of your brother."

"When have you given her occasion to think of you otherwise?"

"Never." Motu Rayen's hands went up slowly to his breast as if to quiet a tumult there.

"Do you mean"—the words were barely audible—"do you mean—that she could ever—love me?"

"Europeans marry because they love," Vyapuri returned with sententious scorn. "We love, having married. I mean that if you are so minded I will give you my daughter for your wife."

"Does she—know?"

Vyapuri shook his head.

"A good father arranges his daughter's marriage first and tells her afterward. A good daughter loves the husband of her father's choice. What do you say, Motu Rayen?"

"I?" Motu Rayen's voice shook. "I? What can I say except that she is dearer to me than the sight of my eyes, that her happiness is the sunlight of my spirit, that I would die gladly to keep sorrow from her? Can she be content with me?"

"Why not?"

"A cripple—so much older than she is——"

"She will see you young and strong in your sons."

Motu Rayen's clenched hands opened and pressed palm to palm, he raised them as in worship.

"Our children"—he closed his eyes. When he opened them, Vyapuri was awed by their solemn brightness. Happy as his own marriage had been, he had not come to it like this. It was as if Motu Rayen heard his unspoken wonder.

"You cannot know what this means to me," he said. "For more than eight years I have been as one dead. My only thought has been that I should

not spoil the world for others—for myself I had no more fear and no more hope. I was finished—it seemed. Now, life begins again, the life that I believed had been struck out body and soul in one swift terrible day. Before that I was a man who could have loved Nila without misgiving and asked you for her without shame. I had a little sister pearl-pure and flower-sweet as she is, a child to whom I was father and mother, for whom I had found no suitor good enough. She had gone down to the Perahera at Kandy with an old kinswoman, and I was to join them there for the great day of the feast. The day I should have gone, the gods struck me—what does the story of it matter now? Only that it left me—as I am—as I must always be. And while I lay sick, my little sister”—

It was a moment before he could go on.

“I have never spoken the words before. I shall never speak them again. You know how it is at the Perahera on the great night—the crowds—the music—it is like a whirlwind. People are separated and lose each other. Our kinswoman was old and weak—I have never blamed her for what happened. If I had been there! A wandering band of the thieves’ caste camped that night by the lake and were gone before the dawn. Trodden in the dust by the ashes of their camp-fire was a torn veil. It was brought to me, I saw it. Hers. That is all I can say, even now. If I dared to think how death came to her—or what came before death—I would go mad. I can only think that her

innocent soul is comforted in another life for the sufferings of this."

Motu Rayen bowed his head on his folded arms. Vyapuri, after a moment, touched the bent shoulder gently.

"My son," he said, clearing his throat, "the past is gone. It is with the gods. You say truly, life begins anew for you. Put the torch of living happiness to the logs where dead grief lies. I will tell Nila to-night."

"Wait a little," Motu Rayen interposed. "It is true, I have always guarded my eyes and my words, that she might not be troubled by knowing that I love her as a man loves a woman. I knew that she was glad of me as a friend, and it would have been a poor love that robbed her of what she valued, to give her what she did not desire. Now, let me come to her as a lover, let me try to wake an answer in her heart, before you speak to her. You have opened a wide door of hope to me—but we must not startle her."

"Have it as you will, my son." Vyapuri rose. "Will you come back with me now?"

"Let me go first to the temple. When I have praised the gods, I will come."

Vyapuri stopped on his way home to report his progress to Ponamma and her husband Keshavan. The talk lasted long. When Vyapuri reached home, somewhat later than usual, he found Nila just beginning to cook their evening meal; had he delayed a little less, he would have found an empty house.

That afternoon she had stood among the cacao trees on the border of the plantation and watched the road that led up from Ambalana. Presently she saw a dark blue figure down the road, swinging along with a quick firm step—not quick enough, however, when he spied the red and gold sari among the green. He broke into a run and cleared the boundary ditch with one long clean leap. Then the sari no longer stirred to the beating of her heart because she was in his arms, crushed against a heart that throbbed more fiercely than her own.

Again that strange terror came over her—the terror that her most intimate, most daring dreams never brought, that came only in his presence.

“My lord, my lord,” she whispered, “have mercy! Let me go—I am afraid.”

He released her with a laugh.

“Did I frighten you, beloved? When I saw you waiting, I knew that you loved me, and I leaped to you as flame leaps to the dry leaves. Ah, but you must not be afraid of love. Sometime, I will hold you closer, closer yet, and you will not be afraid. When, blood of my heart? When?”

“But”—she laughed a little, half-embarrassed—“how can I say that? You have not yet spoken to my father.”

“Have you?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“How could I? I—I do not know your name.”

The narrowed eyes flashed wide again, and

watched her with an odd defiant expectancy, as he answered.

"Tuan Noor is my name."

"Tuan Noor"—she repeated it, her voice caressing the syllables deliciously and giving them the Tamil cadence. "I have never heard it before. It is a beautiful name. What does it mean?"

He hesitated. "What did anything mean till I found you? Now—call me Love like the Sea."

"The sea brought me to you," she whispered.

"Not God himself shall take you from me," he answered.

She quickly raised her joined palms in propitiation for his irreverence.

"No one will take me from my lord," she said. "My father, when he knows you, will love you as a son for your own sake, not only for mine."

He bit his lip. Then he began to speak quickly, urgently, pleating the edge of her sari in strong, nervous fingers.

"Nila, blood of my heart, it has been strange, this meeting of ours. It was not planned by careful parents, it was not watched over by prudent old eyes. Something stronger than man's wisdom, strong as the sea, brought us together. Fate married us in that moment when you turned and gave me your eyes, three days ago. Shall we wait while Brahmins cast our horoscope and bribe the gods with gifts and prayers should the stars be inauspicious? Shall we make a spectacle of our love for the old to jest at? Shall a whole village know and smile as you give yourself to me? Be-

loved, a greater law than man's has brought us together—let that greater law make you my wife, and afterward we can think of ceremonies. I want you—I must have you—mine, past any power to take away.”

“But why are you afraid that anyone would take me from you? My father would want me to be happy.”

“He would think I am too poor. Only a constable—and there must be many men who desire you—rich men.”

“There is no one!” she laughed out in her relief. “You are the first who has asked for me. You are quite safe, my lord.”

“Oh, but the waiting there must be for all the machinery of a marriage! Will you make me wait, beloved? You do not know”—swiftly he bent his head and laid his forehead against her hand. “It is fire, not blood, that is throbbing there, Nila. Fire, not blood, that is beating in my heart.”

Her terror came back at the devouring hunger of his eyes. His forehead had burned against her hand almost as if his wild words were true.

“Perhaps my father——” she began, but he broke in fiercely.

“Too long before I could come to him. Now, Nila—let it be now!”

All the youth, all the womanhood in her answered him, but a power stronger than either drew her back—almost against her will—from his outstretched arms.

"No, my king! Not like this! Shall I bring shame on my father's house?"

"Is love a thing to be ashamed of? You did not feel so a little while ago. You were lost in my breast as a river is lost in the sea. I could have killed you with love. Nila, what you have given there is no taking back. Give me more—more."

Suddenly she saw her way. Such a clear simple way, but she felt it would be vain to explain it to her lover. Better have all ready and settled, with no need of explanations.

"My lord," she said, "when will you come again? A week from the day we first met, at this hour?"

"Yes."

"Meet me here, then—and—ask what you will."

He stood for a moment, his eyes searching hers. Then he smiled.

"Well, I will wait," he said. "God! it is worth waiting for! Four nights. And each of them, as you shut your eyes remember that Tuan Noor lies sleepless and his arms close about his hope of you. How have you done this to me, Nila? It is like a poison in my blood. You are my light—and my darkness without you is the darkness of hell."

He turned and leaped the ditch again. In the road he looked back, a look that burned her like his touch. Then she heard the quick firm tread going farther and farther away, till there was only silence and the stir of the leaves in the wind that rises at sunset.

CHAPTER IV

A FEAR

Yes, she saw her way. Tuan Noor did not know her father, or he would not think it possible that a little thing like his poverty could be considered an obstacle to the marriage. But—here lay the solution of the problem—the one whom Tuan Noor feared because he did not know, she knew and did not fear, and there was an accepted tradition by which a Tamil girl might pave the way for a suitor who had won her good will without conventional preliminaries. Nila knew this as well as did Ponamma, and had wondered whether a girl could ever be daring enough to put it in practice. Now she remembered it gladly. By the time Tuan Noor came again, her father would know, and would be waiting with her to give them his blessing.

Motu Rayen came that evening. For the first time he let his eyes speak frankly as they rested on her face, and once or twice he ventured a word of endearment in a tone somewhat warmer than fatherly.

Nila only thought she had never seen him so kind. She herself was even sweeter and more thoughtful for his comfort than usual, for the

memory of Tuan Noor's vivid strength made her realize Motu Rayen's infirmity as never before. She had grown so accustomed to him as he was that she often forgot his lameness. Now, limping after that panther-spring of Tuan Noor, his infirmity shocked her to a poignant pity. Through the gracious words and acts of that pity shone irresistibly and unconsciously the new glory in her heart—and Tuan Noor was not the only man whose arms closed that night about the hope of her.

She did not mean to hurt the friend who was so dear to her—did not even dream it possible that he might misunderstand. Indeed, she took no thought at all for what his mind might be toward her, so absorbed was she in the progress of her own gentle diplomacy. She followed out every step of the custom—picked at her rice, refused the daintier tidbits that her father pressed upon her, and presently, the day before Tuan Noor's return, she shyly mentioned that she had had a strange dream.

Vyapuri looked at her with eyes that twinkled under a frown.

"So? a dream? What was your dream, child?"

She swallowed a lump in her throat and came over to him, crouching at his feet.

"I dreamed, father—I dreamed—that a young man came to you and asked me for his wife."

"Did he? And what answer did I give in your dream?"

"Oh, father—you said Yes!"

He took her bowed face in his hand and lifted it till her eyes met his.

"My little one! Ah, but you are like your mother! Well, the time had to come for you as it came for her. Perhaps her father, knowing his duty, was no gladder in the doing of it than I am. And what was he like, this fellow in your dream? Have you ever seen anyone like him?"

She smiled and her eyes filled, but she said nothing. Her father stroked her shining hair.

"I know. It is not I that you must tell. If only your mother were here! Go see Ponamma, little one. Perhaps you can open your heart to her."

So to Ponamma the girl went, feeling that her cheeks were burning like her lover's forehead. It would not be maidenly modesty to reveal the name at first asking, but the older woman knew the etiquette of the occasion, and pressed tenderly and tactfully till Nila whispered in her ear, "Tuan Noor." She hid her face on the motherly shoulder and so did not see the consternation her avowal brought.

"Tuan Noor?" Ponamma repeated blankly.

"The constable who passes the estate on patrol duty," Nila explained. "He is so wonderful! He is strong and beautiful as Rama himself, and he loves me so much!" That she should love this young god was to her a thing to be taken for granted—his love for her was the miracle.

"Oh, my little flower!" Ponamma's arms closed tight around the girl, and her voice was

such a cry of pain that Nila pulled herself free to look into the shocked face.

"Ponamma! what is the matter? What do you mean?"

"There is no kind way to tell you, little one. God knows I would be gentle if I could, but there is no way but to stab the truth straight in your heart. You cannot marry him. Your father would rather see your body burning at the ghat."

"I do not understand."

"His very name tells it! A Moslem, a man of no caste, one who prays to his god—if he does pray—in the mosque. My darling, my darling! Why should this grief come upon you?"

Her words were indeed what she had said, a stab in the girl's heart. Nila did not move or cry out, but sat facing Ponamma, dead for the moment. Gradually expression came back to her wide dazed eyes, her lips quivered, and she laid her forehead on the floor, moaning, "O Brahma—O Great God—have pity on him! What will he do?"

Ponamma watched, her face working, but did not try to soothe or to console. For this hour there was no soothing, no consolation.

He had known what it must cost her to link his life with his—that it would mean the loss of kindred, of caste, of everything in her little world except himself—worse yet, that it would be the shaming of her holy dead, the desecration of all that she and those before her held sacred. He had known—and that was why he had been afraid

to face her father. No meaner reason for his reluctance ever entered her mind—this was enough, and more than enough. He had known, and knowing, he had not told her the truth and challenged her to do this thing for his sake. He had tried to trap her ignorance, to take her like a thief.

One bitter moment that thought seared her, then she fought it away with passionate loyalty. Prostrate as a mourner lies in the lowest depths of loss, she lay weeping for him with no condemnation for his treachery, no pity for herself—only anguish for the grief that must come to him, and fear for his despair. “You are my light and my darkness without you is the darkness of hell.”

“O Vishnu—O Preserver—help him to be strong! Save him from that darkness, Light of the World!”

A voice was speaking far away, calling her by name. Gradually her soul came back to the world, and she knew it was the voice of her old friend.

“My darling, my little one, do not die!”

“Why should one live?” said Nila. “Death is easy.” For the first time she thought of herself and saw the years ahead, years bare of Tuan Noor—oh, Great God, no! worse yet—years filled with his presence, with the thought of what he would have been with her, of what he might become without her. She recalled herself with an effort that was keen physical pain. Ponamma was speaking of her father.

“His hopes for you——”

Nila's benumbed mind caught only those words.

"It is strange"—she gave a dreary little laugh—"he seemed pleased when I told him of my dream, I remember. Sad in a way, yet pleased. Of whom did he think I spoke?"

"Motu Rayen."

"Motu Rayen? But—but"—the horrified young voice trailed off into silence. Nothing is so pitiless as memory stimulated by pain. Nila recalled the last few days—and saw all to which happiness would have left her blind. Again she hid her face and there was a long silence.

"Nila, child of my old age," Ponamma pleaded at last, "it was of Motu Rayen that you dreamed?"

But Nila did not answer.

"Motu Rayen! *Motu Rayen!*"

For the first time she thought of him as a man, young, unmated, capable of such love as Tuan Noor's—ah, no! even in her bewilderment of suffering she realized without understanding the difference between the two men. Motu Rayen could never have attempted the treachery that Tuan Noor had attempted—alas, Motu Rayen could never have made her his by a look, a touch, as had Tuan Noor!

Ponamma had the wisdom to say no more. When at last the girl rose and went out, she spoke only by an embrace. She knew that Nila would not lay upon her father the burden that was crushing her; for the rest she trusted the gods in whose hands lie the things that are to come.

When Vyapuri greeted her hopefully that evening, she was ready for him.

"Not yet—I have not her answer yet. But be patient, Vyapuri. The sweetest fruit is the slowest to ripen. You have a good daughter, friend."

The quiver of earnestness in the old woman's voice touched Vyapuri.

"I know it," he said, "and daily thank the gods."

"Well you may." Ponamma spoke with feeling, realizing the cost at which Nila had kept true to the ideals of her race. "A little time—a little time. Remember, you yourself said she is but a child."

So Vyapuri and Motu Rayen continued to feed their hope on Nila's silence, and the next afternoon she kept her last tryst with Tuan Noor, after the poor preparation of a sleepless night.

She heard his step before he came into sight, and bowed herself on the ground as she had in Ponamma's house, her face hidden in her arms. So he found her, and when he saw the prone figure he realized that she knew—and had chosen.

Again he caught her up in his arms—but this time she did not yield. Slight, but strong as steel, she resisted his ardor. He did not try to pretend ignorance.

"Beloved, you will not let such a little thing keep you from me?"

"A little thing! O, God! and is it then a little thing to you, Tuan Noor?"

"Little—less than nothing. Is caste a real thing, as my arms about you are real? Can it make your heart beat as I feel it under my hand? Let it go—life is not for dead men to dole out to us; it is for us to live as we will—if we will. Come to me. I will show you what living means. Your gods are far away—even Allah."

"The gods are not far away." She drew back and interposed the frail barrier of her hands between her breast and his. "The gods are here, my love and my lover—for that you are, though you may never take me to your home, never tie the *thali* about my neck."

"What need of the *thali*? My lips will make a wedding-necklace for you. Is not this better than gold?"

"No, no—I tell you it cannot be. Nothing can level the barrier between us. You are Moslem, I am Hindu."

"Allah! what does that matter? I am a man, you are a woman. That is all I know."

She felt herself drowning in the sea of his passion and her own. Desperately she grasped at a poor reed of support.

"There is another man to whom my father wishes to give me."

"So!" Tuan Noor held her a little from him so that he could look into her eyes. "Another man. And you will obey your father? You will marry this other? Tell me."

"Yes." It was strange that so short a word should be so hard to say.

"What is his name?" the Malay asked with dangerous quietness.

"Motu Rayen."

"Motu Rayen!" Tuan Noor gave a shout of discordant laughter. "The crippled *kangani*—the rich money-lender! God! are you a thing for sale, then? Well, I have one more bid to make. I have offered love, all a man's soul and body—and it is too little. Very well. Now I will give fear." His hands were bruising her wrists, and his eyes, his voice, were making darker, more cruel marks on her soul. Still she did not cry out.

"When the Brahmins cast your horoscope and Motu Rayen's," he said, "what would he do if they should foretell that within two years at most you would lose your *thali*?" Nila cringed in his grasp. The loss of the *thali*, the wedding necklace, means to a Hindu wife no less than widowhood, woman's supreme tragedy, when she lays aside with her jewels the hope, the pride, the very meaning of her sex, and becomes refuse of the world, one whose life offering the gods have disdained. Feeling her shudder, he laughed. "Ah, that hurts you! I am glad. I want to hurt you as much as you have hurt me. Yes, if a hundred priests tie the *thali* about your neck, Nila, still you will lose it. Your Brahmins will not tell you so, for your Brahmins are fools, and beside their tongues will be thick and sweet with Motu Rayen's money. I tell you so, I, Tuan Noor, the man whose heart you have broken." His voice lost its harshness and took again the note that stole her

strength so that again he held her close to him. "Yes, and one thing more I tell you. When the cripple takes you in his arms, you will remember these of mine. When the money-lender buys his bride with kisses as thin and cold as silver coins, you will think of this—and this—and this. You are mine—you know it. I will not let you go. I will take you and keep you, in spite of yourself."

Again the hidden power that was stronger in her blood than passion forbade. She wasted no breath now in pleading with him. Desperately, almost without her knowledge, she cried out, and a voice answered—Hamilton's voice with its ring of authority.

She was alone when the Englishman reached her; only the faint receding beat of a runner's steps was heard on the hard road passing swiftly into silence.

"Forgive me, Dorai. I saw a snake, and was afraid."

His scrutiny was kind, but searching.

"This is not a good place for you, child. In the clear paths you are safe, but here in the underbrush by the road there are serpents. I have even seen the polanga hereabout—a beautiful creature, but more dangerous than the cobra."

"Hamilton Dorai—you saw?"

He shook his head.

"I saw nothing. Tell me—you were only frightened? Not—hurt?"

She hesitated for the right words, but met his keen eyes steadily. "I am safe, thanks to Vishnu

and you, Dorai—quite safe. And now I am on the clear path that leads to my father's house. Let me go alone. The danger is past now, and there is no need to trouble you or anyone for the sake of a fear."

CHAPTER V

THE ROSE OF YESTERDAY

TUAN NOOR finished his rounds that night in a red mist. Fortunately for themselves, no marauders were abroad. He was in a murderous mood, and if his hands had closed on any man's throat that evening, he would have left as little breath in it as he longed to leave in Motu Rayen's—or in Hamilton's, for that matter. If Hamilton had not been so near, just then——

He stopped short in the shadow of the jungle and cried aloud, the inarticulate, involuntary cry of a wounded wild beast. A timid cultivator heard it three fields away, lighted a protecting fire by his tethered buffalo, and sat trembling behind his locked door.

In the police station where he made his report, the grizzled sergeant looked at him keenly, laid an expert hand on his pulse, and frowned.

"Fever," he pronounced briefly. "Go see a doctor, Tuan Noor, and do not come back for duty till day after to-morrow."

Tuan Noor thanked him, saluted, and swung on his heel. The sergeant meant kindly, but—a doctor! As he went out into the street, he laughed. One of his comrades, a Sinhalese, lifted surprised brows at another. The young Malay had his

weaknesses, they knew, but arrack had never been one of them. They were the surer of their guess because he reeled a little as he went down the street.

At his own door he stopped and stood irresolute with his hand on the latch. How could he rest? To lie staring at the stars till they faded into the dawn, where only last night he had dreamed so vividly of her that he had turned his head on waking half expectant of her face on the pillow beside him—Allah! he would go mad.

He walked on down the street out of the town into the blackness of the jungle-bordered road, and overhead marching with him went the blazing languor of the tropic stars. A sort of apathy had come over him—his rage had passed, and he moved numbly in a cold mist of hate and humiliation. Presently he was dimly aware of houses—another town—where there would be people to face—people he knew, perhaps, who would speak to him.

With an oath he turned to retrace the road he had come, summoning his strength. All at once he felt a hand on his arm.

"The stars are setting," said a woman's voice lightly, with a caress as deliberate as that of the hand. "Is it because you, too, are lonely that you walk so late?" Then the studied music broke suddenly in a sharp exclamation of real surprise. "Tuan Noor!"

He looked at her blankly. He knew women of her sort too well and too widely to remember their

faces, but there was a strange troubling familiarity about her.

She laughed—a soft ripple of cool impersonal amusement that chilled him like the touch of a dead finger.

“Once, long ago, the full moon shone on Kandy Lake, but under the sleeping-trees it was dark.”

He rubbed his hot, strained eyes, staring at her.

“You are not”—he began hoarsely.

She laughed again.

“I am not the girl who wrapped her veil about her face that a boy might tear it away, the girl he caught up in his arms and carried from the smoulder of dying fires into the darkness of the trees. No. But I was—once.”

“I thought you would go back to your own people, whoever they were,” he muttered. “Then I heard you were with a man at Kalavila.”

“And then you forgot.” The laugh came again. “That was Mudiyanse at Kalavila—a stupid man; I have not thought of him for years. There have been many since Mudiyanse.” She dismissed the subject with a little shrug, and went on with a kindness as impersonal as her amusement had been. “The fever devil has touched you, my friend. You are a sick man to be walking the roads like this. Come with me.”

“To a doctor!” he jeered bitterly. “There is no doctor for my sickness. Let me die, if Allah will have that mercy.”

“Life has always something left, and the gates of death are long shut. What has put you in such

a state?" She came nearer and looked curiously into his face, livid in the starlight. Then she threw back her head and laughed again. "How funny that it should come to you, too! Strange she would not love you—you are handsomer than ever."

"She loves me," he snarled. "Allah, yes! she loves me, but she is Hindu."

"And she let that matter?"

Dazed as he was, memory stirred in him.

"You," he said slowly, "you loved me once. Do you hate me now?"

"Hate you? Why? Because you tired of me? I cannot blame you for that. I have tired of many men and left them grieving—or cursing—because they could not hold me. I grieved—for a while—because I could not hold you, but I never hated you, Tuan Noor. And now I do not even love you any more." She smiled in his face with the mischievous impudence of a naughty child. "You do not like that? Mad as you are for another woman, it hurts your pride? How funny, how funny! What a joke it all is! But here we stand, and you are sick. Come—no, not to a doctor. I know something better."

"You are alone now?" he asked dully.

"Except when I choose. My last husband left me a little money." She slipped her arm through his and guided him toward a small hut standing slightly back from the road. It was a poor enough place, but cleanly kept, and all about the dingy

room into which she led him were flashing reminders of the woman's vivid, luminous personality. A silk sari, purple and gold, was flung across the bed, a scarf of gauze iridescent blue and green like a beetle's wings—bright bits of color leaped out like the flaws of an opal as she lit the lamp.

"Lie here, Tuan Noor." She pointed to the bed. It did not need the pressure of her hand on his shoulder to make him obey. She rolled the purple and gold sari into a pillow to raise his head more comfortably, and as she bent over him, arranging it to her satisfaction, the lamplight glowed on her face. Even his blurred, preoccupied senses became aware of her beauty.

"You have changed so. Are you really——"

"Dark Rose—sometimes Rose of the Night—was what you called me—have you forgotten that, too? No, I am not your Rose—I told you that. She is lost. I do not mean lost to you, because you threw her away—no, there is only one sure way to lose a thing. It must be picked to pieces, deliberately squandered little by little, soiled, defaced, degraded, trodden bit by bit into the dust. When that is done, not one of all your gods can bring back the thing that was, for it is gone. Gone, though you would give the blood from your veins and the breath from your nostrils to get it back. Do I not know?"

She struck her bosom and the silver chains clashed musically.

"Empty. Empty. That is why I can neither love nor hate—but I can give men what they call love, and despise them for taking it."

She turned abruptly away and went into the adjoining room. He heard the clink of dishes and the jingle of her bracelets and anklets as she moved about. How often he had lain like this while she served him! Had he dreamed the years between? The memory of the afternoon flamed back upon him. That was no dream. He rolled over and hid his convulsed face in the silken pillow, writhing with rage and mortification.

She touched his shoulder.

"Take this," she said, putting a cup to his lips, as he turned to her. "Let those who will pray to gods or sacrifice to devils. The gods I do not know, and the devils I know too well. For me, there is only—the cup of dreams."

He drank, conscious as she held the cup for him of an odd, disturbing perfume that mingled with the pungent scent of the drug.

"I know," he muttered, sinking back from the empty cup. "My people often use it, but I never touched it before. Some say it is dangerous—but what do I care? It is good."

His voice thickened and stopped, for his overstrained nerves responded quickly to the unaccustomed draught. Was it her palm or the weight of his own heavy lids that pressed them down?

The darkness under the sleeping-trees—and a woman—so dark he could not see her face.

CHAPTER VI

SO THEY WERE MARRIED

NILA went home and cooked her father's supper. She left her own food untouched—but that her father expected as a part of the little comedy of courtship that was on their stage. He did not worry lest she should overdo her rôle to the detriment of her health, for when abstinence in public had had its due effect, she could make amends for it in private. When she pleaded a headache and went early to her bed, he accepted that, too, as a part of the play, thinking with tender amusement how well she acted. So she had the only comfort which could have come to her in those first hours—solitude in her pain. That her father should know and suffer also would have passed her endurance.

She fell that night into a sleep as heavy as the drugged stupor of Tuan Noor, but only for a few hours. Slowly, relentlessly, she felt herself being dragged back to consciousness by a vague terror that must be encountered. As her mind cleared, she faced it, no longer vague but agonizingly definite. She must marry Motu Rayen.

With dry, hopeless eyes she looked down the future. He would be a kind, gentle husband, her father would be happy. Vyapuri had well ex-

pressed the training of a Hindu girl—a month ago she would have married unquestioningly the man of her father's choice and settled herself to dutiful affection and contentment as a matter of course—but now!

“When the cripple takes you in his arms, you will feel these of mine.”

Yet it must be done. For her father's sake—for Motu Rayen's, for her own. She knew how sorely the guardian in her soul had needed Hamilton's reinforcements. That the marriage would mean danger to Motu Rayen, as Tuan Noor had threatened, she did not believe. When his first pain and anger had passed, he would understand and pity her. Perhaps, she thought humbly, forget her. Since memory must be hard, she could pray that he might forget. For herself—she could only pray that she might endure. If only all had taken the usual course, planned and carried out by her father, asking nothing of herself but submission! That would be possible—but this! How could she carry out the farce, pretend to this good man that she herself had chosen him?

It must be done, and soon. Time would not make it easier. But how could she play the part set for her, always that other face before her eyes—that other voice in her ears—that other touch?

She went quietly about her household duties. She did not seek Ponamma, and that wise woman left the girl to her fight, knowing that she herself and no other must make it. In the afternoon she went out to the temple, and her father looked

approvingly at the bent head and flower-laden hands. But all her prayers brought little comfort to her heavy heart. She left the temple at last and wandered listlessly among the trees—not toward the boundary road. Presently she sat down on the ground, absorbed in her own thoughts—a pretty picture for a man who paused among the trees near by, breathless lest he disturb her—a man who could not see the brooding grief of her face, only the slim pensive grace of her veiled figure. All at once with a sob she threw herself forward among the fallen leaves.

There was the sudden writhing stir of a startled snake. She drew back, but not in time. Motu Rayen saw the evil beauty of the polanga reared to strike, and hurried forward. Before he could reach her, she lay again among the fallen leaves, this time ominously still. He did not waste a blow or even a thought on the snake gliding away. The polanga's poison curdles the blood and one slips from sleep into death. Had the death-sleep come so quickly, or was this only the unconsciousness of terror? He lifted her gently, and saw on one rounded arm the mark of the fangs. Instantly he pressed his mouth to the wound, drawing out the poison with all the power of his body and his will. He had heard of lives being saved so—how could he fail to save her, when he had the strength of love?

It was again with her as it had been that morning—a dragging back to consciousness through whirling abysses of pain. Only it was a real

physical pain to which she woke. There was a strange feeling in her arm. A man was bending over it, and as she stirred he lifted his head and looked into her face.

She had never thought of Motu Rayen as beautiful before—but there was beauty in this man, whose eyes were stars where Tuan Noor's had been flame.

“My little one, my treasure, jewel of my soul,” he whispered, “I thank the Preserver that I was near, that not a moment was lost. I thought—I feared it was the death-sleep—but I drew out the poison and prayed as I drew, and you are safe! you are safe!”

She would be dead but for him. Well, the girl whose heart had beaten against Tuan Noor's was dead. She owed her life to Motu Rayen—what she had shrunk from as a gift, she could, she must pay as a debt. Gratitude, tenderness, reverence—were they not enough? She would have called them love, had it not been for—but that girl was dead. This life was new. She could give him now what she could have given if he had come asking a month ago; only now she knew what might be—but that girl was dead. That girl was dead.

Solemnly, without shyness or hesitation, she raised her hand, touched his eyes, and laid the fingers gently to her lips.

Sick and shaken as she still was, she felt herself the stronger of the two, though she leaned upon him as he bade her, while they walked slowly back to her father's house. She wondered whether she

would always feel embarrassed beside him, apologetic for being straight and tall—whether she would ever find herself limping and stooping to keep him company.

So the marriage was arranged. Ponamma cried when she heard the news, but tears come easily to the old. Vyapuri was well content, in spite of his earlier objections to Motu Rayen's money-lending. For one thing, he was much pleased by the good promise of the horoscopes. Whether the bridegroom's wealth helped toward this condition or not, the stars declared that Nila and Motu Rayen were completers of each other's destiny, and foretold a long and prosperous life with many descendants and only such small adversities as go to the common lot of man. Most certainly did they make no mention of such a calamity as the loss of the *thali*. For the making of that precious symbol, Motu Rayen took metal to the goldsmith to be wrought in the auspicious hour, and perhaps in this case also a favorable result was helped by the expectation of an exuberant gratitude. At all events, the necklace was fit for a Rani, Ponamma said, with twenty English sovereigns hung as pendants from the gold work.

The preliminaries were long. Nila did not know whether she was glad or sorry for the delay. The old self might be dead and buried, but it was restless as a vampire. There were hard hours—one was just before her wedding, when Hamilton gave her his good wishes and a heavy gold bracelet of European make.

