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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

A Grave Is Five Feet Deep

By AALLA ZAATA

Every other night the Englishman dug the grave of a little child one inch deeper—a strange weird tale of India

“PLACE haunted?” inquired the prospective buyer of the too-anxious owner.

“No,” answered Captain Colbraith, and a little gesture seemed to relinquish sappan, cassia and palm trees, white laurel, hibiscus and thickets of red geranium, the whole exquisite estate of Huipul. The larger part of this flower garden, of great and small growth, he had brought to this place and by infinite labor, by spending a fortune, he owned one of the beauty spots of India. This man would buy it and never know of its different fringes in the spring, of its passion torches in the summer, its later avid verdure, its last whispered deflowering.

The two Englishmen stood silent a moment, gazing at the wonderful grounds, copied partly from English lands and partly from the lands of an Indian prince, the magnificence of the East mingling with the clearly defined methods of English grounds. The residence was of the red sandstone of India, as were the terraces and walks leading to it.

Meredith was not an impressionable man, but some curious thoughts struggled upward in his mind. There was some strange mystery here. A man did not spend fifteen years making a paradise to put it on the market as cheaply as had Colbraith, unless— Without actually intending it, he said impulsively, “You could have sold it ten times over at the price you ask if there is no debarment.”

After it was said he regretted it, for

Colbraith’s face showed strain, the strain of a man who did not sleep well, or who was recovering from fever.

Colbraith’s hesitance was so slight that the other would not have noticed it but for his absorbed interest. “I have just decided to sell it; I am leaving the country in a few days, not to return. Come to the house and have a drink.”

Meredith paused before entering the porte-cochère. It is almost impossible for anyone, not a cosmopolitan, to imagine such unexampled beauty as is produced here when wealth and landscape knowledge have endorsed the native land.

The residence was on an eminence, but so perfectly incorporated that it appeared almost level, and only the twelve steps at the porte-cochère asserted the fact. The driveway was half a mile in circumference and wide enough for two gigantic motors to pass. The center of this, a small lake, was so crowded with white and pink water lilies that they had to be regularly thinned. Around it were the Kashmir roses, in such loveliness and fragrance that it might have been said of them, as of Kashmir’s, that they had been cultivated for forty generations. Red stone steps led down to this lake here and there, and a couple of boats idled on the water, painted the exact shade of its marvelous green. It was a nursery of dreams. Stretching away, as far as the eyes could see, were the crimson and yellow mimosas, the plumes of the tamarisk, the palms, singly and in groups, as potentates, as parliaments,

How could Colbraith give it up?—if *he* bought it no power on earth could make him relinquish it.

MEREDITH followed Colbraith into the immense hall, hung about with Eastern tapestries, carved with intricate Moorish work, furnished with the Black-wood furniture of Bombay. He would have paused here, would have greatly enjoyed handling the specimens of enamel and ivory, the marvelous damascene work of the Punjab, but a possible buyer must not be too interested.

He looked at Colbraith's back, and if backs told anything this one said he was at the end of his tether and his life was futureless. He had been drinking hard, that was certain. Meredith wondered a little. India is the home of many derelicts, of strange, unbelievable stories, only waiting for death to write the final chapter.

He recalled what he had heard about this man in Calcutta. Report had it that he was returning to England to marry some girl and that the affair—he met her in India—had been going on long before his wife's death. He had actually brought her to this place and kept her a week without his wife's knowledge! The residence was large enough. With servants with whom the fear of a master was as much instilled as the fear of their gods, it could have been managed. Then the wife died, because of his barbarity, for she would not divorce him; and now the girl refused to live in this small palace of beauty.

Frequently women came from England to obtain husbands and then insisted upon returning to England to live. How much of this was true? But what made the man look so—trapped? That was the word for it. If the unloved wife *was* dead and he was about to marry the girl

he thought would recompense him—but they all thought that at first, and before the engagement was a month old——

From room to room Colbraith showed the house, saying very little, just a word or two now and then to call Meredith's attention to some bit of inlay work, a panel of hammered brass from Ahmadnagar in Tanjore, marble work, in tracery as delicate as new-budded leaves. Then Colbraith proceeded to a room which was evidently his sanctum.

