

*In Your Wildest Imaginings You Will
Not Guess What Killed These Men
Until the Author Reveals It To You*

The Purple Death

By EDITH LYLE RAGSDALE



N ANAH, Payne's Indian servant, came racing across the ground, his eyes rolling, his dusky face a distorted mask of hideous fear. As he reached his master his limbs seemed to buckle and bend beneath him. Sprawling at Payne's feet he threw his arms about the white man's legs, and sobbed

out a disjointed tale of horror.

"Again, Sahib," he wailed, "again has the fearsome Thing come in the night, and this sunrise, after Nanah had been to the stream to fetch water, Nanah found where it had entered the tent of the Sahib, and—oh, merciful Allah, the Thing has struck again!"

The Indian, growing incoherent, began rolling about on the ground, sobbing, not loudly, as one would imagine, but in heart-broken whimpers.

Payne's set, mask-like face became a shade grayer, the deep-set blue eyes a bit sterner, the inflexible mouth harder.

"So," he said, "another of us has an-

swered the call. Who is it this time, Nanah?"

Nanah gathered himself together and ceased whimpering.

"This time it is the Sahib Arnold."

Payne winced. Arnold had been his friend. Of all the little army of adventurers, treasure-seekers and big game hunters the dead man had been nearest his heart.

"How—?" he questioned the Indian.

"The same as always. The Thing had entered like—like—"

He sought a suitable word.

"Like a *yaksha* or a lost *jnana*. There is the same look of fear and horror on the sirdar's dead face. The same purple line about the mouth and the limbs are drawn up as though the sirdar's agony had been, indeed, great. Like, Payne, Sahib, all the others."

Payne nodded.

"Like all the others. No marks, nothing disturbed about the camp?"

Nanah shook his turbaned head.

"Not, Sahib."

The white man turned.

"I will go to the tent. You, Nanah, go tell Captain Worthington."

Payne, head bent, walked slowly across the intervening space and entered the tent of his friend.

Every smallest detail was as Nanah had said. Nothing had been disturbed, nothing stolen. No footprint, save Nanah's, marred the dust before the door. Arnold's clothing, money and watch were intact. Payne made sure of all this before he turned to the distorted body on the bed.

For a long time he stood and looked down at the corpse. Again the words of Nanah rang true. Arnold had suffered, terribly. The fear of something worse than death was mirrored in the wide eyes, and written on the cold, dead face. The swollen and clenched hands, the knotted leaders which had drawn the knees up almost to the chin, the cords of the neck indicated it.

And sinister beyond words was the purplish ring about the mouth.

Payne's blood congealed. An indefinable dread shook his soul. What sort of a weapon had the murderer used to leave such a mark? Who, or what, was the Thing? Questions, unanswerable, rioted through his mind.

Silent, shuddering, Payne went over the events of the past six months. The story was, up to a certain point, void of anything dramatic. Rather hackneyed. He, Payne, together with eleven other adventurous spirits, had embarked for

India, where, so rumor declared, were great beds of platinum, unworked and worth many times over the proverbial "king's ransom." After a period of prospecting, the beds had actually been located, and with a small army of half caste workmen they had been getting out quantities of metal.

Everything had "come their way," to use Hunt's words. The grains of platinum were thickly scattered through the auriferous sand, and at each washing a small fortune was panned.

The climate, in that particular part of India, was ideal. There was fruit in abundance. Game for the shooting. Fish for the hooking. A stream of pure water. Nature was prodigal with her gifts, and for weeks the adventurers had lived in a sort of paradise.

To the south of them, over in the jungle, the Temple of Indra reared its dome. There a sacerdotal sect chanted hymns to their deity; their white-robed priests moved quietly about; and there, so the white men had heard from their servants, one of the devctees hid, beneath the folds of his snowy turban, the brain of one of the most renowned surgeons the world has ever known.

All these things, taken as a whole, were enthusiastically enjoyed by the platinum hunters. They looked upon the naturally provided food as a god-send. But the priests, even though of an alien tongue and creed, were, beneath the white robes and swathing turbans, men. And, no matter where one may be, human companionship counts.

