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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Temple Dancer

By SEABURY QUINN

*An unusual story, about a white girl in a Hindoo temple, and the loving arms of the gracious lady that protected her on the night when she was to become the Bride of Siva—
a tragic tale*

1. Sanctuary

THE smell of tiger, rancid, acrid, vaguely terrifying, hung in the humid breeze that eddied through the flower-laden boughs of fromager and banyan. Northward sounded the shrill trumpet of an elephant, taken up and mockingly repeated by the gibbons chattering in the bamboo thickets. Superheated, heavy with sweet-scented air as a greenhouse with its fires banked high, the jungle hummed and whispered with mysterious little voices, now shrill, now dull and muted, that seemed to be but echoes in a vast, all-conquering silence.

The man who dragged the bullock's nose-string paused to draw a tattered shirt-sleeve down his face from brow to chin and turned a wistful smile upon the woman huddled in the cart. "Courage, dear heart," he whispered. "It can't be many miles until we reach a station, then——"

She looked at him with eyes deep-set and drawn, their glaze of misery intensified by lines of pain that etched her cheeks, but the tragic look upon her face

was lightened by a smile of tenderness that drew the corners of her suffering mouth a little upward. "It can't be very far away, dear love," she answered as a spasm seemed to rack her. "I can feel——"

Her lower lip began to quiver and she caught and held it firm between her teeth. Despite her brave attempt at courage a deep, heart-wrenching groan welled from her throat, and he could see the corded muscles stand like lines of sudden white against her sweat-drenched neck.

"Please, God, dear pitying God, let it be delayed until we reach a settlement—until we come to human beings!" the man besought as he turned and tugged once more upon the bullock's lead-string. A more than half-forgotten prayer of childhood came into his mind:

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild . . ."

What was the next line? "Look upon this little child"? He wasn't sure, and in an effort to recapture memory he threw his head back, gazing thoughtful-eyed across the mud flats bordering the sluggish river. "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild

—what's that? Oh, God be praised, a building!"

Out of the green distance, not more than two or three miles off, there rose the bone-white towers of a temple. Its walls were meshed in writhing greenery, clutched and bound and fettered in a strangling net of creeping vines and reaching, snake-like roots, but jungle-bound as it might be, it was the symbol of a human habitation. If he could make it before . . . he set his teeth and bowed his shoulders as he urged the weary little taurine steed to greater haste.

Like advance waves of a slowly flooding sea the jungle verdure washed across

and all but drowned the remnants of the stone-paved causeway reaching from comparatively solid ground across the slime-encrusted swamp moat to the temple gateway. The green-scummed waters swarmed with life which spanned the gap from infusoria to amphibia and lapped against a wall of square-hewn stones as massive as the bastions of a fortress. At the roadhead rose a triple flight of stairs, each set divided from the others by a platform nine feet square, carrying out the symbolism of the mystic three times three. Above the final landing arched a gateway piercing through a wall of uncemented masonry with carven elephant heads set



"Butex-Jan, sole surviving candidate of the ordeal, must prove her fitness to be married to the god she served."

as supports on either side and three tiered faces, broad-nosed, blank-eyed, passionless and pitiless, sculptured at its crest, one facing south, one east, one west. "Siva," the man whispered as he looked up at the great impassive faces. "Siva the Destroyer! I thought——"

His words were broken by a low-voiced greeting: "I bid the strangers welcome to the habitation of the Gods." A man with shaven head, robed in a yellow gown and bearing in his hand a yellow-tufted staff, bowed from the gateway's arch. He was taller and more strongly built than the average Annamese, and his skin was scarcely darker than a brunette European's. Across his forehead, heightened by the shaving of his scalp, there stretched the horizontal bars of red and white which symbolize the followers of Siva.

"Is there anybody here who understands — who has skill in medicine?" the man requested breathlessly. "My wife——"

"Enter," bade the other calmly. "We have seen your coming from afar; your reception is prepared and there are those with skill to tend your wife."

"It's all right, darling," whispered the young husband as he lifted his half-fainting wife from the crude cart. "We've come upon a Hindoo temple in the jungle, and the high priest says they can take care of you. You'll be safe, now, and the baby——"

The moan of agony which came unbidden from the tortured woman's lips cut through his reassurance, but she smiled despite her pain and raised her hands to stroke his cheeks as he took her in his arms. "My own," she whispered falteringly, "if I should not——"

He hushed her with a hurried kiss and bore her quickly up the ninefold steps.

Through the arching opening of the gateway he could see the courtyard of the temple, heat-drenched and golden-bright

beneath the fierce Cambodian sun; he saw the serried rows of doorways leading to the cells where dwelt the priests and temple women, and the high-doored shrine where the effigy of Siva the Destroyer sat in sullen menace in the everlasting half-light. This he saw above the woman's head as he paused for breath upon the topmost landing, but the sun which shone directly from the zenith cast no warning shadows of those who lurked behind the doorway's opening, their eyes fixed on the high priest's lifted hand. He set the woman gently on her feet and clasped his right arm around her, steadying her halting walk, and as they stepped across the temple threshold the priest brought down his hand.

There was a flash of metal as four spears thrust simultaneously. The man relaxed his grip about the woman's shoulders, stumbled blindly a half-faltering step and sank down on his face without a sound. A little lake of swiftly spreading crimson stained the stones beneath his breast, and before it reached a half-foot past his body there came a swarm of jewel-hued flies to settle at the edges of the swelling pool and suck the ruddy fluid up with greedy thirst.

The pain-racked woman dropped upon her knees beside her stricken husband. "David!" she called softly. "David, my beloved!"

That was all. Neither tear nor scream came from her as she knelt beside her dead, and when the temple janitors laid by their spears and reached to seize her they met no resistance, for she lay as still and flaccid as he whom they had killed.

2. *A Life Begins*

IN SPITE of suffocating heat and stifling humidity, a charcoal brazier glowed inside the little vault-like room where Deborah Fielding lay propped against a

heap of earth and stones, her infant at her breast. Labor, hastened by the shock she had endured, had been short but terrible. In the evil-smelling darkness of the vault, attended by two hags as hideous as the witches from *Macbeth*, she thanked a kindly Providence for the anodyne of pain, since agony of body helped dull the agony of mind and kept her thought from what had happened at the temple gateway. Now, torn and bleeding from the unskilled handling of the unkempt midwives, but with the tides of pain subsiding, the spate of bitter memories swept across returning consciousness.

"David," she moaned weakly. "David, darling——"

The two old hags who squatted by the glowing brazier rose as at a signal and scuttled from the room, taking care to hug the walls that their profaning shadows might not fall upon the man who stood without the doorless entrance. As the jangle of their tawdry ornaments subsided down the corridor the high priest entered and stood looking down at her. Behind him walked a temple janitor, one of the quartet who had struck her husband down three hours before.

Deborah felt no fear, only a revolted curiosity as she looked up at the visitor. "Why have you done this thing?" she asked him weakly. "What harm had we done you?" As she spoke she noticed how his features seemed to match the sculptured faces by the temple gate, almost expressionless, free from any look of hate or malice, devoid of pity as a graven mask.

He bent his gaze upon her in the charcoal brazier's glow, and though she knew he did not move, his eyes seemed to come nearer, to melt and fuse in one gigantic eye which floated through the intervening air until it rested close to hers. It seemed her brain was shrinking, growing numb; the pain that racked her body gradually

subsided, and like one who hears a far-off voice come dimly through a semi-sleep she heard him say, "It was no question of revenge. We did the needful. This house is sacred to the Gods and not to be profaned by alien feet. It is the house of secrets, and we cannot have those secrets taken to the cursèd French. Your husband was an offering to Omkar, who is the attribute of Siva in this temple. What is it that you wish most fervently?"

"David," she murmured drowsily. "My husband——"

"Be it so," he interrupted softly. "Go thou to join him in whatever place is his." Gently, but not tenderly, he took the infant from her bosom and nodded to the janitor, who drew his simitar and with practised butcher's skill drew its razor-edge across the half-unconscious woman's throat.

3. *The Bulls of Yama*

FLAMBEAUX flared with eery blue-green flames about the temple courtyard, sending flickering beams of brightness through the undooed openings of the cells which lined the quadrangle on three sides, casting ever-changing highlights on the sculptured faces of the gods till their fixed, impassive visions seemed to smile approval on the scene below. Against the southern wall of the enclosure sat a row of music-makers, small guitars, gourd-shaped fiddles and kettle-drums upon their laps. A few held tambourines, all were placid as the carved gods above them.