“Wear this on the arm that the polanga struck,” he said. “May your husband’s goodness draw the poison from every hurt that life brings to you. See, I have had engraved inside the bracelet—‘Gladness and good fortune are for the wife of Motu Rayen.’”

She bowed before him with decorous murmurs of gratitude, wondering all the while whether Motu Rayen could draw out poison from the heart.

On the open stretch of ground before the lines, they built the *pandal*, the marriage pavilion, and the guests gathered to await the auspicious hour. At last, as the red of sunset faded into the clear blue of the tropic night, the bridegroom was led to his flower-decked throne. Every Hindu man is a king on the marriage day as every Hindu bride is queen, but never did the crowning hour come to a bridegroom who received it with more humble thankfulness and more royal pride than did the crippled money-lender. No misgiving marred his happiness. He looked at his bride as she sat beside him with the radiant gaze of perfect faith, and her lids, lowered as a Hindu bride’s should be, hid from him the eyes that, could he have seen them, would have made a desert of his Eden. As the priests kindled the holy fire, a still clearer flame rose in his heart, burning away all thoughts of self, so that when he walked with her the triple circuit of the fire, he forgot that he was lame. The ritual went on—to its climax, the tying of the *thali*. If only that voice would be still, that voice repeating incessantly with the feverish pulses in

her temples: "*What need of a thali? My lips will make your wedding necklace. Is not this better than gold?*"

She could hardly hear the prayers of the Brahmins, the blessings of the wedding guests, as the necklace was carried among them to fulfil the Tamil saying, "A blessed wife is a treasure to her husband." Would all their words make her a blessed wife, she wondered, as the priest fastened the necklace about her throat, and she felt, real as the touch of the metal on her flesh, that other touch—only the *thali* was cold, and the memory burned.

"God, make me a blessed wife! make me a blessed wife!" She sat immovable with downcast eyes, praying, praying.

The end came at last with the sacramental meal together. Her hand was steady, all her body was tense as tempered steel as she lifted the food to his lips. His hand trembled. To him it was so sacred a mystery that he should have this right to feed her, to care for her. He was praying, too. All his thought of her was hallowed, all his love for her a prayer. His hands were joined in unconscious worship and thanksgiving when at last he slept in the house that had become truly home. And his wife beside him lay awake, silently repeating, that she might drown another voice, "Make me a faithful and blessed wife! Help me to give him happiness, O God! Help me to give him happiness!"

CHAPTER VII

FIREFLIES

THE Malay woke from his drugged sleep blinking in the full light of an afternoon sun that poured through the open door. He wondered drowsily where he was, why he felt such a strange sick languor. There was the unaccustomed softness of silk against his cheek, and a subtle, insidious perfume—and frisking impishly on the borders of his consciousness, a woman's laugh.

He remembered. Raising himself heavily to his elbow, he called her. There was no answer, no stir of her presence. He was alone in the house. He frowned, piqued by her indifference as she had said. As he lay back on the bed, languidly caressing the smoothness of the silk with his fingertips, he had a moment's wild fancy of waiting for her return.

No. That was finished. He went back to Ambalana.

An attack of fever was no unusual thing. The sergeant had not expected him the day before, and no explanations were necessary. He went on with his work just as before, except that he was a little more chatty with his fellow-constables, a little more ready to listen to the gossip of the

neighboring towns. It was in this way that he heard of Motu Rayen's marriage.

"A good match for a coolie's daughter," he said indifferently. His fellow-constable who had told the news expanded on the subject of the *kangani's* wealth, and Tuan Noor listened, his eyes glittering slits.

"Marriage is very good for those who care for it," he observed.

"If a man is not married he lives—as you do."

"So?" Tuan Noor stretched his long liteness contemptuously. "Only if he is not married?"

"Well—some, of course"—the constable was embarrassed. Tuan Noor laughed.

"Allah! what a waste of time to talk about these things!"

He nodded acknowledgment of a new-comer's greeting. It was the *arachi* of a near-by town, evidently on official business, for he came in busily extracting his diary from the voluminous swathings of drapery about his waist.

"Trouble?" Tuan Noor asked.

"Much trouble. Rambunda's house has been broken into and robbed."

"Rambunda on the Udigala road? Allah! had he enough for any but an ant to steal? Had it been the Pathan money-lender here in town, now—or——"

"Or Hamilton Dorai's *kangani*."

It was the other policeman who spoke these words, just as they hung fire on Tuan Noor's suddenly dry lips—spoke them quite naturally,

though the Malay had been unable to utter them. The young constable's hands clenched in his pockets. He spoke now, moistening his lips.

"Was anyone—killed?"

"No, no. Not so bad as that." The *arachi* found the place in his diary and proudly exhibited his entry. "I took all the names of the people he identified."

"A gang, then?"

"Four." He read the names. "They beat him and took his money. He had sold a buffalo, and claims to have had forty rupees in the house."

"It took four men to steal forty rupees? What kind of an army would they raise to rob a money-lender?"

Tuan Noor laughed at his comrade's jest and accepted a chew of betel from the *arachi*.

"They took other things"—the *arachi* again consulted his book. "Food and clothes, and about everything that was in the house. A clean sweep. These are Halispattu names—a bad lot."

"Were the Halispattu people angry with Rambunda?" Tuan Noor used the expression in the Sinhalese sense of holding a grudge.

"Yes, they have been angry with him for ten years. He testified against a Halispattu man in a lawsuit."

"Then Rambunda expected something to happen?"

The *arachi* shrugged his shoulders.

"Ten years is a long time, and nothing had happened. But Rambunda's wife said that she

knew trouble was coming—she had seen fireflies in the house lately, and had been afraid.”

“Fireflies?” said the other constable. “Surely. That means that a house will be broken into.”

“And deserted.” A slow cruel smile parted Tuan Noor’s betel-reddened lips. The *arachi* looked at him with a startled ejaculation and edged away a little.

“Is this your day of the malevolent mouth? You look like a panther that has just tasted blood.”

Tuan Noor laughed. “Does betel give the malevolent mouth? Perhaps I have the evil eye, too. They do not interfere with my work, at all events. You have the names, you said?”

All that day as he went about his work, he thought of Nila in her husband’s house, and an idea took shape in his mind. He had offered her fear as well as love. She had refused the love—the fear she should not refuse. Night came and the flashing of a million fireflies. The air was alive with sparks, easy to be caught.

A little while longer. She would be unhappy enough for a time left to herself. No danger of her forgetting Tuan Noor on her wedding night, nor for a time after; but when she began to be accustomed to her home, to the gifts and luxuries that her husband would shower upon her, when she began to take comfort and pleasure in the new life—that would be the time for fear, when she felt that she had something to lose.

A wearisome business, waiting. He stretched

out his hand and closed it around one of the tiny darting points of fire. Easily caught—as easily as a woman. He could feel it fluttering in the hollow prison of his palm. He tightened his grip slowly and deliberately, then opened his hand and let the crushed insect drop to the ground. So she should feel herself caught for a time, trapped, helpless, and then—he had not yet made up his mind what the end should be. If Motu Rayen should die—life has nothing to offer a Hindu widow. She would be glad enough to give up caste and people then!

It was one evening three months after her marriage that Nila found fireflies in the house. She had been cooking supper, and when she brought the dish into the large room of the house, they were there, not one nor two, but a score, darting vividly through the shadows. She caught her breath, frightened. One of Motu Rayen's gifts to her had been a fan of woven *khas* from Jaffna. With a feeling that the cool fragrance that reminded her of her Indian home might exorcise the spirit of misfortune, she took this to drive out the inauspicious creatures, and when the last had flown gleaming out into the night she prayed that no evil might come near their house. Motu Rayen found her so, and she told him the reason. He soothed her tenderly. An omen was an omen, of course, but danger might be averted by prayers and gifts to the gods. It pleased him that their home was so dear to her.

"You are happy here, light of my eyes?" he asked.

"You are so kind to me, my husband," she answered. "How should I not be happy?"

She took his hand between hers with a gesture of real tenderness. In giving him happiness, she found herself happier than she had thought would ever be possible. She did not realize that for him this gift of which she was so conscious had an undercurrent of pain. Since the royal hour of his marriage, he had never lost the memory of his infirmity. How could he, when his wife never forgot it? Sometimes he felt it was his strongest claim upon her kindness.

A month more, and the fireflies came again. This time there was a new terror to Nila in the possibility of misfortune to her home. The blessing of Siva had come to them, the promise of new life. Now there was indeed something to lose. It did not occur to her that there might be a human threat in this renewed portent. Her hope so filled the foreground of her world that Tuan Noor had become vague as a figure in a troubling dream, remembered now and then with a sigh. Sometimes she wondered whether it had been indeed a dream, that brief madness of joy and grief, so remote was it from her daily life, so foreign to the substance of her thoughts.

Again Motu Rayen comforted and reassured her. He was happy in these days—with the touch of wistfulness that was in all his joy. It was right

and natural, he thought, that the child should bring to life in her a love that had never been awakened for him—right and natural. Had not Vyapuri said, “She will see you young and strong in your sons?”

He was late in coming home one day. Sunset had deepened into dusk, and Nila, the evening meal prepared, left it to keep warm for him while she sat down in the soft gloom of the outer room to rest a little in the cool silence and dream of the son who was to come—for surely it must be a son! Her eyes half-closed, she watched through the window at the back of the room the deepening blue of the sky and the gradual coming of the stars. Across the rich darkness of the outer night a firefly sparkled. Her mind went back dreamily to the fireflies in the house. When had she seen them last? She counted back by the hundred important trifles that make up a woman’s calendar. About a month ago. A shadow crossed the window, and all at once there were moving lights in the room. She woke from her musing to a cold, concentrated terror. Again the shadow—this time her strained eyes saw it distinctly. It was the apparition of a hand, closed, then opening against the bars of the window to release into the room a dozen fireflies.

So fixed was her belief that the visitant was supernatural that as she rose shivering and moved and noiseless steps across the room to the window she only wondered what malign spirit of the at unpropitiated demon of the jungle or

stream might be outside. A third time the closed hand rose into sight—and she saw by the starlight the sleeve of a blue serge uniform.

It seemed to her that her heart stopped beating, that all her blood turned to cold venom, as the polanga might have turned it but for Motu Rayen. Stiffly, involuntarily, she stepped forward, and looked out between the bars of the window into the face she knew would be there.

As they had stood at their first meeting, seeing nothing but each other's eyes, they stood now. Between them were the window-bars of her husband's house—bars to which she was clinging for support, with tense fingers that shone with Motu Rayen's gifts. She closed her eyes against that face as it came nearer—so like what she remembered—how had she ever forgotten it for a moment?—and yet so terribly different. Her fingers clenched on the window-bar felt the sudden fierce pressure of his lips. When she opened her eyes, she was alone, and around her the darkness was alive with fireflies. She heard Motu Rayen's step in the verandah, and there swept over her like sickness the meaning of what had happened—the thought of what might have happened.

The voice that had been silenced by the murmurs of her daily life was speaking again, thundering ruin into her comfortable world. This time it was not his words of love that she remembered: "If a hundred priests tie the *thali* about your neck, still you will lose it. I tell you so, I, Tuan Noor, the man whose heart you have broken.

You are my light, and my darkness without you is the darkness of hell." That face outside the window had indeed been the face of a devil. Her doing—hers!

She ran to Motu Rayen and clung to him sobbing.

"The fireflies! the fireflies! are you safe? Are you sure you are quite safe?"

He soothed her gently.

"Why, what would hurt me, treasure of my heart?"

"Some demon." Ah, that face in the starlight!

"The gods are stronger than the demons, beloved. As for the fireflies, I will drive them out."

"It is the third time they have come. I am afraid! My husband, father of my child, I am afraid!"

He drove out the fireflies as he said, but her fears did not go with them. Tuan Noor had his revenge for her brief forgetfulness in the agony of his return to her life. A dream? Unreal? After this, she could never doubt that while she lived he must be horribly real to her, an ever-present menace. How would he strike? He had told her plainly enough, and as she thought of those strong hands of his gripping her husband's throat as they had bruised her wrists, she felt her own breath fail. No day passed that she did not listen trembling for the halting step in the verandah at dusk, no night that she did not wake from her troubled sleep in a cold sweat of fear to

listen for her husband's breathing. Motu Rayen ascribed these visionary terrors to her condition, but as the weeks went on and her eyes grew more and more haunted in their dark-circled hollows he was alarmed.

"What should I do, Dorai?" he appealed to Hamilton. "Nothing has come of the fireflies, and there have been no more since that third time, but she is dying of fear. May I move to another house?"

Hamilton frowned thoughtfully and was silent for a moment before he answered.

"It may be even more than a change of house that is needed—a change of air, perhaps. Let me speak with her, Motu Rayen. I know something of medicine, and you hardly need to be told, I think, how much I care that life should go well with you."

"You are as one of the gods to her, Dorai," said Motu Rayen. Hamilton smiled grimly.

"It may be I have paid some little part of my debt to you," he said. "It may be this is my opportunity to pay a little more. Tell your wife to come to my house this afternoon. I will be in the verandah."

He was pacing up and down smoking when she came, and opened the subject without preamble.

"Motu Rayen tells me you have been frightened by fireflies in the house." He paused, fixing her with keen eyes. "Have you seen anything else to make you anxious? A snake, perhaps?"

The gold coins of her necklace shook to her

quick breathing as she answered, "Yes, Dorai. I saw—the snake again. I am afraid for Motu Rayen. He does not know about the snake."

"What do you want to do?" Hamilton asked. "Tell me only that. I ask no questions about anything else. You know the danger—and you know, too, that I would do anything for your husband."

She looked up at him imploringly, her hands joined in supplication.

"Send us away, Dorai! We must not stay here. We must go far off, to some little hidden place where a snake would not find us. But how would he ever be willing to leave you?"

Hamilton pondered, biting his lip.

"He would do it for your good and the child's. The air of the hills—you are not well here, it is too low. I know a village in the hills, near Canning Dorai's tea estate. A little field—not too hard work for Motu Rayen—it could be found surely. Better still, there is no money-lender in that village, as I remember. I will drive up and look over the ground. I know Canning Dorai very well. We will see what can be done."

That evening Hamilton's motor panted up the steep grades into the hills above Kalavila, where Canning's tea-plants clung to the sheer slopes that fell abruptly away from the road. Canning's bungalow was in a fold of the hill, looking down the great valley toward the south. Beyond it, the road curved around a shoulder of the mountain through a little cleft into a wide outlook on

another valley. In this cleft, scattered along the road and down the slope, were the few houses that made up the village of Maradeniya.

Over their pipes and pegs, Hamilton told Canning that he wanted a good place for his lame foreman, whose wife was ailing in the heat of the lower levels.

"Nothing easier," Canning said. "There is a house that will be just the thing, and garden enough for their own needs. This air will buck her up in no time. Best air in the world—I would be dead of malaria anywhere else."

"How are the neighbors? Good?"

Canning pursed his lips.

"Like most of these villages—three-quarters of them one family. One Punchirala is the head of the clan. He and some others have outgrown Maradeniya and live in Kalavila and near-by places, but they all hang together. You know—it's the same story everywhere."

Hamilton drew hard on his pipe.

"A bit lonely for strangers, what? Tamils especially."

"Rather. There aren't two or three families on your place that need a change of climate, are there?"

"Don't chaff me. I could manage one more family, I think. How about two houses?"

"Righto." Canning smiled indulgently at his friend. "You know, Hamilton, there aren't many who would make a life job of gratitude as you do."

"If a chap saves your life, what other kind of job can you make of it? I say, will you make the arrangements for me about those houses?"

"Lease or buy? Better lease till you see how matters go. The air may not suit your chap's wife after all."

"Oh, I think it will suit her all right," said Hamilton. "I'll buy, please."

"It won't be a king's ransom, of course," said Canning thoughtfully, "but don't overplay your hand. You've had a couple of rotten seasons. I know—it's been the same with tea. It's fine to make homes for other people, and all that—but suppose something turned up for yourself?"

"It won't." Hamilton rose, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and stood smiling whimsically down at his friend. "It won't. I'm chronic. But—I'm rather keen on homes and all that sort of thing, and if I can't have one myself, why, one must have a hobby of sorts, what? Don't worry about me, old son."

He swung on his heel and went out. He hummed as he started the car, and the chug of the motor set itself to words in his mind as he went recklessly down the steep hill road in the fragrant silence of the tropic night.

*"Low down . . . low down . . .
Where the little green lanterns shine,
O maids, I've done with 'ee all but one,
And she can never be mine!"*

CHAPTER VIII

NOT TUAN NOOR

So it was settled. And so it was—Hamilton was a diplomat of no mean power, for all his blunt ways—that when Motu Rayen and his wife took possession of one of the white plaster huts of Maradeniya, Ponamma and Keshavan were installed in another just across the road. He had tried to send Vyapuri, but now that his daughter was married and settled, he preferred to return to his own village in the Indian jungle.

“To the young, life, Dorai,” he said. “To me, memories. I see her a wife, with the hope of motherhood. It is well, and I go again to my own home, leaving her in hers.”

He went, as he said, and so it was Ponamma and Keshavan, the latter transferred to the lighter work of Canning’s tea-factory, who accompanied Motu Rayen and Nila to their new home. Motu Rayen was made a sort of banker for the estate, one who cashed checks for a commission. Since the house was a gift to him, his resources were ample for this and for the village credit, and in case of emergency, he was strictly charged to draw on Hamilton for what further supplies he might need.

From the time they came to Maradeniya, Nila

began to regain her strength, and after a little, her spirits. The people of the village received the strangers with good will enough. It was a great convenience to have a money-lender on the spot, and Motu Rayen kept the methods which had originally fostered his popularity. Without Ponamma and Keshavan, however, they would have been lonely, for between Tamil and Sinhalese could be but little neighborliness. The two households made a small world of their own, planted in their gardens the marigolds to garland their own private shrines, worshipped, ate, and drank according to their own ritual. Paradoxically, Nila saw more of the men of the village than she did of the women. It was the custom for a man who wished to borrow to come to the money-lender's house and after the leisurely fashion of the East to sit and chew betel in the verandah while conducting the preliminary negotiations, after which the parties to the affair would adjourn to the house of some reputable and disinterested third person to discuss terms on what might be called neutral ground.

The first time that Nila heard the step of a stranger in the verandah, panic gripped her heart and she stole to the window, peeping out to see the newcomer. It was only old Dingiri Banda, who lived down the hillside, come to borrow seven rupees—but the moment of terror had made its mark, and after that each time she heard a step in the verandah and the sound of a man's voice, she peered out to be sure it was only a neighbor.

So she came to know the faces well, old Dingiri Banda with his long gray beard, Appuhamy who kept the tea boutique, Singhappu the cultivator, and the rest of the fifteen or twenty men of the village. They came often, borrowing small sums, but even when she knew their steps and voices, she looked from habit. It grew to be hardly more than habit as the months went on with no sight of the face she feared. Fortune turned them a smiling countenance, most of all when the hoped-for son was born, a strong, beautiful baby upon whom Nila lavished an ardor of devotion that—though Motu Rayen constantly reminded himself of Vyapuri's words—made her gentle, dutiful care for himself seem somewhat scant and chill. Humbly he thought he should be content to be loved in his son, and claimed even less for himself than had before been his. Nila, filling her heart with the child, accepted his self-effacement without noticing that his affection was growing to express itself less in personal ways and more through his solicitude for her comfort and pleasure. All of her ornaments now were of a richness to match her *thali*. Ear jewels, bracelets, rings, anklets, all were of gold. Every movement made a soft music as she walked about the house.


One morning in July she had gone down the road, the baby astride her hip, to a spot where the full beauty of the farther valley spread out like a sea in richly shaded billows of green. The feathery fronds of palm, the vivid color of the young rice-fields far down the valley, the velvety expanse

of tea-bushes—all filled her eyes and heart with pleasure. She had found comfort among these hills, where it seemed they had eluded the pursuing terror, and though she still had the habit of peeping through the window when her husband's clients came, it was a habit, not the caution of conscious fear. She looked expecting the familiar faces—not that other face. He could never again be forgotten, never again be as a dream, she thought. Always he must be a real danger, but—thank God! a danger from which they had fled in time.

As she sat on the shady edge of the road looking down the valley, her spirit was drowsy with contentment. What woman would not be happy and proud, with such a little prince of a son! He would be walking soon; he was so bold, he had already made ventures in that line—at least, she pleased herself thinking so. She held him fondly in her arms, singing him bits of tender nonsense such as mothers sing to their little ones all over the world.

*"The jak tree by the dhobi's house
Has only one fruit.
Don't cry for it, little prince of my heart—
There is no salt to eat with it.
A monkey will run up the mango tree
And bring you a ripe yellow mango instead."*

Proudly she felt his straight, sturdy little body. He would be strong and beautiful, not like his father. There had been in her mind, toward the



end of her time, a haunting fear that her child might be a cripple. When it was born, before she knew whether it were son or daughter, her faint hand had groped instinctively for the tiny back, feeling whether the bones were perfect. Motu Rayen saw the gesture, his lips turned gray—but she never knew that he had seen.

She rose at last, settling the baby to his place on her hip with a laughing threat, "I will make you walk soon—you are too strong and heavy to carry, little prince of love!" It was time for her to go back, for though Motu Rayen was away for the day on business in Kalavila, there was always plenty to do about the house. As she came nearer she heard the beating of a tomtom. She was surprised, for she knew of no festival that would be in progress that day. She quickened her steps, but the beating had stopped before she turned the corner of the road that brought her in sight of their house. There was a knot of excited villagers at the door. As Nila came in sight, Ponamma detached herself from the group and hurried to meet her with the heavy shuffling run of age.

"Nila, my treasure!" she sobbed. "Why did you not tell me misfortune had come to you?"

Nila stopped short. Her arm stiffened about the baby with such protecting passion that he began to cry.

"Misfortune?" she panted. "What misfortune? Oh, Vishnu—has he found the way here?" Suddenly she had seen among the heads of the

crowd the blue cap of a constable. Ponamma's eyes followed hers.

"No, no—it is not he. Bad as it is, it is not so bad as that. But I cannot understand—there is something wrong at the back of this."

"Of what? You have told me nothing." Nila moved on, mechanically hushing the baby. "What has happened? Quiet, my sky-full of stars, quiet! *The jak tree at the dhobi's house. . . .* Tell me, Ponamma!"

They had come up to the group, which scattered a little to let her through, looking at her curiously. There was a printed sheet on the verandah of her house. She looked helplessly from the paper to Ponamma.

"What does it say?" she asked. "Do you know what the paper says?"

"They tell me it says—but how can that be possible?—that Motu Rayen owes money, so much that the court forbids you to sell your house."

"But we do not want to sell the house!"

"If you did you must not. That is what the paper says. Also that nobody must pay any debts to Motu Rayen."

"Oh!" Nila protested with indignant amazement. "How can they—as if he were a dishonest man! Who says that?"

"The court—but someone has been lying. There is some evil behind this—some enemy that we cannot see."

Nila sighed—a sigh deep as a moan. Was

there never to be peace? Even here was the serpent to strike? For she doubted not at all that she knew whence the blow came. And now it seemed he was not content with pain and fear, he must add shame as well, public disgrace before the eyes of the village. Bending her head under the gauntlet of those curious eyes, she went into her house and closed the door.

When Motu Rayen came back from Kalavila, he was as surprised as she. "There is no other way to find out," he said. "I must go down to Kandy to the District Court. Better to lose no time. If you will give me a little supper, my treasure, I will go to-night."

"But you are tired," she objected. "It is four miles to Kalavila, and—how many to Kandy?"

"A motor-bus runs from Ambalana," he reassured her. He did not tell her that he would be too late for it. After his supper and an hour's rest, he started out again. The moon was shining and she saw how he leaned on his staff as he limped down the road. Poor, good kind Motu Rayen! Why could he not have been strong and beautiful, like——?

The child slept. The house was very still. All at once she felt terribly alone. She blew out the lamp and, kneeling by the bed where her son lay, she stared at the flood of moonlight coming through the window, where any moment might bring the dark shadow of a hand lifted to pour in threats upon her, a face whose lips smiled ter-

ribly, a whisper, "My darkness without you is the darkness of hell." She fell asleep at last, as men sleep on the rack.

There was no sleep for the crippled money-lender, trudging painfully down the thirty miles of mountain road. There were paths by which the distance might have been shortened, but he dared not trust his uncertain feet among the delusive shadows of the moonlight on those steep slopes. It was near the end of night when he crossed the bridge over Mahaveli-ganga and came to the first scattered houses of the long street that leads to the lake. There were only a few lights in upper windows here and there. The low plastered walls gleamed white under the moon. At last he came to his journey's end—almost. He could not quite drag himself up the short steep hill to the open place about which the court-houses clustered. Wearily he lay down on a bench beside the lake to wait for morning. He was too tired for sleep. It seemed that his whole exhausted body was a mass of restless pain. His head pillowed on his arm, he watched the coming of dawn in the sky, the gradual paling of the stars. The lake came to life as the light grew, and a mysterious mirrored world of palms and blossoming trees stirred as if moved by strange underwater winds of its own. The drums and pipes in the Maligawa Temple struck up their rhythmic call to morning worship. People began to pass, sleeping beggars unrolled themselves from their rags and rose, stretching, from the doorsteps

where they had lain. Suddenly the tide of sunlight poured over the wooded top of the hill and flooded the town. It seemed to Motu Rayen's aching eyes that the close folded leaves of the sleeping-tree under which he lay stirred at the first touch of the sun and began to open like drowsy eyelids. He rose slowly and pushed on, up to the courthouses.

Nila had time to think a score of terrors before he came back. He had started from Kandy in the cool of the afternoon, and had taken the motor-bus to Ambalana, but even so the climb to Maradeniya had been severe, and the night was well advanced before he came in. She fed him and made him comfortable, closing her lips tightly over the questions she was longing to ask, lest she betray more than she would have him know.

"It is nothing to worry about, little one," he said. "Nothing that is past mending, at least. Punchirala says that I owe him fifteen hundred rupees."

"Punchirala!" Her first sensation was of relief. Then she exclaimed in fresh consternation, "Fifteen hundred rupees!"

"The note—when it was endorsed to Punchirala—was made out for fifty, I am sure of that." Motu Rayen frowned, thinking aloud rather than explaining to her. "There should be a memorandum somewhere. Well"—he recalled himself and laid his hand tenderly on her head—"Women do not understand these matters, so I will not trouble this dear head with them. One thing I

must ask you—the fiscal's messenger has not been here with a paper for me when I was not at home? You are sure?"

"Very sure."

"As I thought. It was never served. A fiscal's messenger can be bought in the open market for half a rupee and a chew of betel. And so he won his suit by default. Well, there will be another trial, and a fair one this time. Do not be troubled, Nila. There is no need."

Punchirala—not Tuan Noor. She had grown so accustomed to expecting all evil from one source that she could hardly believe it possible. Beside, Punchirala was only a name to her. Though the village was made up of his kin by blood and marriage, he did not live there, but in Ambalana.

"Are you sure it was Punchirala?" she asked. "Why should he do wicked things to you? I think you never hurt any creature in all your life."

Tired as he was, Motu Rayen laughed.

"Only the gods can read these hearts of ours, little one," he said; "but speaking as a man, I would say that he did it because he wanted the money. He loves money, you see—and a man's deep desire is the hidden fire of his soul from which his actions fly like sparks."

Nila shivered.

"Fire is cruel," she said.

"But it cooked our supper. No, little one—the elements are not cruel, nor kind. Fire may kill a man or help to nourish him—it may warm a house

or destroy it—it may consume the outgrown garment of the body and give freedom to our beloved dead. There are three fires, the destroyer, the purifier, the living heart of the home—it is for us to choose.”

“For us to choose,” Nila echoed under her breath, her tone carefully even. A dutiful wife does not contradict her husband.

CHAPTER IX

THE GODDESS ANSWERS

It had been the plan of Tuan Noor to let pass the time when Nila would look for some sinister reminder of him and strike again, later, when perhaps she might have begun to hope for a reprieve. Six weeks from the night when she had seen him, he went again to the house. This time he carried an even more certain and more dreaded herald of calamity—a bat. Fireflies meant mere misfortune—a bat, death. As he came near the house, his unwilling messenger struggling in the folds of a turban-cloth, he heard a woman's laughter, the light, merry bubbling over of care-free happiness. Whatever he might have expected, it was not that. He crept nearer, and looked incredulously into the kitchen whence the laughter came. A woman was busy there with three children playing about her feet. Even as Tuan Noor peered cautiously in, there was a step on the verandah and a moment later a man stood in the kitchen doorway looking with proud fondness at the pretty group. The Malay stepped noiselessly back from the window and shook loose the turban-cloth. The bat flapped away into the dark. Where were Motu Rayen and Nila?

He could find no trace of them. Hamilton had

done his work thoroughly. Only rumor—and that, he saw to it, was misleading—told where the erstwhile foreman and his wife had gone. Ponamma in her adieux had thrown out strong hints that they might soon return. This simple strategy did not deceive Tuan Noor. He knew that his prey had escaped—for the moment. That he would find them again was as sure as his hate.

Where had they gone? To a city, perhaps, where they would be lost in the crowd, to Kandy, or even to Colombo. Even through the police it would be difficult for an obscure country constable to pick up their trail. Had they gone to Jaffna, the Tamil center? Might they even have gone back to India?

The hopelessness of the search, the blind uncertainty of it, maddened him. It was to his interest to keep on good terms with his fellow constables, to lose no possible channel of information. They never knew the cost of that comradely good humor—but it was paid by the prisoners who were unfortunate enough to fall into his hands for examination. His superiors knew that he never failed to elicit a confession. They did not at first understand his methods. When they did, Tuan Noor's name ceased to be on the roll of the Ceylon Police.

There has been a time when he was ambitious, when he had dreamed of being a sergeant, or something even higher. Now his disgraceful dismissal seemed a very small thing. There were better dreams in the cup that the Dark Rose had

first held to his lips, and which he had since refilled for himself, many times. With such visions, what did he care for ambition, for success? And now his time would be free. There was the question of livelihood, however, to be considered. He knew of plenty of trades easy to acquire, but all involving too strict anchorage to one spot. Was there no trade that would keep him on the road, moving from place to place? His fellow constables, who liked him and felt that he had been punished too severely for what seemed to them only a pardonable excess of zeal, were liberal with suggestions.

"This and that will not do"—one of the advisers had grown irritated at last by continued failure—"it passes mere human minds to tell you anything. Why don't you ask the gods? Anjanan Devi could tell you what to do."

Tuan Noor's white teeth flashed in a smile of approval—that smile which more than one had found rather startling of late.

"You might have told me—indeed, I remember you have told me—much more foolish things than this. Why did nobody think of this before?"