A sort of acquaintance had been struck up between the white men and the priests. When they chanced to meet there was always a friendly word, a nod or smile. In a strange land the friendship of these men was a real asset.

The first month in camp passed happily. The twelve white men worked, played, ate, slept. There was not a cloud on the horizon.

Then one day Nanah had come screaming to Payne, sobbing and wringing his slim, brown hands, crying hysterically that Borden was dead.

Investigation had proved the words of the Hindoo. Borden had been dead for hours. Examination showed no marks upon the body. He had not died from any sort of bite. No beast had torn him. At night, just before retiring, he had been superabundantly healthy. His spirits were soaring. The whole twelve had indulged in a rough and tumble play. When bedtime came he had laughingly bid his companions good-night.

When found his body was stiff and cold. His limbs were contorted, his eyes wide open. A purple ring surrounded his mouth.

That was all.

The one medical student among them who acted in capacity of physician, gave, as his opinion, that Borden had died from acute indigestion.

Sorrowfully the survivors buried their friend and heaped stones upon the grave to protect the body from prowling hyena and jackal pack.

Before Borden had been in his grave a month a young medical student was sleeping beside him. His death was, apparently, identically like Borden's.

Then, swiftly, Marlow, James and Radcliff had followed. All just like Borden, even to the smallest detail.

And now Arnold was gone.

Six of the twelve had succumbed to the Thing!

Payne groaned aloud.

"What is it?" he cried brokenly, "this hideous Thing that strikes in the dark?"

An ague shook him. He, like a frightened child, wrung his hands and moaned.

"Who," he sobbed pitifully, "who will be next? Merciful God—who?"

The space in front of the tent filled rapidly. Captain Worthington and the four men, the half-breed laborers and the body servant of the whites gathered closely about. A common horror held them all.

Captain Worthington entered the tent, his friends at his heels.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Payne.

The latter shook his head.

"I—do not know. I am absolutely unstrung. I am beginning to fear—what shall I say? Necromancy—voodooism—witches? Something, Worthington, is terribly wrong. It is not reasonable for each of the six men who have died to possess the exact symptoms naturally. There has not been a particle of difference in the characteristics of these deaths. What killed one killed all."

"Admitted. But what was it?"

The captain mopped his clammy brow. Again Payne shook his head.

"I—don't know."

Dean withdrew his gaze from the ghastly spectacle upon the bed, caught the eye of Nanah and with a muttered oath turned to Payne.

"I believe it is the work of some of these damned Indian conjurers," he cried. "Strange, isn't it, that Nanah has found every one of the six—like—that?"

He pointed a shaking finger toward the bed.

The eyes of Payne and Worthington met. Subconsciously each had begun to entertain some such weird belief. The entire land reeked with mysticism. Everywhere the occult was apparent. Though good, hard common sense ridiculed the theory of the supernatural as a factor in the deaths of the six men, the fact remained that they were all dead from an unexplainable cause.

They had died from no known disease. There had been no abrasions, not the tiniest pin prick. But they were dead! Something had killed them!

In a row, out there beneath the blossoms of the monkey-bread trees, were five graves. Before the sun went down Arnold would be filling the sixth.

Who would be next? Who would occupy the seventh grave?

Payne shook off the incubus of fear that gripped him and looked toward the spot where he had last seen Nanah's bright turban. The place was vacant! The young Hindoo was gone!

Dean, nerves on edge, cried out, pointing toward a banyan grove: "There he goes—the son of a dog!"

In the scramble that followed, in which Indians joined but to circumvent the whites, the Hindoo, Nanah, made good his escape.

When all hope of capturing him was gone, the men returned to camp. Upon one thing they were all agreed. The Hindoo had used black magic. And, also, they all felt the rest were doomed to go the same way unless Nanah was caught and summarily dealt with.

Worthington, head bent, sat and smoked innumerable pipes of strong tobacco. When he spoke his companions listened intently.