A row of temple women issued from the cells upon the east, small bird-like creatures moving with a graceful, slightly rolling gait and singing in falsetto voices the unending glories of the Great God Siva, Divine Destroyer and titular deity of reproduction. Ornaments of silver clashed and jangled on their wrists and

ankles, jeweled rings shone in their ears and noses and upon their toes and fingers, chaplets of bright marigold crowned their sleekly oiled and parted hair. Between the double file of women marched a rank of little girls dressed in imitation of their elders, jeweled with silver ornaments, crowned with marigolds. Straight across the courtyard marched the parade till it came to halt before the door of the great shrine where, half visible, yet indistinct and ghostly in the ever shifting light which flickered from the courtyard, sat the four-armed idol of the god. Priestesses and little neophytes marched round the idol singing adorations, and the high priest bathed the sacred image with sweet butter, honey and the juice of sugar cane, finally drenched it with fresh water consecrated by the prescribed prayers. As the bathing-ceremony finished, the small girls tripped forward and fell upon their faces at the great god's feet, holding forth their hands with offerings of marigolds.

Now preliminaries were completed and the business of the night began. The temple women stripped their little charges of their jewelry and gayly-colored robes; so they stood like seven little female cherubs in the flambeaux' light. Six of them had straight black hair and olive skin, the great dark serious eyes which were their racial heritage, and already, though but five years old, showed that precocious development which marks a race whose women flower early and are old before their Western sisters reach their prime. The seventh was as fair as her consorts were dark. Her skin was almost milk-white, her eyes a deep, calm pansy blue; her hair, though dark and almost straight, displayed a tendency to wave. Straight and supple as a lad she stood in lanky young girl grace beside the dark-skinned children. No swelling of the hips or gracious turn of leg proclaimed her sex; in the half-light she might have been mis-

taken for a little Cupid in a throng of infant Psyches.

Temple janitors led a herd of small white bulls into the antechamber of the shrine. Save in color they were typical of the wither-humped zebu, but a single glance told they had none of the fine gentleness which makes the Indian cattle more like pets than mere domestic beasts. Vicious little creatures these, with fiery, angry eyes, impatient, stamping hoofs and long sharp barbs of brass set on their sloping horns. With cords of twisted cloth, that the bindings might not scar their skins, the little girls were tied between the small bulls' horns, each with her head set back so it rested on her charger's shoulder hump; her feet hung forward till they trailed before his nose; her little abdomen hooped upward from his forehead, where it protruded unprotected.

Now they led a cow across the entrance of the antechamber, her small hoofs clicking daintily against the pavement, and at her scent the bulls went wild, dragging at their leading-cords, turning viciously upon the janitors who held them in restraint. The high priest raised his hand, a gong beat out a sullen, vibrant note, and the men released their charges.

Bellowing defiance at each other the seven bulls swept through the doorway to the courtyard, paused a moment, dazzled by the bright light from the flambeaux, then with unerring instinct made for the seductive little heifer who stood calmly ruminating as she waited the attentions of her suitors.

The foremost bull had reached his object of desire and was emitting a low amatory snort when his nearest rival canoned into him, and his voice rose in a wrathful bellow. Horn clashed on brass-tipped horn, and rumbling war cries issued from the bovine gladiators' throats. Mingled with the combat bellows of the

bulls came the frenzied shrieks of tortured children as the bayonet-like brass horns gored little legs and arms or drove pitilessly through soft chests and abdomens.

Music rose in wild cacophony from the minstrels squatting by the courtyard wall. Sitar strummed, sarangais wailed like cats in torment, horns shrieked and shouted, tambourines thumped and chattered in sharp cachinnation, and through it all there came the shrill, despairing cries of maimed and dying children.

AN HOUR passed before the high priest gave the signal for the bulls to be restrained and the struggling animals unburdened of their little passengers. They laid the remnants of the children in a row before the idol's base, and took count of the casualties. From one shattered little body came a steady panting whimper as the anesthesia of shock wore off and pain intolerable crept over tortured nerves; a cascade of bright droplets filled another baby's screaming mouth, her eyes were merely blood-filled hollows; skin and flesh had been flayed off another's legs, and from her lacerated sides the white of fractured ribs protruded through the bleeding body. A red-hued little bundle that had once been a small girl bounced and rolled grotesquely on the pavement, the trunk a mass of blood-smearred wounds, arms and legs lying at odd, obtuse angles, each with a double Z-twist in it. Of all the seven, only one seemed to have escaped disfigurement or mortal hurt, the little white girl. Lighter in weight and slenderer in build than her companions, she had been less exposed to ripping, piercing horns, and her steed, less hampered by his burden than the others, had inflicted greater injuries than he had received and managed to come through the conflict with his passenger unconscious but not seriously hurt.

As if they had been so much refuse the broken little bodies were dragged from the shrine, and two temple women raised the white child in their arms, holding her up to the four-armed idol while the high priest thrust a crown of plaited marigolds upon her lolling head and chanted:

"Jae, Jae, Omkar!—Glory and Victory to Omkar, attribute of Siva! Take thou the offering of this woman child, Divine Destroyer, Mighty Recreator. By thee has she been chosen from all others through the ordeal of the Bulls of Yama. Accept her life, her breath, her soul, her body, as all thine. Take thou her as votary and bride. Jae, Jae, Omkar!"

4. Naikin Bayadère

BEFORE the divan where the high priest sat, a disk of torchlight glinted on the polished pavement. In the luminous circle stood a figure veiled from hair to feet, head bowed demurely, waiting further orders from the holy one. Eight years' apprenticeship were passed, and Butea-Jan, sole surviving candidate of the ordeal of the Bulls of Yama, must prove her fitness to be married to the god she served. Crouching at the divan's foot the elder naikin bayadère or ballet mistress showed the product of her training, calling out the different tests of the examination.

The eight years had sped swiftly for the girl. As soon as she recovered from the hurts she had sustained while strapped between the fighting bull's sharp horns her schooling had begun. For hours every day she practised the devotional dances, working till her muscles ached as though with rheumatism and the skin was nearly braized from soft bare feet. She learned the gesture dance which required its performer to assume nine hundred and forty-three symbolic postures and hold them rigidly as if she were a statue. She

learned to play the sitar and the tambourine and to sing the adorations or erotic love songs; last of all she learned the dance of Seven Enticements, which is a combination of the Arabs' *danse du ventre* and contortionism, requiring the performer not only to keep time to rapid rhythm with her shoulders, hips, breasts and abdomen, but to bend her head either forward or backward till it touched the floor without raising either heels or toes or assisting herself with her hands.

Now she began the final test, moving slowly forward with gently undulating hips, her slim white feet placed flat upon the floor, one before the other. The veil dropped from her head, showing her arrayed in short tight sleeveless bodice of red silk, gold-embroidered and edged with tiny bells, and a full wide skirt of purple mesh belted at her slender waist with a wide cummerbund of yellow. Her head bent back between her shoulders, eyes closed as if in sleep, lips slightly parted, drooping loosely at the corners. Daintily between her thumbs and forefingers she took up her gossamer skirt, spreading it about her as a lordly peacock fans his tail; her head swayed slowly to the right, then left, like a lotus swaying in a passing breeze; her eyelids slowly parted and she cast a lingering, enticing glance about her. Slowly she stepped forward, setting one foot straight before the other, treading with the second foot exactly in the print left by the first, and her ankle bells made little laughing noises as she moved.

Now the music quickened and the deep chords of the sitar mingled with the sweet, thin strains which came to life beneath the sarangai bow. It wove light patterns round her and she seemed to tread them as the dancing spider hurries

over her taut net when the morning dew-drops jewel its strands with diamonds and turn its steel-gray meshes burnished silver. Her little tripping feet ceased moving and came to rest beside each other, heel pressed to heel, great toe against great toe, and a wave of undulating movement seemed to ripple up her body. She might have been Nagaina, Brahma's sacred serpent dancing on her tail to skirling pipe and throbbing kettle-drum, or the shadow of a wind-tossed vine against a sunny wall. Her hips rotated as she drew her body back and forth as if it were a bow which answered to the archer's pressure; her shoulders fluttered like the pinions of a bird in flight; her little, firm, hard, newly budded breasts were like a pair of siren hands that beckoned a resistless invitation; the gently swelling rondure of her abdomen rose and fell like water bubbling from a spring amid a desert waste.

