

The Mystic Bowl

By EUGENE CLEMENT D'ART

"MERRY" Roy McFarland, the American builder of bridges, who reached India in the flower of his youth and reveling in the happiness of honeymoon times, returned to New York a few months later, a single, broken man.

Out of the all-pervading jungle had come devastating vengeance, swift, silent and merciless, exacting a life for a life. And this which was intended to bring laughter to the hearts of men turned in an instant to grim tragedy.

Shaken to the core, they who had sought amusement reluctantly left Roy alone with the ghastly remains of the girl he loved that he might weep unashamed and wonder as all wondered at the manner of her death.

Nor would the mystery have been solved, were it not for Hadji, the fakir, who mirrored the memory of things in the clear waters of the Mystic Bowl.

ANN MCFARLAND had followed her young husband to San Francisco, then to Jaipur and then to Khatu, on the edge of the desert. She loved India, perhaps because she worshiped her husband—and he was in India. With him beside her, she would have loved any land. But the jungle filled her with apprehension and snakes with dread, nameless and unreasoning.

Young people do foolish things. Roy decided to cure her of this which seemed senseless fear and was perhaps instinct.

From the jungle, one day, came a band of natives, beating tom-toms, singing and triumphantly dragging the sinuous shape of a cobra they had killed. Roy bought their trophy, hiding it in the long grass near the bungalow until evening came.

After dark, while Ann prepared refreshments, he told his plan to the postmaster and the British lieutenant who had drifted in as had become their custom. The dead snake rested on the couch in the bedroom. That she might not be frightened more than was necessary, they would discuss snakes and warn Ann. Then Roy would trump up some excuse and send her into the room. She would scream, no doubt. Then they would demonstrate how harmless snakes are—when they are dead. And all would laugh.

The two strangers readily entered into the spirit of the jest. When Ann returned, snakes formed the topic of conversation. She frowned lightly.

"Please don't!" she asked. "You know how I hate snakes!"

"Because you do not know them," returned the postmaster. "The majority of snakes fear you as much as you fear them. Barring the deadly cobra, they will strike human beings only in self-defense."

"I bet," smiled the lieutenant, "that Mrs. McFarland would be frightened if she saw a dead snake!"

"Why, no," exclaimed the young wife, "dead snakes do not bite!"

"Still, if you suddenly came upon

a dead snake, somewhere in the house, I am certain——”

“Tush! How could a dead snake come into the house?”

“Excuse me, dear,” broke in McFarland, “would you mind bringing me a clean handkerchief?”

Ann walked into the bedroom. The three men looked at each other, smiling and listening expectantly. To reach the little table on which rested the lamp, she had to pass the couch. She would light the lamp, turn around and then——

But she did not light the lamp. In the dark, she uttered a terrific scream. Then she suddenly appeared at the door, a tragic, swaying figure, deathly pale, her arm extended, showing two small, red punctures.

“I have been bitten——” she said.

Before anyone could reach her side, she fainted. Two hours later, she was dead. In the bedroom, the lifeless form of the snake still lay stretched on the couch, as Roy had arranged it. They removed the horrible thing and in its place, gently, very gently, Roy and the lieutenant set down the remains of this living ray of sunshine that had been Ann McFarland. At the window, near the foot of the bed, the mosquito netting was flapping in the breeze. Mechanically, the postmaster pulled it back into place.

FOR days, within the screen walls of the bungalow porch, Roy sat on his hammock, stupefied, oblivious of his surroundings, irresponsive to the sympathy of friends.

She who had been everything to him was buried at the edge of the jungle she feared, the jungle that had brought her death. And now, nothing mattered.

A hand was softly laid on Roy's shoulder. He was conscious of dark eyes peering kindly into his own. Hadji's bland, melodious voice reached his ear.

“Forget, sahib! You must forget! Death is part of life—a change—a becoming. Because there is birth, there is death. Ay, *sahib*, she still lives. Change has come and altered the face of things but this which is can not cease to be. Life is an eternal becoming. Sorrow, *sahib*, is an extreme, an evil, a passion that must be controlled. We must follow the Middle Path, *sahib*, and forget!”

“If only I knew how she died, Hadji! The snake was dead! How can a dead snake bite?”

“The ways of the world are strange, *sahib*. It seems incredible that a dead snake should bite. And yet, perchance, the soul of the snake—though this too seems impossible—but who knows? Perhaps, if you wish to learn, I can show you how it happened.”

Roy looked up slowly, then, his throat parched, asked: “How?”

“It is difficult to explain, though you may understand. I have once seen a camera and was told how it worked. Pictures of objects that are before this camera register through a lens on the film. Now, *sahib*, as soon as the picture has been taken, it is on the film. Yet, it can not be seen—not until the film has been treated. Things have a memory, *sahib*, all things photograph happenings—even thoughts. But the proper lens is needed for us to see and that lens is within ourselves. If you wish, *sahib*, I shall tell you what to do and then you may learn how the dead snake struck——”

“What must I do?”

“The room where death passed is impregnated with the memory of this which has happened. Let us first go there.”

Mechanically, Roy led the way and then watched Hadji place on the table a small bowl, a plain wooden bowl similar to those carried by Hindoo Holy Men. This he filled with water and, turning to Roy:

"Have you anything that has belonged to her?" he asked.

Roy frowned.

"I have her diamond ring," he said hesitatingly as, handling it with infinite care, he brought out the jewel.

"I shall not touch it, *sahib*. Place it yourself in the bowl."

Roy watched it sink. And now Hadji became the master who directed his actions:

"Watch the ring, *sahib*, look at the diamond, only at the diamond. The water is a mirror. In this mirror you will see all that has happened. Do you not see the room, dark, as it was when death came? Look at the diamond, only at the diamond, *sahib!*"

Strange drowsiness overcame Roy's senses as he stared at the stone that glimmered at the bottom of the water. Then, all at once, it seemed that the diamond and the bowl grew and grew and the water within the bowl encompassed the whole room, plunged in semi-darkness, as it was that night. On the couch, Roy could dimly perceive the shape of the dead snake.

Faintly, as if they came from a great distance, Roy heard Hadji's words: "The window! Watch the window!"

The lower corner of the mosquito netting vibrated under the empire of some exterior force. It gave way. A repulsive head appeared through the opening, the head of a cobra. Then the reptile crawled in through the window, to the bed, until it reached the side of the dead snake. And still, distantly, faintly, came Hadji's voice:

"Its mate, *sahib*, the mate of the dead snake. The cobra that was killed was dragged through the jungle and the one that remained alive followed its scent. It has come to seek its mate and now that it has found it dead, it will kill. Watch the door, *sahib!*"

Ann walked in, her form silhouetted against the light in the other room. She started toward the lamp, but as she passed the couch, the cobra struck and, apparently frightened by her scream, turned swiftly to the window and glided through the opening it had made.
