



THE DOWNFALL
OF THE GODS

HUGH CLIFFORD

CORNELL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY



THE DOWNFALL OF THE GODS

By the same Author

IN DAYS THAT ARE DEAD.
A Volume of Stories.

MALAYAN MONOCHROMES.
A Volume of Stories.

THE GOLD COAST REGIMENT
IN THE EAST AFRICAN
CAMPAIGN.

HEROES OF EXILE.
Being Certain Rescued Fragments
of Submerged Romance.

THE DOWNFALL OF THE GODS

By HUGH CLIFFORD, G.C.M.G., G.B.E.
MALAYAN CIVIL SERVICE

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

First Printed

April, 1911

Reprinted

May, 1911

Reprinted

March, 1928

TO
BETTY

THIS, THE FIRST BOOK THAT I HAVE WRITTEN,
IS INSCRIBED.

This is my Lady's praise :
God, after many days,
Wrought her in unknown ways
In sunset lands ;
This was my Lady's birth :
God gave her might and mirth,
And laid His whole sweet earth
Between her hands.

SWINBURNE.

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE REVELATION	1
II. THE PROOF	15
III. THE SPIRIT OF DESTRUCTION	28
IV. SLAT	48
V. THE BEHEST	65
VI. AN APPEAL TO THE GODS	86
VII. IN THE BA YON	100
VIII. THE SWORD OF INDRA	123
IX. IN THE HANDS OF A WOMAN	131
X. THE FEAST OF THE CITY	146
XI. THE PROCESSION OF THE SWORD	158
XII. DEFEAT THAT CROWNS A VICTORY	173
XIII. ANARCHY	190
XIV. THE SECRET OF SLAT	207
XV. THE INNER SHRINE	220
XVI. SEEDS	229
XVII. THE THRONE OF THE SNAKE	240
XVIII. THE HEART OF THE MULTITUDE	254
XIX. THE HEART OF THE RULER	268
XX. THE INCARNATE SPIRIT	282
XXI. THE SETTING SUN	298
XXII. THE TRIUMPH OF THE SNAKE	311
XXIII. THE SNAKE'S DECREE	323
XXIV. THE HUT IN THE FOREST	333
NOTES	339

FOREWORD

I was at Phnom Penh, the capital of modern Kambodia, the which is a Protectorate of France, ruled by a French Resident, in the name of its aged king. I had just quitted Angkor, after many days passed among its temples, and the spell of its magic was still upon me. Yonder, up the dismal river which flows from the Great Lake, behind the thick curtain of almost deserted forest, I had dwelt in a solitude, hardly broken, amid things ancient and wonderful. Here, in a place one half of which is a modern French town, I was jarred by the incongruity which results from grafting on to the gnarled trunk of Asia, the rank products of latter-day Europe. I sought loneliness and peace. I wanted to think, to meditate upon all that I had seen at Angkor, and upon all that I had learned of its tragic history. I wanted to get once more into tune with the Asia of olden days, away from the noise inseparable from its

invasion by the West; and thus I came, at the close of day, to the foot of the stairway that leads up the face of the Phnom, to the pagoda which crowns it.

To the north, south and west, and east, across the waters of the Mekong, the country lay spread out in an endless flat, clothed by the dingy greens and blues and blacks of its vegetation; but immediately around the Phnom were the lawns and shrubberies of the trim public gardens, set with iron cages, in which were pent a few leopards and many woebegone wildfowl.

And to me, these things—the pagoda, the wild creatures of the forest, the aged king yonder in his palace, the neat gardens, the cages, the sentry-guarded French Residency on the river's brink — were symbols — symbols of the Great Captivity.

Immediately before me, a long flight of brick steps ran upward between twin balustrades, fashioned in the likeness of the seven-headed cobra of the Brahmans. The rounded bodies of these monsters formed the balustrades themselves; the seven up-reared heads, fanning out into a single menacing cobra-hood, rose one on each side of the stairway's base; the pointed tails writhed into the air, against the sky, high above me.

At the top of the stairway, plots of smooth grass surrounded the sacred places, and tipped abruptly down steep banks into masses of clustering bushes. By these the detestable, immaculate gardens were mercifully hidden.

Here, in awful, veiled seclusion, dwelt the most ancient of the gods of the East.

In the foreground rose the pagoda, brilliant with gold-leaf and many coloured tiles, its roof ornamented by long, branching, outward-curving horns, touched by the rays of the sunset and striking a note of gaiety, blithe and joyous. Behind it—the immense, solid base almost in contact with its threshold—stood the great dagoba, a ponderous mass of grey stone and rust-coloured lichen, tapering to a tall and delicate spire, that led the eye up and up, and the heart heavenward. It, too, struck its individual note sombre, awful, and austere.

It was as though the pagoda and dagoba in combination were designed to offer to the Gods all the joys and all the sorrows that fill or oppress the heart of man.

The head of the stairway, the plinth of the dagoba, and each angle of its base were guarded by alternate giants and lions, carved massively in stone, those about the obelisk rising one above the other in outstanding tiers. The giants were

monsters with sinister faces, stout of trunk and limb, reposing big, folded hands on the grips of grounded pollard-clubs. The lions were the heraldic lions of Asia, posturing in ungainly fashion, with out-thrust buttocks, bodies wonderfully foreshortened, the legs of a jibbing horse, and uplifted, ferocious heads. Yet, in some subtle way, the very grotesqueness of these distorted effigies of man and beast—grim, motionless, impassive—enhanced the dignity and the solemnity of this refuge of the ancient gods.

In the west, over the flat, half-submerged country, visible above the dense shrubberies, the day was dying in a wonderful blaze of colour; the heavens above—invaded in many directions by great waves of crimson—displaying a purity of azure, in startling contrast to the vivid green streaks, inset about the furnace-mouth of the horizon. In the east, across the dull red flood of the river, a moon near the full was rising from a bed of rosy cloud-fleece, its orb delicately tinted by the reflected glow of sunset.

Between sun and moon was uplifted the dark and shadowy pyramid of the dagoba, with its grim wardens dimly seen.

A big, black lizard thrust its diamond-shaped head forth from a cranny between two huge stones, and scarred the stillness with its loud,

discordant outcry. Then again a great hush fell.

I had found that for which I had been seeking. This was the East—the real East, mysterious and very ancient—waiting with her immense and measureless patience to catch the awful whisper that shall reveal the secrets of life and birth and death. For she is ever expectant—the East; never weary, never faithless, waiting—waiting always—for the whisper that does not come.

The sadness of the last hour of day—perhaps the saddest thing in all the immeasurable sadness of the East—brooded over the darkening land like some vast, menacing shadow.

The earth, faint with spent energies, drowsed and dreamed amid the soft glamour of the twilight, wrapped about by airs heavy and warm, velvet-soft and fragrant.

Yet the stillness of that quiet place was like an anxious heart-beat.

And here, alone in this ancient sanctuary, watching the dying day, I pieced together from the fragmentary knowledge, which the research of others had furnished to me, this story of the Downfall of the Gods.

My gropings and searchings among the scattered wreckage of a once mighty civilisation, my sojourn amid the deserted temples of a once great people's

worship, had set me dreaming of the Past ; forced my imagination to fearful probings of the Future ; for these things told, in silent, grim mockery, of the changing, unchanging fate of gods and empires.

HUGH CLIFFORD.

THE DOWNFALL OF THE GODS

CHAPTER I

THE REVELATION

OVER Angkor, the capital of the mighty Khmer Empire, the hush of afternoon had fallen. All nature, spent by the long hours of heat, lay prostrate, awaiting breathlessly the first touch of coolness that would come with the setting of the sun. Only man—the tireless fashioner of beautiful, useless things—stared through the glare under burdened eyelids and, at the ruthless behest of man, still toiled and sweated in the dust.

Beneath the drenching flood of sunlight pouring down out of the colourless sky, Angkor Wat stood forth in all its majesty, dominating the featureless landscape.

From the margin of the Great Lake an immense expanse of alluvial flat spread inshore as far as the eye could carry. The turbid waters and the jungle-smothered land merged imper-

ceptibly the one into the other ; little creeks and inlets clinging to the ragged skirts of the vegetation, and mud-stained amphibious trees wading out into the shallows, or standing ankle-deep in the slime and ooze.

The forest—an endless sea of tree-tops—inundated the plain, the sombre waves of colour fading as they receded to melt at last into a misty blur of delicate, elusive tints low down about the fretted skyline. Here and there the sombre monotony of the jungle was relieved by wide washes of vivid green, where the rice stood ripening in the irrigated fields ; and in places the surface of the earth was stained, as by some parasitic growth, by the dusty greys and browns of thatch, and the raw reds of tiled roofs visible beneath their canopies of palm-fronds. For the rest the forest—forest indescribably dingy, squalid, and melancholy—draped itself like a death-cloth over the face of the plain.

Nowhere else in all the wondrous fairyland of tropical Asia could a landscape be found more dreary to the eye, more depressing to the spirit, than this spot on the shores of Tonlé-Sap in the lower valley of the Mekong. The sparse hillocks served but to emphasise its flatness. The very trees of the jungle had the air of having slunk out of the muddy waters and of huddling together shamefully, like a host of woebegone waifs, on the parched and thirsty soil. In their colouring there was no richness ; and the thin heat-haze that shimmered so rest-

lessly above them seemed an emanation from the dust with which they were powdered. Even the brilliant green of the rice-fields failed to strike a note of gaiety amid the dull blues and blacks that enveloped and swamped it. Though Nature had worked unnumbered miracles, clothing the earth with vegetation and filling with teeming life the water and the land, she seemed, in some obscure fashion, to suffer here an eternal defeat. The featureless aspect of the plain and the monotony of sad colouring combined to belittle its immensity. They made of it a thing paltry and mean—a mere background fitted only to throw into added prominence the Titanic works of man.

Of these the most stupendous was the great Wat.

From the day, more than five hundred years earlier, when the Brahman conquerors had stayed at last their wandering feet, and here, in this wilderness of Kambodia, had elected to consolidate their empire, they had wrought strenuously for their own honour and aggrandisement, but more strenuously still for the glory and the propitiation of the gods of their worship.

Quitting the banks of the sacred Ganges in about the fifth century of our era, and striking out recklessly into the Unknown, they had driven irresistibly forward across the great peninsula of Further India, fiery and impetuous as some tremendous conflagration that licks

up in its passage all with which it meets. They had poured down through Assam and Manipur ; had invaded, ravaged, and abandoned the gracious garden-lands of Asia, which to-day are Burma and northern Siam ; had subdued, spoiled, and enslaved its peoples, and had lashed whole populations to their victorious chariot-wheels. Nor, while the force of the inexplicable impulse that goaded them to wander remained unexpended, had any wealth or charm or natural beauty of the lands they traversed and ruined prevailed to turn or stay them ; yet, in the end, like some mighty river that loses itself ingloriously amid stagnant marshes, they had found a final resting-place among the dreary forests of Kambodia, and on the shores of its mud-stained lake.

But the genius and the energy which had borne them triumphantly across half a continent, still demanded outlets ; and the men who had conquered and destroyed upon so gigantic a scale set themselves now, no less greatly, to fashion and to create.

From the comfortless forest-lands they carved out for themselves an immense empire, and peopled it with the hosts they had reduced to bondage. They exacted tribute and allegiance from more than half the princes who ruled the petty kingdoms of south-eastern Asia. They converted the jungles about the margin of their lake into irrigated fields, whence annually they might draw enormous supplies of grain. They

gutted the earth of its mineral wealth as far south as the Golden Chersonese. They made Angkor Thom—their capital city—the centre of a world. Thither many a crestfallen embassy made humiliating pilgrimage. To its loud mart flocked the merchants of India and of China, and the spice-bearers from the rich islands of the southern seas. A place dedicated beyond all others to the service of the ancient gods, it attracted the saintly and the learned of many Hindu lands. It became the chosen resort of the scholarly and the skilful, of the pandit and the artisan, of the cunning carver of wood and stone. In its crowded treasures the Brahmans had accumulated all the wealth that greed and tyranny could clutch, that ingenuity could make accessible, that the patient toil of thousands could be forced to produce, until Angkor had become like the unnaturally inflated limb of one sick of elephantiasis, into which had drained all the strength and all the nutriment that should have maintained the whole shrunken body.

Always, too, the Brahmans—the twice-born demigods—had achieved their successes at the expense of the folk they ruled. They had been the brain—the guiding, inspiring, subduing influence. The thews and sinews had been supplied by the low-caste peoples who served and worshipped them, to whose lot had fallen ever the heat and the burden of the day, the unending travail, the labour unto death.

For in the universal belief in their divinity,

abode the power of the Brahmins—a power that enslaved the souls of low-caste men. These latter, descendants of the conquered peoples, raised awed eyes from the dust in adoration of the priest-princes, at whose bidding they toiled, and who ordered for them their lives. They existed only in the shadow cast upon the earth by these demigods who, to them, were a divine mystery made manifest to human sight. By serving, obeying, and honouring them, thus, and thus only, might they do distant and vicarious reverence to the Shining Ones and so, acquiring merit, might win at last, in some yet far-off incarnation, to more honourable estate. The supreme patience, which is the very soul of Asia—the patience which so unwearyingly awaits the fulfilment of a promise vain and remote—stealed them to endure. Wherefore, like cattle, they bowed unresisting necks to the Brahmin's yoke, and their backs to ever-increasing burdens.

And the burdens increased apace.

The people prostrated themselves in adoration before the demigods who ruled them; what time the demigods themselves rested not from their frantic efforts to propitiate the Deities from whom their divinity was derived.

Ere ever the straggling mass of wooden buildings with roofs of thatch and tiles—which was their capital city—had taken form, already they had begun to construct, in honour of the High Gods, temples of enduring stone. One by one

the thirty shrines of Tha Phrom had come into being, with their domes and columns and labyrinthine cloisters, decked with delicate sculpture. Every hillock in the plain had been crowned by its sacred edifice; and from these little, perfect buildings the Brahmans had passed on to greater and greater achievements. The Ba Phun and the Ba Yon—the two splendid sanctuaries or Angkor Thom—had in turn been designed and executed; and each successive effort of the Brahmans' genius had displayed ever widening conceptions, a more scornful contempt of difficulty, a more complete obsession by the spell of the magnificent and the grandiose, and a more lavish and wanton prodigality of human toil. Drunken with power, indifferent to the needs or the sufferings of their people, goaded onward by a tremendous and augmenting ambition, and urged, moreover, to still greater efforts by their awful fear of the Gods, the Brahmans, through the centuries, had piled monolith on monolith, carving and fashioning them wonderfully, and still had found their fierce lust for architectural achievement unappeased; till, in the fulness of time, the vast scheme of Angkor Wat had burst, in all the splendour of its inspiration, upon the imaginations of these dreamers in stone.

Now, during three hundred years, men had laboured ceaselessly in bitter travail, under the pitiless sun-glare, to give that idea form; but the end of their toiling was not yet.

The Wat, cruel and inexorable as Fate, had bounded and dominated the lives of thousands. To the men of Angkor—the casteless ones dedicated to its service—it had a monstrous personality of its own. It was eternal. It had always been there, claiming the strength and vigour of their manhood, grinding them slowly and mercilessly back into the dust whence they had emerged. Men, whose fathers and grandfathers had grown grey in its slavery, had been born beneath the shadow that it cast; had attained to maturity and had decayed with age, still spending themselves in labour upon it; and had been carried to the burning-ghat under a shadow imperceptibly lengthened. It brooded over their imaginations, menacing and insatiable. It paralysed their thought. They were blind to the beauty of the marvel at which they wrought. They knew only the measure of the toil and pain which were the heavy price of it. They looked at it with eyes sad and hopeless, spoke of it furtively in fearful whispers.

Now, in the hush of afternoon, the Wat stood forth in all the glory of its symmetry, dwarfing the landscape.

Though much remained to be done, the labour of three centuries had sufficed to give full shape to the vision of the dreamer who designed it. The immense outer cloister, some three miles in girth, was completed only on two flanks. Of the four flagged and raised causeways, destined to lead to the threshold of the Wat from each of

the cardinal points of the compass, only one, that from the west, had been constructed in its entirety; and in the temple itself, many stones still awaited the chisel of the sculptor. But the five immense conical domes, rugged with external carving and ornamentation, soared triumphantly into the pale sky; and the eye was led up to them, from the basic platform with its noble stairways, by the sculptured roofs of two tiers of cloisters grouped around the great, cliff-like mass of solid masonry that supported the portals and courts and shrines of the upper temple. And the colour of it was wonderful. Grey for the most part—every tint and shade of grey—golden greys where the sunlight smote the stones; silver greys in the lighter shadows; deeper greys, merging into blues and purples and blacks, where the shadows were heavy; and ruddy browns with violet tints in them where the lichen had rusted the stones.

The sheer vastness of it, in design and execution, reduced all that surrounded it to utter insignificance; and the ant-like men who swarmed, toiling about it, were lost in its immensity, just as the faint clash and tinkle of their tools was swallowed up by the heavy stillness of the afternoon.

On the brink of the great moat at the spot where, on the east, it skirted the limits of the sacred precincts, a small, nearly naked boy was seated, shaken by sobs.

Behind him the forest crept up almost to the edge of the water, and before him rose the Wat, outlined sharply against the sky, and casting a shadow that, enveloping him, traced a huddle of grotesque shapes against the serried ranks of trunks and branches. Between the child and the threshold of the temple lay the moat, placid and shining as a shield of bronze, reflecting with startling vividness the inverted cones and curiously wrought gables of the topmost shrines ; and beyond it again was an open space, grown upon sparsely by grass and weed and under-wood, and littered with big fragments of grey sandstone. No work was going forward on this side of the building, and the boy was utterly alone, with the mysterious, still forest, lapped in slumber, behind him, and the immense, silent bulk of the Wat rising in front to face and overshadow him.

He was a daintily fashioned little creature, and the skin of his body was an even, pale brown, without spot or blemish. His head, small and shapely, set erect upon the slender column of his throat, was covered by a shock of fine, black hair, that hung curtain-wise across his brows, about his ears, and to the nape of his neck. His forehead was high and cleanly cut, his nose straight with slightly drooping nostrils, his cheek-bones rather prominent, his chin firm and beautifully modelled, and the thin lips pouted prettily. His hands and feet were at once strong and delicate, though the palms of

the former were thick with callosities, and the soles of the latter horny with use.

But the most arresting feature of the child were his eyes. They were large and very dark, full of dreams and shadows, and they looked out from under heavily marked eyebrows, black as his hair. They gave to him, at all times, an air of solemn, unchildlike wisdom, and at this moment they were full of trouble and swimming in tears.

The actual cause of his grief was felt rather than realised. He had come hither, seeking solitude and refuge, from his parents' hut, and shaken to the very depths of his being by the storm of elemental passions which of a sudden had burst above his head. Dimly he understood that he, in some inexplicable fashion, had been used as a missile in the fray, from the din of which he had escaped.

There had been shrill word-battle between his mother and a neighbour, over a matter of a broken cooking-pot—warfare that dredged up from the slime of two angry women's souls vile thoughts, and viler words in which to clothe them. Without warning, the panic-stricken little boy had found himself in the heart of an emotional cataclysm whose fury tortured his nerves, while the very intensity of his distress numbed and paralysed his understanding.

He had fled—pursued by he knew not what, phantoms of horror and suggestion—and following some obscure primordial instinct, had headed

for the forest ; and now, by the edge of the moat, he had thrown himself down in the shade, to recover his breath, and still the frantic beating of his heart.

His mother had always been to him a creature vaguely mysterious. Sometimes, when he and she were alone together, she would suddenly fling soft arms around him and draw his head down against her breasts—bruising him with her violence, it might be—while she crooned over him with words of extravagant affection. But when the man, his father, was at hand—home from the quarries or the rice-fields—her spasmodic love seemed instantly to evaporate, leaving her the cold, silent, passionless drudge of every day.

Childlike, he had never spoken to her or to others of these strange outbursts of a love that seemed to have in it something at once fierce, hungry, and ashamed ; but often as he sat watching her, busied over household tasks, or emitting monosyllabic replies to the discontented grumblings of *her* man, *their* master, he would fall to wondering whether his memory and his imagination were not playing the cheat, whether, in truth, this immobile woman was one with the raving, passion-torn creature who on occasion usurped her place.

And as he had grown older, and his features had begun to emerge from the rounded shapelessness of childhood into their present clean-cut beauty, his mother's carefully concealed love and adoration of him had become more intense,

their manifestations more frequent ; what time, the open distaste for him, which his father had always evinced, had grown more and more marked. Little by little, and so gradually that he knew not when the understanding of these things first dawned upon him, it had been borne in upon his mind that he occupied in the household a place apart, an alien place ; that his two small, snub-nosed, broad-faced brethren, who followed him like dogs, were as unlike him in mind as in body ; that his mother loved him above all things, but with an affection which she dared not show in the presence of others ; that his father hated him. He gave back hate for hate.

Vaguely all these memories were present with him now, as he sat, sobbing and shaken, on the grass by the moat's brink ; and nebulous as a mist, the conviction that they had some intimate connection with the tumult from which he had fled, stole up and enveloped him. Certain words and phrases which had poured through the lips of the woman while she abused his mother—words which had lost themselves amid the excitement and the terrors with which the quarrel had smitten him—recurred now to his mind. Many of them still were meaningless to the child ; but through the foul murk of them an idea seemed to loom. The mother who had borne him, and whom for all her waywardness he loved, was a wanton, and he a bastard. More. She was mocked for pride—pride in her sin—pride in him, who was the flaming badge of it.

The horror of this thought, and of the recollection of his mother's face distorted by a passionate despair, as of some wild beast brought to bay, shook him with a fresh tremor; and seizing his head between his hands, and resting his elbows on his knees, he broke into a renewed burst of sobs.

The moat was at his feet, and his face was bent above it; and as he stared downward at his reflection mirrored there, by the still water, a fateful secret was revealed.

The afternoon was waning, and the jungle was beginning to stir in the heavy sleep in which, during all the long, hot hours of the day it had been lapped. It was as though, with faint rustlings, the warm earth was stretching its limbs, very languidly, ere it awoke. Somewhere, far off, a woodpecker was tapping. From homing bees, their hives high in the tree-tops, there came a droning hum that was like a delicate background to the forest silence. A flock of paroquets burst out of the woodland, circled, flashing like a kaleidoscope above the moat, and instantly was gone. A big blue kingfisher flew headlong down the bank, sounding his discordant note. In the forest close at hand arose for a moment a little flirt of feathers, and a cicada overhead broke abruptly into his strident love-song. Then once more the hush fell heavily; and through the silence, the water, lapping about the feet of the sacred places, whispered to the gazing boy its tremendous revelation.

CHAPTER II

THE PROOF

THE moon, surrounded by fleecy clouds, was climbing the eastern sky, as a man drew his body slowly out of the water of the tank that lay over against the main portals of Angkor Wat.

He clambered to the summit of the causeway.

Before him, the temple rose a huge, shapeless bulk of shadows, out of which its gigantic cones sprang heavenward, with outlines sharply defined. Behind him, emerging from the obscurity, the causeway, its flags white in the moonlight, lay like an immense prostrate column.

Stepping deftly, one foot at a time, into the loop of a cotton waist-skirt, he pulled the dry garment upward to shield his nakedness, and let slip his dripping loin-clout. Next, by means of a few practised turns and twists, he converted the cloth into the likeness of a pair of short, baggy pants; and standing erect, stretched himself luxuriously, and brushed the drops of moisture from his eyes and hair.

The years which had passed since that fateful

afternoon, upon which chance had revealed to him the secret of his birth, had changed him from boy to man, and by them the early promise of beauty had been splendidly fulfilled. His features, while retaining their distinctively Hindu character, were now more strongly marked. The nose was straighter, the chin more firm, but the thin lips conveyed a suggestion of sensuality, in spite of the rigid asceticism of their lines. His head, under its close covering of fine, black hair, was small and shapely, lending to him a delusive air of stature. His hands and feet, too, were small, bearing testimony, as did every part of him, to the high-caste blood that ran in his veins. He moved as move the wild things of the forest—every motion graceful, clean, and sure, eloquent of the immense reserve of force that freed it from all trace of effort.

Almost nude, bronze-tinted, statuesque, magnificently developed by the unremitting toil which, as yet, was making, not breaking, his manhood, he stood there in the transparent darkness of the moonlight as perfectly fashioned a young animal as ever humanity had bred. Nature herself had stamped him with the seal of the great ruling caste; yet no Brahman's wafer was on his forehead, his body was clothed in a single coarse garment, the palms of his hands were roughened by constant labour, and he himself, an unconsidered unit in a host of toilers, had been until that night a serf and a hewer of stone.

Fate had decreed that his days should be spent among the casteless folk, who were as driven cattle before their Brahman lords; but from that day, long ago, when the water had whispered its secret to his childish ears, he had hugged to his heart a dear, inspiring conviction. In that hour he had been aware of something that stirred within him and matched that which the reflection of his features had revealed—the soul of the Dominant Race moving, like a babe in the womb, in the heart and brain of this its unacknowledged son. An excitement of pride and of delight, a sudden, new, strange sense of power—of latent force, of potential greatness—had shaken the boy with long-drawn passionate throbs; and thereafter the knowledge that he was not as other toilers in the dust had sustained and uplifted him. To his fellows life was bereft of hope. It stretched away before them, an endless vista of monotony and labour, till it lost itself at last in the smoke of the burning-ghats. But to Chun it was full of promise. The days through which he was living were merely a period of trial, of probation. Fortified by the conviction, which he cherished with so triumphant a certainty, and hid from his fellows with so jealous a care, he could make terms with the unendurable. The pains and troubles of the moment were powerless to oppress the spirit of one who lived, not for the present, but for the future. When the appointed hour should strike, he would slough his pretended inferiority,

as a snake sheds its worn-out skin, and would suddenly blaze forth, before the eyes of those who had known him for one casteless like themselves, a demigod confessed.

In anticipation of that hour he prepared himself with a diligence and resolution that never slackened. With the aid of old Slat, the wise man, he acquired a knowledge of the sacred script, such as was rarely possessed by men of his supposed estate; and he had even made a little acquaintance with the holy, forbidden books. And the ease wherewith he had gotten this lore had itself been full of wonderful surprises. It had been as though he remembered, rather than learned—remembered things half forgotten and now recalled to memory. Once more it was the Brahman blood astir in his brain, bringing with it that pulsing sense of power.

Secretly, too, he had performed a thousand acts of purification, the better to fit himself for the moment, when, as he surely believed, he should be received back into caste by the demigods, his brethren. While he awaited the dawning of that day, he herded with the dull masses of his fellows, and with them prostrated himself before the priest-princes, the offspring of those who, in the beginning, sprang from the mouth of Purusha, the Fount of the Universe, the eternal Soul of Things. But always he felt that he, in truth, belonged to the number of the adored, not to the adorers; and already, almost unconsciously, he lorded it over the latter, less by virtue of his

thews and sinews, than by the magic force of mind.

Thus, through childhood on into early manhood, the secret of his divinity had been to Chun a wondrous spinner of dreams. How good life was—to taste, to smell, to touch—while these great visions made of it a fairy tale that yet was true!

Breathlessly he had awaited the time when, having come to man's estate, he should put the faith that was in him to its final, supreme test—the test that lay ever ready to his hand. But when at last he knew himself free to act, he was long restrained by fears and hesitations. The dream was in itself so beautiful that he feared to shatter it. Moreover, the awful punishment of failure terrorised his imagination.

In the angle formed by the causeway and the western extremity of the great basic platform of the Wat, a tank held its clear waters within massive walls of stone, wonderfully carved. This was the bathing-place sacred to the use of those demigods who performed the offices of their religion within the temple. Only a Brahman might lave himself here, and for one of the low-caste folk to dip in it so much as a finger-tip was untold pollution and defilement. Also it was known to all men that, save for the twice-born, these waters were a flaming death—that they would peel and strip the flesh from off the bones of the impious one who dared to let his unclean hand so much as brush their surface. Folk

drew away from them shuddering, as from a boiling caldron, and there were living even then in Angkor one or two wrecked and mangled wretches who, in a moment of folly, had set at defiance the universal belief.

For months Chun had been haunted and obsessed by the thought of that placid pool, in which there lurked, perhaps, a dreadful death. Again and again those calm waters, so tranquil in their massive confinement beneath the star-set sky, had drawn him to themselves with a compelling, magnetic attraction: again and again, his young blood rebelling against the peril in its fierce love of life, he had recoiled, terror-stricken and ashamed. Death, fearful, unspeakably agonising—death in this life and in all future lives—glared at him from those still depths. Though his faith in his godhead was so firmly rooted in him as to have become an integral part of his being, yet was the risk appalling. He clung to the dream, longed hungrily for the reality, but still was held a prisoner by his fears.

And now to-night, at last, desire had won the mastery; and with bursting heart and throbbing veins, he had nerved himself for the worst that might befall, had drawn his muscles taut to resist the threatened agony, had closed his eyes, and with a great outcry to the Gods, had leaped.

The surprise, that yet was no surprise; the sudden release from the tense, agonising suspense; the wild triumph that flared up in him like

a roaring flame ; the glad, intoxicating relief that had possessed him, as the waters broke cool and refreshing about his fevered body—had almost shocked him into insensibility ; but instantly he had recovered, and had drunk his fill of the most magical of all elixirs—success snatched gloriously from the very teeth of death.

Later, lying on his back and gazing upward through the shadows of the night at the immense, brooding mass of the Wat, darker than the enveloping darkness, gradually there had stolen upon him, with a force never hitherto experienced, the tremendous conviction of his godhead. Like some celestial, healing balm it descended upon the soul of him, dowering him suddenly with a sense of ineffable peace ; so calm was it, so certain, so strengthening and all-pervading. He glowed with a triumph which steadied and uplifted, while it filled and thrilled him. All his childlike faith awoke to add force and glory to the impression. It was as though the sacred waters, which were powerless to do him hurt, were breathing new virtue and vigour into him through every gaping pore. Almost could he hear the footfalls of the Deva, the Shining Ones—of Indra, Lord of the Air and of the Thunders—of Brahma, the universal, self-existing soul—of Atharvan, the Proto-Priest—passing out from the holy places, builded for their worship, to administer this unique baptism to him, the offspring of the Gods.

Long that vision held him ; but in the end he

drew his body out of the water, and donned the coarse garment that was his daily wear. Then, a god confessed, he stood, godlike, on the flags of the big causeway, delighting in the strength and beauty of his young manhood, and in the glorious, strange world into which he had been new-born—the world which the god in him should presently shape to his will.

Slowly the moon was freeing itself from its escort of clouds. Before Chun, at the causeway's end, the wide stairway that leads upward to the main entrance of the cloisters lay heaped in shadow. On either side of it, dimly seen, great cobras, seven-headed, fashioned monstrosly in stone, writhed into the darkness. Lions in strange postures, and hideous giants, resting immense, folded hands on grounded clubs, flanked them, vague and ghostly in the uncertain light. Above them, the long, uneven line of the cloisters' roof-ridge ran away and lost itself in the obscurity to right and left; and over it again uprose the solid bulk of the temple and the huge cones in which it culminated. Every moment the strength of the moonlight increased, touching tenderly the carved edges of the towers, silvering the fretted stone-work, revealing hidden tints in moss and lichen, suggesting more than it disclosed, plunging great masses of the Wat into mystery and gloom. But the causeway, raised above the surrounding enclosure to a height of a dozen feet, was white, all white, with every rigid line of it clearly defined;

and the man, standing there alone upon it, with a long, black shadow extending over the flags behind him, became suddenly conspicuous.

He had forgotten prudence, forgotten the necessity for caution, for concealment. The intoxication that flooded his brain was of such overpowering potency that it left no space for the thoughts of every day. He, in his new-found divinity, forgot to fear mankind, or even his fellows, the demigods.

With a bell-like clink of bangles, a girl stepped suddenly from the shadows huddled about the stairway of the temple, placed soft fingers upon his arm and drew him into concealment. As she emerged from the darkness, and ere she again vanished into it, dragging him after her, Chun saw her, as in a flash, and took in the vision of her with a wonderful completeness.

She was very small and slender and beautifully formed, as though the Gods who fashioned her had taken joy in the exquisite perfection of their handiwork; and the slim symmetry of her figure was delicately revealed by the soft silk cloth which, draped across her breasts, and leaving the right shoulder nude, fell from waist to ankles. Her arms, bare, shapely, something over thin—little virginal arms—showed against that vesture like foam upon a wave. Chun was struck breathless by the extreme whiteness of her—the whiteness and the divine frailty.

The small, oval face, under its low, wise fore-

head, was of an even transparent pallor. Her deep brown eyes looked out, with steady gaze, from beneath brows tenderly curved. Her lips, full and parted, lent to her face its single note of rich colour; but for all their fulness, they were firm, and from behind them peeped two tiny sharp teeth, shaped like the poison-fangs of a snake, which broke the evenness of their fellows. But her chiefest glory was her hair. It was very dark, with a marvellous deep shadow in it, such as falls at dusk in the secret places of the woods. Dry and soft, it waved back in two rounded billows from a natural parting on her forehead. The pallor of her face enhanced its beauty; its darkness etherialised the extreme whiteness of her; and the deep, grave eyes, glancing from beneath it, borrowed therefrom an added mystery.

Those eyes were bent upon Chun as she stepped toward him, scanning him closely, and as she touched his arm, they were of a sudden clouded, till their brown was almost black. For an instant the little pale face became fixed and rigid; and across it there swept a gust of some strange magic of the emotions, or, it might be, a subtle exhalation from the well-nigh obliterated memories of lives long passed. In that instant her face—the face of a child just budding into the maturity of girlhood—became the face of a Seer, infinitely old, wise beyond the limits of human wisdom, filled with unearthly knowledge of the mysteries of life and death, of the past

and of the future ; fateful, seeing in a single flash all the manifold mischance of sad humanity.

Chun marked the change with wonder but without surprise ; for to him this was no woman, though the touch of her fingers was soft and warm upon his flesh. Through the glamour of her loveliness and the air of mystery that, like a vapour, seemed to cast a veil around her, she shone forth for him an Incarnation of some Deva who, in this supreme moment of his emotional experience, had stepped down from her heaven to hallow his baptism. So deep-seated in the soul of him was this conviction that, forgetful of the pride and triumph of his own godhead, he sank at her feet in the shadows, prostrating himself, murmuring in the ancient tongue broken words of praise, of supplication, of gratitude.

Thus, from the first moment of their meeting, Chun knelt to her, his divinity—was on his knees before her in worship of her beauty, of her mystery, of the compelling magic that was hers. There were times through which he was yet to live, when he was to rise up to leave her, curbing his wrath lest he should lay violent hands upon her, and drag her in the dust into which she had stamped him. But ever the real Chun, as now in the beginning, was on his knees at her feet in an eternal agony of adoration.

A musical ripple of laughter sounded above him in the darkness ; and squatting on the flags, Chun raised his head and looked at her. She

was convulsed with merriment, the slim figure shaking till all her bangles were chiming to her laugh. For a moment she could not find breath for speech.

"A Deva! /!" she gasped. "An Incarnation of the Shining Ones!"

There was bitter derision in her tones; and then, of a sudden, she was grave, and to her eyes and face that strange look of age returned.

"And yet . . ." she said presently, as though she were speaking, not to Chun, but to herself. "And yet . . . who knows? Which of us can guess what we are, or whence we come, or why? I am that which I am; but even to me—to me, perhaps beyond the common lot—at times far-off voices have whispered. They make themselves heard in the stillness, in the hush of the night. They murmur of . . . I know not what—shadowy memories of lives long passed. Or are they only dreams—dear, impossible dreams?"

Chun rose quickly to his feet, towering above her in the half light. He knew now that his imagination had betrayed him, and that the girl at his side was no Deva, but a woman fashioned of warm flesh and blood. The reaction from the pitch of intensity to which a moment before his emotions had been tuned was abrupt and stunning as a blow; yet he was still exalted by the consciousness that at last his godhead had been proved. That knowledge warmed his heart, soothed and stimulated his soul, satisfied his every ambition, fulfilled his wildest hopes.

But the perfection of his triumph, he dimly felt, was somehow marred by the presence of this girl. She aroused the man in him, appealing strongly to his passions, and in that hour he would fain have been only a god.

Yet somewhere, deep down in him, there was set stirring a secret, intimate joy that she was no Deva, but a woman, and that he, though a demigod, was still a man.

CHAPTER III

THE SPIRIT OF DESTRUCTION

SHE lifted critical eyes to gaze upon him, apprising his physical beauty with calm appreciation. Then she spoke again.

"Are you mad?" she whispered. "Are you mad, or have you a wager with death? Do you know that it is a sin past all forgiveness for a *Sudra*—a man of servile caste—thus to pollute the waters of the sacred places?"

"But I am no *Sudra*, I!" said Chun proudly. "I am of the number of the demigods! Mark me well. Is not my body fashioned in their likeness? For a very long time the secret of my birth has been known to me, and to-night at last my divinity has been proved—proved!"

The triumphant music of his own words thrilled him. The tremendous truth seemed to take to itself a new might and majesty, now that he had dared to translate it into speech.

"Blasphemer! Blasphemer of the most holy demigods!" she exclaimed in mock horror, and a light laugh tripped at the heels of her cry.

"You are overbold to whisper such vain things, even here, alone with the night and me!"

"But I uttered no blasphemy," protested Chun. "I spoke only the truth."

Again she scanned him critically.

"Yes. It is at least true that you are comely and that you are made something after the model of these demigods of yours; but blasphemer and defiler of the holy places though you be, cannot you be content to be a man? Your limbs have toiled and wrought and broken and hewn, and your labours have dowered you with strength. Your hands have not been folded eternally in mawkish prayer, as are those of the twice-born. They are not velvet-soft and weak and vicious; they are firm and strong and rough. They might be cruel if the will were there—not with the apish cruelty of the torturers, but with the brutal force of the man whom passion kindles. You are no demigod—be sure of that—and thank the High Gods that in this incarnation, at least, they have moulded you in the likeness, not of a mannikin, but of a man!"

"You lie," said Chun simply. "Not an hour ago the sacred waters proved beyond all question that I am one of the living gods!"

Again she laughed derisively.

"How have they proved it?" she asked.

Chun drew her deeper into the shadows, and at the touch of her every pulse in him beat a quickened measure. At the foot of the great

stairway, in an angle of the balustrade, they squatted on the flags facing one another. Chun could feel her warm breath upon his cheek. It was fragrant as a flower.

"Thus I have proved it," he whispered, his voice vibrating with excitement. "A little before you came, I plunged headlong into the waters of the forbidden place. To a *Sudra*, as all men know, that were destruction, yet I took no hurt! The High Gods have accepted me, who long have known the secret of my birthright, and to-morrow I will go to my brethren, the demigods, and proclaim to them my kinship with them."

An inarticulate sound came from her as he ceased speaking, and peering through the gloom, he saw that she was once more shaken by uncontrollable laughter.

"Fool!" she gasped presently, through stifled sobs of merriment. "Fool, fool, fool! Are there still living in our midst folk so simple as to believe the old wives' tales which the Brahmans, for their own purposes, have made current? How cunningly hath Prajapati, the maker of all things, fashioned folly in the hearts of men! Do you really fancy that in those so-called sacred waters Death lies in wait for casteless men and *Sudras*? Is it possible that, though this world of ours is old and grey with age, those who live in it remain always credulous as little children?"

"But these waters are not as other waters,"

said Chun with intense conviction. "That is no legend, but the truth."

"Truth!" she echoed with a bitter sneer, and spat upon the ground in token of her disgust. "Truth! What is truth? Brahman lies that masquerade in stately trappings. Lies, all lies—lies invented by the weaklings you call demigods, who lie that they may live in ease and luxury, and dare not cease from lying lest they perish!"

"Be still!" cried Chun. "I will not listen to such blasphemies!"

The Brahman in him awoke, outraged and wrathful, at her denunciation of the caste which that evening had claimed him. The superstitious awe and reverence with which a lifetime passed among a subject people had taught him to regard the demigods, cried out in horror against this fearless defamer of holy things; but more than all he was gripped by a cold personal terror. This girl was striking at the very foundation-stones upon which the dream of his life had been reared, and already doubt assailed him.

"Blasphemies!" she repeated in unutterable scorn. "To blaspheme is to decry that which is sacred; but here is nought save a little dust, built heaven-high on dust, for the worship of the lean brains, that by these weavers of nothing out of nothing are for ever ruled and cowed. They are lies, I say, all lies—a lie their godhead, a lie their divinity, a lie their purifications where no purity abides, a lie even, it may be, the High

Gods in whose name they grind men's lives to powder! Which of us has seen them, those dumb, invisible Beings for whose glory you miserable *Sudras* labour all your days, piling stone on stone the better to knock at the gates of their brazen heaven? Mayhap even *they* are lies—black lies of the Brahmans' fashioning—but this at least is certain: all the rest are fairy-tales set up like boggarts to scare fools, that the crops you sow in pain and tears may be reaped by the demigods alone!"

