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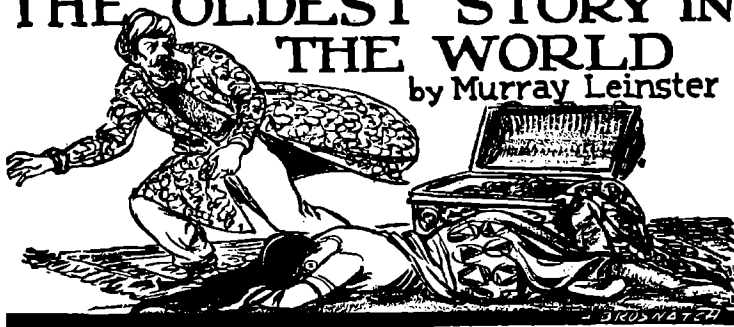
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# THE OLDEST STORY IN THE WORLD

by Murray Leinster



**T**HE man who told me this story said that it was the oldest story in the world, and that it happened a hundred thousand years ago. But somehow, I disbelieve him. He was very drunk and his eyes were a trifle too bright and his hair was quite remarkably disheveled, so it is possible that he was somewhat mixed in his statistics.

He came over to my table in the Jardin de Paris, which is a place in the city of Rangoon some thousands of miles from the real Paris, and as many leagues removed from anything Parisian. For one thing, the stench of the Guleh-Wat is all too near, and it is a mingled odor of incense and stale lotus and nipa blossoms and very, very unwashed human beings who come there to worship. And then, too, one may look out over the river and see the sandbars, with an occasional vulture perched there, critically inspecting some especially unattractive thing that has floated down with the current. And of course there are snub-nosed British tramps, and very natty and not quite clean Japanese cargo-boats, and pot-bellied Chinese junks, and the river craft of Siam, who deserve an adjective all to themselves. The Jardin de Paris is, moreover, some two continents re-

moved from and a hundred years behind anything French, and it is two shillings rickshaw fare from the British legation.

He came over to my table and begged me not to finish the drink I had before me, because the grenadine made it red. He told me that one could have green drinks, made with absinthe, or white ones made with gin and limes, or purple ones and yellow champagne, but that I should not drink red drinks because they were like rubies and in consequence abominable beyond the imagination of men. They had been cursed for a hundred thousand years, he said, ever since the raja of Barowak laughed. And therefore, if I would have a waiter take my red drink away, not spilling any of it, being especially careful not to spill any of it, he would buy me thousands of green or white or purple drinks, and he would sit down beside me and tell me the oldest story in the world.

And naturally, I listened.

**T**O GET to Kosar in the old days (so the man with the disheveled hair told me) one went by Bitab and Pulat through the Molanasian Pass, which led to the country of the Sakai where it was necessary to travel very care-

fully because they used poisoned arrows and lay in wait for strangers. And one would begin to hear tales of Kosar by the campfires somewhere around Ghal, and the tales would become quite definite in the bazars of Talt. There you would hear of the raja of Kosar, of his falling-down palaces and his half-starved guard, of his two mangy elephants and the exaggerated penury of the whole tiny kingdom—save for the jewels he wore on occasions of state. And they were worth more than the whole of his realm. They were rubies, and the largest was as big as a man's closed fist, and the next were as large as a man's thumb, and there were rubies of all sizes from thence on down to small, glittering red stones no bigger than a grain of sand. Very precious were the rubies, and very carefully guarded. It was death to come within ten paces of the raja when he wore them, and no one save only the raja and the ranee, his queen, knew where they were hid.

It was in Talt that a certain man came to believe that they actually existed. He was a white man and had fled from the seacoast because he had killed a man over a gambling game and feared the law of his nation. He was in Talt, living with a dancing girl who was very proud to belong to a white man, and in consequence gave him all her earnings. He lived in her house because she loved him, and he felt safe from the laws of his nation, and had no worry over the means of living so long as her love continued. At ease, then, he spent much time in the bazars learning to pass as a native of the country he lived in, in case he needed disguise for farther flight. And in the bazars he heard tales of Kosar, and of the rubies, and from the dancing girl he learned many other strange things. In particular, he learned the language which is spoken in Kosar and Barowak and the states between them. It is a cursed

language (so the man with the bright eyes told me) which wise men take care to have no knowledge of. But the white man was not wise.