The swiftly lilting music stopped and the drummer beat a long roll with palms and fingers. She crossed her arms upon her bosom and slowly, like a tempered blade that bends beneath the swordsman's practised hand, her slim white body curved a backward crescent. Both feet were flat against the floor; there was no reaching for support with groping toes, no raising of the heels, but still her body's arc increased until it seemed her spine or hips must surely crack beneath the strain; then the crown of her sleek head rested on the floor. The drummer's roll continued, growing soft and softer in a slow diminuendo, and seemingly without the slightest strain or effort she rose until she stood upright, then bowed her head submissively, joined her hands palm pressed to palm, the fingers pointing down, and intoned ritualistically: "*Jae, Jae, Omkar!*" —Victory and Glory to Omkar!"

5. Bridal Night

SHE was acceptable to Siva! With songs and laughter they made ready for her bridal. They dressed her in a gorgeous robe and draped a gold-embroidered sari over her. Marigolds—flowers sacred to the gods—were bound in chaplets round her head and fetters of the same bright flowers joined her wrists together. A golden awl was brought to pierce her nostrils and in the right-hand wound they hung a three-inch loop of gold, while a ruby stud bright as the blood that trickled from the little hole the gold awl made was set into the left side of her nose. The silver rings were taken from her ears and in their place were set long pendants of gold fringe with little scintillating emeralds swaying from each golden tassel. Upon her wrists they loaded bangles, some gold, some silver, and on each ankle they hung heavy bands of gold from which there rippled golden wire fringe so long it almost hid her feet and showed no more than henna-painted toes and heels each time she stepped. With drums and flutes and thrumming sitars they moved before her to the shrine of Siva, and there they stripped her gorgeous raiment off but left her jewels to accent her fair whiteness. A bridal bed of glowing roses had been laid before the idol, and on these she lay supine, the dewy scarlet petals touching her with light caresses while the cruel curved thorns pierced deep into her tender skin till little gouts of blood ran down and mingled with the flowers' brilliant color.

Last of all they brought an unsheathed simitar which they laid lengthwise on her body and bade her clasp the hilt between her breasts. She did not know it, but the blade which rested on her bare white flesh was that which took her mother's life the night that she was born.

SINCE times which human memory failed to reach, the Great God Siva in his milder aspects had accepted mortals as his wives, and generation after generation of young girls had been espoused to him in ceremonies similar to that Butea-Jan had gone through. Only legend told of brides who had beheld their divine bridegroom, but miracles are the common-places of the gods; so though the vision of the heavenly spouse might be denied his mortal wife it was a well-attested fact that never had a maiden lain upon the rose-strewn bridal bed and risen virgin the next day. Butea-Jan was heathen through and through. Such learning as she had concerned the gods and goddesses of Hindooism's pantheon; the stories of the various Immortals' peccadillos were familiar to her as are nursery rimes to Western children, and the training which was hers since infancy had left her under no misapprehensions as to woman's place and function in the Oriental social scheme. It no more occurred to her there might be something shocking or immoral in this concept of physical union between god and worshipper than it would occur to a devout young Christian to say the sacrament of the Communion seemed like anthropophagy. She hugged the sharp-edged simitar against her and closed her eyes in silent adoration of her heavenly spouse. The climax of her short life had been reached; the thing for which she had endured long hours of rigorous training, scoldings, beatings, every species of abuse, was finally about to happen. She was the bride of Siva. Soon she would be his wife.

A quiet of sepulchral hush lay on the sanctuary. The little lizards whose small feet ran scuttering like the rustling of dry, wind-swept leaves were silent in their holes; even Nag the sacred cobra rested in his burrow, filled to satiation with his evening meal of buffalo milk

topped off by a luckless rat which had chanced to cross his path. Butea crossed and uncrossed her slim ankles and pressed the naked sword blade closer. The aphrodisiac effect of pain induced by rose thorns tearing at her skin swept through her like a potent drug. She closed her eyes more tightly to shut the darkness out. Soon he would appear, the heavenly bridegroom. Soon!

A lisping, lightly shuffling step upon the sanctuary's polished pavement, so soft that only ears attuned to catch the faintest sound could hear it; a faint glow, staining rather than lightening the abysmal darkness of the shrine . . . Butea's little body became rigid. She closed her eyes more tightly and thrust her head a little forward. A flush of quickly mounting blood ran up her throat and cheeks, her lips fell open and a smile spread on them. Gently, scarcely noticeably, she arched her body at the hips; her hands released their rigorous grip upon the sword hilt and fluttered upward till they hovered a few inches from her face as if to clasp the cheeks of one who bent above her. From between her little milk-white teeth there came a sigh of ardent happiness. . . .

6. *Swami Rama Pal*

SWAMI Rama Pal, high priest of Siva, had not always been in holy orders. Though a Brahmin and a member of the twice-born priestly caste, time was when he had cherished visions of political preferment, of success at the bar, a seat in the All-Indian Parliament, perhaps an under-secretaryship. His family was impoverished as many high-caste families were, but somehow funds were found to send him out to England where, after making fair but far from brilliant grades at a fourth-rate public school, he matriculated in the law school of a great commercial

city's university. Oxford, Cambridge, or even London, were beyond his family's budget, but a degree was a degree and carried due distinction in the land of his nativity. But the law of torts and contracts, the utter fairness of the English criminal jurisprudence, the inherent honor underlying chancery practise were things his devious mind could not lay hold on. Why should a man be penalized for bettering himself in bargaining? he wondered. Is not all trade based on one man's ability to cheat another? And why should perjury be called a crime? Did they actually believe a man would tell the truth to his own disadvantage, even though he called his gods to witness, these strange Englay?

So when examinations were completed he had a stationer print cards announcing, "Rama Pal, Failed LL.B.," and went back to his homeland, where after the prescribed observances he was considered purified from the defilement of his ocean voyage and was once more privileged to wear beneath his English shirt the triple-stranded thread known as the *junwa*, insignia of the twice-born Brahmin.

There were ways in which a clever fellow could make money, for advice in legal matters was a merchantable quantity, even though the one who sold it lacked credentials at the bar, and there were quite as many ways of spending money as there were of making it. A girl, for instance. Not particularly pretty, certainly not smart, but indubitably white; a maid who came to India in the service of a railway *sabib's* wife. To be seen in pin-striped trousers and an only third-hand morning coat in company with a white girl was decidedly a feather in his cap, but the railway *sabib's* wife objected to the girl's dark admirer, and when a stalwart young private from a Yorkshire regiment began to walk out with the little wench the triumph he had felt at social

recognition from the *sabib-log* turned gall and wormwood in his mouth.

Appointment to a minor post in the police came next, but here again his gift for intrigue proved disastrous. Natives in his district were fanatical believers in the old religion; when a wealthy money-lender died his heirs at law and next to kin decided that his infant widow must become *sati*. Great preparations had been made; the bazars were searched for the ceremonial *marbru* cloth of silk and cotton to shroud the little victims; jewels of silver, brass and tinsel finery were obtained, pinch-beck necklaces and bangles, everything to aid the noble spectacle of a nine-year-old child burned upon her husband's funeral pyre. The rumor of these preparations could not well escape official ears, but Rama Pal was all in sympathy with the arrangement. Was he not a Brahmin, and did not *sati* bring again the golden age to Hind, the Hind that flourished long before the Englay came to ravish and oppress? Besides, the dead man's relatives were rich and more than willing to pay handsomely for temporary blindness on his part. So the rite was carried out and the child died to the accompaniment of her shrieks of agony and the pious shouts of relatives of her departed husband.

The judge *sabib* was most unreasonable. He spoke of loyalty to the British Raj, of duty which would make a man turn on his race and coreligionists if they proposed to break the Englay's law, and of other similar incomprehensible things. Also he sentenced Rama Pal to five years penal servitude.

