

THE CURSE OF THE CATSEYE

A TALE OF
SINGAPORE TOLD BY
THE THIRD MATE.
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Prater.

IT isn't my yarn at all by rights; the Second Mate commenced it, and pushed me in, in the middle. So I've annexed it; and the Second won't mind—for he's dead.

The *Mother Carey* was not a ship to be proud of. I never knew anyone to blow about belonging to her, not even the donkeyman.

We had worked her round to Sydney all right. Then the Health Authorities ordered us off: after which we went and lay off Thursday Island till the firm who had chartered us could wire instructions.

In desperation, our people wired us to go to Singapore in ballast and get any sort of cargo there we could.

I was sorry to leave Thursday Island; the telegraph stationmaster there had a daughter. Her first name was Mary, and, if I can manage it, one of these days her second will be the same as mine.

We got a move on us and were well in the Straits by eight bells that afternoon, and it being the First Mate's watch, the Second Mate came to my cabin to smoke a bit.

"Ever been to Singapore?" he asked.

"No," I said; "never went further than Calcutta that way. Have you?"

"Yes," he answered; "it'll be just about three years ago."

"Nice place?" I asked.

"Terrible hole," he answered. "See that stone? I got that there."

I took the ring off his finger and examined it; it was worth looking at, too. Not for the mounting, which was ordinary enough, but for the jewel it held. I had



never seen a stone like it before, and never again since—but I'll tell that part by-and-by.

It was something like a catseye, this jewel; but the outside was perfectly white, the interior was peculiarly greenish, and right in the centre was a spot of dazzling red like a speck of living blood. The general effect was one of a baleful fascination, repellent and at the same time invincibly attractive; and as I looked, I shuddered, yet could not turn my eyes away.

"That's the way it serves me," said the Second, who was observing. "I hate the thing, and yet I can't throw it away. And ever since I've had it, it's brought nothing but bad luck."

"I was on the *Sardanapalus* when I had the stone first; we were caught in a monsoon in the Indian Ocean, and had to put in at Point de Galle an absolute wreck. My next ship was the *Golden Horn*; the cargo caught fire off Pernambuco, and we were taken off by one of the Brazilian Royal Mails. This'll be third trip; and I shall not live to finish it. I only hope you others'll get through all right."

"How did you come by it?" I asked, beginning, I confess, to feel a little uneasy.

"It was a rum go," answered the Second, "and I don't much like talking about it. But," he added after a moment's reflection, "I'll tell you, in case anything happens to me *there*." And he nodded ahead, where lay Singapore.

"The last time I was there," he went on, "I ran amuck. It was one of Libby's liners I was in, and you know what they are. Rations according to the Act, and as much rum as you can put on a mosquito's left eyelid. So when I went ashore with a couple of dollars I'd subbed from the skipper, I didn't want much to upset me. A bottle of Hamburg square-face soon did the trick; and before I knew where I was I found myself half-seas over.

"It was in one of those shanties back of the garrison barracks where I'd got the stuff; in the daytime respectable merchants' depôts, at night half grog-shop and half opium-den. The long, low, narrow room was divided into two by strips of bamboo matting; I was in the front part at a sort of rude table, alone with my square-face; the back was filled with a crowd of Parsees, squatting in a circle, and gabbling. Between us was a hole for the ladder that went to the cellar, whence came the oppressing fumes of opium; and at the back of the inner room was a door in the wooden wall, opening on a staircase that led to the apartments above.

"I remember all that distinctly; but I don't remember much else. Alone with the noise and smoke and the intoxicating smell of the East that lay all around me, and stupefied by the atmosphere no less than by drink, I must have rested long in a sort of dream.

"I seemed to wake and shiver, and, sitting up, saw the dawn rising in flames of gold. On the floor were people sleeping. I tried to stand up, but felt languid and oppressed, and I sank in my seat, and would have gone to sleep again.

"Then the door from above opened, and a girl came down. And all at once, in spite of myself, and in a manner I cannot explain, all my languor left me and a fever filled my veins. I rose, and, walking across the sleeping bodies, went near to her, threw aside her veil, bent down, and kissed her on the mouth.

"She did not move

or speak; only a shudder went through her, and it was not of fear or aversion.