In fact, it was strange that this suggestion had not been among the first, for the appeal to Anjanan Devi, the Sinhalese form of ink-gazing, was the more popular in the district because Ambalana could boast a practitioner of the art whose results were little short of miraculous, and whose services were sought by Moslems and Tamils as well as by Sinhalese. Tuan Noor's

friends would have been glad to assist at the ceremony and make a little festival of the affair, but for his own reasons he preferred to consult the goddess in private. He was alone in his house that had been swept and garnished for the occasion when the soothsayer and his little son arrived. The man's eyes turned at once to the offerings under the brass standing lamp in the middle of the room, and glittered as he appraised their value.

"You have a liberal heart, Tuan Noor. Upon such the gods look with favor."

"It is a goddess whom I am trying to please," the Malay retorted. "I have always heard that any woman could be bought."

The soothsayer frowned.

"It is not well to jest with the gods," he said.

"Why not, when they jest with us, and none too gently? But I meant no harm. Come, let us get to business."

The soothsayer looked at him, perplexed and displeased. He was used to people who played the game according to his rules, pretending reverence whether they really felt it or not. In the hard black diamond eyes that gave back his gaze, he saw behind all the flippant scoffing a savage faith. His frown gave way to a reluctant smile.

"Brother," he said slowly, "I think you are one of those for whom Anjanan Devi will do much. As you say, a goddess has something of the woman in her. Quick, Kalu, the ink and the betel-leaf while the power is on me."

He took the tools of his magic from the silent child and began his incantation. Presently the chanting ceased, and in a solemn silence he spread on the surface of the leaf the compound of oils and herbs that was the secret of his tribe. When it was done, he gave the leaf to the child.

"Stand by the light, Kalu," he commanded. "Look well into the oil and tell me what you see. Anjanan, Anjanan Devi, show clearly!"

"I see leaves." After a moment the child began to speak in a droning monotone. "Leaves drying by the road. All along the road there is a trail of them. Medicine for the sick. All along the road a trail of healing leaves."

"A trail of healing leaves," the soothsayer repeated. "They will lead you to what you seek. Look again, Kalu. Where does the road of the leaves go?"

"Up to the hills." The child's voice grew drowsy. "The wind blows cold from the hills. Up, up to the hills along the steep road that winds beside the jungle, I am following footprints. They drag in the dust and one is heavier than the other."

"The prints of a lame man's feet," the soothsayer murmured. Tuan Noor, rigid beside him, held his breath.

"Up the road, past the jungle, there is a culvert at the bend of the road"—the child hesitated.

"What kind of a culvert?" his father asked. "Stone or wood?"

"Stone. It is big, big enough to hide a man.

Now I go on—no, I cannot go on. I see ahead small houses—but it is like a fog—father, father, take the leaf! I am afraid!”

As the child dropped the leaf, the soothsayer caught it and held it close to the lamp with muttered invocations.

“I see”—he said slowly after a moment. “I see what frightened Kalu. The way ahead is clouded—clouded—and in the cloud I see dimly faces—the awful faces of the Great Gods. Someone is praying to them, and it is because of those prayers that they cloud the way.”

“Have you seen those hills before?” Tuan Noor whispered, as if afraid he might be overheard. “Are they in Ceylon or another land?”

The soothsayer’s narrowed eyes concentrated on the shining film of oil. When he spoke his voice had the dull remoteness of one in a trance.

“Anjanan Devi bids you wait and watch. She will send you a sign. She is angry with the Great Gods because they have made a fool of her before one who trusts her. Trust her still—in spite of them, she will not fail you. Do not go away. What you seek is neither near nor far. The sign will come.”

His lids drooped, the leaf fell from his hand. He stood for a moment with closed eyes, then he opened them, shook himself as if awaking from sleep, collected the offerings that were his fee, called to the child who cringed on the floor at his feet, and went away.

Tuan Noor put out the lamp and sat in the dark,

his forehead bent on his clenched hands. He knew whose prayers had clouded the path, he knew by those very prayers that even in her new retreat she still feared him. And it was a path of healing herbs that should lead him to her! He laughed.

In the morning he went early to the bazaar, to the boutique of the drug-seller Badur, a fellow Moslem. Badur knew him well by this time, and when he saw the straight young figure in the doorway, he shook his head even while his hand went automatically to a familiar bottle.

"Too much, Tuan Noor! That is the way men go mad. You are taking too much. Only yesterday——"

Tuan Noor smiled.

"No, I have not come to spend money to-day. It is earning that I have on my mind." He stretched himself on the bench by the drug-seller. "You see, I have no trade and have lost the occupation I had learned. What can I do?"

"One can learn a trade," Badur began tentatively.

"Yes," Tuan Noor interrupted. "Am I made for a shoemaker or a tailor?? Could I sit all day within doors when I have been used to walking in the open? I would go mad then, not from drugs. I would fret myself to madness like a tiger in a cage. That is why I have come to you. How do you get the drugs you sell? Surely not yourself? There must be people who collect them for you."

Badur looked kindly over his spectacles at the young man.

"Yes. There is more than a little of the tiger about you. You are not fit for a shut-in trade, that is certain. Do you know herbs?"

"I can learn."

Badur shook his head.

"One does not guess at them, you know. At least you are sure of binkhomba, when you see it?"

"Yes."

"Then that is all you need to know. Gather binkhomba and dry the leaves—it is simple, I will show you how. There are many to buy it, small vendors like me, and those who pack it for the foreign market. There is never too much binkhomba."

"Allah upon you, Badur!" Tuan Noor's benediction was warm with real gratitude.

Summer was more than half done when Tuan Noor, a licensed gatherer of binkhomba, sat in the tailor's boutique at Ambalana, waiting for a piece of work to be finished. As far as the world could see, his new venture was a success. To himself, it was a failure. Anjanaan Devi had not kept her word, and he was still waiting vainly for the promised sign. Twenty times his heart had beaten high when climbing a jungle-fringed hill road he had come suddenly upon a stone culvert—but the road had always led him on a fool's errand. More and more often, in spite of Badur's protests,

he blotted out his disappointment with the cup of dreams. The lingering traces of his last draught were still on him as he lounged on the bench of the boutique—a blurring of the sense of time, of the sense of distance. Under half-closed heavy lids he watched the approach of another customer, aware of his own confusion, wondering half-drunkenly whether the man were near or far.

Neither near nor far—to the devil with women, goddesses and all! Glib creatures, not to be trusted!

“Will you kindly move a little to make room for me?”

Tuan Noor started, blinking the glamor from his eyes, and complied with the stranger’s request.

“I will have this done in a moment,” said the tailor, busy at his machine. “What can I do for you to-day, Punchirala?”

Punchirala explained his needs—a small repair, for which he had ample leisure to wait. The two sat silent on the bench for a time, then the Sinhalese opened conversation civilly.

“Are you a stranger here?”

Tuan Noor had gone back to his disjointed musings, but recalled himself with an effort.

“No, I live here. I gather binkhomba—that takes me out of town a good deal.”

“It is I who am the newcomer. I have lived here only a few months.”

“Do you wish you had stayed in Maradeniya to keep an eye on your affairs?” the tailor asked

genially over his racing needle. "How is your business there coming on?"

Punchirala scowled and made a sound of annoyance.

"Badly at present. You mean that business of the note, I suppose. The fellow has had the effrontery to make a district court case of it, and it will cost me time and money to get my rights."

"It is only a question of time and money!" Tuan Noor asked idly.

"Of nothing else." Punchirala looked him squarely in the eyes, but after a moment his look shifted uneasily. Tuan Noor's lip curled in bitter amusement. He had seen thieves and liars enough in his time. If there was cheating to be done, this man would not be behindhand. "He will have to pay, the scoundrel," Punchirala went on. "And I think he will be sorry he ever tried to cheat me."

The vindictive tone pleased Tuan Noor's humor.

"I pity the man who tries to cheat you," he said. "For one thing, you are shrewd—you would not be easily imposed on. For another, you are a man of the temper I like—you would strike back for yourself and not leave it for God to do."

Punchirala had not wholly approved of Tuan Noor's expression at the beginning of this speech, but now he smiled sourly.

"The gods do not always remember, you think?"

"It is a comfort to feel an enemy's throat in one's own fingers."

"I have no such thoughts as that," Punchirala interrupted sharply. "I am not a violent man who gets into trouble with the police, I may tell you. There are other ways."

"Surely there are other ways." Tuan Noor laughed with lazy relish. "Ways that hurt as much—more, maybe. We mean the same thing, brother, however we may say it."

"You are a young man, and your blood still runs hot. I have learned that it is a good thing to be safe."

"Safe"—Tuan Noor echoed the word dully, returning to his half-dreams. "Who can be safe till he rests in the house that has no door?"

"Not the crippled money-lender, at all events," observed the tailor briskly. "I would not be in his clothes, though his wife were twice as pretty as they say. Here is your sarong, Tuan Noor."

The Malay's hand did not shake as he took the garment. For a moment he sat immovable, his attention apparently fixed on the money in his purse, while in his veiled eyes a consciousness rose as a drowned body comes up through the water.

"So it is a money-lender who has wronged you," he said, deliberately selecting a coin. The silence had not been long enough to notice. "There are many like you. The world cannot get on without that trade, more's the pity, but it could well do without the kind of men who practice it."

"Yes, they know we must endure them, knaves

or not. This man, for instance. Of course I have no dealings with him. We do not even speak, now, but my kinsfolk in the village must borrow of him still—ten rupees here, twenty there. They must do it, and swallow their pride, poor souls—and it makes them all the more bitter toward him.”

“Of course. Your kinsfolk are villagers, I think you said. They would be proud of you—naturally enough. Would resent an injury to you, especially an attack on your good name. That is right, quite right. How they must hate this—what did you say his name was?”

“Motu Rayen.”

“Ah—a Tamil, then? Have you many in your village?”

“Only two families—this man, and another who came when he did. Maradeniya is—has always been—a village of Sinhalese.”

“Is it near, that village? I do not know it.”

“Four miles north, along the Malawatta road. Not near, not far. You know Canning Dorai’s tea estate?”

“Not yet. My business will no doubt lead me there some day.” Tuan Noor rose and stood looking down at his informant. “Allah upon you, friend. May your business prosper and your enemies be confounded.”

“What? You are a Mohammedan?” Punchirala asked with some disfavor.

Tuan Noor smiled suavely.

“I am a Malay, and follow Islam—and yet even

this very day I shall make an offering to one of your goddesses."

He kept his word later, kneeling in the gathering dusk on the stone culvert by the Malawatta road. His hands were full of flowering branches plucked from the jungle that bordered the road. He lifted them between his hands, then let the flowers drop into the dark gully under the culvert—a space big enough to hide a man, as the soothsayer had promised.

"Accept my offering, Anjanan Devi," he said, "and forgive my doubts. You are a woman that a man can trust."

CHAPTER X

PUBLIC SPIRIT

MOTU RAYEN was the kind of man who shelters his women-folk. That had given added keenness to his grief at the loss of his little sister, and it made his distress at the trouble with Punchirala greater that the first disgrace of the notice should have fallen on Nila in his absence. He tried in every way to make light of what had occurred, and was greatly comforted by his success. Indeed, since the trouble came from another source than Tuan Noor's enmity, she was not disposed to take it seriously, especially when her husband appeared to hold it of so slight importance. She went contentedly on her tranquil, uneventful way, and he watched her, as usual, with fond eyes whose wistfulness she was too preoccupied to see.

So he sat in the verandah one day with some accounts that he was making up, the figures neglected as he looked after her, walking down the road with Ponamma, the baby in his usual place astride her hip and her gold ornaments flashing in the sun. When she had gone out of sight, he still sat musing, but now a line of worry deepened between his brows. The district court case was no laughing matter, though he had made a joke of it for Nila. It would be bad for him if he lost, and

might be even worse if he won. He had no doubt that the fraudulent alteration in the note was Punchirala's work, but nothing would make Punchirala's kin believe that—and Punchirala's kin were Maradeniya. The decision of the case in Motu Rayen's favor would almost inevitably mean the necessity of moving to another village. And—that done—would not the whole weary story be all to tell again? He sighed, and since Nila was not there to see, he bowed his tired head on his folded arms.

He was roused by a pleasant salutation. Looking up, he saw a young man in a red sarong smiling down at him. It seemed to Motu Rayen there was a resemblance to someone he had seen before somewhere, but the stranger showed no recognition, so he dismissed it as a fancy. The young Malay—he announced his race not only by the sarong but by the batek kerchief he wore folded into a jaunty cap—laughed outright at the dazed face which looked up at him.

"Are you sick or sad?" he asked.

"Neither." Motu Rayen forced an answering laugh. "I must confess, I lost myself for a moment. It is warm for the time of year."

"And the air is heavy. A storm is coming, I think."

"What can I do for you?" Motu Rayen asked.

"A little thing for you, but an important one for me. They tell me you lived at one time near Sigiriya."

"I am sorry, but they did not tell you truly. I

have never been to Sigiriya. It was near Ambalana that I lived before I came here."

The Malay shrugged his shoulders in good-humored disappointment.

"See how people lie rather than admit that they do not know! I have worked the Ambalana country thoroughly, but have not yet tried Sigiriya, and thought you could tell me whether there would be enough binkhomba there to make it worth my while to go."

"You gather binkhomba? Well, that is a pleasant trade—pleasanter than mine. I am sorry I cannot help you."

"Thank you for your good will." The Malay turned to go, and again Motu Rayen was perplexed by that elusive resemblance.

"Are you going so soon?" he protested hospitably.

"Thank you for your kindness, but I must be on my way. I have a long journey to make."

He strode off down the road, singing. Motu Rayen knew the tune, an old Sinhalese love song, and found himself humming it after the singer's voice had died away.

*"If I were a stone, my passion's fire would split me.
If I were a river, my longing tears would flood me.
Darling, I would offer flowers to the past
If prayers could bring you to my arms again."*

His throat closed painfully. She had never loved him—he could see that now. It had been pity, tenderness, at the last, gratitude—never

what he had hoped, what for a little space of heaven he thought was indeed his. He could give her a sort of happiness—wealth, and the child—but never what another might have given her, had he not snatched her for himself—one of their own people as strong and handsome as the young fellow swinging down the road. He had long schooled himself to remember that the substance of life is action rather than emotion, but let a man school himself never so wisely, there will be moments when he forgets the lesson.

But he was cheerful as usual when Nila came home, and made an amusing story of the stranger who had found him dozing in the verandah.

“He looked like someone I have seen, and I cannot think who it is,” he said more than once. That night, after they had gone to bed, suddenly it came to him.

“Dear, are you awake?” he whispered. “I have it: the herb gatherer looked like the Ambalana constable who did estate patrol duty—I forget his name.”

Nila’s soft even breathing was her only answer. The name, could he have remembered it, might have broken her deepest sleep.

Old Dingiri Banda and his son had finished their work in the field and were on their way home when they heard a pleasant voice behind them.

“We are going the same way, friends. May I walk with you?”

They looked at the stranger rather grudgingly—the red sarong, the Malay cap. He was not one of themselves, but there was a contagious geniality in his smile that made the old man say, “The road is free to all. Walk with us if you like.”

He fell into step with them, checking his own free stride to Dingiri Banda’s gait.

“Can you tell me where to find binkhomba hereabouts?” he asked.

“That is your trade?” Dingiri Banda looked him over again. “Well, it is a good life.”

“I am beginning to think so,” Tuan Noor agreed. “One sees the country and meets people.”

“About the herb now.” Dingiri Banda meditated. “I do not remember any of it about Maradeniya. You might ask Canning Dorai if there is any on his estate.”

“You are of Maradeniya? What a small world it is! I had not heard of the village till a little while ago when I met a man who spoke of it—Punchirala, his name was. Perhaps you know him?”

“Know him? I am his mother’s brother!”

“A fine family. You are all fortunate in your kindred. I hope he has been as fortunate in his business.”

“You mean that miserable money-lender?” Dingiri Banda scowled angrily. “He told you of that, of course. No, he has not been fortunate there. They say the case will go against him in court.”

"Against him? But how can that be?"

"On a lucky day," the old man grimly quoted the proverb, "you can catch fish with twine, but on an unlucky day the fish will break even chains of iron. It was an unlucky day when he ever accepted that cursed note. Money is the only safe thing—good honest money that one can't play tricks with, and all the devils may take these wretched bits of paper and the men who deal in them."

"Ah, I am with you in that. I know what I know, and paid no cheap price for the knowledge. But the world is so perverse that honest men like you and me must go to the money-lender if we are to live and ply our trade." Tuan Noor let his voice darken a little as he added, "And of course we love the money-lenders none the better for it."

There was a growl of assent from Dingiri Banda, and his son put in a surly word.

"If Motu Rayen can fool the courts, we shall all be cheated like Punchirala. He will say we owe him seventy rupees instead of seven, and what can we do? We are poor men."

"Scoundrels like this Motu Rama——"

"Rayen."

"These names all sound alike to me." Tuan Noor laughed. "Fellows like this money-lender of yours do these things because they know they can do them safely. If your village were not so mild and peaceable, or if Punchirala were the sort of man to take back by force what had been taken from him by fraud, your Motu Rayen—have I got

it now?—would hardly dare to play such a trick. The law breakers have some advantage over the law keepers, eh, friends? For the only justice that never misses its mark is the justice that a man deals with his own hand.” He stopped abruptly, with an exclamation of humorous chagrin. “I have been so interested in your talk that I have gone past the road where I should have turned. At Canning Dorai’s plantation, you said. I will try there. Remember, friends, if you are ever in Ambalana and I can do you any service, Tuan Noor is my name.” He waved a salutation as he turned and swung away back along the road he had come. Dingiri Banda and his son trudged on.

“That is a fine, friendly young fellow, if he is a Moorman,” said the old man at length. “He has good sense, too.”

“That was right, about money-lenders daring to cheat because they know they can do it safely.” Kiribanda clenched his fist. “Someone ought to teach them a lesson.”

That was as far as their talk went. Their thoughts plodded on along the way where Tuan Noor had led them, as doggedly and steadily as did their bare feet along the stony road. When Lokuhamy the bread-hawker came by on his rounds a week later and stopped for a chew of betel and a talk with his kinsfolk, it became evident how far they had traveled in silence. The conversation came quickly and naturally to Punchirala and his affairs.

"The trouble is," said Lokuhamy the breadman, "that my cousin is too meek a spirit. If the court says yes, he would never say no. That is why clever villains like Motu Rayen, who can cheat the judges—bribe them, maybe; how do we know?—dare to treat him so outrageously."

Dingiri Banda and his son exchanged looks—looks that said all the words that they had not exchanged.

"You borrow of him, do you not?" said Kiri-banda. Lokuhamy nodded. "So do we. When will he begin to rob us? It is only a matter of time, unless——"

He hesitated.

"Unless we prove to him that such doings are not safe." Lokuhamy finished the sentence.

"Of course, that needs thinking of. It is a serious thing."

"So is this business of Punchirala a serious thing."

"Punchirala is our kinsman," said old Dingiri Banda heavily. There was a silence which Kiri-banda broke.

"There is a man in Ambalana, Tuan Noor by name, a binkhomba gatherer. He is a quick-witted fellow and has had troubles of his own with money-lenders."

"I know him," said Lokuhamy. "He bought bread from me when he was in Kalavila a while ago—that was how we met. He is the sort of man one soon grows friendly with. I knew him well in

an hour or two. He used to be a constable. He is a friend of Punchirala."

Again there was a silence.

"Appuhamy borrows of Motu Rayen," said Dingiri Banda. "So does Singhappu, so does Mudiyanse, so do all our family in Maradeniya and Kalavila. All kin to Punchirala, all in danger of what has happened to Punchirala. He will do nothing, our kinsman, except spend his money on lawyers."

"We need a man like this Tuan Noor to help us," Kiribanda suggested. "We would not know how to begin."

"He was a constable, you said?" Dingiri Banda was cautious.

"That does not make him a friend of the police." Lokuhamy smiled grimly. "I have heard why he is no longer a constable. The officers did not like his way of getting a prisoner's confession, so now he gathers binkhomba for a living. Have you had any talk with Appuhamy and the rest?"

"No!" Dingiri Banda was dazed and frightened by the sudden and sinister definiteness matters had taken. "No! What is there to talk about? We have said nothing here."

"We have said enough to understand each other," said Kiribanda. "Leave that part of it to me, cousin. You will speak with Tuan Noor?"

Lokuhamy nodded.

"Yes, carefully. We must go carefully about this." He got up and swung his basket of bread

to his shoulder. "It is time one of these scoundrels had an example made of him—but no need for us to get into trouble just because we are public-spirited." He grinned at his own joke and proceeded on his rounds.

"He is a wild fellow, that Lokuhamy," Dingiri Banda frowned at his son. "A bold tongue."

"But a clear head."

"What do you mean to do?"

"How do I know? Give the money-lender a beating, perhaps—we have not yet thought out a plan. But we must show him in some way that we are not men to be trifled with."

He found fruitful soil for this idea in the minds of three or four of his kinsmen. Mudiyanse, who was a tailor in Kalavila and rather more sophisticated than the villagers, was ready enough to talk and listen, but balked at action. "That is the way people get into trouble," was his last word on the subject. The majority warmly concurred with Kiribanda's vague threats. Down in Ambalana, however, the threats were becoming far from vague under the sympathetic fostering of Tuan Noor. Lokuhamy had lost no time in making an appointment, and appeared on the evening set. After the usual civilities had been exchanged, he came at once to business.

"You will have forgotten a talk we had when we first met," said Lokuhamy, "but I have not forgotten it. You planted a seed in my mind then, and the thought has grown. Now it is almost ready for harvest and I come to you again."

"I do not recognize myself as a sower of wisdom," Tuan Noor answered pleasantly. "I have made no great matter of my own field—little grain and many weeds. Are you wise in coming to me?"

"I think so. You told me of a village you knew where there was an affair like this of my cousin Punchirala?"

"Yes, I remember. How is his business coming on, by the way?"

Lokuhamy drew a little nearer.

"Badly. It is set for trial in February, but there is little doubt even now that it will go against him. In that story you were telling me, what did the people of the village do to the dishonest money-lender?"

Tuan Noor's lips drew back from his betel-reddened teeth in a slow smile such as had once frightened a fellow-constable; but Lokuhamy was a bit of a free-thinker and did not believe in the malevolent mouth.

"It has happened twice to my knowledge that villagers protected themselves against oppression, for it was self-protection, not merely revenge. I do not remember which case it was that we were speaking of. In Haliyala—the offense had been rank—they killed him."

"That goes rather too far," Lokuhamy put in. Tuan Noor went on quietly.

"I do not excuse murder—they called it execution, by the way. And too many of them went to keep him company. A thing like that must be done—if it is done—carefully. But different dis-

eases need different drugs. So much depends on the kind of man you wish to punish and to warn."

"He is a cripple."

"So?" Tuan Noor clasped his hands behind his head and looked out of the window reflectively. "And is he married?"

"Yes, a pretty young wife whom he loads with jewels like a sacred image. Nothing less than gold, even on her feet, and those who have seen it say that her *thali* is a wonder, no less."

Behind Tuan Noor's head the nails of one hand cut into the knuckles of the other, but his face only showed a scornful amusement.

"A toy that he has bought? Well!"—he closed his eyes as if thinking, and against their hot lids burned the gay figure that had passed along the road toward Maradeniya while he lurked in the jungle—Nila, the complacent wife, the happy mother—Nila with her child, smiling, cherished, gold-bedecked. Beautiful as that figure had been, its passing had left hatred uppermost. He felt for her only such desire as would stir him momentarily for any beautiful woman—not the fierce mastering passion that had dragged him into a humiliation that it was fury to remember. His revenge now demanded, first of all, that she should suffer—not necessarily that suffering should bring her to his arms. He had told her at their parting that she would lose her *thali*—the *thali* that was town talk. In the common acceptance of the phrase, that meant her widowhood. So she had understood it. So he had meant it. He saw

a different meaning in the word now. No—Motu Rayen's death had been a boy's thought. Worse, a thousand times worse, for her to be left penniless, with a beggared cripple on her hands.

He opened his eyes. Lokuhamy sat watching him expectantly, waiting for the result of his deliberations.

"Gold even on her feet," said the Malay softly. "What other woman of your village goes so gay? Your wife?"

"Mine?" Lokuhamy made an expressive grimace. "I have no money for gewgaws. None of us have."

"That may be one reason why he has it. In the other village I spoke of, the usurer's wife was her husband's savings bank. She jingled with gold, while the village women wore threadbare tatters. A band of men came to the usurer's house by night, and when they went away, that woman had no more jewels than the women whose husbands had paid for hers."

"That is a good notion. There's justice in that!" Lokuhamy laughed savagely. "A sort of joke, too. You like a joke, I see."

"Yes." Tuan Noor's answering laugh was half a snarl. "Yes, so well that when one is played on me I always return it."

"This is not your quarrel, of course," said Lokuhamy, "but would you consider taking a hand in the business with us? You know how it has been successfully carried through. Of course you would have your share."

Tuan Noor hesitated as if weighing the proposal.

"Well, why not?" he said at last. "As for my share, I have a fancy for this *thali* you spoke of. Give me that, and divide the rest as you choose."

"No trouble about that," said Lokuhamy. "None of our men would want the *thali*. It would be too hard and dangerous to dispose of."

"I could dispose of it," said the Malay.

"Yes, you travel far. It will be easy for you. When shall we do it?"

Again Tuan Noor considered while the other sat watching him.

"Here is another joke that will please you. The man will be in Kandy the night of his district court case with Punchirala and the woman will be alone. That makes one less chance of discovery and it will be a rather more striking warning, coming just then."

"Good! that is good! What a sense of humor you have!" Lokuhamy chuckled, then his face clouded. "But that is two months away. We are only in December now."

"Two months will soon pass. What is time when one is sure? It is uncertainty that wears a man out."

CHAPTER XI

DREAMS

THAT night, the visions that he found in the drugged cup of dreams were all of destroying the *thali*. It must be gone, utterly gone, so that no effort could recover even the smallest fragment of it—not that Motu Rayen would be in a position to spend time or money on such efforts. In his visions, Tuan Noor tore the mesh of gold from Nila's throat, laughing in bitter triumph that the yielding of her soft flesh under his fingers left him cold. He flung her from him, robbed, broken. In his hand he held all that he wanted of her, the symbol of her marriage, the gold for which she had humiliated him. Rushing down like a storm through the hills, he threw the necklace into the lake at Kandy. It glimmered down through the jade-green water and disappeared. In a moment she was there beside him, praying to her Great Gods—and the *thali* rose and floated to her on the water like a string of jasmine flowers. He caught it from her outstretched hands and fled again—to the sea this time, to the cliff at Trincomalee that plunges sheer down into deep water. Standing on the edge of the rock, he let the necklace fall—it splashed up diamond spray as it struck, and

sank. A moment later Nila was on the cliff beside him, praying, always praying, and as she prayed a white hand came up from the sea holding the *thali*—the hand of the Dutch girl who leaped to death in that place for love's sake, long ago. With a shout he dived, snatching the treasure from the cold hand as he passed—deep, deep he went, and came up slowly through swirling green into a place of moving mists and strange sounds. He stood waiting for something that was to happen, and as he waited, the mists drew slowly into a figure—a woman's figure.

“Rose of the Night!” he whispered.

Her lips moved, but he could not hear what she said. As he went toward her to catch the words, she retreated—and her withdrawal had a subtle allurements that quickened his blood as it had never leaped to her surrender. He had been too sick and miserable, too full of his own turmoil, consciously to see her on the night when they had met. She had been a shadow in a world of shadows—his eyes had taken her image mechanically. Now a trick of memory brought it back. She stood before him, the woman who had once been his.

No, she had never been his, this woman. He could never have wearied of her, never have let her go. She was neither an ignorant girl nor a mere courtesan, this—she was a priestess of passion. Her movements were a ritual of temptation. The mysterious depths of her eyes and her hair were filled with a hidden wisdom of evil as

might those of a demon-goddess, hinting what might be for the one who could break that calm.

"Rose of the Night!" His arms went out to her. She smiled, but she drew back. Still he followed her, still she eluded him, always with moving lips whose speech he could not hear and a smile that drew him, drew him. The scented silk of her garment blew toward him, clung to his eager hands—and the touch of it was fire that ran through all his body. Suddenly he saw that the hands he held out to her were empty. What had become of the *thali*? He looked back for an instant, and saw the path down which he had pursued her, shining with trampled dust of gold and now he heard her voice—the voice that had offered him the cup of dreams:

"There is only one sure way to lose things. They must be picked deliberately to pieces, squandered little by little, soiled, defaced, degraded, trodden bit by bit into the dust. And when that is done no god can bring back the thing that was, for it is gone. Do I not know?"

For one wild moment, she was near him. The mists that whirled about him were her loosened hair, her robe—but when he clasped her, there was only the cold inert weight of a corpse in his arms, and he heard a low laugh.

He waked. And all through his relief at being rid of a nightmare there remained the fire that had stirred in his veins at the low laughter of a woman—his discarded mistress. Had she really changed so much, he wondered? It would not be

hard to find out. The road he had gone that night stood open for whoever chose to take it.

But when he took it, a few days later, the little house that he remembered stood empty. Not empty as he had waked to it that morning when the bright traces of her were everywhere, but bare and dingy, desolate as only a deserted house can be. A faint, haunting perfume still hung in the air—that was all. The Dark Rose was gone.

As eagerly as he had sought Nila, but not as secretly, he sought her. It was not strange that a young man should seek such a woman. For her he need wait the help of no goddess, he could ask of any man and be sure of a sympathetic hearing. The difficulty was, that no man whom he asked knew of her. Strange as it might seem, he could not doubt the honesty of their ignorance. At last, a description of her met with recognition.

“You mean the Opal!”

Tuan Noor, with a savage surge of jealousy, wondered who had given her that name—opals are not so common in Ceylon that she would have been likely to choose it for herself. On the chance, he agreed that he did mean the Opal, and discovered that the lady was living in Ambalana with a merchant. The boutique of the Opal’s present husband—it is Sinhalese custom to consider such temporary domestic arrangements as hers in the light of an unregistered marriage—was on the outskirts of the town, well situated to catch the trade of those coming and going by the Kalavila road, as Tuan Noor discovered when he betook

himself there. It stood in a compound of its own, and as he came toward it, he saw in the garden a familiar, bright-clad slenderness standing in the sunlight like a stalk of scarlet flowers. As he watched her, she stooped again to her work. How often he had seen her rise so and stand for a moment stretching her lithe grace before she bent again to her task. She had been his woman then.

He entered the boutique and asked for tea, looking curiously at the man of the house. He was soft-spoken and gentle-mannered, tall and spare, with gray hair and a lean quiet face under a decently folded white turban. This man, and the woman of his dream? Grotesque partnership! No—this worthy merchant would bring no demon goddess into his dull respectable house. It had been only a drug-dream, and he had come on a fool's errand.