He had much knowledge of sorts it is not well for a white man to have, however, and he had a plan which made him desire to have more. He knew, for example, of the secret cult of Khayandra, the god of the elephant's trunk, which is knowledge that only princes and ranees may possess. The god Khayandra is one of the two gods of birth and causes male children to be born, while Visayana causes females. The knowledge of this secret is confined to princes, of course, because otherwise their people might worship successfully and there would be only men-children born in their domains and no women to bear yet other men.

The secrets of this cult seemed to promise much to the white man, a hundred hundred centuries ago, and so he began to make his preparations. To rid himself of the dancing girl he resorted to a drug, and sold her to a merchant on his way to China. She had loved him, and for months she had kept him in her house because of her love, but he needed to be rid of her before he could go on to Jolun, and Halak, and through the mountains to Kosar.

He journeyed in that direction for a matter of weeks with the mark of Khayandra on his forehead, and that mark is something like a worm, and something like an elephant's trunk, and two of them joined together make a perfect circle.

He came to the city, then, and saw its walls falling, and men nearly naked in the streets from poverty, and children fighting with dogs for bits of food. Kosar was decayed from her ancient splendor, and vultures perched upon her ruined ramparts, and grass grew in many abandoned streets, and the palace of the raja was

growing up with weeds save for the small part that was still inhabited.

The white man reached Kosar on a day when the raja showed himself to his people, and saw twenty horsemen upon stunted spindling steeds driving away the people from a street that was lined with once magnificent palaces that had belonged to the nobles when Kosar was a mighty kingdom. And then there came possibly a hundred soldiers, ragged and unkempt, struggling to make a show with faded finery. And then two elephants, mangy and uncared for, with the raja on the second. All else in the city and the kingdom was poor and mean and faded, even the howdah of the raja's mount, but the jewels gleamed the more brightly for the tawdriness of their surroundings.

They glittered like blood, they sparkled like flames, they were a blaze of sheer magnificence upon a small, weary, dark-skinned man who extracted some weak, vain satisfaction from the looks his people cast upon those rubies. There were no guards near the raja, because it was death to come within ten paces when he wore the jewels of state. And it was possibly due to the lack of guards that a child, barely toddling, escaped from its mother and advanced with curious steps toward the ponderous bulk of the slow-moving elephant. The raja saw it coming near. It was ten paces, seven, five, from his sacred personage.

He nodded negligently, and a spearman darted into the circle that was about the jewels. The scream of the mother was very terrible. . . .

**T**HE man with the disheveled hair, who was telling me this story in the Jardin de Paris, in Rangoon, stopped suddenly. He looked across to another table where a man I knew was taking a seat. A waiter was coming with a glass in which was the counterpart of the drink I had dis-

carded. It is one part limes and one part gin and one part grenadine, with ice and carbonated water, and it is very satisfying.

"He—he is going to drink the red drink!" cried the man with the disheveled hair, in distress. "And the red drink is the color of rubies!"

The man I knew caught my eye, and I beckoned him to come over. His name was Gresham, and he was officially a superintendent of constabulary under the Siamese government, but he was as British as it was possible for a man to be, and I know that he made his reports in duplicate, one copy of which went to his legation.

"Gresham," I said coaxingly, "won't you join us and have a drink? My friend here is telling me about Kosar."

Gresham slipped into a seat and nodded brightly.

"I know Kosar," he said unexpectedly. "Had to go up there and argue with the raja. Beastly tumble-down place. The raja was sparing people that came within a certain sacred limit of his person. Silly stunt. Had some amazin' rubies, though. You've been there?"

He was talking to the man with the disheveled hair, but that person was looking fearfully at the waiter who had followed Gresham with his drink. I explained gently to Gresham, and he sent the drink away. He began to look very thoughtful, suddenly.

"You say you've been to Kosar?" he repeated slowly.

I interrupted, and told him that I was hearing the oldest story in the world, which was a matter of some consequence to a man of my profession. Other things could wait.

The man with the disheveled hair had lost the thread of his story by this time, however, and I had to prompt him to get him back on the track.