Impoverished and embittered, Rama Pal came from the jail to face a world turned upside down. As an ex-convict, almost every avenue of work save those forbidden by restrictions of his caste was closed to him; starvation stared him in the face when he procured a gown and staff

and set out on a pilgrimage to Mandhatta. Here Siva ruled as Omkar, not the mild god of reproduction, the patron of the arts and great ascetic, but the lustful lord of terror and destruction, consort of dread Kali, who rejoices in blood-sacrifices and finds the immolation of a human victim most acceptable of all.

They celebrated *kurban*—human sacrifice—while he worshipped at the shrine of Siva Omkar, and when he saw the fated body hurtle from the tall cliff to the jagged rocks below Rama Pal felt a sudden fierce elation flow through him. This was his niche in life, this the part the gods had written for his playing! To minister at Siva Omkar's altar, to act as surrogate of him who rules the forces of destruction, to feel himself in tune with that which symbolizes annihilation . . . he was of the priestly caste, the world had played him false; henceforth he would have none of it.

He practised the austerities and gained a name for piety; in contemplation and in fleshly abstinence he found some measure of repose, and in the service of the temple he had honor and contentment. His zeal won approbation and his skill at gaining increased offerings from the faithful commended him to those who ruled the cloisters of the priests.

IN COCHIN-CHINA and Cambodia the French were beating back the jungle. Northward, where for centuries the tiger and the elephant were undisputed lords, the paddy fields were creeping, the unfamiliar pattern of white roads was laid. As always when cheap labor is required in the East, great throngs of Hindoo coolies swarmed to help reclaim the jungle-smothered land. Time was when mighty temples rose amid Cambodian jungles to the Hindoo triad, especially to Siva the Destroyer. The mighty piles of Angkor Vat were raised to do him honor. But

Buddhist heresy crept through the land till, though the faces of the gods still looked down from their temple walls, there was none to do them honor and their worship had become a memory. Now with the influx of a Hindoo population there would be worship given to the ancient ones and the temples which had been so long deserted would once again resound with hymns and sacred music; once more the blood of sacrifice would flow; again the incense pots would smoke before the symbol of the lingam, where sterile women prayed for sons and men grown old and impotent besought the god for offspring. Swami Rama Pal was sent as high priest to a reclaimed temple in the jungle of Cambodia.

To the jungle country came two earnest workers in the vineyard of the Lord. David and Deborah Fielding had heard the call to preach the Gospel to the heathen, and in a festering swamp they set their little chapel up and expounded the Glad Tidings as authorized by the Menonite Church. Reared in the absolute democracy of a Pennsylvania village, caste seemed to them to be direct affront to God, and David, who possessed a gift for languages, was eloquent in denunciation of the system. The Hindoo laborers, low caste to a man, were thrilled to hear his message of emancipation. His roll of converts grew apace, and as it grew the offerings at the temple waned.

Swami Rama Pal took counsel with himself. In times gone by the Englay had offended him, refused to give him a degree, spurned his attentions to their women, imprisoned him. Now one of the accursed race denounced his god and lured his worshippers away. His spies informed him that the Missionary *Baba* was to have a child within the month; arrangements were all made to send her down to Saigon, but the Missionary *Sabib*

would remain to spread his poison doctrine.

The night before the Missionary *Baba's* going, both church and parsonage burned down, and when David and Deborah took stock of their possessions they found that all they had was one small bullock cart, a little draft-bull and the clothes they stood in. Home, clothing, money, furniture, were gone, and every servant had deserted. Although his conscience smote him for deserting under fire, David knew Deborah must have skilled assistance quickly; so sorrowfully he took the bullock's lead-string and set out for the nearest settlement.

The Swami knew their progress step by halting step; he was ready at the gateway when the wretched little caravan appealed to him for help. When the spear-men thrust he exclaimed, "*Jae, Omkar, kurban!*—To Omkar the Sacrifice!" When they told him Deborah had been delivered of a girl his plan was ready formed:

The Englay woman like her husband should be *kurban* to Omkar. As for her child . . . those who found favor in Lord Siva's sight were taken as his brides. The priest was Siva's surrogate on earth. . . .

Swami Rama Pal paused at the sanctuary entrance. Through the darkness gleamed the girl's pale body on its bed of roses, white and sacrificial as an ivory corpus on a crucifix of ebony. His breath came quicker, his lips were dry as those of one who tramps an arid desert. He flicked his tongue across them, swallowed once and stepped into the shrine. Here he was master absolute. No power in earth or sky could thwart his purpose. . . .

7. "Rockabye, Baby!"

THE soft step sounded nearer on the temple's tessellated pavement. Butea knew the part she was to play. From babyhood she had been schooled in wo-

man's rôle, the rôle of one who makes of love an art and a vocation, one to whom the rites of love are both a means and an end. Painstakingly she had learned the nine and seventy lubricities, those sweet enticements of eroticism which are the stock in trade of naikin bayadères. Rose thorns ripped the tender skin which sheathed her calves as she gently parted her crossed feet; like little spikes of torment other thorns thrust in her back as she spread her arms up with an eager, hungry gesture.

The glow that gilded the dense blackness of the sanctuary strengthened. Was it the aureole of divine effulgence shining from her heavenly spouse? Despite the warning that the bride who looked on Siva's face unbidden would afterward be blind, she raised her long-fringed lids the tiniest fraction of an inch. Two faces looked out from the semiluculent gloom, one dark, the other almost lily-white.

The darker visage she knew instantly: Swami Rama Pal. From infancy she knew that calm, impassive face, that high-bridged nose, that wide high forehead, those full expressive eyes. To her the face was symbol of the almost unattainable, the earthly revelation of Lord Siva's godhead. But never had she seen it as she saw it then. Its olive swarthy had drained to sickly gray, the chin and mouth were thrust forward, lips pressed taut on teeth; the brows, always so calm with other-worldly composure, were drawn down in a V until the tri-barred sign of Siva rippled in a triple-lined serration; the tranquil eyes were venomously narrowed. It was an angry face, a rageful face, the face of one gone almost mad with hate and fury, but it was also frightened. Every down-drawn line and unaccustomed wrinkle was eloquent of bafflement and unbelieving, wrathful fear. Its stiff lips writhed across the teeth slowly, sluggishly, like worms that are half

animate with frost, and the voice that issued from them was a whispered scream: "Hast thou come back to rob me of my triumph, O slug-spawned woman of the Englay?"

Butea turned her startled glance upon the other face. It was a woman, young by Western standards, with a mouth bespeaking sensitiveness and courage, eyes clear and soft and steady, sad but not angry, slightly dewed with tears, but unafraid. They bent upon the Swami now, those clear, clean Western eyes, inexorable as an accusing conscience.

He seemed to wilt and wither under their fixed gaze. Twice he licked numb lips with a stiff tongue, three times he sought to call upon the potent name of Siva the Destroyer, but only little hissing noises as of frightened breath escaping from fear-burdened lungs came forth. At last, like one who backs from an accusing Nemesis and dares not turn his eyes away lest it devastate him utterly, the Swami gave ground slowly, slinking through the darkness of the shrine till his feet encountered the rough pavement of the courtyard.

Not till then did he turn round, and when he turned he ran, ran like one pursued by demons till he found the safety of his cell where he fell half fainting on his couch and prayed with fluttering breath and gabbling lips to Siva for protection from this Englay thing which spanned the stretchless void of darkness from some unbottomed hell to come back in its worldly form, not reincarnate as the soul of every living thing must be by order of the gods.

Butea looked with awe upon the vision. It seemed to be a woman, yet unlike any woman she had seen. The skin was fair, as fair as hers, the eyes of that same shade of blue for which the temple women mocked her. Around it glowed a gentle light, not bright and fearsome, not flick-

ering as from destroying fire, but cool, unwavering, like moonlight shining on the woman's bathing-pool when the Lady Uma sails her silver boat across the cloud-waved ocean of the sky.

"Who art thou, Mighty One?" Butea asked. "Art thou Parvati, consort of Lord Siva, come down in jealousy because he takes me as his mortal bride? Have mercy, Gracious Lady. It was he who sought me through the ordeal of the Bulls of Yama; I did not thrust myself——" Her prayer sank to a little moan of terror. There was a frantic feeling in her breast above her heart, her breath seemed strangling her. She had seen the temple women's jealous rages, had seen them rush screaming, scratching, biting at each other. If mortal envy was so terrible a thing, what would the vengeance of an outraged goddess be?