"I am going to the Temple of Indra," he began. "I am going to ask the monk, the surgeon, you know to come over and take a look at poor old Arnold. If he is the man they say he is I believe he'll be able to tell us how they've passed out."

He paused and tamped more tobacco into his pipe.

"I do not believe these deaths have occurred naturally. I've seen lots of dead men but—boys, what makes that purple ring about the mouth?"

He sprang up and paced excitedly about.

Dean, eyes filled with dread, took up the question.

"Aye," he said huskily, "what makes it? No common death leaves a mark like that. There's black magic back of all this."

He sank again into moody silence, shaking fingers describing a circle about his lips.

"Purple," he murmured. "Purple death!"

Payne and his comrades exchanged glances. It was patent that Dean was wavering on the brink of a collapse, hovering above the narrow line which separates the sane from the insane.

Worthington, shoving his own dread to the back of his mind, spoke almost cheerfully.

"Come on, Dean, let's walk over to the temple. I've a hunch the priests of Indra will be able to put their finger on the trouble."

Dean, still running a stodgy finger around his lips, arose and followed Worthington.

Three hours later they returned, accompanied by the surgeon-priest. On the way back Worthington had given the Hindoo all the known facts in the mysterious series of deaths.

When the camp was reached the priest entered Arnold's tent, paused beside the cot and stood looking intently at the corpse.

Payne, to whom the waiting had been soul-sapping, spoke.

"What do you think of this, taken in connection with the five other deaths?"

The turbaned devotee of Indra turned, and for a fleeting instant Payne almost cowered beneath the look in the gleaming eyes.

"Think?" he said softly, "What is there to think? Death comes to all alike. Perhaps not in the same manner. But it comes. And there are many things much worse than death. To the good—Sworga."

He lifted his eyes rapturously. After a short pause he resumed.

"This man, no doubt, suffered terribly. I am quite certain he did."

He smiled and Payne could have sworn he detected a diabolically exultant expression on the brown face.

"But he did not die from disease. He, from all indications, died from—*fright!*"

The eyes, which Payne had thought malicious, were melting with sympathy. The white man felt a revulsion of feeling as he gazed upon the kindly face.

"It was the uncertain light," he mused, "and my nerves. I must get a better grip on myself."

The Indian again spoke.

"There are no signs of disease."

He ran his long, taper fingers over the body.

"No abrasions, no contusions, no fractured bones."

With a shake of the head he stepped back.

"I could perform an autopsy. But it would tell you nothing. Nothing that I cannot from the signs here tell. Fear—fear alone—killed your friend."

"Oh, but see here!" expostulated Hunt, "that is preposterous! All six of the men who have passed out were—men. There was not one weakling, not one coward, among the whole lot. For the most part they were ex-service men. Men who never turned a hair at such little pleasure parties as St. Mihiel or Chateau-Thierry. Men who have roughed it all their lives. No sissies nor perfumed dandies in the bunch. Men that would have fought their weight in wild cats—"

He broke off and cast a puzzled, miserable look about.

"Hunt's right," said Payne. "Those boys weren't the scarey stripe. I, like Dean, think there's something mighty rotten about the whole business. And I think that damned black-skinned Nanah's at the bottom of it. Get him and fill his black hide full of lead and the rest of us will be able to get out of this hole alive."

For Payne, usually dubbed "The Silent," this was a long speech.

"It may be," acquiesced the priest, "Nanah's father was a sorcerer."

His eyes held a rapt expression. The twisted thing upon the cot seemed to have lost interest for him. His mind, plainly, was elsewhere. Some scene, conjured up from the past, gripped him.

Worthington jerked impatiently about.

"See here," he demanded, "can't you, if you are as learned as they claim, tell us just what caused the boys' deaths? It's idiotic to suggest anything frightful enough to scare six husky, daredevil rounders to death. I believe it's just what Dean says. Some sort of hoodoo work. And I believe you, as an Indian priest, are hep to the whole thing!"

The priest's face went livid, but his self control was admirable. He bowed profoundly, smiled graciously and turned to Payne.

"I can do neither the living nor the dead any service by remaining. My watch at the sacred shrine of Indra commences with the sunset. Therefore, I must be on my way."