"I drew from her at last, and, the light creeping up through the windows, could look at her.

"She was not a Malay; she was not, I thought, a Hindoo: something of a Cingalese, a Cingalese of the hill-tops, nearly white, of features almost classic, a nose finely Hebraic, and eyes of an Aryan gipsy.

"I have been watching you, she said, in perfect English; 'watching and waiting. Did you not feel the incense in your nostrils—that was my love-spell. And it has worked.'

"Again I stooped and kissed her.

"I like that," she said, with a little laugh. "It is a good thing of the white men's. See, I will try to act thus also," and she in her turn had reached up and kissed me.

"I leaned forward to seize her, but she slid through my grasp and had flown up the stairs.

"To-night," she whispered, "by the old pagoda, I will weave you another love-spell."

"Then she came down a step. 'Look well to yourself



"I THREW ASIDE HER VEL, AND KISSED HER"

here,' she whispered again; 'there is danger. Take this—it is an amulet—it will protect you,' and she had flown away out of sight, leaving in my hand a tiny square of ivory hollowed through the centre.

"I stood for a minute as in a trance; between my feet I saw a body, and, as I looked, one of its eyes, it seemed, was watching me.

"Had it been there all the while? I did not think so. Yet, looking again, it was not watching me at all; its eyes were firmly closed, and it was sleeping. Yet a fear crept into my heart, and instinctively I felt in my belt for my revolver. It was not there; it was not on the table; it was nowhere.

"And all my courage went from me, and I staggered across the sleeping men and burst through the fragile door and fell out into the sun. And without stopping I ran as hard as I could to the ship, sweating with a terror I dare not think about.

"The boatswain was washing down with the steam hose; I stripped and stood in front of it and took a bath that way. It steadied my nerves, and the bright sea and the bright sunshine did the rest.

"I was at the pagoda that night, sober, without even a cigar, but with another pistol in my belt. It was a weird place.

"Not a soul was in sight. The pagoda was dark and empty. The only sound I could hear was the ripple of the waves on the distant shore.

"All sorts of fancies crept into my brain; I tried in vain to put them away. At last I tried to go. I could not; I was as if rooted to the spot.

"I looked around and fancied I was going mad, and I laughed. And the echoes came

back from all around, so that the air seemed full of mocking devils, and I turned round and round to see whence came the sound.

"There was a figure bowing before me, and a voice said: 'Salaam, Sahib,' and in front, by the light of the moon, I saw a man.

"'I have a token for my lord,' he said, 'from one he loves, who begs him to accept it and so depart,' and he handed me the stone you have seen.

"'Stop,' I cried, taking it. 'Are you her servant?'

"'The Flower of the Cinnamon was my daughter,' he answered, 'but now—no longer.'

"'What do you mean?' I cried again.

"'The Flower of the Cinnamon is not,' he said; 'and in your hand you hold the token.'

"The moonlight caught the glitter of his evil eye, and I saw then it was the man who had lain between my feet. I sprang forward to seize him, and he was gone; gone like the wind, with not a trace behind.

"In my hand I still clenched the pebble; I took it in my fingers to put it in my pocket. There was the other token, my amulet of ivory. I took it out to look at it, and its veins were red—red with the streaks of blood.

"So I went back to the ship, walking warily and looking behind my shoulder; but I saw nothing and felt nothing—nothing but the stone the man had given me, that lay like a weight on my heart. It was there next morning, but my ivry amulet I could not find; it was gone, and with it, I knew, my salvation."

"That is all?" I asked the Second, as he stopped to wipe the sweat from his forehead.



"I BURST THROUGH THE DOOR AND RAN AS HARD AS I COULD."

"All—at present," he answered, "for we sailed that same morning. And I have never seen her since. And I never shall see her," he added, in a tone that made me feel cold to hear.

"But you kept the stone?" I asked again.

"I could not get rid of it," he replied. "Once—you may believe me or not, as you like—once, I took it from my waistcoat pocket and threw it over the bulwarks. It did not touch the sea; next morning it was there again in my pocket. So I made the best of what I knew was a bad job; I got it mounted in London in a ring, and I wear it so in defiance."

There was more of fear than defiance in his eyes just then; he swung on his heel and turned away; nor did any further allusions to the subject pass between us.