**T**HE white man prospered in Kosar. There were those who knew of the meaning of the mark on his forehead, and they paid court to him because he could dispense the favors of Khayandra. He had horses and slaves and food waiting for him when he received a secret summons from the palace. It was from the ranee, the wife of the raja, and she met the white man with tears in her eyes and something of fear upon her countenance.

"You must pray to the god Khayandra," she told him, wringing her hands. "You must implore the god to be merciful."

The white man knew what she had to say, because it had been a part of his planning that she should say just this. But he feigned ignorance. In his pretended character of a priest he asked, "What do you wish of the god Khayandra, whose name not many know?"

And she told him. The raja was growing weary of her, and she loved him. He had no son to carry on his name and was debating within himself the purchase of other and younger wives. He would even sell one or more of his rubies to secure young and fruitful girls of great beauty. The ranee wept as she told the white man of this, thinking him a priest of the god of births.

"The god will hear you," said the white man, pointing to the mark on his forehead. "By this mark he will hear you,—if you make proper sacrifice."

And she wept again, and told of her poverty, of the poverty of all the whole realm where the raja's palaces fell to ruins for lack of revenues to keep them in repair, while the raja clung close to his rubies, in worth more than the whole kingdom.

"Those rubies," said the false priest of Khayandra, his eyes glittering strangely; "show me those rubies. Let me touch the mark upon my fore-

head with the greatest of all the rubies, and the god will grant your prayer."

"But it is death to approach them," cried the ranee, again wringing her hands, "save only for the raja himself."

Here the false priest turned away, and the ranee flung herself upon the floor before him, pleading. And he was obdurate.

With a cloak flung about her and a single taper in her hand, she led him down deep and dark damp passages, where molds grew upon the walls, and where the air was heavy with the scents of decay. Once she crept softly past a sleeping guard. Twice she pressed secret things and seeming solid blocks of stone opened before them. Twice she shuddered as she led the way within.

And then they came to a place where there was a moldy European carpet upon the floor of a tiny, rock-walled room. And there were rickety chairs there, and a table that was falling to pieces from the damp. And in a chest, quite unlocked, she showed him the rubies.

They glowed and gleamed and glittered by the ray of the single taper. The white man, disguised as a priest of Khayandra, caught his breath as he looked at them. They were men's lives, and women's honors, and war, and famine, and pillage. They were all luxuries, and all things desirable, and they were things that caught at a man's heart and held it fast, so that he coveted them fiercely and could not rest until he possessed them.

"Here," said the ranee, catching her breath in a sob, "here is my sacrifice to the god Khayandra. I have betrayed my lord through love of him, that the god Khayandra may grant my prayer for his honor."

And the white man, in his strange robes of a hidden priesthood, threw back his head and laughed.

"Come here, then," said he, "and I will show you proof of the god's reward."

And she stood before him, hopeful that her prayer would be answered, yet unhappy because she had betrayed a secret of her lord. And the white man made a sudden movement, and a knife glinted momentarily in the dim light of the taper. She did not cry out save once, but the taper fell from her fingers and was extinguished. And then in the darkness there was no sound save the suddenly stealthy movements of the white man as he groped in the chest and hid things away in corners of his robe, and in his head-dress. He was suddenly very much afraid, because the rubies were his, now, and he was in a strange panic lest other men hear of it and kill him for them.

He made his way back through the damp and moldy passages, feeling the walls with his fingers. When he came to the place where there was a guard, the man was stirring drowsily beside his light, and the white man leaped upon him suddenly from behind.

He felt queerly secure, then, and wiped his knife carefully before he made his way unseen out into the ruined streets of the fallen city of Kosar.

MY GLASS was empty, and I rapped on it as a signal for the waiter to bring another drink. The man with the too-bright eyes and the disheveled hair was leaning forward upon the table. His expression was curious—that of one who sees incredible things. I began to suspect that he had the horrors, but Gresham was listening intently. He yawned, however, when the man stopped.

"Beastly unpleasant yarn, this," he remarked casually.

"Which happened." I commented skeptically, "a hundred thousand years ago. And I still don't see why rubies are accursed."

"That was because the raja of Barowak laughed." The man with the disheveled hair shivered uncontrollably, and his eyes, which were too bright, began to look rather alarming. I was growing rather bored, and it began to be apparent to me that the man only had the horrors.

