

Jugganath's Ring.

BY W. A. FRASER.



“YOU will have to wait an hour,” said Dr. Balasco. “The tooth is broken, and some time will be required to fix it properly. Here is a magazine and, as there are no ladies about, a cigar if you like.”

Then the doctor, with the courtly manners of a Virginian, and the frank, pleasant smile of a downright good fellow, withdrew to prepare a gold cap for the broken tooth. When I had finished my cigar I felt too lazy to read, and as I sat glancing about, a gleam of prismatic coloring caught my eye. It was reflected from a ring upon my finger. A shot of sunlight had come down from an opening in the shutter just above my head, and the large diamond in the setting was dancing with fantastic coloring.

This ring was unique. It was a serpentine coil of gold; the head was a large Golconda diamond of unusual purity; this was hooded round with a slender gold band; the eyes were two pigeon-blood rubies, as rich as ever came from the King of Ava's mines.

Two years before I had been in Her Majesty's service in India, and for a period of ten months was stationed in the dependent State of Vizianagram. The State's business, which consisted chiefly in grinding more money out of the ryots (small-farmers), was carried on by the Dewan, and a grand revenue collector he was, too. Sitting in the cool of a veranda in the *Dewan's Kosa*, he would spit at the groveling, pleading tillers of the red, sun-baked earth as they begged on their marrow-bones — down on both knees with their faces buried in their clasped hands — for some relief from the grasp of the tax fiend who had clutched them by the throat.

Nothing turned him from his course — pleadings and prayers

glanced from his thick skin like bullets from the armored back of an alligator. Even when that thick skin was penetrated a little it mattered not, for twice had a long steel blade been driven hilt deep through it, with a vengeful sweep of the arm of a ruined native.

Jugganath Raj was wealthy. From being clerk in the Dewan's office, he had risen to be Dewan himself. And when the ryots brought their families and begged him in the name of all their gods to be merciful, he spat at them and reviled them, and stripped the women of their jewels to pay the tithes. To the Europeans he was "Old Jug," but to the poor natives of the lower class he was "Sir P. Jugganath Sahib Gam, Dewan."

It was of this man I had the ring; not that we were friends — no man was a friend of Jugganath Raj — and that was the strangest part of it. When I was leaving I went to pay the farewell visit which native etiquette demands. With difficulty Jugganath rose from where he sat, with his legs doubled under him, for he was fat and rheumatically, and sprinkled the attar of rose over me, placing about my neck the customary parting gift, a gold filigree chain. Then with an evil smile passing over his vicious face, he put his ring upon my little finger, saying: "The Sahib is great. I am the Rajah's servant, but perhaps some time this will make you think of me. Do not lose it, Sahib, and," with a laugh like a hyena, "do not admire it too much."

The snake's eyes fascinated me this afternoon as I sat in the comfortable leathern operating chair and gazed fixedly at them.

It was as though I had been touched by the wand of a Hindu magician. The old life at Vizianagram opened up before me as one unfolds a Japanese screen.

I was glad when I heard footsteps behind me, and a pleasant voice called me out of the stupor into which I had fallen. The speaker was a tall, pale young man with a decided stoop, hair worn rather long and parted in the middle, blue, serious eyes with a droop in the left eyelid, and I caught the gleam of heavy gold filling prominently displayed in his front upper teeth when he smiled.

"Pardon me," he said, "but that is a beautiful ring you were admiring as I came in. May I look at it?"

I made no objection, and he bent over my hand for a moment. Then sitting down, he opened a small instrument case which stood in the corner, and took out a bottle. Sprinkling a few drops on his handkerchief, he inhaled it with a long-drawn breath of satisfaction.

"This is chloroform," he explained, seeing I was watching him. "Have you ever tried it? I have a nervous irritation of the throat, and this is its best remedy. I feel as if I were down in the bowels of the earth, digging for gold or something. All the little bothers of life have been blotted out. It's a great nerve settler. Do you care to try it?"

For answer I lazily held out my handkerchief, which he moistened with the fluid and placed gently to my face. "Take a good strong breath," he said.