She paused breathless, shaken by the passion of her scorn; and Chun was silent too. Dismayed and bewildered by her appalling blasphemies, he waited expectant of some thunderbolt that surely must punish them, and when nothing happened his terror was increased. Were the High Gods powerless as he to defend themselves from this ruthless shatterer of his dreams?

"Listen," she resumed more calmly. "I, who am what I am—who am what these same demigods of yours have made me—I speak because I *know*. This world in which we live is based upon a lie; is reared up, tottering and perilous, with only lies to stay it; is ruled and held together by lies. If once the truth be understood, the whole vast edifice will topple inward, crumble, and collapse. Sometimes I dream that the hour of its fall is near at hand, and that through me, even me, the Brahmans will be brought to ruin."

"Who are you? What are you?" whispered Chun.

Again the idea flashed across his mind that this was no mere mortal who, in his supreme hour of triumph, had risen out of the darkness and the shadows to rob him of its perfection.

"A moment ago you worshipped me as a Deva," she said softly. "For a little longer let me be, to you at least, a daughter of the Gods. You would have me believe in your godhead. I make no such demand on your credulity, though this much of divinity is mine—that I have emerged from the mists by which you still are blinded, and that now, like the Gods, I see clearly, knowing good and evil."

"But your name?" asked Chun. "How do men call you?"

"What matters the name of my body? It is my soul that to-night speaks with your soul. For a very long time it has been held in a bondage of silence: now it begins to snuff the air of freedom."

She tilted her chin and inhaled the fragrance of the night.

"If you would know what manner of goddess I am, think of me as the Spirit of Destruction," she said.

As she spoke, her face became fixed and rigid, and even in the uncertain light the shadows deepened in her eyes. Again there swept across her features the fateful look which

Chun had marked when first her hand was laid upon his arm.

"So am I well named," she continued. "The Spirit of Destruction! For this, perhaps, the voices of the night have whispered in my ears time out of mind, for this—that through me this monstrous edifice of lies should at last be brought to nought, wrecking all that is builded upon it, and crushing in its fall the foul beings who have fashioned it. And now listen and mark well that which I have to tell, for out of the depths of suffering have I drawn forth my knowledge. Nay," she cried, touching his bare breast with the palm of her hand, when he made as though he would have stayed her speech. "Nay, for you *shall* listen! Too long I have pondered these secrets in my heart, and never till now have I found one to whom with safety I could utter even a word of them."

"And I?" whispered Chun. "How do you know that it is safe to speak such blasphemies in my hearing? I have told you that I am of the number of the demigods. How if I betray you to my brethren?"

She answered with a derisive laugh.

"How do I know that it is safe to speak to you? Think! Did I not see you bathing in the forbidden waters? Do not the Brahman wardens keep their vigil even now in the temple guard-house, yonder? Have I not only to raise my voice, and will you not on the instant be taken? And after . . . ? What think you is.

the measure of retribution meted out to those who sin against the Lie? Again I speak because I *know*. I have but to cry aloud, and in a little space you will be stretched upon a bed of torment, from which you shall not be lifted till your brain has snapped, or your body is still in death. You have committed the unpardonable sin—the sin past all redemption—for you have disproved a lie. Are you not afraid to find yourself thus held, soul and body, in the hollow of a woman's hand? Accuse me as you will, the Brahmans will not hearken; but to me they will listen readily. Say, shall I cry to them? Shall we put my words to the test?"

Chun clutched her arm with the eagerness of terror.

"Be still!" he gasped.

He drew in his breath sharply, for of a sudden he knew that she spoke the truth. In spite of his still unshaken faith in his own divinity, the fact that the Rulers, his brethren, would be less easily convinced, flashed upon him with a shocking certainty. The godhead of the Brahmans, he knew, carried with it no immunity from physical suffering or from death. He had thought boldly to proclaim his right to be taken into caste, pointing for confirmation to the test which he had braved; he had dreamed that he would be accepted, welcomed as a brother who, by some mischance, had strayed from out the fold. Now, in an instant, this girl's scornful words convicted him of presumptuous folly. The

waters had set the seal of truth upon the belief in his godhead which so long had been his cherished secret. but the high hopes that had sustained him during all his days of toil and servitude were as distant as ever. Ah, she was indeed well named—the Spirit of Destruction!

“Have you heard tell of Phun, the mad-man?” her quiet voice was asking. “Like you, he dreamed that he was a Brahman. Like you, he put his belief to the proof.”

“Yes. I know him. But he, he was no demigod, as the event made manifest,” said Chun. “Slat, the wise man, Slat, his brother, found him at the dawn, writhing in the dust without the big gateway. He was sightless; the tongue of him was consumed, as it were, by fire; all his flesh was flayed and bleeding. Even his reason had gone from him, and ever since that day he has been dumb and pitiful to see, and helpless as a maimed brute. He braved the forbidden waters, it is true, but he was no Brahman, and they destroyed him utterly. Often I have seen our folk point at him and tell the tale of his presumption and its punishment.”

“I saw that punishment,” said the girl, with a little, hard laugh. “The waters did him no harm, but that night your demigods were more watchful. They captured him as he came up out of the tank, gagged him and bore him into the guard-house. I was only a child then, but the sound of the scuffle awoke me. I followed and

hid without, and peeping through the embrasure, watched all they did to him. His tongue they wrested out with red-hot pincers, and even then he screamed and screamed, while the blood gushed from his mouth. Red-hot irons drilled his eyes. With little sharp knives, working very busily and in silence, they flayed him. They were hurried, for the night was far advanced, but I marked their apish pleasure in their task. From time to time one or another laughed, sucking at his lips. Some trembled with excitement, and Baguan Das, the old High Priest, sobbed and uttered little cries of ecstasy. Before the dawn they carried him to the threshold of the big gateway, and threw him out to writhe in the dust—a lie to shore a lie. I know, I know, for I saw it all—and I, too, a little, I licked my lips. It was a new emotion—that; and a devil of pleasure, somewhere deep down in the dregs of me, was set stirring by it.”

She paused, and he shuddered. He was possessed by a frantic, hot desire to crush her in his arms, and to stifle on her lips the words that so blighted his dreams of gods and men, aye, and of women too.

As though conscious of his thought, she drew a little apart from him, and for a moment her breath came hurriedly. Then she spoke again.

“Listen,” she said. “Listen, since it is my will that you should hear that which no mortal in this terror-stricken place has yet dared to

whisper ; which few have had the courage even to harbour as a suspicion amid the shuddering secrecies of their hearts. Listen while I speak of these lies that sway our world.

“Let the High Gods be, since of them we can only guess : but the divinity of the Brahmans, that at least is a lie confessed. In what do they differ from the rest of mankind? Are they not mortal even as we? Are they not born of women? Are they not in the beginning helpless babies, all dull, grey eyes and gaping, sucking mouths? Do they not grow into children, who play in the dust, even as other children? Do they not become men, full of lusts and low desires, as it is the manner of men to be? Do they not take unto themselves wives, and thereafter beget children in their turn? Have they not every frailty common to their fellow-men? Are they not passion-swept, greedy, torn by anger, excited by cruelty, slaves to the eye, bondsmen to the flesh, jealous, miserly, false, mean? Are not idiots born among them, aye, and in greater numbers than among the *Sudras*? In a word, are they not men—just *men*—as vulnerable of body, as limited of soul as others of their kind? I tell you that they are less than that, for ease and luxury have weakened them. I know them for what they are—futile servants of their passions, unfettered, uncontrolled, save when a woman has the whim and the wit to torture them, to make of them her thralls, to stamp them into the mire which is less foul than

they. *Ahi*. Indra! Lord of the Thunders! Demigods, forsooth, these sorry rags of humanity that Prajapati in bitter irony has created! Before our eyes they are rotting to decay, yet you foolish *Sudras* hold them in awe! Perhaps the Brahmans of old time, who conquered all the world, possessed miraculous powers such as are claimed in our day by their degenerate offspring: but the age of miracles has passed away, for the earth is spent, and the race of heroes has left no trace behind it. Now only their name survives, and in its mighty shadow the Brahmans lurk, like beasts of prey, and you cowed *Sudras* are the witless cattle upon which they batten. How long shall this monstrous wrong endure? Ah, that a man might arise to tear this myth to shreds—a man with force enough in the soul of him to rouse our people, and with the skill and daring to make himself their leader! Ah, that I were a man! Ye gods of sky and air and earth! If I were a man, how should these Brahmans tremble!”

She threw her slender arms aloft in a passionate gesture. Her whole body, quivering with the excitement that shook her, seemed to be possessed by a very demon of rage at her own impotence, at the intolerable vanity of the fate that sheathed so militant and virile a soul in a scabbard so delicate and frail.

“It is fortunate for you that you are not a man,” said Chun, scornful in his turn. “Wickedly you have miscalled the Gods and the

demigods, of whom I, too, am one; yet the Heavens have taken no heed; the night silences are still unbroken. It is because you are only a woman. Earth and sky regard not the vain outcry of one so feeble and so burdened with all unwisdom. The Gods will not even stir themselves to blast you!"

She turned upon him slowly, and looked at him through the shadows out of calmly contemptuous eyes.

"So it is always. So it has ever been. They are impotent folk, these High Gods of yours. Only by men is their sanctity defended. It is not they, but the men who prate of them, who punish what you call blasphemy or sacrilege—and why? Is it not because the Brahmans claim to be the shadow cast on earth by the Gods we cannot see, the Gods we cannot hear, the dumb ones who cannot speak to us? And if there be no substance, how then should the shadow have being? Are not they, perhaps, the most monstrous lie of all, moulded from nothingness—vain imaginings glorified by their creators for their own selfish ends? If I spit in the face of the meanest of our kind, forthwith he strikes to avenge the insult. Now spit I—thus—upon these same High Gods, and behold . . . I am unscathed!"

"Be still! Be still!" cried Chun, beside himself with superstitious terrors. "The Gods scorn to wreak vengeance upon the unclean. In their heavens they abide, magnificent and aloof.

They pay no heed to the ravings of an angry woman."

"That is easy to say, but who shall prove or yet disprove it? If they exist, then must their dwelling-place be very far away, and they themselves too busy with their loves and their revels to regard the prayers we raise to them, since even our revilings they cannot hear. Who has heard their voices? Which of us has touched their robes? When have they made answer to our supplications? When have they punished the reproaches of man with the thunder-bolt or with the earthquake? We pray always, and whether we pray or no, in its appointed season comes the full harvest or the dearth, the parching drought or the rain that gives life to the fields. If they be not dead, then certainly are they drugged or slumbering, regarding not at all those who on earth worship or blaspheme them."

"They bide their time," said Chun. "It is true that no word spoken by us can move them; yet we pray on, humbly, as befits the servants of the Gods. Thus seek we a little to raise our souls nearer to them, so that in the end they, perchance, may hear us. But you, though they disdain to strike you dead, will in some future life pay the full price of your impious thoughts and utterances."

"What care I for future lives?" the girl cried passionately. "Of past existences, if such there be, I can remember nought, save now and again

when, out of the eternal silences, an elusive whisper seems to murmur of vague memories. But this incarnation is real. I am here in the world—I, I, I! They are actual, my miseries and griefs, the little shreds of happiness, the dreams that alone make endurable the burden of my days. What matters the Past, what matters the Future? Of them we know nothing; but the Present—ah, that is everything! And for us—for you, for me, for tens of thousands—the Present is poisoned by the Lie to which men cling in cringing abjectness.”

“The Gods confide to their worshippers the task of avenging insults hurled at them,” said Chun in a hoarse whisper. “And of the number of their chosen servants am I, who from them derive my godhead!”

He spoke more to himself than to her; and to him it was as though the Shining Ones, claiming him as their champion, had made his thought articulate. They had not visited this girl's wild blasphemies with instant annihilation because they reposed their trust in the loyalty of him, their minister. They communed silently with his heart, as from the beginning the Gods have communed with the children of men, laying upon him a charge and awaiting its fulfilment. Their message was distinct, imperative. No merciful doubt rose mistlike to blind his eyes to his plain duty, to the nature of the demand they made upon him. Yet every fibre of him quivered with revolt at the thought of laying violent

hands upon the beautiful, frail creature at his side. He buried his face in his hands, and rocked his body to and fro in an agony of hesitation.

Once more the sound of her laughter broke upon his ear, and he raised his head and looked at her with eyes in which wonder fought with a great despair. Tragedy was very near to him, yet she, she could laugh!

"Avenger of the Gods!" she mocked him. "Defender of the Impotent! You, most mighty demigod, would slay me, the . . . the Spirit of Destruction, in obedience to the dumb pleadings of the Voiceless Ones who are powerless to slay in their own behoof! Yet am I unafraid! Slay me! Behold, I am very small and frail. One twist of those strong hands of yours, and the deed is done! Then will the poor, feeble gods be avenged, and thy secret which is mine will the more easily be kept! You, who call yourself a Brahman, act after the custom of your brethren, and by serving the Shining Ones, serve your own divine self!"

Chun's hands had been clenched in the darkness while he strove to gather resolution to grasp that slender throat. Now they fell nerveless to his sides. A moment later, he again buried his face in his hands.

"Ye Gods," he sobbed. "I cannot do it! I cannot do it!"

He knew that he was turning his back upon all that he held to be sacred: that for her he was

killing his soul. But the music of her voice subdued him: her presence compelled him. The very delicacy and defencelessness of her, exercised over him a power that was above and beyond all strength. The conviction was upon him that he was earning an eternity of damnation—that in a moment he was undoing the work of countless incarnations which, at the last, had made of him on earth a Brahman and a demigod: yet his arms hung slackly at his sides, and his will was set. Defiantly he disregarded the mandate of the Gods. Now, he thought, now surely, their thunderbolt must fall.

"You long to slay me, the blasphemer; but me, the woman, you cannot endure to slay," the girl whispered.

To Chun it seemed that his soul, naked and ashamed, lay there stripped and bleeding for her merciless inspection.

"But, since I have greatly sinned," she continued, "and since you have been the witness of my sinning, it is fitting that death in horrible guise should punish my misdeed. Yonder lie the dark waters of the forbidden place. I, who am no demigod, will cast myself into them, and so court the destruction which my wickedness has merited, and which you dare not deal to me."

She rose at the word, and ran lightly from him in the direction of the Brahmans' bathing-tank. With terror in his heart, Chun leaped up in pursuit. He knew now that he could not

endure that death should rob him of her. Quickly as he followed, he failed to overtake her, for this child of the night stepped so surely amid the shadows that she was standing poised on the brink of the tank ere he could do more than lay an outstretched hand upon the fluttering hem of her garment. His voice, hoarse in entreaty, praying her with passionate, strained intensity to forbear, sounded strangely in his ears.

With a quick, wriggling movement, she freed herself of the silken cloth that covered her, and for an infinite, wonderful moment the whiteness of her body blinded him. The soft vesture remained in his grasp. He clutched wildly at her, but she eluded him. A splash sounded, and he covered his eyes with his hands.

A mocking laugh recalled him to himself. He dared to look. She lay at ease, floating on the water, her shapely white limbs almost motionless, her hair, unbound, adrift upon the surface, making a dark background for the small oval face which showed very pale in the moonlight. Her lips were parted in laughter, and her mischief-freighted eyes shone alluringly.

"So I too, it seems, am of the number of the divinities!" she cried up to him, her voice cautiously subdued. "The water is cool and sweet. Come. Come here and swim with me!"

In a moment, Chun had let slip his waistcloth, and his bronze body seemed to flash in the moonlight as he leaped at her bidding.

His whole being was in turmoil; his world upheaved. He knew no longer what to believe, what to disbelieve. Only he was aware that a passionate, wild desire inspired him—a desire to echo this girl's blasphemies, to out-do her sinning, to drag the very Gods from their thrones, if that would pleasure her. It was a delirium of triumphant surrender of the god and the man in him to this strange incarnation of Womanhood. It intoxicated him like some sweet and magical elixir.

For a space, light-heartedly as two children, they swam and raced and played together in the still, cool waters, with the solemn, moonlit night around them, and looming through it and above them the immense shadow of the great temple. Then, before he was aware of her intention, she regained the land, draped her cloth about her, and vanished into the darkness.

He sprang after her, hot in pursuit, straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of her flitting figure. To the very portals of the Wat he followed, but no trace of her could he find; and at last, slowly and sorrowfully, he turned away. Then, through the stillness, a whisper seemed to vibrate.

"Thus does the Spirit of Destruction breathe upon the Lie, and her breath is death!"

He wheeled sharply about, peering and listening. Was he cheating himself, or did the sudden gust of dawn-wind, which that instant awoke to rustle in the trees, bear him yet another message?

“To-morrow night at the rising of the moon !”

Chun turned away, bearing in his breast the grey ashes of many a hope which all his days he had cherished : but nestling close against his heart was one new-born.

CHAPTER IV

SLAT

SLAT, the old wise man, sat in the doorway of his hut, preparing a quid of betel-nut. His withered body was bare to the waist, its skin a network of intricate, fine wrinkles. The folds of his *som-pot* covered him from waist to knee; his thin, bony legs were crossed compactly in front of him; his feet were unshod. The worn, frayed soles of them resembled rotting leather. Above the bulging protuberances of his brow, to which his emaciation lent an added prominence, his white hair rose in an erect shock, stiff, straight, and close. His features were craggy—the forehead, heavy with thought, was massive and rough-hewn as a boulder; the line of the nose irregular and strong; the chin firm and thrusting. Even the empty gums, and the hollows into which the lower part of the face had sunken above them, could not rob the mouth of its calm strength. Shaggy eyebrows sprouted in thick, white clusters above eyes set in innumerable radiating wrinkles. The chisels of time had scored deep furrows across his brow, and

had gouged out straight channels from nose to mouth. His rugged face might have been carved out of mahogany by some keen implement.

He held in his left hand a thin bamboo, its surface worn black and shiny with use. The hollow of it served him as a mortar in which to crush to paste the ingredients of the quid which his jaws could no longer chew unaided. His right hand, grasping a short stick of dark, hard wood which he used as a pestle, rose and fell with the regularity of a machine. An appreciable portion of his life was spent in this task of preparing betel-quids; and the effortless action and the soft *beat, beat* of the pestle on the dissolving mass beneath it, had become for him inseparable accompaniments and stimuli to the working of his mind.

For years now he had been judged too feeble to toil in the quarries, or even to sit upon the scaffoldings, with chisel and hammer, carving the great stones which the labour of his fellows had set in place. Early in life his intelligence had forced him through the ranks of the dull, heavy-eyed, brutalised workers, and had relieved him of the grosser tasks of a purely mechanical sort; and the Brahmans had taken full toll of his ingenuity, his skill, and his art. They had detected in him, also, a peculiar mechanical genius; and so long as his hand was steady and his eye sure, they had used him body and brain much as, in our day, men use a machine upon

which they can depend. Then, when they believed that he could serve them no longer, they had cast him aside, like any other blunted and discarded tool, to rot or rust, to starve or die, on to the great human scrap-heap where lay decaying the worn-out manhood of Angkor.

But old Slat had neither starved nor died. His reputation for wisdom attracted to him many who stood in need of counsel, and many more who believed him to be a wizard; for in the East men and women alike have ever been eager traffickers in the intangible. Moreover, Slat had three stalwart sons—heavy, bovine creatures, slow to reason and apt to labour—and such make useful and docile offspring for a man of many wiles. They sweated and toiled because their lords, the Brahmans, had need of them, but incidentally they helped to support their father and his brother Phun.

Neither did he rust; for though his body was old, his mind became increasingly active now that at length he had full leisure in which to ponder and meditate. Always he was busy reasoning, speculating, planning: and goaded by a fierce itch of the spirit, he sought restlessly for solutions of problems abstract or mechanical.

He was deep in thought now, as he sat there at the head of the rickety ladder-way that led from the ground to the pile-raised threshold of his hut. His hand rose and fell with a regular motion above the betel-tube of worn bamboo, and his old eyes, wise and weary, gazed out,

through the aching sun-glare, over the low, dark masses of the forest, out over the mighty domes of the Wat, up into the distant heavens and beyond.

A profound stillness wrapped the earth about, as though it were part of the heavy atmosphere of the noontide; but from the direction of the temple there came, faint but incessant, the eternal sound of metal smiting stone. So gentle was it that it seemed but another phase of silence.

A sudden bestial babbling, inarticulate and shrill, broke rudely upon the universal peace, and upon Slat's meditations. It burst forth, abrupt and startling, from the dim shadows of the hut's interior, where some half-seen creature grovelled on the torn mats.

Slat, flinging his chin sideways and scowling viciously, spoke as men speak to dogs.

"Be still, there!" he ejaculated, and the babbling dwindled immediately to an awed, broken mumbling, pathetic in its impotence.

"A king and a god, forsooth!" Slat growled under his breath. "A god begotten of the living gods! A fool always, and now the begetter of nought save folly! 'A prey to the forbidden waters,' say the witless people. A fool, say I, who suffered himself to be broken body and brain in the vain attempt to prove things which by reason were already proven!"

He turned to snarl savagely at the grovelling

creature in the shadows behind him. It whimpered, seemed to tremble, and was still.

Slat chuckled, and then, as he caught sight of an advancing figure, he muttered with a sneer :

"Here is yet another offspring of the gods ; ripe for folly and filled with yearnings to share with us our godhead of the dust—as was Phun, my brother, in his time!"

As he spoke, Chun crossed the rubbish-strewn space before the hut, and ascended the stair-ladder. Without a word, he seated himself cross-legged upon the mat within the door, and mechanically Slat pushed a clumsy wooden betel-box across the floor to him. In silence Chun prepared a quid ; then he looked up and spoke.

"My father," he said, "I am troubled by many thoughts."

"You too!" exclaimed Slat, still chuckling mirthlessly above his betel-tube.

Before he spoke again, he pressed the tip of his pestle against the false bottom of the bamboo, till the brick-red paste which he had been pounding emerged from the other end in a damp, cylindrical mass, nearly an inch long. He broke it off neatly against his gums, and as the pungent concoction of betel-nut, pepper-vine leaf, gambir, and quicklime bit his palate, for a moment he closed his eyes the better to enjoy its flavour.

"You too, O son of the living gods!" he said, and bent upon the young man a sudden, penetrating scrutiny.

Chun, stiffening in every limb, returned the gaze with a look of half-terrified surprise.

"What do you know?" he asked in an awed whisper.

"Many things," said Slat. "I know something of the pride, the folly, and the naughtiness of youth, since once long ago I, even I, was young. I know the potency of the dream. I know the magic lure of the promise that only in dreams may find fulfilment. Above all I know the itch of the blood that is shared by you and by me, aye, and by the beast-thing yonder who writhes and whines upon the mat. It was the ambition that *was* his—that *is* yours—which uplifted him, cast him down, and in the end left him what now you see him."

"Tell me, tell me!" cried Chun hoarsely.

"What shall I tell you that your knowledge of yourself has not already revealed? You are one of the demigods—so am I! You are of the blood royal, and divine—so am I! You have the brain and the desires with which all who are of that strain are endowed or cursed—I also! These things we share gloriously—you and I—with our masters, the Brahmans, and with our fellow the beast, who grovels yonder maimed and moping in the shadows! How splendid is our heritage! Let us, in awe and wonder, bow down and worship . . . our own godhead!"

He shook with cackling laughter.

"Father," said Chun earnestly, "I come here to lay my very life between your hands.

I need help, counsel, aid. Doubts and strange thoughts oppress me. May I speak boldly?"

"Aye, speak without fear," said Slat, gravely now. "Though the devourer feasts upon its own spawn, and men prey upon their fellows, we be a close brotherhood, we others, we demigods of the dust. Be not afraid!" And here he laughed again mockingly. "But, I crave pardon! How should a god know fear?"

"I am a demigod, and I am not," faltered Chun. "I know not rightly what I am! My kinship with the Brahmans has long been known to me. All things proclaimed it—my face, as I have seen it, gazing back at me out of still waters; the manner in which my limbs, my hands, my feet are fashioned; the way in which, at your call, the ancient tongue came to me, an awakened memory. But more than all these, some secret stir in my blood convinced me of the truth. It was like a voice, hushed but full of music, that whispered to me, deep down in the crannies and subways of my being: and last night . . . last night I put my godhead to the proof!"

"Even as once did Phun," snarled Slat.

"Aye, but look at him!" cried Chun. "And see me! I am unscathed while he is . . . what he is!"

"True," chuckled Slat. "My son, very certainly, then, you are one of the living gods!"

"Mock me not, father," Chun implored him.

"I come here seeking knowledge. I am tortured by doubt. Think! What if, after all, it is only a dream and I am not a god!"

His voice dropped to a hushed whisper.

"That were indeed grievous," sneered Slat. "But, even so, you are still a man—not a writhing beast-thing like Phun, the madman. In that, at least, you are to be accounted happy."

"But I, who so long have dreamed of my divinity, can find little to comfort me in mere manhood," said Chun.

"Better a whole man than a mutilated god," said Slat bitterly. "Look at Phun, and take warning from him. And listen. To me, too, there once came a season of madness when, like you, I dreamed dreams; for in my veins also runs the blood of our Brahman lords, upon whom may the High Gods smile! If they smile not at them, and at the vain pride of them, then there is no merriment in heaven.

"Between me and Phun, my brother, there was this difference—Phun by his dreams was ruled, and to-day he may not govern the aimless motions of his limbs: *I* swayed my dreams, and so I am what I am—a son of the Gods, indeed, though you know it not. I tell you that I, Slat, the old wise man (aye, name me a *man*, for in the man in me I have found the god) have set foot where no demigod of them all has ever attained. I tell you more—that *my* dream is real; that it is no vapour of the brain, no self-deluding

mirage such as the Brahmans conjure up to charm them to security, but a victory wrested by thought from the secret forces that dominate all created things. Thus am I content; but you, my son, blinded by your pride, following the beckonings of elusive hopes, have already drawn lots with death; and are still, it would seem, in the mood to woo again the spirit of destruction."

"Do you know her too, the Spirit of Destruction?" cried Chun astonished.

"This I know," replied Slat. "There are in this world of ours two spirits that never rest—one that creates, one that destroys. She, the Creator, has inspired all the marvels that the toil and the blood and the tears of our people, from generation to generation, have fashioned. She is insatiable. She craves eternally for the bodies and the souls of men. She grinds us to dust in her unending service. No travail of our torn and bleeding hands can glut her. She devours our days, enslaves us from the cradle to the burning-ghat, drinks to the dregs the last drop of our vitality, monopolises our thought. But though of our every energy she takes so heavy a toll, our souls she stimulates and uplifts, wafting us ever to increasing heights, urging us onward to more daring flights, till in her bondage the mind of man attains to undreamed-of emancipation. It is she that plants in our brains the seed of desire—the passionate longing to achieve the

impossible ; for she harries us with dreams, lures us with visions, points beyond the horizon to the hidden things that might be, will be, shall be!

“It was she who of old whispered in the ears of the Brahman lords, bidding them cease from their blood-stained conquests, entreating them to turn away from the seductions of her sister Spirit, demanding of them that they should *make*, not *break*. And thus it was that our Khmer world, which is the head and crown of things, had in this wilderness its obscure beginnings.

“My son, consider and mark well the miracles which under the guidance of this spirit have been wrought! To me they are as a vast and noble stairway of the intellect, which the soul of our people has scaled, step by step, in the eternal pursuit of beauty. See how the vapours of men’s thoughts have materialised in the grey, enduring stone! First the Tha Phrom, with its thirty perfect shrines: then the temples which crown our hills, such as the Ba-Kheng yonder. Next, from out the misty depths of the mind emerged those tremendous conceptions, the Ba-Yon and the Ba-Phun, which flank the forum of the Great City; and in the sweat and toil of thousands, at the cost of countless lives and pain piled on pain, even those wild visions were made actual. Spent with their long labours, after that, for a space, our people lay prostrate, panting in the dust; yet still did the spirit slaver

for fresh victims, still was the gluttony of her desire unassuaged. No longer did she speak in whispers. Now she raised her voice in a scream, imperative, irresistible, and those who heard and understood cowered before her, their finite brains reeling under the shock of an infinite idea. It seemed to them—it must have seemed to them—that the task laid upon them was beyond the power of man; but the spirit breathed upon one master-mind among them all, driving out fear. Thus was the plan conceived, which in our day is taking final shape in the great Wat, that rises heavenward before our eyes. Even though inspired by the spirit, how did the fettered mind of man dare to dream so greatly? You know nought, my son, of the immutable laws of strain and thrust, of the mysterious forces that dominate inanimate things, of the bewildering, warring problems which assail the master-builder. You have been born under the shadow of that stupendous monument of imagination, execution, and endeavour; and unwondering you have looked upon it because, to you, it has been as familiar a marvel as the daily rising and setting of the sun. You and your fellows have laboured blindly at the bidding of that godlike man, who, long since, has been gathered to the Gods; and like those who for generations have preceded you, you have wrought more mightily than you dreamed. But he, be sure, *he* knew! Though the pyre devoured him ere ever his thought was

realised, he beheld with the clear vision of the uplifted soul of him that which to-day we see. He foreknew it all, to its last, least detail, before a pick was set to the quarry—all, all, all! And the supreme difficulty of it, that too was by him anticipated, grappled with, laughed at, overcome! And yet . . . and yet . . . One secret eluded him—even him! *That* was left for me, in this later, meaner age—left as a legacy of the mind to make to me divine amends for my filched godhead—for upon me too, though the Brahman dotards know it not, the Spirit of Creation has breathed, and shunning the Spirit of Destruction, which has consumed Phun, my brother, I have found an answer to a question which baffled even him, the man my master, my god, my only deity, the conceiver of Angkor Wat!"

He paused, breathless, his whole frame pulsing and trembling with emotion and excitement; and for a moment there was silence.

"But what know you of the Spirit of Destruction?" asked Chun presently.

"She, too," responded Slat, in a subdued tone, "is restless and very busy, and in the end, mayhap, she will prevail. Sometimes, indeed, I wonder whether, in truth, there be *two* Spirits—whether there be not one only that works in divers ways—for without the Spirit of Destruction the Spirit of Creation cannot live. Through the ruin of many kingdoms was the Khmer empire evolved. We shatter the eternal hills, that we with their rocks may build our temples.

We are ground to dust, generation after generation, that the thought bred in the brain of one man may live for all time. Nought arises save out of wrack ; by destruction is creation fed ; there is no making, save by much breaking. It is the Law, awful and unrelenting ; the Law that rules our world.

“ But here at Angkor, the greatest city of the greatest empire that the audacity and ruthlessness of man have fashioned, the Spirit of Destruction never rests. She feasts cruelly upon human lives in the quarries, at the pulleys and the levers. She crushes them under the wheels of her huge, stone-freighted cars. Every block that has been laid in our temples is cemented with blood of her shedding, has been watered by the tears wrung from helpless men by her merciless hand. But also she works in many hidden ways, for she is subtle even as she is pitiless. When she is in jesting mood, she lures to death some madman—such as you or the fool, Phun, yonder—with lying promises and treacherous dreams ; but most of all she delights to fill the souls of men with doubt. That is an insidious poison that invades the veins—inflames the brain. ‘ Who hath seen the Gods ? ’ she asks. ‘ Who hath heard their voices ? ’ Mockingly, she demands a sign, and from the heavens that are as brass no answer comes. She pours scorn upon the Brahmans and their divinity, and beneath the lash of her derision our lords are as impotent, as defence-

less as the silent Gods. Yet these are the plinth upon which our world is set; if it be shaken, then is the entire scheme of our life a-tremble. If the Gods are not, we very surely are mad and smitten with folly, since aeon after aeon we toil and strive and break and slay ourselves, rearing, in their honour and for our own security, these endless prayers in stone! And if the Brahmans be not demigods, are we not worse than mad, we, an abject, slavish generation who suffer them so mightily to outrage and oppress us—we who are many, they who are few—we whom toil has endowed with strength, they whom ease and luxury have enervated? If there be no Gods—if the divinity of the Brahmans be nought save a lying myth—what answer can there be to question such as these? For only by their faith in these mysteries are our people enslaved. They, the poor, dull clods, they cannot see what I see. To me—to me perhaps alone—the fruit of all our labour is its own tremendous end; but the others, the mob of soulless toilers, how should their slow brains respond to the imperious call of art? What do they know of Beauty, of her wonder, her magic, her glamour-weaving spell? How should the glory of supreme achievement solace them for the stunted life, the lost freedom, the days of ceaseless travail, the aching limbs, the wrenched muscles, the lacerated flesh, the breaking hearts? How should their dwarfed minds perceive the wonder of the work to which their weary hands

are set? They labour blindly, knowing only that the monoliths are heavy, the toil unending. They bend sweating over each day's sordid task, with heavy eyes fixed upon the earth, driven by fears of the Unknown—slavish brutes whom fear alone can drive.

"My son, if the Spirit of Destruction cast down the ancient gods from their high places, and reveal to our people the feeble humanity of the men whom they so long have deemed divine, I fear greatly that on that day the work would cease. 'Tis to me an ever-present dread. Better than that the bondage which binds them to toil for the Brahmans, and for the fulfilment of my Master's dream. And yet. . . . The secret that my eager brain has found amid the striving laws of strain and thrust, I cannot let it vanish from the earth with me. It has eluded all men, till in the appointed hour to me it was revealed. It is a special gift to *me*—utterly mine! It, at least, shall not be made the spoil of these dogs of Brahmans, who have used me body and brain, and who have denied to me and to Phun, yonder, as they deny also to you, that to which our blood makes us co-heirs with them! Think you that I should have won to the secret knowledge which to-day is mine, were it not for my kinship with the great ones who, in times out of mind, planned and foreordained what the degenerate folk who now rule us have only enough of wit to execute? A despised and broken branch of the mighty Brahman tree am

I ; but in darkness where I lie neglected, I have borne fruit no less glorious than that which of old came from the parent stem ; and that I will yeild up to no false demigod of them all ! ”

Again Slat fell silent. His old eyes flashed, his body quivered with rage, and Chun watched him with uncomprehending wonder.

“ And yet,” the former murmured after a brief pause. “ And yet, if the Spirit of Destruction hold her hand, and hasten not to shatter and destroy, only by the grace of the Brahmans can my thought quicken. I had rather that it should perish with this brain of mine which gave it birth.

“ Remains only, then, the hope ! Who knows ? If the ancient tyranny were broken, perhaps our people would still submit to labour—some of them. Is this also a dream ? I ponder over it long and long, for if it have but one slender chance of life, I would not willingly suffer my idea to die. Surely among some of our toilers there must abide a little love of their handiwork, and habit too is a compelling force. Moreover, should not I, a master-builder in my generation, be at hand to inspire and guide them ? As I sit thinking anxious thoughts, more surely does the *hope* burst into the flame of certainty ! ”

He had forgotten Chun, who sat mazed and wondering at his side. Almost mechanically he was emptying his mind of its burdens through the outlet of spoken words, while his eyes gazed, unseeing but intent, out through the sunshine at

the massive cones which crowned the temple of his adoration. The longing to see his own visions realised no less gloriously, warred within him against the fear lest any act of his might jeopardise the fulfilment of his Master's transcendent dream. Desire kindled hope and derided his timidity ; yet doubt tore at his heart.

"Much of your talk I cannot understand," said Chun. "But the Spirit of Destruction spoke with me in the night-time, decrying gods and demigods, even as you say. Have you also chanced upon her, seen her beauty, heard her voice, listened to her blasphemies? Have you too been lured by her to abet her sacrileges?"

"Aye," said old Slat slowly, while he still gazed out at the hazy distances. "Aye! I have known her long; passionately have I desired her; breathlessly have I awaited her coming; but also I have feared her greatly. I fear her now!"

Then the old man plunged into silence, and that day Chun could win no further word from him.

CHAPTER V

THE BEHEST

BEHIND and over Angkor Wat a moon, a little past the full, was rising. On earth the night was intensely still; the air—hot, moist, scent-laden—seeming to float in suspension above the ground, like a dense vapour, invisible but stifling. But, high aloft in the heavens, atmospheric currents were raging, and vast masses of black cloud, ragged and fantastic, rushed storm-driven across the sky, rapidly changing their formation as they scudded, like some vanquished host in panic-stricken flight. Almost incessantly the horizon toward the south was illumined by wide flares of summer lightning that, with the irregular regularity of a heliograph, were blazoned for an instant above the jagged line of forest tree-tops—shimmered and went out. Pale stars glimmered mistily in little patches of open sky, till the storm-wrack overwhelmed them and they seemed to soar upward into infinite, smoky depths of air. Amid this noiseless violence of inaudible storm, the moon

sailed toward the zenith in serene, impassive splendour.

As she rose, the outline of the temple emerged gradually from the vast shadows of the night. The moonlight touched and fretted the edges of the domes; washed in a pale background against which the dim bulk of roofs and walls and portals stood forth in sudden prominence; flooded courtyard and cloister through unsuspected apertures; threw with seeming caprice huge fragments of the building into calm, majestic light; and plunged the rest, by contrast, into impenetrable gloom.

Chun, creeping cautiously along the narrow strip of darkness, cast upon the ground by the abrupt wall of the causeway, watched this evolution of shadow out of shadow with a beating heart.

"To-morrow night at the rising of the moon!"

Had fancy cheated him, or had those words really been spoken by the strange musical voice through which there thrilled for him elusive echoes that seemed to awaken twilit memories of earlier incarnations? Those were the questions which, all day long, had revolved in the heart and in the brain of him—an endless torturing procession. They were grinding his soul now with the pitiless monotony of their insistence—with their vanity, with the knowledge that the event alone could answer them.

Of a sudden, as he crept through the shadows,

they were revealed to him in the likeness of vital, personified spirits—haunting, malevolent, and relentless. They resembled, he thought, the ruthless dragon of tradition which, from time to time, flings itself with wide slaving jaws upon the moon, and is only foiled because those who on earth love her raise so great a tumult that its craven spirit is daunted. Monstrous as this incarnation of evil, the questions that were persecuting him seemed to Chun to have devoured all that till now had been to him momentous or beautiful—the dream of his divinity, the pride of his birthright, the lure of his ambition, the hopes which, since his boyhood, had gilded for him this grey world of toil and travail. These things had been for him the glorious interpreters of the meaning and the mystery of existence; but in the space of a few hours they had vanished into the jaws of these insatiable invaders of his thoughts. Beside his overwhelming desire to know that he would see Her again, all else had faded into pale, sad nothingness. The world in which he lived had been blotted out; and he saw himself of a sudden reduced to a single fierce craving—a cry, a hope, a fear.

He was trembling in every limb—shaken by that intense violence of tremor which, in moments of deep emotion, smites the very strong—when he came at last to the foot of the great stairway, and stood there peering eagerly into the darkness. His breath was coming

through his locked teeth in short, painful gusts. His heart was leaping savagely, like a wild thing caged and pent. There was so irresistible a sinking within him that he was stricken with nausea. His whole body seemed to be strung like a bow by the tense agony of expectation.

For a space he stood thus, searching the shadows, his senses torturing him with tiny shreds of sound, and lovely misty shapes that had no existence save in his imagination. Then, with a sob, he collapsed in a sitting posture on the temple-steps.

Hour after hour he sat there motionless, while the moon soared higher and higher into the clear heavens, whence the flying storm-scud had departed—sat there numbed by the terrible force of the reaction, gazing miserably at the wreckage of his hopes and at the ruined soul of him. For he realised now that she had done this—that she had killed his soul. Obedient to her spell, he had betrayed the Gods, had rejected, in thought at least, the doctrine of the divinity of the Brahmans, and with her had made a mock of his own godly heritage. In answer to her reckless call, he had plunged into the sacred waters, not reverently, as a Brahman should, but filled with sacrilegious delight, responding to the outcry of the flesh which craved for proximity to the beautiful, shameless body whose whiteness had shone so alluringly up through the troubled waves.

Now he was oppressed by the most intolerable

of burdens—a sense of unforgivable sin: but most sorely was he borne down by the knowledge that he had sinned against himself. Nothing in life, he felt, could ever be the same again. Never more could the marvellous scheme of things be to him that which it had been so short a while before. Swayed by the casual touch of a woman's hand upon his arm, hypnotised by the music of her voice, lured by the magic of her beauty, he had bartered the god in him, and with it all his wealth of godlike dreams, for . . . what? For this raging hunger of the heart and of the flesh, for this craving of the soul, for this agony of baulked desire that made all the world a measureless, aching emptiness, for the humiliation of vain waiting, for the merciless dragging in the mire of his manhood and his pride. She had not robbed him only of his dream of godhead: she had filched from him also all that made of him a man. In that instant he had a vision of himself as the thing to which she had reduced him—a being of shadowlike futility, without force, or strength, or power of achievement, without aim or meaning—an impotent fleck of foam, passion-tossed on a wave of supreme, unsatisfied desire.

He bent his head above the folded arms that rested on his knees, and his frame was shaken by hard sobs that brought with them no relief of tears. He had ceased to listen to the elusive noises of the night that conjured stealthy foot-falls out of the great silences. He had ceased

to hope—almost to think. He was a mere clot of desire, of shame, of suffering.

Of a sudden he was aware that a miracle had befallen—that she was there, before him, close to him in the darkness. Something within him—something tense and strained—seemed to snap with an appalling shock, and in a moment he was prostrate at her feet, caressing them with lips and cheek, touching them with adoring hands, crooning over them with broken, passionate words—worshipping this girl with an extravagant intensity such as he had not lavished upon her, even when, at her first coming, he had believed her to be an incarnation of the Gods.