Certainly there was no other reason why one dressed so carefully and so well should have his hair in a tangled, matted mass on his head, as if no comb had been through it in weeks or months. And I guessed at the horrors because they are not infrequent in hot climates with strong liquors, and they often make a man have queer aversions to some small thing. I knew a man once, who would not cut his nails for a year and a half and could do no work in consequence until he sold his nails to a Chinaman who wanted to send evidence home that he had prospered. But that, after all, has nothing to do with this. It was Gresham who prodded on the stranger to the rest of his yarn.

"I know the raja of Barowak," he commented sympathetically. "He has an odd sense of humor. Had some pigs, once, put in china jars—"

He laughed. The stranger shivered again. "It was a hundred thousand years ago. . . ."

The scents from the Guleh-Wat came over the wall as he went on, mingled odors of incense and stale flowers and cooked food and particularly unwashed humanity. A colossal temple bell clanged slowly, far over the city. Sunset was upon us, and the big moths that flutter in the tropics began to fly about, clumsily, because it was still light. The man with the disheveled hair clutched firmly at his glass. It was full of a green liquid.

THE white man went swiftly away from Kosar (so he told us) only anxious to get beyond the reach of the raja's half-starved guard. He was

very much afraid. He was terrified by his own shadow, and it seemed to him that everyone who passed him must know of the jewels he had hidden about his garments. He fled hurriedly through Raman and Khota to Barowak. And constantly he became more and more afraid. In Raman there were few who knew what the mark on his forehead meant. In Khota there was none. He ceased to be regarded with profound respect, and he considered that as a sign of suspicion.

When he saw the walls of the city of Barowak below him, he was in terror. He ordered camp to be made, and the slaves who had been given him in exchange for his prayers pitched his tent and watched over him while he slept, or seemed to sleep. Actually, he was making a hiding place beneath his bed for the jewels. He buried them deeply, and in the morning he went on to the city of Barowak alone, leaving his slaves to guard his tent. He was a clever man, the white one, and he knew that they would never suspect that he had left about them a treasure more precious than the kingdom of Kosar.

He went down into the city, and by means of his knowledge of the languages they speak in Barowak he mingled in the crowds and listened to the talk in the bazars. And he heard no word of Kosar save of the rubies of the raja and his falling-down palaces, and the people hungry while the raja wore jewels, in value greater than his whole domain beside. And then a great contentment settled upon the white man. He knew that no word of his most marvelous theft had preceded him through the kingdoms. He became intoxicated with security, and knew that he had only to travel onward to China where in a certain city there was a man who would buy of him whatever he chose to sell, when he could go far from the sea and build himself a secret palace with

many dancing girls and much wine and live in endless delight from thence onward.

He was a great man, and a wise man, so he felt, and it was already time for him to begin the enjoyment of his treasure. He began to look hungrily at the wines and sweetmeats, and to think obscure and evil thoughts concerning the women he saw about him. He debated on the purchase of dancing girls. He had been so long among dark races that he had almost forgotten that he was a white man.

Surely it was not the thought of a white man that made him throw back his head and laugh aloud in the bazar of Barowak. He had heard that the rance of Barowak was most beautiful of all women. And it was no more than fitting that he who had taken the jewels of Kosar should likewise take for himself the pearl of Barowak. His garb had been perfect for the first of his purposes, and was no less adapted to the second.

He went and held a secret consultation with an old female slave of the palace. . . .

**T**HE mark on his forehead was a sign to make the doors of women open to him, and to make women anxious to please him. He could grant or withhold the favor of the god Khayandra, the mark told those who were wise enough to understand it. And women desire that god's favor, and in particular, the wives of rajas desire it.

She gave him cooling drinks with her own hands, and watched him anxiously as he sat at ease beside a small marble pool, all ringed about with marble, while a scented fountain played in the stillness. She was desirous of making him well-disposed toward her, but she seemed a little frightened, too.

"Why have you fear?" he asked, as she listened apprehensively to some retreating footsteps.

"My lord knows not the worship of Khayandra," she told him. "But if I may please the god in any way . . ."

The white man was drunk with his power, which lay hidden in the ground among the hills that looked down on the city. His power was in small red stones, the largest of which was the size of a man's fist, but they glittered very wonderfully, and most men would have sold their souls for one of the smallest of them. The white man, disguised as a priest of Khayandra, thought of those stones glittering in the dark damp earth, waiting for his coming, and the thought intoxicated him. He looked upon the woman before him and found her pleasing. She was proud of carriage, and small of foot, and graceful. And her lips were very, very red, almost as red as the rubies the white man had stolen, and her eyes were like other jewels he did not possess.