Soft hands were on her cheeks, a smooth palm brushed her forehead. She trembled as the vision brought its sweet calm face to hers, fearing rending teeth, but when cool soothing lips were pressed against her brow Butea knew a peace the like of which she never had felt before. Kissing is a Western import into India; in all her life Butea had never seen or felt a kiss, and she thrilled to the caress. There was a sweet and lovely perfume emanating from the vision, not pungent like the scent of musk, not acrid like the smoke of incense, not sweet and cloying like the perfume of the jamun or the kush-kush, but vaguely, indefinably lovely. And now she felt what she had never felt before, a pair of arms clasped round her, an elbow crooked behind her head, the pillow of a sweet soft breast beneath her cheek. Something like a gasp of pain came from the visitant as Butea turned a sleepy head and her nose-hoop came in contact with the bosom where she rested, but the exclamation died half uttered, and she heard strange, alien words crooned over her: "Daughter—little daughter!"

Butea felt the weight of sleep upon her lids. Half consciously she realized she should be on her knees before the heavenly visitor with her forehead pressed against the floor, but it was very sweet to lie there in those folding arms, sweet to listen to the crooning chant the like of which no Hindoo sanctuary ever heard before:

"Rockabye, baby, on the treetop,
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,
When the bough bends . . ."

Butea-Jan, new made naikin bayadère, mortal spouse of mighty Siva the Destroyer, slept her bridal night away in a peace surpassing understanding.

8. *The Swami Asks a Boon*

IN THE flat expanse of green-scummed marsh that held the jungle in abeyance at the rear of the temple three vultures fought above the remnants of a carcass. Hovering at the jungle's edge, appetites contending with inborn discretion, jackals waited for their betters to complete their feast. The meat was raw and bloody where simitar-sharp beaks ripped through it; when denuded bones appeared they showed oddly grotesque points and angles. The skull, stripped naked of its fleshly envelope, was smashed and flattened. All was food—the gift of bounteous Vishnu—that came the vultures' and the jackals' way; they took the gift the gods provided with no question of its origin, but an anatomist passing by would have classified the broken skeleton as human, and female.

Twelve hours earlier the *kurban* had been celebrated. Siva Omkar the Destroyer was displeased and demanded human sacrifices. Not once but many times within the past three years the Mighty One had told his priest the Swami Rama Pal that only *kurban* could propitiate his wrath. The victims had gone willingly—

until the moment of the fatal leap—for death in honor of the god insured an entry into *kailas*, the paradise of Siva, the dwelling-place of Brahm, Creator of the Universe, and assured the low-caste votary that she need not be born again.

Sometimes victims had been chosen from the women of the coolies; more often they came from the ranks of temple women, for it was not fitting that the fourth-caste scum be given many opportunities at heaven. When the choice was from among the women of the temple it was made by lot, and Swami Rama Pal presided at the drawings. His face remained impassive as girl after girl drew forth the blood-red disk that named her the thrice-favored one, but in the silence of his cell he raged against the unseen warden who kept Butea from the disk of fate. The Swami had some skill in jugglery and more than once he so arranged the lots that it seemed impossible for Butea to fail to draw the disk of death, yet each time disappointment stung him like a salted lash; at every lottery she drew a disk of white, unspotted bone.

Before the altar of his god the Swami crouched, his forehead to the floor. "O Omkar," he besought, "grant but this single favor, only this and nothing more. Let thy servant see the Englay woman's spawn dashed shapeless on the stones; let him see the agony of fear spread in her face as circles widen when a stone is cast into the pool. Grant him but this single boon, great Mighty One. Take thou his life, decree that he be born again a louse, a maggot or a woman. Make his incarnations twenty times ten hundred thousand, but in exchange give him to see the Englay woman's brat go down to death!"

Froth bubbled from the corners of his mouth, his eyes were glazed like those of one new dead, purple bruises showed upon his forehead where he beat his

brow against the paving-stones before the altar.

"Grant, O Omkar, grant!" he panted. "Give me this boon. Just this, no more. 'Tis all I pray!" A shudder shook him as he lay prostrate upon the tiles. He moaned and choked, then stiffened as with sudden cold.

Out in the swamp the vultures, glutted to satiety, rose in awkward flight like overloaded airplanes. Jackals, grown brave at their departure, rushed in with yapping cries to haggle snarling for the remnants of the feast.

Swami Rama Pal lay corpse-stiff on the stones before the effigy of Siva Omkar.

9. *Evening in Saigon*

RICHARD LANGLEY pushed his empty coffee cup away, dropped a quarter inch of cigarette ash in it and took a sip of Chartreuse. Through the insulation of his interest in the scene before him the persistent, slightly querulous objections of his vis-à-vis came faintly. Langley did not want to listen to the numerous good reasons the Inspector had for desiring him to give his sketching project up. He had been through India making sketches of pre-Buddhistic religious architecture; the less known ruins of Cambodia would complete his work. He was anxious to be finished and go home; just at present he desired to see the sights of Saigon. It was interesting, this town which France had built upon foundations older than the Pyramid of Cheops. From the jungle, never far away in Cochin-China, the tomtoms throbbed with the monotonous insistence of a giant pulse. Night had fallen thick and hot, moonless and impenetrable, but the arclights blazed like monster fireflies on the Rue Catinat, picking out the passers-by as a theater spotlight picks out characters upon a stage: native soldiers, trig and trim in dark blue

tunics and straw helmets, Annamite women walking with the easy grace of flowing water, colonial officials and their wives, moist in limp pongee or wilted crêpe georgette, pretty little ladies come all the way from France to be amusing. The air was filled with Eastern scents, the smell of flowers and spice and the dank, thick heat that rolled up from the Saigon River like a cloud of unseen steam.

"Eh?" Langley turned from contemplation of the ever changing panorama. "I beg your pardon, Inspector, I didn't hear."

Inspecteur Georges Jean-Josèphe Marie Renouard of le Service de Sûreté Général heaved a gusty sigh of resignation. Name of a dog, they were all mad, these artists! When they were American, to boot . . .

"I said, *Monsieur*," he pronounced carefully, like one who would impress his meaning on a child of sluggish wits, "I said it would be better if you should postpone your expedition to Cambodia for a week or two."

"But I can't wait," objected Langley. "My ship sails in two weeks, and I must complete my work——"

"Then go to Angkor Vat, my friend. There are ruins to delight the heart of any man, a veritable heaven for the archeologist."

"I'm not an archeologist. I'm an architect, and I'm especially interested in the older Hindoo temples. Angkor's been so much exploited lately that it's lost its novelty. Besides, I think that I'm more likely to find what I want in the smaller, earlier ruins—those built before the reign of Paramacevera which show no Buddhist influence. I've heard that there's a place not far from Kampong Thom which the Hindoos themselves think so authentic that they've rededicated it to——"

"I do not think you should go there, *Monsieur*." The Inspector's tone was un-

accented, but something in his voice and the level stare from his dark eyes conveyed a warning.

"Why not?" Annoyance fought with curiosity in Langley's question.

"Because of many things, some known, some guessed at, some to be discovered. I shall journey northward in a week or so. Will not you wait and go with me?"

"You think I need a police escort? I've always heard the Annamites were friendly."

"The Annamites, yes. Occasionally they rob, sometimes they kill, but one cannot call them definitely criminal. The temple which you speak of is not Annamite, but Hindoo; its priests, its staff of hangers-on, its worshippers are of a different race. I do not think the place is very healthy for the lonely traveler. No. Certainly."

Langley was amused at the Inspector's earnestness. "I've traveled all through India," he answered, "and I never met with anything but courtesy from the natives. Even at the great temple of Madura the gurus were most friendly."

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders, smoothed his iron-gray pompadour and tugged thoughtfully at his imperial. "Attend me, if you please, my friend," he ordered. "I am Renouard, and when I say a thing is so, that thing is surely so. I do not like that temple or its ruling priest; most of all I do not like the stories which I hear about it. Sixteen years ago a Monsieur and Madame Fielding, missionary countrymen of yours, set out from their small mission chapel to come to Saigon. We know they left, we know they went alone, we have traced their journey to that temple's gate. Afterward"—he raised his shoulders in another shrug and puffed his cheeks as one who blows a candle out—"je ne sais quoi."

"You think——"

"Tiens, c'est drôle ça. Me, I am a

policeman. I am not paid to think. *Mais non*, it is that I must know."