She stood quite still, looking down at him with grave eyes, outwardly unmoved, but warmed a little, mayhap, by the sincerity of his adoration. Then she bent over him, laid a hand on either cheek, and so drew him upward till, with lifted face, he half knelt, half squatted before her.

He sat back upon his heels, looking up at her, his breath caught, his eyes dazed by the sudden wonder of her beauty. Absent, he had thought her present, so perfectly had his imagination seemed to visualise her. Even at noonday, when he had let his eyelids fall, it had seemed to him that the small, pale face, the eyes of depth and mystery, the shadowy hair, the slender, girlish form had leaped instantly into vivid life

against a rosy background. Now that she stood before him in the flesh, these visions of her were revealed to him as inadequate, faded things. Dazzled by the wonder of her, he knelt at her feet, and his soul too was prostrate before her.

To others, perhaps, this girl might have seemed no more than a dainty, pretty slip of womanhood, a creature of moods and shadows, less brilliant than many of her sisters; but over Chun, from the first, her beauty worked an imperative, magical spell. To this one man she stood for Womanhood itself. In her he recognised, unconsciously, the antithesis to his own virility. In her he was aware of the strength which is combined with physical frailty, and exerts over mere brute force a tyrannical ascendancy—the weakness which makes to a strong man's nature an insistent, irresistible appeal—the subtle qualities of soul and intellect which are complementary to those of the male animal, not comparable nor competitive, differing from them in kind rather than in degree. Out of the night she had come to him, at a moment of supreme emotion, in the likeness of a daughter of the Gods. Out of the immense, impenetrable darkness of the past, the soul of her seemed to cry to his soul, stirring his being to its depths, awaking slumbering memories that arose, ghost-like, to pass and repass, veiled and mysterious, in some dim shadowland of fantasy.

“You have come!” Chun panted at last.

So elusive did she seem to him, that he needed spoken words to set a seal upon the actuality of her presence.

"Why are you here?" she asked. Her passionless tone was cold and unwelcoming. He, who had been rent by such longings and despairs because her coming had been delayed, who had been filled with a joy so tumultuous by her mere proximity, winced under her question as though a whip-lash had been laid across his face.

"I came at your bidding," he blurted out.

She stepped away from him.

"At *my* bidding!" she echoed. "What care have I for your comings in and your goings out—casteless one? Why should I bid you come or go or stay or depart? What are you to me?"

"I thought . . . I fancied . . . I hoped . . ." he faltered, mightily abashed.

"What know I of your thoughts, your fancies, or your hopes?" she flung back at him. "You weary me with meaningless words, and already I am over-weary."

At the word, she sank down in a squatting attitude upon the flags, a little figure, pitiful and forlorn—the incarnation of flesh distressed and spirit over-taxed—and all the tenderness of Chun's nature awoke instantly in answer to her mute appeal. Like a dog he crept nearer to her, longing to express the sympathy that inspired him; but he did not dare even to touch the hem of her garment.

"Ye Gods of earth and air!" he ejaculated in a hoarse whisper. "That I might comfort you, ease your pains, bear your burdens."

She cut him short with an impatient shrug.

"Be still!" she said curtly. "I desire peace, not words. Be still!"

At once his speech was hushed: and he sat there in the shadows, afraid almost to draw breath, motionless in spite of the cramp that presently began to assail his limbs which chance had drawn into unnatural attitudes.

For a long time she too was motionless, while her eyes stared gloomily into the darkness. She made no sign that betrayed consciousness of his proximity, and he felt himself to be thrust away from all communion with her—from her thought and from her memory—beyond the limits of distant horizons.

She seemed to have power to bruise the very soul of him.

At last she spoke, but without turning her head or looking at him.

"Are you dumb?" she asked. "Are you dumb and dead? Can you neither speak nor move? Have you not enough of wit to know how horrible to me are these silences of the night?"

Anger flared up in him at her perverse injustice, but he suppressed it instantly. A great fear was upon him lest a jarring word should send her back into the darkness out of which she had come.

"All the night I have waited here for you," he whispered humbly. "I have longed for your coming as a man stricken with thirst craves for the cool waters."

"Why?" she asked. Her tone was as hard and as unyielding as ever.

"Because . . ." said Chun in a passionate whisper, and now his words came from him in a rush. "Because since you came out of the shadows and into the shadows passed, I have thought only of you, dreamed only of you, seen nothing but the vision of your beauty, heard no sound save the music of your voice. All the world is vocal of you. Every shadow hints the shadows in your hair. All solitudes are fragrant of you, and to me are no longer lonely, for you in them are close to me. Every sunbeam holds a promise of your coming, and the twilight whispers to me of you. You inspire all created things, so that for me they have no meaning save through you. You are Life itself—the soul of its beauty and its mystery."

She bent a calm gaze upon him, then slowly smiled.

"Am I not well named?" she asked, "I, the Spirit of Destruction?"

"No!" he cried in passionate protest. "No! You are the Spirit of Creation, for since last night you have made for me a new heaven and a new earth, aye, and a new hell therewith. To be near you is my heaven, to long vainly for you is my hell, and the earth itself exists now for me

only, that, moving on it, I may love and serve you."

"The madness!" she ejaculated softly. It is by this name that in the East the supreme insanity of love is known. "The madness! It seems, my friend, that the virus has set fire to your blood," and she laughed as one well content.

"Yes," said Chun. "It is in very truth the madness—bred of the senses, it may be, but asking no satisfaction of the sense. It has infected me, mounting to my brain, I think, filling my heart and my soul. It is a great evil—the madness—when it grips a man as I by it am gripped."

"No," she whispered softly. "It is the only sanity. Without it there is no faith, no hope, no colour in the world, no joy nor inspiration in the work of man, no end nor meaning in the unsought, tyrannical power of woman. It is the invisible motive force that uplifts and casts down, that fashions and destroys, that creates something out of nothing or brings high hopes to nought, that turns defeat into victory and makes victory more bitter than defeat. Lacking it, mankind would be levelled with the beasts, and the earth itself become a wilderness."

"But in me already it has worked destruction," said Chun. "Ere you came, I was a demigod. By the Gods' very selves, by the baptism of the sacred waters, my godhead had been accepted and approved. And now . . . And now I am less even than a man, only a cry! a cry for you; only a desire, a desire for your presence; only a

shadow, a shadow cast by you. What care I for the High Gods in their heavens, since you for me fill earth and sky? What worth is there in the divinity of the living gods, or what does it matter whether by them or by others our world is ruled, seeing that you are my only demigod, your will my only law? Already at your bidding I have committed sacrilege, slaying perchance my soul, as to serve you I willingly would give my body to be burned. That surely is a madness and a great evil, for it has stolen from me my very self; casting down, not uplifting; robbing all things of their values; paralysing, not inspiring, my mind."

"That shall not be," she whispered earnestly, laying a hand upon Chun's bare shoulder. "Listen, and bid that trembling cease." For at her touch he had been shaken anew by that strange, uncontrollable palsy of the limbs. "Be still, and listen. Last night you were obsessed by dreams—dreams of your fabled divinity, dreams of the power over men that your godhead might win for you, dreams of I know not what futility. I breathed upon them, and like mists they melted away. Now they are dispelled, and you sit here mourning over them like a child who weeps because the footfall of a passer-by has ground back into the mire the mud castles he had builded. Yet they were only castles fashioned from the dust, those poor dreams of yours. Waste no tears on them. Do not our architects clear of all things the spaces

upon which presently their temples are to be reared? Even so have I done to you. Destruction must precede all creation. I have taken from you nothing that was of any worth, nought save false hopes and vain ambitions. a belief in a divinity that was not yours, a paltry longing for recognition by the Brahmans, who begot you in shame, of a godhead no more real than that to which they lay claim. You thought, mayhap, that these things would bring with them a life of ease, such as the Brahmans lead, that you would share with them the adoration of the *Sudras*, and the power to oppress your fellows. Are those such high and noble desires that you should be mightily cast down because you now know that they can never be satisfied? Say, my friend—have I filched from you much that it profited you to keep?”

“How can I judge?” said Chun. “This only I know—that since your coming you have changed for me the face of life.”

“And that is well,” she insisted earnestly, leaning a little toward him. “That is well, for, ere I came, you were not looking on the face of life, but on its lying counterfeit. Look up yonder at the great Wat that towers above our heads. Have you ever asked yourself why the Brahmans have builded it; why to fashion it our people labour out their lives, like cattle yoked to a plough in an endless furrow?”

“It is built in honour of the High Gods,” said Chun simply.

"And why, think you, do the Brahmans so greatly desire to do homage to the High Gods?"

"Because they are the Gods of their worship," responded Chun.

"Fool!" cried the girl. "It is because the Brahmans are afraid! I tell you that these self-styled demigods are oppressed by eternal fears. They know that they are few and weak, and that the men over whom they tyrannise are numerous and strong. They know that they and their forbears, from generation to generation, have sinned past all redemption, enslaving those whom they name *Sudras* and casteless ones, making a mock of their humanity, dealing with them as beasts of burden, working them to the bone, robbing their bodies of health and strength, killing the live souls of them, casting them aside to rot and die; when age and much toil have broken them, holding them to be no better than the dust in which they travail, back into which, after many days, in the end they grind them. They know the measureless immensity of their crime, done in the sight of the Gods, against their fellow-men, and frantically they strive to propitiate, to placate, to bribe. They build these temples that the Gods themselves may, in some sort, be made with them sharers in their sinning. Thus, they hope to escape retribution; and they dare not desist, lest the Gods should wax wrathful, and the men they so long have outraged find leisure at last for thought and questionings. Look at

the works which they have built by the toil of other men, how, in the beginning, they were small and humble; how each generation has seen them become more grandiose, more monstrous; until now, in our own time, this cruel and tremendous edifice of Angkor Wat draws near completion. Always greater and greater bribes to heaven, and heavier burdens aid upon our people—and so it will be for ever, while we, like dumb beasts, endure their rule and their oppressions. Do you fancy that the labours of the *Sudras* will have an ending when the great Wat is carved to its last stone? I tell you that the Brahmans dare not hold their hands. Fear of the Gods, fear of the men whom they have wronged, alike goad them onward. They have become the thralls of their own tyranny. These colossal prayers in stone may not cease, lest the Gods, being angry, wreak at last the long-merited vengeance. The slavery of toil which is brutalising our people may not be relaxed even a little, lest freedom breed revolt. I tell you these Brahmans are pursued by furies of fear lest the Gods should strike, or lest the people, learning their own strength, should rise up and destroy them."

For a space, after she had ceased speaking, Chun sat motionless, sunken deep in thought. To this man, born and bred among the *Sudras* the idea that the demigods could feel fear was new and astounding. Their divinity was, in his eyes, an impregnable rampart reared

around them. That they should hold the Gods in awe was part of the appointed order of things, but that they should be afraid of men! Ah, that were almost unbelievable—a notion not easy of assimilation. Stated by other lips, it would have seemed to him the merest froth of folly; but coming from her, and wedded to the voice that set tingling within him such deep, responsive vibrations, it assumed a new force and reality. The energy emanating from her, the intense earnestness and conviction which inspired her frailty, had also their hypnotic effect. Though once more she was shaking the foundations of his world, he had nothing with which to oppose her fierce iconoclasm.

“How do you know? How do you know these things?” he demanded feebly. Already all the beliefs that had been his were staggered by doubt. Presently, perhaps out of the wrack of them, a new faith would arise.

“How do I know?” she echoed, and suddenly was torn by passion. “Ye gods of earth and air, how do I know? How do I know that these Brahmans are no demigods, but vile, weak men? How do I know that their gods are myths, their service a foul excuse for the satisfaction of bestial appetites? Hush! Do not ask me how I know these things: but be sure, very sure, that beyond all doubt I know!”

She ceased abruptly, but even through the great stillness that wrapped them around it

seemed to Chun that the fury of her passion still vibrated.

She had spoken with head thrown slightly back, with eyes that flashed, with tumultuous, torrential speech. Now, suddenly, she seemed to collapse, to shrink into herself, to be transformed from a creature of furious, storm-driven energy into a little, pitiful girl, frail and spent. Her face assumed once more that strange look of infinite age, of weary, superhuman knowledge.

For the second time that evening all the tenderness, all the instinctive chivalry of his manhood, flared up in Chun's heart, like a mighty sacrificial fire alight before the altar of her divinity. His whole nature responded unreasoningly to he knew not what subtly expressed need of hers. He crept toward her, and very gently laid his arms about her slender shoulders. As he buried his face in the fragrant masses of her hair, he caught the sound of a little sob.

For a moment or two they sat thus, motionless in the darkness; the passion within him abashed by a measureless compassion which had been awakened he knew not how. Then the palm of one of her hands was laid upon his breast, and softly he was thrust from her. He drew away at once, unresistingly; his mind and body alike obedient to her wish: but the miracle of that instant of physical contact with her was thrilling him with a glowing wonder and surprise. It intoxicated him, lent a new

glamour to the still, moonlit world, made life a triumphant, glorious thing.

He sat very still, fearful lest by word or movement he should break the spell of this perfect moment; but his heart beat wildly. What now to him were gods or demigods? What cared he for his wrecked dreams of divinity? The man in him, leaping up in fiery response to the pathos of a woman's mute appeal, fulfilled his every desire. As a man, he loved her, longed to serve her, saw in the hope that he a little might help and comfort her, an all-satisfying ambition and the sole reason of his existence upon earth. Already, it seemed to him, he by her was so utterly absorbed that he had, apart from this being so compact of force and frailty, no separate existence.

She sat before him on the flags, her knees drawn up, her arms embracing them, her chin resting upon them, looking at him through calm, searching eyes.

"Do you love me?" she asked suddenly. "Love me with your soul; not only, manlike, with your body?"

He broke into eager protestations; but with a gesture she stayed the torrent of his words.

"And in proof you would do *any* deed—*any* deed—that I might demand of you? Think well before you reply. Any deed?"

"Aye," he cried. "Have I not already told

you? I would give my soul to be slain and my body to be burned for you."

Again she scrutinised him closely and then abruptly spoke.

"Bring here to me—here where we now sit—the Sacred Sword of Indra!"¹ she said.

He smiled at her, thinking that she spoke in hyperbole; but her face was set and grave, and upon it once more that unearthly expression was fixed.

"You are silent," she said presently, in cold, hard tones. "Are your protestations all vain—mere empty words, spoken as men speak such things to delude the folly and the faith which they dream abide in women? Shame upon you and upon me! Almost for a moment I believed you."

"You can believe," cried Chun in desperation. "But, think, . . . The Sacred Sword! The blade forged by Indra's self, and by him given into the hands of the Brahman king who, first of all his house, ruled over our world! Men say that the very soul of this land of ours abides in that weapon of the Gods, and that if aught of ill befall it, the kingdom itself shall perish. Already I have done sacrilege at your bidding, but that were nothing by the side of this. To seize the Sword of Indra! That were to smite with open palm the faces of the most High Gods. It would bring plague and pestilence and calamity and death to ravage this land. There-

¹ *Vide* note 1.

after no crops would grow. Famine would devour our people. To its uttermost foundations would our world be shaken. Think, heart of my heart. Think well, I entreat you, ere you demand this thing of me."

Slowly, with weary grace, she rose to her feet, and he rose too, so that for a moment they stood facing one another—he towering above her, troubled and distressed, she looking up at him, inexorable and commanding.

"Enough of words," she said. "I have claimed a deed from you who would *give your soul to be slain and your body to be burned* for me." She mimicked his words with a cruel sneer. "If you desire to see my face again—ever more to hear my voice—again—who knows?—to hold me in your arms, to feel the softness of my hair upon your cheek and brow—to taste, it may be, joys more intimate than these—gifts of my giving—then do my bidding. Bring to me the Sacred Sword. Bring it here and lay it at my feet. Then, not otherwise, shall I believe in your love. Fail me in this, and I, who came from out the shadows, shall be swallowed up by them once more. I shall leave you, but"—(here she laughed mirthlessly)—"not altogether as I found you. Then"—(she laughed again)—"then you were a demigod, convinced of your own divinity. I shall leave you shorn of your godhead, bereft of hope, robbed of ambition, and even the miserable manhood that belongs to you denied its chief

desire, and clothed with the shame of shames, because for the fulfilment of that desire it did not dare enough."

Her words, her laugh, her derisive tones maddened him. A great wave of anger swept over him—of anger and desire—impelling him to seize this little, delicate girl, who so mocked and tantalised him, and crush her in his brawny arms—to have his will of her, avenging thus the injuries she had wrought upon his soul, and slaking thus the fierce thirsts of his body.

It was only for an instant that he was shaken by this up-welling of the brute within him; but the paroxysm left him exhausted and ashamed. He had thrown his arms aloft, his face straining upward, as with conscious, physical effort he battled with the devils who assailed him. Now his hands fell limply to his sides. He bent his eyes to the spot where the girl had been standing—but she had disappeared as silently as she had come.

CHAPTER VI

AN APPEAL TO THE GODS

By the half-built southern portal of the outer cloister of Angkor Wat, a gang of perhaps five hundred men was toiling in the blazing heat of noon. The moving shadows which they cast were circular, squat patches of blackness, staining the white dust; those thrown by the sheer walls of the cloisters were incredibly narrow, clean-cut and hard. The sparse cocoanut palms—their fronds lifting and stiffening in the heat—had little sun-striped circles drawn about their boles. For the rest, the rank growth of grass and the blinding earth, where the passage of innumerable unshod feet had worn the vegetation to powder, lay exposed to the vertical sun rays, and the refraction from them struck upward with an intolerable intensity.

High noon poised above Angkor Wat—tropical noontide, fierce and pitiless; yet within the half-finished gateway, where old Slat was sitting, a dim dusk prevailed. Above him roughly-hewn stones, the successive strata inclining more and more to meet at last in the

acute angle of the roof, supported far overhead an immense conical tower. On either hand of him a long, straight cloister stretched away in narrowing perspective, the rigid lines broken here and there by deep embrasures, by the square bulk of pillars, and by jutting masonry of occasional shrines in which, dimly seen, stood gigantic images of Hindu gods.

Closer at hand were grouped big, four-sided columns, with capitals and bases delicately carved or awaiting the chisel of the sculptor; and about him, and around him and before, stood the massive, time-defying structures of the gate.

Through windows whose embrasures, formed in the thickness of the walls, were shrouded from without by clusters of shrubs and vines and creepers, there crept a veiled light which served to suggest, rather than to reveal, the wealth of sculpture decorating so many of the stones—carved figures of bearded Brahmans rapt in perpetual adoration; dancing-girls with rounded breasts and triple pyramidal head-dresses; curtains of fine drapery exquisitely imitated; intricate designs of flowers, of leaves, of birds, of imaginative scroll-work in endless variety.

A dank atmosphere pervaded the place, and the air fell chill, as with the chill of a tomb. The semi-darkness lent to it a haunting sense of mystery and gloom. Yet immediately in front of Slat, cut sharply out of those grim and sombre stones, was the blazing oblong of daylight framed by the gateway.

The contrast between the dim, shadowy interior and the tense, white heat without was abrupt, sudden, stunning as a blow; and Slat's old eyes, dazed and reeling under the shock of it, were led along the line of the great causeway which—like an immense prostrate column, of the colourless colour of flame in the heart of a furnace—stretched straight to the threshold of the Wat, beneath thin ghosts of heat-haze that danced and danced.

Then, gradually, as his sight became inured to the blinding glare, the mighty pile of the great temple emerged, as from behind veils—the magnificent, inevitable culmination of that giant causeway. Framed by the dark monoliths of the gate, set against a background of white-hot sunlight, it stood forth revealed in all the splendour of its design, in all the triumph of its beauty and its symmetry. The stairway breaking the line of the base, and leading upward to outer portals, the long roofs of the exterior cloisters, the massed bulk of the cliff of masonry which supported the shrines and courts of the upper temple, the abrupt flights of steps which scaled its face and vanished into three dark, oblong entrances, and the piles of sculptured stones above them, each in its turn fulfilled its purpose, carrying the eye higher and higher till at last it rested upon the huge, conical domes whereof the rugged outlines were set in sharp silhouette against a sky pale with heat.

This was Slat's chosen view of the temple

whose beauty was his idol, for none other seemed to him to convey in equal measure so complete an understanding of the perfection of its design. Sitting thus, gazing from out the dusk of the distant cloister at the Wat, standing solitary and immense in the heart of this sun-steeped landscape, ever there seemed to come to him as a new and wonderful surprise a full appreciation of its grandeur as a single, vast idea, tremendously conceived, triumphantly realised. Then he would draw in his breath with a sort of passionate delight. The splendour of it filled and thrilled him, satisfying every longing and aspiration of his soul; and somewhere deep hidden within him there lurked a secret joy and pride borne of the conviction that he alone really *understood*, that his mind only was attuned to the mind of that dead genius upon whose imagination there had dawned, long ago, this transcendent dream of beauty.

"Yet, even from *his* eyes was hidden the secret which *I* have wrested from amid the jarring strife of thrust and strain!" he would often murmur. "That, from the beginning of things, was reserved for me—for me alone!"

This was his triumphant thought. It bore him, by ever so little, nearer to the Master whom he worshipped.

He turned himself about, and looking through the opposite portal of the gate, fell to preparing a quid of betel-nut.

There came to his ears the noises made by the labour of many toilers—the choraic song of men working in unison, the clinking of metal against stone, the whine of coir ropes winding through clumsy sheaves, the groaning of green-wood skids, the rumble of heavy carts on worn and rutted tracks, the low rumour of human speech, and the occasional abrupt sound of a voice raised in counsel or command—noises that seemed to be rough-hewn out of the midday stillness.

Down the rude track which led from a distant quarry to the works, unwieldy drays, with solid, wooden wheels, were crawling, jolt by jolt, surrounded by ant-like clusters of men who pushed and hauled them. Nearer at hand, labourers were making ready to discharge a huge monolith from the cart which bore it. Skids lay ready on the ground for its reception. Long poles of specially selected hard wood were lashed across it, at short intervals, and under these a crowd of men, with crooked knees, gripping hands, and anxious faces, were thrusting their sun-tanned shoulders. Most of them used some clot of worn-out garment as a pad, to prevent the pole from eating into skin and flesh; but in spite of this precaution, many of them showed swollen and bruised contusions between neck and shoulder-tip. Such abrasions—often purposely self-inflicted—were a frequent and popular pretext upon which to base a plea for temporary release from labour; and the Brahmans, knowing this, had learned to think

lightly of bleeding shoulders. A man's flesh needed now to be very severely lacerated ere it could earn the boon of rest for its owner; yet time and again, rare holidays came to most of the toilers from this cause.

Slat, pondering moodily, sat watching the men who were busying themselves about the cart and block. The task of lifting and shifting a heavy piece of stone was one which he had seen performed thousands of times, and ordinarily the labourers and their sufferings were, to him, matters of scant moment. All his life he had been accustomed to see his fellows toiling, doggedly and stupidly, at a task in the results of which they took no delight, and whereof the infinity was like a dark shadow cast across their days. Collectively they had not interested him. Individually they had been to him little more than cogs in the machine which disrupted the eternal hills to give the Idea form. As each in turn became worn out and useless, he was replaced by another. Only the work was enduring and immortal, of infinite importance compared with the ephemeral beings who themselves upon it.

But of late, since he had felt old age creeping upon him, and had fallen to the weaving of dreams which could only be realised through the co-operation of the multitude, he had begun a little to regard and estimate his fellows as sentient human souls. What they *were* became to him of a sudden a question of greater

moment than what they could do. He still held them in unfathomable contempt, apprising and perhaps even exaggerating their stupidity; but he speculated much concerning their thoughts and feelings and passions, trying to calculate whither these things, under his guidance, might lead them. They were still to him the component parts of an engine whose united force might be directed to the performance of an allotted task; but it was as though upon these inanimate things there had been laid the curse of souls—as though, beneath his hand, they had rotted unexpectedly into unclean life. This conception of the toiling mob was so new to him that even now he was repelled and a little bewildered by it.

The men around the big monolith were engrossed by their task. The huge grey stone lay inert upon its dray, incongruously swathed in a tangle of coir lashings, like some fettered monster, and the men who swarmed about it were dwarfed into insignificance by its bulk.

The war-chariots of the Brahmans ran on high wheels, graceful things with sixteen slender spokes wrought wonderfully in metal—the most perfect contrivances of their kind that the East has ever devised—but these were too delicate for the rough work of the quarries. The heavy cart upon which the block now reposed was supported upon two solid, circular pieces of hard wood, each fashioned from a single slab, and the rims of these were worn and frayed by the

tremendous pressure from above, and contact with rough ruts below. The body of the dray, as it stood at rest, was kept in a horizontal position by means of upright props.

Practice and inherited aptitude had given to the Khmers much skill in the handling of unwieldy masses of stone, but the inadequacy of their appliances caused their labours to be beset by constant risk of mischance. The immense ashlar with which they wrought were ordinarily possessed by a tremendous, stubborn inertia ; but this (as all men knew) was capable upon occasion of being transmuted by some trifling mishap into an unaccountable, blundering impulse to charge and crush and maim. It needed so little of heedlessness, of momentary inattention, of chance unhandiness on the part of any of the men, to cause a big block to break away from governance ; yet the safety of all concerned was dependent upon the maintenance over it of an uninterrupted control. Experience had taught the workers these elementary facts, and had driven into their slow perceptions an understanding of the precarious uncertainty which attended all their toil ; but, none the less, familiarity with danger had bred in them an incurable, indolent indifference. Angkor at this time was filled with maimed wretches whose injuries the rude surgery of the place had done pitifully little to repair ; but their fellows learned no prudence from these ugly object-lessons. Even now, as Slat sat watching, man

after man, engrossed by the work in hand, placed himself directly in front of the monolith which any sudden disturbance of equilibrium might precipitate upon him, or craned over the tail of the dray which a similar mishap might drive upward like a bolt from a catapult.

Chun, nude save for a loin-clout twisted about his middle, was toiling savagely with the rest.

Terribly awake, yet hungering for the sleep which was denied to him, his eyeballs smarted in the sun-glare. A fiery sap seemed to pulse through his veins, mounting to his brain in a fevered excitement, secret, repressed; but restless. He was intensely alive, quivering with an abnormal keenness of vitality that goaded and maddened him. Though his body laboured, and a portion of his mind was set firmly upon the details of the task under his hand, some hidden, inner part of him was absorbed and intoxicated by the memory of recent events, and yet was a prey to a fierce struggle between duty and desire. It was to him as though he were held by the woman, who had named herself the Spirit of Destruction, in a grip resembling that of a demoniacal possession; he was obsessed by the thought of her; haunted by her face, her lips, her hair, her eyes. Through all the tumult of labour he heard the music of her voice. Even when released, as now, from the thralldom of her presence, he was conscious of a strange, hypnotic force that radiated from her, dominating his soul, penetrating all distances, pursuing without haste,

subduing without effort. In deep, wrathful humiliation he knew himself for what he had become—her thing, her chattel.

From the nethermost depths of his being, a rebel of pride raised a bruised and bleeding head to mock at her, and at him with bitter jibe and sneer. It pointed a scornful finger at the fool who had suffered himself to be robbed alike of his godhead and his manhood. It showed him a merciless picture of himself, ground into the deepest degradation by the tyranny of uncontrollable desire. It shouldered aside all sophistical, extenuating pleas, and dug down to crude, basic causes. It spat upon him and upon his shame with passionate disgust, with venom, with spite. Brutally it analysed her magic.

Yet all the while, some other force within him—a force at once abject and noble—fought hard for mastery. It kissed the fetters that bound him, gloried in his slavery, flooded his whole being with an infinite tenderness, set him longing for some supreme opportunity for self-immolation whereby he might render homage to this wayward goddess of his worship.

But here he caught his breath, remembering that the occasion lay ready to his hand, recalling too the awful nature of it.

A third voice within him was clamorous now, and not all his hungry craving to see her again could quite still it. The accumulated traditions of a lifetime, and the superstitions inherited from

unnumbered generations of men and women who had greatly feared the Gods, conspired together to paralyse his will. Already the sacrilege done by him at her bidding oppressed him with an intolerable conviction of unforgivable sin; but that faded into nothingness beside the deed which she now demanded of him. Even to touch the golden sheath of the Sacred Sword of Indra was, for all save the initiated Brahman wardens, an act of unthinkable wickedness. To seize it, bear it away, and lay it at the feet of a woman, was comparable to an attempt to drag the High Gods from their very thrones. The mystic Spirit of the Land, as all men knew, had in this blade his chosen dwelling-place. Chun trembled to think of the vials of terror and calamity that would surely be poured out upon his people if that spirit were to suffer outrage at his hands. And the deed must be deliberately done, planned with forethought, skill, and caution. It was not to be performed while a momentary, intoxicating impulse nerved him to the commission of an almost unpremeditated act. Not only his body and a part of his mind, but the whole of his being must combine to flout the Gods. That the opportunity and the necessity for thought were thrust upon him, inspired him with an overwhelming sense of guilt.

He knew himself to be standing at a parting of the ways. If he obeyed her behest, then was he damned as never since the beginning of

things had man been damned before. If he subscribed to the dictates of the conscience that was in him, and which now awoke with such passionate entreaties to be heard, then would he never see her again. It was the old, old choice between a distant, dull security and a present, dear delight; between eternity and time; between the infinite—vague, shadowy, but terrible—and the finite—a near, warm, intimate joy. If he obeyed her. . . . The bare thought of his reward set him quivering. If he turned away from this horrifying, yet alluring temptation. . . . His heart sank as he beheld life spreading away before his young eyes in a dreary, loveless vista—without hope, without promise, without delight to redeem its cruelty, without dreams to soften its harshness, without *her* to assuage its fierce hungers.

There remained, then, for him only death.

Suddenly the big block, balanced so nicely above the clumsy wheels, drew his thought with magnetic force. It assumed on the instant a new and tremendous meaning. It was no longer only a huge ashlar of cold, grey stone: it was a thunderbolt of the Gods. His breast was bared to the missile of their vengeance. Let them strike, and in vindicating their offended majesty—end his bitter pain.

Acting on a sudden impulse, he leaned his weight against one of the uprights by means of which the dray was propped. Two men were stooping low above the skids on to which the

monolith would presently be slipped. These he thrust aside, leaping into their place. He was in a direct line now with the blunt end of the long stone, and he felt the prop yield as again he pressed it outward. Then, bracing himself to await the catastrophe, he closed his eyes and drew his muscles taut.

"Not yet! Not yet!" yelled many voices, and then "Leap clear! Leap clear!" they cried.

The world went out for Chun in the crash of splintered timber, the dull thud of a mighty impact, and shrill cries of pain and terror.

He opened his eyes to find himself standing in the heart of a great cloud of dust. With a shock, the violence of which caused every thw in his body to fall limp in reaction, he realised that he had suffered no hurt; but in his ears there was a hubbub of excited voices, punctuated by abrupt, discordant shrieks.

Presently through the veil obscuring his vision—dust of earth and fog of brain—he saw clearly.

The monolith, instead of shooting forward to the skids, had toppled sideways from its carriage, shattering the dray and precipitating itself upon the working-party. The men had been standing all along its length, two and three deep, with their shoulders under the wooden yokes by means of which the block was to have been lifted, and guided in its descent. Most of them had had time in which to leap free, and these were standing now, shaken and dazed by the

appalling narrowness of their escape from death ; but about a dozen of them had been borne to the ground, and lay there, crushed beneath the monstrous stone. The more fortunate of these had been smashed, as an egg is smashed, with an atrocious completeness ; but one or two were writhing and screaming in the dust, tethered awfully to the block by limbs which now bore no likeness to any member of the human body. They were doomed to die, for it would take near an hour to lift the stone sufficiently to effect their release ; and knowing this, their fellows stood around them, bewildered and impotent, crowding together like scared cattle. A dull, sullen murmur arose from them, making a dark background of sound against which the agonised shrieks of the tortured men were like red flames made vocal ; and old Slat, listening unmoved, heard in that growing rumour the voice of a people demanding blood for blood.

But Chun was conscious only of the silence of the defenceless Gods.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE BA YON

NIGHT had fallen once more, and of a sudden all Angkor Thom was clamorous with a wild, insistent outcry to the Gods, that they might hear.

From the temples grouped around the central forum of the city, screaming conchs broke out, as the last of the daylight died—in prolonged, passionate appeal. Drums boomed and sobbed a restless accompaniment.

In the echoing courtyards of the sanctuaries, bearded Brahmans, grown old in the service of the Gods, paced to and fro, their faces rapt, their eyes half closed in transports of ecstatic excitement. They moved rhythmically, their bodies swinging from the hips, both hands clutching the great shells which they held to their lips, whence fiery spears of sound seemed to thrust upward to clash against the very gates of Heaven.

Surely the Gods would hearken! Surely this clamour, arousing them for an instant from their luxurious self-absorption, would cause them to

cast earthward one casual glance upon the mighty works which their servants, the twice-born demigods, had wrought in their honour!

The still air vibrated, the dull earth throbbed to this quivering and agitated music. It was a pitiful, vain cry raised by the finite to the infinite, pathetically hopeful, eternally hopeless. Men wrought for the Gods, slaved for them, besieged them with supplication, toiled and strove and ground their fellows to the dust in frantic efforts to appease them, raised entreating hands in worship to them, and set up in enduring stone imperishable prayers to propitiate and invoke them: but always the Gods were dumb.

Their unyielding silence was fraught with terror. By the superstitious awe which their divinity inspired the Brahmans, generation after generation had held a mighty multitude in thralldom; but they too endured a like bondage. The High Gods whom they worshipped were stupendous beings, strong, rapacious, cruel, suspicious too, and swayed by caprice and jealousy. They were insatiable. No sacrifice could satisfy their greed; no toil done in their service could allay their ravening desire for lordship over the bodies and the souls of men; no extravagance of homage could turn aside their insensate wrath. Wanton and vindictive, they smote with pitiless stripes the men who spent themselves in their service, speaking only in the roar of storm, in the sullen fury of deluge, in the indiscriminate slaughter of pestilence.

Cowering before them, the Khmer Brahmans, who ruled a world, crept upon the earth, fearful and abject.

The very palace of their king, behind the great wall so curiously carved, was built only of timber. Dwellings wrought of stone were the peculiar perquisite of the Gods. Every ceremonial observance of the Brahmans' lives was a symbol of perpetual worship. Their godhead itself was but a shred let fall from the divinities on high. Proudly and cruelly they ruled, as viceroys of the proud and cruel; but they bent men to labour, less in their own service than in that of their inexorable task-masters. A passionate love of artistic achievement inspired them; but in their eyes beauty, at best, was but a bribe paid by them into the heavenly treasure-house. Also they dared not desist, or even slacken their efforts, lest the anger of the Shining Ones should overtake them.

Four times daily were their terrors and their desperate, vain expectancy made vocal in the wailing clamour of conch and drum—a little before the dawn, at the coming of the first heats, at the fall of dusk, and as now at the beginning of night. It was as though the agony of man, becoming suddenly articulate, raised this outcry from the dust in which he grovelled.

Then, abruptly, in the middle of a wild, beseeching note, each conch was stilled, as if at last it were convinced of the futility of its appeal; and a heavy silence fell.

Gradually a rumour of sound made itself heard, arising from the hive of human dwellings which, under a huddle of thatched and tiled roofs, spread away and away to the margin of the Great Lake—the tinkling, faltering jangle of a three-stringed lute, the throbbing of distant drums, the hum of speech, the wailings of little children, the occasional yelping of curs. But as the night advanced, all these were hushed, till the peace of slumber, after the long day of heat and toil, brooded over Angkor Thom.

This was the hour for which Chun had been waiting. With a beating heart, he crept from his sleeping-mat to the barred door, let slip its fastenings, and began to lower himself to the ground down the rickety ladder-way. The rungs, creaking under his weight, seemed to shout aloud the nature of his errand. Every faint sound magnified itself in his ears and increased his apprehensions. Intense relief came to his wire-drawn nerves with the soundless fall of his bare feet upon the beaten path he presently was treading.

He passed in the darkness along a narrow alley, flanked by two uneven rows of hovels and fences; and at last emerged into a big, open space, exchanging a slender ribbon of star-spangled sky for the wide splendour of the heavens. Before him lay the empty oblong of the forum.

On his right, the cluster of tiled roofs, which covered the palace of the king and its groups of

connected buildings, showed above the wall encircling them. Chun could see the long, upward twisted horns spreading away from their ridges, and could catch the tinkling of the little bells with which they were adorned; but the obscurity hid from his sight the riot of gilding and many colours which by day made them wonderful to behold. The long roof of the hall of state, thrusting prominently forth from the shapeless pile of dwelling-houses, was visible outlined against the sky, supported upon quadruple rows of columns, each hewn from a single balk and fantastic in the extravagance of its ornamentation.

Further to the right, an immense, shapeless mass rose into the night, squatting ponderously on the brink of a moat, and Chun knew it for the Ba Phun, the great temple which, till the Ba Yon and Angkor Wat successively took form and overshadowed it, marked in its day the culmination of one of those vast waves of adoration, of which each ripple was a shrine wrought wonderfully in stone. Others had preceded, others again had followed it, each in turn foaming itself away at the feet of the unmoved Gods.

Some such reflection, vaguely formulated, was in Chun's mind as the shadowy bulk of the Ba Phun caught his eye; for to-night he looked about him on old and familiar things, and beheld them in a new aspect. It seemed to him that he had been that day the recipient

of a special revelation. The Gods had always been silent, giving back to man no answering sign; but now he knew them to be defenceless.

He shuddered a little as the sight of those tortured innocents, and their heart-rending cries recurred to his memory. *They* had done no sacrilege, yet they had been taken—he spared. Were the Gods blind, as well as deaf and dumb and impotent? In what then did they differ from the stocks and stones of inanimate nature? The reply came readily. In this, that the latter were visible—tangible—while the Gods. . . . He gave vent to a sound that was half laugh, half scoff. The Gods! And he laughed again.

In that moment they, to him, were dead—self-slain; and with them died awe and fear, and the reverence and restraint which are born of fear.

And suddenly there flashed upon his perception a vision of what life on earth might mean if it were rid of these things, and of the abundance of delight that a man might wring from it who was untrammelled by the fetters that bound his fellows.

He had not realised it before, but now he saw that all his days he had been hedged about by fear—fear of the Gods, fear of the divinity that hallowed the Brahmans, fear of the unknown and of the hereafter. Released from these paralysing terrors, it seemed to him that he had attained the godhead which

had been denied to him when he bathed in the sacred waters. His was a divinity transcending that of the Brahmans, who prostrated themselves before the Gods. To him now all things were possible; the Sword of Indra itself was nought save a bauble; and sacrilege was shorn of all its horror.

Chun stepped out through the darkness with a bolder stride, his heart uplifted and confident, as though his spirit had cast aside a lifelong burden. It had seemed to him that he had lost his soul when, servile to the charm of a woman, he had surrendered his claim to be numbered among the demigods; and then he had been ashamed. But now, now he was glad, since through her also there had come to him this undreamed-of emancipation.

The moon, late rising, was beginning to force its way upward through great billows of cotton-soft cloud, massed low down on the eastern horizon. Already the palace-buildings and the Ba Phun were bulking through the gloom with faint, silver-edged outlines, and were casting long, hard shadows across the forum. Presently all the secrets which night had shrouded would be revealed. In Chun the fear of the Gods was stilled; but the fear of men, and of the hate and cruelty of men, remained. He hugged the wall of the forum, and though he went quickly, he moved with caution.

At last he reached the foot of the broad stairway which led upward to the outer courts of the

Ba Yon. Even in the uncertain light, he could see the upreared hoods of the twin seven-headed cobras, whose rounded bodies formed the balustrades, spreading above him, and their tapering tails writhing high aloft, half lost in the darkness.

Flattening his body against the flank of one of these monsters, Chun climbed the stairs, step by step, crept beneath the base of one of those waving tails, and ensconced himself in an angle of the parapet. Here he squatted, holding his breath, and sought to quell the strong tremor of excitement by which he was shaken. Inaction fretted his nerves; yet until he could see more clearly, he dared not penetrate further into the forbidden sanctuary.

He was seated in deep shadow cast upon the flags of the courtyard by the half-wall, against the rough stones of which his shoulders rested. His heels were drawn compactly under him. In this position he faced due west, so that the moon, as it soared into the sky behind him, threw slanting rays which passed above his head, and lighted up the masses of sacred buildings on the fringes of whose precincts he was trespassing.

As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and as the moonlight strengthened, first one and then another of these shrines rose slowly out of the darkness, great fragments of them made luminous, while others were still plunged in shade. Each was

a temple, square in form, its sides, penetrated by arched portals, rising abruptly from the flags to terminate in a dozen huge stones, nicely dovetailed together, from whose united surfaces, on each facet, a gigantic head of Brahma had been hewn. The delicately carved head-dresses with which these were crowned, combined to form the dome of each sanctuary. As Chun knew, there were fifty-two of these tower-like edifices grouped around the central shrine, which now was his objective; so that in this temple the effigy of the impassive countenance of the divinity was repeated one hundred and twelve times.