Manikrala brought the tea and as he gave Tuan Noor the cup, he held the young man with one steady look—no more than a shopkeeper would naturally do to fix in his memory the face of a new customer—and yet Tuan Noor had the feeling of one who, treading idly over the pleasant softness and dim mellow colors of an old carpet, feels all at once his foot strike cold iron under the fabric. It brought back with a shock that moment of his dream when, groping through the beckoning draperies of a desired woman, he found the cold weight of a corpse in his arms.

He jerked his shoulders impatiently. These horrors came with the pleasure—he had seen such

things among his people. That was one reason why he had kept away from the drug till that night. Well, one must pay for pleasure. The woman of the dream would be worth a nightmare or two.

He finished and paid for his tea. There were many customers in the boutique, and the shopkeeper was busy as he gave the young man a polite answer to his farewell. Tuan Noor sauntered out and turned the corner of the house toward the garden.

At his step, the woman looked up from her work. She did not seem surprised to see him, did not greet him in words. Almost it was like the days when she had looked up from the work of his house.

Almost. The dream had not lied. His Dark Rose and the Opal were one, and yet—this woman had never been his. He moistened his lips before he spoke.

“I have been trying long and hard to find you.”

“Why?” The light indifference of her tone flicked like a lash.

“You know.” To his surprise his voice choked on the words. She lifted her brows ironically.

“To fill the cup of dreams again?”

“A deeper cup—and with true dreams. You said you had forgotten how to love. I could teach you.”

“Nothing that I do not know.”

“You have learned from that old man, perhaps?”

Her chin lifted and her face hardened a little; then, after a moment, a smile of mischievous cruelty twitched the corner of her mouth.

"Perhaps. They call him the Teacher."

Tuan Noor smiled back at her and his voice deepened.

"You are laughing at me, Rose of the Night, devil-goddess. You did not laugh at me—once."

"If I had, perhaps"—she left the sentence unfinished, and again the little smile flickered over her face. "I have learned much since—you."

"If you were mine now"—he took a deep breath—"I would keep you. Allah! I would kill you before I let you go—if you were mine now."

"When I was yours"—she laughed.

"You shall be mine again, and I will keep you. What is your price?"

"More than you can pay." This time it was her voice that shook, but she was bending over the bowl of paddy and the blows of her pestle covered the tremor. She finished her work and rose, lifting the bowl to her shoulder. In the doorway she looked back—a look that brought him to her with a step that was almost a spring.

"We shall see."

His outstretched hand caught a fold of her sari, as it had in his dream, and as in the dream she drew back, tempting him on with the subtle mockery of her eyes and lips.

"Remember! The wares in the boutique there are cheaper than mine."

His hand let go the sari to grasp—but she had

glided in swiftly as a snake and the door closed in his face.

"Dark Rose!" he whispered against the panels. "Rose of the Night—open! I have more to say to you." The only answer was the click of a bolt shot home and the sound of her low laugh, the laugh of his dream. He stood for a moment breathing quickly, then swung on his heel and strode away with no farewell.

That laugh was a lure even stronger than her beauty. He had tired of the child who trembled in his arms, who made unhesitatingly the sacrifice that had been too much for Nila. This was a woman who could make men tremble at her will and laugh as she watched them, a woman for whom a man might fling away his home, his people, his God.

He remembered that look of hers, suggesting everything, promising nothing, a swift premeditated opening of depths like the crater of a volcano, where one divined rather than saw flame. "His wares are cheaper than mine," she had said in her mockery. Truly, it had been from empty hands that she withdrew in the dream. A little while and his hands would not be empty. He laughed in his turn, his face lifted exultantly to the bright sky. The grim humor of the situation pleased him.

"You took one woman from me, Motu Rayen!" he said aloud. "Well, you and she together shall give me wherewith to win another. That is fair."

He thought of his next visit to the Teacher's

boutique—and its garden. Would she be waiting for him? Would she avoid him? Would her eyes hold for him only bright shallows of scornful laughter, or would they widen and deepen to reveal again that underworld of veiled fire? At the thought his breath came quicker and his heart stormed at his breast. He walked on his way like a conqueror, head up, singing as he went. Life was not life for him unless it surged at the flood.

CHAPTER XII

SUCCESS

IN the dark of the February morning set for the district court trial, Motu Rayen and Keshavan started down to Kandy. There was an unusual sum of money in the house, so Motu Rayen had asked Canning to send one of the estate coolies for the night that he must be away—a lad named Arasan, whom he knew well and who called Nila Elder Sister. Nila watched her husband go with no misgiving. The case was sure to be decided in his favor. Keshavan had heard that as common talk through the village, and had told Ponamma. There were other things that the taciturn old man had heard and did not repeat—things that were the reason of his journey to Kandy, instead of the vague business that he alleged when he asked for leave of absence from Canning, things that the Englishman understood when he granted the leave. Motu Rayen was glad of the companionship of the sturdy, silent old neighbor. He did not realize that Keshavan thought it might not be safe for the defendant in that case to walk those wild roads alone.

As they trudged through Ambalana, they saw on a side street the gleam of a red sarong, and heard a deep voice singing an old song:

"If I were a stone, my passion's fire would split me.

If I were a river, my longing tears would flood me."

"And probably"—Motu Rayen spoke aloud—"there is not a maid of his people who would not come if he called. Those are the ones who sing like that."

As had been expected, the judgment was given in favor of the defendant. He slept that night in the verandah of the advocate who had conducted his case, and while his tired patient eyes closed on the struggling moonlight and wind-shredded clouds, Tuan Noor sat under the culvert, also watching the sky with eyes of quite another temper. He had abandoned his love-song for a grim parody of the hunter's ritual, and chanted under his breath, "For the favor of all the wild gods of love and hate who have pleasure in hunting—I hunt to-night. Send me the honey of gold and of kisses—send me the game I hunt both in hate and in love, gods of the jungle!"

He took a phial from his breast, hesitated, then put it back. When all was over, when he had the booty safe home, then he could dream—but not now. Now he must not risk a bungling of the business in hand by even the slightest blurring of his wits. His first price for complicity in the robbery would have bought satisfaction for his hate, but it might not suffice to tempt the Opal to his arms. He must have more than twenty sovereigns to bid for her wares. He had not suggested augmenting his share. It seemed to him wiser to trust to craft when the thing should be

accomplished, and for that he must keep a clear head.

At a low cautious call, he came out from his hiding-place. All the bolder spirits of Punchirala's clan were there, old Dingiri Banda the only one half-hearted in the enterprise. It was a company of nine that stole along the road in the darkness that seemed all the blacker for the occasional fitful gleams of moonlight.

"Mudiyanse would not come, talk as I might," Lokuhamy grumbled. "He is cold-blooded as a fish—no taste for adventure, no public spirit, no sense of humor."

"The night favors us," Tuan Noor observed.

"There is a coolie boy from the Medawatta estate at the house," Lokuhamy whispered as they went on. "He must be taken care of."

"I will do that," Tuan Noor rejoined. "He shall not trouble you."

"It is only necessary to quiet him for the moment," Dingiri Banda put in anxiously. Tuan Noor laughed.

"You thought I meant to quiet him forever! No. This is a comedy, not a tragedy, that we play to-night."

The lamps were lighted in Motu Rayen's house and its windows made warm friendly paths through the night to the road and across it, where Ponamma's house was already dark. Nila was busy in the kitchen with the last housewifery of the day when she heard a cry from the verandah—Arasan's voice, in pain and terror. Her first

thought was of one of the myriad forms of reptile life that haunt the fragrant darkness of the tropic night, and she was concerned as much for her baby as for their young guardian. She ran from the kitchen into the middle room that opened on the verandah.

It was like the horrible confusion of a nightmare—the swift devastating rush of the robbers, turmoil and destruction breaking like a whirlwind on the placid, drowsy quiet. Thinking of her child, she fought them desperately, but was beaten down—harsh hands were at her throat, the cold touch of a knife—she heard a voice screaming for help, and hardly knew that the voice was her own till the scream stopped as a heavy palm closed brutally on her mouth.

The merciful release of complete oblivion did not come to her. Though she lay motionless, apparently unconscious, she was aware of the moving figures about her as one sick with fever is aware of his delirium. She saw and recognized faces with which her peeps from the window had made her familiar. Lokuhamy the bread-seller she knew by name. It did not seem possible that the good-natured trader who joked as he bargained could be this fierce man who stood looking about the gutted room for more plunder, his white cloth stained with red where her *thali* hung in his belt—his knife had severed the web of gold none too gently.

They were gone. It seemed that she had not seen them go, only realized all at once that the

room was empty, as the scenes change in a wild dream. Perhaps it was a dream—if only she could wake! The sharp wail of a child startled her to motion. She struggled to her knees and crept toward the kitchen, dragging herself by one arm. The other hung limp beside her. At her call he wriggled out from his hiding-place among the pots and pans, and she drew him toward her, tremulously searching his plump little body for injuries. She found none, and yet there was blood on him. Then as she bent over him, a heavy red drop fell, and she realized that it was her own.

“Elder Sister!” Arasan, bruised and shaking, whimpered beside her, “What have those devils done to you, Elder Sister?”

She could smile, now that the child was safe.

“They did not hurt him. Go tell Canning Dorai.”

Canning was down with an attack of the malaria of which not even the hills could quite cure him, but he sent his butler to bring Nila and the child to shelter and to notify the police. The kindly servant cried out in pitying indignation, when he found her where Arasan had left her, among the wreckage of her home.

“But this is a matter for the doctor!” he exclaimed. “Come to us to-night—you need a woman’s care and my wife will do what she can—and to-morrow you shall go to the hospital.”

The butler’s wife made Nila welcome, and they gave her what comfort they could—little enough.

“In the morning I will go to the police. If only

the law can get hold of the villains, the good English law!" The butler turned to Arasan. "Did you recognize them?"

"No, it was dark, and beside I am a stranger here."

"I saw them," said Nila faintly. "There were Lokuhamy the bread-man, and the old man with the long gray beard—I do not know the names, but I would know the faces of all who were in the room. There were eight of them."

"There were more than eight," said Arasan. "One did not go in at all, that I am sure of. He was holding me outside. When you screamed, his hands tightened around my throat"—he choked and shivered at the remembrance.

"Lokuhamy at least shall be in jail to-morrow," the butler promised. "And we shall find the others—surely we shall find them!"

"The old man with the long gray beard," put in the butler's wife. "That would be Dingiri Banda, would it not? And the others—were they of the village, men you had seen?"

Nila moved her aching head with a feeble assent.

"Those who came to borrow of your husband? Yes! Aha! the scoundrels—they knew he would be in Kandy to-night!"

The butler stared at his wife with respect.

"You have said it. They knew. And—there are more than nine kinsmen of Punchirala in the village and hereabout. I think we have the end of this skein in our hands."

Punchirala! Even in her pain, she slipped into unconsciousness happy because it was not Tuan Noor, because at last that curse, it seemed, was lifted.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CURSE OF FIRE

EARLY next morning the news came to the sergeant at the Ambalana police station. A crime of such magnitude was a matter for the Superintendent of Police and the sergeant sent a telegram to Kandy before going himself to Maradeniya. He arrived in the late afternoon, and was met by the *arachi* of the group of villages, a nervous little man alarmed by the importance of the present issue. This was a very different matter from the customary bickerings about strayed cattle, trampled fields, and disregarded boundaries.

"I do not know how much money there was in the house," the fluttered official explained. "The woman was quite unable to tell me. She knew nothing of her husband's business, it seems. But all her jewelry was taken—that was about a thousand rupees worth."

"A thousand rupees!" the sergeant lifted his brows.

"Yes, that is the truth, I know. I have seen her. She was the talk of the village. A young wife—a rich, crippled husband—natural enough!"

"Is she badly hurt?"

"She is in the hospital—bruises and cuts, and an arm broken, or some such matter. I have not looked into that—it is not my affair, as long as they did not kill her."

"Have you made any arrests?"

"Yes, Lokuhamy the bread-seller. The woman herself called him by name. She speaks of an old man with a beard—that might be Dingiri Banda, but she is too sick to identify him and I cannot arrest him on the chance. I tried to get something out of the woman who lives across the way—Ponamma. She is a Tamil, too, and friendly to these people, but she insists that she saw nothing, that when she heard screams she was afraid and shut up her house."

"Well, that was natural enough, wasn't it? Perhaps, too, she feared something more than the robbers."

"But I was gentle in questioning her, very gentle!" the *arachi* protested.

The sergeant looked gravely down at the mild, twittering little man, and the corners of his stern mouth twitched under the shelter of his gray mustache.

"It is sometimes rather risky to bear witness against one's neighbors. I meant that, not to accuse you of harshness. I will try whether I have any better luck."

To his first questionings, Ponamma repeated the story she had told the *arachi*. The sergeant listened patiently, his eyes fixed on a clump of marigolds in the corner of the little garden. As she

finished, he looked her in the face silently and waited.

Ponamma fidgeted.

"How should I see across the road?" she demanded. "I am an old woman, my sight is not good. How could I say at such a distance if it were this man or that?"

The sergeant nodded.

"Of course. You are afraid. And because you are afraid the men who robbed your friends may go free. But the law will do what it can, and there is no blame to you, mother. What you did not see you cannot tell."

He made as if to turn away, but Ponamma struck her hands despairingly together.

"I did see," she wailed. "I did see! My house was dark, for I was ready to lie down in bed, but I had not closed the shutter of the window that opens on the road, and I looked across. I saw Lokuhamy, Dingiri Banda, Ukkubanda, Appuhamy, and Singhappu—those I knew. There were some others whom I could not make out—they were crowded in the house, passing and re-passing the door, and I could not see the faces—but those I saw, and now that I have said it, they may do what they like to me, I will stick to it, though it should be in the great court at Kandy."

"They can do nothing to you," the sergeant assured her. "They will be very quiet in Ambalana jail. You have done the best thing for yourself as well as for your friends in telling me this. I will make the arrests."

"There was another witness, if you could find him," said Ponamma, who having embarked upon the adventure was disposed to no halfway measures. "He stood out in the road staring for a moment, and then Lokuhamy the bread-man saw him and chased him away with a knife. The light was on his face, and I think it was Kader Meera, the peddler from Galatenna. I cannot be sure of it, but you might try him."

"I will," said the sergeant, "but I think you are mistaken. I met Kader Meera on my way here, going down to buy some cattle at Kalavila, and had a few minutes' talk with him. I told him my business, and he was surprised—it seemed to be the first he had heard of it. If he had been an eye-witness, I think he would have told me."

"He might, and again he might not. Try him, at least—for I tell you I am not easy in my mind with some of those men safe, as you say, in Ambalana jail and others going about as they choose. You have the names?"

The sergeant read them from his note-book. Ponamma sighed.

"Dingiri Banda's son must have been there, but I did not see him. I suppose you could not arrest him on the chance, could you?"

"I am afraid not, mother," said the sergeant gravely. "Perhaps Kader Meera can speak for him. I will try."

Kader Meera, however, was not to be found at Galatenna, and the sergeant had to content him-

self with the arrest of the five she had named. They were not hard to find, for not expecting to be identified they had made no effort at concealment, indeed had gone somewhat ostentatiously about their customary business. Only Lokuhamy had thought that Nila might know him and so had gone to the trouble of preparing an alibi. The others had no idea that she had ever seen their faces, and had not thought of Ponamma.

"There is nothing to worry about, father," Kiribanda whispered, as Dingiri Banda was taken into custody. "I will see to it that the old woman is so frightened that she will take back every word."

"Yes, you will do great things," the father grumbled. "You will get yourself hanged and me, too. Let a bad business alone, if you have any brains. A jail is poor lodging, but it is better than a grave."

This prudent counsel, however, fell on unwilling ears. Much better received was the advice that Tuan Noor gave when Kiribanda came secretly that night to his house in Ambalana.

"Burn the crone's hut over her head," the Malay said, "and contrive to let her know that if she does not take back every word, the next blow will fall on her husband, and the following one on herself. Of course, you must not let her be sure enough of you to denounce you—only suspect enough to fear."

"That will be rather hard," Kiribanda demurred.

"But not for a clever fellow like you," said the Malay admiringly.

The young cultivator swaggered a little.

"Yes, I know my way about. But you are clever, too," he conceded. "That was a good idea of yours, to take all the stuff to your house. The first thing the police sergeant did—may all the devils give him their special attention!—was to search our place high and low. If we had had a bit of jewelry or a piece of money, he would have found it. You have it all safe?"

"Absolutely safe." Tuan Noor smiled. "Not here. It is well hidden in a place that nobody but myself can find. We will divide it when all this has blown over—as of course it will, once you succeed in upsetting Ponamma's evidence."

"There was a man passed in the road, but Lokuhamy chased him away, and I think he was frightened enough to keep his mouth shut. He is a poor rabbit of a thing, I know him. By the way, you were out there—why did you let him stand gaping in at us?"

"Would you have had me let go of the coolie boy and send him running to alarm the village?"

"You could have given him one good blow on the head instead of holding him by the throat all the time. That would have left you free to help us."

"Your father did not want any killing, you remember? And I am unfortunately strong. It is difficult to hit a man on the head just hard enough and not too hard. But I noticed the manner of

your friend in the road, and I think we are in no danger from him—especially if Ponamma's house should happen to burn down within a day or two."

"The money-lender will be coming back from Kandy to-morrow," Kiribanda said as he took his leave. "I would give a rupee—now that I am a rich man!—to see his face when he finds the little surprise we have prepared for him."

The surprise was pitifully complete. The superintendent of police found him at the advocate's house in Kandy, and asked his questions in so casual a manner that Motu Rayen did not suspect calamity until the superintendent offered to take him and Keshavan back to the village in his car.

"Why do you go, Dorai?" he asked, hardly knowing that he spoke. "Has anything happened?"

The superintendent looked at him earnestly.

"It is better to tell you," he said. "Your house has been robbed while you were away."

"My wife? My wife and my child?"

"The child was not hurt at all, and your wife not seriously. She is in the hospital, well cared for. You shall see her there. We will stop on our way to the village."

Motu Rayen thanked the superintendent and after that said nothing, all the long miles of hill road to Maradeniya. It was not a tense silence of clenched hands and twitching muscles; the habit of self-control is as strong as the habit of self-indulgence. He sat perfectly quiet, looking

straight before him. The Englishman, glancing sidewise at that mask of calmness, was the one who was nervous. His hands gripped the steering-wheel till they ached. Could one ever really see into the minds of these Orientals, he wondered—ever know how they would take things? Motu Rayen was doing exactly as he himself would have done under similar circumstances, but that was something he had still to understand.

At the hospital, Motu Rayen could not speak with Nila, only look at the restless, bandaged figure from a distance, and briefly caress the child who wriggled from his arms, eager to get back to the novelty of the kind nurses' pettings. That—as little things can be—was the last disheartening touch. It was a broken and discouraged man who was left alone in his empty house, when the long questionings and formalities were ended for the day. The hour was late; dusk closed around him as he sat in a corner by the door of the kitchen, his forehead on his folded arms. He was tired, body and spirit—so tired that he wondered how he could go on. It must mean beginning afresh in a new place; he knew the Sinhalese villager too well to cheat himself with hopes of recovering his lost property or of the possibility of continuing in Maradeniya. His solace hitherto had been the thought of what he could do for his wife and child, the comforts he could give to them. That was gone at a stroke. He had nothing to give them now but poverty.

And he could not tear off the weight of life and fling it away. He could not even pray to the gods for death, since the long agony of Hindu widowhood would be for Nila even worse than his crippled penury. He had taken her youth and her loveliness and her kindness—for this!

“Are you here, Motu Rayen?”

It was Keshavan’s voice. The old neighbor was standing in the doorway, dark against the lamp-light that streamed from the little house across the way. It seemed to Motu Rayen that the one impossible thing would be to answer, to accept their hospitality, their sympathy, to wear a hopeful face and speak bravely of to-morrow. If only he could be left alone with his misery one night!

He held his breath as Keshavan called again and took a hesitating step forward into the shadows of the room. Then, all at once, there came a crash, and a piercing scream from Ponamma.

“This is the reward of lying witnesses!” a harsh voice shouted. Across the road a man with his face masked by a handkerchief was in the act of hurling through the window a large stone—evidently the second, for one lamp was already a pool of blazing oil on the floor, where Ponamma ran about desperately trying to rescue some of her household goods. Even as they watched, the remaining lamp was shattered, and the old woman in loud terror rushed into the street.

Keshavan ran straight to her as Motu Rayen, stiff from long crouching on the floor, was strug-

gling to his feet. The flimsy little house flamed up like a heap of dry leaves, and the glare lighted the money-lender's room. There was a rustle of swift stealthy feet and the masked man stole in by the kitchen door, breathing hard. He craned forward, laughing exultantly to himself, and wagging his head with complacent self-satisfaction as he looked across at the blazing house and the distracted old couple—then, all at once, he saw Motu Rayen.

He stood for a moment a ludicrous figure of dismayed incredulity, then his presence of mind returned. One blow sent the lame man to the floor, but did not clear the incendiary's way of escape as he had expected. The thin hands closed indomitably about the sturdy bare ankles of the marauder and brought him down with a crash. Over Ponamma's shrill laments rose Motu Rayen's call for the police.

"Let me go, you fool! It will be the worse for you!" the man muttered, writhing in vain efforts to get at his captor.

Motu Rayen wasted no strength in words after that first cry. He held on with all his weak muscles and strong will. There was a running of shod feet on the road outside, and Hamilton's voice calling his name. He answered with a supreme effort as his prisoner at last got a grip of his throat.

The hands were strong, but stronger hands tore them away. There were lights in the room. Constables guarded the prisoner, and Hamilton

bent anxiously over Motu Rayen, as he helped him to his feet.

"You saved my life, Dorai," said the Tamil.

Hamilton patted the bent shoulder with clumsy tenderness. "Even so, we are not quits yet," he returned. "Good luck for all of us that Canning Dorai and I were coming down to take you to his place for the night when we saw the fire, and ran. If we had been a few minutes later—well, we won't think of that. Who is this man, Motu Rayen? Do you know him?"

Motu Rayen looked at the sullen face from which the mask had been stripped.

"Kiribanda, son of Dingiri Banda."

"Another relation of our district court friend?" Hamilton asked in English, and Canning answered with a nod. Hamilton whistled.

"Your man was right, it would seem. Pity that the tools must be punished and the master-hand go free. Any hope of implicating Punchirala?"

"Not much. Still"—Canning shrugged his shoulders philosophically—"there's always the chance of the cleverest rascal making some kind of a false step. The chance, but not much hope in this case."

"Damn!" Hamilton looked around the desolate room. "It's a cruel business. There's not even a chance of the money, I suppose?"

"They are searching, of course, but—knowing the people, I'd say, not a chance."

"And so all that can be done is to jail the poor simpletons who did the dirty work, and add one

more to the million village grudges. Good Lord, what a world!"

"Well," Canning remarked mildly, "I can't say I feel any great compassion for this young man, considering the little job he has just put through."

He motioned toward the burned house across the way. It was a shapeless heap of embers now, before which Ponamma was still wailing in a vigorous abandon of grief which promised to keep up while one coal was left to smoulder. A knot of villagers had gathered in gloomy silence, and the red glow lighted their worried faces. Suddenly Ponamma's mourning stopped abruptly on a particularly high-pitched howl, and she darted at the group of bystanders.

"Kader Meera! Kader Meera!" she vociferated. "Kader Meera, the police are here! Tell them what you saw."

The silence broke up in cackles and cries of astonishment as a young man, indicated by Ponamma's imperative finger, came forward reluctantly.

"They were robbing the money-lender's house," he admitted grudgingly.

"They? Who were they? Tell the names."

The young peddler took a scared hasty look at Hamilton's tall figure—a khaki riding-suit is not so very different from a uniform in the light of a dying fire, and the Englishman's tone was that of one accustomed to obedience.

"Lokuhamy the bread-man—he chased me with a knife—Dingiri Banda and his son, Ukkubanda, Medduma."

"Wiejesinghe Medduma?" The little *arachi* had come bustling up, and now prepared to take notes.

"No, Narangedara Medduma, of course—Punchirala's brother you know, the sawyer. Ukkubanda."

"You said Ukkubanda once—was there another?"

"No, I meant Loku Banda. Appuhamy. Sing-happu. That is all."

"Eight." Hamilton turned to Motu Rayen. "Your wife said that there were eight men in the room."

"One was outside, holding the coolie boy," Canning put in. He turned to Kader Meera. "Did you see anyone outside?"

The peddler shook his head.

"No, I was looking in where the lights were. Then Lokuhamy came at me with a knife, and I ran."

"How far did he chase you?" the *arachi* demanded importantly.

"How do I know?" Kader Meera retorted. "I did not stop to look around at him—I kept on running."

"Very wise conduct," said Hamilton, suppressing a smile. "Have you the notes of all this, *arachi*?"

The *arachi*, after a moment of feverish scribbling, answered in the affirmative.

"As far as to-night's business is concerned," Hamilton went on, "any time the police want my evidence they know where to find me."

"What?" Kader Meera stared at him with aggrieved astonishment. "You are not the Superintendent, then?"

"It is Hamilton Dorai from Medawatta," Ponamma informed him, "and he knows as much as any policeman, let me tell you."

"All the same, I wouldn't have talked if I had known," the peddler grumbled. "A man of many words is a man of many troubles, especially if he speaks the words in a law-court. It can't be helped now, though. What I told was the truth, and the sooner you catch them the better for all honest people."

"Do you all come with me to-night," said Canning, his kind look including Ponamma and Keshavan with Motu Rayen. "I have shelter for three as well as one."

Ponamma saluted him reverently.

"One moment, Presence! One little moment. There is a thing that I must do." She lifted her hands in solemn malediction.

"The curse of Siva Creator and Destroyer upon the creator of this destruction. Fire to the heart that sent this fire, ruin to the mind that planned this ruin! May the blood in his veins turn to flame, the wealth in his hands to ashes, and let his name go barren to forgetfulness like

smoke upon the wind! Lord of Life and Death, hear me!"

"That is as complete a curse as I ever heard, in all but one thing." Canning looked at her curiously, then put a sudden question. "Why did you not name Kiribanda? You knew he set the fire. Why did you say only 'the creator of this destruction'?"

"I told you——" Hamilton begun, but Canning stopped him.

"Let her tell me. One never knows."

"Why should I curse Kiribanda? The law will punish him, the good English law." Ponamma was refreshed and comforted almost to jauntiness by her anathema. "No, he set the fire, but he was set himself to do it. Poor lout that he is, he never had the idea. There is one working behind all this, and it is that hidden one whom I would curse."

"Then you do not think that we know the name of the hidden one?" Hamilton asked. "A name has been spoken."

Ponamma nodded shrewdly.

"And I think it is the right name, Dorai, but I would take no chances with a curse like that. If I cannot be sure, sure beyond a doubt, it is better to leave the delivery of it to the gods, who cannot be deceived."

"A good idea, yes?" Canning lifted his brows quizzically at Hamilton. "The law has its mistakes, you see—but there is no blinding the gods."

"You have much faith," his friend remarked dryly.

"Do you suppose," Canning pursued his whimsical humor, "that she has any formula that will bring back the stolen goods?"

"*He* needn't worry about that," said Hamilton curtly, in English, with an imperceptible nod toward Motu Rayen.

"But he will," Canning returned with even greater brevity. Turning to Ponamma, he spoke again in Tamil. "Can you curse the stolen money so that it will be too hot for the hands of the thieves?"


Ponamma shook her head in vigorous dissent.

"That would never do. If by some miracle it should come back, the curse would still be on it."

"Whether it comes back or not—we may as well face the probability that it never will"—Hamilton drew Motu Rayen a little away from the others as they walked on, and spoke confidentially, "you need not be anxious. We will speak of that later. Only remember—whatever happens, you must not be anxious about money. While I have anything, you shall not want. Did that rascal hurt you?"

"On the contrary, Dorai. He did me good." Motu Rayen smiled. "I was discouraged and mean-spirited, and he showed me that I am still a man, after all."

"You are a man right enough—never doubt that. As to the discouragement—that was what we spoke about a moment ago, was it not? Your



wife I know is doing well; they told me so at the hospital to-day."

"You went yourself to ask? Dorai, that was kind."

"Kind—nonsense! Of course I went. What else could I do?"

"Of course you could do nothing else, Dorai."

"That's all right." Hamilton spoke with the quick brusqueness with which an Englishman disclaims the charge of magnanimity. "And you shall be all right in any case."

"Yes. I understand, Dorai. When I need money from you, I will ask."

"That's right."

Hamilton was content—more content than he would have been had he read Motu Rayen's thoughts.

"Kind heart—he thinks I do not know that he is troubled about money—that he borrowed for the last new machine. He thinks only of my needs—and I was losing courage! I am ashamed that I thought only of my very own. I will care for them, and little by little I will pay back what he has done for me. There must be some way."

"Look," whispered Ponamma to Keshavan. "One would think Motu Rayen would be half dead—and I never saw him walk so straight."

CHAPTER XIV

SOME DAY, PERHAPS

THE OPAL, plaiting mats of gayly-colored rushes in her garden, saw Tuan Noor go to the tea boutique. She smiled maliciously. He had become the most regular of customers. If there were few beside himself, he would drink his tea, chat a while with Manikrala, and go away—perhaps with a long look toward the garden where she might or might or not be, perhaps with a glance that would escape eyes less keen in such matters than hers. If there should be a crowd in the shop, he would soon come down the road beside the garden, to lean for a moment on the wall of the compound and speak of meaningless things in a voice that gave meaning to the most commonplace phrases—a meaning that she of all others could understand. To-day the boutique was closed—Manikrala had business in the town. It was only a moment before the Malay came down the road to the entrance of the garden with no pretense of casual passing.

He sat down on the ground near her. She looked at him steadily between provocative, half-closed lids, and as she let her gaze fall again to her busy fingers, she felt his desire beating on her like a hot wind.

"Dark Rose," he said abruptly, "how long is this to last?"

She laughed—a low measured laugh of deliberate insolence.

"You know best," she said, "how long it will be before you grow tired of it."

"Do not think you can play that game with me," he retorted. "I am tired of waiting now—tired! Allah, what a word for the flame that is in my bones! I asked you a plain question here, the first time I came, and you did not answer; you only mocked. Give me a plain answer now, for I am dealing in something heavier than words. What is your price?"

"You talk like a rich man." Her idle tone suggested that his pretensions were not worth a sneer.

He drew from his breast a knotted handkerchief. Untying it with fingers that were not quite steady, he poured a little shower of sovereigns into her lap. She did not show her surprise—only counted the coins into her palm and weighed the golden handful critically.

"Twenty. Quite a fortune it would have seemed to me once. Now"—with a quick gesture she threw the sovereigns back into the crumpled handkerchief and resumed her work—"now that would not buy one kiss for you. Is that a plain enough answer?"

"You were not always such a hard merchant," he said after a moment's pause. "Is this because——"

"Because I was once fool enough to give away what I sell now?" She laughed with a light irony that made him wince. "You think I am bringing in a bill for the past? No, no—it is too dead for that. Your money is like any other man's." She saw his throat move convulsively, and smiled, her fine even teeth catching her lip.