"The god Khayandra," he murmured, looking at her obliquely, "desires to show you his favor. And I am his priest."

Had he been a wiser man, he would have seen that the light that came upon her face was from a thought of another than him, but his own heart was puffed up with pride, and full to bursting with vanity. And there was much evil in his eyes, which blinded him. He did not see stealthy figures creeping up behind him, nor read aright the sudden terror that overcame her as he reached out his hand to touch her.

An arm crept about his throat and tightened. And a cold, wavy blade pressed against his side, and then two men flung themselves upon his feet before he could more than gasp from a sudden very terrible fear.

Then he saw small, monkeylike eunuchs fling themselves upon the ranee Sahnya, and bind her fast. Then they grinned at him while one more monkeylike than the rest squatted on his haunches and made signs to the white man. The monkeylike man could not speak, because his tongue was cut out,—which told with horrible clarity of tortures that were in store for the false priest of Khayandra.

THE white man had forgotten that though he might be very powerful, because of certain red stones hidden in the damp earth, he had ventured from pride and lust into the palace of the raja of Barowak, and that the raja was jealous of his honor, besides being possessed of a peculiar sense of humor. The white man went pale to his very liver, from certain foreknowledge of what was to come to him. He had forgotten the mark on his forehead.

One of the eunuchs vanished, bearing a message, and presently returned. He made signs to the others, and the white man was lifted up and carried for a long distance through gloomy corridors of stone, while those who carried him giggled to themselves at what was to befall him. He could only writhe. But the ranee Sahnya made no struggle.

They brought him at last to a little courtyard where there was a fountain, and the raja of Barowak sitting on a divan, half asleep, while a pallid, plump man with spectacles read to him from a book. It was a curious book to be in such a place. It was printed in English, and the *babu* was reading from it with great unction, and then translating what he had read into the accurst language which is spoken in Barowak.

The raja of Barowak looked up sleepily when the white man was flung down upon the stone floor.



"How did he find entrance?" he asked drowsily. "Slay those who let him in."

And then he nodded again to the plump man with the spectacles, and he went on with his reading. The raja listened only half-attentively. Behind his sleepy eyes thoughts were moving slowly. After a long time he smiled to himself.

"Stay. What is the name of that book?"

The *babu* puffed out a little.

"It is the *History of the Spanish Inquisition*." He read the title in English, and then translated.

The raja grinned like one who is very drowsy.

"And what was that other one, from which you read this morning?"

The *babu* picked up a volume which was lettered: *Arthurian Legends*. Truly those were strange books to be in such a place, but the white man who lay bound there, waiting to learn in what fashion he was to die, did not think of that. He was remembering tales he had heard concerning the various unpleasant things a man may endure before death comes to him. He had heard that with care an expert torturer could keep one alive for four, even five days, in torment that would make hell a haven of infinite repose by contrast.

The ranees still was silent. The raja looked at her without particular malice, but rather as one who is meditating upon some jest.

"What is your excuse, O *Sahnya*?" he asked mildly. "Doubtless you love the man."

"Nay, my lord. But he is a priest of the god *Khayandra*, and I had supplication to make of his deity."

The raja said nothing whatever, but he looked very carefully at the mark on the white man's forehead. The white man took courage and spoke loudly, threatening the raja with the wrath of *Khayandra*. And the raja smiled again, seemingly half asleep.

"But the priests of *Khayandra*," he murmured softly, "have that mark indelibly upon their foreheads, and yours is running down your face from the cold sweat of terror." He began to laugh suddenly. "O white man, you have had your skin stained brown for many months, but the nails have grown out from your fingers, and the base of your nails is like the nails of the white men. This is a jest. I shall judge you by the laws of the white men."

The white man would have groveled in the earth, then, but that he was tied. The raja laughed, rocking his body back and forth.

"The raja Arthur, with his *tuans*, had many strange customs. There was that notion of the ordeal. I shall put you two to the ordeal. One of you shall live. And the other . . ."