I did so. There was a queer, tickling sensation up my nostrils, a sweet taste in my mouth, a gentle, dreamy languor. I felt myself sinking, sinking, sinking. Evidently I, too, was going down into the depths of the earth to dig. All at once something clutched my hand with a vise-like grip. It was the young man who had given me chloroform, who was tearing the ring from my finger. I struggled desperately and tried to shout, but I was powerless and voiceless. Just as I was about to be dashed to pieces at the bottom of the awful gulf toward which we were descending I awoke with a start, and, staggering to my feet, was confronted by — Dr. Balasco!

"Well, by Jove!" he said, with his pleasant laugh. "You have had a great sleep. I must have startled you when I put my hand on your arm."

I stared stupidly at him a moment, then things began to take shape in my mind and assume their natural sequence. I glanced at my hand. No, I had not been dreaming; *the ring was gone!*

"Where is he?" I gasped. "The thief — did you see him go out?"

"What thief?" asked the doctor, looking at me quizzically.

"I have been robbed," I blurted out. "Doctor, a man came in during your absence, chloroformed me and stole a valuable ring from my finger."

The doctor was amazed and doubtful; he evidently thought I had had a bad dream. I reiterated my statement, showing him a

slight contusion on the second joint, where the ring had been wrenched violently off. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked bewildered. "How did the fellow get in?" he asked. "No one can enter this room without giving notice, for, as you probably observed, there's a bell on the door. Had it rung I should have heard it, for I am accustomed to be on the lookout for visitors, and never miss it."

I gave the doctor a hurried account of the sudden appearance of the young man and his subsequent actions. He listened with increasing astonishment. "Can you describe him?" he asked.

I did so minutely. "It is very peculiar," he answered. "You have accurately described my assistant, Mr. Valoyd, but I can bear witness that he has not been here since I left you. He has been at work in an inner room, the only exit from which is through my office, where I have been constantly engaged for the past hour."

Dr. Balasco's manner was perfectly judicial, and he appeared to be weighing the matter carefully. "Come with me," he added. "We will investigate this affair at once."

We proceeded to the inner room, where his assistant and the artisan who made and set up the teeth were at work, and as Valoyd turned toward us, I recognized with a thrill of recollection the long, lank hair, the sinister droop of the left eyelid, the stooping shoulders — in short, the man who had given me the chloroform. I could have sworn to him among a thousand.

"Have either of you been out of this room during the past hour?" asked the doctor.

"No, sir," replied the artisan, looking up from his bench and holding poised in a small pair of pincers a porcelain tooth.

"And you, Valoyd?" he questioned, pointedly addressing his assistant, and there was a slight tremor in his voice.

"No, I've been here for the last two hours," answered the young man, without the slightest hesitation. He proceeded with his work with the most admirable *sang-froid*; had I not seen him take the ring, he would have deceived even me.

The doctor looked at me. "Do you wish to make an accusation against Mr. Valoyd?" he asked.

"I do," I answered somewhat hotly, for the cool self-possession

of the man who had robbed me, actually seeming to put me in the wrong, angered me. As I described the scene that had taken place in the dental parlor, Valoyd looked straight into my eyes unmoved, though I saw the color rise to his pale face when I mentioned the taking of the ring. In a few emphatic words he utterly denied all knowledge of the transaction, and the artist corroborated his statement so far as to ratify his assertion that he had not been absent from the room for the past hour.

There could be, of course, but one result to all this. A detective was put upon the case; there was an inquiry; two or three consultations were held at police headquarters, and a searching examination made of all hands about the place. As the mystery deepened I saw that it was reflecting anything but credit upon myself. The loss of the ring dwindled to small importance, compared to the other features of the case, for it had come to this — either Valoyd was guilty or I had deeply wronged an innocent man on account of an hallucination which might hint at an unbalanced reason. But from all the investigation not a single clue was discovered. The mystery of the ring grew deeper and more inexplicable as time passed on.

A marked man leads a miserable life. Continuous watching had its effect upon Valoyd, and either this or a sense of guilt weighed him down. The stoop in his shoulders increased, his face grew sunken and haggard. I wondered at times what must be his reflections knowing, as he must know, that I had been conscious at the time of the theft, and was fully cognizant of his guilt. Under these circumstances I was not in the least surprised when he resigned his position with Dr. Balasen.