Payne inclined his head.

"We had hoped you could help us in our trouble," he said, quietly. "Anyway, we thank you for coming. Let me offer you refreshments before you begin your return journey."

The priest stiffened and his face became convulsed with passion.

"No!" he cried sharply.

Then, as if ashamed of his rudeness, "I thank you," he said, "but a priest fasts more often than feasts. I cannot eat your food."

With this enigmatic remark he turned and plunged into the jungle.

That afternoon the body of Arnold was laid beside the other victims of the purple death.

A hopeless despondency settled over the camp. The laborers, sullen and brutish, went about their work in a spirit of insubordination. Nanah, their friend, was under the white men's displeasure. Therefore, they, in a body, resented it.

The temper of the whites, too, was on edge. The least overt act of the natives evoked a curse or a blow. Mutiny was in the air.

The night following Arnold's death the men sat hunched about the smudge fire. Sometimes they talked rapidly, disjointedly, about the tragedy. Again, for long periods, no one spoke.

The peculiar attitude of the priest gripped them. His assertion that fear, the poltroon's plea—had caused the deaths, angered them. His conversation lacked stability. After declaring fright had killed Arnold he, too readily, it seemed to the men, switched to the theory that Nanah had been instrumental in the crime.

"Allowing Nanah did kill them," suddenly voiced Hunt, "what in God's name did he do to scare them to death?"

No one answered. Each man was too busy conning the question: "Who will be next?"

Far into the night they sat. When, sick, body and soul, they retired, a double guard was patrolling the camp.

For a month after the last death nothing occurred to mar the humdrum quiet of the camp. The guard, working in six hour tricks, neither heard nor saw anything suspicious. Therefore the whites, lulled by the treacherous security, dropped back into their former peaceful existence. There was, however, one exception. Dean never felt at ease. In moments of abstraction his finger always hovered about his mouth, always circled his lips.

One day a guard came hurriedly to Payne.

"Sirdar Payne," he began warily, "at sunrise today, as thy servant was watching the jungle to the east, thy servant thought he saw a face. It might be, Sirdar, that Nanah lurks about."

Payne knew, in his own mind, that the guard had not only seen Nanah but that he had held converse with him.

For a time the American smoked in silence. Then, removing the stem from between his teeth he said succinctly, "It might be. And it might be that Nanah is going to get his hide full of lead. We are desperate men, Augwa. And we are vigilant. We sleep on our arms. It might be that should Nanah learn this he will find other parts of India more to his liking."

Augwa bowed to the earth.

"It might be," he said.

Dean, upon learning of the Hindoo's return, became, in a measure, insane. For months he had been haunted by the overweening fears of the nameless horror. Six times he had viewed the grotesquely rigid bodies, the wide-open, staring eyes, the clenched hands of the men with whom he had slept, eaten, worked and played. Most hideous of all, six times his soul had been flayed by the livid, purple ring about the frozen mouth.

Captain Worthington, listening to Dean's ravings, cursed in his heart the venture that had led him and his comrades into the land of mystery. Out there in the lurid sunshine were six rock-heaped mounds, covered softly by the snowy blossoms of the monkey-bread trees. At a distance Payne, Hunt, Brown and Carson were standing, dejectedly looking at the row of graves. Inside the tent Dean, chained like a dog, cursed and fought imaginary Nanahs.

It was terrible.

Worthington's heart ached for the living man more acutely than for the dead. They could not feel, while Dean, racked by fear, suffered the tortures of the damned.

No one expected to sleep in camp that night. Nanah was near. As they valued their lives they meant to stay awake.

Wearily the hours dragged. Eventually the rosy pink of dawn crept across the sky. Cicades hushed their strident clamor, vampire bats winged their zig-zag homeward way. Birds awoke twittering and singing. Day dawned and Nanah, the terrible, had not struck.

A week passed and, as nothing had occurred to disturb the every-day routine of the camp, vigilance relaxed.

Nanah had taken Payne's hint and decamped.

Wearily the men sought their cots. The day had been exacting, sultry, filled with accidents and mishaps.