From the spot where he was seated a score or more of them was visible; and as these, one by one, emerged from the enveloping darkness, his new-found atheism was for a moment shaken. In spite of himself, he was impressed by the sublimity of these unmoved faces which, symbolising the spirit of prayer, awaited with such secure certainty, such tireless patience, the coming of . . . he knew not what: for some world-shaking catastrophe, it might be, or perhaps for the answer so long denied to man's eternal invocation.

It was only for an instant, for mockery awoke within him once more when he recalled the fact that these immense, impassive faces were man-fashioned like the rest; that they symbolised a human, not a divine idea; that they and their awful expectancy were, in truth, only one more

appeal of the finite to the unheeding infinite, of the despairingly articulate to the dumb, blind, deaf, powerless beings who, like their effigies, owed their very existence to the imagination of their worshippers.

Yet, even as this thought flashed through his mind and set a sneer upon his lips, he was obscurely conscious that with the passing of a faith which had inspired his race for centuries, much else that had sustained and ennobled humanity must also pass away. Though he still exulted in the freedom of his soul, which that day had come to him, he of a sudden was depressed by a vague sense of loss.

But Chun's thought was not long held by these groping speculations, for presently he became aware that the darkness about him was peopled by invisible, flitting forms. Once more superstitious terrors stirred within him. What if the High Gods, now that he had penetrated into their sanctuaries, should at last elect to wreak on him their wrath? Here, in the gloom of the temple, with those mysterious heads of Brahma dominating the night, the non-existence of the deities seemed less certain than it had appeared out yonder, under the open sky. Though he sought to scoff at it, fear still pursued him.

A moment later, and his ear caught a familiar sound—the chink and clink of bangles and anklets. His heart, upon which the cold hand of terror had been laid, leaped suddenly within

him. Had *she*—already, in his thought she was nameless—had she, by some occult intuition, divined the hour of his errand, and come hither from Angkor Wat to watch or aid him?

Straining his ears, he found that the peopled obscurity was sibilant with whisperings, and it seemed to him that he caught the sound of bare feet falling upon the smooth flags.

An instant later, the figure of a girl came forth suddenly from the banked shadows on his right, into a patch of moonlight; her ornaments making music as she went. Chun leaped up, almost to his feet, then crouched anew. For a second the illusion had been complete, so like in costume, in gait, in outline was this maiden to the lady of his worship; but in a flash he saw that it was not she.

The girl stood for a little space, her small head tilted over her shoulder, her eyes fixed on the darkness behind her, a smile of mockery and invitation on her parted lips. A second figure stepped swiftly after her, threw its arms around her, tilted back her head roughly with a big hand thrust beneath her chin, and buried its face on hers. Chun could hear the man's hard breathing and see his blazing eyes; and knew him for a young Brahman of about his own age, Chandra Dass by name, whom the quarry hands called "the Arrogant One," and who had often set Chun's blood boiling by his caustic speech and scornful gestures.

Chun set his teeth in the darkness, and his

hand felt for his heavy wood-knife, for there was hate in his heart, and the male animal within him was goaded by primitive instincts. A sense of the importance of his mission alone restrained him from the insanity of action. He sat still, holding himself in leash by a mighty effort that set him quivering.

"Thus in pleasant fashion do we serve the Gods," Chandra Dass was saying, as he kissed the full lips upturned toward him. "I, the fructifier, you the fructified; that the earth may bring forth an abundance of good things upon which lowly ones, such as you, may feed!¹ It is a duty well devised and much to my liking. Come! That I may serve the Gods according to their so wise ordinance; and that you, pretty one, may serve alike the Gods and me!"

He laughed evilly, and began to draw her after him into the shadows. She went, still smiling, but with feet that made believe to lag. Her attitude was one of complete surrender.

A third figure emerged from the darkness, and stayed them with a gesture.

It was Baguan Dass, the old high priest: and at the sight of him the girl squatted on the flags, bowing her head above her folded hands.

He was a man far advanced in years, with a shock of thick white hair upon his head, and a bushy beard of the same hue falling in a great cascade to his waist over his hairy breast. He wore a huddle of white cloths about his middle,

¹ Note 2.

beneath which were visible long frilled trousers, but his body was bare, and his skin was shrivelled like that of a withered pippin. His face, too, where it was not hidden by hair, was scored by deep furrows set in a maze of infinite, fine wrinkles; and his eyes, beneath shaggy white eyebrows, glared from their deep sockets with the savage fire of the fanatic.

He turned fiercely upon Chandra Dass, and spoke to him, using such vocatives as a man may address to a dog.

"What make you here?" he asked. "Do you not know that this is the night of the Cleansing? In that fool head of yours is there no understanding of propriety?"

"I did but seek to serve the Shining Ones, according to their ordinance," pleaded Chandra Dass meekly. "That the earth may be fruitful, I. . . ."

But with a snarl, the old man cut him short.

"Serve the Gods, forsooth! Your beast-passions are the only deities served by you and such as you. It is ordained that on the night of the Cleansing none save those appointed to the King's service shall enter the sanctuaries."

"I had forgotten, Father," Chandra Dass began falteringly.

"Forgotten!" the other flung back at him. "Well I know the wickedness in your heart. You thought to creep in here, secretly, the better to take your pick of the temple women, on a night when you would find no rivals.

Shame upon you! Begone, casteless son of a foul woman! To-morrow fitting punishment shall be meted out to you. Well are you named 'the Arrogant One,' dog and son of a dog. Begone!"

Chandra Dass made a low obeisance, and slunk away without a word. He passed so close to Chun that the latter could have touched him with his outstretched hand, and Chun licked his lips with satisfaction as the moonlight, falling full upon the young Brahman's face, revealed a chapfallen and scowling countenance.

Baguan Dass stood where the other had left him. He was alone, for the girl had melted into the shadows. Chun could see his long beard wagging below his restless lips, but no sound came from him.

The old priest was presently joined by others of his cult, who came in twos and threes from various parts of the temple, and massed themselves silently at his back. One or two of those of higher rank spoke a word to the high priest ere they fell into their places behind him; but to them he made no reply, acknowledging their whispered communications only by a slight inclination of his head.

From the shadows, beyond the group of hierophants, came the jingle of bangles, and the soft rustle of silk garments. Once in a while the sound was heard as of a tambourine accidentally struck or shaken. The women of the temple were also mustering.

Chun next became aware of a noise without, which stealthily approached; and peeping round the angle of the balustrade, at imminent risk of detection, he saw a long and narrow oblong of blackness moving slowly across the forum from the direction of the palace enclosure. Peering at it intently, he presently made it out to be a body of men, advancing with rhythmical tread, bearing in their midst something which looked like a closed palanquin.

Chun withdrew his head, and flattened himself, with beating heart, against the wall.

The sound of footsteps grew momentarily more and more distinct. They began to ascend the main stairway, and Chun heard a whispered word or two, apparently addressed in caution to the bearers of the palanquin.

Then the head of the procession came into view within a few feet of him, the men who composed it fanning out to right and left, so that he had much ado to avoid being trodden under their feet.

Next the palanquin reached the head of the stairs, and at its coming all the priests except Baguan Dass, squatted suddenly on the flags, and even the patriarch bent his old head nearly to the ground in humble obeisance.

The bearers set the closed palanquin down in the moonlight, and as they drew back, old Baguan Dass, approaching, squatted beside it, and seemed to hold a whispered duologue with

the occupant, who still remained hidden behind its embroidered curtains.

Chun's mind was working with lightning speed. He was determined to probe these mysteries; for since his entry into the temple, merciless revelations had been made to him. Life held for him now a pain so keen and savage that he had ceased to fear death. He was brimful of a hatred so intense that it calmed, rather than excited, his faculties. Every secret that chance might enable him to filch from the Brahmans would be, he felt, a weapon forged for their undoing and laid in his willing hands; it would be, too, in some sort, an act of vengeance wreaked by him upon the persecutors of the girl he loved.

Very cautiously, but without hesitation or faltering, he began to creep, inch by inch, along the wall, and to penetrate deeper and deeper into the mysterious depths of the temple. He had to pass almost under the feet of the men grouped around; and once a member of the processional party kicked back at him blindly, evidently mistaking him for a prowling cur. Edging his way along as silently as he could, he won at last to the flank of one of the nearer towers, and stood erect in its shadow. Here he paused for a moment to look back; and as he did so, he saw four young priests approach the palanquin, and set their shoulders beneath its yokes.

He turned about swiftly, and tiptoed off in

the direction in which he knew the central shrine to lie. At first he was bewildered by the labyrinthian passages, open spaces, and stairways of the ancient place; but he held resolutely upon his way, and presently caught the gleam of lamps and torches a hundred feet distant. Towards this he crept, leaping quickly across little patches and runnels of moonlight, and seeking to bury himself in the shadows, till at last he found himself lying flat upon his stomach, on the floor of the cloister at the very edge of the portal.

Raising his head with the utmost stealth, he peeped into the interior of the shrine. A wide, low altar, heaped with floral offerings, filled the whole space at the end of the sanctuary. Rich hangings depended from and hid the walls behind it; and before them, with gold and silver vessels laid at their feet, and illumined by lamps marvellously fashioned of the same materials, stood bronze figures of Indra, God of the Thunders; Brahma, the Spirit of Prayer, whose sublime calm looks upon us to-day from the face of the sedent Buddha; and Siva, Lord of the Dance, the most joyous effigy that ever has kindled the glad worship of mankind.

Around the walls long torches, steeped in *damar-resin*, flared and smoked; and the air was heavy with the scent of decaying flowers and the heavy fumes of incense.

Two aged priests squatted silent before the shrine, and as Chun peeped at them, one

arose, and passing from torch to torch, stirred each into brighter flame with a long silver instrument.

Already the sound of approaching feet was making itself heard, accompanied by a low rumble of incantation, which boomed through the lilting chorus of female voices raised in song, the occasional clash of cymbals, and the thrumming and jingling of tambourines.

Chun, quickly realising that his present position was untenable, drew back into the cloister, rose to his feet, and keeping close to the wall, slipped round a corner of the building. A great window, its embrasure fashioned in the thickness of the huge ashlar of which the shrine was built, was visible some feet from the ground, and through it a mist of smoky light straggled forth to lose itself in the surrounding darkness. It was barred by a row of big uprights, made of stone elaborately carved; but these were set well within the sill, which was broad enough to accommodate Chun, who swung himself up, and lay flat upon it. He now had an uninterrupted view of the interior of the sanctuary; and lying without in the darkness, ran little risk of being seen by those who stood within, in the glare of the torch-light.

The indistinct, bass murmur of the priests, the subdued song and music of the women, and underlying all the shuffling of bare feet upon the flags, grew momentarily more loud;

and soon the portals of the shrine were blocked by a troop of white-clad Brahmans. These crushed and pushed their way into the sanctuary, in unceremonious fashion, and drew off to right and left, lining the walls. Next, the big door-space was filled by a kaleidoscopic group of women. Their trim, black heads, with oiled hair accurately parted in the middle, shone in the torch-light ; their right shoulders were nude ; their arms and wrists and ankles were loaded with ornaments of gold and silver ; gorgeous, many-coloured silks draped their graceful figures. They held small tambourines in their uplifted hands. The faces of some were rapt, their eyes fixed in a seeming ecstasy. The expression of others was unmoved, indifferent ; while one or two smiled and tittered as they nudged and edged their way into their appointed places in the confined space.

In obedience to some secret, preconcerted signal, all these women sank suddenly to one knee, and then advanced up the centre of the sanctuary, in perfect unison and with incredible rapidity, with one leg always in a kneeling posture, while the other, in its turn, was flung forward, the sole of the foot resting on the ground, the knee crooked. The ease and grace with which this difficult feat was performed bore testimony to the lifelong training to which these girls had been subjected.

Arrived at the foot of the altar, the leading row leaped lightly into an erect attitude, their

tambourines poised above their heads; and those behind them followed their example. A chorus of shrill song burst from them, and the tambourines clashed and throbbed in time to the music. Simultaneously every woman began to dance with an *abandon* only equalled by the bronze effigy of Siva, above them on the altar, with his brandished arms and legs.¹

As abruptly as it had begun, the dancing ceased; the crowd of women sank again to one knee, and retreated down the sanctuary, as they had advanced. The portals reached, they melted away into the darkness without, to the accompaniment of a faint jingling of metal ornaments. Chun, where he lay, could hear their whisperings, the clinking of their bangles, the rustle of their garments, and their light footfalls, as they dispersed.

Again the doorway was blocked, but this time by the palanquin, borne high on the shoulders of four young priests, surrounded by a mob of hierophants, and followed closely by old Baguan Dass and a dozen of his leading assistants. Then the great metal doors clanged to, after all the younger priests had withdrawn.

The gilded palanquin, with its heavy embroidered curtains closely veiling its occupant, stood in the centre of the shrine before the altar of the Gods. The two priests who awaited its coming, Baguan Dass and perhaps a score of aged servants of the temple, were grouped

¹ Note 3.

around it, and from them ascended a wailing, sonorous chant.

The holy song, pitched in a heart-broken minor key, sobbed and cried and moaned; the torches flared and smoked; the incense thrown in handfuls into the braziers on the altar sent up thick, curling wreaths, which hung low in the still air, and eddied in slow, fragrant, luminous billows, over Chun's prostrate body, through the great embrasure. The atmosphere within became intolerable, and old Baguan Dass's body shone with perspiration as, the chorus of the priests abruptly ceasing, he took up his place before the altar.

Three times he prostrated himself, then stood erect, and with uplifted arms began to intone a passionate invocation in the ancient tongue.

His body quivering, his eyes blazing with religious excitement, his beard agitated, he mouthed out the rolling syllables with their majestic cadences; but Chun, for all Slat's teaching, could catch little of the meaning of his words, save the oft-repeated names of the deities, a reference to the Sacred Sword, and the reiterated entreaty that through its agency some miracle of mercy might be wrought in favour of the Son of Heaven, the Lord of Lords, the Ruler of the World, the Prince of Demigods, the immortal and all-puissant King of the Khmer Empire.

Then Chun's heart stood still within him, for suddenly he understood that the Lord of the

World—upon whom it was death for any of his subjects to set eyes—was seated within that palanquin, not twenty feet away from him. He was unable wholly to free himself from superstitious terrors; but curiosity conquered fear. He lay still and watched.

Long old Baguan Dass besought the Gods, working himself up to a pitch of frenzy that communicated itself to those who surrounded him, so that many rocked their bodies wildly from side to side; and when, from time to time, the other priests in chorus echoed his prayer, sobs and groans and cries mingled with their responses.

With one long, torrential appeal to heaven, the old high priest abruptly ceased his invocation; and turning with a commanding gesture to the palanquin, bade its occupant come forth to experience the mercy of the Gods.

The curtains of the palanquin were agitated for a moment, and Chun held his breath in expectation. Then, from under them there slipped a figure, covered from head to heel in an ample cloak of cotton dyed yellow with turmeric, the which in Angkor was the exclusive wear of royalty.

For an instant the figure stood before the altar; and then, at a sign from Baguan Dass, let fall the garment in billows about his feet.

He was naked now, save for a yellow clout twisted tightly about his loins; and his

face and parts of his body were studded closely with gnarled bosses, prominent and shiny. The nose and more than one finger and toe were lacking: for this man—the Chief of Demigods, the Lord of Lords, the Ruler of the World—was a leper.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SWORD OF INDRA

HE stood there before them all, in his nakedness and his shame, his body, with its incomplete extremities and its discoloured and nodulous surfaces, palsied a little by feebleness or emotion. His weak eyes, from the red rims of which the lashes had moulted, peered and blinked at the lights blazing upon the altar. His knees vacillated, as though they with difficulty sustained his weight. His unsightly hands groped at the air, with motions wavering and aimless. Then, giving vent to an inarticulate sound, he collapsed suddenly in a heap, which writhed itself into an extended prostration—his face against the flags, his arms flung out before him, his hands palm downward, upon the worn and slippery stones.

There he lay, the ruler of thousands, the head and front of a proud and priestly caste, bearing upon his misshapen shoulders the burden of an immense tradition, and reduced pitifully to this—a man, cursed beyond the common lot of men, craving abjectly from the Gods an impossible boon.¹

¹ Note 4.

The two old priests, who from the first had occupied the shrine, arose now from their places, prostrated themselves, and then crawled slowly to the back of the altar. A moment later they reappeared, bearing between them, with fearful reverence, a long, narrow box wrapped in silk coverings.

Halting at the left of the still prostrate king, they began, with infinite care and slowness, to unwind these swathings, till a case of ancient red lacquer was exposed. This was made in two parts, bound together by rings of rattan, and from it presently was drawn a long object enveloped in more silk cloths. One by one these in turn were removed, till from between the hands of the two Brahmans there rose aloft a huge sheathed sword, its hilt upon the flags, its point high above the heads of the grovelling men.

With a slight indrawing of the breath all present bowed themselves to the ground; then squatting on their heels, lifted expectant faces to gaze and watch.

The glare of the torches shimmered on the sheath, and threw crude lights and shadows on the chignons and nude shoulders of the two old priests, who, head to head, with their legs folded under them, and with their arms, from elbow to wrist, lying flat upon the flags, supported in their clasped hands the sword upreared between them.

The sheath, over five feet in length and some

four inches wide, was wrought of gold, lavishly embossed and carved, as though the craftsman who fashioned it had rioted in unstinted use of the precious stuff. It blazed in a great flame, with purple shadows in the deep crannies of the carving, and tiny tongues of orange and scarlet licking along its length—for this was not the pale gold of Europe, but the rich, red gold of south-eastern Asia, almost virgin in its purity, which, when treated with certain herbs of the jungle, takes to itself a splendid ruddy tint, like that seen in the heart of a fire.

With an indescribable slowness and reverence, the elder of the two servants of the Sword drew the sheath upward from the hilt, exposing to the sight of the worshippers about six inches of the blade.

Again all present bowed themselves to the ground, and from many of them little sighs of emotion escaped: for this was the Sword of Indra, the gift of the God of Thunders himself to the first of the Khmer kings, and in it was known to abide the mystic Spirit of the Land. Even Chun, the sceptic, gazing at it from his hiding-place, was impressed against his will. For this blade, he knew, many men had died, throwing away life as a thing of nothing worth, that thereby they might save it from capture. Even to him it was no mere weapon upon which his eyes were bent. It was the incarnation of an Idea—an idea for which men had spent and slain themselves.

Then, of a sudden, he recalled the reason of his presence in that forbidden place, and sought to still an involuntary, inward shuddering. The night had brought to him so many revelations, each one of which had seemed to set the seal of certainty upon his new-found disbelief, that even the innate superstition within him stirred now with slack vitality. Soon, with an air of conscious truculence and yet subconscious fear, he raised reluctant eyes to gaze irreverently upon this tremendous relic of his race.

The short length of metal which the priests so grudgingly exposed to sight was black and encrusted with age, roughly triangular in shape, and the torch-light revealed a network of fine gold-watering above its massive carvings. Near the hilt a sedent figure was visible, embowered in delicate scrollwork. The scabbard hid the rest of the blade.

All this while the king had maintained his prostrate attitude, his body shaken now and again by a ripple of tremor, while sighs and moans and inarticulate sounds occasionally broke from his lips. Now, at a sign from Baguan Dass, who half lay, half knelt beside him, he crept across the intervening space of floor, touched the Sacred Sword with his leprous hands, and for an instant rested the crown of his head against it near the feet of the carved god.

Led by Baguan Dass, the assembled priests set up, on the instant, a wailing chorus. It was at once a lamentation and an appeal; and little

by little it sobbed itself into silence, while the incense thrown upon the altar filled the confined space with thick wreaths of fragrant smoke, and the heavy stones of the walls and roofs seemed to imprison and multiply the sound.

Then the king shuffled back across the floor, and again fell prone and motionless along the flags.

The servants of the Sword, with many observances, restored the sacred weapon to its niche behind the altar.

Again Baguan Dass uplifted his voice in prayer, and his assistants chimed in at intervals in resonant chorus. Then the king rose tottering to his feet; the yellow garment was draped about his shoulders, and he clambered painfully and awkwardly back into the palanquin.

The great doors were flung wide. The priests lifted up their burden. The procession re-formed, and trooped out of the sanctuary into the still air of the night. The two old servants of the Sword, blinking sleepy eyes, fell to extinguishing the torches and the lights on the altar. Chun slid from off the sill of the embrasure, and squatted in the cloister with his back against the wall.

For perhaps an hour he sat there, fighting off the sleep which now began to oppress his eyelids, and turning over in his mind the meaning of the secrets which had been that night revealed to him. But there was one scrap of knowledge, from a full comprehension of which

his whole being drew back in an agony of repulsion and distress; yet it was this, more than all else, that now nerved him to the act upon which his will was set.

Creeping round the angle of the cloister, he was able presently to peer, as he had peered before, over the threshold-stone, into the interior of the shrine; for the doors, though drawn together, were still ajar. Two lights flickered from the low altar, but beyond their range the shadows were heavily banked. From a corner of the sanctuary came the sound of regular breathing. After their long vigil, the servants of the Sword slept beside their sacred charge.

Chun rose to his feet, pushed the big doors slightly apart, slipped swiftly through the aperture, and dropped once more to his knees. Crawling on all fours, he made his way, inch by inch, across the floor of the sanctuary, while the three defenceless gods upon the altar, their bronze figures shimmering in the flicker of the lights, seemed to watch him through impassive eyes. Once one of the sleepers—Chun could make out their forms dimly, as they lay against the wall, wrapped to the nose in the long cloths which they had drawn about them—moved in his slumber, flinging out and withdrawing an arm, and muttering brokenly. Then Chun clamped himself to the flags, and hushed his breathing till his heart seemed like to burst.

Again he crept onward. He wormed his way to the left-hand corner of the altar, and into the darkness beyond. He had now to feel with furtive, outstretched fingers every inch of his path, lest he should come into collision with some unseen object whose fall might arouse the sleepers. He moved more slowly than a shadow at midday ; but at last his hand touched silk, and passing it cautiously to the right, he realised with a thrill that the Sword of Indra lay at last within his grasp.

Its great weight, when he began to lift it from its place, came upon him with a shock of surprise ; but his were the muscles of the hewer of stone, and without difficulty he leaned it over his shoulder, and with redoubled caution began his backward course.

Once more, feeling his way with his left hand, he crept from behind the shrine, helped now by the faint light cast ahead of him by the altar-lamps. The servants of the Sword still slept. Again he traversed the flags, and at last reached the doorway, rose erect, slipped into the cloister without, and drew the portals to behind him. As, gazing through the acute angles of the arches, he saw once more the stars in heaven and the soft light of moon, he could hardly believe, in spite of the load across his shoulder, that the task his love had set him had indeed been accomplished. It had seemed an impossibility : it had proved so easy. He had meditated upon it with such terror, such

writhings and agonies of the soul; and behold it was, in the event, as prosaic as any common robbery. He remembered that, throughout his adventure, his fears had been directed solely towards *men*, as are those of any thief of human property. The servants of the Sword had slept: but what of the slumbering Gods? There was in his heart a veritable ferocity of contempt and derision.

The Ba Yon also slept. Its cloisters, lighted faintly by the moon, were silent solitudes. Chun passed through them cautiously but with confidence, and reached at last the great outer stairway up which he had crawled a few hours before. Descending this, he was absorbed into the shadows of the night.

A little before the dawning of the day, he hid a long object, wrapped throughout its length in the sheath of the cocoanut, and securely bound at intervals with pieces of rattan, in the thatch of his hut. Then, making fast the door behind him, he crept to his sleeping-mat, and fell into the slumber which waits upon utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE HANDS OF A WOMAN

“BEHOLD! I have done your behest! I have it here—have brought it with me—to lay at your feet!”

Chun spoke breathlessly, his face uplifted to the little, shadowy figure which stood before and above him in the darkness. It was the moment of triumph that all day he had been promising himself, of which the thought had been like a warm and glowing joy, close hidden in his heart.

Once again he had kept a long and solitary vigil; but though the suspense of expectancy had been hard to endure, he had not experienced the paroxysms of despair which formerly had visited him. He had *known* that she would come to him. And now she was here—very near him—so that, as she stood looking down at him, he fancied that he could catch the faint fragrance of her breath: no mocking shadow, this, but the creature of delicious flesh and blood who was his love.

The words that should tell her of his deed

accomplished, and done through loyalty to her whim, burst from him in a tumultuous whisper. His voice was shaking with excitement. Eagerly he peered upward through the gloom, seeking to read the smile of glad surprise which should reward him for all the perils he had braved.

The girl stood, not a yard away from him, with one small foot caressing with its sole the ankle-joint of its fellow. Her silk garment, draped over her right shoulder and about her waist, fell downward in graceful lines and curves. Both hands were raised, holding in their fingers a single blossom of *frangipani*, which men call "temple flowers," since they have a special use as floral offerings to the Gods; and the thick petals were a spot of whiteness against the even pallor of her face.

She made no sign nor movement while Chun was speaking, and even when his eager words had died away into the stillness, she remained immobile and silent. Then, after a long pause, in a voice as cold and passionless as crystal, she ejaculated one syllable—

"Well?"

His disappointment, in the violence of reaction, had for Chun the force of a blow. He saw in an instant of time, as men see a landscape, with its outline and its colour revealed by the sudden vividness of a lightning-flash, all that had befallen him, all that he had endured, since last this girl had stood beside him. He

recalled the mental struggle and anguish which had preceded his appeal to the Gods ; again he braced himself for death ; once more he looked in horror upon the shrieking wretches pinned beneath the monolith ; he beheld himself standing vainglorious and contemptuous above the grave, which held the dead faith that had inspired and uplifted his fathers ; saw himself wresting their secrets from the Brahmans in the temple of the Ba Yon, filled to overflowing by a fierce hate, which had its root in his love for this girl ; gazed with loathing and repulsion upon the leprous king ; held the Sword of Indra—a trophy won to win her—between his hands : and all for . . . What ?

In an instant, by a single spoken word, she had brought to the dust all his soaring hopes, all his pride in that which he had attempted, and suffered, and achieved in the vain expectation that she, too, would share a little in his pride and triumph.

“Well?” she repeated irritably, as he still was silent. “Why do you not speak? Why do you sit there, like a dumb thing, whimpering on the ground.”

“I did not whimper,” he replied in a surly growl.

“Well, snuffling,” she said. “Why don’t you speak?”

“I have spoken. I tell you that I have brought it here—the Sword of Indra. No matter how I wrested it from its wardens ; no

matter what risks I have run, that your will might be accomplished; no matter what dangers I have faced, in peril from the hate of man and from the dire hatred of the Gods. Let it suffice that it is here—here beneath my——”

With an impatient gesture she cut him short.

“Peace! Peace! Peace!” she cried imploringly. “My head spins with your so many words. I ask only silence. Peace!”

Bewildered as a dog in the hands of a capricious master, Chun stemmed the current of his complaining speech, and watched the girl as, with a little shudder of fatigue, she cast herself down in a heap on the flags by his side. Her knees were drawn up, and her hands clasped about them. Her face was buried between them, so that only her little ears and the white nape of her neck were visible below the dark masses of her hair. She remained so still that she seemed hardly to respire; and Chun, afraid to stir, sat beside her in a hypnotic immobility.

After a long, long time, she raised her eyes and looked at him. The small, beautiful face was almost haggard. There was upon it no expression of curiosity nor interest; only a great weariness.

“Now tell me,” she said.

Shyly at first—almost shamefacedly—Chun began to recount the story of his emotional and bodily experiences; but as her attention became more and more visibly arrested, his own self-

confidence, in a measure, returned. Soon he was speaking and describing with force and vivacity, and more than once she interrupted him to ask some eager question, and once at least she smiled, as one well pleased. She, who had seemed so dead, was keenly alive now—living with him, in imagination, through every moment of the history he related. Her eyes were fixed upon his face, her lips were parted, and behind them the little snake's fangs showed among her white teeth. Her whole figure seemed to be vitalised; the lassitude and inertia of a few moments before transformed into excitement and vivid energy: and Chun, watching her through hungry and adoring eyes, marked the change, and felt that this, his reward, was doubled in value because it had been wrested from her, not freely given.

When he came to the moment in his narrative when the king, emerging from the palanquin, had stood naked before the altar—a leper far gone in the disease—she gave vent to a little cry, and clutched Chun's arm with a grip that hurt him.

"Ah! Ha! my friend!" she exclaimed. "That, then, is the mystery. You have done well. You have stolen from the Brahmans something more precious than the Sword of Indra. But, go on. Tell me more, still more."

And Chun continued his narrative. One thing only he omitted. He made no mention of the scene which he had witnessed between

Chandra Dass and the girl of the temple—the woman whom, for a moment, he had mistaken for the girl at his side. Yet this, and the secret meaning which it held for him, were the most portentous discoveries in his eyes that that night of adventure had brought in its train. His love, and a very chivalrous tenderness which that love inspired, caused him to shrink from revealing to her that he, by chance, had resolved the mystery with which, as with a garment, she had sought to shroud herself.

He recalled the words which she had used to him at their first meeting—words which now to him were a cry more pathetic than surely ever yet had woman raised to man :

"For a little longer let me be, to you at least, a Daughter of the Gods."

Chun could have wept for very pity of her, as they recurred to his memory : but well he knew that this girl must be for him, not "for a little longer," but for always, that which from the first she had been—his queen, his dear divinity. Also, the frenzy of rage and hate which an understanding of her lot had kindled in him, flared up anew ; and while his very soul boiled with it, seething above the fire of an emotion that was stronger than his pain, he seemed to grasp the reason of his existence, the nature of his mission upon earth. He was here to serve and to avenge her, the Spirit of Destruction ; for her to labour and to fight ; for her to destroy and overcome. This great passion of

hatred that so shook him, was implanted in his heart of set purpose. It must be slaked, or he would die; and only by slaking it could his love be served and saved.

The girl sat scanning him closely through the shadows, which were beginning to yield to the strengthening moonlight.

"And did you see no women in the Ba Yon?" she asked presently.

"No," said Chun. He lied bravely, but his eyes fell.

She emitted a short, mirthless laugh.

"No man can lie to a woman," she said quietly. And then, after a pause, "So now you know."

Chun looked at her in hangdog fashion, as though he had been detected in the commission of some disgraceful crime. Then, in silence and grief, he bowed his head with a nod of assent. He kept his eyes fixed upon the flags before him, upon one of which with the forefinger of his right hand he was nervously tracing a meaningless figure.

The silence that followed was like a scourge laid across his naked soul.

"So even this dream is taken from me," she said at last, "that a man should think of me with reverence!"

There was a sob mingled with the music of her voice.

At the word, Chun, with tears gathering to his eyes, flung himself prostrate at her feet,

covering them with caresses. His own words came brokenly, torn by the passion of his desire to convince and comfort her.

"Reverence!" he cried. "Could you but look into my heart! Could you but read my thought! Ah, but then you—even you—would be satisfied. Reverence! It is too slight a word. There is worship, adoration, pity too——"

"I want none of your *pity*!" she interjected sharply.

"I worship you, I adore you, I long only to serve you," he continued unchecked. "For me there are no longer gods in heaven; but on earth, you are my goddess, my queen, my love——"

She withdrew her feet sharply from his touch, and moved a little away from him.

"I knew it!" she said. And her tone was scornful. "I had been waiting for it. Ah, ye Gods! But a man is ever a man! His thought makes believe to cradle with his service the woman whom he desires; but always it is *himself*, his own vile passions, to which he first would minister. You think, because I am what I am, that I am within *your* reach!" She spat savagely into the darkness. "But it is not so. I am no rejected meat, let fall from the Brahmans' table, for *Sudras* to devour. Though I be allotted to the service of these dogs in the name of gods who are not, I have not yet declined to the last degradation of our slavery.

No waif of the city am I, of whom even castleless ones may have their will."

Chun, no longer prostrate, was beset by the old bewilderment.

"You know no justice!" he cried, goaded into anger. "I ask nothing——"

"That is well," she flashed back at him, "Since you would ask in vain."

"I ask nothing from you," he repeated doggedly, as though she had not spoken. "I desire nothing. Least of all do I want aught that you cannot give freely and with gladness. But this, truly, I do seek—that I may a little serve, and aid, and comfort you; that, if the Fates be willing, to me may fall the task of avenging you upon those who have abused you; that the great hate which is within me may be poured out in devastation upon those at whose hands you have suffered——"

"How do you know that I *have* suffered?" she asked innocently, but with evil meaning. She heard him draw in his breath with the quick, abrupt inhalation of a man stabbed by a sudden twinge of pain; and she continued, smiling a little to herself, like one revolving pleasant memories.

"It is a drab thing, the lot of a woman who has no lovers. From that Fate has saved me. Why, then, should I quarrel with Fate?"

"They must be lovers of her own choosing," said Chun grimly. "A woman may delight in *giving*, but——"

"But she loves also mastery," she insinuated softly. "Think of the princesses in the ancient tales; were they not always captured, and were they, think you, quite unhappy?"

Chun writhed where he sat listening.

"Ye gods of earth and air!" he blurted out. "Take the Sword of Indra, since it is your whim to make of it a plaything, and let me be gone. If you be happy in your degradation, there is nought for me to avenge. But, listen, woman of the temple! The ignoble pleasures by which you set such store are viler far than any passion that, harbouring in the heart of a man, craves the satisfaction upon which you so cry shame. This is the end! Take the Sword and let me go!"

She moved nearer to him, and her little fingers clasped his arm with a grip at once soft and firm. Her touch stilled instantly the storm of anger in him. She looked at him intently out of those great, mysterious eyes.

"And would you, at a word, desert me?" she whispered. "Would you leave me, and my little body, and my tortured soul, at the mercy of men who are strong, and cruel, and ravenous? And you prate of your *love*!"

She gave vent to a laugh bitterly derisive.

"Is it your will that I should be eaten by worms; when you, perhaps (who knows?), by a little labour and self-sacrifice might save me?"

Chun listened, with indignation against himself augmenting within him. Almost was he persuaded that he had been guilty of some monstrous treason against her.

"Pardon," he whispered hoarsely. "I crave your pardon. But you know—always you know—that I am yours, yours to you, to do with what you will. Indeed I ask no guerdon. I cherish no hope, save that a little I may serve you; my being is without reason, unless through me some added happiness, or some surcease of pain may visit you. Believe me, my love for you is a holy thing—no vile passion of the blood: and always, *always*, it goes hand in hand with reverence."

Again her arms were clasped about her updrawn knees, and her face sank down between them. She rocked her body to and fro. Her shoulders heaved a little.

"Mahadeo!" she exclaimed in a muffled voice. "How I have suffered! You, who are but a man, with the coarse fibres of your kind, *you* do not know what suffering is—*you* do not dream how acute is the pain, how bitter the humiliation, that women must endure. But *I* know, for those agonies have been to me my daily fare."

Chun longed to throw his great arms around her, to draw this little sobbing child to him, that, resting against his breast, she might feel his big, unselfish love enveloping her, and borrow therefrom a moment's consolation.

But, in his uncertainty of her shifting moods, he did not dare even to touch her.

"Yet, I too know a little," he said, hushing his voice to a soothing tenderness. "I have thought—I have imagined. Ever since an understanding of the truth came to me out of the shadows, yonder in the Ba Yon, it seems to me that this alone has obsessed my mind. It has been filled with harrowing pictures—your beauty, so degraded and abused; your pride, dragged in the mire; you, *you*, my queen, my divinity, thrust down from the throne in the heavens, which should be yours, to be made a victim of the Lie by the lying dogs who shore and serve it!"

In spite of himself, his voice rose with his rising passion. He did not realise how slavishly he was echoing thoughts which had their origin with her.

She raised her head and turned her face toward him. Out of its pale purity of tint and line, her eyes scrutinised him with amusement and curiosity.

"You have learned your lesson well," she said slightly. "But there are still other lessons for you to learn. You have thought, you have imagined. . . . But you have not *known*. Now listen: it is well that a full understanding should be yours."

For nearly an hour she spoke, almost uninterruptedly, while Chun writhed and shuddered at her side. She spoke with a

studied and brutal frankness of her experiences, dwelling with a morbid insistency, that seemingly to her was almost pleasurable, upon every detail of her ill-treatment and humiliation. She forced Chun to share in every insult to her body, every affront to her soul, to which life had subjected her. She spared him nothing that could torture or wound a lover, or that could outrage and inflame the fury of a man. It was as though she, who had suffered greatly, took a savage delight in making him a participator in every pang that she had endured. And all the while, she watched him narrowly, as if the soul that she was torturing were some delicate instrument upon which she played with infinite skill, and that its instant response afforded her a keen satisfaction.

Chun had not dreamed till that moment what passions of sympathy and of ungovernable rage, what an insanity of hatred and of jealousy, had their abode within him. She left little upon which his imagination might feed: yet was his imagination busy, exaggerating and elaborating the intolerable. He was pale and shaking, and sweating at every pore, when at last she ceased her monologue.

The crown was set upon his suffering by the conviction—firm within him, though firmly and loyally he sought to uproot it—that he, vicariously, felt a shrewder pain than any with which she, in living through the happen-

ings of which she told, had ever become acquainted.

"And now," she concluded. "Now that you know all, would you leave me, abandoning me to this—to this?"

He bent his head to the ground before her, and laid it against her feet.

"I love you," he murmured, with a shuddering sob. "I love you. Every pain that has been yours is my most bitter pain. I long to comfort you for all you have endured; to protect, and aid, and serve you. But, most of all"—and here he sat erect and threw back his head with a passionate gesture—"Most of all, I seek to avenge you!"

"That is well," she said calmly. "Now show me the Sword."

A little before the dawn, he left her. She had been gentle, even tender to him; and he, warned by his slowly growing knowledge of her, and unmindful of self, had sought to be to her what she would have him be.

Also, together they had explored the paths through which an ambushed vengeance might be led to precipitate itself upon the demigods; and he, before he passed to his sleeping-mat, burned in a wayside bonfire the long lacquer-box and the silk wrappings which had protected the sacred weapon. He went about this task with quiet confidence, stepping lightly, holding his head erect; for great pride and joy that

night were his. Yet was he in chains; and upon his shoulders had been laid heavier burdens than he ever before had striven to sustain.

. And the Sword of Indra lay at rest at the bottom of the Brahmans' bathing-pool, with the still waters above it guarding it from the sight of man.

CHAPTER X

THE FEAST OF THE CITY

THE day of full moon, which synchronised most nearly with the summer solstice, had come, and throughout the Khmer Empire all the world made holiday.

It was the day, tradition related, which had seen the foundation of Angkor Thom, the first and greatest of cities; the day upon which Indra, Lord of the Thunders, incarnated in the likeness of a youthful warrior, had appeared suddenly before the Brahman king, and had placed in his hands the Sacred Sword.

Every Khmer peasant could repeat by heart the mystic dialogue which had then ensued between the aged monarch—worn and white-bearded, after a lifetime of battle, seated gravely among his councillors—and the god, resplendent with supernatural light, and in all the pride and glory of immortal youth.

“Guard well this Sword,” Indra had concluded, “for within its blade, not made with hands, shall the Spirit of the Land abide. While it is in thy grasp, thy house shall

endure; thy sons shall rule; thy kingdom shall be a mighty kingdom. Plenty shall lavish its gifts on thee and on thy people. Here, in thy city, peace shall tarry, and in distant lands thine arm shall prevail, and the nations shall cower before thee. But suffer the Sword to be wrested from thee, and all calamity shall be thine. Famine and pestilence and disastrous war shall stalk abroad to devastate the land. Thy people shall rise against thee. The trees of thy fruit-groves shall be barren, and the crops rot in the fields. Thine enemies from without shall harry thee, and in thine own house shall strife and dissension be found. Health and wealth and power shall alike desert thee, and in that hour shall all thy works be brought to nought. Wherefore, guard well this Sword!"

In awe and reverence and fear the king and his councillors had bowed themselves to the ground. When they raised their heads, the god had vanished; but the sunlight flamed along the scabbard of red gold in which the gift of the Divinity was sheathed.

For days past, troops of men, women, and children, drawn from the neighbouring districts, had been gathering in the vicinity of the capital. Clad in spotless white garments, as befitted folk on pilgrimage, they came mostly on foot; but small carts, pulled by little, vicious bulls, were numerous; and now and again the throng parted, the people squatting reverently in the

dust, to admit of the passage of one of the demigods, seated, rocking, high above them, in the howdah of a gaily caparisoned elephant, or lolling in an ancient war-chariot, drawn by a horse upon whose rough back a slovenly postilion sat astride.

Every house and hut in and about Angkor was crowded to overflowing. Little family groups camped in the outer cloisters of the temples; and in every open space, and along the shores of Tonlé-Sap, lean-to sheds had been improvised to serve as temporary dwellings.

The good people of Angkor spoiled the strangers with a more than Mosaic completeness. Extravagant prices were asked and given for accommodation, which on any other occasion would have compelled a *pariah* to protest. When the small stocks of rice which the pilgrims had brought with them were exhausted, the visitors found that fresh supplies could only be obtained at famine-rates. The men of the town saw in the necessity and the simplicity of the men from the country a golden opportunity, and they turned it to gold; practising upon them every imposture, every extortion, every cynical deception, that the subtle ingenuity of the East could devise, and the wit of a money-loving population could contrive. In the forum and the market-places men, with laughter and the slapping of thighs, related to appreciative groups strange tales of their successful trickeries.