The ranees spoke very softly, and very quietly. She was pleading for her life, but she spoke very softly. The raja waved her aside.

"This white man's custom of *chi-chi*—" He looked at the *babu*, and the *babu* puffed out and said, "Chivalree, sar." The raja chuckled and murmured, "Chivalree. It means that a man always dies for a woman. It is very foolish. You two may decide which is to die, and which is to go free."

The white man began to plead in an agony of pleading, struggling with his fear-stiffened tongue until the froth welled from his lips, begging, imploring the raja to slay the woman with many tortures, but to let him go free.

But the woman merely said, "If he is a false priest, kill him."

The raja looked disappointed. He had perhaps looked for a comedy wherein each would beg for the other's life. This matter convinced him against his will that the woman was innocent, but he had no mind to lose his jest.

"Then you may buy your freedom, or she may buy hers," he said, still hopeful of diversion. "And the one who fails to pay the greater price shall test out some of the things that are in this book."

He indicated the fatter of the two books, from which the *babu* had been reading.

"It is vairy instructive, sar," said the *babu*, lapsing into English in his excitement. "This feeding a man powdered diamond, sar. He lingers for months, with many peculiar pains, sar. I—I was jeweler's clerk in Bombay, sar, an' I could fix—"

He began to rustle in the pages of the book and read excitedly, while the raja listened drowsily. The rack was there described in detail, and the torment of thumbscrews, and of the boot, and the other devices with which the Inquisition had operated upon men's religious convictions.

He read on and on, his translations growing more and more enthusiastic as he described the tortures that had been devised by holy men. He was especially pleased by the device of clipping off the eyelids and staking a man out in the sun.

But the raja merely drowded, until presently he said suddenly:

"Let them name the prices they will pay for mercy."

And then there was silence for a long time, while the white man's soul writhed. On the one hand, the prospect of staring with lidless scorched eyes up at a pitiless tropic sun for days or weeks or months, with other tortures yet to follow, the rack, and the boot, and flame, and water dripping until death came. And on the other hand, the giving up of his rubies, his priceless, precious rubies that glittered with a red fire that was neither of land nor sea.

He gave an agonized cry at the thought, but terror drove him, and he offered rubies for his life. The largest

was the size of a man's fist and those next in size as large as a man's thumb, and so on down to tiny glittering stones no bigger than a grain of sand. He offered them all, despairingly, for his life.

And the raja looked sleepily at the woman.

"And what is your price that you will pay for life?"

And she said just two words, which the white man did not hear.

Then the raja smiled very curiously, and bade his servants go and dig up the rubies that the white man had described, and as he saw them go, all the anguish and bitterness in the white man's heart turned to venom against the woman whom he had coveted to this loss, and he made a bargain with the raja that if the rubies were as he said, that he should be able to ask one demand.

And he lay bound in the sunlight, full of an unspeakable anguish at the loss of his rubies, until the men came back with his treasure.

The raja looked at them sleepily, and allowed the *babu* to touch and finger them. He made no move to examine them himself. But the white man, seeing all his wealth passing forever from his hands cried out horribly.

"My demand! I make my demand!"

And the raja gazed at him, drowsily.

"The life of that woman! Kill her with torments!"

The white man sank back upon the stone flooring and moaned with anguish at the red stones going from him forever.

And then the *babu* looked up and smiled very placidly and said, "These are the rubies of the raja of Kosar, sar. I took them to him from Bombay, sar, when I was jeweler's clerk. He was very poor an' could make no display, so he had these jewels made

for state occasions, sar, an' they are made out of glass."

Through the stunned horror of the white man there came a curious sound. It was the raja, laughing. He was laughing at the jest of a man trying to buy his own life and the death of a woman with bits of colored glass which were paste and not precious stones at all. He was particularly amused at the white man's trying to buy the death of a woman who had offered a very great price for her life. She had offered him a son, concerning whom she had wished to make prayers to the god Khayandra. It diverted the raja of Barowak to think of a man trying to exchange trumpery bits of trash for so priceless a gift, and he was minded to carry out the jest to its only fitting conclusion, with the aid of the *Arthurian Legends* and the *History of the Spanish Inquisition*. He gave orders, laughing uncontrollably . . .