"But you don't know——"

"*Tu parles, mon ami*, but I can think, I can imagine, I can suspect, can I not? *Regardez*"—he leveled a blunt finger like a gun for emphasis—"walls have ears, my friend, and for the *Sûreté* they have lips, as well. Some rumors have come to me, rumors which if I understand them right I hope to be untrue. I have been told that in this *sacré* temple there is one who dances for the honor of the monkey-visaged gods as never bayadère danced before, one who dances like a flame blown in the wind, like moonbeams on swift flowing water, like the twinkling of a star in the quiet midnight sky. Also, *Monsieur*, these indubitably lying rumors say that though her hair is black it is as fine as thrice-split silk, that her skin is fair as milk and her eyes like violets in the springtime. How came she there? I ask to know."

"But you don't know," argued Langley. "You just said——"

"I do not know, yes; but I shall know all soon, I assure you in all confidence. I shall go to see the priest who rules this temple in the jungle, I shall reason with him——"

"Reason?"

"Perfectly. With a platoon of *Trailleurs Annamites* and machine-guns, perhaps a howitzer, as well. Oh, believe me, my friend, they understand such reasoning perfectly, these *canaille*."

"Who is she, have you any idea?"

"*Mais cela parle tout seul*. Madame Fielding the missionary lady was in great haste upon her trip; it was for medical assistance she came. It is in my mind she bore a daughter in that temple and that this so mysterious white dancer is she. In any case, you will agree she has no business there, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"H'm, I suppose so," Langley granted.

"Still, you can hardly come down on a peaceful temple with a squad of soldiers and machine-guns just because you suspect that——"

"Ha, can I not? You make the grave mistake, believe me. This is French territory; we have here no foolish notions such as those of England and your own illustrious country. Here every man is presumed guilty of all crimes to be imagined till he proves his innocence. If things transpire as I think and this dancer is the daughter of the missionary lady, a crime has been committed in that her birth was not recorded. Besides——" He caressed his beard in moody silence till Langley prompted:

"Yes?"

"There is another matter. The *Sûreté's* ear is very keen, its arm is very long. We have heard some most unpleasant things about that temple, things stringently forbidden by the *code criminel*, things which have to do with *Siva Omkar* and his sacrifices. You apprehend?"

"Can't say I do."

"No matter, perhaps it is as well. At any rate, it would please me greatly if you should delay your visit till I am ready to depart."

"Is that an order, sir?"

"An order? No, merely a request."

"Then I'm sorry, Inspector. I know you are sincere in your objections, even though I think you are mistaken. But it's imperative I catch the next ship home. I'll promise to be careful and do nothing which could give offense to the *Hindoos*——"

"*Tiens*, my friend," the Frenchman shrugged again. "I know your breed. Short of putting you in physical restraint there is no way to dissuade you from this madcap expedition. *Bien*. Shall we be going?"

As they left the *Café de la République Libérée* he dropped a step behind and

beckoned to a figure lurking in the shadows. "Observe him, *mon petit Kim-Kien*," he ordered, nodding toward the young American. "Have him always in your sight; when he walks you walk, when he runs, run you also; when he sleeps you wake, and if he promises to get in mischief, as he almost surely will, see that I have due and timely notice. You comprehend?"

"*Bien oui, mais certainement, Monsieur l'Inspecteur*," whispered back the Annamite.

"*Très bon. À bientôt. Allez!*" Renouard rejoined.

10. Beside the Lotus Pool

BUTEA-JAN stood knee-deep in the limpid water of the women's bathing-pool. Lotus blossoms nodded on tall pliant stems around her, their pearl-pink mirrorings picking up and accenting her sweet delicacy of coloring in the water's glassy speculum. At the border of the pool a knot of iris bloomed and the purple blueness of their tufted petals was an echo of her eyes. She had loosed her wealth of blue-black hair so it fell in wavy cataracts across her creamy shoulders as she bent to cup a double handful of clear water up and lave her arms with it. More lovely than a Venus carved by Praxiteles she was as she swayed above the dimpled pool at dawnlight, slim rounded limbs, firm young breasts, skin like lustrous bride-white satin underlaid with rose all glowing with the water she splashed over them. She hummed a passage from the *Râmâyana*, India's ancient love-lyed, as she bathed:

"For the faithful woman follows
Where her wedded lord may lead,
In the banishment of Râma
Sita's exile is decreed . . ."

But her thoughts were not upon the

royal lovers of the olden days. There was more to think of in the present.

Naikin bayadères had other things to do than dance and sing devotions to the gods. It was a portion of their sacred duty to fare forth upon occasion for the entertainment of such nobles as could pay the fees the priests demanded. Often, if their beauty and attainments were sufficient, they remained as inmates of the noble's purdah, honored, pampered, preferred before their hosts' first mates, having all the attributes and honors of a wife without her obligations; for the nobles who supported them in luxury might not kill or even beat them for infraction of their household discipline, since they belonged to Siva and injury to divine property was sacrilege almost as great as killing of a Brahmin. Butea knew that she was beautiful. The polished silver mirrors of the women's quarters told her so, the cool reflection of the bathing-pool attested it. She knew that she was skilled in dancing and in singing the devotions, for if nothing else proclaimed her talent the other women's jealousy was proof enough. Yet when such few among the Hindoo population as could pay the temple's fees demanded entertainers from the sacred purdah, Butea-Jan was never sent. She alone of all the bayadères had never left the temple precincts, she was the only one in all the company of dancers who had never felt a man's hand laid on her in love.

"Am I uncouth and poorly formed?" she demanded of the charming image staring at her from the bathing-pool's clear surface. "Am I one-eyed, noseless, leprous, that men should pass me by and choose others in my stead? Must I grow old and fall like rotten fruit, with none to taste my sweets——" The lotus blossoms brushed her dimpled knees as she stepped a little farther in the pool, re-

garding her reflection with tear-misted eyes.

"*Om mani padme hum*—O thou jewel of the lotus!" Softly spoken, the hail came from atop the vine-draped wall set as a rampart against the jungle's onward march. *Om mani padme hum*, Butea knew, was the universal Buddhist salutation to the Lord Gotama, and since the Buddha had scorned caste and even doubted that the gods existed, to chant his praises in a Hindoo temple was almost as great a sacrilege as slaughtering a sacred cow inside the holy compound. She looked up in quick fear. The Annamites were Buddhists, and there had been disputes between them and the Hindoo immigrants, arguments often pointed with the sting of knife blades. Had one of these come here to offer insult?

"*Jae, Omkar,*" she began an invocation, but paused with eyes and lips agape. Across the green-draped wall there peered a face like no face she had ever seen. Despite its overlay of tan and freckles, it was white, and the eyes that looked from it were blue and bright and merry. A curling thatch of copper-colored hair topped it, not umber like that of wandering holy men who dyed their hair with henna, but vivid, fiery, vital as spun metal come to life. Also, the stranger smiled at her, and his smile was like none she had ever seen. Smiles, in her experience, showed malice or amusement, sometimes both, but this one displayed friendly kindness. Vaguely, a memory stirred in her. Clearly, the visitor was of a different race from that with which she was familiar, and his skin, though different, was strangely like her own. Only once before had she seen such features and complexion in another than herself . . . the Gracious Lady who appeared to her the night she married Siva Omkar, the heavenly one who held her in her arms and sang strange, soothing words. Butea's

knees felt weak, her breath came hot and fast with awe. If this were another heavenly visitant, and he had found her unadorned, without so much as nose, or ear-rings . . .

With a quick, unconscious modest gesture she crossed her arms above her little, high, young, pointed breasts, the open palm of a slim hand cupped upon each shoulder. Her eyes were bright with wondering fear, but more of curiosity than terror showed in them as she whispered haltingly: "Be pleased to turn thy star-like gaze from thy handmaiden, Mighty One, till she can greet thee fittingly." Her voice had a soft richness alien to the Hindoo woman, a sweetly modulated alto come to her through generations of mixed German-English ancestry.

"All right, gorgeous," the vision said, then, at her look of wonder at his foreign words, "Make haste to attire thee fittingly, O maiden, but tarry not too long, for I would speak with thee."