There was little enough to suggest any

religious or sacramental objective. Men, women, and children, it is true, crowded into, and shouldered and pushed their way out of, the wide portals of the temples, and within laid floral offerings at the feet of the Gods and prostrated themselves before them ; but the city and its precincts were given over to feasting and revelry. Under rough booths, open to the view on all four sides, strolling players enacted ancient dramas and fairy tales, interspersing the songs and slow-moving, posturing dances, with improvised dialogue, coarse and topical. At night-time, behind cotton transparencies, the story of the Ramayana was told and retold, with the aid of rude puppets, held on long sticks, whose shadows moved grotesquely across the white and shimmering oblongs. By day and by night, conjurors, jugglers, and snake-charmers moved through the crowd, or squatted in the heart of a circle of spectators, making display of their skill. Contortionists—the elasticity of whose bodies was capable of astonishing a people, every one of whom in childhood can pick up a coin with his lips from a spot on the floor *behind* him—wove themselves into knots and horror-inspiring convolutions to the exciting music of flutes and drums. Prostitutes, bedizened and bedecked, with hair oiled to a mirror-like lustre, sat on verandahs, drawing from lutes attenuated melodies, and raising above the murmur of the crowd, thin jets of song, while their hard eyes, unnaturally large

against great smudges of bistre, invited with leer and ogle the attention of the passers-by. Panders moved hither and thither through the throng, accosting indiscriminately bearded fathers of families, dull countrymen, grey-headed elders, and callow boys, with infamous smirks and nudges. Hawkers, crying their wares in shrill, inarticulate falsetto, offered toys and sweetmeats and baubles to the pilgrims. Around the eating-shops, where rice and steaming-hot curries were for sale, a clamorous mob struggled to secure a meal. The halt, the blind, and the maimed—many of them the victims of accidents in the quarries, or at the works—sat by the roadside, filling the air with lamentations, and exhibiting in merciless fashion abominable deformities. *Fakirs*, with long hair grown solid with dirt and with neglect, displayed self-inflicted mutilations, or held atrophied arms aloft, gnarled and rigid as the dead boughs of trees. The eyes of these holy men were closed; or opened to their fullest extent, glared with the wild light of insanity. From the gnashing jaws of one and all of them, there issued streams of chant or invocation. Attendants, expectant and alert, gathered up the tin coins cast to them, and haggled over the prices they demanded for relics of these saints. Occasionally, the people were pushed roughly aside by obsequious and officious *Sudras*, to make way for one of the demigods who, unmindful of the salutations of the throng—whose members at his approach sank to the

ground in sitting postures, with folded hands uplifted to their foreheads—stalked through the multitude, as through an empty street.

Everywhere, in spite of the white garments worn by most of the pilgrims, there was colour—colour, intensely vivid and of infinite variety, that shifted and changed and combined and dispersed with a constant, capricious mutability. From above, the sun, set high in the heart of a cloudless sky, poured upon the scene floods of its crude and glaring light. Behind, the grey bulk of the temples, refracting the heat, rose mountainous and sombre.

A great tumult, made up of many noises, set the heavy air quivering—a dull rumour of voices, like the humming of a myriad swarming bees; the yells of hawkers, the lamentation of beggars, the frenzied invocations of religious mendicants, the songs of players, the throb and pulse of drums, the screaming of temple-conchs, the faint, thin music of stringed instruments.

The heat was intense; the atmosphere stifling. The acrid scent of a massed and perspiring multitude was blent with the pungent, nerve-exciting odours of a bazaar of south-eastern Asia.

Ordinarily, the spirit of the people was as gay and as light-hearted as the scene was brilliant and tawdry; but this year, on the Feast of the City, there was discernible throughout Angkor a strange feeling of unrest. Its causation was

obscure; yet the town was a-buzz with vague rumours—was like a whispering gallery in which sounded hushed voices, foretelling calamity, that came no man knew whence. A brooding, indefinable fear hung like some intangible mist over the people. It pervaded the very atmosphere; and men, inhaling and exhaling it, blew upon the sullen embers of a universal, unreasoning anxiety.

The *quidnuncs* were busy plying all men with eager questions, distorting replies, magnifying report. In the eating-booths and in the market-places, in the temporary camps of the pilgrims, and in the houses and huts of the city-dwellers, folk asked one another, *What is it?* and drew apart with grave faces and unformulated presentiments of evil. The women of the town whispered strange tidings in the ears of their paramours; and the peasants, bewildered by a multitude of conflicting rumours, discussed impossible happenings with the wearisome reiteration of stupidity.

Some, speaking under their breath, told how the army sent forth from Angkor to chastise the presumptuous Thai,¹ had met with crushing defeat: but this was scouted by the multitude. Never since the beginning of things had the Khmer Empire tasted of aught save victory. That that record could ever be reversed was an idea to which the public mind was not easily attuned.

¹ Note 5.

Others contended that a great king—the grandson of one Kublai Kaan—had arisen in the far north, and that his envoy who, with his pig-tailed retinue, had recently visited and quitted Angkor, had come to demand submission from the Chief of the Demigods. This story, however, was laughed to scorn by the citizens of Angkor Thom. The envoy had come, it was true; but his mission was to offer, not to demand, tribute. This view was popular, since it accorded more nearly with all past experience, and was grateful to the national pride.¹

But, as is usual when rumour runs riot among an Oriental populace, these vague and unsupported prognostications of calamity were not confined to purely mundane events. In Asia, the line which divides the supernatural from the natural is not held to be drawn with the rigidity ascribed to it by Europeans. To an Eastern people the impossible is always possible, the incredible is ever worthy of credence. The voices that echo through the vast, mysterious corridors of the Beyond are audible; the unearthly beings who have there their habitation, are, on occasion, visible to the eyes of man. Gods and demons alike are for ever busy about human affairs. They watch over, protecting or disturbing, the slumbers of infancy. They attend mankind upon their way through life, blessing or cursing their labours, bringing the increase, sending the dearth. They smile

¹ *Vide* note 6.

through sunshine, mix the mercy of their goodwill with the fructifying rains, proclaim their wrath in storm and earthquake and pestilence. They soothe or haunt the dying, and mark with jealous eyes the observances performed by mourners around the burial-places or the burning *ghat*. When unrest is in the air, men instinctively cast furtive glances upward and around; for at such seasons the Spirits of Good and of Ill are felt to be near at hand.

So now in Angkor strange whispers circulated. The figure of Indra, God of the Thunders, become incarnate in the likeness of a comely youth, and burning like a flame, had been seen by many, during a recent night of darkness and storm, standing on the summit of the Ba Yon. Slat, the old wise man, who had come to Angkor Thom that night from his hut near the great Wat, to harbour with some friends who had need of his counsel, had himself witnessed the prodigy, and had called others forth to see.

The portent was variously interpreted. Some maintained that the god had descended upon his favourite city to renew with it his covenant; others that the vision was an evil omen, heralding destruction. A rumour—sprung whence no man knew—spread like wildfire, that Indra had come in wrath to take back the Sword that, in the beginning, he had given as a talisman to the demigods who ruled the land. This was denied, with rage and indignation, by the sanguine and the patriotic; but though men might seek to

stamp out the smouldering flame of doubt and of suspicion, ever it burst forth anew, to sear and blacken the thought of the populace.

Fear and unrest were stimulated by the manner in which the Brahmans of the Ba Yon were known to have comported themselves upon that night of visitation. They had not approached the god with greeting and praise and offering, as aforetime their fathers had hailed such incarnations of the Divine. Instead, there had been a mighty running to and fro within the cloisters and corridors of the temple—a search—a chase!

“They hounded the Shining One,” a waggish sceptic of the bazaar had declared, “as though he had been a swift-running fowl whom the cooking-pot awaited. Running in blind haste and falling over one another, they hunted him! They be a rapacious breed, these demigods of ours, and for a very long time they have preyed upon *us*; but surely 'tis a new practice, even for them, to seek to make a meal off the very Gods of heaven.”

And the incarnation of Indra had vanished. That much was certain; for after he had been seen to blaze forth for an instant from the summit of the Ba Yon, no living soul again had set eyes upon him. All that night the Ba Yon had hummed like a disturbed hive; and the storm had risen ere the dawn to a wild pitch of atmospheric fury, and had only died down with the breaking of the day. Thus was the wrath of

the outraged god made manifest to all the people.

Had he carried off the Sword? The dread of this made the hearts of all stand still, and men recalled and repeated to one another the prophecy of Indra with which tradition had familiarised even the youngest. They could not, they would not, believe; but the fear and doubt, once kindled, were not easily quenched.

And blent with this was yet another rumour. The god whom the Brahmans had insulted had smitten the Chief of the Brahmans. He had cursed the king, whom his people had not been permitted to see for more than a decade, transforming him into a toad—a snake, yellow, inert, and blind—a dragon, without teeth or claws: the report took many forms. The king, it was said, had put up a prayer that his life might be taken rather than that he should be deprived of his natural shape; but his entreaty had been in vain. He lay hidden yonder in the palace, reduced to the likeness of a beast—he, the Chief of the Demigods, the Ruler of the World!

The sheer horror of the idea fascinated the imagination of the populace.

And to-day a suppressed but strong excitement animated the people. At noon the great procession would form at the portals of the Ba Yon, and the Sacred Sword, followed by the king and all his court, would be borne through the heart of the multitude to the steps of the

Ba Phun, there to be exhibited to the people, that the land might be blessed.

Presently it was felt all these vaguely formulated fears would be set at rest or—confirmed. The latter was unthinkable — and yet — Men awaited the event with curiosity, with eagerness, but with an involuntary, inner dread.

Inspired by the Spirit of Destruction ; guided and aided by the cunning and wisdom of Slat ; braving, with a reckless courage that was his own, imminent risk of capture, of torture, of death, Chun had made ready the faggots for the conflagration that perhaps would set all Angkor in a blaze.

CHAPTER XI

THE PROCESSION OF THE SWORD

THE forum, packed with people, was a sea of shifting, kaleidoscopic colour, with a surface of black heads and brown upturned faces. The outer courts and cloisters of the Ba Yon were thronged by a struggling, perspiring multitude. The crowd, filling every available spot of standing-room, overflowed in broken waves on to the crests of walls, on to the temple-steps, into the branches of trees, and clung in clusters to the steep sides of tile and thatched roofs.

At the foot of the great stairway leading upward into the Ba Yon, elephants, their big bodies covered with rich but tawdry caparisons, and with tall howdahs on their backs, were massed. They stood there, with the people pressing fearlessly about them, almost touching their flanks, with their mahouts, goad in hand, standing at their shoulders, and with three or four disreputable-looking ruffians—such as in Asia are always to be found in the train of an elephant-driver—astride upon them. Their little, wise eyes looked forth from the immense

bulk of their wrinkled, slate-coloured bodies with an incredibly evil cunning; they rocked slowly, leaning their weight, first on one huge foot, then on its fellow; their heads and ears and trunks and tails were in constant motion. One of their number, a gigantic albino, his skin a patchy, unsightly pink, clumsily scaled the steps of the temple, and rolled into the gloom of the courtyard at its head. He was a sacred animal, and he was supposed (except by the anxious folk who had the hereditary charge of him) to be immortal. Four generations of his mahouts had come and gone, while he survived them, and now the men of a fifth tended him by day and by night. Of late they had detected in him signs of failing strength, and their apprehensions were becoming acute. If death overtook him, they knew that the blame would be imputed to them, and that those among them who had him in their immediate care would suffer terrible things ere they were permitted to share with him the peace of the grave. To-day, as painfully he climbed the stairs of the temple, they glanced fearfully at one another and marked his every movement with a keen anxiety. They knew by a hundred subtle signs how great was the strain that was being imposed upon that labouring, time-worn heart.

With difficulty the big brute was forced to flounder down into a comfortless kneeling posture, while a knot of Brahmans, with much irreverent noise, bore a howdah of beaten gold

from the interior of the temple, and lifted it on to his back. Suffered once more to stand erect, he rocked restlessly in the heart of a little swarm of men, who with busy hands and feet lashed his burden securely to its resting-place by means of long, soiled cords of crimson and gold. They clambered over and about him, as though he had been some inanimate object, making the curves of his long, gold-bound tusks serve them as rungs for their feet, swinging themselves this way and that, with one hand upon his neck and the other grasping his trunk, fitting their knees into the hollows behind his big ears.

At last all was ready; the portals guarding the Shrine of the Sword flew wide; a long procession of priests began to debouch from them and to make its way down the wide cloisters; a solemn chant echoed through the temple, rising strident and penetrating above the murmur and clamour of the crowd without; and suddenly, from every sanctuary in Angkor Thom, conchs screamed and brayed wildly, accompanied by the vibrating tumult of drums.

The gates of the palace-enclosure were thrust open, and the royal palanquin appeared, its yellow curtains closely drawn; long sunshades of the same colour, with heavy fringes made of little, lozenge-shaped pieces of gold, were held reverently above it.

A tremor of movement swept, wavelike, over, the crowd, which seemed to quake, then

suddenly to subside earthward. The people were squatting, with hands laid palm to palm and uplifted to their foreheads, in homage to their invisible king.

The palanquin, with its guard of young Brahmans, passed across the forum, the people shuffling back upon one another at its approach, and making way for it; and one man in that multitude recalled the last occasion upon which he had seen it cross that open space in the direction of the Ba Yon.

The procession of priests from within the temple, and the troop of courtiers surrounding the palanquin of their king, arrived simultaneously, the one at the foot of the stairway, the other at the side of the elephant, which had again been made to assume a kneeling posture. The royal party paused expectant; the wardens of the Sword, aided by old Baguan Dass, ascended into the howdah. Crouching there, head to head, and not a foot apart, they held erect between them—its hilt upon the floor of the howdah, its point aloft, swathed throughout its length in wrappings of cloth-of-gold—the sacred weapon of the Thunder God.

The elephant, with a floundering motion, regained its feet, and began, with infinite caution and slowness, to descend the wide stairway.

The mahouts noted, with superstitious awe, the palsy by which the wardens of the Sword were of a sudden smitten. Their own anxieties were

centred in their elephant and his ebbing vitality. They drew a woeful omen from the strange emotion of the priests.

As the huge pink monster rolled into view, his hunched legs making ungainly movements, every line of him eloquent of his discomfort and apprehension, a murmur ran through the crowd. At first the sound was like a mighty whispering, hushed and sibilant. Quickly it swelled to a savage muttering—gathered volume, till it grew to a roar; from a roar, burst into a wild and clamorous outcry; then sank away into a silence which, after that moment of tumult, even the insistent scream of the conchs seemed powerless to break. Then the noise of many voices reasserted itself: tongues were busy throughout that multitude. Everyone was imparting his opinions to his neighbours, with reiteration and emphasis. The mob was swayed by a common indignation, a sullen wrath, ready to burst into the red flame of action. A spirit of suspicion had entered into possession of it. It was filled alike with fury and with fear. Here and there a man more fiery than his fellows had leaped to his feet, and was haranguing all who could hear him with frantic words and gestures.

“For years past,” cried one, “they have veiled from us the face of the king! Now they seek also to deprive us of the sight of Indra’s Sword! Nay, not of the Sword only, but of the very scabbard that is its casket!”

"Listen, O my brothers!" another was yelling. "The demigods who rule and so abuse us, who bind us to toil, while they live at ease, who feast on our labour, casting to us others only the leavings they discard, they never weary of heaping insults upon us. We are not worthy to look upon our king, lest the sight of folk such as us defile his sacred countenance. That we have endured! Now we are held too mean and unworthy to look upon the Sword which holds within it the mystic Spirit of the Land. Must we endure that also, O my brothers? Are we men or dogs that we should suffer this thing? Have we not hands to strike, aye, and knives in our hands? Shall we . . ."

The tumult drowned his words.

"The God hath taken back the Sword that he gave!" was a cry that arose on every side. "The Sword! The Sword! Let us see the Sword, if indeed it hath not been reft from us!"

A man of the goldsmith caste, with open mouth and wild gesticulations, was trying to tell those within hearing that he and some of his caste-mates had been bidden fashion a gigantic scabbard by the priests of the temple, and had pleaded the impossibility of making it in the time allotted to them.

The belief that the shrouded and wavering object, held aloft on the howdah of the white elephant, was not in truth the Sword of Indra, was spreading throughout the multitude, blent,

illogically, with the conviction that in swathing it in wrappings a studied insult had been flung in their faces by the men of the ruling caste. The temper of the crowd was ugly and threatening.

Old Baguan Dass, descending the steps of the temple with a large body of heirophants grouped behind him, looked out with scorn and anger upon the swaying, clamorous people. It was to him as though a pack of curs had dared to yap and show their teeth in the face of their master ; yet from among his followers, priestly deserters were slinking off, one by one, to vanish amid a flutter of white draperies into the dark interior of the temple.

Long years of security and ease, of sensuality and self-indulgence, had softened many of the Brahmans, sapping their courage and their energy, unfitting them for emergency, and so enhancing the value of life that they did not dare look into the hard eyes of death.

It was no large band, even of the courtiers, that rallied about the palanquin of their king. An uneasy feeling was abroad among them that something was wrong ; that their fortunes were on the wane.

For a moment those in charge of the procession seemed in doubt how to proceed ; but Baguan Dass—his long white beard falling to his waist and blowing backward over his shoulders in the excitement of his wrath—commanded and compelled the mahouts, marshalled the procession of

elephants, two by two, with the Sword and the palanquin in their midst, and bade them force their way through the mob in the direction of the Ba Phun.

But movement was no longer easy, for the multitude gave way grudgingly, and more than once men in the foremost rank were thrust by those behind them almost under the feet of the slowly marching elephants. When this happened the great beasts, who in cold blood would not willingly injure a human being, halted and backed, with wise heads shaking and small eyes aglare; and their mahouts had some difficulty in urging them forward again.

Very slowly the procession, wriggling throughout its length, like an injured snake, pushed out into the forum, heading for the Ba Phun, the people surrounding it and crowding in upon it from every side. They were on their feet now to a man, not keeping their distance and crouching in the dust in accordance with ancient custom, and this alone was menacing; but the aspect and attitude of the multitude were more threatening still. Once again that grim muttering sound broke out, swelling to a roar, sinking almost to silence, then rising anew with augmenting force and volume. The very ground under foot seemed to vibrate in response to it; it was like a fretsaw working busily upon the nerves of all who heard it; the very elephants became restive; but still the procession crept onward.

The centre of the forum was nearly reached,

and the leading elephants had almost passed the spot where a large group of quarrymen from Angkor Wat was assembled, when of a sudden the mob began to surge back and forth with a strange rhythmical motion. At once the procession, elephants with the rest, was tossed to and fro in the heart of the multitude, much as a boat rocks in the wash of a steamer that passes it in a confined space. The movement was irresistible; the men in the front ranks were powerless to stay it; at every upheaval it gained velocity and momentum. The mahouts, high above the tumult, could be seen with raised arms and blood-stained goads, striving to steady their elephants, against whose flanks the mob was breaking in waves and sprays. Men were trampled under foot, and screams of pain arose above the roar of the people. Then came a rush and for a moment all was confusion.

Chun, waving a long wood-knife, sharp and heavy as a cutlass, and followed by perhaps a hundred of his fellow-quarrymen similarly armed, broke into the heart of the procession. A young Brahman of the Court tried to stay him, pushing him from him with his left hand, while with the other he sought to draw his sword. His face, upturned toward Chun, was eloquent of surprise, of contempt, of excitement. Then the heavy wood-knife crushed into it, and the man dropped, to be trodden instantly under many scuttering feet. On every side Brahmans were falling. To the last they had not found it possible to believe that the

Sudras would dare to raise sacrilegious hands against them. The procession had lost all coherency : it was broken in a dozen places, each component part becoming a separate centre of battle. Chun, closely guarded by his two clownish brothers, Sud and Muth, flung himself at the flank of the white elephant. The mahout jabbed at him with his goad, but Sud parried the blow, and slashed back at the hand that held it. The wardens of the Sword, letting their charge fall into the howdah, slipped discreetly down the opposite side of the elephant, and were immediately stamped underfoot in the fray.

Chun clambered into the place which they had quitted, shouted to the mahout to mind his manners as he valued his life, seized the Sword and held it aloft.

At the sight of it, brandished above his head, the tumult of the multitude was for a moment stilled. All eyes were fixed upon the fluttering draperies of cloth-of-gold. The desire for this unveiling had been universal, but the actual deed revived superstitious terrors in the beholders. Save where men still fought for their lives, all now were stricken motionless, holding their breath in awful anticipation.

Chun, his bare feet gripping the sides of the howdah—the frail canopy had been wrenched off in his struggle to ascend—stood swaying above the throng, every line of his strong, young body visible to those who gazed. One

by one the cloths swathing the Sword were unwound and flung aside, to flutter slowly downward; till at last he waved above his head a long piece of painted wood.

"Behold!" he cried. "This is not the Sword of Indra, but a painted lie, forged by these arch-forgers of lies! A lie like their godhead! A lie like their shrouded king! A lie! A lie!"

With a passionate gesture, he bent the dummy sword across his knee, and snapped it with a loud noise of splintering wood.

For a moment he held the broken pieces aloft, then flung them from him.

There arose, on the instant, a bestial roar of rage—resonant, menacing, and ferocious.

The mob, released from the paralysis of fear, which for a moment had held them in leash, broke free, in the violence of the reaction, from all control. These men, so long kept in complete subjection, had felt themselves aggrieved, and their anger had goaded them to the brink of rebellion; but until now the majority had been timorous and afraid. They had watched the sacrilegious acts of Chun and his companions with wonder and a secret sympathy; but their audacity had shocked and affrighted them. For an instant, they had been sobered and cowed by a great dread, as they beheld the sacred emblem between his hands; but now, when the deception practised upon them was made manifest, and they saw the sham sword broken and cast aside, a change was wrought in

them. The conviction was strong upon them that the fetters of their bondage were loosened; that they were immune from retribution; that their numbers made them powerful; that they were strong; that the Brahmans were few and weak. They were inspired by a collective courage. For the first time in the memory of man, they crept forth from beneath that lowering shadow of fear, under which each one of them had been born and bred.

There were many among them—owners of property, traders, shopkeepers, landowners on a small scale—who stood to lose much by an outbreak of anarchy; but these had no time for thought, and infected by the prevailing rage and enthusiasm, they roared with their fellows, loudly demanding a victim, with all a mob's slaving lust for blood.

"Thus deal I with this shrouded lie!" Chun was shouting. "Now shall ye behold your king, upon whose face you outcasts are not worthy to look!"

He vanished from his eminence upon the howdah, and dived into the thickest of the fight.

The Brahmans, smitten with panic and utterly outnumbered, were struggling back to the Ba Yon, old Baguan Dass raving and cursing in their midst. The royal palanquin was protected only by a few faithful courtiers.

Chun, striving to make his voice heard above the tumult, and calling to his quarrymen to let

the crowd deal with the retreating demigods, flung himself at the band of devoted men who still sought to save their king. He felled the leader with a mighty blow of his wood-knife, and his companions aiding him, the little knot of warriors was speedily overpowered.

Forcing their way through the vociferous crowd, and dragging the palanquin with them, paying no heed to the outcry of its squealing occupant, they won at last to the flank of the white elephant. Muth and Sud had been standing guard over the mahout during the absence of their brother, and at a sign from him the driver forced the huge brute to kneel. The palanquin was with difficulty fixed across the floor of the howdah, Sud and Muth mounting on to the elephant's back, and holding the swaying thing in place, while Chun once more assumed an erect attitude by its side.

Slowly the elephant rose, heaving and rocking, until its driver, the three men upon its back, and the palanquin, with its curtains still drawn, were visible above the heads of the crowd.

"The King! The King! They have the King. Bring him forth! Let us see him! The King! The King!"

The whole forum was clamorous.

Chun held his right hand aloft, and silence fell in obedience to his gesture.

He was panting with his exertions; his cloth was torn and blood-stained; and he had upon

his forehead a ragged cut, which had bled profusely. As he spoke, he jerked his head back repeatedly, as though he sought to rid himself of the trickle that invaded his eyes. His bronze figure was alive with excitement, alert, triumphant.

"I have here your king!" he shouted. "The Son of Heaven! The Lord of Lords! The Ruler of the World! The Prince of Demigods! The immortal and all-puissant Monarch of the Khmer Empire!" With blasphemous irony he recited the style and titles of the king. "Behold in him yet another shrouded lie."

He turned to the palanquin, thrust a hand through the curtains, and with an air of uncontrollable disgust, dragged forth its occupant. Sud and Muth, at a word from their brother, flung the palanquin to the ground, and in an instant the crowd had torn it to shreds.

The king, wrapped from head to heel in a long silk cloth of the royal yellow, squatted in the howdah, every inch of his body as completely hidden from sight as that of a veiled woman. Handling him with brutal roughness, Chun pulled him on to his feet, tore the big cloth away, rent the silk jacket from his back and the full waist-skirt from about his loins, and then stood aside, attempting to cleanse his hands, as from some unspeakable pollution.

Naked, the leper stood before his people, his body of unclean flesh bent forward a little from the hips, his maimed hands hanging limply from

his feeble wrists, his weak eyes peering and blinking.

A heavy silence had fallen, and through it was heard a thin wail. The Prince of Demigods, naked and ashamed, was weeping abject, human tears over the departed divinity of his House.

CHAPTER XII

DEFEAT THAT CROWNS A VICTORY

"Now, tell me all."

She issued her command to the man who, in an hour, had sprung from obscurity to become the leader of the people, with the same calm assurance, the same air of unquestioned superiority, that she had used to Chun, the unknown *Sudra*. For a moment, surprise and disappointment, and a dull, resentful pain, more bitter than disappointment, held him dumb.

They were not hiding in the shadows, as of old, but instead were sitting in the moonlight outside the central portals of the upper temple of Angkor Wat.

At their feet, the abrupt mass of masonry, which is the immense plinth whereon the temple stands, fell in a precipitous descent, sheer to the courtyard eighty feet below them, scaled in three places by perilous stairways. The courtyard, blocked in one spot by the guard-houses, no longer tenanted by Brahmans, was plunged deep in shadow; but beyond it rose the walls and arched roofs of the inner cloisters, which almost

hid from sight the outer precincts built on terraces, each lower than the last. Beyond and below these, the moonlight glinted upon the bathing-tank, and showed the great causeway, a broad white shaft cleaving the darkness of the earth, leading to the domed portals of the encircling cloisters, a quarter of a mile away. The moonlight, falling full upon the old grey stones, revealed those close at hand with an infinite wealth of detail, and caused those at a distance to stand forth with an elusive, ghostly beauty.

Beyond the outer precincts of the temple, the forest, spreading away to the silvered waters of the Great Lake, lay like a heavy shadow over the land; but in the direction of Angkor Thom, the sky was red and lurid, and below it mighty tongues of flame rose and fell. That sprawling city of wood and thatch was burning in many places.

The girl of the temple sat in her favourite attitude—her bare feet set upon the flags and peeping from below the hem of her garment; her arms clasped about her updrawn knees, her chin resting upon them. Her face, very pale in the moonlight, showed no trace of excitement or interest, but her eyes were fixed intently upon the leaping fires and the glowing sky, yonder, over Angkor Thom. Except that she issued her command to him, she betrayed no sign of being conscious that Chun was beside her.

In her presence, and chilled by her indifference, he felt himself slipping downward from the pre-eminence to which he had that day attained, back into the serf and the *Sudra*. A sort of still rage awoke in him, bred of the knowledge that, though he could dominate and lead his fellow-men, the Spirit of Destruction had but to breathe upon him to reduce him forthwith to a mortifying, ineffective impotence. It was as though the spell she cast over him wrought a paralysis in his brain — hypnotised his soul.

Always he had chafed under the sense of humiliation with which she, without a look, almost without a word, had power to imbue him; but this evening—when he had come to her uplifted and triumphant, intoxicated a little by his first draught of success, by the incense of applause and the acclamation of his fellows, feeling himself to be a hero who had wrought heroically—secretly he had counted upon a different reception. He had even dreamed, perhaps, that she, at last, would hail him as her master; that she, too, would join in the clamorous, half-wondering flattery which had greeted him on every side after the scene in the forum. At the least, he had thought, she would treat him as a being on an equality with herself—he who had planned and schemed with her, and later with old Slat, and who, while she sat still and awaited the event, had toiled and wrought, risking life and limb, and

braving the chance of torture, which is worse than death. But now, sitting here beside her, watching her pale, unmoved face, he knew how vain were all these hopes; and the crown of victory that had been his was turned to withered leaves.

"Has a dumbness smitten you? Or are your ears deaf, that you do not hear me?" she asked, still speaking without turning her eyes toward him. Then, enunciating every word very slowly and distinctly, as though thereby she trusted to make their meaning plain to his dull intelligence: "Tell — me — all — that — has — befallen," she added.

Chun, feeling that, by some strange magic of hers, all his great deeds had of a sudden been assimilated with the commonplace, grudgingly took up his tale.

He told how he had sought out Slat, who, for reasons which Chun could not fathom, greatly desired the overthrow of the Brahmans, as a stepping-stone to the attainment of certain ambitions of his own, connected with some architectural secret, at which he was constantly hinting. How the old man had inspired him with an idea, and had provided him with a "medicine that causes the body to which it is applied to shine in the night-time, more especially if the skin be wet." How he, Chun, risking detection and capture once more, had made his way to the summit of the Ba Yon, during a night of storm, and standing there,

smear'd with the aforesaid medicine, had been seen, for a moment, by a score of curious folk, whom old Slat, without attracting attention to himself, had contrived to assemble for the purpose.

"Old Slat did well," was the girl's only comment at this juncture. "He is wise and cunning and brave."

Chun's share in the adventure she completely ignored, and her injustice made him wince.

Sullenly he continued his narrative—describing how the rumour of the incarnation of Indra spread like wildfire throughout Angkor, and among the assembling pilgrims; how Slat, dropping here a hint, and there some cryptic utterance, fermented the spirit of unrest; how he, Chun, fanned the uneasiness and the smouldering discontent of the quarrymen; how, little by little, playing upon the superstitions of the people, doubts concerning the integrity of the Sacred Sword, doubts about what had befallen the veiled king, had been planted in many minds; how the public anxiety, once kindled, spread like a raging flame; and then, his own enthusiasm leaping up within him, telling in dramatic fashion of the events which, that afternoon, had been enacted in the forum.

"He wept, the unclean one," Chun concluded. "Like a weak woman, he wept, making a little outcry, feeble and pitiful, and the people roared and laughed, mocking him. He stood there, naked before them all, palsied and almost blind

—he, the Prince of Demigods, upon whose august countenance we, forsooth, were not deemed worthy to look! The sight of him, sore smitten by the evil sickness, gave a lie to the godhead of the Brahmans; and for a little I suffered the multitude to glut their eyes with the sight of him. Then, with the point of my knee thrust beneath his buttocks, I heaved him down among the people. They drew apart, avoiding his uncleanness, so that he tumbled sprawling; then rising, tottered hither and thither, groping with his hands, while they fell back before him. Then a man smote him on the face with his open palm, and he staggered and cried, burying his head in his hands. I saw his shoulders heave. Forthwith the fury of the crowd was kindled. For a space they baited him; but all were too eager to strike. Very soon he was a shapeless thing, motionless in the dust, which men still spurned and smote.

“Then I lifted up my voice, and sent my words ringing over the heads and dinning in the ears of the multitude.

“‘Thus,’ I cried, ‘do we, who now are a free people, proclaim our freedom! They are no demigods, these dogs whose king you have mangled and killed, fouling your hands with the touch of his uncleanness: they are not demigods, but men, fashioned as we are fashioned. Also, they are few, and we are numerous; they are feeble, while we, we are strong. Our muscles are of iron, by reason of the labour to which we

and our fathers before us have been bound by them and by their sires; theirs, from long disuse, have become weak as those of a woman. Our bonds are broken, our slavery is at an end! No longer shall we be as driven cattle before these Brahman swine; no longer will we suffer their oppressions and their tyrannies. Indra has taken back the Sword that was his gift, and the prophecy of old time shall be fulfilled!

"Then, even as I spoke, a voice was uplifted from the fringe of the crowd, near to the entrance of the forum.

"'Aye, it shall be fulfilled!' it cried. 'Famine and pestilence and disastrous war shall stalk abroad to devastate the land. The people shall rise against their rulers. The trees of the fruit-groves shall be barren, and the crops rot in the fields. Our enemies from without shall harry us, and in our own house shall strife and dissension be found!'

"All heads were turned toward the speaker, men standing a-tiptoe, and craning their heads to see; and I, still standing on the elephant, beheld a little knot of war-worn men leaning on their spears. It was their leader who spoke.

"Quickly the intelligence spread that these were messengers from the army that recently went forth to chastise the presumptuous Thai, and ill were the tidings they brought. Our people have sustained a crushing defeat, and many of them are slain or captured. A great

lamentation arose, as the news became known, for all had friends or kinsmen with the army. The messengers were well-nigh torn to pieces by the eager, questioning people. I and the Brahmans were alike forgotten.

"I saw that, for that day, I could do no more in Angkor Thom.

"I slid from off the elephant, and gathered together my comrades of the quarry and the workyard. Their thought still was centred upon what *we* had done. They were not fickle and without continuous purpose, like the rest of the mob.

"Hastily we marched hither to Angkor Wat—and you know the rest. The Brahmans, for the most part, had gone to Angkor Thom to attend the feast—and a ripe bellyful of feasting was theirs—and few remained to keep watch and ward. Also, like their fellows yonder, they did not dream that the men they name *Sudras* would dare to raise their hands against them. They fell an easy prey to us, and you also, I think, saw something of that slaying?

"Now here, upon this rock-like mass of stones, with the temple-buildings, which are set thereon, to afford us house-room, we will make our citadel, until the power of the self-styled demigods be utterly destroyed. I have brought hither stores of rice; I have planned; I have made ready against attack; I——"

"I, I, I," she echoed, sneeringly. "You, always *you*! It is the sole thought that fills

that narrow head of yours. Peace, peace, I pray you! Give me a moment of silence in which to *think*. You are full of vain boasts of that which you have done, of that which you can *do*: but now it is thought, not mere action, that is needed, and in that you, for all your prating, cannot aid."

During the whole course of his narrative, she had not changed her pose, nor glanced toward him, save when he told of the baiting of the leprous king. Then, for an instant, her eyes had flashed, and her lips, parting in a smile, had disclosed the two sharp fangs and the small, white teeth, cruel and set. Later, while she spoke to him, her face had been turned in his direction, her eyes fault-finding and contemptuous, her forehead frowning. Then she had relapsed into her former immobility.

Chun sat still and silent, afraid to move, hardly daring to look at her. She always had the power utterly to subdue him. He knew himself to be a slave to her will. Many fetters had he broken, and that very day he had had a leading share in bringing his fellows out of a bondage which had endured for centuries: yet, in this girl's presence, he felt himself to be bound hand and foot with bonds that he could not sever—to be held in an appalling and degrading thralldom, brain and heart and soul.

After a long while, during which Chun had watched the moon climbing up the curve of the sky, and the shadows huddling and contracting,

she spoke aloud. Her chin still rested on her crooked knees; her eyes still gazed at the patch of ruddy cloud that hovered over Angkor Thom.

"And that?" she nodded at the conflagration. "That. What is the good of that?"

"There is no good in it," said Chun, humbly. "It is only ruin and loss and folly. The thatch is dry; the fire has been set in many places; and before the dawn all the town will be in ashes."

"While you, who have kindled the flame, sit here and boast to a woman of your prowess," she sneered.

"But I cannot stay that burning," Chun pleaded.

She laughed a hard, dry laugh.

"That is true and over-true," she said. "You can light a blaze, but you cannot quench it. You can set a storm raging, but you cannot control its fury. You can lay a world in ruin, and take pride in the easy task; but you have not the wit to guide the forces you have brought into being, so that out of destruction there may arise something more perfect than that which you have demolished. Said I not sooth when I declared just now that, though you can *act* with your big body and your strong, rough hands, you have no brain with which to *think*?"

"But what can I do?" asked Chun, miserably. She laughed in his face.

"*Do!* Always *do!*" she cried. "That is ever the limit of your imagination! Well, since you

are bent on action, and indeed are unfitted for aught else, go down yonder and fetch me the Sword from the hiding-place in which we laid it."

Chun rose without a word; descended the abrupt flight of steps that fell away from the portal in which she was seated, to the courtyard below; passed the guard-houses, now occupied by his own friends; and entered the cloisters beyond. The place was dark, and the moonlight, struggling through the deep embrasures, cut sharp angular patches out of the gloom, and intensified the blackness of the shadows.

Chun groped his way through the central chamber; descended the steps which led down into the second tier of cloisters; and at last found himself at the head of the wide, stone stair which gave upon the giant causeway. Down these he passed, recalling the hours he had spent within their shadow in the company of the girl who above awaited his return. It seemed to him that now hope was a fainter thing than then it had been.

Once more he stood, as once long ago he had poised himself, on the brink of the bathing-tank; then lowered himself into the water; took a deep breath and dived. He just failed to reach the bottom, and came to the surface, after a severe struggle, panting hard. The cut on his forehead smarted; and suddenly he was conscious that the strain to which the events of the last few days had subjected him, body and mind, had left him more exhausted than he had realised.

His eyes swam, and his head whirled giddily. There was a strange rushing noise in his ears.

He drew himself out of the water, and for a space sat resting, and gathering his strength for a second attempt. He was haunted by the fear that he might fail; and already he winced and flinched as, in imagination, he saw the scorn in the girl's eyes and heard her merciless comment. "I thought, at least, that you could *do* things!"

At last, setting his teeth, he stood erect; poised himself for an instant; took a long breath; and leaped headlong into the water. With strong, eager strokes he swam downward, every muscle extended to the utmost tension of its energy; his breath hard held; his heart leaping and racketing; his blood roaring in his ears. Down and down he swam, nailing himself to his endeavour, as to a cross, feeling that his very veins would burst if this appalling pressure were prolonged; and at last his hand touched the flags of the tank's bottom. Lying prone, in an agony of endurance and suspense, he groped blindly for the Sword; touched it with his fingertips; missed it; groping, touched it again; grasped it at the last; and then, clutching it tightly, drew his feet under him, and prizing them against the smooth and slippery stones, sprang upward. Weighted by the great Sword, he rose slowly, his neck extended, his face yearning upward, strained and agonising, his heart in tumult, his lungs fluttering like a wild thing held

in his bosom. With his legs contracting and straightening themselves in a series of violent, spasmodic efforts, he fought his way upward; felt the water like a monstrous burden press upon his head; saw a pale light grow momentarily more distinct above him; till at last he tore through the surface, and his imprisoned breath burst from him in a mighty exhalation.

Barely enough of strength remained to him to make it possible to struggle to the side of the tank, and inch by inch to draw his body out of the water.

His eyes smarted; in his mouth there was a curious salt flavour; and a little blood was trickling from his ears. The gash on his forehead had broken open and was bleeding profusely; but the Sword of Indra, in its scabbard of wrought gold, lay across his knees.

Long he sat there, feeling too sick and giddy to move; then, with the lagging steps of a man broken by years, he crept back into the temple. Painfully, he dragged the weight of his weary limbs up the stairways, from terrace to terrace; and in ascending the last steep flight, he had to halt and steady himself more than once, lest he should miss his footing and fall into the courtyard beneath.

At length he stood before the girl, panting and trembling, and laid the Sword at her feet, without a word.

She sat where he had left her, and her pose was unchanged. She did not glance at him, nor

at the weapon which, at the cost of so much pain and endurance, he had brought to her.

"You have been very long," she said.

"The water was deep," he replied apologetically, and sat down, spent and gasping.

"Don't make that noise, opening and shutting your mouth like a newly landed fish," she snapped at him. "It irks me."

He tried to still the frantic pumping of his lungs.

"Well?" she queried, after a pause. "Why do you wait? I only want the Sword. You can leave it here and go."

"Why should I leave it here? It is mine, not yours," said Chun, moved to sudden anger.

"And why should I go? I and my comrades—not you and the hussies who are your playmates—wrested the Wat from the Brahmins."

He pointed downward to a spot in the courtyard where a white-robed figure still lay as it had fallen, stricken down in the fight.

"We, not you, killed that carrion; and tonight Angkor Wat and all that it holds are ours, to use as we will. How, think you, are the other women, your sisters of the temple, at this hour engaged? They are making unto themselves friends of my brethren of the pulley and the lever. Caste fell dead yonder, in the forum, where fell the body of the stricken king. I have released you from a sorry slavery. Try me not too highly, lest perchance I abandon you to——"

She had turned, and was looking at him out of grave, sad eyes; and his own fell before her. His angry words sank abashed into a shamed silence.

"Chun!" she said; and the rich, low tones of her voice seemed to vibrate through him. "Chun! Is it you who speak thus, and—to *me*?"

She said no more, only bent the gaze of her great eyes in a sort of sorrowful pity upon his distressed face: but it was enough.