Dust and cigar ashes lay thick upon tables that would have brought a huge sum in London. Torn papers, books lying open, gloves, empty wine-bottles, Eastern sashes, swords that were not for ornament, letters, pictures, many smokers' sets in brass, satinwood, ivory—the litter was not easily enumerated and would have been difficult to reduce to order. Meredith stood hesitant, for not a seat but was filled with some of this stuff.

"I never let them touch it," and Colbraith frowned at a chair that he seemed to expect would make room for his visitor. With one movement he swept it clear and motioned for Meredith to take it. "It's the one place I keep for my own," he said explanatorily.

Meredith sat down, surprized that anyone could permit such strata of disorder in a room petitioning for the best a human being could give.

Colbraith clapped his hands, and a splendid specimen of the Goorkhas made his appearance. He had brought drinks without being ordered and now put them down before Colbraith. There was green Chartreuse and brandy. Meredith chose Chartreuse, Colbraith brandy. A large glass, not the usual one, stood by the brandy-bottle and was evidently customary, also.

There was a short silence while the

men drank. When Meredith had filled the large glass again, the conversation was resumed.

"Those window mountings came from one of the palaces in the Rajput States."

"They are exquisite," murmured Meredith, and he got up to examine the work more closely. Amid a collection of hunting and fishing traps, on one of the tables, he saw a photograph, overturned, and so near the edge of the table that it just missed falling. He put out his hand to replace it, but as he touched it, it fell.

"I am sorry," he said, as he picked it up, and turned it about to replace it. It was in an encased silver frame, made in Bikaner. But it was the face that made him pause, with his hand half-way to the table. A woman's face, not beautiful, but one so much beyond beauty in the way of sorcery—deviltry—that it held the attention as might a tragic actress at a high moment. The photograph was tinted, but one did not need to be told by the artist that black eyes and blue-black hair belonged here, that the half-scornful look was more bewitching than coquetry, that had she been painted with a dagger in her hands it could not have asserted her claim to the dagger more. There was not merely one story printed on her face, there were as many as Scheherazade knew!

He brought the photograph to Colbraith. "Will you tell me her history?" he asked.

Colbraith started violently. "Put it back!" he said in a loud voice that was beyond control. "I did not know it was there—*put it back!*"

"I am sorry." Meredith deposited the picture, face down, on the table.

Colbraith poured out a glass of brandy and drank it down so quickly that he strangled. When the coughing was over, Meredith drew his chair nearer. He felt

in some sure way that the fate of the place would be decided in a few minutes.

THERE was silence for the time it took Meredith to fumble for a cigar. But he did not put it in his mouth. Some thought had come to him, stirring old stories, memories of unnatural tales. He turned frankly to Colbraith.

"I have not been in India long, but long enough to know of many curious things, where property was sold which really included a death sentence to the new owner, by plague, superstition, inhuman vows of the Indians. If you will tell me the truth about Huipul and it is not prohibitive in this way, I will buy it."

Colbraith's expression showed his unwillingness.

"I will hold it as at the confessional."

The other hesitated, spoke quickly. "Then you shall know. The place must be sold immediately. I do not think I could remain another——"

He picked up his glass, looked in it as if expecting to find it full of liquor, then put it down.

"Five years ago I met the woman whose photograph you saw. It was in Calcutta. There are circles and circles there, socially. She was not in the first, but in a set that received Eurasians—Indian blood does not mingle with the English, and the Eurasians have the poniards of both and not a white flag between them! She was—you have seen the picture—as hot-tempered as I was, and I—I was actually proud when it was said of me that I was like the great Tippoo, who had rather live a day as a tiger than a lifetime as a sheep."

The wind ruffled softly through the open windows; then wave after wave of boisterous play began, just enough to seem to enclose the two men in complete isolation.

"We had several bitter disagreements after we were engaged. I remember once she said she had rather commit *bari-kari* than marry me. You know that song of the Uzbeks?

I had rather the knife was my end
Than the touch of your traitor hand;
I had rather it severed my flesh
At the voice of my own command!

"She quoted that to me."

Colbraith put out his hand for his glass, but Meredith shoved it just out of reach, his eyes commanding the other as he did so. "Don't mix things," he said. "Go on with your story."