We reached Singapore shortly afterwards; and I noticed the Second Mate getting more and more nervous. He tried to hide it and to conquer it, he worked harder than any man on the boat.

At last we had got our cargo in and had finished coaling; the next morning we should (machinery permitting) clear out for home. The Second seemed easier that evening, but he had scarcely been in my cabin half an hour when a convulsive spasm seemed to shoot through him. He stood up, as if in agony, and cried out in a thick guttural voice: "I've got to go," and made towards the alley-way.

I tried to stop him; he dragged me along as easily as if I had been a child. Then, nearing the gangway, he shook me off and cried: "You had better keep out of it; I shall be enough," and passed over the gangway to the quay.

I went after him, just speaking to the watchman; yet even this delay put me far behind, and I had to run to overtake him, so quickly did he walk.

At last we reached the house, and the room he had described: he ordered liquor, which I took care not to drink; and in desperate defiance let his hand lie on the table, stretching out the finger that held the ring.

Strive as I might to keep my head clear, I felt the fumes of the place suffocating me; yet, stupefied as I was, I had a consciousness that myriad eyes were around and watching us.

Below, through the hole where the ladder went, I saw the opium smokers; at the back where the staircase mounted, I saw the door open.

A woman entered, and at once the place seemed empty, save for her and us.

The Second was looking too, and started suddenly. He got up and walked towards her and threw her heavy veil aside. Then, in a voice so calm that it astonished me, he said—

"You are not Flower of the Cinnamon?"

"No," she answered, "the Flower is not. But when she was, she was my sister."

And she pressed forward towards me. "I am called," she said, to me, not to him. "I am called the Sheen of Morning." And she made a low obeisance towards me.

I did not speak, but looked towards her, looked passed her and saw into the cellar. I saw a man, dark-skinned, yet no Hindoo, kindle a fire on the ground; and as the flames leaped red, he sprinkled a powder on them and the fire burnt green, and the smoke came through the opening.

The woman was still bowed before me and watching me with entreatying eyes; but now the lustre went out of her eyes and they had no more life in them than a sleep-walker's. Then she rose stiffly and walked backward to the staircase door and so passed through; and the door shut of itself, for I saw no one to shut it.

And the man, or devil, in the cellar put more powder on his fire, and the flames burnt red, red as a bullock's blood. And the Second turned slowly round and walked from the room into the street; and, looking neither to the right nor the left, took his way still further across the marsh. And I followed, shivering in my heart.

Nothing before or around us but the darkness and the heat of the night that brought up the fever-fog; and from the distance came the horrid noise of a Chinese sing-song.

And we still walked on, till, in the darkness of the night, there loomed another darkness, thicker and more compact: and I saw it was the shadow of a pagoda.

The Second led the way right to the entrance; as we reached the threshold, a light sprang up within.

The Second was mounting the steps; I seized his arm and with my whole force tried to retain him; he did not even pause, but dragged me after him as if my strength were nothing. And so we went into the temple.

The light shone from the other end:

we drew closer to it and stood in front. There, on a shrine, was an enormous figure of Buddha, sitting cross-legged, with six arms extended. The light shone from his eyes; and, glancing along his nostrils, on one side sparkled back. In his nose was a jewel the duplicate of that the Second wore; on the other side was a space for a second jewel, which was the Second's.

As I looked, I cried aloud and started back; my hand was still on the Second's arm, and so great was my terror that I drew him back with me a space. At that moment the pavement in front of us opened where but an instant before we had both been standing; and in the void revealed, I felt and smelt, rather than saw, the fetid moisture of a bottomless water-pit. And the light in the idol's eyes burnt red.

A little finger touched my left hand: I turned. It was a woman, the same woman of the hut; who whispered, so that none but I could hear—

"Come, my lord, and quickly. Leave him to his fate, for he is doomed. But thou, while there is yet time, come."

"Yes," I said to her; "but not alone. *He* must come too."

"Does my lord command it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said again.

"Then I will try," she whispered; "yet it is Death we three look in the face."

She raised her hand and rubbed my lips with something she held; something that was cold like menthol, and bitter as gall. She did likewise to the Second, who at that seemed to awake from sleep and stare about him bewildered. And taking me by the hand, and I the Second, she led us to the door; and the door was shut

and barred, and the light in the idol went out.