In a moment, filled with passionate self-reproach, he was lying prostrate before her, caressing her feet, seeking to conciliate her just anger by faltering assurances of his love—of his fidelity; mingled with fierce condemnations of the brute which, for an instant, had stirred within him and had lifted its head to snarl at her.

He had forgotten all her cruelty, all the little barbs which she had planted in him, the more surely to goad him to rebellion. He had forgotten her ingratitude; the ungraciousness with which she had avoided all acknowledgment of aught done by him in her service; even her refusal to recognise that he had wrought bravely and skilfully for the downfall of the Brahmans, and his own bitter disappointment, were forgotten. He remembered only that he had used harsh and angry words to her; that, mad with pain and wrath, he had threatened her.

He was no longer, even to himself, the man who, that day, had swayed and led and dominated

his fellows. He felt himself to be the meanest thing that moved—a proven traitor to his love. Appalled by the revelation which had been made to him of the brutality and the force of the passions dormant within him, filled with self-distrust and a bitter self-contempt, he did penance before her in the dust.

“That you, even you, should fail me!” she exclaimed.

There was a pained surprise in her voice, as though the last and surest of all her poor defences had been snatched from her by some ruthless hand.

Chun redoubled his protestations ; and after a long while, a little hand stole downward and rested upon his head.

“Say no more,” she said. “And I will try to forgive, even if I may not wholly forget. I will take the Sword, since I have need of it, as you shall presently see. Also, I have a mind to use the inner sanctuary for mine own, and there I would be alone. If you, in truth, desire my forgiveness, see that I am unmolested ; that women, even, are not suffered to penetrate thither to disturb me. Let food—the best that you can procure—the woman Zin, who is among the captives, hath much skill in cooking—be brought to the doors of the shrine twice daily ; but do not seek to enter, unless I summon you. Set over the place guards whom you can trust. That, for the present, is all. Now, give me the Sword.”

She rose to her feet, lifted, not without difficulty, the great sheathed weapon from the flags, and rested it over her little shoulder. Then bending upon Chun one more look out of her grave and passionless eyes, she passed through the portals, and was lost in the darkness within.

CHAPTER XIII

ANARCHY

THE dawn-wind stirred among the palm-fronds with a harsh, rattling sound, and in the ears of old Baguan Dass—as he stood shuddering a little, and drawing his cloak more closely about his shoulders—it was as though the bones of a hanging skeleton were set in motion.

The long panic and agony of the night were ending: the cold despair of morning had come.

Beyond the high wall which enclosed the palace-buildings, where yesterday portions of the town had been visible, nothing was now to be seen save mounds of charred *débris*, from which smoke-clouds ascended to mingle with the mists arising from the dew-drenched ground.

Not a living thing moved, except a lean cur or two, nosing and questing among the ruins; and a great silence reigned, for to-day—for the first time for centuries—no pulse of drum nor scream of conch sounded from the temples to speed the vanishing shadows and herald the rising sun.

Forgotten of the Shining Ones, to whom the Brahmans of Angkor had put up such passionate prayer—with folded hands and lifted voice, with conch, with drum, with sacrifice, with enduring stone piled in mountainous, eternal monuments—the city lay in ashes; and the men who had ruled it were penned like sheep within the royal enclosure, with fear and despair laying cold hands about their hearts.

But it was by neither of these emotions that old Baguan Dass was chiefly swayed as, standing alone in the grey light of the dawn, he looked around upon the desolation and wreckage which a few short hours had wrought. He was filled with indignant rage, with wonder, with savage disgust. Proud son of the proudest caste on earth, it was to him incredible that the *Sudras* should dare to lift sacrilegious hands from the mire to strike at the deputies of the Gods. From infancy he had looked upon the people as hardly distinguishable from the rest of the brute creation. By his aristocratic spirit, the very gods in heaven had always been visualised as another higher aristocracy. That they could fight on the side of the casteless ones would have been to him but yesterday a notion frankly blasphemous. He had thought too well of their discrimination, of their sense of propriety, of their appreciation of the eternal fitnesses, for such an infamous accusation easily to frame itself in his mind against them. And yet——

He looked out at the huge, grey temples, as one by one they bulked forth from the misty shadows, in the growing light of dawn—at the heaps of blackened cinders—at the palm-trees, whose fronds, discoloured and wilted by the flames, hung rattling in the breeze.

Turning, he gazed into the palace-precincts—at the open spaces, strewn with stones cast by the hands of a hate-maddened populace—at the hall of state, open to the air on three sides, in which, stretched upon the floor, lay huddled crowds of sleeping refugees—at the roofs, with their fantastic, upward-branching horns, and their tiles, bright with gilding and gay with many colours—at the groups of woebegone, dragged wretches (Brahmans every one of them) who squatted around the few clumsy mortars, exchanging fearful whispers—at the unmistakable signs of siege and hastily improvised defence which everywhere were visible.

Yes: this thing was not an evil dream that had haunted the watches of the night. The impossible had come to pass. And suddenly old. Baguan Dass—throwing his arms aloft, his face straining upward, his beard disordered, flowing back over his shoulders—stormed at high heaven, blaspheming the Gods of his worship.

The outburst left him spent and exhausted; and drawing his cloak around him, he leaned upon the coping of the wall.

His mind, over which he had relaxed control,

wandered back through the years of his long life, obedient to a subconscious conviction which whispered that the end was near.

With a pride more paternal than personal, he conjured up the vision of the youth he once had been—light-hearted, swaggering, vainglorious, eager for battle, hungry for adventure, ripe for mischief, greedy of emotion; and it seemed to him that the blood ran thin by comparison in the veins of the youngsters of this later day.

He recalled with an extraordinary wealth of detail, every circumstance of the campaign against the rebel King of Champa, in which as a lad he had taken part—the days and nights in the forest and on the waters of the Mekong—the stockades and the camp-fires—the struggle through the swamps and the labyrinthian waterways of the estuary—the first sight of the sea, so like, and yet so unlike, the mud-stained expanse of Tonlé-Sap—the sacking of the rebel city, and the ill-things done joyously during that night of tumult and license.

He thought of his many loves—girls of the temple, girls of the town, women whom he had had to wife, publicly and with ceremony, women wedded to *Sudras*, whom he had used for his pleasure: and of the latter, one stood forth, in his memory, from all the rest. She, if she still lived, was a withered hag by now, the worn-out drudge of some low-caste household; but he saw her only as she once had been a score of years ago, when, through her, for a season, and late in

life, "the madness" had smitten him. The world, now so old and drab and sad, had been a good world then, and life a glorious thing. Colour and beauty had held for him, on a sudden, a new, glad surprise. The sunshine had put on an added splendour; the moonlight had fallen upon the sleeping earth with a softness of glamour and mystery never seen before. Every sound was melody: every scent had borrowed an unsuspected fragrance. Upon all things there had come a marvellous gift of tongues, endowing the inarticulate universe with an undreamed-of eloquence.

It had been short-lived—the madness. Caste and pride of race had been its enemies. The woman was already the wife of a *Sudra*. There had been degradation in the connection, even in its moments of most supreme intoxication. His people, discovering it, had dragged him, defiled and polluted, from the slough in which he had been sinking; but somehow life for him had never been quite the same again.

He had had many loves since then; and as his vitality slackened, till only an occasional flicker leaped in flame above the grey embers of burned-out desire, women had been replaced by other idols. He had thirsted for power, and of that too he had had his fill. Turning sated from this, yet still holding it fast in his time-worn hand, he had sought in asceticism and in the religious exaltation of the fanatic, fresh outlets for his mental energy. It had seemed

to him that life and earth were too narrow for his needs. He had hungered for future incarnations that would afford him, perhaps, more spacious opportunities, that would crown him at the last, it might be, with unimagined victory.

And now, now, even this paltry world, which he had learned so to despise, was passing beyond his control; the Gods, in whom he had trusted, were betraying him; the *Sudras*, who had been as the dirt beneath his feet, were leagued with them for his undoing; the men of his own caste—who, in spite of the withering contempt which they individually excited in him, were not to him as other men—were displaying a degenerate cowardice, and all through the night had given tokens of their panic, their futility, their inability to combine, or to defend their rights.

The world, it seemed to him, had waxed very old, ripening to decay.

With his own eyes he had seen the king, his kinsman, stricken with foul disease; the Sword of Indra filched from its sleeping wardens by some sacrilegious thief; the deception which he had devised exposed by the rebellious multitude; himself and his priests attacked in their own forum, under the walls of their own temples, by a populace from whose limbs the trammels of superstitious awe and worship had miraculously fallen; and the prince, and head of his House, stripped naked, mocked,

abused, and done to death by sweepers and outcasts.

The ingratitude of the Gods kindled a raging anger within him—a passion embittered and made virulent by a sense of his utter impotence. He thought of the adoration, the prayers, the countless sacrifices which had been offered to them here, in Angkor; of the temples builded in their honour in the sweat and the blood of thousands; of the unwavering fidelity which, from generation to generation, the men of his caste had shown to them; and behold this, after the long, long silence, was the answer they vouchsafed!

Again, with features distorted, with uplifted arms, with all his body quivering and vibrating in the fury of his emotion, with loud and awful outcry, he blasphemed the heedless Gods.

A babel of noise, echoed through the shrines and cloisters of the Ba Phun—the murmur and mutter of a big crowd, the sound of voices striving to make themselves heard above the tumult, the shuffle and patter of many feet, the cries of little children, the shrill tones of women, the occasional clashing of metal against stone.

Chun, and perhaps five hundred of the quarrymen from Angkor Wat, had come in; and the mob, without discipline or organisation, was marshalling itself for a renewal of hostilities with the Brahmans, who still lurked in hiding

behind the big stone walls of the palace enclosure.

Men, women, and children, rendered homeless by the conflagrations which had laid all Angkor Thom in ashes, had crowded into the temples, seeking protection from the tropical sun. Wherever a shadow was cast, little groups were gathered together, busying themselves around fires and cooking-pots. Mothers sought security in corners from the press of trampling feet, giving suck to their babies, trying with scant success to save their little ones from the dangers besetting them on every side. Yesterday, in the forum, and all night long, while the fires raged, many people had been crushed to death in the surging of the crowd, and the mad rushes of panic-stricken fugitives.

From time to time, great clouds of smoke, hot and suffocating, and pungent with the penetrating reek of burning wood, came billowing through the temple, borne from the smouldering ruins on the breeze of morning.

Chun shouldered his way through the clamorous, vociferating mob, and won at last to the inner shrine of the Ba Phun, where, among broken images of the gods, old Slat was seated with his eternal betel-tube in his hands.

"The Spirit of Destruction is abroad," croaked the old man. "The city, which centuries have been needed to fashion, in

a single night has gone up to heaven in smoke! They are brutes and mad, these low-caste folk—possessed by devils of hate and wrath—they are no longer men, but apes drunk with wine and with success. They can only tear and rend and break and burn. Look at these effigies of the Gods! Thus will they serve all things of beauty, as these already they have served. It repents me that I had a hand in this upheaval. It will bring into the world no new thing, but it will take much out of it that, being here, lent something of beauty to life: and my dream, behold it is only a dream. I know it, and am sad."

"Yet now there is no turning back," said Chun.

To him, also, the fruit of victory was already turning to dust and ashes in his mouth; but the scene which he had witnessed between Chandra Dass and the woman of the temple recurred to his memory, and his hatred of the Brahmans, and his lust for vengeance upon them flared up anew.

"'Tis vain to look back," he repeated. "To-day we must make an end—to-day while the fury of the people is still fiery hot, and ere the men of the army come hither from the place where they have met defeat. If the Brahmans recover that which yesterday saw shorn from them, it will go hard with me and with many. Have you any counsel to give me, O my Father?"

Slat shook his head.

"Nay," he said. "I am old, and my limbs have turned traitor. I cannot aid you in the fight; and for the rest, these people are mad. They will not listen to words, and words now are the only weapons I can wield. Act, my son, since the strength to dare and do still abides with you."

Chun left him without a word, and gathering half a dozen of his friends around him, bade them bring drums from the shrines, and climb with him to one of the domes of the temple.

The heads of the crowd were raised, when the rumble and thrumming from aloft sounded in their ears; and Chun, standing erect among his squatting retinue, motioned to the people, entreating silence. A fresh clamour burst forth for a moment and was with difficulty stilled, but curiosity to hear what he had to say presently occasioned a lull. From within the temple and from places where Chun was not visible, there still came a muffled tumult of many voices; but above this, his clear, young tones were distinctly heard.

Until the day before, he had never addressed an audience; but he, who was of the people, knew the temper of his fellows. Hate lent to him a rude eloquence. The passion within him was infectious, and the growing excitement of the mob reacted upon his own enthusiasm. He put into rough, plain words thoughts and suspicions which, half-formulated, had found a secret

lurking-place in many minds. He lashed the multitude to anger, to rage, to a slaving lust for blood. Men, with clenched hands, and working, upturned faces, danced upon the ground in their impatience, smiting their breasts with cries and curses. With one voice they yelled to him to come down, to make an end of speaking, to exchange words for action, to lead them forth-with against the men who had so monstrously oppressed them.

When, followed by the quarrymen of Angkor Wat, he at last descended, way was made for him; and the multitude—grasping weapons in their hands, making a mighty tumult, and drunk with excitement—surged after him into the forum.

The palace buildings, perched upon a slight eminence, were distant some two hundred yards from the point at which the noisy crowd debouched into the open space; and above the stone wall, upon which at regular interval, effigies of elephants, the size of bullocks, were carved, could be seen the brilliant roofs—a jumble of lines and slopes and angles—their colours vivid in the sunshine.

As the mob, roaring like the sea, rushed into the forum, with faces distorted by passion and excitement, upturned beneath arms that waved, that gesticulated wildly, that brandished weapons that shook clenched fists, the mortars in the enclosure were fired. For a moment the wall

of the palace was hidden in clouds of smoke that leaped out horizontally with furious speed ; stopped suddenly ; to hang suspended in the still air.

It was the chance for which the Brahmans had been waiting, and they had trained their clumsy pieces so as to sweep the forum ; but, now that the supreme moment had come, they touched them off with reckless haste, not exercising the patience, which alone could secure the best results, and forgetting in their agitation that, by emptying at a single discharge their entire battery, they would temporarily disarm themselves.

Two or three of the great, round, stone balls crashed into the crowd, leaving thin lines of casualties in their wake ; but others flew high ; some swept portions of the forum, into which the people had not yet spread ; and a few, falling short, ricocheted harmlessly overhead, to plunge into the surrounding fruit-groves.

For a moment the multitude was checked in its impetuous rush by this thunderous volley, and cries of pain and rage and dismay arose, blended with the wailing of women ; but the fury which animated and inspired them was unquenchable. The smoke, hanging like a curtain before the defences of the Brahmans, concealing them from sight, became, in an instant, no mere cloud of vapour, but a tangible enemy. The multitude, so maddened now that fear was forgotten, charged at it in a transport of ferocity ;

the leaders, compelled by those behind them, swept up to and over the wall, as though it had no existence; and leaped down headlong into the lines of its defenders.

They were aware of rows of anxious, fearful faces, peering in uncertainty through the dense veil of smoke—faces which forthwith contracted into the frowning, set expression of hate and concentrated effort, as naked swords rose and fell above them—faces that went down, borne to the earth by the violence of the onset, to be trodden under foot—terrified faces whose owners turned and fled.

The sheer brute-weight of the mob carried all before it. Here, in the heart of the *mêlée*, the head of a dead man lolled limply, with distorted features, the body prized up by the struggling masses which surrounded it; there, one of the *Sudras*, missing his footing, would collapse, to be stamped to death by the throng of his fellows. Women, who had become entangled in the crowd, wailed and shrieked, their agonised faces seeming to float on the surface of the multitude.

The swaying, surging rabble drove forward, like a solid body, across the open space, which divided the wall from the long hall of state; burst into it, crushing many of its members to death against the four rows of immense wooden columns supporting the roof; and sprayed out, at last, to overwhelm the mass of palace-buildings grouped behind it. The terrified cries of women

and children rent the air ; savage-hand-to-hand fights took place in every doorway ; fire-stands were overturned, and flames burst forth in a dozen quarters ; but still the eager throng behind drove the foremost ranks on and on, making shields of the bodies of their dead, till the flood of maddened human beings inundated every cranny of the royal precincts, and many were forced, bruised and breathless, against the high wall which guarded the rear of the enclosure.

The Brahmans fought with the dumb savagery of wild-cats ; but they were overpowered by the multitude of their assailants. Kill as they would, they could deal death only to a few. Then they were borne down crushed under foot, stamped into the dust, overwhelmed, obliterated. In many of the houses the flooring, built upon piles, gave way under the weight of the rabble, and the *Sudras* and their enemies, and the women and children hiding in the dark interiors, were precipitated in struggling, cursing masses on to the ground beneath.

Presently, their thirst for bloodshed still unslaked, men looked about savagely for fresh victims ; and in that moment many a defenceless creature—hag and maiden, child and babe—became the prey of the mob's insanity.

Little by little the pressure from behind relaxed. The fight was over. Men, freeing themselves from the throng, had time to draw breath and to look about them. Everywhere, as the

crowd parted, the ground was seen to be littered with the dead. The *Sudras*, in exterminating the demigods, had stamped the life out of full as many of their fellows. Men stood, in awe-stricken groups, about the mangled corpses of friends ; and women, springing from nowhere, filled the place with their lamentations. Gradually a sort of hush fell upon the multitude, broken only by a sound of weeping.

Then, above the lull, arose the solemn music of chanting priests, and all eyes were turned toward a little stone temple—the only building in the enclosure not made of wood—whence it seemed to issue.

Its walls and portals had withstood the rush of the rabble, which had opened out and swarmed round it, leaving a little heap of dead to mark the place of its impact with the unyielding stone.

Chun, with the gash on his forehead reopened—bruised and breathless, and bleeding in many places—swung round on his heel when the chanting fell upon his ear. The crowd, re-forming, pushed toward the temple ; but the pressure was not as irresistible as before.

Chun, whom all now recognised as, in some sort, their leader, was able to restrain the men immediately behind him, and to keep clear a little space before the closed portals of the shrine.

These—while men craned their necks, standing a-tiptoe, and clambering on to buildings, in

their efforts to see—were slowly agitated, and then flung wide.

Old Baguan Dass, with half a dozen of the more aged of his hierophants grouped behind him, stood in the entrance.

His white beard fell to his waist; his long, thin hands were folded palm to palm, thumbs to breast, finger-tips to lips, in the traditional posture of prayer; his eyes, fixed high above the head of the mob, blazed with fanatical fire. In a strong, musical voice he intoned the sacred chant, mouthing the rolling and sonorous syllables.

Thus, with laudations of the treacherous Gods upon his lips—fearlessly contemptuous of his enemies to the last, faithful too to his ideals as a priest and a son of the twice-born demigods—he came forth to his death, impassive and unfaltering.

As he advanced, a great silence fell upon the multitude, and only the chanting of the priests was heard above the roaring of the flames, which every instant were gaining ground in the blazing palace-buildings.

A hand clutched Chun's naked arm with a grip that pained him; and turning he looked into his mother's face. How she had come there he knew not, nor stayed to ask. He had not seen her since before the riot in the forum. There was a look in her withered face that was new to him, though he had seen many expressions imprinted upon it which had been hidden

from all the world. Demons of horror and dismay peeped from her eyes. Her features were drawn and haggard in the stress of an intense emotion. Her voice trembled, and her words were hoarse and tremulous.

“Save him!” she whispered. “Save him! The Twice-born! The High Priest! He . . . he is your father!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET OF SLAT

SEVEN days and nights had come and gone since the morning which had seen the palace-buildings invaded and sacked and burnt by the *Sudras*; and to old Slat, sitting alone in one of the courts of the upper temple of Angkor Wat, it had seemed to be the mission of each passing hour to make manifest the vanity of his hopes.

He had withdrawn now to this secluded spot that he might avoid sights and sounds symptomatic of the prevailing anarchy, each one of which moved him to contempt, to indignation, or to disgust.

He had his seat on the floor of one of the cloisters which, raised to a height of some five feet above the flags of the square court, ran round all four sides of it. Looking across the open space, he could see the shady interior of the opposite cloister, and the steep pitch of the heavily sculptured roof above it, sloping upward to the ridge, along which the effigy of a huge snake writhed against the sky-line.

With the loving eye of the artist, he took in

every detail of its beauty ; with the technical appreciation of a craftsman, he noted how each stone, put to its special purpose, aided in the evolution of the perfect whole. Yet was he not entirely satisfied. The acute angle at which the slopes of the roof met, robbed the architectural scheme of something of dignity and grandeur in Slat's sight ; and this, repeated in every temple, in every cloister, in every dome which his people had constructed, was a flaw so obvious that he could never quite escape from it. It was, to him, a perpetual chagrin that by it should be marred even this supreme masterpiece of the dead dreamer whom he worshipped.

One of the causes of the immense solidity of the Khmer temples—which have survived, almost unharmed, centuries of time and of neglect—is to be found in the method whereby their builders evaded the difficulty of the arch. To effect the convergence of their walls, they laid stones, in successive strata, upon the summits in such a way that each was held in place by the weight of the portion of it which did not overlap. When all was completed, and before the task of trimming had been taken in hand, a Khmer “arch” must have resembled a rough double-staircase, culminating in a single, narrow block ; but so carefully were projections cut down to the limit of safety, and so elaborately were the surfaces ornamented with carving and sculpture, that, in the end, the rule-of-thumb method employed was only to be detected by reason of

the acute angle at which the walls met, and the stiff and ungraceful form of the roof which resulted.

For years, old Slat—unaided by any save instinctive mathematical knowledge—had sought a remedy for that which an artistic sense within him proclaimed to be a defect tarnishing the perfection of his idol. Long had he pondered, meditated, groped; seeking the solution of his problem, as he had once said to Chun, “among the mysterious forces which dominate inanimate things—the immutable laws of strain and thrust.”

Obsessed by his idea, undaunted by repeated failure, bringing to his task the tireless patience of the East, he had reasoned, calculated, argued, experimented; had fashioned little stones of fantastic shapes, which he hoped would develop the cohesion that he sought; had worked always in secret, lest the Brahmans should surprise his notion; and throughout had been stimulated and inspired by the thought that he was treading in the footsteps of the master who had designed Angkor Wat, from whose eyes, in spite of all his genius, this priceless conception had been veiled.

And at last, when old age had come upon him, when his eyes were dim and his hands smitten with palsy, suddenly—like a whisper from the Gods—the solution had flashed upon him and his mind had grasped and mastered *the formula of the arch*.

The little model, with its nicely dovetailed

stones, had stood before him in the flicker of the *damar*-torches—for old Slat had been puzzling at his problem far into the night—and as he saw the noble curve of the arch which he had fashioned, almost he adored it—no, not it, but the inspiring genius of his race which, deigning to use his heart and hand and brain, had brought into being this thing of wonder and beauty.

Always he had known himself to be a descendant of the demigods—though the knowledge had not spurred him to acts of madness, such as that which had led his brother, Phun, to the destruction of his manhood; but now he had felt, for the first time in life, that the divine in him had found a fitting outlet.

And forthwith all that was most human in this man had leaped up to assert his right of ownership in his discovery. That, at least, should not become the spoil of the Brahmans who, in their pride, had denied to him all that, by right of blood, was his. They had withheld from him everything over which they wielded power; but he, from them, would withhold his precious secret. That should be his vengeance upon them for a lifetime of oppression and neglect—the vengeance of the man whose body had worn itself out in their service, whose intelligence they had used unscrupulously, giving in return no guerdon of thanks or recognition.

For a season this thought had been his delight, and he had hugged it to his heart, gloating in triumph over the double achievement of his

discovery and of its concealment; but as time passed and the fires of the burning-*ghat* began to hold for him an imminent threat, the desire to see his dream realised in all the majesty of enduring stone became more and more insistent. It was like the pain of a raging tooth. It would not suffer itself to be forgotten; it broke eternally upon his peace; it devoured all other hopes and aspirations; it monopolised his thought. Yet, never once did he feel tempted to surrender his knowledge to the Brahmans: too deep for that was his hatred of the demigods. Only, he fell to dreaming anew, to plotting, planning, scheming; and then Chun had come to him—an unacknowledged Brahman, like himself—and almost insensibly the old man had been sucked into the whirlpool of a great conspiracy.

From the first, his reason and his judgment had told him that he was staking all his hopes upon a desperate chance; but obstinately he had shunned the truth. Now, looking back upon recent events, he saw clearly that which, subconsciously, he had always known—that the revolution, which he had aided, could result only in anarchy, and must make the realisation of his dream more visionary than it had ever been.

This conviction had been branded on his brain when, after the scenes of riot and savagery enacted in the forum, the mob had given itself up to a night of pillage and license, setting fire to the capital, reducing to ashes huge stores of

food and merchandise, rendering thousands homeless, and thereafter, in their wantonness, wreaking an iconoclastic wrath upon the images of the Gods, and upon the mighty monuments which had been builded by the labour of them and of their fathers.

To Slat, the massacre of the demigods had been an incident of little moment—for them he felt no pity : but the stupid love of destruction for destruction's sake, which had throughout been evinced by the maddened populace, aroused in him a sullen rage.

As he sat now, alone with the silent stones—which, embodying a vast idea, had for him a meaning that humanity could never have—he thought of the happenings of which he, during the past few days, had been a disgusted witness.

The *Sudras*, released from a bondage that had endured for centuries, were intoxicated by the suddenness and the completeness of their emancipation. Fear and awe and reverence—the fetters which so long had shackled them—had fallen from them in an hour. The demigods, who had enslaved them, they had utterly routed and vanquished. The Deities, of whom the Brahmans were the vicars upon earth, had shared in the defeat of their servants. Hatred of the demigods, and of the Gods in whose name their endless labours had been exacted, had been a smouldering passion in many a *Sudra's* breast, while superstitious dreads still prevented it from

bursting into flame. Now, in an instant, it had flared up into a fierce and vindictive atheism. The very Gods were felt to be defenceless, even as the Brahmans had proved to be defenceless. Divinities and demigods stood and fell together. Of a sudden the superhumanity of both was revealed to the popular understanding as a cruel and tremendous myth—a myth which, time out of mind, had enslaved the souls of men, and had harnessed their bodies to an eternity of toil—a myth which was now for ever shattered.

The abrupt revulsion of feeling had displayed itself in a thousand brutish manifestations. Everything that before had claimed the reverence, the devotion, or the obedience of the multitude, had now become an object of its abhorrence and its spite. The Brahmans who had escaped from the attack upon the procession of the false sword, and from the massacre in the palace, had been tracked and hunted down; had been dragged from the huts of peasants and their hiding-places in the forests, to be done to death by a hate-maddened people. Every insult that a perverse imagination could devise, every atrocity that the vile ingenuity of man could invent, and the Asiatic's special aptitude for the infliction of exquisite pain could perfect, had been practised upon the captives; till even the fury of the multitude and its love of spectacular horrors grew languid through satiety. With stupid uproar and laughter, the images of the Gods were broken and ground to powder; and

though the solidity of the temples defied the mob's efforts at demolition, an aimless rage was wreaked upon some of the more accessible of the sculptures.

The Spirit of Destruction reigned supreme. The people could only mangle and kill and break and wreck. Work, which had been the inspiration of the demigods' rule, had earned a special hatred from the multitude of whom it had been required. In the quarries, the half-lifted block was suffered to lie where it had fallen. The tracks leading to Angkor Wat were barred by abandoned drays, each freighted with a gigantic monolith, and to many of them were still tethered starving cattle, which no man had taken the trouble to release. Even the crops in the fields were neglected, for the prevailing sense of insecurity had robbed property of its value, and the masterless people were inspired by no collective foresight. The men whose lives had, from generation to generation, been ordered for them by a higher intelligence, in which all power of initiative, organisation, and command had been centred, had not yet learned to think or plan for themselves. Slat and a few others, as they watched Angkor Thom and its granaries go up to the heavens in flame, and as each succeeding day made the indolence and the folly of the people more clearly manifest, had looked deep enough into the shadows of the future to see therein the grinning phantom of famine; but, for the most part, men took no thought for

the morrow, ate, drank, and made merry, squandering lavishly all that, by looting and pillage, they had wrested for themselves out of the general wreck.

Old Slat smiled sardonically, licking his lips with an evil satisfaction, as he thought of the retribution which presently would descend upon those heedless, brainless revellers ; but not even his prevision of the miseries which awaited them could afford him lasting consolation. Work, which is the common lot of man, would reclaim them in the end, he knew ; but using necessity as its goad, it would drive them into the fields and the forests, seeking food—not into the unfinished temple, to make his dream come true.

His secret of the keystone had been discovered only to be lost ; and realising this, he was overcome with grief. It seemed to him that he had lived too long in a world of apes and fools.

Chun, followed by a little band of youngsters, who had attached themselves to him, entered the cloister in which old Slat was seated. He and his companions were dressed in bright, new silks ; and magnificent weapons, mounted in silver and gold, were thrust into their girdles and carried in their hands. During the past few days, the young and the energetic had found many chances of looting the objects most to their taste.

Chun came from the direction of the western courtyard, having scaled the perpendicular steps

which lead to the central portals of the upper temple, and was now making his way toward the inner shrine by the southern cloisters.

When he caught sight of Slat, he bade his fellows leave him, and squatted in silence by the side of the old man.

"Whither away?" asked the latter, in mechanical greeting.

Chun pointed with outstretched chin—peasant-fashion—in the direction of the interior of the upper temple.

"Yonder," he said.

"I might have known," said Slat bitterly, "that all this turmoil had its beginning, aye and its end, in a woman. Who is she, and what is her style and name?"

"She—but, in truth, I know not her name. She—she calls herself the Spirit of Destruction."

"Then she has broken loose, my son," said Slat.

Chun was on his feet in an instant, a prey to anxiety and dismay.

"When? Whither? Where has she gone?" he cried.

"Is she not abroad throughout the land—the Spirit of Destruction?" asked Slat sardonically.

"Yes: but I speak of this woman—this girl! Has she gone forth? Have you seen her?"

"Nay, I have not seen her," replied Slat. "In common with all men, I know that

someone abides in the inner shrine; and I, being mindful of your youth, my son, and of the insensate folly of youth, needed no man to tell me that, very surely, it is a woman. Yet even I did not know that she was an incarnation of the Spirit of Destruction. Indeed, it is very fitting and right and appropriate that such a one should in this hour usurp the innermost shrine of the Gods."

His mocking words were without merriment. Through them there breathed a spirit of disgust and indignation.

"For seven days and seven nights she has been there—alone," said Chun. "Even I have not been suffered to see her."

"Are you sure that she has been *alone*?" asked Slat.

Chun looked up at the old man, with the horror of an appalling suspicion dawning in his face.

"Yes," he said, in a voice which he vainly tried to make full of confidence. "My brethren, Sud and Muth, have kept watch and ward without the portals of the shrine since the moment that she entered them.

"*Without* the portals," echoed Slat.

"What know you?" asked Chun breathlessly.

"Only the treachery and the naughtiness of woman," said Slat. "Is she your leman?"

"No," said Chun, bowing low his head.

"Hath she other lovers—or a lover?" asked Slat pitilessly.

"No. At least, I—— In truth, I know not," faltered Chun.

"Whence comes she? Who are her parents? What is her caste? Is she a virgin?" asked Slat.

Chun was seated cross-legged, his forearms resting on his thighs, his clasped hands in his lap, his head bent low above them.

"Of her parentage I know nothing," he mumbled. "And she is no virgin. She is—she is—a—a woman of the temple."

Slat turned upon him at the word, with a snarl like that of some savage animal.

"And it is for this—for a woman born in harlotry and bred in whoredom—that you have brought our world crumbling in ruins about our ears! For this, for this!"

His words tripped and stumbled over one another in the intensity of his anger and indignation.

"And I, fool and dotard that I am, *I*, for this, have helped you! For *this* have suffered the shattering of my dream! Arrrgh! It lacked but this to put the crown of shame upon my grief!"

"Be still!" said Chun, sullenly, raising his head and looking wrathfully at the old man. "You speak of things of which you know nothing. She is not as other women."

Slat spat upon the flags in token of his disgust.

"When, since the world began, was a fool's

love like unto other women?" he exclaimed. "You have said enough. She is—of the temple; yet hath she denied herself to you. And—for seven days and nights, she has been—so she would have you believe—alone!"

He was shaken by uncontrollable laughter, mirthless, mocking, and vibrating with spite. There was, to him, keen satisfaction in the knowledge that, amid the general wreckage, it was not his dream alone that had been dispersed.

For a moment Chun's hands went out, as though with them he would have gripped the throat of the old man, and wrung the life from out of him. Then he drew them back, and leaped to his feet.

"It is a lie!" he cried. "You know her not. Now go I to prove how black is the lie you have uttered against her!"

He turned away, and with hurried steps, passed out of sight in the direction of the inner shrine.

His words were confident; but in his heart there was a secret, raging dread.

CHAPTER XV

THE INNER SHRINE

ON palm-leaf mats, spread before the big bronze portals of the inner shrine, Chun found his two loutish, peasant brothers sitting, chewing betel-quids, and talking listlessly. They had been camped there, day and night, for a week, and they had been enjoying themselves immensely. Their slack curiosity concerning the world-shaking events, which were taking place outside the temple, was satisfied by the news that from time to time filtered through to them; and, for the rest, they had attained suddenly to the realisation of an impossible ideal. *To eat and sleep only*—that, to these drudges of the house, and toilers in the quarry and the workyard, had been a phrase which from childhood, had seemed to enshrine for them the perfect existence; and, behold, here, seated or lying upon mats of luxurious softness, nothing was expected of them save eating and sleeping. It was incredible, no less. Also, to complete their well-being, an ill-favoured damsel of the temple—who had thought to grasp a golden opportunity by making to herself friends

of the brothers of the man of the hour—had taken up her abode with them; and they shared her favours—as they shared everything—with a placid, animal content.

Chun, without casting them a word or a look, as they pushed and sidled their sitting bodies across the mat, to make way for him, walked swiftly to the closed doors; withdrew the bolts noiselessly, with firm hands; pulled one of the portals wide; stepped into the dim interior of the shrine; and clanged the heavy sheet of bronze to behind him.

He heard a man's startled exclamation, and a girl's laugh.

He had an instant vision of two seated figures, with the low, stone altar rising behind them, surmounted by vessels and lamps of gold and silver, grouped about the feet of posturing, fantastic images. He saw both leap erect, and one—the taller—feel for and draw a sword; but Chun was too quick for him. In a transport of murderous rage, which had in it all the super-human strength and violence of insanity, he flung himself upon the man, and bore him to the ground, crashing down upon him with fingers buried to the knuckles in his throat. The drawn sword fell clattering on the flags.

Chun was conscious of arms that strove to throw him off; of fists that smote at him with blows that he did not feel; of a body that writhed and floundered beneath him, in impotent efforts to win free. Through the

flogging of his heart-beats, and his own laboured breathing, he heard the agonised pumping of his enemy's bursting lungs.

Again and again, he lifted the man's head from the ground, to bring it down upon the flags with a dull, stunning impact; and as his own set teeth ground against one another audibly, in the intense concentration of all his physical forces, he was aware that each pang which he inflicted upon his adversary found an answer within him in a throb of passionate satisfaction.

Quickly the strength of his writhing victim ebbed. To Chun it seemed, as resistance slackened, and only the convulsive heaving of the man's lungs maintained its violence, that he could feel the vitality oozing from his opponent, like fluid expressed from a sponge; and elated by the knowledge that the end of the fight was near, he lifted the limp head, and brought it smashing down upon the flags again, more remorselessly than before.

At last, the frantic efforts to draw breath—which mechanically the man's body had been making, independently of his will—became more infrequent, more feeble, till in a sob they ended; and with one more shattering blow of the head against the stones, Chun cast his enemy aside, and rose stiffly from above him.

In a silence, broken only by the panting and floundering of the combatants, he had killed this man with his hands.

He stood still, for a moment, gazing down at the dead body. He was spent, not only by the tremendous physical exertion, but by the insanity of anger, blent with many emotions, which for a space had endowed him with invincible force; and standing thus, gasping loudly, dazed and giddy, he was conscious of a sensation of utter exhaustion of body and mind; and also that his hands were paining him acutely.

Then something seemed to snap inside him, and he rolled over, fainting, and collapsed on the flags above the body of the man whom he had slain.

It was her voice that, from an infinite distance, hailed him from the heart of a shadowy world. Feebly he groped his way through the darkness in the direction of the sound.

Presently he became aware that he was lying on the ground with his head softly pillowed, and that her voice hovered above him.

It was distant still, but momentarily it drew nearer. It was showering upon him all manner of endearing epithets; and with closed eyes, he lay motionless, consciously to enjoy his dream.

It had visited him before, many times—this dream; and he had learned to dread waking from it: but now it seemed to possess a reality never equalled in the past.

Yet, he was afraid to open his eyes.

There was a taste, as of blood, in his mouth, and his limbs seemed weighted with lead; but all around him there was suffused a fragrance which he had learned to associate with her.

The soft object upon which his head was pillowed, moved slightly, and the sweat was wiped from his brow, gently, with a silk handkerchief. A hand caressed his hair. The low, deep, musical voice wooed him with tender phrases.

Very slowly, and still expecting that the illusion would be immediately dispelled, he opened his eyes and looked upward.

She was bending above him, her face half averted and dimly seen beneath the soft masses of her hair. Anxiety, curiosity, and a mockery that was half-doubtful, half-alluring, peeped from her eyes. Her lips whispered his name.

He closed his eyes and lay still, too spent to move; but feebly, he pressed, with his swollen and wrenched fingers, the little hand which she slipped between them.

His rage against her had ceased to move him. He was conscious only of a great content.

Too exhausted and inert for thought, he passed again into oblivion; but, even in sleep, he maintained his grip upon her hand. To the last he was haunted by the fear that he would wake to find her gone; yet his exhausted body demanded rest, and would not be denied.

When he, at last, recovered consciousness, it

was only by an effort that he was able to recall what had befallen him, and where he was.

The night had crept up, and the shrine was lighted only by a smoking oil-lamp, set upon the low altar-stone. It threw a faint garish glare, flickering and uncertain, upon the lower limbs of images, whereof the bodies were plunged in shadow, and upon the figure of the girl, seated placidly upon a mat at his feet.

She was looking at him, steadily and calmly, as she had often looked at him ; and at the sight of her, Chun struggled up into a sitting posture.

She rose, without a word ; vanished into the gloom, and instantly returned, bearing rice and a curry-bowl or two, which she set before him. She produced a brass vessel, with a funnel-shaped mouth, and a little silver cup, fashioned in the likeness of half a cocoanut-shell and filled with water. This she poured over the hand which Chun mechanically extended. He noticed that his fingers were swollen and discoloured, and that they were stiff and sore. Beneath his nails, the quicks showed black with suffused blood.

“Eat!” said the girl.

She spoke with her accustomed accent of command, and mechanically Chun obeyed her. He had not realised how badly he stood in need of food. Ravenously he devoured the rice and the savoury mess of curry ; and then drank deeply of the water she handed him in the little silver bowl. Still in silence, he suffered her to

pour the ablution for his fingers, and to remove the plates and eating-vessels.

She opened the bronze doors a little, to thrust them out into the vestibule ; then reseated herself near him. She bent grave, questioning eyes upon his face, and before her gaze his own fell.

The recollection that, during all these days, she had duped and fooled him, welled up suddenly within him, filling him with pain and keen distress. The emotions that tore at him were more akin to shame, than to anger. It was to him—in some illogical sort—as though, not she, but something outside her—something unconnected with her personality—had wronged and outraged him—betraying his trust, mocking his love, and torturing him with an insanity of jealousy.

“You—you harboured *him* ! All these days and nights, while I did loyally your bidding, you gave him refuge here—*you*——”

She silenced his stuttering speech with a gesture full of weariness.

“Must you speak of him?” she asked plaintively. “Now that you are rested, now that you have eaten and drunk your fill, will you not a little think of me—who so tenderly have cared for you—and remove that carrion?”

With a little shudder of dislike, real or affected, she indicated something that was only a patch of blackness, more black than the surrounding shadows.

Chun, checked and abashed, as this woman

alone had ever the power to abash and check him, rose at once, and dragged into the feeble lamp-light the body of the man whom he had killed. It was already stiff, and the face with its swollen and discoloured features, the protruding, purple tongue, and starting eyes, fixed and glazed, looked up at him with an air of horrible, waggish mockery.

In spite of its disfigurement, Chun recognised Chandra Dass, the young Brahman whom he and the other quarrymen had been wont to name "the Arrogant One"; and he was conscious of a distinct feeling of relief—he who had lost his faith in the Gods, and had led the onslaught upon their twice-born servants—because his rival had not been a *Sudra*.

Calling to Sud and Muth to aid him, he drew the body out into the darkness of the vestibule.

"Take this thing, and cast it over the parapet into the court below," he said to them.

Baguan Dass and three or four of the aged priests who had been captured with him—Chun had saved them from the mob, claiming them for his own, on the plea that they might yet be needed to guard the Sacred Sword if Indra should return it into human keeping—came out of the shadows and gazed silently at the dead body of their kinsman.