**T**HE man with the disheveled hair was staring, now, as if he saw terrifying things. He drank of his green drink and shuddered. Gresham was listening very intently, and perhaps for the first time in his life did not notice that we were becoming a bit conspicuous. The voice of the man with the disheveled hair had grown louder, toward the last.

**T**HE raja of Barowak gave orders, laughing, and men departed swiftly north and south and east and west to scour the whole world for red things. They brought red cloths and red woods and red stones and red dyes. And they took whole rivers and made them red with the dyes that they had brought. And then they took the white man and sat him in a red chair, binding him very securely, and so that he could not move, nor even open his jaws to scream. And then for a hundred years they left him.

They did not touch him. They did not beat him. They did not harm him in any smallest way, but from some spot far overhead a tiny drop of red-tinted water fell down upon his head. Once every second it fell, deliberately, inexorably, never late, never early, never varying by the thousandth fraction of an inch from the one spot where it fell.

From taps the blows rose to hammer-blows and then to mighty, horrible collisions that jarred his brain to its very foundations. The inevitable monotony of it grew terrible, horrifying, of a sort to drive away sanity. The white man began to make noises in his throat by the end of the first year. By the hundredth year he was screaming through forcibly closed lips.

Then they took him away, and he slept for a day. And then they took him back for another hundred years, but he was forgotten, and they left him for a thousand generations, while he screamed and screamed and the water fell remorselessly, drop by drop, drop by drop, upon the one same spot upon his skull.

And then he was released for a single day, while he knew that the raja and all his descendants must have died and been forgotten, and hoped that they had forgotten the cause of his doom, or the length of it. But they put him back again and again, and yet again, until he knew that he must wait patiently until all the armies of the world could find no more red dye with which to tint the rivers, and the rivers had run dry, and there was no more water in the earth. He sat on his reddened throne and screamed endlessly because a tiny drop of water fell drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . upon a single tiny spot upon his skull.

And he stayed there for a hundred thousand years.

(Continued on page 285)

## The Oldest Story in the World

*(Continued from page 176)*

NIGHT had fallen in the Jardin de Paris, in Rangoon, and the boats on the river were no more than dark bulks from which many-colored lights shone out serenely. The scents of the Guleh-Wat, over the wall, grew thin. The incense became stale. The hibiscus and the nipa blossoms and the lotus flowers took on a queer, sickly smell that was the odor of premature decay. The night insects were fluttering about our heads with an exaggerated energy.

Gresham coughed suddenly.

"Poor beggar," he said, not ungenerally. "I sh'd think that would drive a man crazy. Fancy a drop of water on one tiny spot that you couldn't vary! It 'ud make a man hysterical, I imagine."

The man with the disheveled hair turned too-bright eyes upon us.

"It lasted for a hundred thousand years," he said lucidly, "so, naturally, he cursed rubies, because everything about him all that time was the color of rubies and the water that fell was always tinted like rubies. It looked like them as it fell, glittering . . ."

"I wonder," I said, ruminating, "if it would have to fall on a special part of a man's skull to drive him crazy. I've heard of it, of course."

The man with the disheveled hair told me that it would not. That it had fallen all over the white man's head, but in each imprisonment only upon the one spot. He told me accurately just where it fell each time, but curiously, he did not raise his hand to his head to illustrate.

Gresham lighted a cigarette very

thoughtfully. He had hardly paid attention to the last of this talk.

He made a sudden impatient gesture.

"Look here, Leinster," he said abruptly to me, with an undercurrent of meaning and perplexity in his voice. "I'm supposed to arrest a certain chap. I'm in the constabulary, y'know, and you can guess why I ought to arrest him. But—dash it all! What'd you do?"

The man with the disheveled hair was lying slumped back in his seat, and he was staring with an infinite pleasure at the greenness of his drink as it showed in the dim lights the Jardin de Paris provides.

"A hundred thousand years," he murmured, and shuddered. "Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . ."

A waiter passed behind him and stumbled just a little. In stumbling, he raised his arm to catch himself and a single drop of red liquid slopped over the edge of the glass. It fell on the head of the man with the disheveled hair.

And in an instant he had caught the arms of his chair in a frenzied grasp and was sitting upright in a queerly rigid position, as if he were tied there. His face was terrible to look upon and his eyes were fixed. And he began to scream in a certain horrible monotony, as if he had been screaming for a hundred thousand years.