"We were married with priests, flowers, blessings, all the things that could confirm—lawlessness. I have been in the East fifteen years, and in that time, perhaps, some of the evil that lies in wait for you here, as scorpions, may have augmented mine. For I do not excuse myself. As I was then I would have married her if she had been a leper—I would have fought her had she been an angel.

"We disagreed from the first. I brought her straight here. She had seen the place, and when we became acquainted I thought she wanted to marry me because of it. She knew I loved it, that India had been scraped, as far as a foreigner could scrape it, to make this place what it is. Yet that first evening, when I wanted her to have dinner in the kiosk you saw back of the lake, and we walked down there, she refused. She must have read in my face something of my attachment for Huiplul, because a look of resentment crossed her face.

"I believe you care more for it than you do for me!" she cried.

"I started forward, but she put up her hand as if to strike me. In a moment we both remembered, but it was as if a curtain had been rung up on a scene not yet ready for the audience. Say what I would, and I said a great deal, she would

not consent to dine there. The moonlight in that place," Colbraith's reminiscent tone told his devotion as unmistakably as fallen leaves tell where their trees stand, "with the tiny fountain in the center of the table, splashing one's hands now and then, the dhaks, with their crimson flowers making the walls inside—God!

"It went from bad to worse—to the very worst. If anything is tainted, you know what heat does for it. What does it matter, say the Shiahhs, if the sword fall on the flesh or the flesh on the sword? There came a time when whatever was proposed by the one was negatived by the other.

"If you are married you know something of this; if not—no devil can tell you how, between husband and wife, there can be words bitterer than the ashes of Sodom, more cruel than the rending of Zamir's wife. You do not know that Indian *kaid*? Thank whatever gods are yours, East or West, that you do not know; the eyes can bear but so much sun, the ears but so much drum-fire.

"A child was born to us in due course, a boy. I thought that would make a difference, but it only made the abyss between us wider. We quarreled over the name, and there was nothing I wished that she did not oppose. Do you know," the man's voice held that wonder that we keep for the impossibilities that still occur, "that she taught that boy to strike at me when I came near him! To call me Krishna—that Hindoo god that disported himself with thousands of gopinis, that was so notorious no Indian outcaste girl will be his wife! You know girls are married to the gods?"

Colbraith considered a moment, trying to make this thing intelligible to foreign ears.

"If it was over, my lips would be sealed, but it is not over, and that is the

reason the place has to go. We were nearly always alone here; occasionally a stray man came on business, but not often, and, of course, the isolation exaggerated the difficulties. We went out of our way to find things to quarrel about and sometimes Isabel actually manufactured them. I remember one day she said a python *reticulatus* crossed the lawn. She must have hunted that up in some history, for no woman would care to inform herself about the largest snakes in the world.

"I told her they seldom, or never, left the big forests, for they feed on deer, and live near their food. Chancing to look out of the window a little later I saw her with a stick, the size of my arm, drawing an irregular line along the sandy drive. I went out and seized her hands. She did not shrink. 'Why not?' she said deliberately, without being in the least affected by my discovery. 'We must quarrel until one or the other is dead!'

"Another time—I am telling you some of these things because I want you to know that the curse is on *me*, that it has nothing to do with a purchaser. You understand, don't you?"

The words were very insistent, and the wind, which had been stirring with little mysterious noises in the room, suddenly ceased. It was like a second question mark to Colbraith's question; it was as if it listened for Meredith's reply, wondering if he were credulous enough to answer, believe.

MEREDITH felt himself shiver, in the heavy gold of an Indian afternoon. "Of course, of course," he replied hastily, surprized at his nerves.

"Another time—you say you have lived in India just a year. That is not long enough to salaam to the East! Among

certain tribes, like the Pathans, Beloochees, the cutthroats of the borderlands, ferocity is a business and the knowledge of this business can be bought, like any other commodity. And with the knowledge, the *means*."

He stopped and Meredith recalled him. It was getting late. "Another time——" he prompted.

Colbraith came back from some place that was as far away as *jahannam*. "I was trying to piece it together for you, credibly. But not Indian bred, you are not even born, say the Vaishnava sects. So—the Hindoo gods have human attributes, some good, others unspeakably vile. One branch of the Minas—they of *decoity* ill-fame—employs certain men who invoke the gods in their godless profession of the black arts. These go to further lengths than the Minas usually do; for, strange as it may seem, though these last make their living by lying and thieving they are a kindly people and actually do a great deal of charitable work.