He forced himself to quietness and looked about him appraisingly.

"This is not a king's palace, nor even a rich man's house."

"Fools judge a fruit by the rind. He is rich. Richer than I know or than you can guess."

"So he plays the miser with you! I would give you everything—you need not smile like that! By Allah, that is no empty boast. I have—when I dare use it—what would make him seem poor, and it should be yours, every rupee."

She shook her head at him.

"Still using the cup of dreams, I see. You must be careful. It is a rather a dangerous symptom when one forgets that he is only dreaming."

He drew nearer.

"You mock me," he said. "And while you mock me, I love you. I love you. Come to me. What are you doing here, with this old man? Tiger should mate with tiger, flame should melt into flame. Come to me."

She laughed.

"Laugh, devil-goddess," he whispered, his eyes dilating and darkening. "Yes, laugh. I love your laughter. It drives me mad—a glorious

madness, a madness that is better than peace. Laugh at me always—but sometime you shall laugh in my arms and my mouth shall crush the laughter into silence. When, Rose of the Night? When?”

He leaned toward her, and the heavy grip of his feverish hand stopped her work.

“When you make it worth my while to change,” she said coldly. “I am very comfortable here.”

“Allah! what are you?” he cried. “Are you a woman?”

“Men say I am.”

“You were once, I know. Do you remember one night in Kandy, and a boy and girl together in the shadow of the trees?”

“You are still a boy, but I am not a girl now,” she said without bitterness.

“We would be boy and girl again in each other’s arms!”

“I do not think it,” she answered musingly. “When you held me in your arms that night, I could hear your heart beating. It drowned all the drums and cymbals of the feast. That was the first time I ever had heard a man’s heart beat. Now I know the sound well, and it is always the same. It is strange, whether he is kind or cruel, young or old, whether it is the love men die for or the sport of a night, the sound is always the same. It is strange.”

Involuntarily he released her hand and drew back. She looked at him. The cool, detached speculation of her eyes kindled to vivid mischief.

"How funny you are! You have had many women, and yet——"

"It is not the other men," he interrupted her. "When you are mine, I will laugh at them with you. It is the way you speak of them."

"I speak as I am," she said.

"When you are my woman, then, I will have kisses instead of words."

She narrowed her eyes at him, and his blood leaped in anticipation of the mockery he knew was coming. Then, all at once, her eyes widened, and their expression changed to one that he did not know and could not understand. He turned and saw coming toward them the tall thin figure of Manikrala.

With a swift turn of the wrist Tuan Noor caught up and concealed all but one of the sovereigns, as he rose with an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Here is the Teacher himself—that is good. I came to get this gold piece changed and thought perhaps when you were gone that your wife might be left in charge of your small money."

Manikrala took the sovereign and examined it closely.

"I can change it for you," he added. "Part of a necklace, was it not?"

The Opal saw Tuan Noor's hands, clasped loosely behind him, stiffen to a tense grip.

"A necklace?" he repeated. "I do not know. Very likely. Why?"

"It has been something more than a coin," said

Manikrala, holding it out. "Feel, this little rough piece of gold where it was broken away from the ornament."

"Surely." Tuan Noor looked candidly into the older man's face as he ran a finger around the edge of the coin. "I had not noticed that. A man who owed me five rupees for binkhomba brought me this and I gave him the change. Then I found I had left myself short, so I came to you."

"I am glad I came back in time to spare you a disappointment." The shop-keeper's steady eyes met the young Malay's with their usual deep inscrutable quiet. "My wife knows nothing of my business, as you had doubtless discovered already. Now if you will come to the shop with me, your affair can be attended to in a moment."

The Opal looked after them and shrugged her shoulders.

"Part of a necklace!" she thought. "Well, why not? He is very handsome, and if some poor fool of a rich woman is giving him her treasures—she is not the first!" She laid down her rush-plaiting, and sat with elbow on knee and her chin in her palm, her brooding eyes fixed on the distance.

She did not start when she felt Manikrala's hand rest quietly on her head, though she had not heard his approach. She drew the hand down and pressed it to her cheek for a moment before she looked up at him with a smile.

"Long thoughts?" he asked, sitting down beside her.

"Very long. All down the strange road that ends here."

"So this is the road's end?"

Once more she laid her cheek against his hand.

"Here I rest."

"And how you need rest, poor tired child!"

"That was what you called me the first day—the day you saw me in Naithumba's house. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"You called me the Opal, too, that day, and Naithumba liked the name because he said the Opal was a gay jewel with a new mood for every changing light. Was that what you meant? You would not say, then. You only nodded—and I wondered."

"I meant that, partly. I think I meant more that the Opal was a brave jewel with a broken heart where tears were hidden."

"Why have you never told me that?" she asked after a little silence.

"Would you have understood?"

"No."

"A broken heart," he said gently, "does not realize that it is broken. When it does, healing has begun."

"Always there must be—scars." Her voice was so low that he had to stoop to hear.

"Look, child." He lifted her hand, on which a large opal glowed with strange darting fires. "Look, dear. What makes the beauty of this stone? The scars."

“How?”

“Each of those bright places marks a crack filled with water. It is as I told you—the stone is like a heart broken again and again, full of unshed tears. If it were a ruby or a sapphire, it would be ugly, worthless, a ruined thing—but it is an opal, and its flaws make its beauty.”

“I have never known a man like you,” she said. “You give so much and ask nothing. I wish there were something that I could give you, for your goodness—but you want nothing. You have everything in your own great heart. Has it always been so with you, all your life? Have you never wanted anything for yourself?”

She could have counted Tuan Noor’s wildest pulses with amused accuracy, but she did not feel the hand under her cheek grow tense nor notice the moment’s pause before the quiet voice answered.

“There is great happiness in giving. You have had too much asked of you, poor child, to know that. It is the right of a heart to give without demand, freely—some day, perhaps, that will come for you. Then you will know.”

“You understand me, through and through,” she went on. “There has never been a time when I felt that you did not understand me. But I cannot always understand you.”

“Some day, perhaps, you will.”

“I have wondered,” she went on, slipping the opal ring from her hand and trying the effect of it on the tips of his fingers one after another, “I

have wondered why always, from the first, I knew, even without understanding, that you were different. I was tired of Naithumba when you came. I liked him, and I was thankful to him for teaching me the comfort of the cup of dreams, but I was almost ready to leave him. When he kissed me, I would turn my face away, and his loving had begun to make me impatient. When it is so, and a new face comes to the door a woman like me wonders, Shall I go to him? But when I saw you I had no such thought. I wanted to look and look at you till my eyes were full of you, but I never wanted you to touch me as a lover. I did not want to go to you, but I stayed with Naithumba through his sickness and cared for him till he died, because he was your friend."

"But you came to me at last," he said slowly.

"See—I said I could not always understand you! I had tried to forget you. I do not know why I tried so hard to forget you! Then you came, just as I had spent the last of the money Naithumba left me, the very day, as if you had known—and you said your house was open to me. I did not know what you meant. I thought I knew. I thought——"

"I know what you thought, poor child. I saw it in your eyes."

"I wonder what you saw. I could not myself have told what I felt. I was glad to come if you wanted me, but I was sorry that you should want such things; it seemed that all at once I had lost something beautiful, something more precious

than anything I had ever known, and the heart in me cried and cried and would not be comforted—and yet—and yet—I tell you I do not know what I felt.”

“I know what I saw,” he said.

She pressed his hand closer in both her own.

“And I came to your house, ready to be with you as I had been with the others, and you—you said, ‘This is your room, my child.’ Do you remember?”

“Yes.” He released his hand to put the opal ring back on her finger.

“That night,” she added, “I knelt with my forehead on the ground toward the wall beyond which I heard you walking—I who have no God.”

He drew a sharp breath.

“I am only a man. Do not make a god of me.”

“I must.” She looked up at him with a wistful smile. “I am not good enough to think of you as a man. If I could, I would do as my brother did to me, the last time I saw him. It is the way our people show their best love—like this.”

She lifted her hand, touched his eyes, and brought the fingers back almost to her lips.

“No.” She let her hand fall with a gesture of discouragement. “No, I cannot. It soils you. I have kissed so many—not like that, never like that, but when I try to go back to the old beautiful way, I remember. No. I must worship you. That is good—one is so lonely without a god.”

“Some day, perhaps, you will give me that greeting of your people—a Tamil custom, is it

not?" As she shrank, with an inarticulate sound of protest, he added quickly, "Why should I not know so much, little one? Your brother—is he living?"

"How do I know? I have heard nothing of him for ten years. I can see him now—tall as you are, strong and handsome as Rama himself. If he is alive to-day, he will be prosperous and happy, with a wife and children. He would make a woman very happy. He was like you. I forgot him when I said I had known no other." She bowed her head and her voice broke suddenly.

"When you said to that man 'my wife' it hurt me. You are a man, not a god. You should have a wife in your house instead of—me. Shall I go, Teacher? Will you say 'Some day, perhaps' to that?"

Her face quivered like a wind-troubled pool. His was set in its quietness as he answered.

"Some day, perhaps, God will show us both a new world of happiness beyond our present dreams. But as for your going"—he smiled now, his kind, familiar smile—"if you do not go as far as the kitchen, and that quickly, we shall have no supper."

"It shall not even be late!" she declared.

"Nor under-cooked?" He pretended solicitude. He knew how absurdly proud she was of her housekeeping.

"Nor under-cooked!" She flashed into the house, laughing. It was a laugh that Tuan Noor had never heard.

Childlike, she dropped her work in her impulsive flight and it lay forgotten. Manikrala stooped and picked up the scattered rushes and the unfinished mat. He stood motionless, looking at the rainbow handful with none of a god's aloofness in his eyes. And when he carried it into the house, it was with an odd tenderness, as if it were alive.

CHAPTER XV

MISFORTUNES OF A PRUDENT MAN

MUDIYANSE of Kalavila might have been a stupid man from the Opal's point of view, but where money was involved he was shrewd enough. As the net of the law gathered in one after another of the high spirits, who had so doughtily undertaken to teach the usurer a lesson for the good of the community, Mudiyanse chuckled, congratulating himself on his prudence in having kept clear of that affair. Still, he did not forget that they had obtained the money and the jewelry, obtained and kept it. No search, however minute, had availed to find one rupee of the plunder. The cautious Mudiyanse, in the midst of his chuckle, sighed at the thought of all that good money lying idle somewhere while a pack of hotheads who did not know how to cover their trail went to prison and served their term. Prison it would be, he was sure, though lawyers had been retained to defend them at the August assizes in Kandy, where the case would go for trial. The English court had an uncomfortable way of upsetting the most cleverly manufactured alibi, and seeing through the most carefully primed false witness, even when the latter had been well paid in advance with the promise of more. Yes—the balance of his thought

took another swing as he saw the Ratamahatmaya coming down the street; Mudiyanse was in Ambalana for a day's business. Yes, he had chosen wisely. That white figure with its gleams of gold would bring terror to a guilty man—for the Kandyan Chief has kept his prestige among his own people as he has kept the sumptuous dress of the old days. Had he fallen in with the mad humor of his kinsfolk, Mudiyanse would turn up a side-street now, eager to efface himself. Instead, aggressively conscious of integrity, he obtruded himself upon the Ratamahatmaya's notice with obsequious salutations and swaggered a little as they were acknowledged. The official's keen eyes dwelt thoughtfully on Mudiyanse in a way that would have made a less spotless conscience fidgety. Mudiyanse felt injured. Surely all the kindred of Punchirala would not be under suspicion because misfortune had fallen on a few! That would not be just. He felt that he must take every opportunity to deny the guilt of his kinsfolk and vehemently to deplore all such lawlessness as that of which they stood accused. He did so to various semi-official acquaintances who would be sure, he thought, to report the propriety of his sentiments to the Ratamahatmaya, and when he was ready to return to Kalavila, he felt confident that he had made a marked impression. As he set out on his journey, he stopped at the crossroads boutique to fortify himself with tea. There was only one customer in the shop when he arrived—a young Malay, evidently a regular patron of the

establishment, lingering over his empty cup to chat with Manikrala. As Mudiyanse sat down, the other rose and took out his purse.

"No more sovereigns to-day, I hope," said Manikrala, smiling, "I am short of change myself."

The Malay laughed, with a quick sidelong glance toward Mudiyanse.

"No fear," he returned. "If he was turning his wife's jewelry into cash, as you thought, he has brought no more of it to me. Good day to you, Teacher."

"Good day to you, Tuan Noor."

"A brisk young fellow that," observed Mudiyanse. "Tuan Noor, you said his name was? I know that name, but he is a stranger to me. What is his trade?"

"He gathers binkhomba. He lives here in the town."

Mudiyanse pondered a little longer, then shook his head.

"No, it means nothing to me. I shall remember presently where I heard the name. A little thing, but annoying, to forget." He sipped his tea, found it much to his taste, and all at once it occurred to him that here was another good opportunity to put his law-abiding sentiments on record.

"My name is Mudiyanse, of Kalavila," he went on. "Narangedara Mudiyanse. Narangedara has always been a respectable name, but it means trouble now."

Manikrala made the polite sound of interrogation that was expected of him, and Mudiyanse warmed to his subject.

"It is a terrible thing when spite comes to a little village—a terrible thing. Just because there was trouble between my cousin and a rascally money-lender, here is a whole family brought into disrepute, and some of its finest members falsely accused, shut up in jail—yes, it is terrible."

"You mean the Maradeniya robbery? I did not remember for the moment the name of the family involved in that. It is hard, I agree."

"If they had done it—which of course they did not—I would feel worse, for to a man like me there is nothing so distressing as violence and lawlessness. But as it is, there they are, imprisoned, their innocent families suffering, and the whole connection suspected or at best looked on askance. It is a cruel world."

"It is not a gentle world at all events. The money-lender is suffering, too, and the old people whose house was burned. One of your family was taken in that act, I heard."

"Er—yes. I believe so. A young fool, out of his head to think of his old father being arrested on the word of a false witness. He should hardly be held responsible for his actions, but I would be the last to defend a breach of the law, however natural it might be. As for the money-lender, how is he suffering? He will recover his money—if it was ever stolen."

"How?" Manikrala ignored the last innuendo.

"Your innocent relatives are in jail. That leaves the real robbers at liberty, and by this time they may be—wherever they choose."

"True." Mudiyanse was abruptly deflated and not a little annoyed. "That is true, of course. I had not thought of that. Do you really believe that everything was taken?"

"I hear only gossip," Manikrala answered. "According to that, the poor man is left absolutely penniless. His wife is still at the hospital here, so he has come down to keep the boutique at the Medawatta estate till the regular man returns from a journey to India. Hand to mouth, no more. They say Hamilton Dorai is well disposed toward him. But even if he were to be started again at Maradeniya, you know better than I what kindness he would meet there. Well, he must make his own way, as we all do. The wheel of life is just, but, as I said, it is not a gentle world."

Mudiyanse paid for his tea and went along the road to Kalavila. As he went, his thoughts returned to Motu Rayen's money, lying idle—returned yearningly, for Mudiyanse himself had great need of money just now. A certain field which he had long coveted, possession of which would treble the value of his own property, was to be bought for an absurdly small figure if a man could pay cash. It seemed ridiculous, intolerable, that the fruit of his kinsfolk's industry and enterprise should be going to waste.

A sudden thought brought him to a chilly stand-

still. Perhaps it was not going to waste. The testimony in the police court, which he had sedulously followed, pointed to nine robbers at least. Eight of his own kindred were in Ambalana jail.

Mudiyanse trudged on, wiping his forehead. That ninth man outside with the coolie boy, the man whom nobody had seen! Had he decamped with all the loot? It was a thought to turn an honest man's bones to water. He wrung his hands as he went, trying to think who it could be. If he had only let them give him more of their confidence! He reproached himself fiercely for his lack of family feeling. He should have been more sympathetic, should have taken an interest in their enterprise even if he did not feel that he could share it.

On the outskirts of Kalavila he passed the house of Lokuhamy the bread-seller, and was halted by the sight of Lokuhamy's wife disconsolately pounding paddy in the corner of the verandah. Late sympathy, thought Mudiyanse, was better than none. Possibly he might learn something from the poor woman—Lokuhamy always was free with his tongue and foolishly open with his women-folk. Lokuhamy's wife, faded but conscious of past prettiness, brightened perceptibly at the visit, though she sustained a degree of dramatic anguish which seemed required by the situation.

"Lokuhamy told me not to worry, that he had a good alibi," she confided, Mudiyanse being one of the family, "but you know as well as anyone that

alibis are not what they used to be. These lawyers—may their spirits never reach peace!—no longer take a respectable man's word. They must fuss and pry and prove—it would take a hundred witnesses to satisfy them where two used to suffice—and with the bargaining that goes on now where formerly it was almost a matter of simple friendship—oh, it is hard for the poor!”

“Yes,” Mudiyanse agreed feelingly. “It is indeed hard for the poor.”

“Not that you can really understand it, a man of substance like you—but for the poor like us, it is death, such a time as this. I always say it is trouble that shows your true friends. Lokuhamy was always running about with a lot of young men, and have any of them stood by him? Have any of them come to see whether I was in need or not? No. There was one—a handsome rascal he was with eyes, and a tongue in his head—I made sure he would be among the first to come, at least to say how sorry he was—for though he has not been here often, when he did stop it was always Lokuhamy's cleverness and Lokuhamy's good judgment—and as for Punchirala, you would have thought they were brothers, or associate husbands, or something intimate like that, the way he went on. Well, here it is nearly four months my poor husband has been in jail and not a sign of Master Tuan Noor or any of the rest of his fine companions. I used to tell Lokuhamy it's all very well——”

"Tuan Noor? Do you mean an herb gatherer in Ambalana?"

"That's the man I mean. Lokuhamy even went down there to his house once or twice. He was very mysterious about it. I would have thought perhaps the young fellow might be borrowing money of him, only I know he had none to lend. He said it was some business they were going into together that would make us rich, but you see what kind of prosperity has come! Well, as I say, it's trouble like this that shows you who your friends are. Here you come to comfort me, kind soul that you are, and find me sorely in need of comfort—hardly a penny in the house."

She began to cry, but Mudiyanse did not rise to the occasion. With a few hasty commonplaces of consolation he took his leave, and went on to his own house. His family found him silent that night, much disposed to meditation.

His visit to Lokuhamy's wife seemed to have stimulated him to a stronger realization of the claims of blood, for at his next leisure he announced that he was going to pay a visit to the families of his imprisoned relatives. He returned tired and out of temper, but as he thought over the matter in the cool of the evening, his humor mended. After all, there was enough to justify his proceeding along the line of his suspicions with Tuan Noor. The herb gatherer had had mysterious dealings with Lokuhamy—he had been passing money taken from a woman's ornaments

—aha! The circumstances were compromising enough to justify a cautious man in levying a little blackmail—how much would depend upon the way the situation developed. Though the Malay were guiltless, he might be willing to pay something to avoid the necessity of proving it.

Even the opportunity for an inconspicuous return to Ambalana stood ready. It might have attracted unwelcome attention had he gone back within a few days, having no obvious motive for the journey, but the next week would bring Wesak, the birthday of the Buddha. It was equally natural and pious that he should make the pilgrimage to the Temple of the Tooth—and the road to Kandy led through Ambalana. It was a pleasant road, for May came in with as smiling a countenance as the pilgrims wore who streamed along the palm-shaded miles toward the city by the lake. Each village along the way had its pavilion roofed with talipot and garlanded with graceful sprays of king-palm, where food was provided for the pilgrims by the devout rich. It was a time of pleasant gayety, and in the city itself the rivalry was keen as to whose house should be the most elaborately decorated. Little lamps starred the warm fragrant night like glow-worms, illuminated pictures rehearsed the Saint's Progress of the Bodhisat. Mudiyanse stopped before one picture that showed the temptation of Prince Siddartha, and stared at the figure of Mara. The artist had not chosen to embody the lust of the world in an over-exuberance of seduc-

tion, as the others of his craft. This was a slim young girl with a lure that was rather to be felt than seen, an appeal that was the more dangerous because it was to the imagination as well as to the senses. Mudiyanse frowned as he stared, because the picture brought back memories of another Wesak, years ago, and what had come of it.

"The little baggage! And I picked her out of the gutter!" he muttered angrily as he stamped away down the street. The wound to a mean man's vanity never heals clean.

As he came down Trincomalee Street, still muttering, he found himself caught in a crowd surrounding the large cart, brilliantly decorated and illuminated, on which sat a circle of small boys in the dress of noble maidens, shrilly singing the hymns appropriate to the festival, and enlivening their hallowed labors by nudgings and squabbles among themselves that threatened at times to upset the solemnity of the pageant. The light from the car struck into vivid relief the intent, upturned faces of the crowd. Mudiyanse, at some specially flagrant prank of the young choristers, laughed aloud and looked around with the instinctive longing to share the joke that comes when one is amused alone in a crowd. He saw many merry faces, some of them acquaintances, but it was a somber face that caught and held his eyes, a face he had not expected to see there.

Tuan Noor stood at a little distance. It was quite evident that his sullen mood came from his failure to meet someone whom he had expected,

for now and then his brows would lift and his stormy eyes brighten eagerly. Always, however, disappointment followed, and each time his gloom deepened. Mudiyanse, unnoticed, watched him. This meeting evidently was of great importance to him. Could it have anything to do with the robbery? Little by little the cautious man wormed his way through the crowd. It was slow work, for acquaintances spoke to him here and there, and he had to stop for a moment's talk. Before he reached his quarry, the car moved on, and the crowd around it swirled and eddied like the water in the wake of a ship. He had lost sight of the handsome tragic face under the Malay cap, and search as he might he could not find it again.

Anxious not to reach Ambalana before Tuan Noor, he took every pretext for delay in the days immediately following. There was still food at the charitable booths under the drooping king-palms, and pilgrims who had come from a distance and wished to make the most of their visit, so his lingering was neither expensive nor conspicuous. In company with a group of country sightseers, Mudiyanse spent an hour or two watching the trial of a murder case, in the audience hall of the kings of Kandy, taken over in all its austere old beauty by the majesty of the English law. It was a scene full of color and interest, from the scarlet and black of the Bench and the Judge's robes to the constantly changing kaleidoscope in the back of the hall where the spectators stood. Tamil women in their richly colored

saris and clanking jewelry, Moormen in tall brimless hats of red and yellow, Afghans with astrachan caps and gold-embroidered waistcoats, Sinhalese with long hair gathered up with tortoise-shell combs that seemed to crown their mild faces with the horns of a crescent—all came and went unnoticed about Mudiyanse, who stood frowning at the prisoners in the dock. He was a man of no great imagination, but he could see how his kinsmen would look in that dock at the next Assizes. That would be in August, at the time of the Perahera.

It was very improbable that all of them would be sentenced. Lokuhamy, for instance. While it was true that alibis were not what they used to be, still this one might avail. It behooved a cautious man who wished to share the plunder but not the penalty of the crime to secure what he wanted before August—if it were still available. Tuan Noor might have come to Kandy to dispose of the treasure—nothing but money could put a man on the rack as the Malay had been that night of the festival. Mudiyanse, at the thought, broke into a gentle but chilly perspiration and left the court.

A last thorough round of the city convinced him that the man he wanted had gone, and he set out for Ambalana. By the time he reached the town he had invented a good excuse for his intended visit, so he asked boldly where he could find the herb gatherer.

The man of whom he asked the question looked

at a companion with a meaning smile as he answered, "Tuan Noor's house is in the street where the brass-worker lives, but you might *find him* at Manikrala's tea boutique—or around the garden of it."

He stressed the repetition of the questioner's words, with an evidently facetious intention. Mudiyanse did not get the point, but took it as some local joke, possibly meant to be at his expense, and went to the house. Finding it empty, he decided to try the alternative. If it had been a joke, it was founded on truth. The boutique was closed, but there was the Malay, leaning on the wall of the compound, talking to a woman who stood in the doorway of the house, her hand on the door, her back toward Mudiyanse. As he looked, she went in, closing the door after her. The young man stood with his eyes fixed where she had disappeared, his hand picking, picking at the clay of the wall.

"Humph!" thought the cautious man. "So it was Manikrala's wife who disappointed him at Wesak. Women are devils, some of them." The apparition of Mara—or of someone like her—must have flashed into his memory, because he again muttered, "The little baggage!" Then, with a half-sigh, "but what a way she had with her!"

He approached Tuan Noor with a polite greeting. It was returned in kind, but it was evident that the Malay was in no mood for civilities, and the courtesy came hard. Mudiyanse debated for

an instant the advisability of waiting for a more favorable occasion, then resolved to go on.

"I have already been to your house looking for you," he said.

"You want some binkhomba? I am afraid I cannot accommodate you. All I had is sold and it will be some time before I get more. I—I am not well."

"You do not look well. I hope you will soon be better. What is your sickness?"

"A common enough fever." The Malay's lip curled bitterly. "I have had it before—though never quite like this—and I shall not die of it. But I am not fit for work just now."

"You are a lucky man if you can afford to be idle." Mudiyanse's tone sharpened in spite of his effort to keep it casual. The scent was growing hot. "You have had a legacy, perhaps."

Tuan Noor smiled.

"Money left to me—or the payment of an old debt—or savings by own wit and thrift—it does not matter what you call it. They are all true. Well, I am sorry not to oblige you."

The honk of a motor drove them to the side of the road to let the car pass. It was Hamilton's car, bringing Nila back from the hospital. For once, there seemed no incongruity in Motu Rayen's protecting care of her, frail as his bodily strength might be. Neither she nor Motu Rayen saw the two by the road. Her eyes were closed, and as she leaned against his shoulder, all his attention centered on her.

"Allah!" Tuan Noor muttered.

"You know them, then?"

"Who does not, after all the stir? Those are the people who were robbed at Maradeniya. They say she was a pretty woman before that. It is hard to believe."

"She certainly was roughly handled, but scars grow faint with time. She is not so greatly disfigured."

"Enough. Enough. Allah! they are a good pair."

Tuan Noor laughed aloud, jarringly. Then he turned to his companion. "Well, good day to you."

"Not yet," said Mudiyanse, keeping beside him. "I will walk a little way with you."

"As you like." Tuan Noor's acceptance of the offer was not encouraging, but the cautious man ignored any lack of cordiality.

"I saw you down in Kandy, at Wesak," he ventured. "I tried to speak to you then, but lost you in the crowd."

"Were you there? Plenty of men in Kandy could have sold you binkhomba, and you can get it here from Badur the drug-seller. There is his shop, down this street."

"Wait a moment." Mudiyanse laid a detaining hand on the arm with which Tuan Noor swept an impatient gesture toward Badur's boutique as he turned away. "Wait a moment, Tuan Noor. It is more than binkhomba that I want of you."

"I do not understand. Do you mean some drug it is illegal to sell? You have come to the wrong man."

"What I mean is not a drug, and I have not come to the wrong man. I am a kinsman of Lokuhamy, the bread-man, also of Dingiri Banda and his son, and some others."

"Then you are unlucky in your relatives."

Tuan Noor took an impatient step, but Mudiyanse's hold tightened.

"No, it is my relatives who have been unfortunate."

"True enough either way. You are a little crazy, I think. This talk has lasted long enough."

"Not quite long enough, Tuan Noor. It will last till you give me Lokuhamy's share and Dingiri Banda's and Kiribanda's—for their families, of course. I am acting for them."

"Share of what?" The Malay's expression was perfect in its astonished annoyance, but there was a cold, deadly undertone in his voice that while it convinced Mudiyanse that he was on the right road led him at the same time to withdraw some steps.

"You know. You know very well."

"Assuredly you are mad. What have I to do with your pack of robbers?"

"Would you like the police to know the answer to that question?"

The pleasant dreams of the drug which was Tuan Noor's servant and his master, like other

pleasant things, must be paid for, and the coins he laid on Badur's counter were the least of the young man's payment. He had not foreseen the situation that confronted him, and the surprise shook him. He did not think that it was an empty threat, that Mudiyanse would be as anxious to keep the matter secret as he himself—the frayed cord of his self-control snapped, and with an oath he caught his tormentor by the throat.

“If the police learn anything about me, it will be that I killed you. Do you understand?”

For a moment it seemed likely that the police would indeed have cause to take cognizance of just that fact; then the insane glitter in the dark eyes dulled to bewilderment, the murderous grip relaxed. Tuan Noor stood for a moment, his hands pressed to his forehead, then went toward his own house without another glance at the unfortunate Mudiyanse who lay coughing and gasping where he had been flung. He was picked up by charitable persons, whom his blinking and congested eyes presently perceived to be the ones of whom he had asked the way.

“This begins to pass a joke,” said one. “Once before he has half killed a man just because he laughed at him for running after Manikrala's wife.”

“He is a dangerous man,” wheezed Mudiyanse, his anger growing as he rubbed his bruises. “He is a scoundrel and a criminal.”

“Come, come!” the other objected good-naturedly. “Dangerous, yes. But a dashing

young fellow like that may be a bit of a fool about women without being a criminal. Here, take a chew of betel; it will ease your throat."

"Women! who said anything about women? I was talking about money. I asked him for my share of some money, and you saw what he did."

"Go to the police, that's the thing for you to do. They will get your money for you."

"No, it's not a matter for the police," said Mudiyanse hastily. "I'll talk with him again—I'll be ready for him, now that I know the kind he is."

"You'll hit first next time? Good! You did not look as if you had so much spirit."

"No, no, I meant nothing like that. I'm a law-abiding man, I do not want to get into trouble. I'll take precautions—that was what I meant."

His hearer sputtered into sudden laughter and Mudiyanse added angrily, trying to reestablish his sorely shaken dignity, "But I will have my rights! You hear me? I will have my rights. I must have my share of that money, and I will."

"What is wrong?"

A calm voice behind them brought the little group about with a jerk and they all stood saluting the Ratamahatmaya with the speed and assiduity of mechanical toys. He looked at them with a twinkle of amusement in his keen eyes and turned the shadow of an ironic smile toward his companion. That this was Manikrala did not tend to ease the minds of those whose conversation had been interrupted.

"What is wrong?" the chief repeated. "I heard some talk of money. Tell me your grievance? Have you been robbed? Anyone can see that you have been roughly handled."

The cautious man was frightened, and tried to steer that most perilous of all courses between a lie and the truth.

"No, your Excellency—I have not as you might say been robbed. But I asked for what was due me and was beaten as you see."

"This is serious. You saw the assault?" He turned sharply to the Ambalana man, who wondered uneasily how much of their conversation had been overheard. The people of Ambalana knew that lying to the Ratemahatmaya was an unprofitable venture.

"This man came to me about an hour ago, asking the way to the house of Tuan Noor," he said. "I directed him, and the next I saw of him was when the two of them stood here talking and all at once Tuan Noor shook him by the throat and threw him in the street and went away. That is the truth, I would swear it in the Maligawa."

"Tuan Noor"—the Ratemahatmaya frowned. "I know him. He was dismissed from the constabulary for torturing prisoners but I have heard nothing against him since then. He owes you money, you say?"