"There is another way," she said at last, and led us on; till behind a pillar she stopped and stooped, and, groping for some time, found at last a rude staple in the stonework.

"Pull," she said, "for you are strong." And I pulled, and the stone came round on invisible hinges. In the opening there disclosed I felt rough-hewn steps that went down, and pushing myself through I descended. Three steps I counted, and then there were no more; and I lost my handhold and fell. I threw out my hands wildly in search of some support; my head swung forward and struck against a projection; and, insensible, I still fell—down, down . . .

When I came to myself I was lying on the ground, my head in the woman's lap; and her hair had torn loose and was swathing my temples; and as she bent to kiss me, I felt that her eyes were wet.

But between her and me came the memory of Mary, and the promise



"HE DRAGGED ME ALONG AS EASILY AS A CHILD."

the moon had seen at Rockhampton; and I did not kiss her back, but took her hand, and said, "My sister, my sister." And so she understood, and raised me up, and put something on my head that cured its aching; and the Second came to my side and held me, and we went on down the passage.

There was no light to guide us; but the walls shone with phosphorescent drawings, and all the vile gods of Buddha's Pantheon served us as horrid guides. We went on—the woman in tears, I in pain, and the Second in terror and dismay—till there came some rough-hewn steps, and these mounted, some stairs of wood; there the woman left us and bade us wait.

Presently she returned and led us still upward, and lifted a flap and let in a flood of light. And springing through, we were in the room of the grog-shop—all alone, save for the invisible eyes that I knew were watching us all around.

And we sat at the table: and I gave my hand to the woman, and said again, "My sister," and she fell to weeping afresh.

I looked towards the Second, and his brow was wet with sweat, and on his finger gleamed ominously the curse-stone.

I tried to get the ring off. It

clung till with a wrench I had twisted it and had it off, and left his finger free; and then, before the woman could prevent me, had put it on my own. At that she shrank, shivering; but I knocked the table loudly in summons.

A coolie came in, and I ordered two bottles of Bass; but in knocking and ordering and talking I took care to show my ring. He saw, and smiled maliciously; and coming back with the beer looked again. The woman had disappeared, spirited away again by some invisible power.

So the Second and I drank—he hugely, I scarcely at all. And then I told him my scheme: that he must go back to the ship alone, for without the ring I felt he had nothing to fear. He was reluctant to do so, for he was a brave man; yet his terror was so great that in the end he departed.

So I was left alone with the ring: and waiting till I thought it time, began to reproach myself for running in danger when my life belonged to Mary. Then I thought again: and I knew at last that Mary herself would have me to do this. So I kept up a stout heart, and ostentatiously leaving a dollar on the table, passed out.

There was a shadow in front of me—it was the woman, who fell at my feet beseechingly.

"Fool," she said, "and foolhardy. Throw it away lest it kill you. For it is a vampire that drinks men's blood."

And she took hold of my finger and tried to wrench the ring away; but the flesh was closed up tightly round it, and it would not budge.

"It is the spell already winding round you," she said. "Yet it was not *you* that my father cursed. What shall I do, my love, my love?"

"Better throw away your finger than your soul,"



"I PULLED, AND THE STONE CAME ROUND ON INVISIBLE HINGES."

she said again; "cut it off and so escape."

I searched for the knife in my belt, but my sheath was empty; and we looked into each other's eyes in hollow despair.

"I would bite it," she cried, "but I cannot—I cannot; for I love you."

"You must not say that," I answered; "and you must not come with me."

"My lord commands?" she asked, in pained humility.

And I said "Yes." And she disappeared into the darkness.

I strode on quickly across the swamp towards the quay, and already I saw the lights gleam in the harbour. Yet even now I could not feel at ease, and would glance round furtively and yet see nothing—until suddenly the moon shot out from behind a cloud, and in front of my eyes was a gleam that was not of light, but a reflection of light. I quickly put out my left hand, and jagged steel pierced it, and I shrieked aloud.

With my right hand I seized my assailant, who was anointed with oil and slipped through my fingers like an eel. Yet he did not run, but remained at a little distance, waiting to attack me again, and there were others with him. By their stiffened upright black hair I saw they were Malays; but the one who seemed their leader was the devil of the cellar. And my heart thumped and thumped, as I waited.