"The Satenga, however, are ruthless. They are burned red by suns, begrimed, their dress filthy, a mass of torn cotton underneath, sheepskin coats over all, and on their never-combed heads they wear a turban called a Koola. They are like no other people in India. The Minas, occasionally employing them, actually try them when their barbarities are excessive and, on Government service once, I was at a trial. The similarity of these men impressed me—I should not know one from the Vanaprastha, the Sanyasi, the Kshatriya—they are as much alike as snakes. On more than one occasion the English Government has used them, but nothing but retribution has followed.

"Another time, to go on, I returned to Huiplul at dusk one evening and throwing my reins to a *ghorewala* was

about to enter the house, when I saw what I thought was a bit of white, not far from the corner of the house, a woman's dress. Isabel never remained out of doors when it began to dusk, she always said she was afraid.

"I turned the corner hurriedly, thinking I scarcely know what, startled a little, perhaps. No Isabel was in sight, but in the distance, nearing that bit of woods"—Colbraith pointed—"there was a man. To my astonishment I thought I recognized a Satenga. A moment later I knew I was correct, for an odor of sheepskin floated to me—they wear these coats constantly, even in the hot sun.

"I stared after him, then remembering I was unarmed called to Narapor, my *khansaman*. He did not appear at once, and by the time he got to the woods the man could have reached his destination—the final pit.

"As soon as I changed I went to Isabel. In some way I felt she knew why this man was there and it was for no good purpose. She was in the drawing-room, idly fanning, and her eyes met mine with a look of barely veiled hostility, but I thought, too, with dread.

"'Who was that man to whom you were talking just now?' I asked.

"'What man?'

"'That—Satenga!'

"'What is a Satenga?' she inquired.

"'You may know one of these days, for he would rather kill you for that emerald on your finger than leave you to grieve for its loss.'

"'A robber! Why didn't you——'

"'I did and I will,' I answered, as I left the room.

"I HAD almost forgotten the incident, though, three days later. There had been some crawfish in the lake, making holes that let out the water. I had it

drained, the places cemented, and was enjoying its beauty again. I had just seated myself on a sandstone bench and was wishing it had a back when I saw Isabel coming from the house. I wondered what she wanted to ask me. Such thoughts come, said Boolava, when one lives in the river and is at enmity with the crocodile.

"Half laughingly she said, 'I have been teaching Glenburn'—our boy—'some dance steps. How do you like them?'

"She lifted her dress and began some intricate movement that reminded me of the dances of the Khattaks in the Punjab. These men dance with drawn swords, slashing at imaginary enemies until they, themselves, are often covered with blood. The sunlight, flashing on her jeweled bracelets——

"'Chale-jao!' I exclaimed—'Go away!' And I said it in the tone one uses to a *mash'alchi*.

"But she went on, and I straightened myself to get up and make her stop when a quick breath touched me from behind, something *hurled* over my head. Swifter than thought my hands went up, pushing it away as I turned. An instant's delay would have been fatal—it was a kurong!"

"'A what?'" inquired Meredith, leaning forward, the better to gather Colbraith's evidently dreadful meaning.

"'A kurong—you don't mean to say you never heard of one?'"

Meredith shook his head.

Colbraith looked his incredulity. "You have heard of the Thugs, professional murderers? The Satengas go them one better, for they are assisted in their deviltry by the gods. India's religion has one hundred thousand hells—the Indians do nothing by a gnat's scale—and those who enter evil trades go to Rowrave, where they will be tormented by fabulous animals, called the rurus. The favorite means

by which the Satengas secure their victims is by this kurong, of which you have never heard! It is not the garotting of the Thugs, which kills at once, it is"—he took up his glass and dropped it on the floor, where it smashed to atoms, entirely unconscious of the act as he finished the sentence—"hell's death.

"It is an arrangement of something like ropes that are so connected the throat is pinioned, the arms, the legs. *One* lasso-like throw and the legs are fastened together, the arms to the sides and this hangman's rope is about the neck. But—here comes the gods' part, no doubt—it is *not* a rope, but something so slick that the individual caught in this trap is unable to hold it, though his hands can touch that part around his waist. It is supposed to be made of"—Colbraith's lowered voice told what ravellings his nerves were—"snakeskins with their guts prepared in some way to toughen and at the same time make them pliable, a cat-gut affair! And it adheres! If it touches the neck it is impossible to get free—my hands pushed it off before it settled there.