"For clothes that I made him," Mudiyanse was inspired to say.

"Ah? That is interesting. Who are you? I have seen you not long ago."

"Mudiyanse, tailor, of Kalavila, your Excellency."

He would have gone on, but his voice trickled lamentably out as he met the steady quizzical eyes under the white and gold hat. He wished he had called the affair a simple quarrel. The Ratemahatmaya looked at him for a moment in silence. He had seen men go to pieces more than once under that quiet survey.

"A strangely violent way of repudiating a debt so small as that must have been," he remarked at last, suavely gentle. "What was the amount?"

Mudiyanse, far gone in collapse, mumbled that he had forgotten. The Ratemahatmaya raised his brows.

"Curious. But many things about this matter are curious. It is curious that before I spoke to you, you were talking of your share of certain moneys, not of a bill for clothes." He turned to Manikrala. "You see people who come and go. Do you know this man?"

"He took tea at my boutique not long ago, and told me then he was Mudiyanse Narangedara of Kalavila. He came in, I remember, just as Tuan Noor was leaving the shop."

The Ratemahatmaya's eyes narrowed a little at the family name, but he made no recognition of it in words, and there was no change in his pleasant even voice.

"There was no quarrel then?"

"They did not seem to know each other. Why, I remember now"—the shop-keeper turned to

Mudiyanse—"you said he was a stranger to you."

"The clothes must have been made since then," the Ratemahatmaya remarked. The mockery was evident, and Mudiyanse made a flustered and injudicious clutch at the belief which he felt he was losing.

"I did not want him to suspect that I would ask him to pay," he stammered. "He had money then, I knew from his bringing you that coin, and I was afraid he might——"

"What coin?"

Manikrala explained the circumstance.

"You have it now?"

"At my house."

The Ratemahatmaya's manner was curt and stern now.

"You, and you," he nodded to the townsmen, "will come with me now to the police station as witnesses. Manikrala, get the sovereign and meet me there. You and your wife will both be wanted as witnesses."

"I had no hand in the Maradeniya robbery! I swear it!" Mudiyanse howled. "I will be boiled in oil to prove it! This is unjust! You are suspecting me simply because of my connection with that family."

"To which I have made no allusion, nor to the Maradeniya robbery. Thank you for saving me the trouble. No, you are quite wrong, Mudiyanse. There are other reasons. Tuan Noor has no connection with your family, I believe, but he will be arrested, too."

CHAPTER XVI

UNDERSTANDING

WHEN Motu Rayen first brought his wife from the hospital to the little house Hamilton had provided for them, she made a feeble effort to take her accustomed place and responsibility. Later she lay submissively quiet on the bed and watched him care for the house and the child and herself. Was it to be always like this? she wondered. Would she always be helpless, sickly, an object of pity? Pity—yes, with a flavor of repulsion. She had seen people whose hearts she knew were kind to her turn their eyes from her scarred face. As she watched Motu Rayen limping about the little room, it came to her what his life must have been. He had seen that look—where had he not seen it? Even in the eyes of his wife—she had felt that mixture of pity and aversion too often to hope it had never been visible to him. And yet she had never found in him a taint of bitterness. What he must have suffered, behind that steady good-humor of his! With a depth of emotion in which her own griefs were forgotten, she turned her face into the shelter of her bent arm and sobbed silently.

She felt his hand on her shoulder in instant comfort.

"Jewel of my heart," he whispered, "be comforted. You will be strong and well soon—did not the doctor say so? But not so soon if you cry like this. It is only to be patient, beloved, patient a little while out of all the years."

All the years—the thought of his long patience shook her afresh.

"That I should be a burden on you now!" she murmured.

"A burden! Such a burden as wings to a bird. Has it not always been joy to me to serve you? When I was poor in strength, I was rich in money. Now I am poor in money, but for you and the little son I shall be rich in strength."

So brave and kind—always so brave and kind! And it was through her that he had become poor. Even though Tuan Noor had had no share in the robbery, that did not absolve her. Had they never gone to Maradeniya—the weeping came upon her again, so violently that he beckoned to Ponamma.

"She must be sick," he whispered. "Shall I not send for the doctor?"

"Why should she not weep?" Ponamma retorted. "She has lost her wealth and her strength and her beauty—does a woman laugh about such things, I ask you?"

"She is more beautiful than ever," said Motu Rayen.

Ponamma shrugged her shoulders as she walked away. If a man choose to talk like a fool!

But Nila turned her face toward him with a wistful searching look. He bent over her.

"You are better now, little one?" he asked tenderly. She put up one hand and held him away so that she could look into his eyes. Her own face looked back at her from those dark mirrors, but she could not see the scars on it. Her face in his eyes was as beautiful as it had been when Tuan Noor had seen it to the ruin of them all. Yet she knew it was disfigured. So it must be with her all the rest of her life, she thought. To see what might have been, had she known him sooner as she knew him now—and to know what must be, on through the years, till the scars should be lost in wrinkles!

"My husband," she whispered, "I have wronged you. I have wronged you cruelly. I have brought you sorrow—you, to whom only good belongs. I should never have been your wife."

He did not speak for a moment. Then his words came slowly, quietly.

"My little one, we will speak once of this, and not again—it is too late for words. But it is right that we should talk plainly to each other once. Do you need to tell me that you should never have been my wife? I know. But you have done me no wrong. You only followed the customs of our people and your father's will. How could you know what love might be? I thought—but it was because I loved you so much, and was

mad with hope, for a little time. I should have known. I should have thought of the one who might ask for you some day, the one to whom you could give all your heart. It was I who wronged you, beloved—who robbed you of what life might have meant—and then had not even the strength and courage to hide the sadness of my tardy knowledge. Never reproach yourself—you have given me enough, more than I could hope—ah, the madness was beautiful, but it was madness. I see that now. That is all past. Life is a greater thing than love, and love is greater than the love of man and woman. Let me feel that I have not stolen everything—that you are happy a little. That shall suffice for me. You love the child, and you shall not be poor long—you and he. I have been thinking—there has been much time to think. And a few days ago there came to the boutique a Jaffna man who wants to retire from shopkeeping and live on a tobacco plantation that he has bought. We have arranged that when the trial is over I am to go to Jaffna and take charge of his shop for him. Trade is good in Jaffna, and when I have paid Hamilton Dorai, some day I will get bracelets for you again and a chain of gold for your neck.”

He talked on gently, soothingly, planning for her and for the child, letting his voice fall more and more into a soft monotone as he thought she slept. When at last he was silent and she knew that he bent over her to make sure of her rest, she breathed deeply and evenly, though her hands

clenched under the coverlet. She heard him sigh, then the halting tread left the bedside and went out. She heard his voice in the next room, speaking to the child, and the little boy's laughter. Without opening her eyes she could see the two as she had seen them so often at the hospital during the latter part of her time there, when the pain and weakness had receded into the background of her consciousness and left her vision clear. She knew so well the shining kindness of the father's face, the delight of the little son. He was speaking to the child now in just the tone that he had used to her. Once there had been a different quality in his voice, that made a strange music of the mere utterance of her name. She had shrunk from it sometimes. Perhaps he had seen that, and that was why the thrill had gone from his voice, just as the voice had stopped saying, "I love you."

He said now, "I loved you." "That is all past." "Life is so great a thing that even love is only part of it, and the love of man and woman is only a part of love." How great a part she was understanding now. What she had felt in Tuan Noor's arms seemed to her only a straw-fire—yet that straw-fire had branded on her the scars that she must always wear, and it was Tuan Noor who stood between her and Motu Rayen, sinister, reproachful.

"He brought me all the strength and beauty of his heart, and I turned him to a devil," she thought drearily. "Can a woman do that, and

then be happy? The gods would punish her—have they not shown that they are angry with me? And I do not suffer alone. A curse is upon me—and I lay it upon my husband. I am poison in his meat, misfortune by his hearth. Kali Devi, you are a woman—have mercy! Let me die, before a worse thing comes to us!”

She did not die. Gradually, as the doctor had foretold, her strength came back. But even while her body returned to health, the thought that she was accursed held and festered in her mind like a hidden sore. Wistfully she studied her husband, who had learned to live smiling with sorrow. She could not give him joy—her one solace would be not to give him pain. She learned what an effective veil gayety is for a heart in which fear lives, but hope lies dead.

And yet, in a heart as young as hers, hope dies hard.

“It is the evil that I did to Tuan Noor that has cursed me,” she reasoned with herself. “But, perhaps, after all, it was not so great. This wickedness was none of his doing—perhaps that is a sign to me that he has risen above the harm I did him. If he should forgive me, would not the gods also forgive?”

Ponamma found her one day looking in her mirror. She started violently and put it down flushing. She had just been thinking that if Tuan Noor could see her now, he would perhaps be glad. Ponamma’s diagnosis of her confusion was incorrect, but none the less positive. She came

quickly to Nila and her shrill old voice was very tender.

"You are not ugly, dear child. What do you care whether other people ever call you beautiful again, when you know that to Motu Rayen you will always be beautiful? You were sad enough when you took him, but you have a better life than you could ever have had with——"

Nila flinched as if a hand had been raised to strike her.

"Can you not even bear his name? But you need not be afraid any longer. He was cunning in his wickedness, but not cunning enough. It will be long before he can harm anyone now."

Nila, looking blankly into the mirror, saw the stricken face of a woman whose very lips were gray. The lips moved and her own voice said faintly, "Do you mean—the robbery?"

"He has been arrested, yes. He and Mudiyanse of Kalavila. He covered his tracks well, but there are gods in Heaven. The witnesses are men to be afraid of—the Ratemahatmaya himself," she made an awed pause, then went on more conversationally, "and Manikrala who keeps the tea boutique at the crossroads. He is a man everyone respects, even if he did marry a light woman. She must have a way with her, if all the stories are true—and men are only men. A pity all the same. She will tire of him soon. Even now they say he has good reasons of his own for wishing Tuan—a certain person—safely behind bars."

Ponamma caught a sudden glimpse of the mir-

ror. With an exclamation of fright she stared into Nila's face.

"Gods!" she cried. "What is that devil to you, Nila?"

"My curse," said Nila. Ponamma might or might not understand. It did not matter.

Ponamma's mouth opened—but a peremptory gesture checked the speech that would have come. Nila had heard, though the older woman did not, a halting step in the verandah. She hastily rubbed her cheeks and bit her lips to bring back their color. Then she went out smiling to meet her husband.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TEMPLE IN THE ROCK

TUAN NOOR's rage of disappointment had not been without cause. A few days before the festival, when he had come to the garden after his stop at the boutique, the Opal had whispered: "You need not come here for tea during the time of Wesak. The Teacher will not be here. He is a good Buddhist."

Flame leaped up in his eyes.

"You mean that he will go to Kandy and leave you here—alone?"

Her demurely lowered lids flickered up, then down again.

"Of course I go with him to Kandy. But"—after a pause her eyelids lifted again, not swiftly this time but with a slow, deliberate seduction—"but not to the temple. I do not pray."

"Why should you pray? You, who have only to take whatever you desire?"

It was a moment—a long moment—before her laugh came and the light mockery of her answer.

"It has always been so, has it not? I had only to take your love—at the price of all my world, to be sure—if I wanted it. Well, I wanted it and I took it. Then there came a night—it was Wesak, do you remember?—when you said, 'If you are

unhappy, why do you stay with me? The way is open for you to go.' I went—and out in the lights of the street Mudiyanse of Kalavila said to me, 'Come home with me, if you will.' I went with him, and then, after a while——"

Tuan Noor stopped her. His face was haggard and he swallowed a strangling something in his throat two or three times before he spoke.

"Whatever I did to you, I am paying now. Allah! but I am paying! How cruel you are! I never tortured a prisoner as you torture me."

"Foolish boy!" she smiled at him, playing on his strained nerves with all the cold skill of a musician. "Why should I be cruel? Do you think the past is bitter to me? No. There is none of it that I could spare, not you, nor Mudiyanse, nor—I forget the names. It is good to be wise. As for this Wesak—I said I do not go to the temple. But I might follow the lighted car, with the crowd, to hear the children sing."

Her voice trailed into silence, but her eyes spoke on, and she saw in his face all that she meant to see.

"Devil-goddess!"

She drew back into the doorway.

"Not—here," she said, and the door closed behind her. He caught his breath as the latch clicked. It had come to be a nervous spasm that was bodily pain, the sound of that door closing between them, shutting her in with that old man.

He went down to Kandy on the same motor-bus that carried Manikrala and the Opal, but in the

confusion of arrival he lost sight of them. This did not trouble him greatly, since he knew that he would find her again with the crowd gathered about the lighted car to hear the children sing. He would find her again and—not *here*, she had said.

But Manikrala took no lodging in Kandy that night. He had thought, as one plans for the pleasure of a child, that the lights and music of the festival would appeal to the Opal, but before they had made half the journey, she whispered to him under cover of the rattle of the bus.

“Teacher, do you love this festival as they keep it in the city?”

He looked down at her in surprise.

“All the noise and glitter. Is that—holy—to you?” she persisted.

“It is meant to be holy,” he answered. His surprise deepened to an intent scrutiny, a wondering gladness that such thought should come to her.

“But there are better ways of saying what one means, yes?” She drew still closer to him, yet he had to bend his head to hear her. “There is a temple in the rocks—very, very old—out beyond Matale.”

“Alu Vihara.” He waited for what she would say, as one waits for the opening of a flower.

“One goes there by train from Kandy, you said. Naithumba asked why you had not come to see him, and you said you had been in search of peace. That was the second time I saw you,

and you had just come back from that temple in the rocks. Do you remember?"

"Yes. I went there after I first met you in Naithumba's house. I remember."

"You went there to find—peace." Her voice caressed the word wistfully. "Will you take me there? Does the journey cost very much?"

For a moment he did not answer. She looked quickly up at his face. Then her head drooped and she grew pale.

"Perhaps," she added slowly, "perhaps—you would rather not take me to a—holy place."

"Little one, no. It was not that. How could you think it? I was only wondering whether one mortal could ever bring another to peace. I will take you to Alu Vihara, yes. That is a simple thing. If I could lead you into peace, I would do that, whatever it might cost."

Matale, too, was keeping Wesak, not brilliantly like the city by the lake, but with decorations worthy of a thrifty and thriving town, and a little palm-fringed booth of refreshment for pilgrims on their way to Maligawa. Palm fronds also arched the entrance of the stairs that led up to the rock temple. The great cliffs, almost meeting overhead, shut out the mellow afternoon sun, and in their shadow it was cool and hushed. The yellow-robed priest who came out to meet them smiled kindly but remotely, as if he moved in a shadowy muted world apart from theirs. The Opal's anklets clashed tawdrily on the stillness. First she tried treading quietly; then, while Mani-

krala was speaking with the priest, she stooped hastily, slipped the heavy silver rings over her slim bare feet, and knotted the discarded trinkets in the corner of her sari. The priest opened the door of the temple cut in the heart of the rock, and led the way in.

It had been dusk out there in the shadow of the cliffs. Here it was night, starless night save for the faint yellow glow of a lamp. She saw Manikrala kneel, and slid to her knees beside him. Then, gradually, as her eyes could receive it, out of the lamplit darkness grew the gigantic figure of the rock-hewn Buddha. He lay at full length, his head propped upon his hand. Simply carved as it was, there was nothing crude or gross in the immense oval of the face. It was the magnifying of tranquillity to something noble, but cold as space, to which humanity was no more than the wax-white temple flowers heaped high in offerings, their fragrance heavy on the close air. She looked at Manikrala's face. In the faint warm light it appeared to her as augustly calm as the stone face of the great Buddha. It seemed to her that this was indeed peace, this dim, hushed place with the world shut out, where she might lie at his feet like the temple-flowers before his god, forgetting all that had been, all that might be—desiring nothing, fearing nothing—content.

“Are you tired, my child? Shall we go now?”

“As you will, my lord.” She used the Sinhalese word that may mean either the height of earthly honor or divinity itself. Then, her eyes starry,

in the lamplight, she breathed, "If we might never go—if we might stay here always!"

"Ah—if we might!"

He rose, lifting her as he would a child, and like an obedient child she went with him into the magic moment when the tropic day meets and merges into night. Already dusk was giving place to darkness, and in the rift above their heads, stars were shining white against the deepening amethyst of the sky. The priest closed the door and slipped away into the shadow. She looked back to the black wall of rock, and shivered.

"It is gone," she said.

"It is only hidden. When we come again, it will be there."

"Shall we ever come again?"

"Why not, my child?"

She sighed, still looking back toward the closed door. In silence they went down the steps and along the shadowy road, their tread noiseless in the dust. As they came in sight of the lights of Matale, she stopped with a sudden gasping breath.

"Already it is going," she thought. "It can never be like that—anywhere else."

He turned quickly.

"What is it, little one? Anything wrong?"

With a nervous laugh she untied the corner of her sari and put on her anklets.

"They made too much noise there," she explained, "but here, they belong."

Later, he watched her musing by the lamp in

their lodging, till her dreamy eyes grew drowsy and the heavy lids closed. Her face had grown strangely younger with the soft curves it had gained of late. The sinister quality that had poisoned the beauty of Naithumba's mistress had gone with the little shadowy hollows of cheeks and temples. Could innocence come back? Could the soul renew its tissues like the body?

With a deep breath, too controlled to be a sigh, he rose and lifted her very gently in his arms. It was for him to give her peace, whatever it might cost, he had said—and should he be the one to trouble the peace that she had? If she had waked, if she had opened her eyes to the face he bent over her then—but she did not wake. Only, when he laid her on the bed, she stirred in her sleep and moaned a little.

The day after his return from Kandy, Tuan Noor did not stop at the boutique as usual. He went straight to the garden. The Opal was sitting there with wistful far-away eyes and idle hands. Hearing his voice, she sprang up and faced him.

"You went to Matale," he said. "Did you know you were going there when you said what you did? Did you mean to make a fool of me?"

He spoke quietly, but his gripping fingers broke bit after bit from the top of the clay wall. It was with an effort that she kept her eyes fixed on his, but though she would not look at those restless fingers she was horribly aware of them. There was no mockery in her answer, only a rigid cold-

ness that might have been aggrieved dignity—or mortal fear.

“I did not know, Tuan Noor. He told me on the way down that we were going to Matale. Why should I lie to you?”

“Because”—he moistened his lips—“because you know the power you have over me. Because you are taking your revenge for the days when I was the stronger. Even then—even then I think I could not have taken you against your will. I know that I cannot now. Whatever your price may be, I must pay it. I can outbid your old man, rich as he may be. I have money in a hidden place, waiting for you. If it is trinkets and jewels that you want, I have them. A thousand rupees’ worth, I have them. Wherever others have given you silver, I will put gold in place of it—anklets, bracelets, earrings—you shall be gold from head to foot, you shall make a golden music when you move. Is it enough? Is it enough? or”—he leaned on the wall, and his voice dropped to a harsh whisper—“is more than money needed? I have broken my pride to dust and thrown it for your little feet to tread on. I have paid you an hour of torment for every tear that I may have made you shed. You said you took no account of that, but whether you do or not, that score is wiped out. What stands between us now except money? Must I buy you with a man’s life?”

“Are you mad?” she asked. She even managed a laugh. “Surely you do not think——”

"How do I know what to think? The heart may do strange things. Mad—yes, sometimes I am. Allah, the hunger and thirst for you, the fire in my temples and behind my eyes—my empty arms when I wake in the night!"

Out of a cold whirling blur of terror she heard her own voice, as if it came from a great distance, saying lightly, "You are a fool. The world is full of women."

"Yes, I know that." His answer was so low and quiet that she could hear the tiny avalanches of clay rattling down the wall. "I know that the world is full of women. And I know that I am a fool. But I know this, too. In a world full of women, sometimes there is for a man—the woman. You are the woman, for me. Whether you have put a magic on me or whether it is the will of Allah, I do not know. I do not care. It is fate. If I had all the other women in the world, and not you, my arms would be empty. If I had all the houris of Paradise, and not you, I would be unsatisfied. I do not understand how it can be so with me, but it is so. I called you devil-goddess. I meant it only as a love-name, but perhaps it is true. Your people worship a devil-goddess, and there is blood on her altars. Is that what you want from me? There is blood on the gold, a little. But if that is not enough——"

It seemed to her one moment more of that low, quiet, venomous voice would kill her as cruelly and surely as those hands.

“I did not know—I did not understand”—she stammered. “I must have time to think—oh, go! go! there is someone in the road.”

He heard the click of the bolt shot home. As she leaned against the wooden panel, his words came to her.

“For the last time! You have shut that door in my face for the last time!”

CHAPTER XVIII

GOD THE CREDITOR

“WOMAN”—the counsel for the defense pushed back the sleeve of his gown and shook an accusing finger at Nila—“woman, I put it to you. All that you have said is false.”

The Tamil interpreter translated the words, his gentle liquid voice softening their harshness. Nila looked down at him, from her place in the witness box. Slowly her hand went up to her scarred throat, bare of any wedding-necklace—touched the marks on her cheek, the marks that would always be there. Her face quivered, and she answered, not bitterly but with a slow hopeless sadness like the inevitable brimming over of a full cup. The interpreter turned her words into English, his dark eyes fixed on the judge.

“My lord, why should I add a lie to the sorrows of my miserable life?”

His Lordship looked at her. Not resentment but heartbreak had been in the tone of her denial. He saw a face pitifully young to be so stamped with tragedy—saw, too, how thin and frail her long illness had left her, and how heavily she leaned against the witness box where she had been standing for two hours. He gave a quick order, and one of the court attendants set a chair behind her.

"Tell her to sit down," said the Judge. "She is worn out."

She did not understand his speech, but no interpreter was needed for the chair, the tone, the compassion of the kind eyes under the close gray wig. She raised her joined palms humbly, then spread them in swift deprecation.

"A woman of my position, my lord," the interpreter translated, "cannot presume to sit on a chair in this Presence. If my lord permits, when I am too weary I will sit on the floor."

She waited, with submissively lowered eyes.

"Are there any more questions for this witness at present?" his Lordship asked.

"I would request, my lord," said the Crown Counsel, "that she might be recalled later if necessary. The Superintendent of Police desires if possible to give his evidence to-day, as he is sailing for England in a few days."

"The witness is dismissed for the present. Call Mr. Bosworth."

"You may go now," the Tamil interpreter told her gently. "I think they will not want you again to-day, but do not go far from the court."

Nila stepped down from the witness box and went out into the anteroom where her husband and other witnesses were waiting, feeling strange little shocks as she trod, as if the floor were coming up to meet her feet. She had not looked toward the dock where the accused sat since her first bewildered glance about the courtroom, but she could see now, as she had seen then, the lithe

powerful figure lounging indolently in a corner of the prisoners' pen as if he were taking his pleasure in a place of his own choosing. His fierce beauty of a wild creature was more striking in his red sarong and Malay cap than it had been in the constable's uniform, but it was no reviving flame of the old passion that took what poor strength she had and made her cold hands clench on the rail of the witness box to hide their convulsive trembling. It was the hopeless certainty that life had gone wrong with him, since their parting. That he was evil, and that she had made him so. Even when she heard of his arrest, she had cherished a faint hope that he might be mistakenly accused. Seeing him now, that hope was gone. Even his beauty was the beauty of corruption, like the iridescent film of tarnish on metal. How could she, she who had done this thing, however innocently, dare hope to be happy like other women, to escape her share of doom? There was no escape from the gods.

Tomtoms were beating down there in the Maligawa—tomtoms—or was it only the blood in her temples? As through a mist she saw her husband coming toward her anxiously. She drew back from his outstretched hands.

"No nearer! On your life, no nearer!" she whispered. "There is a curse!"

Keshavan sprang up to catch her as she fell, but it was the cripple's arms that received her.

"I am the stronger now," said Motu Rayen. Manikrala, patiently waiting outside the wit-

ness room, heard the stir within and went to the door. The Opal, sitting on the grass in the shade, her back against the wall, did not move except to turn her head a little, so that her eyes could follow him, and to lay her hand on the grass beside her that his feet had crushed.

The weeks since Tuan Noor's arrest had not dealt kindly with her. She knew that this was only respite, not release. Though she thrust behind her the sick terror of that last interview with him, it was always with her. He had said truly that she had shut him out for the last time. Now the deadly quietness of the man with whom she could no longer do as she would stood continually in the background of her mind, waiting, whether she dared face it or not. The little shadows had come back to her cheeks and temples, and the deeper shadows to her eyes. If she could have told any story that would put Tuan Noor out of the world altogether, she would have sworn it by all the gods in whom she had no faith; but she could hope for no more than prison, and if a word of hers helped to send him there—why, men had been known to slip even through the iron fingers of the English law, and then—she thought of those other iron fingers at work on the wall of Manikrala's garden, and clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering.

The spasm of terror passed, and she relaxed with a sigh. Her tired eyes burned and smarted with misery that could find no relief in tears. They were so short a time ago, those good days

when she had asked no sweeter gift of life than to serve Manikrala's household comfort, and to sit beside him in the garden drawing his strength to her weary spirit as she held his hand to her cheek. So short a time ago—could they be gone forever?

*"O stop your ringing and let me be—
Let be, Brookland bells!"*

She did not understand the words of the song, but there was something in their tone that chimed with her mood. She looked up at the Englishman who was humming absently, his back toward her, his tall figure dark against the glowing green of the lawn.

*"O leave me walk on Brookland Road
In the thunder and warm rain.
O leave me look where my love goes
And p'raps I'll see her again!
Low down—low down—
Where the liddle green lanterns——"*

He stopped with a sharp impatient shake of his head and jerked his hands out of his pockets to fill and light his pipe. The Opal watched him with a pitiful little smile of sympathy. So often, lately, she had roused like that from a memory that was at once joy and pain.

He turned, with a swing that ground his heel into the turf, and she saw his face. Brooding and preoccupied, he walked on, unaware of the slim figure motionless as a startled snake against the wall. At the door of the witness room, a few steps away, he collided with Manikrala.

"Pardon, Hamilton Dorai," said the Sinhalese, courteously. The Opal rose involuntarily at the name, swiftly as the snake uncoils.

"Sorry," said Hamilton. "My clumsiness. I ought to look where I go. I haven't been called yet, have I?"

"Bosworth Dorai is on the stand now. Till a few minutes ago it was still Nila."

Hamilton frowned.

"Hard for her, poor child."

"She fainted when she left the stand. She is there in the witness room now. The pity of it all, Dorai, the pity of it!"

"I know. To start again in a new place—of course it means that!"

"If only they could get back the money, it would make things easier, but of course that is hopeless. By this time it is scattered through twenty families. That coin and the few rags of clothing we saw to-day—that is all of the lost fortune that they will ever recover."

"She identified the coin? Let me see—you had something to do with that. I remember—the young fellow who brought it to you—do you think he had anything to do with the robbery?"

They were talking in the vernacular. Manikrala's quick glance noted that the Opal had glided nearer to them, quietly as a shadow along the wall. Tired lines deepened about his eyes, but there was no change in his gentle, even voice as he answered.

"No, Dorai. I do not think it. He is a cruel man of violent temper, but I do not believe him to be a thief. To my judgment it is a family matter, and he is only an outsider who has been involved by accident."

"This Mudiyanse is one of the family, eh? I thought so. A bad lot. Even so, what a pitiful affair it is! These scoundrels must suffer, of course, or no villager would be safe in his house, but what comes of it beside that? Only bad blood in the village—a grudge to fester along for years and years and break out in some new violence sooner or later—and Motu Rayen pulling up all his roots!" He shook his head impatiently. "What makes me angry is that the master of the gang goes free."

"Dorai, the master of no wickedness goes free."

"You mean, God makes him pay? He gives long term notes, Manikrala!"

"No, Dorai. Payable on demand. Sometimes he waits long."

"And sometimes forgets to collect."

"Never."

Hamilton shrugged his shoulders.

"The wheel of life is just."

"Your wheel has many revolutions," said the Englishman. "I only see one life on this earth for each of us. And when it is such a sad one for a man as good as Motu Rayen, I wonder whether justice is more than a name."

"He has had other troubles, then?"

"Other—yes. And harder to bear. A damned lot harder, for a man like that. There he is. I must speak to him."

With a nod to Manikrala he passed on. As he stopped in the doorway beside Motu Rayen, the crippled figure was a pitiful contrast to Hamilton's lean muscular height. The Opal sat down again suddenly, almost as if her knees had given way.

"Is that—the man who was robbed?"

"Motu Rayen? Yes, there with Hamilton Dorai."

He barely sketched an identifying gesture, but she caught at his arm.

"Do not point at him. I see. I thought—someone told me—he was the taller of the two. How did it happen?"

"Happen? Why, I do not know. He was so when I came to Ambalana, and, never hearing him spoken of except as the cripple, I took it for granted. Who was it that told you?"

"I forget. Perhaps I dreamed it. Ah!" The sharp intake of her breath as Motu Rayen started to walk beside his friend was almost a cry, but she turned it swiftly to a laugh that flashed out like the defensive thrust of a sword. "I am silly about deformities," she said. "They hurt me. This is the first time I had seen him. I had heard, of course, of Motu Rayen the cripple—the name is so common among Tamils, as common as Panchirala among Sinhalese—and the cripple is an easy word to say, but when one sees, that is an-

other thing. I will not look." She flung into the air a handful of grass that her nervous fingers had plucked as she talked. "I am so tired! How much longer must we sit here?"

"It must be nearly the end of the session now," Manikrala answered. "Yes—listen."

There came a droning call from within. "The Supreme Court of the Island of Ceylon stands adjourned till to-morrow. God save the King and his Lordship the King's Chief Justice." Manikrala knew the formula and translated it to her.

"That is funny," she commented mischievously. "I would say there is no need for a King and a Lord Chief Justice to call on the gods to save them. They should be strong enough to take care of themselves. The gods have their hands full with such."

She nodded toward the door of the witness room, where her eyes had returned in spite of her. Hamilton had gone about his own affairs and Motu Rayen was taking Nila and the child back to their lodging, with Ponamma and Keshavan bringing up the rear of the pathetic little group.

"There is a world upside down," the Opal murmured, "where the old are stronger than the young. And yet, even as he is, he is the head of his house. See, his wife leans on him, his child holds to his free hand. And he must take the Englishman's charity as if he were a beggar, unless—unless they find the stolen money."

"Unless is a wide word."

"That gold coin. She recognized it as a part of her wedding necklace, you said?"

"Yes. There were twenty such, and only this——"

She interrupted him, a rare thing for her.

"Twenty! twenty! and she had many ornaments beside, had she not? Anklets, bracelets, earrings, all of gold?"

"A thousand rupees' worth. They say she was gold from head to foot."

"A thousand rupees' worth." Again the Opal's fingers tore the grass, though her voice was idly speculative. "That is a fortune in itself. And the money. That is with the jewelry, hidden somewhere?"

"No, no. All scattered here and there among Punchirala's kin. There are enough of them to hide all traces of it. You know how it is."