FEARFULLY, Butea raised her forehead from the pavement and gazed in wonder at this visitant from outer worlds. In the little interval since he had come she had arrayed herself in short, tight, sleeveless bodice, a full, sheer skirt of many plaits, a gold-edged sari of black net and all the jewelry she possessed until she tinkled musically at every slightest movement. "Has thy servant attained favor in thy sight, O Heaven-born?" she asked timidly.

"I'll say you have—yea, verily," the sunny-haired visitant answered. "How are you called, O maiden of the iris eyes?"

"Butea-Jan, my lord, and never have I felt the touch of man, for they say that I am ugly and unpleasing——"

"They do, eh? Well, go tell 'em to laugh this off!" A pair of strong white

hands were hooked beneath her armpits and she felt herself drawn upward till she stood on tiptoe. Again that surge of memory . . . around the heavenly stranger hung the same sweet, cleanly fragrance she had smelled the night the Gracious Lady came to her. She wondered, then ceased wondering, for his arms were round her shoulders and his lips were pressed to hers.

Only once before had Butea felt a kiss; then it was on her forehead. Now, as the god-like stranger joined his mouth to hers, a curtain seemed to draw across the sun and a pounding as of distant surf seemed booming in her ears. She was fighting for breath—drowning. Her heart was quivering and jerking like a doe that feels the huntsman's spear bite deep into her vitals. She groaned softly, as if in agony unbearable, and went limp within his arms. For a long heart-stilling moment she lay helpless as the dead in his embrace; then her arms went about his neck, pulling his lips more tightly against hers. Between her half-closed lids he saw the shimmer of her eyes, deep pansy-blue, worshipping, entreating. "O my heart," she panted, drawing soft palms downward on his cheeks, "O soul of my soul's soul! Droppings from the honeycomb, sweetness of pomegranates in the summer, let me die! Let Butea die before this happiness has ended!"

11. "Till Death Us Do Part"

ROUND and bright as an exchange-worn coin the moon climbed slowly up the ladders of the sky, flinging down a cascade of pale argent light that silver-plated wall and tower and shimmering pool and fromager and waving bamboo frond. In shadows lay the tall slim reeds, vague and indistinct the tufted iris nodded at the bathing-pool's far edge, but

the moonlight drenched the open lotus buds in silvery radiance, made fallen, floating petals little vermeil-gilded ships, made a royal robe of silver tissue of Butea-Jan's white sari. Langley leant his back against the mhowa tree and hummed a snatch from Lehmann's *Rubáiyát* suite:

"Ah, moon of my delight that knows no wane,
The moon of heav'n is rising once again.
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same garden—after me in vain."

The girl moved closer to him. Through her thin draperies he could feel the throbbing of her heart. "I'm afraid—afraid, O Heaven-born," she whispered. Her hands stole upward to his cheeks and pressed them. "Look at me, soul of my soul's soul!" she softly bade, but her eyes were closed.

Langley drew his arm around her quivering shoulders, patting her bare arm with gentle, clumsy reassurance. "Be not affrighted," he consoled; "there is nothing here to fear."

She moaned softly, as in pain, and laid her cheek against the roughness of his flannel shirt.

"Why do you call me Heaven-born?" he asked. "What makes you think I am an avatar of Krishna and not a man like other men?"

"Thy smell, my lord, the heavenly perfume you exude," she answered. He could feel the coolness of her nose-hoop on his throat as she pressed her face against the open collar of his shirt.

"Smell?" he asked, bewildered. "You mean—oh"—quick laughter pinched the skin around the corners of his eyes as he realized he'd doused his newly shaven face with lavender before he set out from his camp to keep his assignation at the temple—"what makes you think the perfume heavenly?"

"Its aura hung about the Gracious Lady

when she visited thy servant, Mighty One."

"The Gracious Lady? Who the deuce was she?"

Timidly, self-consciously, like a child who takes her little treasures from their hiding-place to show them to a loved grown-up, Butea told the story of her bridal night and of the heavenly presence who held her in her arms when she had driven Rama Pal away.

"Good heavens!" Langley whistled softly when the tale was done. "This is the most amazing thing I've ever heard . . . those missionaries . . . it would be about the time . . . you're just about sixteen . . . you don't recall your mother, do you, child?"

"Thou art my father and my mother, and Butea is thy slave," the girl responded simply.

"H'm, yes, of course," he nodded in abstraction. "And old Monkey Face was all set to make passes at you, eh? See here, my dear, I think you'd better come away with me. Would you like that?"

"Does the shadow pause to speak of likes and dislikes when the sun sinks in the west, or the fallen petal talk of its desires when the wind embraces it, my lord?"

"But you don't understand, I want to take you home with me; home to America. I want to—oh, hang it all, you're the loveliest thing I've ever seen—will you marry me, Butea?"

"Marry? You would make the *nika* with me—take Butea to wife——"

"By heaven, I'd give my soul to do it!" Moved by a sudden inexplicable impulse, he drew his class ring off and slipped it on her left third finger. "Till death us do part, beloved," he whispered as he

kissed the slim white finger where the ring reposed.

Her eyes were misty, almost visionless, but they never wavered in their steady gaze on his as she drew a gorgeous emerald from her thumb and put it on the place left white against the sunburn where he had worn his class ring since his student days. "Till death us do part, O heart of my heart's heart," she echoed dreamily. Then: "Is Butea now the chosen consort of her lord?" she asked, half hoping, half incredulous.

"I'll tell the heavens and the earth you are!" he answered. "If anyone——"

Her quivering mouth was on his mouth, her arms gleamed whiter than her moon-enameled sari as they crept about his neck, drawing him down to the sweetness of her lips, the warmth and pulsing of her bosom.

SOUTHWARD four hundred miles Georges Jean-Josèphe Marie Renouard, Inspecteur du Service de Sûreté Général, read the dispatch just placed upon his desk, tugged at his beard and swore with Gallic fluency. Kim-Kien his native spy had been efficient, but four hundred miles is still four hundred miles, and when more than half of it must be traversed by relayed native runners before the Government telegraph at Kampong Thom can forward it—name of a dog, *le bon Dieu* only knew what dire things had occurred since Kim-Kien sent that message on its southward way!

"*Enfant!*" he called the little orderly who lounged, cheroot in mouth, outside his cabinet. "My compliments to Capitaine Molière. Tell him it is that I must have three planes with bombers and machine-guns tuned up and ready at the airport within the quarter-hour. *Allez, tout vite!*"

12. "Greater Love Hath No Man . . ."

"ART ready, heart of roses?" Langley leaped down from the wall and looked about the shadowed garden by the bathing-pool. "Where art thou, Butea mine?" His glance shot questing through the shifting darkness where the iris bloomed, searched the shade cast by the mhowa tree, scanned the deeper dimness where the tall reeds nodded whispering together. "Butea, Butea-Jan, where art thou?"

"I'm sorry, Langley Sahib, Butea-Jan will not be able to accompany you." Tall, austere, lean to skeletal emaciation, Swami Rama Pal stepped from the shelter of the mhowa tree and smiled unpleasantly. "Even in your country, my dear sir, it's not considered just the thing to lure another's wife away. Butea happens to be the wife of Siva, and unfaithfulness on her part is a grave breach of decorum. As for you"—his gently mocking manner fell away as though it were a veil ripped off and innate malignancy, bitter, acid, poisonous, shone like the reflection of a soul consumed in hell-fire on his face—"as for you, adulterer, woman-stealer, thief of innocence, we have means to deal with you——"

Langley took a quick step forward, but before he could advance a foot strong hands were on his elbows, others grasped his neck, a stick was thrust between his legs and twisted. In a moment he lay trussed as neatly as a fowl, Rama Pal regarding him sardonically.

"There are a number of gateways for the soul to take departure," the priest said almost musingly. "There is the death of twenty thousand cuts invented by our Chinese brethren. In it the executioner begins his slicing at the feet and takes an upward cut a minute till a vital spot is

reached. I have been told it is elaborate in discomfort. Then there are swarms of hungry ants to be attracted to a body pegged down to the ground and smeared with honey; or if that seems somewhat crude, we have my lord the elephant to help us. Did you ever see the body of one trod to death by elephants, Langley Sahib? It is really rather comical. The broken bones stick through the flesh, the entrails gush out like the inside of a rotten fruit that's fallen to the ground, the skull is mashed flat as a muffin——"

"Stop, stop, my lord, have mercy! Be merciful to him and I——" From a knot of temple women gathered in the background Butea struggled forward and threw herself upon her knees before the priest.