"Even as I turned, the Satenga was coiling something in his hands—by heaven, I see it now!—and then, like the serpent of whose breed he was, disappeared in the woods. It is only necessary to say that when a man is taken in this way his death is assured, though it may not take place for——"

Colbraith shuddered. "I could not pursue him—I might as well have tried to pursue a hyena's howl.

"Something touched my arm. 'What was it?' cried Isabel. 'Oh, what was it?'

"I had forgotten her. She stood as though terribly frightened. I suppose she was, but there was some expression in her eyes that made me say, 'How many rupees did you promise the man?'

"If she was frightened before, she was terrified now. A man *is* lord of his wife

in India. I had but to go back to the house and say, 'Take my wife and bring her to the lake,' and not a *mazdur* would have remonstrated by the butt of a paper-knife. If only I had made her part of it for ever!"

Meredith stared. Was Colbraith losing his mind?

"Of course I could prove nothing, really knew nothing at that time, but now I could prove—premeditated murder! I was sure, though, she would be glad if I died. I had made my will—it's the first thing you do in India, you know—and left her everything. I began to piece things together and, at last, to hate. I proposed to her more than once that we should separate, of course thinking she would be the one to go. At the first mention of it she said she would be delighted, that she thought it strange it had not occurred to us sooner. India is so tremendous in every way, in *impossible* things, like fevers and Johar, like opium and cholera, that if one has any tie, no matter how galling, it is seldom separation is considered. Better anything than the unknown here, but I had money—there could be no question of the bare bones of life.

"Two days later she came to me—we were under that tree."

Colbraith pointed to a perfect mimosa, its frond-like branches notching the sky, its lower ones drooping shelteringly about a wide circle on which there was a small stone, very white, but as he did so his hand shook and his eyes barely touched it.

"She told me that she would be delighted to remain *here*, that I, who had proposed separation, was the one to go.

"I stared at her in utter astonishment. You know, despite all the English have accomplished there is much that *never* finds its way into those Blue Books—that

is concealed as a man conceals his own dishonor. A woman can not live here, away from other English people, even if she is guarded by a battalion of native soldiers. You remember when the Baroness of Duffield tried it?—that story is unequalled in the sad things of history. I think Isabel had lived long enough in India to drink these things as a fish. But she no longer cared. It was not because she wanted Huipulul, it was because she knew it was my Mecca.

"I was furiously angry. I remember I got to my feet and cursed by all the Indian gods, by Durga, by Lakshmi. And she answered me by every evil word she could think of in the East.

"You can not fathom the things that we gum over, the defilement to which one reverts here when dominated by passion. The East and its suns adopt you. You must know to what a pass Isabel and I had reached in our relations, almost incensed to the knifing process of the followers of Kapalika. You must endeavor to understand. . . .

"The following evening, just before sunset, was beautiful, like the pictures they paint of India, the sky-stained windows, the earth a green cathedral. Isabel was on the first terrace when I came out. A wide balustrade—you may not have noticed—goes around it, and on the left it is above the ground some twelve feet. I came out on that side.

"I had been drinking, but I was not drunk. Isabel said something about it and laughed. No words can tell you what her mocking laugh was, a jaguar's grimace, a hot mouthing. I threw out my right arm, without any thought except of warding off her utterances, but before it struck something she screamed. It was the boy. He had followed me, climbed on the balustrade, and my arm knocked him off violently. We rushed down the

steps, but the little chap's head had fallen on a stone—he was dead."

THERE was a pause which Meredith did not break.

"Isabel was beside herself, with anger more than grief. When she was satisfied he was dead—that unmistakable look comes in a short time here—she still refused to have him buried. The physician urged her, and a high-caste Brahmin. Toward dusk, exhausted by emotion, she fell asleep.

"Doctor Heyworth came to me and explained. In spite of all we could do, other things were explaining it, too—insects. The boy's *ayah* came to me and said the words I shall not forget. 'Death can not wait.' To the fraction of a second the Hindoos know.

