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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Idol and the Rajah

By CLAUDE FARRERE

What mystic connection did the Rajah of Saharajonpur have with the six-armed goddess Kali? A strange tale of sudden death

THE Idol which plays a part in this experience of mine (or does it play a part, after all?) is an ivory image which a Singhalese sold me once for thirty rupees, at Mount Lavinia in Ceylon, on the terrace of the famous hotel which serves the best curry on the island. This bit of carved ivory represents a Hindoo matron in a strange squatting position. The lady has six arms with which she is gesticulating vigorously, holding in each hand a severed head which she grasps firmly about the neck. The effect is that of a sort of Tanagra in the Asiatic manner, and it is a little hard on sensitive nerves. I presume you haven't any sympathy with the foolish tales of transmigrations and metempsychoses. In that case my Idol will have only a passing interest for you; and in that case there will be, for you, no particular connection between the image and the adventure which I am moved to tell you about.

The affair dates back a number of years. To be precise, it happened to me on Monday, March 2, 1903, in Salonica, in Macedonia, in a blind alley in the upper Jewish quarter. I should never in the world have published it during the lifetime of Churah Singh, who shared with me the position of protagonist in the business. But Churah Singh died back before the Great War, in his capital of Saharajonpur—died without issue. So I see no reason why I should not mention the extraordinary happening if I choose.

You will remember that Churah Singh was at the time of his death Rajah of Saharajonpur, under the suzerainty of the Emperor of the Indies. But in 1903 he was still only the heir presumptive to the rajahship, and he and I were touring Europe together. We had become acquainted some six years before, in Ceylon—as a matter of fact, it was on the very day when I bought the Idol at Mount Lavinia. I saw him first at lunch. Churah Singh, distinguished young nabob in elegant traveling-costume with a rainbow-colored turban, was having difficulty in making his wants known to the obsequious and troubled native waiters.

"Rajah Sahib," I said to him in the Urdu speech, "would you like to have an interpreter?"

"You're jolly well right I'd like to have one!" he answered me in faultless English. "I'm a Punjabi, as you see. I can't make anything out of these barbarous Southern lingoos. By Jove, man! you speak all the languages, don't you?"

We were friends from that moment. It was about an hour later that I bought the Idol. And this time it was Churah Singh's turn to place his information at my service.

"Well now!" he exclaimed when he took a look at my new purchase. "Well now, fancy that! That's my grandmother!"

"Your——?"

"Yes sir, that's who it is, my grandmother! That's Kâli, the Six-Armed Goddess. And we Rajahs of Saharajon-

pur, we are direct lineal descendants of Kâli. But I must admit that we have degenerated."

And he tapped each of his shoulders jocosely with the opposite hand. The prince had two stout, muscular arms, it is true, but only two.

He was the sort of Hindoo prince you meet often nowadays: educated at Sandhurst, an officer in the British army; varnished with English culture from head to foot. But underneath, there was still a Hindoo.

Now for what happened six years later: It was on the evening of March 2, 1903. At about eight o'clock, Churah Sungh and I left our hotel in the Rue Parallèle, in Salonica, to take dinner with the general in command of the International Gendarmerie. (The reader will not have forgotten that in 1903 Salonica still belonged to Turkey.) We had been in Salonica for two days. We had been making a sort of tour of inspection of the District of Mitrovitza. The revolt of the Comitadjis was at its height. They were an ugly bunch, those fellows, and Europeans were a lot of ninnies to be taken in by their crocodile tears. I was writing a series of letters on Balkan conditions for the *London Daily Herald*, and I had had a dozen threatening notes and had even been shot at from behind a hedge. The bullet had missed me by two inches. But I felt it my duty to tell the world what I knew about this business. After the affair of the bullet, I had proposed to Churah Sungh that we separate. I reminded him that it was dangerous to stick around in my neighborhood. But he came back at me indignantly.

"What do you take me for, old fellow? By Jupiter, I believe I'm a man, no matter whatever else I may be or may not be!"

High-minded Britisher in all his ideas and ideals. English to the very tips of his fingers. But underneath, a Hindoo to the marrow of his bones.

WE WALKED along together, to the end of the Rue Parallèle, with its great, flat paving-stones, then up the little streets which climbed the Upper Town, with their unpleasant sharp pebbles. It was darker than a pocket. There were lowering clouds, and street-lighting was unknown. I knew in a general way what direction we were supposed to take. But anybody who knows what a labyrinth the city of Salonica can be when it chooses, will understand how it came about that after half an hour of stumbling through that tangle of alleys in the dark, I realized that I was lost.

"Churah Sungh," I said at last, sheepishly, "I haven't the least idea where we are. I believe the best thing we can do is to climb straight up to those terraces up above us there. Then we can see the whole town."

"Yes, let's get up there as quick as we can. Too bad we'll be late for dinner!"

It was written that we should be even later than we expected at that time. As we stumbled through a dark, twisting little street that was blacker than a mole-hole, somebody hit me a furious blow on the back of the head, and I dropped in my tracks without a whimper. Awhile later I came to my senses and discovered that I was lying on the pavement, on the spot where I had fallen, but that I was tied up like a sausage. When I opened my mouth to cry for help, a big devil of a Bulgarian with a face like some savage beast stuck the point of a knife against my throat. When I felt the sharp, chilly knife-blade touch my flesh, I decided that it would be best to keep quiet.