Baguan Dass, seizing a torch and stooping low, examined closely the face and neck. Then, drawing himself erect, he looked at Chun with something resembling pride in his eyes.

"I gave you sound muscles, son of mine!" he said.

They were the first words that had passed his lips since he had been made captive; and involuntarily, Chun bowed himself before his father.

He turned back, and re-entered the shrine, closing the heavy doors behind him.

"Come!" whispered a voice from the shadows. The light had been extinguished during his absence.

He groped blindly, till a little hand found his, and drew him forward. A soft laugh, musical and hushed, sounded close to him; and in an instant, the girl was in his arms, her cheek against his cheek.

"Ah," she whispered softly. "Now I know that you love me; and you, too—perhaps—a little—I love; for you are cruel and brave and very strong. For a moment, almost, I feared you."

And again a happy laugh came from her lips.

Chun, straining her to his heart, could find no voice in which to answer. All her maltreatment of him, all her tyrannies, all her deception were forgotten; and with a little shudder of self-loathing, he realised that the fire of his passion was inflamed, rather than quenched, by the knowledge that other men had greatly desired her beauty.

But he had no time for thought. He knew, at last, the supreme ecstasy of a dream come true.

CHAPTER XVI

SEEDS

ONE afternoon, a little before the last of the daylight died, Chun was seated alone at a spot just without the main portals of the upper temple. To the right and left of him, the narrow abutting platform flanked the massive walls, and spread away to the angles of the building, where other porches projected, crowned high overhead by their tremendous domes. At his feet, far below, and already plunged in shadow, lay the courtyard, with its twin guard-houses indistinctly seen. Beyond the huddle of roofs on its further side, which formed Chun's immediate foreground, and the long, distant line of the exterior cloisters, the forest—pitch-black in the dusk—rose in sombre, broken wave-crests against the sullen reds and purples of the sunset. On the horizon to the north-west, the waters of the Great Lake were visible, glinting with a dull and ruddy sheen as they faintly reflected the glow in the sky.

Chun was deep in thought ; but remotely he was conscious of an insistent, half-heard commotion within the dark recesses of the Wat.

With a tumultuous, shrill shrieking, and a hurried beat and flutter of innumerable wings, the bats were assembling for their nightly exodus.¹

In their myriads they came, from every dark cranny of the temple, flocking to the porches, there to hang in dense, ragged festoons and fringes, till the carved wooden ceilings were black, as though grown upon by some foul, fungoid lichen.

Presently half a dozen adventurous pioneers flitted out, described wide circles on noiseless wings, and flung themselves back into shelter. Looking over his shoulder, Chun could see the interior of the porch alive with bats—thousands depending limply, like sodden leaves in some enchanted forest; others in motion so swift that his eyes could not follow them in the uncertain light; while the ceiling, in patches, was alternately covered by them, as by a sudden black eruption, and as suddenly and mysteriously cleansed.

And all the while, the sound of the creatures' frenzied twitterings and squeakings, and the stir and flutter of their wings, increased in volume, disturbing the solemn silence of the sunset hour.

Then, abruptly—as though each unit composing it acted in obedience to some inaudible command—the bat-army started forth upon its nightly foray to the fly- and mosquito-infested borders of Tonlé-Sap.

¹ Note 7.

From the main entrance, before which Chun had his seat, and simultaneously from every other portal of the Wat, bats poured in columns, in continuous streams, in jets, in bunches—their numbers past all counting. Over Chun's head they came in great clusters and gushes, that broke up magically, each individual swinging and veering in its panic-driven flight, each troop fanning out rapidly, till the whole sky, in the direction of the lake, was dotted with their hurrying battalions.

Theirs was the speed of terror, for enemies awaited them—big, tawny, white-headed fish-kites, little grey eagles, sparrow-hawks, owls, and birds of prey of many varieties. Some hovered above the huge domes of the temple; some floated, in wide sweeps and circles, poised on outstretched, motionless wings; others sat perched here and there on roof-ridge or carving, in calm, secure anticipation. Then, when the moment of exodus arrived, all became instantly animated by an extraordinary vital energy. The fish-kites and the owls flapped and floundered through the scattering throngs of bats, with difficulty securing a single victim; but the hawks and the eagles never failed. Like plummet they dropped into those nimble multitudes, plunging to strike, and a soft crunching sound and the snick of frail bones was heard; then they soared swiftly upward, to plunge and strike again. All was enacted with amazing quickness, and in silence, for the bats

had ceased their squeakings when their flight began; and almost in the flick of an eyelid they had vanished into the shadows, and their persecutors flew hither and thither, slowly, with full talons.

A moment more, and the darkness had descended. The nightly toll had been paid; and the bats, released from fear, were free, till the dawn, to feast joyously upon a yet mightier host of tiny winged creatures, around the swampy borders of the lake.¹

The sight was one which Chun had watched many scores of times, and always with a certain amused appreciation; but now—so much had the range of his ideas been expanded by his connection with recent events—even things old and familiar wore for him a new aspect. They set in motion trains of thought which they had never formerly suggested to his mind.

Thus, as he now sat gazing out into the darkness and following, in imagination, the hosts of bats upon their predatory way, he was struck suddenly by the grotesque resemblance between human and natural history; and fell to arraigning the appalling cruelty of the scheme which suffers the individual life to subsist only so long as it pays a ransom by inflicting numberless deaths. An arresting conception of the universe, new to him, flashed upon his mental vision. He saw it as one vast slaughter-house in which—without breathing-space or

¹ *Vide* note 7.

intermission—blood-guilty survivors, after a lifetime of bloodshed, came, each in his appointed hour, to a bloody end. It seemed to him that, even as he sat there, earth and air and water quivered and vibrated with the horrible turmoil of that eternal, selfish carnage—the struggle for life, prolific of death; that the stillness of the night was like a mighty door, closed before him, to shut out from hearing the wails of the death-dealers who, at last, by death were stricken. He beheld all animate creatures—great and small, weak and strong, ferocious and timid, old and young—inspired by a detestable, insatiable egoism; forced to kill that they might live; forced, too, in the end, to yield up in agony the life which they had fed with the mortal pangs of others.

Chun hid his face in his hands, as though he sought to hide from sight the pictures his sudden conception had evoked. It was, to him, as though the whole universe had been smitten, before his very eyes, by some monstrous malady, and had dissolved about him into a struggling mass of putrescence.

In that moment the relative proportion of things, as he had always seen them, became strangely transformed. That which, for him, had filled all the world—the tyranny of the Brahmans, the revolt of the *Sudras*—lost its magnitude. What were the long slavery, the bloody and triumphant revolution but mere

casual manifestations of the same inexorable law—passing phases in the fierce fight for existence, in which, by blood and suffering, a transient victory was secured, ere the final defeat of annihilation inevitably befell?

Other thoughts came hurrying in the train of these.

What were the weapons which the accumulated experience of their kind had taught men to use, in order a little to postpone the sure, ultimate destruction? Faith, hope, the charity that works and schemes for others, forethought, combination, discipline. But how should these find place in a land where fear and reverence lay dead?

Chun recalled the elation which had been his when, intoxicated by the sense of freedom inspired in him by his new-found atheism, he had felt himself to be emancipated from the thralldom of superstition by which his fellows were enslaved. Yet, even then, he had been conscious that, with the passing away of the faith of his fathers, something very precious was vanishing from the earth. Now, with vision made more clear by a riper knowledge of men and things, he realised that that which had been lost was not only precious, but essential. Everywhere the images of the Gods were broken on the altar-stones. Save for Baguan Dass and the few aged priests who had been saved with him, the last of the demigods had been done to death. Angkor Thom lay in ashes. The

surrounding country had been pillaged, and property wantonly demolished, that an idle populace might gorge themselves with food, and slake a stupid thirst for destruction. The fear and awe inspired by the Gods, the reverence and obedience which the demigods had exacted, were alike forgotten ; and Chun, looking around upon the ruin he had wrought, perceived that without these restraints his fellows were foolish and ruthless as the beasts that perish.

But how replace that which had been riven from the hearts and minds of men ? How bring order out of this universal chaos ? How avert the famine which must surely fall as a scourge upon the people in punishment for their follies and their sins ?

These were the problems which now beset Chun's mind, sleeping and waking ; and as yet to them he could find no answer.

Old Slat came out of the porch of the temple, and seated himself on the narrow platform at Chun's side.

"You gaze into the dark, my son," he croaked. "There is only darkness into which to gaze. All is dark, dark, dark."

"The moon will rise ere long," said Chun, refusing to take the other's meaning.

Slat gave vent to a low laugh that was like a snarl.

"This is a darkness upon which no moon will rise," he said. "Though there be no gods,

yet are the Gods angry; and presently they will strike, with famine and with pestilence, as is their godly way. The demigods are no more; yet will the people be driven to toil, as of old, by the task-masters who never die—by necessity and by hunger; but, ere that befall, more folk than the Brahmans ever slew will perish, by reason of their own folly and idleness. It is magnificent, in truth, my son, this ruin which you have wrought; and wisely do the wise fools name you Liberator of the *Sudras*, Benefactor of our Kind!"

Chun turned upon him angrily.

"Be still!" he said. "It was not I who put folly into the hearts of fools."

"And yet," said Slat, musingly. "I dreamed that it was you, my son, who spoke to the people from the summit of the Ba Phun, telling them that the Gods were dead, that the demigods must die, flogging the live souls of them to an insanity of rage. Bravely did you pull down, in a day, that which had been builded in an eternity of time; and now that all our world lies shattered at your feet, you sit here and gaze into the darkness which is of your making."

"The people heard me then," Chun said. "Now they will not listen. The Gods are dead, the demigods have perished, and our folk to-day are masterless."

"Aye, they are masterless," croaked Slat, "and even if the demigods were restored to

life, the people would no longer serve them. Remains, then, only the Gods."

"But they too are dead. On the altars their images lie broken. Our people slaughter cattle in the holy places, camp in the shrines, and defile the cloisters with their revelries," said Chun.

"Aye," said Slat again. "The old gods are cast down from their thrones; but in the secret heart of man there lurks always some buried seeds of worship."

A deep voice spoke suddenly from the shadows of the porch.

"Even the cult of the High Gods failed to root out from the heart of the people the cursed heresy of the Snake," it said.

Both Chun and Slat turned about, and saw old Baguan Dass squatting at the head of the low stone steps which led into the interior of the temple. Even in the darkness his full, white beard was visible, covering his chest.

"Men said that the king was wont to visit the Seven-headed One nightly in her secret shrine,"¹ said Chun, suddenly reminded of the superstitious belief which, for centuries, had been current among the Khmers, "and that she appeared to him in the likeness of a beautiful woman, and gave to him much wise counsel concerning the affairs of the kingdom. Also, that until, at the stroke of two fairy gongs, she vanished from his sight, not even the first queen was suffered to approach. I have heard many

¹ Note 8.

of our women say that, were they the queen, they would not have suffered any damsel, human or divine, to withhold them at night-times from the sleeping-mats of their men ; yet, if folk speak truly, the queen was forced to restrain her impatience till the Snake Spirit had had her will of the king, and if he failed her, some storm or fire or pestilence forthwith befell.”¹

“Lies! All lies!” growled Baguan Dass. “Lies devised by fools. As the holy books relate, the Snake is the symbol of the *kundalim*—the coiled-up energy, which is divine. From it is sprung the cosmic force that is in all things. In man it hath its abiding-place at the base of the spinal-column, in a triangular plexus near the sacrum. It is the aim of the *Yogi* to arouse from its slumber this coiled-up force, to lure it step by step up the spinal-column to the thousand-petalled lotus, which is the plexus of the brain. Then—then at last—the *Yogi* hath at his command all the cosmic energy ; attains to perfect illumination ; and shares their divinity with the Gods.”²

“But young men,” mocked Slat, “are content with the possession of that energy, whereof the quality depends more on desire than on meditation. This son of thine—this saviour of the *Sudras* and destroyer of his father’s race—hath more use for a snake turned wanton, than for any coiled-up force that, worming its slow way up the spinal-column, wins at the last to a power

¹ Note 8.

² *Vide* note 9.

that rules the world. So it hath ever been, since young blood first was young; so it will ever be, while a wanton winks a wicked eye, tempting men to turn their backs on duty."

Again Chun flung round at the old man, with flashing eyes and angry words upon his lips; but now yet another voice spoke suddenly from the interior of the Wat. It was that of his brother Muth.

"She bids you come," it said; and forthwith Chun sprang to his feet, and with quick, glad steps, hurried in the direction of the inner shrine.

CHAPTER XVII

THE THRONE OF THE SNAKE

CHUN passed swiftly through the passages and courtyards of the Wat, his head held high, his shoulders swinging a little, his gait lithe and buoyant—every movement of his body and limbs betokening the immense reserves of physical energy that were latent within him. Youth and health were his, endowing him with courage and with force; yet was his mind freighted with almost intolerable burdens.

The sights, of which he was a daily witness, told an uncompromising story of the utter demoralisation of the people. The ceaseless jibes and taunts of old Slat stirred into a torturing restlessness his sense of responsibility for all that had befallen. The foresight with which he was cursed forbade him to ignore the sure calamities that lay ambushed in the future, by which the populace would presently be beset, if nought could be done to allay or check the dementia which had seized upon them.

The necessity for action was imperative, if the mob were to be saved from the results of their

own folly; and in existing circumstances, he alone could act effectively. Not an instant, he knew, was to be lost: and this knowledge was like a goad, driven deep into the soul of him. Yet, despite the strength of his conviction of the extreme urgency of the need, he felt himself to be bound by fetters of inaction and bewilderment—not knowing where to begin, what to do, nor how even to set about devising a remedy for the evils he so clearly saw.

His anxieties, in combination with the certainty that immediate measures must be taken to control the general madness, and the inability to hit upon any effective line of action, occasioned a suspense so unbearable that he was often tempted by a futile longing for escape. The jungles lay open to him, and in them, by the aid of his two brothers, he could fashion some sort of home in which to pass uneventfully the remainder of his days, freed from all responsibilities, save those of the primitive bread-winner. The idea was full of allurements. But forthwith there rose before his eyes the face of the girl who still inhabited the inner shrine, and he knew the vision to be vain.

For while his thought was beset by fears for the land whose people he had plunged into the welter of anarchical revolution, Chun had himself been accumulating many emotional experiences.

Upon the night which had seen the life torn

by his hands out of the struggling body of Chandra Dass, he had won his heart's desire—and forthwith had found his desire unfulfilled. Then and since, this girl had given herself to him with a passionate delight which had in it the violence of frenzy. She had whispered to him exquisite things of that love which is of the flesh; revelling in her own fastidious enjoyment of its subtleties; dazzling him with the delicate artistry of her conceptions and discoveries; and she had worked upon the desire in his blood, as a skilled player draws music from his instrument: but throughout, it had seemed to him that she was taking—not giving. There was in her relation to him nothing of the subordination of the woman to the man who has possessed her; and he knew his possession of her to be incomplete. Her body was his, as—he winced at the knowledge—it had been the plaything of many; but the heart of her, the soul of her—that which he most coveted—the real woman within her, continued to elude him.

This he knew; and the knowledge lent to their union an element which he felt to be degrading. In some strange way, which he lacked the wit to explain or completely to understand, it caused their respective positions to become transposed—reduced him to the condition of the wanton; and left her untouched, save by the pleasure he afforded her, and the open triumph which she displayed in his moral debasement.

Yet, nightly, at her bidding, he visited her, drawn irresistibly by the hypnotic force which emanated from her; and if the summons were delayed, he plumbed the depths of misery. He was suspicious of her always—jealous even of his loutish brethren who kept guard without her door; and she had forced him, not once, but many times, to listen to every odious detail of her experiences. She seemed to extract a morbid delight from the act of impressing upon his imagination every circumstance of degradation which had gone to the making of her life as a woman of the temple. It was as though she could not sufficiently insist upon and glory in her own defilement, since it made his own subjection to her the more defiling.

Chun, writhing body and soul, had no will but her will. The crown of his suffering was the knowledge that he would forgive her any wickedness, any deception, any infidelity—as he had forgiven her her love-passages with Chandra Dass.

For Chun loved her with the one love, the great love, which is not of the flesh; and though his desire of her was an enslaving passion, it was upon the elusive, wayward soul of her that his heart was set.

They sat together, in the half-light of oil-lamps, upon the soft mats which were piled upon the floor at the foot of the altar. For near an hour the silence had been unbroken—the girl sitting

cross-legged, elbows on knees, chin supported in the hollow of her joined hands, her eyes fixed upon the shadows with an unseeing stare—Chun, motionless beside her, hardly daring to draw breath, lest the faint sound should disturb and irritate her.

He had become used to these periods of complete inertia which, with this girl, frequently followed upon paroxysms of violent emotion ; and inevitably they led his thoughts into the past, and recalled to his mind similar moods, which he had noted in her, when, early in their intercourse, she had stolen forth to meet him near the steps of the lower temple. He controlled his limbs, even the expression of his features ; but the comprehension which now was his, set him wincing and writhing inwardly.

At last she spoke.

“Well? Is there no news? Here am I, penned in this hateful place, like some captive animal, while you go abroad and take your pleasure ; and when, after long delay, you come to me, you have no word to say.”

“I thought——” began Chun ; but with an impatient gesture she interrupted him.

“I have no use for your thought—nor, indeed, for anything that is you. I want to hear what folk are doing, what men say, what is befalling—out there, beyond these deadening walls.”

“There is no news, save ill news,” said Chun wearily. “The people are mad and drunken

with folly. They eat and drink only, feasting upon the fruit of their pillage. The crops rot in the fields, for no man will work. Those whom the fires have rendered houseless have crowded into the cloisters of the temples, or have made for themselves sheds in all the open spaces. Each man has collected for his own use that upon which he can lay his hands, and many have destroyed, in their wantonness, all that they cannot carry away. For the moment there is plenty to be had without toil, and men use it wastefully, as though it would last for ever. There is no law, no order, no forethought, no hope—only a masterless people who blindly compass their own destruction.”

“And you, O Liberator of the *Sudras*!—as you would have me believe that fools name you—you sit here, like a weeping woman, wringing your hands and making moan! Why do you not *do* something?”

“What can I do?” asked Chun, despairingly. “I tell you the people are smitten with madness. They will not listen. They care only for their food and drink. And there is worse behind—the Thai! They have beaten our army. Presently Angkor will be filled with the hosts of the routed—and how shall we feed them too?”

“Perchance, among the leaders of the army, there will be found a *man*—one who can curb and rule these casteless wretches.”

“I doubt it,” said Chun wearily. “The army

has suffered defeat ; its chiefs will be discredited ; and already, men say, the warriors have risen up and destroyed the Brahmans who were with them. In the day of uproar, the people hearkened to my words. When I led, they followed willingly. I——”

“You!” she exclaimed with infinite scorn. “Why should they yield obedience to you, who are of low caste, like themselves?”

“But I, too, am a Brahman,” said Chun, with a spurt of pride.

“A Brahman!” she sneered. “Aye, a Brahman, conceived in shame and littered in the gutter! ’Tis not to Brahmans such as you that the people bow down in worship.”

“Our folk worship no longer,” said Chun. “But the blood of the rulers has still some magic when it stirs in the veins and the brain of a man. Though they knew it not, it was because I was a Brahman that the people followed me : yet, to-day they will not follow.”

“I blame them not at all,” she snapped at him.

For a space there was silence ; then Chun spoke again.

“I fear that the Thai—the Barbarians—will follow hard on the heels of the army. It passeth the wit of man to forecast what will then befall.”

“I see clearly,” she said. “Many will perish ; many will endure slavery ; and we others—women-folk, who possess beauty and are skilled

in the enchantment of the hearts of men—we shall get new lovers. Among them—who knows—perchance, here and there, one or another of us may happen upon a *man*. For myself, it seems to me, there is little to fear; and anything will be better than this burial in a tomb while life is still quick in me.”

“That,” said Chun, with calm conviction, “is a dream that can never come true.”

“Why?” she flashed at him.

“Why?” echoed Chun. “Because, ere I would suffer you to fall into the possession of any other living man, I—even I, who sit here beside you—would crush the life out of you, as, before your eyes, I tore it out of your lover, Chandra Dass.”

She turned her face to him with a smile, and putting up one little hand, softly caressed his face.

“I like that!” she whispered. “Moreover, I believe you would do that which you say. There are times when almost I am persuaded that even you are a man.”

“I utter no jest,” said Chun grimly.

“I know. That is why I love you,” she said, still smiling. “There is much of the brute in you, for all the ease with which I master you; and no man is man who is not part brute. Believe me, who have known many men.”

He turned upon her furiously.

“Be still!” he shouted.

“What evil have I done?” she asked mock-

ingly, simulating terror. "I did but say that I have known many men—and how should it be otherwise? Was I not a wanton of the temple? And think you that such as I learn nought concerning the sex that uses us for its pleasure?"

"I will not listen," cried Chun, pressing his hands against his ears.

She twined her fingers about his, and drew them to her lap.

"I have done," she said. "But there is more that I would hear. "What do men say of *me*?"

"They know nought concerning you," said Chun.

At once her face was eloquent of her displeasure.

"How mean you that they know nought of me?" she asked. "Do they not whisper that the *Liberator of the Sudras*"—she paused to laugh disdainfully—"repairs nightly to the innermost shrine of the Wat, even as of old the king was wont to visit the incarnate Spirit who had her seat upon the Throne of the Snake? Do they not tell one another that Indra hath returned the Sword into thy keeping—that it too is within the central sanctuary—that Baguan Dass, and the priest-dogs who follow him, are its wardens, sitting without the portals, guarding it from afar, lest aught of ill overtake the sacred weapon?"

"May be they say these things," said Chun

stupidly, "but in my hearing they are not said."

"And, therefore, you fancy that no such talk is current!" the girl exclaimed, with intense scorn. "I was wrong: you *are* a man! No woman would be so dull as not to *know*—words or no words."

"But you . . .?" cried Chun, turning upon her savagely, his eyes ablaze with jealousy and suspicion. "How do you know? You, who are hidden here in the very heart of seclusion? With whom have you had speech?"

The girl returned his gaze with a look of amusement and pity.

"I know, because I am a woman, not a mere dolt of a man. Also, mayhap, I have overheard the talk of those two clowns, your brothers, and the oafs who come to visit them, and of that foul slut who is their leman. I tell you that all Angkor is a-buzz with rumour—when men are idle, then do their tongues most wag—and already the people weave legends around you, and (though they know it not) around *me*, too. You only are deaf to it, and need a woman to tell you that which hourly is shouted in your ears."

For a few moments after she ceased speaking, Chun sat still and in silence. Then, suddenly, he smote his thigh with the palm of his right hand, and looking up at her—his face alive with excitement—gazed into her mocking eyes.

"Behold! That points the way. The Sword! The Spirit of the Snake! The worship, more ancient than the ritual of the

Brahmans, brought back to life once more! Our people must be yoked to an idea, to a faith, to a belief in high, invisible Powers, if the order and discipline, which alone can save them, are to be revived. In this lies salvation, for them, for us, for . . ."

"My friend," she said quietly, laying a hand upon his arm. "Have I not been telling you this for a good hour past? Be not unduly puffed up because, at the long last, you too have grasped the obvious. For days I have sought by hint and by suggestion to kindle this thought in your brain; and only now has the slow tinder caught the flame."

"Where is the Sword?" asked Chun, too much excited by the idea which had taken possession of him to pay any heed to her taunts.

"It is in *my* keeping," she replied, calmly, emphasising the pronoun.

"But you must give it into my hands," cried Chun. "It is indeed a true saying that in that sacred blade the mystic Spirit of our Land abides. Now, in the hour of our extreme necessity, that Spirit shall save our people! It was because the Sword had passed from out the keeping of the Brahmans, that the populace rose against them, and their power was brought to nought. It is with that Sword in my clasp that I will bring order out of chaos, peace and good government out of anarchy, and with it will I establish a new despotism. I have hungered and thirsted after liberty; but men are fools,

and our people know not the difference between freedom and license. They are not ripe for self-rule; for the will of the blind and selfish majority means, in the end, the destruction of all. I have seen it—with mine own eyes have I beheld it. A masterless people are like a herd of maddened cattle, that crush and gore themselves and one another; but I and the Sword will be their master."

"Have done!" cried the girl. "Cease your babble, and listen, for a space, to me."

Chun was silent in an instant, and sat still with his eyes fixed upon her face. For a while she, too, was motionless, and her eyes had in them a far-away look. She was immersed in thought. Across her face there flitted that strange, fateful expression which gave to the small and mobile features so extraordinary an air of age and unearthly wisdom.

"You, in your blindness, have seen in me nought but a woman," she said, "and a woman I have been to you and to others: yet, in part only am I of this world. In the beginning, when first I appeared to you at the brink of the Brahmans' bathing-tank, for a moment light was vouchsafed to you, and kneeling at my feet, you worshipped me as an incarnation of the Shining Ones. *Then* I rejected your adoration, for the appointed hour had not yet come: but search your thought. Who inspired the revolt against the self-styled demigods? Who exposed the vanity of the lies which were as a rampart

reared around them? Who freed you from the yoke of superstition, beneath which your neck was bowed, and using you as an instrument, wrought with you more greatly than you dreamed? Who compelled you to seize the Sacred Sword of Indra, and breathed into you the courage to brave even the Gods? Whose hand has led you, as a mother leads her child, supporting, guiding, coercing, restraining? Is it not mine? And is this, think you, the work of a mere wanton of the temple?

"Search your thought once more. Am I as other women? Do you, even in your secret heart, judge me as others you would judge? Am I not above and beyond all law? Could aught that I might do be, in your eyes, so sinful as to overpass the limits of forgiveness? My body of flesh and blood has lain in your arms; but have you touched the spirit that makes of it its habitation? Can defilement defile me, or degradation degrade? Hath not the divine in me triumphed always over that in me which is of the dust—the common clay wherefrom mankind is fashioned?"

Chun sat gazing at her fascinated, at first with a startled and incredulous surprise which, as she proceeded, gave gradual way to doubt, to wonder, and, at the last, to the excitement of conviction. The hypnotic power of suggestion, which she had exercised over his mind from the earliest moment of their intercourse, paralysed his reason. The glamour which she cast over

herself, over him, over all his world, blinded him now, as always it had blinded him. While he was held by the spell of those strange eyes, while the music of her voice set every nerve in him vibrating, faith was easy; the impossible became credible, the miraculous became merged into the normal. For Chun was not only a man who had surrendered his very soul into the keeping of a woman; he was also an Asiatic peasant, and, in spite of his scorn of the ancient Gods whose impotence had been made manifest to him, there lurked in his mind embers of belief in the supernatural, which awaited but a breath to fan them into flame. Her words, as he listened to them, seemed to flash light into the obscurity by which his vision had been dimmed. They resolved mysteries of which he had been remotely conscious—made clear much which had baffled him, not only in connection with public events, but with regard to his own psychological experiences. Unknown to himself, the knowledge that he had been enslaved, not by a woman, but by an incarnation of divinity, was as balm to his wounded pride.

"Do you not know it for the truth?" she was saying. "Have you not felt it a thousand times? Have you not caught of it, now and again, countless subtle hints? Have you not been conscious of it always—deep down in the hidden recesses of your heart? Speak!"

"Aye," he responded, bowing down his head. "Aye. I think that, from the very beginning, I have known it."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HEART OF THE MULTITUDE

THE chill hour of reaction, after the uproar and excitement of recent events, had come to the people of Angkor ; and men who had had much to lose, had time now to look about them and to make a reckoning of their loss. These, of necessity, were in a minority, but possessing more of intelligence and enlightenment than their fellows, their thought leavened that of the mob, and they formed a nucleus, around which malcontents instinctively gathered. They were traders, mostly, who had always held the quarry-folk in deep disdain, and hating the Brahmans mainly because they were tax-gatherers who levied heavy dues on merchandise, and because, from the height of their fabled divinity, the demigods looked down upon all men who were not of the twice-born caste, drawing scant distinction between class and class. To many of these it had seemed that, if once the Brahmans were extirpated, the dominant power would pass, naturally, into their hands. Now they stood aghast, gazing upon the ashes of their

homes and property, watching the *Sudras* plundering and pillaging unchecked, and yet not daring to stir a finger in their own defence, lest the bloody fate which had overtaken the Brahmans should fall also upon them.

There were others—well-to-do men of the higher castes—who, though they had not shared the divinity claimed by the demigods, had enjoyed, under their rule, some measure of popular deference and respect. These were now outraged to find themselves merged in the general equality; yet dared raise no protest, less worse things should befall them.

Among the people, too—even among its dregs—there were many who still held the ancient Gods in awful reverence; and to these, the iconoclastic fury of the mob was as a madness where-with heaven had smitten the land, which presently would be punished by famine, earthquake, and pestilence. These crept timidly through the crowds of disorderly folk, momentarily expecting a catastrophe, and gazing fearfully into one another's eyes.

The time was one of signs and marvels. It had witnessed the sudden shattering of the tremendous myth, whereby the Brahmans, for so long, had exercised dominion over the souls of men, and had compelled the labour of the multitude; and to many this was a miracle, inspiring awe and wonder and fear, but in no wise shaking their faith in the innate divinity of the demigods whom a sacrilegious mob had

done to death. It was felt that in an hour in which such things had been suffered to come to pass, the bounds of the impossible were flung wide; that no cataclysm could any longer occasion surprise. Men whispered together, foretelling the imminence of the world's ending.

And even among the quarrymen, who still, like their fellows Sud and Muth, found much delight in idleness, in gorging themselves with stolen food, in sleep, and in love-making, a spirit of fear and unrest was awakening. They were possessed by something of the uneasy feeling of the schoolboy who plays truant. They could not, in their innermost hearts, win to a secure belief in their own emancipation. They, who for so many generations had been enslaved, still looked about involuntarily, searching for a master to whom to yield obedience. Since, as a class, they had always hated the merchants and property-owners, envying their comparative ease and luxury, they would recognise no leader among them; but, as Chun himself had said, it was the Brahman in him, not the quarryman, whom his fellow-workers followed. They saw in him, ostensibly, one of themselves; but sub-consciously they detected a difference, and to this, instinctively and unreasoningly, they did obeisance.

Also, though with savage pleasure they had slaughtered the Brahmans, and had smashed with stupid shouts and laughter the beautiful images of the Gods, each man among them

craved secretly for something beyond humanity to which to offer prayer. Already many of them had fashioned little phalli of wood or stone, and adored the spirit of generation with uncouth, natural symbolism, hoping thereby to increase the vigour of their own bodies, weakened by unaccustomed debauch. Others worshipped the seven-headed Cobras, whose effigies were repeated endlessly among the Khmer temples; and shreds and tags of half-forgotten superstition were recalled to mind, and whispered from man to man.

Gradually the rumour spread among the people that some wonder was about to befall. Men, who all their lives had dragged worn-out bodies to their sleeping-mats soon after dusk had changed to night, spoke fearfully of strange stars in the sky, which never before had been marked by human eyes. The imaginative saw ominous signs and portents in the heavens and upon the earth, and their stories met with instant belief from their credulous fellows. The unwonted idleness of the bodies of men inured to heavy labour, set minds, hitherto linked closely to material things, groping their stumbling way through labyrinths of inconsequent thought and speculation. All the world was agog, awaiting breathlessly some tremendous event.

It came in a night of storm, that befell just before the new moon was due; for again old Slat, and a few folk whom he had gathered

about him, saw for an instant the naked form of the great god Indra, clothed in elusive flame, poised for a moment on the central dome of the Wat.

The news spread like wildfire; and when the dawn broke, grey and tranquil, after a night of thunder and tumult and downpour, and as the sun emerged at last from behind the heavy banks of mist, Angkor hummed, throughout its length and breadth, like a disturbed beehive.

From the Tha Phrom, from the temples of Angkor Thom, from the Ba Keng, upon its hill, from every outlying hamlet where the homeless folk of the capital were seeking a crowded shelter, the people poured toward the Wat. The Sword of Indra had returned, and with it the fortune of the land! Men shouted the news gleefully to one another, as they shouldered their way through the mobs, which all hurried to a common centre. The great god Indra, patron of the Khmers, had become incarnate, as of old, and descending from heaven in flame, had restored the Sword to his people, who, at his bidding, had wreaked a righteous vengeance upon the Brahmans, the betrayers of their trust. There was joy, there was triumph, there was relief in the very air. Men pushed on and on, talking, shouting, gesticulating. Their faces were joyful and expectant. The fear of famine, of the invading Thai, of the fell wrath of the outraged Gods, all had vanished in an hour. Only now that these shadows were lifted, did

men realise how darkly they had brooded over their minds. The sudden ending of the world, for which so many had looked in terror, was felt in a moment to be remote. The great Khmer empire, which had seemed to be tottering to its fall, was seen to be standing on the threshold of a new and yet more glorious era. Hail be to Indra, Lord of the Thunders, who in thunder had descended to work the salvation of his people!

Easily cast down, as easily lifted up, the multitude surrendered itself to a delirium of ecstatic excitement.

At noon a sound was heard which had not echoed through Angkor since the procession of the false sword; and at the first note a great silence fell upon the people. The crowd had surged past the exterior cloisters, covered the causeway from end to end, overflowed into the open spaces on either hand, and now thronged the stairways and galleries of Angkor Wat, and filled every inch of the great courtyard, in the centre of which, supported on its cliff-like plinth, rose the upper temple, crowned by its gigantic domes.

In an instant the tumult arising from this mighty concourse was stilled, and men with tense and expectant faces stood stock still, holding their breath, and straining their ears to listen.

As the rustle and shuffle of their movement

and the clamour of voices died away, there came from the sanctuary of the upper temple the shrill scream of a conch. Loud, discordant, vibrating, it stabbed the silence as with a tongue of flame that flared up, quivering, leaping and falling, till the very sunlight seemed to glow with the fire of its wild music. The insistent, penetrating sound scarified the nerves, and whipped the excitement of the multitude to a madness of religious enthusiasm. From infancy, the shrilling of the conch had been connected in men's minds with the worship of the Gods; and now, after the long silence of the temples, it played with irresistible force upon the chords of memory. Here and there, a sinner transported out of himself, lifted up his voice in loud penitential lamentation. Men with clenched fists, smote themselves cruelly on head and breast and face. Strained countenances, down which the tears ran unchecked, were raised toward the heavens. Arms were waved and brandished. Sobs and cries arose. After many days, there had returned to the people their faith in higher powers, and they hailed it in a frenzy of excitement.

Then, presently, while the tumult of drum and conch continued to sound from within the Wat, from the great western portals of the upper temple, a procession began slowly to emerge. Those who led grouped themselves along the narrow platform to the right and left, making room for those behind. Others took up

a position upon the stone steps of the great door itself, till only a small aperture was left free ; and through this, at the last, came Baguan Dass, walking reverently, surrounded by the priests who had survived with him, and bearing in his hands the Sword of Indra, shrouded in silken veils.

At the sight, the entire crowd—although it was so closely packed that it could barely move—subsided earthward, and became suddenly a sea of upturned, passionate faces surmounted by outstretched arms and praying hands. Even above the clamour of conch and drum, the resonant murmur of universal prayer was heard, like the complaining sob of the sea.

The attendant priests drew near, and one by one the wrappings were unwound from about the sheath of the Sword, until the very last had been laid aside. Then the aged hierophants fell back, leaving Baguan Dass standing alone and prominent, with the sacred weapon held reverently before him.

Naked to the waist, and with a single white garment falling thence, in stiff folds, to his ankles, he held himself erect, his eyes fixed upon the Sword, and in his face the absorption and the proud veneration of the devotee who performs sacred offices. His long white hair mingled with the beard that streamed down his chest ; the skin of his body, bronze in the sunlight, was covered with wrinkles ; his massive features were lined and scarred by age

and thought; but his extended arms, holding their precious burden, were unshaken by a tremor. Only his lips were restless, mouthing inaudibly words of the ancient tongue.

Behind him rose the grey portals of the temple, framing a dark oblong of shadow, over which writhed an effigy of the seven-headed cobra; and above this again the walls of the Wat soared up and up to roof-ridge and carving, culminating in the huge domes, outlined strongly against the flawless blue of the sky.

Before him, its hilt grasped in his hands, its tip pointing heavenward, the great Sword, sheathed in its scabbard of red gold, blazed in the sunshine like a flame; and below him, in the courtyard, in the cloisters and doorways, along the length of the causeway and on either side of it, to the outer limits of the sacred precincts, the multitude crouched with ecstatic faces and lifted hands.

From the priests, a thin chant arose, its sound well-nigh lost in the vastness of the place, and drowned by the inarticulate, murmurous supplication of the people; and then, at a sign from their leader, his acolytes drew near once more, and two of them began, with infinite slowness, to draw the golden scabbard upward.

A tremor ran through the crowd, as a breath of cold air ripples over the surface of red-hot metal, and a sound like a great sigh came from them.

Inch by inch the gnarled, black blade was

exposed, till nearly a span of its length was visible. Then the priests desisted, drawing aside that the people might see more clearly, while their hands still grasped the wavering sheath. No living soul in all that multitude had ever been suffered by the Brahmans to behold a larger fragment of the sacred weapon.

Then, from the dark interior of the portals, Chun suddenly stepped forth, and joined the group of priests upon the narrow platform. He was dressed in gorgeous silk clothes of many colours, and a splendid dagger was thrust into his girdle. He raised his right arm above his head, with a gesture commanding silence; and then his clear young voice rang out, carrying far over the heads of the multitude.

"Behold, my brethren!" he shouted. "Behold, the great god Indra, Lord of the Thunders, this day hath restored the Sword, which is the emblem of his protection, into the keeping of his people!"

Shouts and cries arose, mingled with the name of the god, and loud acclamations of Chun, the Liberator of the *Sudras*. It was some minutes before he again could make himself heard.

"The High Gods," he cried, "have been busy with our destinies. Last night, as many know, Indra himself, incarnate as of old, descended to earth, and gave back the Sword, in which the mystic Spirit of the Land abides. In his wrath, he reft it from the Brahmans, because they had abused the trust reposed in them: and forthwith,

the Brahmans and all their works were brought to nought."

Again he was interrupted by loud shouts and acclamations.

"Now, in his infinite mercy, he hath restored it to us, his people; yet he gave it not into human hands. The Spirit who hath her seat upon the Throne of the Snake, hath assumed once more her ancient incarnation. I—I, who speak to you—I, by day and by night, have had speech with her!"

A murmur of awe and wonder arose from the multitude, and many hid their eyes with their hands. It seemed to them that the face of the man who had held converse with Divinity, shone with a light upon which human beings could not look unblinded.¹

"Into her hands did Indra give the Sword!" Chun shouted. "He bade those Brahmans, whom he hath decreed should not perish with their fellows, keep watch and ward over it, as of old; but he ordained that they should hold it in trust for us, his people."

Again the revelation was received with a mighty uproar of satisfaction.

"And in token thereof," Chun continued, when once again he could make his voice audible—"in token thereof, he hath appointed this day of full moon for the complete unveiling of the sacred blade, before the eyes of all the multitude—a privilege never before accorded to man."

¹ Note 10.

Wild cries of joy and of delight broke from the mob. Men leaped to their feet, shouting and gesticulating in their excitement. As a long swell moves in the sea, the crowd surged forward, each individual seeking to gain a nearer view of the mystic weapon which, since the beginning of things, had been hidden from the sight of man.

Again Chun's arm and hand were held aloft, demanding silence.

"But first," he cried, "She who hath her seat upon the Throne of the Snake, hath bidden me, her servant, give this message to you, my brethren—and thus hath She spoken : *The season of rest and of revelry must end.* I, who am her henchman, and Baguan Dass, the Warden of the Sword, and Slat, the old wise man, with others whom She hath named, are enjoined to take order, that peace, and respect for property, and good government, and seemliness of carriage may be restored amongst us ; that foodstuffs be garnered and hoarded ; that measures be taken to resist the Barbarians, the invading Thai. It is by toil—thus speaks the Spirit—it is by toil alone that men can live—not labour expended endlessly upon unyielding stones. . . ."

A roar of applause rose from the quarrymen, and old Slat, seated just within the portals of the Wat, gnashed his toothless jaws and cursed softly, under his breath.

"Not travail of thew and sinew that beareth no fruit save these cruel monuments of our pain," Chun continued, "but work done in field and

mart, that the earth may bring forth crops, that wealth and plenty may visit the land, that peace and prosperity may abide with us."

This, too, was popular, as was shown by the general acclamation with which it was greeted. All the forces among the people, which made for law and order, hailed with delight the re-establishment of settled government. Those who had salvaged a moiety of their property from the general wreckage, saw now a chance of maintaining their hold upon it. Those who had nothing, beheld themselves, in imagination, transformed into prosperous landowners or thriving traders. The quarrymen, firmly set in the habits of labour and obedience, welcomed the promised exchange of toil in the building-yards for the casual husbandry of the East.

"And if we obey not this, her command—so speaks the Spirit—famine shall stalk amongst us, devastating the land; disease and storm and pestilence shall take their toll of us; and the Thai, like a fiery scourge, shall fall upon and utterly destroy us!