"They had procured a coffin. We went out in the grounds, a ghostly procession, for the dark seemed instantaneous that night, and by the light of lanterns, held aloft by the Indians, we buried him, under that mimosa." Colbraith indicated the perfect one that he had spoken of previously.

"A beautiful spot," Meredith heard himself murmur.

"I had wanted to wake Isabel, to tell her at least, but the physician would not allow it. 'It might kill her,' he said. You see he did not know, he only thought the wild extravagance of her words and behavior was owing to the shock, death. But I—I knew.

"I suppose the little procession made some noise as we returned. At all events a door opened as we neared the terrace, and Isabel appeared. The scene that followed was terrible—the only thing that matters to you, this: A week later she told me she knew I had killed my child purposefully, and that she had consulted the gods through Salsada, a great mystic.

Their decree was that I must dig his grave every other night and, each time, one inch deeper—a child's grave, *small!* Do you understand?

"I laughed sardonically. 'Why every other night? Why let me rest one night?'"

"'Because grave upon grave is not proper, say the Sri-Sampradayis. You would die too soon.'

"That evening I decided this must end, it was killing us both. But instead of my telling her, after dinner she came and told me she was going away.

"'Our lawyers will arrange matters,' she said. 'I suppose you want a divorce as soon as one can be obtained—I do.'

"The next morning the house was filled with the noise of packing. Trunks and suit-cases were everywhere."

Colbraith rose to his feet, resting his hand upon a table by his side as if in actual need of its support.

"A grave is above five feet—sixty inches deep. Dig this every other night and each time add one more inch. Allow thirty days to the month and sum up fifteen inches to sixty at its end—God in heaven! Every other night I dig, in my sleep, but I awaken *in the grave*. I can not call. When I get out I am again asleep. One inch deeper! Now you know why I must sell Huilpul. By and by—awake—it will be impossible—to—get—out!"

Meredith was so absorbed in the story that he had forgotten the individual, and said, "And you think if you go away——"

The next instant he would have given much to have recalled the words, for Colbraith's face went as white as the dead. He reached out his hands for the brandy. Meredith handed him the bottle and as he put it to his lips he answered slowly, "It is my only chance."

Meredith might not know India, but

he knew men. Before Colbraith finished the bottle Meredith silently accused him.

. . . Yes, Colbraith had told the truth, the whole truth, but was it nothing but the truth?

IT WAS some months later when Meredith, reading his mail in his library at Huilpul, saw the following obituary notice in the *Times* of London:

Regrettable Death

Captain McClaren Haines Colbraith, late of the One Hundredth Infantry, the Mooltan Regiment, Bangalore, India, died in the thirty-ninth year of his age at Dawlish, England. He had retired from the army some years ago, but lived for a time at Huilpul, in Dekanboos, where he had built a handsome residence and laid out grounds, the whole forming one of the most beautiful private residences in India.

His health failing, he returned to England, consulting the best physicians of London, but, unfortunately, without avail. His valet, William Newes, a man he had secured in London, reported that his master slept miserably, waking with distressing nightmares. These occurred with the utmost regularity every other night. The day before his death, being much depressed, he had asked his physician if a man could live without sleep.

At two o'clock in the night, the valet, hearing screams, went in his master's room to find him seemingly asleep and in convulsions. Doctor Lettell was summoned at once and every effort was made to save the life of the unfortunate man. Very peculiar features attended the case, unexplainable, contradictory.

He was asleep and yet suffering agonies of pain. Anesthetics had no effect upon him, nor was it possible to arouse him. He cried out in his torture, and the listeners once or twice distinguished the word "Isabel", which was the name of his wife from whom he was securing a divorce. At ten o'clock, the convulsions having lasted eight hours, death came to his relief.

Doctor Lettell, his physician, summoned two experts on Indian diseases to diagnose the case, as in all his medical experience he had witnessed nothing like it.

After laboratory tests it was found that Captain Colbraith's stomach contained no poison, which was at first supposed to be the cause of his strange death. The testimony of his valet showed that his master slept wretchedly, and this was confirmed by certain conditions of the body.

Summed up, the testimony of the experts was that Captain Colbraith came to his death from some unknown cause, supposed induced by his long residence in India. One other mysterious thing the physicians observed was that the fingernails of the deceased were torn, bleeding, and filled with earth, not the red earth of the countryside at Dawlish, but the heavy black earth of India.