But a fatality followed him, as though an invisible justice had taken up the case. Another engagement that he entered into, and which seemed likely to prove a life-long work, was broken.

About this time, in an extremity of feeling, I wrote to my friend Dr. Hanson, at Vizianagram, asking him if he could gain any information concerning the ring of Jugganath Raj, and relating the circumstances of its disappearance. I knew the doctor had a certain hold over the Dewan — it was some crooked business that had happened long ago, in which the crafty old fellow had been involved.

One morning three months later a letter was laid beside my bun and coffee, with the four anna six pie stamp in the corner. I tore it open and read: —

Dear Philip: I have seen "Old Jug" about that infernal ring he gave you, and think I can put you in the line of straightening the whole thing out. It took considerable pressure to bring him to time. At first he sputtered evasively, and said he had given you "nice ring, very nice ring, because you were such a good Sahib, a *bahut archa lat Sahib*."

I knew this was a Hindu truth, and gave him until four p. m. to remember exactly what kind of a ring he had given you. The old *sheitan!* His memory was better at four o'clock, and with many salaams he told me all about it.

Of course I can't remember all he said, but the whole thing seems to be that he had it in for you, and gave you a ring that he got from the temple at Poree, and which, under certain conditions, has the power of kicking up no end of bobbery (trouble). Some of their cursed Brahminical deviltry.

"Old Jug" wanted to stop at that, but I told him that as he had gotten you into a scrape, he would have to get you out of it. Finally he gave me a curiously carved small green stone, which I forward to you per registered parcel. "Jug" says that if you take this in your hand and go to the place where you lost the ring, and allow yourself, as it were, to come under its influence, the thing will be cleared up or you will see again what occurred at that time.

Now, old man, after the mystery is solved I think the best thing you can do is to chuck the ring into the sea or give it to the British Museum.

This was all the letter contained relating to the ring.

The next day I received the registered parcel. It contained a small green stone, about the size of, and shaped like, the index finger of a child's hand. At a glance I saw it was a beautiful piece of jade. On it were engraved these characters: —

" بخت "

This was the Persian word "bakht," meaning good luck, and I surmised at once that there must be some great evil in the ring, and that Jugganath had sent this as a talisman.

I lost no time in repairing to Dr. Balasco's office, and explained to him the situation, saying that with his assistance I hoped to clear up the mystery. The genial doctor was as much interested as I, and was eager to have the experiment take place at once. I took my position in the chair, just as I had sat that fatal afternoon, holding the jade talisman grasped tightly in my

hand, and concentrating my mind on the ring and what had occurred that day.

I felt my senses being lulled to sleep; the din of the street died out from my ears; all my outer life was shut off. I could see about the room quite distinctly, but this did not distract me, for I seemed to have a double vision. I was aware that Dr. Balasco was standing there, but only as a statue or a figure in a mirage. Presently living figures began to people the room; old Jugganath peered at me from over my shoulder, holding up the lost ring. I saw myself approach him as a bird approaches the serpent which has fascinated it. The ring seemed to have hypnotized me.

Then the figure of Valoyd appeared, with a reproachful expression on his face, but he made no movement toward the jewel. Nearer my own form approached—it took the ring from Jugganath's hand, proceeded like one in a trance toward a grinning skull which was lying on a high shelf, and prying open the hideous jaws, I dropped it within, and coming back sat down in the operating chair. Awaking with a start, I found the doctor looking at me curiously. "What is it?" he asked. "You seem to have been under some strange influence."

I looked around, and there on the high shelf was the grinning death's head I had seen in my vision. The doctor saw me looking at it. "That's a skull I use for showing the arrangement of the teeth," he said, with a smile.

I rose without a word, and stepping on a chair lifted down the gruesome relic. There lay the gleaming demon ring of Jugganath!

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Reparation was due to Valoyd, and luckily it was not too late. He is again with Balasco, is doing well and is apparently happy. As for me, I did not take my friend's advice about the ring. I have it still, but though I value it as a curio, I take care that I do not "admire it too much."