Then a soft hand again touched me, and a voice said, "It is I," and the woman had taken my finger that held the ring, and saying, "Yet I must do it, because I love him," had bitten it clean through. And

shouting to the men in a tongue I knew not, she hurled it in their midst; and their leader seized it, and yelled aloud in triumph, and showed it to the others running round him.

And the woman spoke again, and to some purpose, for then the men departed with the prize. And the moon went in again behind the clouds.

"Do not slay me, my lord," the woman was saying, "for your life is not yet saved."

She tore the veiling from her face and bandaged the stump that had been my finger; and then she took my other hand, and, withdrawing the dagger, sucked softly at the poison of the wound. But the pain was too much for me, and I just leaned over and fell fainting to the ground.

Next morning, I found myself in my bunk, and the Second was watching over me, and

the woman was crouching on the floor.

"That's right, old man," said the Second, "and now I'll fetch the doctor."

The doctor was the chief engineer, who forthwith came aft with a hot iron and seared the stump of my finger.

"And now, laddie, ye'll do," he said; "and I must awa, for there is some leetle difficulty with the boilers."

"She carried you here," said the Second, answering my eyes, "though how she managed it I can't say. And she had sucked the poison clean from your wound, and Mac said there was no danger left. Though, mind you, the kriss had enough on it to kill twenty men."

"Yes," he went on, "I'm all right, and you shall tell me how it happened to you



"TAKING THE FINGER THAT HELD THE RING, SHE BIT IT CLEAN THROUGH."

afterwards. Now you must swallow this sleeping draught Mac's left for you."

And I swallowed the medicine he gave me.

But I did not sleep; I fell into a stupor. I could not move or speak; yet I could hear and understand.

The sailors were clearing the decks above me; at intervals the steam whistle sounded; we were preparing to get under way.

At last came the cry, "All strangers leave the ship," and there was a bustle across the gang-way.

The woman in the corner rose, came to my bunk and kissed me on the lips, opened the door, went into the alley-way and on to the deck. She mounted to the poop above my head, then a shadow passed for a moment athwart my port-hole. I heard a splash—and she had done suette for her love of me.

The blade of the propeller began to revolve, and the ship to forge slowly forward. My tongue was parched and my temples throbbing, and the delirium of fever came over me.

My eyes still open looked far away forward, into the pagoda of Singapore. And before the Buddha knelt the throng of worshippers, and the idol looked down upon them in content and triumph, and in his nostrils were now the catseyes, sparkling on either side. And a shadowy form that I knew for the ghost of the woman came before the god and fell prostrate, and lay there praying for me; and the idol did not frown, but gazed still content; and I knew that the curse was lifted from me.

Then my eyes could close, and the fire went from them, and the darkness came and gentle sleep.



"SHE MOUNTED THE POOP AND JUMPED INTO THE WATER."

The next thing I knew was that Mac was pouring quinine down my throat, and we were out at sea and the sun was shining. And at Aden, where we coaled, was a letter from Mary; and I was well again.

The Second met the fate he feared. You know from the papers how the voyage ended; no one knows, and only I can guess, how it came to end as it did. It

was off Ushant, almost in sight of home. The Second had the watch. The moon was at its full; there was not a cloud to cast a shadow. The man at the wheel saw a huge rock loom on the starboard bow. He veered off a point to give it a wide berth; the Second came towards him and took the wheel himself. And then, the man declares, he headed straight for the rock, his eyes fixed intently in front of him, his hands a-tremble with unavailing fear. The man thought he was mad, and tried to tear the spokes away; the Second, with strength almost supernatural, with one hand lifted him up, and hurled him to the lower deck. Then the ship forged on, straight to the rock ahead.

The boats were lowered and quickly filled, and were casting off. I sprang up to the bridge—I touched the Second's arm and took his hand in mine.

As I hurried him down the gangway and across the forehold, a boom of the winch pinned him to the deck and he could not move.

Then, as I live, I saw a woman—a black woman—holding him in her arms, holding him down. There came a rush of water. The vessel slid back into the trough of the sea. The woman kissed him—he shrieked aloud—and the waves sucked them in together.

The curse of the catseye was completed.