Langley looked at her with mounting horror. They had taken off her gorgeous costume and clothed her in a single garment of coarse cotton, a rough woven sari of cheap muslin almost as crude as burlap. Her jewels were taken from her, her lovely hair was hacked away until it stood in stubbly fuzz upon her almost naked skull, her face and throat, her arms and breast and shoulders, had been daubed with filth and ashes. On one arm, clasped just above the elbow, was an iron band, the Hindoo widow's bracelet, symbol of lost caste, dishonor and disgrace. Her wrists were bound together by a twist of rough hemp cord, and as she held her hands up to the priest in supplication Langley saw the raw wounds which the spiny fiber bonds had rubbed against her tender skin.

"Adulteress, strumpet, what have you to offer in exchange for this one's life, you whose doom is ready written in the book of fate?" Rama Pal threw the insults at her as he might have hurled a missile at a dog. A titter sounded from the women as he raised his foot and spurned her, but

she propped herself up awkwardly upon bound hands and crept toward him on her knees.

"If—if thou wilt spare him I will be *kurban!*" she cried gaspingly. "*Kurban* to Siva Omkar!"

The Swami's scowling face grew thoughtful. Time and again he had endeavored by every means within his devious powers to force this girl to immolate herself, but always he had failed. Some unseen but insuperable guardian had always thwarted him. Even now, when she was taken in the very act of fleeing with her Englay lover, he dared do no more than degrade her. Much as he would have liked to kill her by slow torture, he dared not face that spectral countenance, those calm, accusing eyes that routed him the night Butea had become the bride of Siva. But if the girl went voluntarily to death, if she gave herself a willing sacrifice to Omkar, surely the dead Englay woman's ghost could not come back from *jahannam* to haunt him for her murder. Here was the answer to his fervent prayers! As for letting Langley Sahib go . . . who was to hold him to his promise when Butea had become *kurban*? Can last year's hurricane rip away the roof, or does one thirst today because of yesterday's hot sun? Can the dead demand fulfillment of a compact?

"Be it so," he said, then, to the assembled temple servants: "Butea-Jan the nainkin bayadère makes herself a voluntary offering to Siva Omkar. At the rising of tomorrow's sun she will become *kurban.*"

"**C**OME, thou who seek'st to enter *kailas* through the merits of the *kurban* made to Siva Omkar!" Deeply resonant the Swami's hail sounded at the entrance of the sanctuary, and Butea rose from her prostration at the idol's feet. All night she had lain stretched upon the stones and prayed to every god the Hin-

doo pantheon contained that happiness should go with Langley Sahib when he left the temple the next morning, that he might bear her image in his heart and not forget her utterly. Now the time was come to pay the price of his deliverance, and she rose unhesitatingly, bowed once more before the symbol of the lingam and came out into the sunlight. Horn and drum burst in a salutation to her as she stepped across the threshold of the sanctuary and the women crowded around her, holding out their rings and necklaces and bracelets for her touch. However much they hated her white skin and purple eyes, however envious they were of her ability to dance and sing devotions, she was *kurban* now and holy. Her lightest touch upon an ornament made it a lucky amulet.

The Swami headed the procession. On each side of Butea walked a temple janitor, brave in brightly colored costume, the strengthening sunlight glinting on his spear, his simitar a-jangle at his waist.

Three times around the courtyard they proceeded, then halted at the foot of the tall tower by the gateway from the top of which the three impassive faces of Lord Siva looked sightlessly across the jungle.

Against the eighty-foot gate-tower bamboo ladders had been placed so Butea could ascend the highest tip of the great sculptured god's tiara, and at the ladders' lowest rung Swami Rama Pal came to a halt, tendering the girl the ceremonial betelnut wrapped in lime and pipal leaf, signifying her relations with the world were ended.

Butea waved it back. "One minute, one minute with him ere I take the leap," she pleaded, and the Swami bowed in acquiescence. This was even more than he had hoped. To see the heartbreak in their faces, to see the tears of parting dim their eyes—and to know that when the sacrifice was made the Englay's blood would dye

the courtyard stones as that other cursèd one's had stained them on the day Butea came into the world.

"Do not quite forget Butea, heart of my heart's heart," the girl besought. "In that outer world of thine when fair women look into thy eyes and speak their love to thee, hold one little corner of thy heart for memories of our nights beside the pool——"

"Butea-Jan, beloved, do not do it!" Langley begged. "Let us go together, if we must, dear, fighting——"

"Ah, no, my heart of roses, that is not to be," she interrupted. "They would only bear thee down by force of numbers and then kill thee with the foulest torments. Me they would also surely slay, so I must die in any case. This way I give thee all that I have left to give, and can go to *kailas* happy in the thought that I have bought thy life with mine. Take not that little comfort from me. Is it not better one should die than two? Is it not sweet to know Butea loved you, even to the death? But come, we have but little time to say farewell. Take me in thy arms again and kiss me, if so be thou hast the courage to caress a thing so shorn of beauty as I am. Tell me that you love me, that you will not forget——" She threw herself into his arms, and in a storm of tears he kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her close-cropped head, her throat, her trembling, avid lips.

"Do not watch me mount the steep," she pleaded; "do not look as I perform the leap. Think only this, remember this of Butea, nothing more——" She joined her mouth to his, pouring all the hopeless passion of a thwarted love into a last long kiss.

"The time is overdue!" The Swami's summons broke the long embrace, and with a shuddering sob Butea dropped her arms from Langley's shoulders and with-

out a backward glance began to mount the bamboo scaffolding.

Langley tried in vain to look away, but the slender white-robed figure toiling up the swaying ladders drew his eyes as to a magnet. Higher, higher, she ascended. Now they saw the flutter of her sari as she stood atop the minaret-tower of Siva's carven crown. A wreath of marigolds fluttered down from her left hand; it struck the pavement with a soft impact, and every watcher in the sun-drenched courtyard gave a sharp involuntary shudder. In another moment . . .

The girl raised both arms, like a diver poising for a plunge from a high spring-board, swayed a dizzy second, white against the bright blue sky, then slowly, stiffly, tilted forward.

Despite the callous background of their cruel religious training the temple women screamed and clutched their throats and the men closed their eyes tightly—all but the Swami Rama Pal. Bright with triumph, his eyes were on the slender figure as it hurtled through the air, his lips set in a taut, fixed smile, every line of his dark face an etching of elation. "*Kurban!*" he shouted frenziedly. "*Kurban! Jae, Jae, Kurban!*"

The impact of her fall was like a giant hand slapped on the stones. Not very loud, not crunching, as Langley had anticipated. When he dared look he saw her lying in a little heap, her clothing hardly disarranged, one arm bent under her, her face—thank kindly heaven!—turned away. Through the meshes of her coarse white sari a bright stain was welling; on the stones around her other stains were spreading fast. Weak and sick, sicker far at heart than stomach, he leant against the wall. "Greater love," he sobbed, "greater love hath no man than this . . ."

"Kill him, kill the Englay!" Swami Rama Pal strode forward, one hand ad-

vanced, his brows drawn down, mouth working as though he chewed upon the bitter cud of hatred. "Slay him lest he tell the French——"

Far away, but growing louder every second, came the drone of airplane motors. Now they showed against the blue Cambodian sky, small as silver gnats, swift pursuit planes streaking with the speed of minnows, growing larger, nearer . . . nearer . . .

Four temple janitors advanced, spears leveled, but a fifth leaped before Langley, sword upraised. "Nay, brothers, hold thy steel!" he shouted. "Think ye that the French would come if they knew not this man is here? They have missed him and are flying to his rescue. Soon they will be upon us, and the guns that stutter death will speak. Heed not the Swami's words, we cannot keep the secret of the

blood which he has spilled. Do ye wish to perish on the guillotine?

"Speak well of me and tell the French I had no part in this day's doings, *Sahib*," he whispered as his knife slashed Langley's bonds. "Do thou go forth and signal to thy friends, lest they loose the guns upon us. I will hold these men in check until the planes have come."

Langley cast a last look at the little broken body lying on the courtyard stone; then weeping like a broken-hearted boy he staggered through the temple gate and stood upon the causeway leading through the swamp.

The great emerald which Butea had placed on his finger flashed a green glint of sardonic malice as he raised his hand to wave a signal to the airplanes circling overhead.