As the night settled down a holy calm seemed to envelop the camp. Far, far away, stars twinkled brightly in the velvety blackness of the great dome overhead. From the tents came the regu-

lar breathing of sleeping, work-wearied men.

The guard changed. The moon, now at the fag end of the last quarter, slipped up out of the vastness and hung, a tiny red-gold thread, in the sky.

The men on guard were tired. They, too, had done their bit in the sand beds. A turbaned head dropped, jerked back, sank again until the chin lay upon the black, full-muscled chest. Morpheus, with silent fingers, pressed down the weary lids. The camp slept.

Payne awoke suddenly. A weight, warm, palpitant, was on his breast. A rhythmic murmur flowed and eddied about him. A peculiar sensation, as though something was compressing his chest, oppressed him. A hot flame seemed scorching his face, a searing circle burned about his lips, his breath was leaving him. He tried to move, to shake off the crushing weight. But, above him gleamed two phosphorescent flames chaining his will, subjugating him to the Thing until he could not stir.

He tried, then, to scream. To shout. To cast the hideous incubus from him. But by some hypnotic power the Thing overruled his soul, clung tenaciously.

The myalgia in his muscles was excruciating. In his agony Payne began drawing up his knees, gripping his fists. And his eyes, mesmerized and held by the glowing green flame above him, opened wider, wider, until the balls seemed bursting from the sockets.

His lungs, like a top balloon from which the air is squeezed, collapsed. His breath became the merest flicker. He, like the six, was doomed. His last conscious thought was of the seventh grave beneath the monkey-bread tree.

Then came a roar and a blaze of light. A scream neither human nor animal but a blending of both.

Some time later Payne awoke. His body was a mass of aches; his lungs were a rack of pain; but he was alive. He knew he was because, as he moved, a turbaned head came into his line of vision. He could see the sun shining, could hear a low hum of voices. Yes, beyond a doubt, he was alive.

"Nanah," said Payne, with effort.

The boy came forward. His handsome face was aglow, his white teeth gleaming between his scarlet lips. "Beloved master," he cried ardently, "it is as though thou art returned from *Swarga!* As though thou wert given back from the grave."

He fell to kissing and weeping over Payne's hands.

Payne smiled weakly at what he

mentally styled the Hindoo's extravagant behavior.

"Guess I've been sick," he hazarded. "Must have been a little off. Touch of fever. Seems I had a dream. The Thing was on my breast. Sucking my breath like a cat. I can still feel the way its paws prodded up and down on my chest. Ugh! It was pretty awful. Glad it wasn't the truth. Queer, the tricks delirium plays."

Worthington, entering the tent, heard Payne's last remark.

"Yes, but, old dear, it wasn't delirium," he said lightly to cover his real emotion. "It was pure facts. Only for Nanah, God bless his darned old hide, you'd be filling the seventh grave today with every prospect auspicious for the number to go up to twelve."

Payne drew his aching body erect.

"The truth!" he cried, "Why man, it could not be!"

Worthington pushed his friend back on the cot, seated himself and struck match to pipe. When it was going good he answered Payne's protest.

"It both could be and was," he said soberly, "we have the answer to the puzzle. Nanah, here, because he is Indian, suspected something. But he, even, never came in a million miles of the truth. When Dean accused him of the crime he simply, to save his own skin as well as to have a free hand in working out the riddle, made himself scarce. Nanah knew that if suspicion once fastened on to him his chances of getting in the clear was about zero. So, logically, he took leg-bail, laid low, and saved you from being the seventh victim of the purple death."

Worthington stopped and mopped his brow. When he resumed his face was pale.

"The story has its inception in an event which occurred a year ago when some man, an explorer and curio-seeker, came into this part of the country. As I understood it the priests of the Temple of Indra have, there in the temple, a god called Indra. This, as all such heathen junk, is sacred in the sight of the devotees.

"But the curio-seeker determined to annex the god. One night he stole into the temple, shot the priest on guard, swiped the image and was making his getaway when two other priests surprised him. One he killed outright but the other, shot through the spine, became a paralytic.