I was lying on my right side, and my

guard squatted on his heels in front of me. I could see nothing but a ferocious Bulgarian phiz and a big toad-sticker. But I was sufficiently well informed without any enlargement of my landscape. I knew that I had fallen into the hands of the Comitadjis, and I cherished no illusions about my fate. The scoundrels had missed me on the road out in the country, but they had me now, and there was no danger of their letting me go.

Nothing happened for a quarter of an hour. I heard steps approaching, and the light of a lantern was reflected from the blade which still pointed menacingly at my throat. Rough hands seized me and plumped me up against a wall. The first thing that caught my eye was my friend Churah Sungh, trussed up and propped against the wall just as I was. He had dropped into a strange squatting position. I could see that his Hindoo essence had cast off the English envelope, as it always did in crises of elemental emotion. He was crouching with his knees separated and his legs horizontal, in a posture that no one but an Asiatic could ever get himself into—I realized, in a flash of remembrance, that he was in exactly the position that my Idol had taken. . . .

I was not allowed a great deal of time to think my discovery over. Suddenly the man with the lantern flashed it into my face. And another man—there were eight or ten of them altogether—came up and stared at me. This last fellow was a little less dirty than his acolytes, and he seemed more anxious to remain incognito. He wore a neat black mask which left nothing of his face visible but his eyes.

He studied my features for a minute that seemed an eternity. Then he pulled out of his pocket two numbers of the *London Herald*, unfolded them, and laid his finger on my signature.

"You—Harold Furth?" he inquired in broken English.

I DID not answer either Yes or No. He sneered. He had the answer to his question in my silence. Another scalawag came up and pointed at Churah Sungh. The leader shrugged his shoulders and pronounced several words which I could not understand, but the gesture which accompanied them was unmistakable. And to make assurance doubly sure, we were formally notified, in English, of the fate that awaited us. The man with the mask stammered, awkwardly but intelligibly:

"The Bulgarian Committee of Salonica has condemned the two of you to death. You will be executed at once."

The point of the dirty fellow's knife still caressed my Adam's apple. There would have been no point in crying out. The houses which surrounded us, black, silent and grated like prisons, gave no promise of aid. I have often heard it said that the imminence of death stimulates the brain to extraordinary activity. It may be so, but I had no such experience at that moment. What I felt, instead, was a stupid and inert sort of resignation. I remember that I had a sensation of extreme chilliness in the small of my back, and that I reasoned vaguely that an Englishman, assassinated in that cowardly fashion, must give his assassins a lesson of courage, by dying disdainfully, with his head in the air. Then I began to think, jerkily, with no particular reason for any of it, of a whole incoherent procession of things and persons: of my father, who had died in his bed as I stood at his bedside, in Brighton—of a poker game I had won a couple of days before—and then, strangely, of the Idol. . . .

Then I felt a sudden obligation, just as a pair of brutal hands were pulling me

down on my knees. It was doubtless a sort of reminiscence of my reading, for that is the way things are done in books. I turned my head toward Churah Sungh:

"Rajah Sahib," I said, "can you forgive me for causing your death like this?"

He did not answer. I looked around at him, carefully. He had not lost consciousness. I could see his eyes, black and white, his Hindoo eyes, which glittered strangely in the darkness. And I could hear that he was chanting some incomprehensible prayer in one of those sacred languages of the North of India which only the priests and the rulers up there understand.

Then, all at once, the butchers seized him. It was evident that they had decided to kill him first. I could see him in the gloom, very distinctly, still crouching, his bust very straight, like the Idol, exactly like the Idol. Two men had taken hold of his shoulders. A third advanced toward him with a knife in his hand. The masked man, who stood looking on, took a step forward to supervise the execution. . . .

Then something mysterious and terrible happened.

The two men who had been holding Churah Sungh let go of him suddenly, and their hands went up to their own throats, as if to pry loose the grip of invisible fingers which were choking them. They tried to cry out, but their voices were hoarse and muffled, and their two cries ended in ghastly noises of gargling

and gagging. The man with the mask and the man with the knife, attacked in the same way—or is "attacked" the word for it?—struggled in some mysterious grasp, gasped and writhed in the death agony. It seemed—yes—it seemed as if Churah Sungh had strangled the four wretches with his own hands. And yet all the time I could see distinctly that his hands—his *two* hands—were lashed motionless to his body!

The four grimacing faces stiffened and blackened. The four twisted bodies dropped to the pavement, lifeless heaps of flesh. I saw them fall. I saw four corpses lying before me. Then I remembered that the rest of the band had fled, howling with terror.

And in the unnatural silence which followed, I recall that I heard my own teeth chattering.

IT WAS a night watchman who released us, entirely uninjured, an hour later. As we were friends of the general in command of the International Gendarmerie, there was no investigation. The dead men were four well-known Comitadjis who were on the black books of the police.

Churah Sungh never made a comment on the affair. And the only reason why I am telling it now is that Churah Sungh long ago went to his reward, leaving no descendants, so that the line of the Rajahs of Saharajonpur is extinct, and that consequently there is no longer on earth a child of Kâli, the Six-Armed Goddess.