"Yes." She dropped the word abruptly into a brief silence, like a stone tossed into a pool. "Yes. I know."

"Shall we go, child? You look tired."

"I remember now," she said slowly, "that I am not a child. That I can never be a child again."

CHAPTER XIX

WOMEN TOGETHER

THE courtroom was filled, for the case had caught the popular interest even to the overshadowing of the approaching Perahera. Overhead the electric fans whirled round and round, droning like gigantic beetles. The vivid August sun quivered back from the lawn in green reflections that made the carved columns seem velvety with moss. In his corner of the prisoners' dock Tuan Noor lounged, superbly negligent of the placard on his chest, 10, his number on the list of the accused. The evidence had not yet touched him, except when Motu Rayen had mentioned his passing inquiry about the binkhomba of Sigiriya, and that had merely established him as an enterprising tradesman concerned about his own business.

The carriage of the Chief Justice had driven up to his chambers behind the courthouse, and as the door to the Bench opened the company came to attention, expecting His Lordship's entrance. It was only a court attendant, however, ushering two ladies to seats on the Bench. A moment later, the mace and sword were set in place over the door, all rose to salute the Judge, and the morning session began.

Hamilton was the first witness called. He had

seen that there were guests on the Bench—that was an attention frequently shown to travelers, whom friends had commended to the inexhaustible courtesy of the Chief Justice, and Hamilton had no interest in them. He glanced casually at them as he was sworn—then laid down the Bible with a hand that it took all his will power to keep steady. The Judge in his scarlet and black robes of office, the pleasant English matron in the chair beside him, all the motley assembly in the courtroom had faded to a blurred background for a girl's face, with blue eyes from which little imps of laughter looked out. Those imps stood their ground under Hamilton's stare of amazed recognition, but the shadow of a smile that trembled on her lips was just a bit timid.

The testimony went on, and the cross-examination followed. Hamilton's answers were brief and simple, but there was an underlying fervor in his voice that was more moving than studied eloquence. The jury was visibly impressed in Motu Rayen's favor, and all through the court there stirred a current of feeling friendly to the lame man. Tuan Noor's easy scornful smile hardened. However the warmer passion may fill a Malay's heart, there is always a corner left for cold vindictive hatred. He had not forgotten the night he ran from Hamilton's voice.

He whispered to Mudiyanse, who drooped next to him, disconsolately concave under a large 9. The lawyers finished their questions and as a matter of form, Number 9 was given an opportunity

to interrogate the witness. Mudiyanse was conducting his own case through an unfortunate excess of misplaced astuteness. He had promised his lawyer the full sum demanded, though he had in fact no more to spend on the whole case than what was asked as a retaining fee. This he had cheerfully paid, thinking that once they were publicly associated the lawyer could not well relinquish the responsibility. He had been thoroughly and painfully undeceived early in the case, for the lawyer, having been convinced that no more money would be forthcoming, withdrew when he had delivered legal goods to the value of the fee that had been paid. Now, as his name was spoken, he rose and showed signs of pumping up enough voice for a question, to the surprise of the Bench and the Bar, for Hamilton's testimony had in no way involved him.

"My lord," the Sinhalese interpreter translated with an iron gravity, "I ask the witness on what grounds he takes so great an interest in his former servant that he provides Motu Rayen's wife with house, food, and clothing, gives her costly jewelry, and visits her at the hospital when she is sick?"

Tuan Noor's glittering dark eyes turned toward the jury with malicious relish. The shot had told—arched brows and none too covert smiles registered the fact. It was not at the jury that Hamilton looked. White under his sunburn, his hands gripping the rail of the witness box, he leaned a little forward and spoke very quietly,

but in a voice that went through the room and beyond it.

"I will tell you on what grounds I do what I can for Motu Rayen and all who are his, and shall always do it. Fifteen years ago he came to me as a high-caste coolie, and I have never seen a handsomer young fellow than he was then. Strong as a buffalo, straight and proud as a young king, a heart as big and fine as his body—he was half a head taller than I—he was wonderful, but not as wonderful as he is now. I was drawn to him—who would not be? I made him foreman when he had been with me only a year, because he was a man whom other men obeyed gladly, a man whom I could trust. One day—it was ten years ago, just at this season of the Perahera—I remember it well. I was taking him in my car about the estate to explain some special work that I wanted done. I was a reckless driver in those days. We came to a dip in the road with a steep hill beyond and I went down at full speed to get momentum for the climb. And as we struck the lowest point of the dip, the car swerved to the edge of the bank, the soft soil crumbled and we went over.

"You have seen him, here in the witness box. He is what you saw because I am like this—because I am here at all. He could have saved himself—but it was I that he saved. And when I knelt by him, asking like a fool if he was hurt, he only said, *'If it is well with you, Dorai, it is well with me.'*

"Is this a sufficient answer to the question?"

Nila, in the witness room, heard and sank to her knees as if she were in a temple. She forgot herself, Tuan Noor, the curse, in the ecstatic vision of all the strong beauty that had been given so freely for love and loyalty. Her heart held one image—her husband as she saw him now, as she would always see him.

"Do you hear Hamilton Dorai?" she exulted, holding her son close to her. "Do you hear how nobly he speaks, clear as the trumpets of Siva? He is telling all the people how great your father is. The Presence in red and black, and English lords and ladies, the Ratemahatmaya himself, all are hearing and wondering at your father. The gods grant you to be like him, my son."

"Why are you so proud and happy about that?"

Nila looked up at the woman who had spoken. A stranger to her, yet there was something oddly familiar about the face that made it seem quite natural for one to speak and the other to answer.

"I am his wife," she said. "I have the right to be proud of what he did."

"Was it such a great thing to maim himself?"

"That his friend might live! There is no more beautiful deed."

"You mean that. You see it that way. People like you—and him. It is a hard thing to understand—and yet—I can remember"—the hand with the opal ring rose slowly to her throat as she went on, her voice barely audible, "I can remember a

time—when such people were—mine. When I was one of them. Long ago. Long ago.”

She let her hand fall hopelessly, and turned a curious look toward Nila.

“You did not know this before? You are his wife. You loved him as he was, before you knew why he was so?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes—I loved him—as he was.”

The Opal, looking wistfully into that radiant, proudly lifted face, laid her hand lightly on Nila’s head.

“I am glad. Oh, I am glad! Whatever—whatever sorrows may have come to him, you are his comfort, his blessing!”

Nila shrank suddenly from the other’s caress and stooped over the child, hiding her face.

“Go out and play on the grass, little lord of my soul,” she said, and as he demurred, “Perhaps you will find your father there.”

At that, he toddled out eagerly. The Opal gripped the drooping shoulder, and drew Nila up to face her.

“What is the matter?” she demanded.

“What you said. I could not bear it. I am his curse.”

The Opal’s grasp tightened painfully.

“No, no! You are not—like that—are you?” Then, as Nila’s eyes met hers in blank bewilderment, she went on, “I did not understand, I think. Tell me plainly what you mean. How are you his curse?”

“His sorrows have come through me,” said

Nila solemnly. "Evil follows me because I have spoiled a life."

The Opal's lips twitched, but she did not smile, and the dry humor of her tone did not reach Nila.

"All of his sorrows are not your work, it would seem. Had you met, ten years ago? I do not think it. As for spoiling a life—we have not so much power as that, we little things. It is not for us to wreck another's life or to save it—if by life we mean something beside blood and breath. No, we are what we are."

"But this was different," Nila faltered.

"Of course. This is always different. This was you and he."

"Yes," Nila assented eagerly, "and with me, he might have been—!"

"I thought that coat would fit." The Opal smiled now, a thin smile, not bitter but very weary. "He, of course. What does the name matter? Man and woman, woman and man,—over and over and over. Everywhere—I suppose it is so even across the Black Water. The English are men like others—do I not know that? And I suppose their women are only women. What is it all for? I never wanted a child—not since I was a child myself. With you, he might have been—what? You gentle, pitiful thing, we are what we are. Part of one another's fate, but only a part. With how many other women might he have been——?"

"But there was no other! That is why."

“If he was one of the great ones”—deep fires kindled in the Opal’s eyes—“if he was a man whose heart was holy, like a temple in the rocks, how dare you think you could spoil his life? He would be too strong for you to weaken, too clean for you to soil, even if”—she checked herself suddenly. The dark lids fell over those burning eyes, and a heavy noiseless sigh lifted the silver chain on her breast.

“But he has become evil. I have seen it!” Nila pressed her hands to her temples, her eyes searching, searching the other woman’s face as if it were a maze where some hidden presence eluded her. “I had never thought it possible that some other—oh, if I could only be sure that it was not my doing! If I could only be sure! I never thought I could speak of this to anyone except the gods.”

She did not realize how little she had said. It seemed to her that she had told the whole brief tragedy of her womanhood.

“Who are you, that I have spoken to you like this?” she asked, with awe. “Did the gods send you? Who are you?”

“We are women together with tears in our eyes. What else matters?”

The dark lids lifted, and truly the tears were there, though under them the fires burned on unquenched. Nila’s hands went out unconsciously and clasped the Opal’s. They were standing so when Ponamma bustled in. With all the flurry of being called to the witness box, she stopped

short with a sniff and an aspect that permitted of no misunderstanding. The Opal's face hardened. Her chin went up and she drew her hands away.

"Nila!" Ponamma exploded. "Are you blind? Or have you gone mad with your troubles? That is—not one of our people."

"Sorrow has many daughters," said Nila gently. "Our sister has been kind to me."

Ponamma's second sniff was more eloquent than the first, but the Opal ignored it, turning a strange luminous look on Nila.

"Thank you—sister," she said. Then, with a swift change to light malicious insolence, she added, "Our—grandmother—does not seem as friendly as you."

"Dust of the common road," Ponamma began vigorously, but she spoke only to the air and a mocking laugh that came back from outside—a laugh whose sting still rankled a moment later in the witness box, so that when Ponamma was asked her age she tartly told the court to draw its own conclusions.

Nila sat on the floor of the witness room, her chin in her palm, thinking—thinking.

The suave penetrating voice of the Tamil interpreter came into her consciousness.

"Have your relations with the families of the accused been friendly or unfriendly?"

"Neither friendly nor unfriendly," Ponamma hurled back. "They are Sinhalese, we are Tamil. They cannot eat with us, we cannot eat with them."

They cannot come to our house, we cannot go to theirs. What, then, is friendship?"

Nila knew an answer to that question which had nothing to do with eating and drinking or with going from house to house; an answer which she had not known an hour ago. "We are women together with tears in our eyes. What else matters? We are what we are."

"Of course this is the truth!" came Ponamma's strident protest. "Would I tell a lie for money? And if I would, nobody has offered me a chew of betel, let alone fifty rupees."

Money. It seemed such a small thing now. She could be poor with Motu Rayen—with a singing heart she could slave for him and for their child, if only she could believe what the stranger had said. Who was she? Ponamma had called her dust of the common road, but she had not been dressed as a courtesan. She wore the neat print skirt, the close white bodice, the gay silk sari, the discreet silver jewelry of any well-to-do Sinhalese woman—the wife of a shop-keeper, perhaps.

Manikrala. Manikrala, witness against Tuan Noor—he kept the crossroads tea boutique. A fine man who had married a light woman. A man who might have good reasons of his own for wishing Tuan Noor in prison.

Nila sprang up and ran to the door. There was the slender figure that she could recognize now, she thought, in any crowd, sitting demurely on the grass beside a grave, elderly man in immaculate white. Motu Rayen was on the lawn with the

child, and came to the door when he saw her standing there.

"Who is that woman, there with the old man?" she asked him.

"It is Manikrala of Ambalana—that must be his wife. Why do you ask?"

"She has been kind to me," said Nila.

Motu Rayen frowned a little. He had heard of Manikrala's wife—who had not? It hurt him to think of this woman coming near his flawless emerald, and yet his heart was too high and gentle to put his instinctive repugnance into words. Nila answered, though he had not spoken.

"If yesterday were all! But one goes on—through to-day—into to-morrow."

CHAPTER XX

THE OPAL TESTIFIES

To another woman, that night, the same thought came, but with a different meaning.

"There is no going back. There is nothing to do but to go on."

She was tired, with the feverish weariness that finds its only relief in motion, but she lay rigid lest a creak of the rough bed should disturb Manikrala where he slept on a cushion by the window. In the strange dim borderland of conscious but uncontrollable thought that is neither waking nor a dream, she wandered up and down the cleft at Alu Vihara, beating vainly upon the rock to find the door of the hidden temple. In there, she knew, if only she could find it, would be the answer of all puzzles, the righting of all wrongs—peace. Motu Rayen would have his treasure back, and——

She turned her head and looked at Manikrala. The light from the setting moon touched his face and showed a stern, weary tenseness that sleep could not relax. This was sleep, but not rest. He would wake tired. She had grown to know that look in the intimacy of their lodging during the trial. In his own house she had never seen him asleep, the day's garment of patient kindness laid aside; and the night at Matala, it had been she who slept and he who kept vigil. She had

never wondered how he looked asleep. Now she knew that she had taken it for granted, without thinking, that he would be like the great Buddha, calm, withdrawn into divine solitude. Before that sleeper, she was content to be a handful of votive flowers. Beside this tired, troubled man, in the unconscious revelation of his silent pain, she was a woman. She wanted to kneel beside him there in the moonlight, to lift the gray head softly to her breast, and, like a mother with her sick child, to see the lines of pain smooth into perfect healing rest—and then, just at dawn, as he opened his eyes drowsily to her face, to touch those eyes and then kiss her fingertips, as her brother——

Her dream broke. It could never be anything but a dream. Whatever his trouble might be, it was not for her to heal. She was so little a part of his life. Poor child, he had called her. Poor tired child. She thought of the day he had found by the road a starved vagrant dog hurt by a passing motor, and had carried it home in his arms. The creature was injured beyond hope and suffering pitifully. She begged him to end its misery, but he had said, "It is the law to help and do kindness, but to take life is forbidden. Suffering passes, but life is immortal. The wheel of life is just." That was the one time she had been angry with him. She had cried indignantly, "What do we know of all that? Hear it moan! I will help it—love makes its own law! and your wheel can do what it likes to me." Sobbing and

trembling, she had stooped over the dog, but before she could bring herself to touch it, the moaning stopped.

The wheel of life is just. It would be just that she and no other should right her brother's wrong—all of it that could be righted. Tuan Noor had the treasure hidden. He had admitted that to her. To tell that in court? Useless—what could she prove? But there must be some way—the wheel of life is just.

Though she had not been aware of sleep, she waked. Dawn glimmered in the room, and from the Maligawa came the wild monotonous music of the morning prayer, the throb of tomtoms and pipes. She shivered, and her breath quickened. The passion that had wrenched her young life from its anchorage and set it drifting down strange waters was dead, long dead, gone through the horror of decay into cold dust—but still her nerves answered mechanically to the music that was for her the voice of that night. Two days from now, the Perahera. Perhaps Tuan Noor would be free then. After all, what was the evidence against him? Guess-work, more or less—it would depend upon the mood of the jury and the handling of the witnesses—and Manikrala had spoken in her hearing of the cleverness of the Malay's lawyer. Free. Again she shivered, but this time it was not at the music. It was at the memory of a set face and burning eyes, of restless fingers crumbling a clay wall, and a low voice that spoke quietly of murder. "There is blood on the

gold—a little—but if that is not enough!” She remembered the scarred face and throat of her brother’s wife, the woman who had called her sister. There would be no scars if he should strike again.

And she knew what she might do. It seemed she must have known it for a long time. Such a thought, coming suddenly, would have shocked like a blow. This was like an old, old fear that one has lived with till it has settled into a chill, speechless dread.

“Must I?” But she did not know to whom she put the question. “Must I?”

She slipped noiselessly from the bed and stooped over Manikrala.

“You see him—he is troubled, he is weary!” her spirit pleaded into the inexorable dark. “It might be I could help a little—just a little—if I stay? Who would serve him like me? If I go—I shall never see him again.”

She went out into the cool beauty of the dawn. The sun had not yet sent its cataract of light over the hill, and the leaves of the sleeping trees were still folded, but the woman of the house was about her daily tasks. She greeted her guest pleasantly and asked if there were anything they wanted.

“Yes. I would like to take up some tea to my lord,” said the Opal. So strong a desire to serve him in some little homely way had possessed her that she snatched at the first idea that came to her. Anything to feel that she was of use to him, that there was some reason why she should stay!

She took up the tea to him, making a merry little drama of it, that he should be served in his room like an Englishman, and teasing him for oversleeping. Then, still as if more in jest than in earnest, the question in her heart tore its way out.

“My lord slept late because he was tired—troubled, perhaps. Sometimes to tell a trouble drives it away.”

She did not quite dare to look at him as she said that—why, she did not know. She stooped, busy with the tea-things, holding her breath as if some word of fate were to be spoken—but though he touched her bent head gently, he did not speak.

The calling of the Ambalana witnesses infused new life into the case. Hitherto, there had been nothing implicating the ninth and tenth accused. That the others were guilty, the eye-witnesses alone had left no doubt. Now the spectators waited eagerly to see which of these two would prove to be the mysterious ninth, who had held Arasan outside in the dark. Mudiyanse's family connections were against him, but there was no doubt that Tuan Noor looked the fitter of the two for desperate adventures. As the Ratemahatmaya told his story, the jurors straightened in their chairs with revived interest. The official's evidence was given in English, and as the Sinhalese interpreter translated it, Mudiyanse huddled forward with a drawn pitiable face, licking dry

lips. The Malay beside him sat like a man of bronze, immovable, except for an occasional twitching of the muscles in his cheek. When the time for cross-questioning came, Mudiyanse's courage failed him in the face of authority incarnate.

"Did—did I not tell your worship that I am a law-abiding man?" he bleated lamentably. "Did I not tell that myself to your excellency with many words?"

"You did. You yourself. With many words." The dry corroboration somehow left the cautious man uncomfortable, and after a moment's wavering, he sat down.

Tuan Noor's lawyer was a veteran of the Kandy bar who had reached a point of reputation and prosperity where he took only cases that interested him. The young Malay had caught the attention of this specialist in erring humanity, and his savings—the lawyer accepted that characterization gravely, albeit with a humorous glint in his sharp eyes—were enough to cover the fee; so he had sat quietly through the case waiting till it should actually touch his client, with none of the clutching at chances for clever publicity that might have tempted one whose position was not already established. He asked a few questions now—they were apparently of slight importance, but when he sat down the jury had a clear impression of a headstrong, hot-tempered young fellow, popular among his friends, feared by his enemies. The lawyer made no attempt to white-

wash his client's failings—he had learned that a jury has large charity for faults that are not at the moment on trial, but for which anybody might get into trouble. They were there now to try the night robber, the furtive assailant of women and children—not the proud brawler, the fighter of men in broad daylight on the public street.

Manikralla came next and told his story with a dignity equal to the Ratemahatmaya's own. Simple as it was, its implications were strong. Mudiyanse had been so disheartened by his previous experience that he waived his right of question. Tuan Noor's lawyer rose slowly, his bushy eyebrows drawn down. He had not failed to acquaint himself with all the village gossip about the people involved—talk to be duly discounted, but also to be duly valued as straws that showed the way of the wind. Nor had the effect upon the jury of Mudiyanse's suggestion regarding Hamilton been wasted on him. That was one of the things men were ready to believe about other men, and for which they had no great condemnation. In Hamilton's case, it had been a chance shot and mismanaged at that. In other and abler hands——?

"Is the tenth accused one of your regular customers?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You have always found him quiet, orderly, prompt to pay? You have nothing against him—as a customer?"

The slight but significant pause suggested some

hidden trap—that was why Manikrala paused a moment to weigh the question before answering in the negative. The lawyer lifted his brows obviously, for the benefit of the courtroom.

“Nothing against him as a customer. And apart from business your relations are friendly?”

“Apart from business we have no relations.”

“Ah?” Again the heavy brows knit and lifted—obviously. “You are married?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife, I believe, is the next witness to be called. I have no more questions to ask—of you.”

The Opal, waiting her turn at the witness room door, heard. Heard also the little hissing titter, not quite a laugh, that ran through the fringes of the crowd. She drew herself up furiously, livid under the touch of paint she had put on that morning after looking in her mirror. Had he understood? Had it hurt him? She had her answer as she met him on her way to the witness box. The set sternness of his face, wearier and sadder than it had been in his sleep—but as they met and passed, he patted her shoulder, as tenderly, she thought, as he had touched the hurt dog.

“Do not be afraid,” he said.

She was not afraid, now. She thought she could never be afraid again. One is only afraid when one has something to lose.

The little hissing titter stung her once more as she stepped into the witness box. Her head went up, and she looked about the courtroom, her great eyes under their darkened lids meeting de-

fiantly the looks and smiles she knew so well—so wearily well.

“I am his trouble—I am his shame—I, who would die for him!”

She did not hear the interpreter speaking, though she stood calmly enough, her head bent, her finger that wore Manikrala’s opal tracing the groove of the railing on the witness box.

“Let that point pass,” said his Lordship kindly. “I think we need not ask these ladies their age unless they are very old or very young.”

The interpreter translated. She was herself now—more than that, some inexplicably exalted power of herself—as she directed a demurely mischievous glance and a gesture of worship toward the Bench, then stood waiting. Her way was clear before her now. A desperate way, but the strait was desperate. As she took up her old game with life—the game in which there were no rules—the deviltry came back to her eyes and her smile. It would be amusing, after all, to play the game once more, and for such a stake.

“You are the wife of the last witness?” the Crown Counsel began.

“He told you so.”

“Is your marriage registered?”

“No. I never do that.”

His question had been according to prescribed formula. Her answer was not. The whole court room roused with a jerk.

“You—er—have been married before, then?”

“Oh, yes,” she said carelessly.

"How often?"

The Opal frowned thoughtfully, then relaxed into her light cold laugh of detached amusement.

"I forget."

The Crown Counsel's healthy ruddiness deepened and he changed the subject with some abruptness.

"Where were you when the tenth accused brought you the sovereign?"

"In my garden."

"Had you any acquaintance with him before that?"

She opened at him wide eyes of luminous darkness.

"Oh, yes!"

"When—how—had you known him?"

"I lived with him a little while."

She felt the whole court stiffen to increased attention, and all the laughing devil in her set itself to play the game.

"That was"—she hesitated imperceptibly—then went on, emphasizing the words, "twelve years ago."

"Did"—the Crown Counsel balked momentarily, conscious of the ladies who were again on the Bench. No matter. He must do his duty. "Did he really bring the sovereign for Manikrala to change?"

"Not at first. No. But"—she favored the Crown Counsel with a smile that intensified his blush to the point of agony—"I told him it would not buy him one kiss, far less——"

"I have no more questions for the witness," said the Crown Counsel.

Nor had anyone else, till the turn of Tuan Noor's lawyer came.

"Far less?" he asked.

"What he wanted."

"Ah. You were his—unregistered wife—twelve years ago?"

"Yes."

"Why did you leave him then?"

"We quarreled."

"And then?"

"I went to Mudiyanse—that one there. A woman must have a home."

"Ah. And why did you leave Mudiyanse?"

The Opal's eyes glittered.

"Because he was a thief."

"A thief? Be careful. Are you sure?"

"I should know. He kept the house full of stolen stuff—it was a habit of his. I cannot live always hiding things when the police knock at the door—it is disgusting. So I left him."

"But there was someone else? As you say, a woman must have a home."

"Oh, yes," she returned calmly. "There has always been someone."

By this time there were stifled gusts of laughter sweeping the courtroom, and Mudiyanse's sputters of protest had no effect.

"And Tuan Noor? Have you seen him since you parted, before that day in the garden?"

"Many times."

"And he has asked you before to return to him?"

"Yes." She seemed surprised that he should find it necessary to ask the question.

The lawyer's even voice rang out sternly.

"You left Tuan Noor in anger, twelve years ago. Since then you have gone from man to man, how often you yourself cannot remember. And yet you have kept such a grip of him that he follows you, and when at last he has a bit of gold to offer you, he brings it—to be told what we have heard. Look at him—is that not the face of a starving man? If he had more, would he not have offered it?"

The jury's eyes followed the swift gesture to Tuan Noor, surprising the look that the lawyer had seen in the unguarded moment when the attention of all was centered in the woman. Under the sudden battery of eyes the Malay's self-possession broke. He hid his face on his knees.

There was a tense, breathless silence that seemed long, but broke at last like a taut string. The trial went on.

Nila had closed her eyes after one glance at Tuan Noor. She stood now quiet and unnoticed among the crowd, and drew her sari about her face, to hide the tears that she wiped away. There was no bitterness in those tears—they were of pure pity. And somewhere—she thought—a bird had begun to sing.

CHAPTER XXI

TUAN NOOR'S MARK

ON the last days of the trial, the wild ceremonials of the Perahera broke like a crashing wave. The city by the lake was like a fever-dream of slow-treading, gigantic shadows, flaring torches, dancers leaping like a madman's thoughts—over all the cold, inscrutable whiteness of the moon, through all the pulsing maddening throb of the devil-music. The Opal welcomed the frenzy of it, as in other days she had drugged her fatigues and perplexities with the cup of dreams. The cup of dreams—there would be need of that again, before long. But for the present, the Perahera was drug enough. She could blind herself with torchlight to the grave, sad wonder of the Teacher's eyes. The reckless beat of the music in her blood could keep her gay and light under the torture of his troubled patient pity. He would not need to pity and be patient much longer—soon, very soon, the trouble and shame would be lifted from him. The creature upon whom he had taken compassion, whom his great heart would not let him turn away, would be gone of her own accord. He could sleep calmly then, quiet as the great Buddha. Motu Rayen would have his money, and the sweet gentle wife who had called

her sister could wear her golden trinkets again. All those things the Opal would have to think about, when the time came for refilling the cup of dreams.

What was so terrible after all in the way that she had chosen? There had been a time when Tuan Noor's embrace had been not a thing to be endured as well as might be, but a joy as savage and intoxicating as the music reeling through the air. Why should it not be so again? She had been listening to a new language, incomprehensible to her but sweet as wind-bells stirring at dawn. When that would be silent—when she would never hear it again—why should not the old call bring the old response? Only—she wanted to listen to the last syllable of the new language, though the listening was pain. While she could look at Manikrala's unconscious face in the moonlight, she would not think of Tuan Noor.

The end of the trial came on the great night of the festival, and the wild music drowned the clamorous lamentations of Lokuhamy's wife and other women when they heard the sentence passed upon their men. One after another, the robbers were assigned a term of penal years—Dingiri Banda's sentence the lightest because of his age. Tuan Noor alone went free, the jury deciding that there was not sufficient evidence of his complicity.

"You are a lucky man," said the lawyer, smiling, when he met his newly released client. His tone gave the words a meaning beyond their face value.

"That"—Tuan Noor answered the smile—"that I shall know before long. If I am not, I shall not be unlucky alone."

"Remember one thing," the lawyer suggested thoughtfully. "I do not take murder cases. They are too wearing at my age."

Tuan Noor's smile tightened.

"If it should come to that," he said, "let Allah be my defense—and my judge!"

As the Malay strode away into the tumult of savage splendor, the lawyer looked after him and shook his head.

The streets were boiling with excited people, the air quivering with conches, pipes, and drums. Lurching past went the long line of elephants, their gaudy trappings bright in the torchlight, the moon glinting coldly from the gold and silver umbrellas of state. Clashing their cymbals, beating their drums, groups of devil-dancers whirled and bounded by in a fury of studied and rhythmic motion. And then, all at once, like the wild sensuous lure of the night made flesh, she stood facing him. Only her eyes in the moonlight had a glitter cold as the moon.

"Why did you do it?" he asked abruptly. It was as if they were alone, so utter was the crowd's absorption in the spectacle, and their voices were drowned in the shouts and music. Her answer was as simple and direct as his question.

"I wanted you free—alone."

"Why?"

"You offered a bargain, there in the garden. You remember?"

"Yes."

"Do you still want to buy?"

"Allah!"

"I will sell—if you really have the treasure."

"You mean it? You are not playing with me?"

"I am ready to pay your price, if you pay mine."

She could feel him trembling, so close were they pressed by the crowd.

"Is it—only for the gold—that you do this?"

"I would not do it without the gold."

"But for the gold—alone—would you?"

She closed her eyes. It was not his face that her mind saw.

"Nor for the gold alone," she whispered.

"Allah!" His hand groped for hers, closed on it. "Mine! My woman! The gold is yours, and my body and soul—come, Rose of Desire! The moon is bright on the lake, but under the sleeping-tree it will be dark."

She laughed.

"Here you can give me only half the bargain. No—the gold first, and then your body and soul."

"Devil-goddess!" he echoed her laugh, boyishly exultant. "I will give you the gold—but I will make you forget it."

"Will you? I wonder." She looked at him, thinking how easily he had once made her forget more precious things than gold, wistfully sur-

prised that there stirred in her now nothing warmer than a critical admiration of his flaming beauty. Passion makes some men ridiculous. She remembered instances. She was glad that he was one whom it transfigured—but oh, how tired she was of all that! How bleakly, drearily tired!

“We will forget it together,” he said.

Again she laughed.

“Do you remember”—his eyes held her closer than another man’s arms could have done—“do you remember that I said sometime you would laugh at me and I would kiss the laugh into silence? That moment is near—oh, my Rose, my Rose of Desire!”

“A woman can love many times,” she said slowly, “but she always remembers. When a man loves, he forgets, and it is all new. They are so cheap, so easy, all these words.”

He paled at the taunt.

“I will speak with gold then. And after that—I will waste no strength in words.”

“It is at Ambalana—the treasure?” He nodded. She glanced around, and leaned toward him, lowering her voice. “We go back to-morrow. Have it at your house, the next day, at sunset—and I will come.”

“It will not take so long. I can go back now and have it there for you to-morrow night.”

“I shall not be ready then. There are things I have to do.”

“What things?”

“I must set the house in order.” Her throat

filled at the thought of those little homely services that she could do for him that one day—only that one day—and then, no more. It was like a blow when Tuan Noor flung back his head in a loud laugh.

“Is that your life with the old man? Setting the house in order? Allah! and I was jealous of him! Jealous enough to kill!”

“You can let him alone,” she said. “He has been kind to me. That is all.”

“Will he be surprised at your leaving him?”

“Will anyone—after the other day in court?”

“Hardly.” His strong white teeth set for an instant. “I could have killed you in my shame, that one moment when you stripped my heart naked before them all—you and the lawyer.”

“That naked moment—and the lawyer and I—set you free.”

“I know. It was a part of the price I pay for you. Free—when I am your slave, like this—ah, but you shall not dole yourself out to me, smiling! Not even you can come so near to the fire that is consuming me and not take flame. No, you shall love me—love me! Sweep out your old man’s house and scour his pots and pans one day more, if you like. I will have you to-morrow night in my dreams—and the next day, at sunset, you will come.”

“You will give me all the treasure—all?”

“Yes. And when I have given, I will take—all.”