"I am not sure as to the thief's fate. Anyway, he fell into the hands of the priests and, from what I've gotten from the blacks, I guess it was enough.

"The man whom the explorer shot lived for weeks. On one subject, he was violently insane. When he thought, which I guess was pretty much all the time, about white men, his whole desire was to kill. He, himself, was out of the running. The poisoned bullet had done its work well.

"It was not only of his own misfortune that he thought. The young priest on guard at the shrine of Indra that particular night was the paralytic's baby brother, a young chap who'd just taken orders. He was the first man murdered.

"You may imagine something of the helpless priest's agony of spirit. His kid brother dead, himself a paralytic. Hate and revenge seethed in his blood. His soul cried out for vengeance. Nothing but the lives of white men—not one only, but as many as his malignity could reach—would satisfy him.

"Obviously, he, in his condition, could do nothing. But, because of much brooding, he evolved an idea."

Payne held up his hand.

"What has all this—the god of Indra, the thieving explorer, the slain and maimed priests—to do with the murders here in camp and my own narrow escape, if, as you say, it was fact and not hallucination?"

"It does seem sort of rambling and far-fetching, doesn't it?" agreed Worthington, "But it all correlates. I have to lead up to the climax gradually. If I took it on high the chances are you'd think I was stepping on the gas!"

Nanah nodded.

"The Sidar is right," he said, "White men cannot understand Indian ways."

Worthington resumed.

"As the injured priest lay on his hard pallet in the palm-thatched hut he, because he was insane, devised one of the most diabolically clever plots a human's mind ever conceived.

"The kid brother whom he loved, even though priests are not supposed to love, had as a pet and companion a trained cheetah. This cat was exceptionally large. It was the sole witness to the brutal murder in the temple.

"The plan which matured in the mind of the stricken priest was horrible and unique. It was to have a part of the cheetah's brain removed and the diseased section of his own brain grafted in its place.

"At first the surgeon, the scoundrel we got to look at poor old Arnold, refused. But the paralytic was importunate. He pointed out that he must surely die. With his brain functioning in that of the animal, the work of revenge would go on as long as the cat

lived. As the cheetah was less than a year old, the chances were good that it would secretly slay its tens, aye, its hundreds.

"The operation was performed. It was a success so far as the cheetah was concerned. But the priest died.

"The surgeon took the cheetah in hand. Talking to it he made it understand its mission. The hate cells of the priest's brain grew and functioned in the cat's head. Among the natives it was docile, gentle. But when it scented or saw a white man it became the prototype of the insane priest. The hate which had racked the man lashed the animal to fury.

"When we arrived on the scene the operation was three months old. The cat was perfectly recovered and ready for the test.

"The night of Borden's death the surgeon-priest, holding the cheetah in leash, crept up to camp. Everything was silent.

"Gloatingly the hell-fiend watched as Borden stirred, woke, sensed the presence of the creature upon his breast. With devilish joy he watched the cheetah as it laid foul lips to the mouth of its victim and sucked away his life.

"Enjoying the prospect of a long-drawn-out reign of terror the wretch called the cheetah, snapped back the chain and returned to the temple.

"You know the rest."

Great beads of perspiration were rolling down Payne's face. Vividly, as his friend talked, he re-lived the hideous experience of the night before.

Worthington knocked the dead ashes from his pipe.

"Only for Nanah, ever watchful, you'd—"

He broke off, abruptly.

Payne, wide-eyed, white and shaken gasped: "How did you learn all this?"

Sirdar Worthington's lips tightened, grimly.

"From the surgeon-priest, before he died. Nanah got the cheetah, but we got the priest."

He shrugged and changed the subject. "Old Dean's right as a trivet now that—"

Payne interrupted.

"What did you do with that damned hound?" he cried.

Worthington's gray eyes hardened.

"What did we do with him? What does it matter? Anyway, it wasn't nearly good enough for him!"

Nanah nodded a wise head.

"Where he is now, Sahib Payne, they do not perform surgical operations. There is too much heat!"

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