A sudden backward surge of the crowd caught

and pressed them close. He bent his head, and she felt a touch like a brand of steel and fire.

"There is my mark on you, till you come to me. Let the old man have to-morrow—he cannot stroke that away!"

She tore her hand free from his and struggled to raise it to strike out that triumphant smile of his, but as suddenly as it had brought them together the eddy of the crowd swept them apart. She let herself drift. It seemed as if the flame of anger that had swept her had left her ashes. When the crowd about her relaxed, she stood for a moment, then went slowly back to the lodging. There was nobody in the house. As she lay on the bed, listening to the tumult outside, she loosened her close white bodice and touched the throbbing bruise. What had so enraged her in that last jeer? The mockery of her god? She must grow used to that—must learn to laugh at it—perhaps even to share in it, lest he grow jealous again. She laughed now, silently, at the grim humor of it all. And as she laughed, she thought how strong and firm and cool Manikrala's hand was when she held it against her cheek.

She was asleep when he came in. He took a deep breath—was it of relief?—when he saw her quiet figure and heard her even tranquil breathing. Softly he came to the bedside and stood looking down at her with an immeasurable tenderness. She moved a little, and her hand slipped from the soft curve it had shielded. He bent forward suddenly—even in the half-light that came from the

torches of the street he could see what she had hidden. His hands clenched and he turned away with a hasty, shaken movement unlike his usual steady calm.

When the pipes and tomtoms of the Maligwa waked her at dawn, he was standing at the window, looking out. When he turned to her, she was startled—was it the early light that made his face so strange and gray?—but when he spoke, his voice was quiet and gentle as ever, the patient kindness of his look was unchanged.

CHAPTER XXII

THE COST OF PEACE

THEY went back to Ambalana that morning. In the afternoon when Manikrala was busy in the boutique, she slipped out to the drug-seller's shop. Badur was alone.

"It is long since you were here," he said, "but they always come back."

"You remember me, then?"

The drug-seller smiled.

"Did any man ever forget you?"

She smiled, too, at some joke of her own that seemed not wholly pleasant.

"Perhaps not—but to remember is not always to recognize. One changes."

"This does not change," said Badur. He put out his hand to a familiar place on the shelf.

"Have you a stronger essence?" she asked. "I want the strongest you can give me—so strong that a little phial may last a long time. I do not know when I can come again."

Badur looked at her keenly.

"Is the Teacher going away?"

She met the question unmoved, facing him steadily with eyes from which she had withdrawn all expression.

"No. I am."

“Far?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“That is—you would say—as Allah wills.”

“Allah”—the drug-seller’s shrewd face wrinkled quizzically. “Who is his prophet this time? Never mind—I can guess, perhaps. If my guess is right, you need not spend your money. You will find plenty of what you want in the house where you are going.”

“I buy for myself,” she said. “Strong—strong—strong!”

“Well”—he rose, and turned toward the back room of his shop.

“Wait!”

He looked back. She had slipped off her heavy silver anklets and was holding them out to him. They made a merry little jingling as if their weight were a tax on her outstretched hand.

“Give me as much as you can for these,” she said.

Badur took the trinkets and weighed them expertly. At the same time, his sharp eyes, taking their estimate of her, softened. He made a little clucking sound of pity and shook his head.

“Must you go back to it?” he asked.

Again she shrugged her shoulders.

“How do I know? But I know that I must have it to go back to——”

Without another word he went into the other room. She sat waiting, her hands idle, her face without expression. Presently he returned, and gave her an oddly shaped, painted phial.

"I have put it in this bottle," he said, "to remind you that this essence is three times as strong as any that you have used before. That phial holds enough to kill an elephant, taken all at once. You will remember?"

"Yes."

"Remember, too, this is a pleasant servant, but a hard master. You know its dreams—the death it gives is different. It is a very slow death—and not easy."

"Is any death easy? I have always thought that whatever life might be, it was better than death. Do not be anxious, Badur, I will remember." She slipped the phial into her bodice—it was cool against the fever of the bruise—and went away with no farewell. She was going home, she thought, for the last time. To-morrow night—

She drew her sari over the sudden agony that convulsed her face. She mastered the pain, and smiled as she went in through the garden and closed the door, but the thought that it was for the last time lay heavy in her heart, like an actual weight upon her breast that made it hard to breathe. To-morrow night—

She wanted to forget, to limit her vision to the immediate hour. And always, across her passionate absorption in the beloved routine, came with each act, the remembrance that it was for the last time, that to-morrow night—

She could fling the door of her imagination shut in the face of those words, but always, relentlessly, something pushed it open again. It seemed

to her that she was continually leaning all her weight against a slowly opening door. She wanted—she would have given her life—to have every one of these last hours vividly real to her, and instead it seemed she was moving through them in a dream.

She had thought how sweet, how peaceful their last evening must be—the evening that he would not know was to be their last, for if he knew, he might force himself to some special kindness, and she wanted to remember him as he always had been. Crouching in her room, listening to the slow rhythmic tread pacing up and down the other side of the door, it seemed to her that for the first time in her life she knew what it was to suffer. She had told him a cool good night, and gone away. How was he to know that something in his eyes—the glitter of the lamplight, what else could it have been?—had set a mad dream running through her veins like fire?

“I could”—she muttered to herself. “I could. Why should he be stronger than others? He is a man—I could——”

Each step of his, there beyond the door, woke a responsive thrill in her blood like the throb of the tomtoms at the Perahera.

The Perahera. She looked down at the bruise with dilated eyes of terror, as if it had some malignant power. No, no—not Manikrala!

There was something else there in the warm hollow of her bosom. Death—perhaps, sometime. Now, unconsciousness.

Bitter—bitter—Badur had told the truth. Bitter as death. Had she taken enough for death? Surely not—she had only touched the narrow mouth of the phial to her lips, then stoppered it quickly. No, it was sleep—her stormy pulses calmed to the rhythm of those feet, pacing, pacing, there beyond the door.

She waked. She was lying on her bed, and Manikrala stood beside her. It was morning.

“I heard you moaning, and thought you might be sick,” he said. “But you were asleep—there—against the door. I carried you to your bed and laid you there, and you did not wake. Once before I have done that—at Matale.”

She closed her eyes. She could speak steadily, she thought, if she did not see his face.

“You were kind. You have always been kind.”

“My child, my child”—how could she bear the tenderness of his voice?—“why are you taking it again?”

Her eyes flew open at that. He was holding out his hand, and she took the phial from it steadily enough—but when she fastened it into her dress her fingers shook.

“I needed it,” she said.

“That holds enough to kill you. You play with fire.”

“No new thing for me,” she said drearily. Then the significance of what he had said struck her. “How do you know?” she demanded.

“When first you came to me, and I realized that

you took that drug, do you think I did not find out all there was to know about it?"

There had been just that pitiful kindness in his face as he bent over the wounded dog. She shrank from it and buried her head in her arms.

"Tell me, dear—child." The last word came as if to reassure her. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No. No. I have had peace, with you."

"Why do you say, *have had*? Is it over?"

"Yes."

"Whose doing is that? Mine—or another's?"

That shocked her upright. He must not know that she had seen herself as the cause of his weariness, his trouble—he might even think he had driven her back!

"Not yours! Oh, my lord, not yours!"

The set of his mouth grew a little firmer, that was all.

"I am not surprised," he said at last. "I think I saw this coming when it was still far away. Perhaps before you saw it yourself. You have not been—even now, you are not—unhappy here?"

"No. No." She did not trust her eyes to lift, but her hand went up and clasped his.

"But you go. And yet, not gladly, I think? Why are you not glad? Is it because you are sorry for me?"

Sorry for him! She could not laugh at that yet. Sometime, perhaps. Now her only answer was that same desolately quiet no—no, like a little wave from a deep sea of bitterness, breaking only

to whisper its way back into the sea—to break again—and again.

“I am not even sorry for myself,” she said after a moment. “I go the way that I choose—why should anyone pity me? We are what we are.”

His hand was in hers, strong and firm and cool—she drew it to her, close to where the phial of dreams lay. Once—once she might feel it there! No harm to him in that—he would not notice whether she held his hand there, or to her cheek, in the old childish way.

“Think,” he said. “Little one, think what you are doing. You are leaving age and tender care and safety”—his voice deepened on that last word—“for youth and passion.” He felt her quiver, and all at once stern lines leaped into sight on his face as if the reckless chisel of a god had hewed them. He took a deep breath. “And suffering,” he finished. “This man is cruel. Cruel as a beast—no, beasts are not cruel as men can be. He will make you suffer. You know that?”

“Do I know that?” She laughed now. “Wise as you are, Teacher, you can teach me nothing there.”

“And yet, you go.”

“I must. It is a stronger thing than I.” She let his hand go, and with a swift lithe turn knelt on the bed, her hands clasped before her palm to palm, as in prayer, her eyes looking intensely into his. “I must do the thing that has come to me. How I shall fare in doing it, does not matter. He

is cruel—yes. Well, when I am with him, I shall be cruel, too. I know this—when I say good-by to you, I say good-by to peace and to all the good I have known since I began to live. Yet I must say it.”

Under his steady eyes, her own filled and overflowed. Her face drooped forward on his shoulder, and he felt through his thin coat the hot rush of her tears.

“Can there be no coming back?” he asked gently.

“No. No.” Again that surge and ebb of despair. “No coming back. Only to go on. Perhaps, at last—if I have the courage—but I am afraid of death.”

She sat back on her heels and rubbed her wet eyes impatiently.

“I did not mean to do this,” she said. “I did not know I could. Well, it is over, at least. Now you know. I might have known you would foresee it. You have always known me better than I knew myself—almost. You have understood me, when those who loved me could not.”

“There are many ways of loving,” he said quietly. “Perhaps that is my way.”

“A god’s way. Yes.”

He turned and went to the window, where he stood looking out, as he had stood when she waked after the Perahera.

“You said,” she went on, watching the sunlight on the gaunt strong line of his cheek, “you said that if you could you would lead me to peace,

whatever the journey might cost. That is not given, is it? Not even to the gods. And yet—you did know the way there. You took me there, once. Perhaps once in a lifetime is all that creatures like me can hope for—ah, my lord, my lord, if only we could have stayed there in the rock temple! If death could have taken me gently, there in the dark, at your feet!”

He did not move for a moment. Even the folds of his garments hung motionless, as if some petrifying magic had touched him. Then he turned to her—smiling.

“We will not speak of sad things in the little time we have left together,” he said. “When will you go?”

“To-night. I may stay till then?”

“Surely, child. Do you remember the morning at Kandy, when you brought me tea and teased me for oversleeping? I felt, I think, that this was to be our last morning, and I have made tea for you. You shall drink it in bed like an English lady. A moment, and I will bring it.”

Light as his words were, there was solemn dignity in his bearing, an infinite, yearning sadness in his eyes, that brought her upright on her knees before him.

“I worship you,” she breathed.

“It may be you do well.”

So the stone Buddha might have spoken, she thought. That was the man who would bind up the hurt brute’s wounds, but would not put it out of its pain. She hid her face in her hands, hot

with shame. How had she ever dared to dream that he might be as other men?

He touched her shoulder gently. She looked up, to see him standing there with the tea, one cup poured ready for her. He was still smiling, that fixed, sculptured smile of the stone Buddha.

"No more tears," he said.

She took the tea, sipped it, and gave an involuntary shiver. Bitter—bitter. She was not used to the taste of tears, she thought—or else the memory of Badur's strong essence had lasted from the night before. With an effort she drank the rest of the cup at a draught and held it out to him, afraid lest his grave steady eyes might have seen the momentary revulsion. She would not spoil his little play of kindness.

"Such good tea! May I have some more?"

He poured it silently. This cup had only a faint suggestion of bitterness. Evidently the first draught had braced her nerves to their usual poise. She set the empty cup on the tray, and rose with a spring.

"There—all is well with me now, thanks to you!" she exclaimed.

Tall and straight as he was, he seemed to grow still taller and straighter. The stony smile was transfigured all at once to a radiant tenderness. Yet his words were commonplace enough.

"Yes. All is well. And now, how shall we spend this last day of ours? Shall we make a festival of it? I will close the boutique, if you like, and we can go——"

"No. I want"—in spite of her, there was a quiver in her voice—"I want a day like all the rest. Our common days have been better than festivals to me. Let us only forget that it is—the last."

But it was not so easy to forget. While he was busy in the boutique—and it seemed to her that never had so many people come to buy—she put the house, already clean, in scrupulous order; but when it was done, there was something terrifying in the result. It had the awful composure of a house where one is lying dead. Shuddering, she hastily disarranged things here and there, with a wry laugh for her own folly. She was very merry at their meal, for which she had prepared his favorite dishes—almost too merry. She made a brave show of appetite, and if he saw the untasted food she concealed so dextrously, he made no sign.

So the day passed. In the afternoon she had been sewing for him. None of his clothes were in need of mending, so jealous was her vigilance, but she took precautionary stitches with a needle that seemed to grow strangely heavy as she worked. She slipped off first her bracelets, then her rings, all but the opal, but nothing seemed to ease the drag. Slower and slower her hand moved, till it stopped and she let her aching head droop forward on the garment. Waves of fever swept over her, and yet she was cold—cold—with a peculiar chill that came from somewhere deep within her as if the blood were curdling about her heart. A slow stagnation spread through her veins, till she

felt that all the life in her was concentrated in the pain that hammered through her head. Tuan Noor had said there was fire in his temples and behind his eyes—was it like this? She had meant to hurt him—but she had not meant pain like this.

With a sob of terror she shook off her lassitude and raised her head. It was dark. Would Tuan Noor come for her in anger, thinking she had broken her promise? No—it was not dark. The darkness had been in her own eyes, and now, as she rubbed them, it passed like a cloud. But it was nearly sunset. She got to her feet, folded the garment carefully, though she could hardly feel its substance in her fingers, and put it away. Then she made ready to go.

Manikrالا was sitting by the door when she came from the inner room. As he heard her step, he rose and stood waiting. She crossed the space between them slowly, uncertainly, her eyes dilated, unnaturally bright.

“Where are you?” she asked, though her groping hand had touched his arm. “Have I nearly reached you? It is such a long way.”

“I am here,” he said. “Rest a little.” She leaned against him as his arm went around her.

“So far,” she said. “I am so tired.” She spoke hoarsely as if breath came hard, and framed her words laboriously with stiff lips. Gentle as his arm was, lightly as it supported her, its muscles were rigid, and his teeth caught his lower lip. Suddenly she swayed forward, with a shiver.

"Sunset—" she said. "Red, like blood. Yellow, like gold. Do not be angry. I am coming."

She turned to Manikrala, after a faltering step or two.

"Help me to take off my anklets," she pleaded. "I am so tired, I cannot stoop. I would never get up again. And it is hard to walk when my feet are so heavy."

"You are not wearing them," he answered.

"I remember." It was pitiful, the bewildered trouble of her face, but he kept his eyes fixed on her without wavering. "I gave them to Badur for the drug. You do not mind? You could not give me peace, but—that is a little forgetfulness. There is another thing, while I can remember." Fumbling with uncertain fingers, she drew off the opal ring and held it out to him. "I cannot take this with me. It would be as if you were there and saw me, as I must be with him. I would be—ashamed."

"I will keep it for you,"—he spoke slowly and distinctly. "When you come back to me, I will put it on your hand again. And you will wear it in peace, and not be ashamed."

She smiled. It was as if she had heard him with her spirit, clear of the sick misery of her senses. Slowly, but with no uncertainty, she lifted her hand, touched his eyelids gently, and pressed the fingers to her lips.

He stood, his hands clenched hard on his breast, watching the slender, hesitating figure as it went away without a backward look. Then, at a little

distance, he followed, till she had turned the corner of the street where Tuan Noor lived. There he stood for a moment, till he heard the clang of a closing door.

It was as if something had broken in him, and let the tall straightness of his figure bend and sag. Once or twice, as he walked along the narrow street toward the police-station, he touched the house-walls as one leans on a staff.

"What can I do for you, Teacher?" the police sergeant asked after due exchange of greetings.

"A kind service," the shopkeeper answered. "No, thank you, I will not sit—my business will take only a moment. My wife has left me and has gone to Tuan Noor. I am concerned about her. When first I knew her, she was in the habit of taking a dangerous drug; to-night, when she went from my house to Tuan Noor's, I think she had taken too strong a dose of it. I am—concerned about her. You will understand"—voice and manner were perfect in their dignified composure, but as the evening darkened, the overhead lights of the police station brought out grim shadows in the strong, aquiline face. "You will understand that it is not possible for me to keep watch on her, to know whether she is well or not."

"Do you care?" the sergeant blurted.

"I care," Manikrala answered evenly, "so much that I ask you to keep her especially in mind. In case of any circumstance in which I could help or serve her, will you be kind enough to notify me?"

"You mean, if she gets sick and Tuan Noor gets rid of her?"

"Or if she dies."

"You shall know, Manikrala. I will tell the watchman to give that street an extra round to-night."

"I am grateful to you."

The shopkeeper bowed with dignity, and went out. The sergeant looked after him, and sighed.

"What a fool a man can be about a woman!" he reflected. "Breaking his heart over a butterfly that any hand can catch. What could he expect, though, when he is so old? I had not realized how old he was."

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW DREAMS COME TRUE

TUAN Noor stood waiting in his doorway. He had told himself that he would not go to meet her, that she should come to him, all the way to his threshold, but when he saw her turn the corner and come slowly along the narrow street, a slight vivid figure that seemed to gather and hold the last crimson and purple of the sunset, he held to the sides of the doorway, shaken as if a high wind were driving him toward her.

She was walking as in a dream, her face lifted, rapt, when she saw him waiting there with wide arms, his face transfigured as it had been at the Perahera by the fierce light of desire. Whatever her dream had been, that sight brought back reality. She stopped, closing her eyes. Not even ignorance to help her—she knew so well every step of what was before her. And all at once what had seemed rather wearisome than evil to her had become a horror and a deadly fear.

Horror and deadly fear—the python coil of his arms that lifted her, his rush into the house, the clang of the door he flung shut behind them. He stood there for a moment, his back against the closed door, as if he had snatched her from a pursuer.

“I could not wait.” His voice came in hoarse

gasps, like the breath of a spent runner. "You call me night and day, I have no rest from you. Nothing is left of me but the want of you, and now—the door has closed again, and it shuts you in—with me."

He laid her among the silk cushions with which he had heaped his rough pallet.

"Crown me, my queen," he whispered, bending over her—but she turned away her face.

"The gold—first."

"Little usurer! I love you for holding to your terms. Mock me, torment me—I will love you all the more for it now that you are mine, as I could have killed you for it when you were his."

The words stabbed. Her hand wavered up to her breast and fumbled at the close bodice—a little of the drug—just enough to numb her to what must come.

His fingers put hers aside and trembled as they loosened the folds of muslin. Then he stooped and touched the bruise with his lips.

"Did I do that, beloved? I was mad that night. I could not bear to think of you with any other man, even one tame as an old house-cat curled asleep in your lap. I shall hurt you again, for I am a tiger-lover—only a tiger's claws could hold you, devil-goddess!—but always I shall be there to heal when I hurt."

She pushed him away. If her futile fingers could only have closed about his throat!

"You are trembling," he murmured. "I am trembling, too, and weak—Allah! When I tor-

tured prisoners, sometimes they cried like children afterward. I am near crying now, I think. The gold—I will heap the gold on you like flowers on the altar, and you shall laugh at me. That will bring back my strength. You shall laugh at me, and I will drink the laughter like wine—my woman.”

She heard him busy in the corner of the room, moving a chest on the floor, talking over the chink of metal—and in her blurred consciousness under his half-understood words reverberated like the note of a deep gong, her resolve to die.

“All yours, every trinket, every rupee. You shall wear the jewels when we go away—it will be safe, for you will be veiled from head to foot as a good Moslem’s woman should be. Other men have seen you for the last time. You are mine—mine. Early in the morning we will go. I have a friend who rents a motor car to rich people—well, who is rich now if not I? He will take us quickly to Trincomalee, and we will sail from there on a boat over the sea—as far as the country of my people, perhaps.”

What did anything matter now except to get the stopper from the phial before he should turn and snatch it from her? Again and again it slipped through her paralyzed fingers. With a desperate effort, she closed her teeth on the stopper and wrenched it out—as in a bad dream, the bottle was empty!

Empty! Empty! All the life that was left in her gathered to one flash of understanding, like

the last flame of a dying fire. And Tuan Noor had talked so boldly of love and death! How funny!

He leaped to his feet, his hands full of gold that he flung toward the couch.

"Yes, laugh, devil-goddess! Now comes my turn——"

The sovereigns of Nila's *thali* leaped and spun forgotten on the floor.

Night was not over when the police sergeant was called by a frightened watchman.

"You told me to keep an eye on Tuan Noor's house. There is something wrong there—terribly wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Strange noises, horrible noises—one would say a cage of mad tigers——"

The sergeant frowned, biting his lip.

"Did you hear a woman's voice?"

"It might have been a man's or a woman's or a devil's. The people of the street are all roused—well they may be! I tried the door, but it is bolted and the shutters all closed tight."

"And I fancy you made no great effort to open them. Well, I will come."

He shook his head regretfully on his silent progress through the dark town. He had liked the young Malay. With all his faults, he had been an efficient constable.

An excited neighbor met them at the entrance of the street.

"I hear no disturbance," said the sergeant.

"But look! look! we have pried a crack in the shutter."

From the house there came a reassuring sound. Tuan Noor's voice, a little hoarse, a little strange, but crooning quietly enough an old song the sergeant had heard him sing many times.

*"If I were a stone, my passion's fire would split me.
If I were a river, my longing tears would flood me.
Darling, I would offer flowers to the past
If prayers would bring you to my arms again."*

"He has been drinking, that is all," said the sergeant. "There is a woman with him. I know."

"There was a woman with him," the man returned grimly. "Look."

The sergeant obeyed. In the small rude room, lighted by a single lamp, there was one spot of incongruous splendor—the couch with its shimmering luxury of silk and tinsel, where a woman lay who would have seemed asleep had not the lamplight gleamed on her eyes under half-closed, unmoving lids. At her feet, a pile of gold and paper money had been heaped like the offerings one lays upon an altar. More gold was on her hands, her arms, her bosom where no breath stirred the shining weight. Tuan Noor knelt beside her, looking eagerly into her face, his ever-moving fingers slipping back and forth over her passive hand a heavy gold bracelet of European make.

At the sight of that trinket, the sergeant's nos-

trils dilated suddenly. He had among his records Hamilton's description of his wedding gift with its engraved words. If the name of Motu Rayen should be inside that band of gold—if this should be the Maradeniya treasure!

He wiped his forehead and leaned forward tense and breathless as Tuan Noor began to speak, his restless hands clasping that inflexible figure.

"Devil-goddess, are you still cold? Is it not enough? You were alive when I carried you over my threshold. You were warm—God, how soft and warm! when my kiss ended your laughing, and you did not turn your face away nor slip from my arms. Then the dream came back, the horrible dream, and now I cannot wake. Wake me, you! I shall go mad if I keep on dreaming. Have mercy! what more can I do? I have given you all the lame man's treasure—see it here at your feet. I have clothed you in gold from head to foot as I promised you." His voice rose steadily like the resistless advance of a storm. The knot of watchers at the window shivered as they saw above his bent head the frozen subtle smile of her unmoved face.

"There must be more than gold upon your altars"—he drew back a little, his voice suddenly hushed. "I remember now. Yes—you shall have—everything."

The sergeant swallowed, straightened, and drew the revolver from his belt. He had understood little of the Malay's raving, but enough for his own purposes. He strode to the door and was

about to knock when his lifted hand was checked by a sound from within—a cry not human, such as the watchman had described. It—or some sight that came with it—drove back the curious onlookers from the window like the rush of a gale. The sergeant braced himself for a repetition of it; none came, but the silence was even worse.

The sergeant, with an oath, set his shoulder to the door and drove in the thin panel. Through the crash of splintered wood and the turmoil of voices, Tuan Noor lay as quiet and indifferent as the Opal herself. his face hidden in the soft darkness of her loosened hair, his fingers clasped in hers. His last offering dripped red from their locked hands, and gathered in a dark pool about the sovereigns on the floor.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BRIDE'S LIGHT

"We quite miss Mr. Hamilton, don't we, Eve?" Mrs. Greeley-Foster, placidly stirring her after-dinner coffee in the lounge of the Queen's Hotel, smiled benignantly at her young companion. "A very fine young man. Did he set any day for that visit to his plantation?"

Eve Gray helped herself deliberately to two lumps of sugar as she answered, "No. He said he would write, but he has probably forgotten about it."

"Well, there has hardly been time, has there? The trial only ended—let me see—day before yesterday, wasn't it? My dear, I thought you said sugar spoiled coffee for you. Don't you want a fresh cup?"

"Three days ago. This is Friday. No, thank you, I had a fancy to try"—she stopped and set down her coffee untasted, her eyes shining.

"How pleasant," Mrs. Greeley-Foster observed tranquilly, without turning. "Do you know, I had an idea that he might come instead of writing. He seemed so to enjoy town life, didn't he? Really, it must be dull for him up there alone in the hills, you know." She looked up with a genial smile. "Good evening, Mr. Hamilton."

Hamilton bowed over the welcoming hand she stretched out to him.

"We hadn't expected to see you again so soon," said Eve.

"I'm only here for the night, going through to Jaffna."

"To Jaffna?"

"Motu Rayen's there. I've just found him through the police. He went away without a word to me, you know."

"Of course, with all you had done, he was afraid you would feel bound to care for him now. I would have behaved exactly the same way in his place," said Mrs. Greeley-Foster. "Won't you have coffee?"

"No, thank you. But that's absurd—it is my right to take care of him. You heard." Hamilton was too excited to be embarrassed or self-conscious. "I'll tell him off for that properly, when I see him. But as it happens, he needs no help from me. Jove!" he laughed boyishly, "he's the rich one of the pair!"

"They've found the money?" Mrs. Greeley-Foster exclaimed. Eve said nothing, but it was to the starry questioning of her eyes that Hamilton directed his answer.

"Yes, they've found it. Barely touched—perhaps fifty rupees short. The necklace is gone past praying for, but we knew that. They did find the other nineteen sovereigns," he added, with an odd change of tone. His face clouded for a moment and his brows knit at some memory he did

not share with them. "Now I'm going on to Jaffna to find the family and bring them back with me. He can have his old place on my estate. It"—he took a long breath—"it's a miracle. It's like a dream come true."

"Well, they do sometimes, don't they?" Mrs. Greeley-Foster finished her coffee and rose. "Tell Eve all about it. It was really extraordinary what an interest she took in the trial. Especially in Motu Rayen. I have some letters that I must get off to-night if they are to go by the next boat, but she will give me the story in the morning. You'll stop a day or two when you come back from Jaffna, won't you? Good night."

She trailed her black draperies slowly up the stairs. At the landing she looked back. They were standing where she had left them, and while she watched they began to drift toward the door that opened toward the lake. The older woman sighed a little, smiled wisely, and passed on out of sight.

"I can't believe it, somehow." Eve broke a somewhat awkward silence. "It seems too good to be possible. Things like that don't happen."

"I used to think so about your ever coming back," said Hamilton. "But you're here."

"I never made anything of my drawing, after all," said Eve irrelevantly. "I was all set for fame and fortune and big service to the world—you know? And nothing has come of it but a few illustrations. They were not what would matter to me or to anyone else—shadows. Something

was missing—and the East kept calling me, as if it had what I needed. You said I would come back.” Her tone changed abruptly, perhaps at the remembrance of what else he had said. “Tell me about Motu Rayen’s treasure. How did they find it? Where did they find it?”

“In Ambalana. I’d rather not tell you how they found it—that’s too ugly. But Tuan Noor was the one who had it after all, and he’s dead.”

They had reached the Esplanade by this time and were leaning on the broad stone wall by the lake. The soft lap of rippling water sounded clearly in the hush that followed Hamilton’s last word.

“I can guess,” said Eve breathlessly. “That woman—he loved her—what love meant to him. I saw his face in court that day. And she wouldn’t take what he stole for her, so he killed himself. Was that the way of it?”

“Near enough.”

“I wonder”—Eve began, then stopped, “There are so many things I don’t seem to understand,” she ended wistfully.

“You haven’t any equipment in your mind to understand people like that,” Hamilton told her.

“That’s I—or that might have been I,” she reminded him.

“That’s all right, but it has limits. Nila, perhaps. Yes, you could say that of her. You are a woman to make one man happy”—Hamilton’s voice broke a little and his hand tightened on the stone coping—“to be loved and cherished and

sheltered as well as he can—Nila, yes. Not the Opal. No.”

“Perhaps the Opal was like that, too—only she didn’t find her man soon enough. Why do we talk about things that hurt? To-night is too beautiful.”

The world has few places lovelier than the shore of Kandy Lake on a moonless night of stars. The lamps along the farther side made swaying golden trails in the calm water. The vast expectant stillness of the fragrant dark, an invisible presence intensely alive, brooded over their quickened pulses and their disturbed words.

“Motu Rayen—and Nila—in a little house in Jaffna.”

Hamilton drew back as he spoke, lest she should know that he was trembling.

“And happiness on the way to them.”

Eve’s voice trailed into silence.

In the little house in Jaffna, Motu Rayen was weary in body but far more troubled in spirit. He had endured patiently Nila’s dutiful kindness—but the sweet shy tenderness of her manner to him in the days since the trial had been a mounting agony that grew intolerable.

“She is sorry for me as she was before,” he thought. “I must not make it harder for her by misunderstanding, as I did then.”

To hold himself continually in leash, to live again in every word and act of hers the dream that he knew was vain.

"It will pass," he told himself. "She pities me now—she will soon forget, and be busy again with the house and the child. If only she can be happy, a little!"

The house was bare and cheerless, that August night, but Nila smiled and said that it was beautiful.

"You make it beautiful for me," Motu Rayen told her gently. "We may never be rich again, but I can give you comfort."

"I am rich enough now," she said, "but—there is one thing that I want."

He looked up, surprised. She had never made demands.

"What, jewel?"

"What is a wife without a thali?" she asked, her eyelids lowered, as she stood before him.

"That is gone, you know." He sighed. "The coin showed that. Even if anything should be recovered, that is gone. I will get you a chain of gold some day, but—how does one tie the thali twice?"

"Like this"—she took his hands in hers, raised them, and laid them on her shoulders. "I will never lose this thali if you close it about my neck, my lord, my beloved, king of my heart."

She looked into his eyes now. They could hear through the silence the soft breathing of their sleeping child. She was his wife, but in her eyes he saw the light of the bride—the glory that a woman does not realize and that a man can not describe. His hands met.

In the silent sweet-breathing darkness by Kandy Lake, Eve lifted eyes that shone with more than the starlight.

"It almost seemed as if we were there—for a minute—didn't you feel it?" she whispered. "We can do so much for them, can't we?"

His voice was deep as he answered, but quiet—quiet as one who sees the first faint dawning of a longed-for day.

"We will,"

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