"Say, O my brothers, will you obey the behests of the Spirit who hath her seat, now and always, upon the awful Throne of the Snake?"

"We will! We will!" the people cried, with one voice; and a mighty acclamation arose from them in praise of Indra, Lord of the Thunders, of the Sword which was his gift, of the Incarnate Spirit of the Snake, and of Chun, who once

again was hailed on all sides as the Liberator of the *Sudras*.

Making a sign with his hand to the priests, he stepped back into the portals, whence he had emerged.

The roar of the multitude made in his ears a tremendous, stimulating music. He was intoxicated with enthusiasm and excitement; and so possessed was he by his faith in the divinity of the woman he loved, by whom he felt himself to be inspired and guided, that amid all the wild medley of truth and falsehood which he had uttered he was unable to distinguish where fact merged into fiction. He stood in the shadow of the porch, with his hand pressed against his forehead, reeling like a drunken man; and old Slat, squatting close beside him, watched him with a sneer on his lips.

Slowly, slowly, the priests raised the scabbard, till at last—as they drew it over the point of the Sword—it flamed anew, flashing in the sunshine; and in its place, rising erect from the hands of Baguan Dass, the dull, black blade was upreared, exposed in its entirety to the public gaze, for the first time for centuries.

Then, with a sound like a mighty sob, the immense crowd of people—even as Chun had done obeisance before the woman in the central shrine—bowed low their heads in an ecstasy of adoration.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HEART OF THE RULER

IN the more southerly of the two stone buildings which, on the western side, half fill the central courtyard of Angkor Wat, Chun was seated, just after the night had fallen, engaged in the transaction of public business.

Formerly, these solid and elaborately sculptured structures had served as guard-rooms, in which the wardens of the sacred places had been wont to keep unending vigil; but Chun had made of them respectively his council-chamber and his audience-hall—the little power-houses whence was transmitted the energy that ruled, and made belief to revivify the Khmer nation.

In Chun, the Liberator of the *Sudras*, the chosen Servant of the Snake, the past few weeks had wrought many changes. His figure was as erect and as alert as ever; but the feverish rapidity of his movements, and the slight trembling of his hands, told their own tale of wire-drawn nerves. He had lost much flesh, and there were dark, bruise-like shadows

beneath his restless eyes, and deep hollows below his high cheek-bones. Care, responsibility, and many emotions had scored heavy lines across his forehead, between his eyebrows, and around the corners of his mouth. There was about him an indefinable air of unrest—of unhealthy, morbid excitement—of acute irritability, with difficulty suppressed. He looked like a man whose vitality was being consumed by some secret, devouring flame; and those who watched him daily, noted in him a steadily rising impatience, an increasing intolerance of advice or interference, and a tyrannical demeanour which, beginning in a tendency to browbeat and domineer, had rapidly developed into a vicious and despotic cruelty. Even Baguan Dass—who now rarely spoke, and seemed, for the most part, to be sunken in a sort of torpor—and old Slat—who contented himself usually with a word or two of cynical jibe or scoff—had ceased to have much weight with him. For the rest, he had organised the stoutest of the quarrymen into an armed rabble, and since he fed them well, clothed them lavishly, and winked at their private delinquencies and exactions, they did ruthlessly his bidding, which was often ruthless.

His earliest public measures had been wise, though wisdom had not always been brought to their execution.

The fugitives from Angkor Thom, who had sought accommodation in the Wat, had been

driven forth at a moment's notice, to seek such shelter as they could find in a place already dangerously overcrowded. This had been the beginning of the discontent; and the exacerbation of the sufferers had been increased by twenty-four hours of unbroken, tropical downpour.

Every atom of foodstuff that could be collected had been gathered together by Chun's orders, and stored in the courts and cloisters of the temple whose occupants had been thus evicted. The entire population had been placed upon rations, calculated on none too liberal a scale; and after the plenty and the waste in which, of late, the people had rioted, the sudden restriction was keenly felt.

The young and the able-bodied, without regard to caste or class or social standing, had been herded in batches, and driven like cattle to the fields, where they were forced to work, while Chun's quarrymen stood over them, quickening their flagging energies with outrageous blows and curses.

Men who, of old, had been owners of property, gnashed their teeth in impotent rage, as they watched all things being thrown into a common stock, over which Chun and his ruffianly followers exercised uncontrolled dominion. They recalled with tears of regret the days of prosperity and security which they had enjoyed under the rule of the Brahmans, and cursed the hour that had seen the rise of the

emancipated *Sudras*—folk who, now that they were without fear, knew no reverence for rights of person or of property.

Here and there some greedy wretch attempted to break in upon the stores of hoarded rice and dried fish, or a trader, driven to the fields, refused, with the unconquerable obstinacy of the Oriental, to address himself to the unaccustomed labour. Such were haled before Chun, where he sat daily in his audience-hall; and already the open spaces beyond the outer cloisters were studded with the scaffolds of the crucified.

Chun was fully conscious now that his rule, like that of the Brahmans which had preceded it, was stepped and rooted in fear—fear of condign, physical punishment, and fear, too, of a supernatural force which the popular imagination pictured as guiding and inspiring the material power that now governed the land.

Insensibly, as this truth became more and more apparent to his understanding, a greater measure of recklessness and cruelty began to characterise his actions. Having once baptised his rule in blood, he found it difficult to stay his hand. The infliction of death was so easy—a word spoken, a curt order given, and the culprit's doom was sealed. Presently, death unattended by torture, became in his sight a thing too simple to supply an adequate example. He sought object-lessons of a kind that would impress the minds of the most stupid and unimaginative—spectacles capable of making a

special appeal to a brutalised people who, in their secret hearts, looked for cruelty, and expected an insatiable appetite for pain and bloody, human sacrifice from the gods of their worship.

Left to himself, Chun, perhaps, would have used his power with greater mildness and wisdom; but nightly the Spirit of Destruction spoke with him, and listened—licking her lips and moved by a strange excitement—to the details of the day's executions.

For if Chun ruled with barbarous despotism, he was himself the victim of a crushing tyranny.

Every evening, in obedience to her summons, he visited the occupant of the inner shrine. The conchs shrilled and the drums throbbed and pulsed, as he passed in state to the threshold of her sanctuary, across which he alone was suffered to set foot; and the cowering people, hearkening to the tumult from afar, shuddered at the sound, asking one another in fearful whispers what fresh command would be laid upon him during the supernatural interview to which he went.

Chun himself did not know whether these nightly meetings with the strange being, who so compelled his body and so dominated his soul, were most fraught, for him, with pain or with delight.

Her moods, her waywardness, and her unending caprice kept him in a constant ebullition of nervous irritation, all the more

violent since he was forced rigidly to suppress it. Often, nothing that he could do, nothing that he could leave undone, had the least power to please her. For an hour on end, she would gird and rail at him with an insanity of wrath that was as vehement as it was unreasoning; and when at last she panted herself into silence, Chun would feel as though the very soul of him were raw and bleeding. She would seize upon some trifling word or act of his, and weave therefrom a web of fancied offence in which, in a moment, he would find himself hopelessly entangled. Over and over again she would call upon him to make renewed profession of his belief in her divinity; and this she most required when, by her own speech and deeds, she had rendered belief most difficult. At other times she would be plunged in thunderous silence, from which any chance movement of his would bring her, ravening like a wild beast from its lair; or with jibes and flouts and bitter mockery, she would pour scorn on him—the base-born knave who had crept to place and power over the murdered bodies of his betters—and with blistering contempt, would deride herself and him and the lies upon which his brief authority was based.

Yet, a moment later, she would be demanding from him fantastic and degrading homage, in her capacity as an incarnate deity.

But there were other times which, when they came, obliterated for a space all memory of the

many and grievous things that she caused Chun to suffer. Then, for a little, the goddess would be forgotten, and would be replaced by all that was most seductive, all that was most tender and gracious and wooing in woman; and almost Chun would persuade himself that at last, at last, she loved him. There was no need then to bid him patter a formula of faith, or to demand the performance of extravagant acts of self-abasement. She was, in his eyes, divinity incarnate, and with all his soul he worshipped her.

If only she were always thus! The thought pursued and persecuted him: but he knew that it enshrined a hope faint and elusive as a vision of the night. Also—though of this he was unconscious—a constant kindness might, perhaps, have palled upon him; whereas the capricious changefulness of her moods kept him, by reason of the torture they inflicted, in a perpetual quiver of uncertainty and of desire.

For the physical passion, which she excited in him, took to itself a more compelling violence with each hour that he spent in her company; till, gradually, it seemed to Chun to have debased and swallowed up every other sentiment that she had aroused in his nature. When she gave herself to him, he was in heaven; when she denied herself to his embrace, he was in hell. The thought of what the approaching night might give, or might withhold, never quitted him during all his hours of

labour and waking. It obsessed his mind—now numbing it, now goading it to a desperate irritation. The ever-present memory of her was like a heavy burden that weighed upon his spirit. He began to see only through her eyes; to feel, not for himself, but vicariously, as he fancied that she would feel. Daily he acted, ordered, decided, not as to him seemed best, but in the way that he believed to be most likely to gratify her savage humour. Little by little he lost all sense of right and wrong, of policy and impolicy, of discretion, of restraint, and of the proportion of things. He was convinced that his tenure of this woman was precarious; and he grabbed and grasped and sinned wildly, in the desperate hope that he might thereby prolong it. Undisputed possession of her was, in his eyes, the sole end of the unlimited power which he wielded; nay, it was the very essence and meaning of power. He clutched frantically at the reins of despotism lest, losing his grip on them, he also should lose her—who made of him her bondsman.

In bitter introspection, and with a flare of anger against himself and her, he recognised that it was by all that was lowest and most vile in his nature that he was, through her, enslaved; that the love, pure, generous, and unselfish, which in the beginning she had inspired, lay dead and lacerated in the dust, its life stamped out of it by her little wanton

feet; that she held him, and only desired to hold him, by the monstrous passions which she kindled in him so skilfully, tormented with such tireless ingenuity, and from time to time allayed with such undreamed-of perfection.

He knew, too, that his slavish subservience to her caprice was loosening his hold upon the authority which alone enabled him to make and keep her his. He noted how his fellows glanced at him, with wonder and distrust in their eyes, when he issued some command, whereof the atrocity stayed their breath, and of which the malignity was her conception. But ever she demanded from him an exact account of all that he had done; and to her he could not lie.

There had been times when he had pleaded with her, seeking to mitigate the ferocity of the deeds she required him to do; but at the first hint of restraint, her wrath flamed up, while she flashed at him the question whether it was he, or she, who was to rule over Angkor. He dared not insist; and later he had meanly sought to propitiate her by succulent accounts of the barbarities which he had practised in her name.

From the first, he had racked his brains and ransacked his imagination to hit upon some means of affording her more natural pleasures. He had loaded her with ornaments of silver and gold, and had piled at her feet gems which he had taken from the royal treasure-houses. The wardrobes of the Brahman women had been

pillaged to provide her with gorgeous raiment ; and at a time when all the populace was subsisting upon the scanty rations doled out to them, every dainty known to the Khmer civilisation had been sought for far and wide, the better to tempt her appetite. But she usually poured scorn upon Chun and upon his gifts, or tossed his offerings contemptuously aside ; and with misery and dismay preying at his heart, he marked in her an increasing restlessness, a growing dissatisfaction which nothing had any power to quiet or allay.

Chun, sitting lonely in his council-chamber, after a day passed in dealing out insensate punishments for trivial crimes, felt that the foundations of his world were crumbling beneath his feet.

Old Slat entered the building, and seated himself, without a word, upon the stone dais which occupied its centre.

Very deliberately he crushed a quid of betel-nut in a long, silver tube, embossed with scaly effigies of dragons. Chun had looted it at the sack of the palace, and had presented it to his old friend. It was the only thing, by which he seemed to set any store, that Slat had gotten out of the revolution.

When he had forced the little cylindrical mash of nut, *gambir*, and pepper-leaf, fused together by lime, out of the end of the tube, and had transferred it carefully to his red-stained mouth,

he looked up at his companion, and spoke, tauntingly, as was his wont.

"Have you drunk your gallon of blood, my friend? And is your consuming thirst quenched for this one day, at least?" he asked.

Chun bent a sullen gaze upon him; but he said no word.

"The Brahmans, curse them! were a sorry crew," Slat continued. "But *they* made things. They ground the *Sudras* into the dust, perhaps; but from the dust they fashioned immortal Beauty. It was left to you, O Liberator of your Kind, to erect nothing more noble than gallows, to create nothing more exquisite than pain, and to heap up nothing more magnificent than a pile of mangled corpses. You do well to be proud of your handiwork. Never since time was, has there arisen so stupendous a monument to the wisdom, the clemency, and the power of a born ruler of men."

"Have a care, lest I make of you its cupola," cried Chun. His eyes flashed anger, and his hands were hard clenched.

Slat turned upon him with a snarl, no whit less angry.

"Peace, fool! You dare not touch me—*me*, Slat, the old wise man, who in this season of the breaking up of faiths, sways all men by the fear of his magic. When you spouted lies from the platform overhead, and poured maggots into the ears of the people, even then you did not dare exclude old Slat from the number of

the Snake's chosen councillors. Snake, indeed! Spirit of Lies! A wanton hussy who, even in the hour of your victory, played you false with a lad whose good looks had set her fickle fancy itching! And you did not dare to punish her, as man should punish woman, with fist and stick, when her light desires lead her a-straying. Incarnation of Divinity! How must the old gods laugh, shaking their sides. Ye Spirits of earth and air! Incarnation of Mischief—of feminine Malice and Naughtiness! So do I name her, spitting upon her; yet by her are you ruled, and you, forsooth, would seek to rule me—even me!”

The old man, beside himself with indignation and disgust, flung his body about, as he sat, mouthing and gesticulating.

“Silence! Silence, I pray you,” pleaded Chun, in low, earnest tones. “If anyone should overhear you! Think! Think!”

“Ha! Ha!” said Slat, more quietly, but with venomous mockery. “So that sobers you, since the Truth hath power to sober even a drunken fool. But *I* may not so lightly forget that you dared to threaten me. Hark, Saviour of Nothing and Ruiner of all, reason hath deserted you, and wisdom and you were never close acquainted; but it is I, Slat, the old wise man, who speaks and decrees that you should listen.

“Men differ from the beasts: they may not be ruled by fear alone. By fear the Brahmans sought to rule our people, and they brought to

the labour of governance engines more finely tempered than any of the rude tools which you know how to handle. Therefore, for a space their dominion endured ; yet even it, in the fullness of time, was reduced to ruin. You—whose hands still are rough with toil at cartwheel and lever—and the hussy in the shrine yonder, have not behind you the prestige of the twice-born ; and knowing this, you still dare, in the madness which has smitten you, to outrage and oppress our people, as never by the Brahmans were they outraged or oppressed. For a little, perhaps, they will endure, though daily you pile upon their backs burdens by no means to be borne ; but, in the end . . . !”

Slat, shrugging his shoulders, left his sentence unfinished.

“ You lie,” said Chun, with the brutal directness of the Asiatic peasant. “ I do but maintain authority in the eyes of fools whose perversity bids them set it at nought.”

“ Yet, you dare not exert that authority,” said Slat, musingly.

“ Again you lie,” said Chun. “ There is nothing that I do not dare—no command that I need hesitate to issue—no order of mine that the multitude would have the courage to defy.”

Slat looked into Chun's eyes and laughed sourly.

“ The Brahmans perished because the myth in which they trusted was of a sudden shattered ;

yet it stood far more four-square than that on which you rely. And it seems to me, verily it seems to me, that a word or two whispered here and there into gaping ears by Slat, the old wise man, would go far to set the edifice of lies which you have devised a-rocking on its plinth. Then, if it tottered to its fall, you, my son, and the so-called Snake, would be like to be crushed in its ruins, like the little woodpeckers in the tree that is felled by the woodsman."

"It is you who threaten now," growled Chun.

The old man drew himself suddenly erect, and fixed commanding eyes upon his companion.

"Aye," he said. "I threaten, and with meaning; for I have had enough of this folly and wickedness. You say that there is no order that you dare not give; and it is well, for now I, Slat, whose word can utterly undo you, demand, as the price of my silence, that forthwith you issue a command to our people of which I will dictate the terms. Too long have I watched you breaking and rending. The time hath come for a new making and building up. You shall drive the craftsmen of the quarry and the labour-yard back to their toil upon the temples, and of those new works, I, even I, will be the master-architect."

"I dare not," said Chun, in a fearful whisper.

"But you shall," said Slat, simply.

CHAPTER XX

THE INCARNATE SPIRIT

IN the middle of a discordant, frantic note, the scream of the conchs broke off abruptly ; with one last brazen clash the cymbals ceased their harsh reverberations ; with a rapid roll and patter, the throbbing beat of the drums dropped back into the silence ; and Chun, stepping from beneath the state umbrella, which two of his henchmen had been holding over his head, walked alone up the three stone steps that led to the threshold of the inner shrine.

As he laid his hand upon one of the enormous metal bolts, by means of which the two heavy doors were secured, the musicians and the mob of armed quarrymen, who formed his escort, sank in squatting attitudes upon the flags, their heads bowed, their faces buried between their extended arms.

Chun stood still for a moment, glancing back at them over his shoulder.

With mingled scorn and satisfaction he noted how abjectly the people grovelled ; and he drew pleasure and confidence from the know-

ledge that the awe in which they held the Spirit of the Snake acquired an added extravagance from their fear of him. Here, outside the shrine, he could cheat himself into the belief that he was still the ruler. While meaner folk crouched upon the ground, bowing their faces to the earth, he alone might stand erect. It was symbolical of the lordship that was his. It comforted the wounds which old Slat's threats had inflicted upon his pride—the pride which suffered yet more deadly hurt from his foreknowledge of the humiliations that awaited him when once those doors were passed.

To-night he was more than ordinarily loath to exchange the apparent omnipotence, that was his by day, for the galling thralldom which he endured during the hours of darkness. He was debilitated physically; mentally exhausted. The strain which this woman, in combination with circumstance, was putting upon him was assuming an intensity that was intolerable. Under it—body and mind—he felt himself to be breaking.

The whole world, as he had known it, had from the beginning of his experience been ruled and swayed by fear—fear of the Gods, fear of the twice-born Brahmans; and he, in his turn, had sought to govern and dominate his fellows by fear alone. But now, suddenly, as he stood here upon the threshold of the shrine, he realised that he himself was enslaved by the same awful force—that he was afraid—afraid of Slat, of his

venomous tongue, of the evils it might work ; of the contempt of consequences which his obsession by a single idea inspired in that old man.

And the closed doors of the sanctuary divided him from a still more compelling terror. He had suffered so much, that he now was morbidly sensitive to, morbidly afraid of pain—the torture of the mind which this woman inflicted upon him with such tireless skill. In anticipation, he hardly knew how to summon the fortitude necessary for its endurance.

For the moment, even his desire of her was numbed. The idea of its satisfaction had become blent in his mind with the carking ache that was in his heart and flesh.

It was to him as though his very soul had been flayed alive, and the lightest touch was now an unspeakable agony.

For a little he stood there, with his hand upon the bolt, the gorgeous gilding and colours of the door making a background to his lean figure. Then he drew the portals apart, and stepped into the dusky interior of the shrine.

Thick mats were piled upon the altar, and on these, facing him, the girl lay prone. On her right, a bronze effigy of Siva, Lord of the Dance, pranced with majestic gaiety, his four arms brandished, his legs capering joyously. On the left, its outline almost lost in the shadows, stood an image of Indra.

Clothed in brilliant crimson draperies—in and out of the folds of which writhed dragons,

embroidered in silver and gold—she lay extended; her elbows on the mat, her chin supported by her hands, her fingers framing the perfect oval of her cheeks. The soft masses of her hair made a dark nimbus about her head. Her red lips were sucked inward. In her eyes, fires, sullen and slow, seemed to glow and smoulder.

To Chun's imagination, as he prostrated himself before her in an attitude of adoration, she was visualised suddenly as a tigress that waited for its prey with all the calmness of certainty.

Neither by glance nor movement did she betray a consciousness of his presence—though she knew full well the meaning of the tumult of wild music which a moment earlier had shattered the vault-like quiet of the temple—and Chun, his obeisance ended, sat back upon his heels, patiently waiting upon her will. His head was bowed upon his breast; his clasped hands lay limply in his lap; his eyes were fixed upon the carved base of the altar-stone. He knew by heart every line and convolution of that tracery, for his sight had unravelled its intricacies a hundred times, subconsciously, while all his other senses had been engrossed by the sufferings this woman's words were causing him to endure. With them the labyrinthine carvings had become so closely associated in his mind that the identity of both was merged, the one into the other; and merely to follow with the

eye the elaborate details of this sculptured stone was now to him a mental pain.

For nearly half an hour, perhaps, she kept him in the suspense and humiliation of a silence he dared not break. Then she spoke.

"The clown in you becomes more prominent every day," she said, critically. "How was it that I once thought to trace in you some signs of birth and breeding?"

"I am what I am," said Chun sullenly.

"Aye," she said quickly, "that is the burden of my complaint."

"And what I am, you have made me," Chun went on. "In your presence I am, mayhap, a clown and a dolt, because always you put me in the wrong, no matter whether I speak, or whether I hold my peace."

"Then, why do you come here?" she asked derisively. "Why do you not send some other man to relieve the tedium of my solitude? There must be many, young and comely, who would very willingly take your place, and become in your stead the chosen servant of the Snake."

Chun writhed and was silent.

"You think only of yourself," she went on, her voice rising in her anger. "Never of me do you think. Picture to yourself the life which I lead, cooped up here like a wild animal in a cage; with no pleasures to beguile the interminable hours; with nothing to break the monotony of my days save the visits of one eternal man who comes hither to brag of his great deeds, or else

to sit silent and sulky, wearying me with his lowering looks, and adding a new gloom to this sad prison of damp, grey stones. All my years I have been used to sunshine, to colour, to beauty, to movement, to *variety*. I dreamed then that I wanted only peace, and solitude, and quiet ; but now that I have had my fill of these, I know that they have no power to satisfy me."

Chun listened in miserable silence. He knew that she spoke the truth, and in answer he could find no word to say.

"It is easy and pleasant for *you*," the girl resumed, speaking with a concentrated anger so intense that she was shaken by it, and uttering each sentence as though it were a whip-thong with which she sought to lash him. "It is easy and pleasant for *you*. *You*—making arrogant and selfish use of a power which emanates from *me* alone—wield over men a tyrannical sway, and come hither to prate of it : but how does that profit *me* ? If the shrine were empty, and you set yourself to the invention of new lies, wherewith to blacken your soul, the result for *you* would be the same. You would have me believe that in all things you do my bidding : but how do I know that you, who lie so freely to the multitude, do not lie to me also ?"

"To you I tell only the truth, and the whole truth," said Chun. "What profit would there be in lies, since you, an Incarnate Spirit, would forthwith detect their fallacy ?"

She wriggled her whole body, where she lay,

in an anger and impatience which she could not control.

"You sneer," she cried. "You dare to sneer at *me*! Though I be a god, you know full well that my senses are shackled by this body of human clay in which my spirit is pent; and you, in your ingratitude—you whom I have *made*, as children fashion atomies from mud—you dare to deride the limitations which voluntarily I have assumed in order to work the salvation of you and of my people."

"I know. I know. I am ungrateful," said Chun, soothingly. He spoke as one might speak who sought to pacify a wayward child.

She lashed out with her legs at the shadows behind her, and clenched the little hands by which her face was framed.

"You shall not answer me like that," she screamed. "You filch from me *my* power, and put it to your own vile uses, and now you would bear yourself toward me as though I were a creature unreasoning and impotent. Bully your quarrymen, if they be fools enough to endure your tyrannies, but seek not to browbeat *me*, who am the sacred source whence flows all your authority."

Chun, bowing himself to the flags, murmured hurried excuses and protestations. As he did so, he knew, in his heart, that his short-lived belief in her divinity had long been dead—that she had killed it in him, together with so much more of greater value. Also he speculated in-

voluntarily as to how far she herself was really deceived by the fiction which was of her invention. It was a question to which she, too, might perhaps have experienced a difficulty in supplying an answer.

In spite of the abjectness of his homage, and the feverish words with which he strove to propitiate her wrath, she was instinctively conscious of his unbelief; and while it enraged her, his grotesque and unsuccessful efforts to conceal it moved her to a bitter contempt against him.

"Have done!" she cried. "Seek not to deceive *me* with your lies. Though this gross veil of human flesh be drawn across my finer senses, yet I can still see into the depths of *your* false heart. With your head wallowing in the dust, and with the lip-service of your tongue, you make pretence to do me worship; but I can detect beneath this play-acting the blasphemies which you try to hide with them. And if you believe not in my godhead, why do you debase yourself before me? Why do you lack the courage to avow your profanity?"

Chun drew his body erect, and sat back upon his heels. His eyes glared at her.

"Because I love you!" he cried in a voice of concentrated fury. "Because I love you; and often I hate you—you hurt me so much."

She spat at him.

"Love!" she echoed with unutterable scorn. "I would be loved by a *man*, not by a slave."

At the word, he sprang to his feet, took two strides toward her, and seized her little body roughly in his grasp. She fought and struggled, furiously and in silence; but easily he mastered her, and bending his face to hers, crushed it against her red lips.

"But it is true—that which I told you. I cannot any longer endure this life."

They were lying upon the mats, heaped upon the altar-stone, and her face was pillowed in the hollow of his shoulder. His arms held her in a protecting clasp.

"Men do not understand the hearts of women such as I. Some there be who are fashioned by the Gods to serve men as their wives—others to bear children, and to be mothers all their days, yea, even to the men-folk who love them. But I belong to the number of those in whose hearts, from the beginning, the demons of air and water have set the fickleness of the wind, the restlessness of the wave. For such there is no abiding joy in the gentle bondage of wedlock—no enduring solace in the pangs and the delights, the cares and the consolations, the sorrows and the vicarious triumphs of motherhood. I, and those who are made as I am made, are afflicted ever with a cruel itch of the flesh—a gnawing unrest of the spirit—which only *power* can allay—power over the passions of men, since only through their passions can

men be swayed by women. Some there be who are content to work through the men whom they enslave—to use them as their instruments, even as I have used you; but I am not of these. Wayward as the winds that blow, restless as the waves that gather and break upon the storm-torn surface of the Great Lake, I may not rest and be at peace, guiding and controlling the energy which I inspire. There is that within me which will not suffer me to be still. Nought that men may do at my bidding, in obedience to my decree, subservient to my suggestion, slavish to my whim, can satisfy the fierce desire that tears me. I myself must hold all power in these two hands of mine.” She extended her arms, and her fingers clutched and grasped at the empty air. “I myself must *do*—must see accomplished the deeds upon which my will is set—must be visible to all men as the substance, not the hidden shadow of authority. And you, if you love me, must aid me, that my desire may be fulfilled. Until I have tasted this draught for which I crave—until I have drained to the dregs this cup of omnipotence—of unshackled dominion over the bodies and the souls of men—never, never shall my heart know satisfaction.”

She clung to him, half in entreaty, half in command, with a grip so violent that it hurt him.

“I am afraid,” said Chun in a low whisper.

She drew herself from his clasp, and sat erect upon the mat.

"Afraid?" she echoed scornfully.

Chun also sat up, facing her.

"Aye," he said slowly. "Aye. I am afraid—not for myself, but for you.

"Have no fear for me," she said, with confidence.

"But I have—I am consumed with fear . . ."

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"You are jealous," she asserted. "You are afraid lest other men, looking upon me, should desire me."

"That, maybe, is true," said Chun thoughtfully. His eyes wore an abstracted look; his forehead was furrowed; his brows knit. "Maybe that is true," he repeated, "but it was not upon that that my mind was set. There are some shadows which are mightier than any substance. Remember the divinity of the Brahmans, how long it endured as a shadow. When men put it to the test, not as an offshoot of the imagination, but as a concrete fact, it vanished almost at a touch. Now *you* are a myth—wrapped around with the mystery of the unseen—awful because unknown. If you dispense with these things—these veils of illusion—I know not what may befall."

"And I reck not!" she exclaimed. "Only this I know—that the worship of a multitude

which I cannot see—which cannot see my face—is to me nothing worth. Better were the excitement of the venture, of the attempt—even if it proved vain—to snatch victory and boundless power from between the very jaws of peril, than longer to endure the burden of these heavy, uneventful days. I am so strangely fashioned that monotony to me is alone intolerable. Always would I choose that calamity should fall upon me; that I should suffer pain and grief, aye, and death itself, rather than that slow hours should creep by, bringing forth no happening to lend a spice to life. For me the grave or the burning-*ghat*, rather than the inanition of heart and soul which, in this tomb of cold, unyielding stone, too long I have endured.”

“It is to woo death,” said Chun grimly.

“Yes—or to seize, once and for all, everything that life can give!” she cried, with flashing eyes.

For a space there was silence between them. Then Chun spoke, deliberately and impressively.

“It chances that our rule—your rule exerted through me—is near unto its ending. This very evening came old Slat to me, with threats upon his lips. *Him*, I . . . we . . . you . . .” he hesitated, “dare not touch. The people fear his magic. Even my quarrymen would not injure a hair of his head—curse him! Now that their faith in the ancient gods is

dead, they cling the more closely to their belief in wizards—and Slat, in their eyes, is a prince of medicine-men. Perhaps they see truly; perhaps the old man hath, indeed, a wisdom beyond the grasp of ordinary men. When he is moved by wrath, I—even I—fear him.”

He made the confession shamefacedly in a shocked whisper.

The girl was silent, shuddering a little.

“He hath some secret plan, whereby he dreams that he will compel stones to stand in a form like a rainbow, without the leverage of overlaps; and I myself have seen him fit together with his fingers a little model which, by virtue of I know not what charm weaved, or spell whispered, stood four-square and solid, as though some invisible force from without welded the blocks together.

“It is ever in his mind that he would drive our people again to labour—as of old they toiled for the Brahmans—piling stone on stone, and building therewith a mighty temple, greater even than this vast Wat. In this monument of dreams every cloister’s roof, every portal, every dome, will be fashioned—not in the form that has been our immemorial usage—but with curves more perfect than those of the crescent-moon; after a design which—so he avers—hath been breathed into his brain by the spirits during the long watches of the night.

“Now he threatens to spread dissension and

unbelief among the people, to stir up their enmity against you and against me, if I will not lay this command upon them."

"And you hesitate?" cried the girl, incredulously.

"Aye, I hesitate," Chun made answer. "We have ruled, you and I, with a tyranny more bloodguilty than that which the Brahmans used; but from this, at least, we have rescued the people—from the travail that had no ending—from the unfruitful toil which brought forth no increase from the earth, and added nothing to the wealth, the enjoyment, or the happiness of mankind. Why, think you, do the quarrymen rally round me, acclaim me when I appear—name me Liberator of the *Sudras*? Why are they ready to execute my will—your will—be it never so wanton or wicked? Is it not because I have freed them from the bondage of the pick and the pulley, the cartwheel and the lever—from the cruel despotism of the ashlar—from the oppression of the cold, blind stones which crushed their fathers, from generation to generation, and by which, in their turn, the manhood of each one of them was being crushed? Even those whom I have forced to labour in the fields, find in the light tasks of weeding and tilling and reaping, an undreamed-of restfulness and relief to the muscles which long struggles with the monoliths had wrenched. Think! You who are wise with a wisdom beyond my reach. It would be to dare greatly, desperately, to try to

drag these liberated wretches back to the yoke from which so recently they have been torn."

"Yes," she whispered, her voice quivering with excitement. "It would, indeed, be to dare greatly: but I am of the company of those who greatly dare. What are *they*—these casteless creatures of the gutter and the mire—that they should dictate to me what orders I shall, or shall not decree?—to *me* who have shed their foul blood like water for my whim. Obedient to my will, they shall bow again their brutish backs to labour in the quarry and the building-yard. Slat, the old wise man, shall be my henchman, and with the visions of his brain and the toil of the quarrymen's hands, he shall build me a temple in my honour, that shall surpass in beauty and in magnitude all the conceptions of the dreamers in stone, time out of mind!"

She sprang to her feet, her body quivering, her face transfigured, her arms extended above her head, in a passion of prophetic excitement.

"And in this temple I will reign," she cried, "a god confessed, claiming and receiving the abject worship of the populace, and wielding power—*Power*—such as never in all the long history of the world has been possessed by woman or by man!"

The dim light of the shrine fell full upon her upturned face, her outstretched arms, bare to the shoulder, from which the scarlet draperies fell back, cascading to her white feet like a

garment of flame ; and Chun sat gazing up at her with a strange mingling of love, admiration and fear in his eyes.

"Always I am your servant," he said in a low voice.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SETTING SUN

FOR many days, every effort had been made by the schemers in the Wat to kindle anew, among the people of Angkor, the fiery religious enthusiasm by which, so short a while before, they one and all had been consumed.

Chun's despotism had gathered around it, not only the mob of ruffianly quarrymen who were its undisciplined army, and the sweepings of those men of the warrior caste who had straggled back to the capital after the disastrous encounter with the invading barbarians, but also a number of pseudo-scholars and pandits, tale-bearers and spies—men who possessed a little more learning, wit, or cunning than their fellows, and who, in this hour of rising scum, came naturally to the surface. This band of panders and sycophants—with one eye cocked upon their master, the better to anticipate his pleasure, and the other watching the wind, as it played among the straws, lest by some sudden gust of popular feeling their cockle-boats should be taken aback—had of late been busy. They were ubiquitous—

they frequented the eating-booths of the town ; mingled with the crowds which awaited the periodical issue of rations ; squatted among the groups of toilers in the fields, when these, at intervals, rested from their labours. In the markets, where men still bartered and traded, they came and went ; swelled the rabble of quarrymen, idling or gambling in the long cloisters which served them as their barracks ; or joined the knots of loafers who had had the good fortune to evade work upon the crops. Also, as evening was falling, they made part of the band of spectators who watched the younger men kicking a basket-work ball high into the air from one to another, or sat with the elders, gathered around the bases of the big fig-trees to discuss the gossip of the place.

These men who could claim a personal knowledge of the Liberator and his councillors, and who professed a greater intimacy with them than they, in fact, possessed, were treated on all sides with elaborate courtesy, were listened to with deference, but were regarded with suspicion. Caution and prudence forbade free talk in their hearing ; and men were apt to tell them, not the thoughts which engaged the mind of the populace, but those things which they fancied would be most pleasing to their masters. Yet it was only by the reports which were brought to him by these creatures of his despotism, that Chun was able even a little to gauge the temper of the people. This task was rendered still more

difficult by the fact that these sycophants were loath to repeat to him anything that would not fall gratefully upon his ears.

Living by their wits, they were quick to seize upon any hint thrown out to them; and very soon they were making Angkor buzz with rumour and with report, were doing all that in them lay to stimulate the excitement and curiosity of the multitude, and to spread abroad a feeling of expectation and unrest. Old Slat knew the value of contradictory tidings as a provoker of discussion; and indeed the palace news-bearers had little enough of actual fact upon which to work. The Spirit of the Snake had vanished, and Chun was now paying nightly visits to a deserted shrine—so said some, whispering fearfully to one another, with quick, nervous glances thrown over their shoulders in search of possible eavesdroppers. She had issued to her Chosen Servant a new decree of forbearance and compassion—and credibility was lent to this by the fact that, in her name, the scale of rations had suddenly been revised upon more liberal lines, and that simultaneously the bloody tortures and executions had ceased. Sated with human sacrifice, it was said, she was about to inaugurate a new era of clemency and peace; in future her wrath was to be wreaked only on the presumptuous Thai. The invaders, so rumour had it, were to be suffered to approach Angkor, that the power of the Snake might be made manifest in the eyes of all the people. In the appointed hour, she

would blast them with her magic so that, without a blow struck, they would be destroyed to the last man, and their camp would be given over to sack and pillage. This was a comfortable doctrine, and as such it found many adherents. She had not quitted her incarnation and returned to the skies, as by some had been blasphemously alleged. The Snake would not desert her people, who so moved her love, in the hour of their sorest need; but presently she would disclose her ordinance, whereby the barbarian hordes might be routed and driven back. Also, as the Sacred Sword of Indra had been exposed in its entirety to the popular gaze, for the first time in recorded history, so now, in this age of miracles, not only her Chosen Servant, but all her people, to the last and the least of them, would be suffered presently to feast their eyes upon this Incarnation of Divinity.

Over this last rumour old men shook their heads anxiously.

"The Gods give nought for nought," they said gravely, with unconscious blasphemy. "If the Snake incarnate vouchsafes the sight of her countenance to all men—to the clean and to the unclean—to Brahman and *Sudra*, and even to the *Pariah* and the foul *Chândâla*" (recent events had not yet stamped out all ancient prejudices, and in the mouths of the people the old terms still lingered), "be sure that she will exact payment from us in ample measure."

"What more can she demand of us?" asked

others. "Hath she not already drunk her fill of our blood? My wife's half-brother's son—a mere stripling—he did but steal a ration not his own, and . . ."

Then would follow ghastly details of the torture and death inflicted in the dread name of the Snake.

So the people talked together; but something of lethargy was discernible in the interest and the curiosity which were aroused by the sedulously circulated rumours. Events, of late, had so crowded upon one another's heels, that the public mind was exhausted. There was lacking to it now the enthusiasm and the spontaneity which had characterised the riot in the forum and the attack upon the palace; and which, a few weeks later, had borne the multitude, like one man, to the precincts of the Wat, to witness the exposition of the Sword, which Indra had restored into their keeping. The popular faith—which had sustained a rude shock through the downfall of the demigods, and the impunity with which the images of the deities had been broken upon their altars—had momentarily been stirred to fanatical fury by the vision of the sacred blade; but the ferment had subsided quickly. Material discontent, occasioned by Chun's administrative acts, had replaced religious fervour. The fear which is near akin to hatred had taken possession of many hearts.

Also, men of the higher castes, who had always held the *Sudras* in contempt, mocked secretly at

their plebeian autocrat, and his fabled Snake. When secure of their audience, they whispered tales to one another of the solecisms uttered, and the absurdities committed by this peasant who masqueraded as a ruler of men. These stories, repeated from mouth to mouth with sneering comment and exaggeration, delighted an enmity which could laugh at, if it dared not offer open defiance or resistance to, the object of its detestation.

The foundation-stones of Chun's despotism were already loosened by the most potent destroyers of authority—hatred and contempt in league with ridicule.

Upon a certain day, messengers from the Wat spread the word among the people, that their presence was required within the sacred precincts of the temple at the hour when the kine go down to water—in the late afternoon.

Few of the inhabitants of the outlying hamlets bestirred themselves to obey the summons, since compliance with it would entail a return to their home by moonlight; but, the time chosen being the most idle in the day—that at which men have ceased their labours, and have not yet settled down in their huts for the evening meal and the sleep which, in Asia, follows so hard upon it—the people of Angkor itself assembled in goodly numbers.

In the big open spaces, within the exterior cloisters, along the whole length of the causeway

—from the steps of the great western portals to the domed entrance, a furlong distant—and on either side of it, to the limits of the enclosure, the people squatted on the flags or on the ground—a dense mass of black heads, and brown backs and faces, above a kaleidoscopic display of coloured garments.

They chatted listlessly to one another, while they apathetically awaited the event. The prevailing air was one of weariness and indifference, rather than interest; and a few of the more intelligent asked themselves what new insult was about to be offered to their understanding.

The clash of cymbals, the blare of conchs, and the restless beat of drums heralded the appearance of Chun upon the narrow platform, without the western porch of the upper temple.

The sinking sun—casting long rays over the roofs of the outer cloisters, and the palm-fronds and tree-tops massed behind them—threw its light full upon him; causing the golden head-dress that he wore to flash blindingly, and rendering more vivid the gorgeous colours of the silk garments, and the splendour of the weapons with which his person was adorned. He stood with head erect, his chin tilted somewhat upward. His left hand was on his hip, the arm akimbo. His right hand grasped a long, naked sword, its point directed toward the earth.

His was an imposing, even a kingly figure, in all the strength and beauty of his young man-

hood; but his air was subtly suggestive of defiance, rather than of confidence, as he stood forth from his escort, and in silence, suffered his eyes to roam for a space over the multitude. In his heart, he held them in the disdain which soon is bred in a man for those over whom he has wielded unfettered dominion—power of life and death, and of the infliction, at will, of torments more terrible than death: yet, beneath the contempt there lurked also something of anxiety and fear.

His reception was not encouraging.

His rabble of quarrymen raised a brave shout, and here and there among the multitude a solitary voice broke out into acclamation, abruptly checked, that died down falteringly, as though ashamed of the nakedness of its solitude. From the crowd there came a dull, resonant murmur; but it was without the vibration of enthusiasm, and sounded no note of welcome or applause.

The contrast which this wave of ominous muttering presented to the roar that still reverberated in his memory, and which, at the moment, had almost stunned his brain, was like a cold douche that chilled the feverish tumult in his veins. It aroused in him a sullen anger. At once his attitude unconsciously became more pronouncedly defiant.

"Listen, O ye people!" he cried; and men noted that he no longer addressed them as his brethren. Also, some, nudging one another,

drew attention to the plebeian accent, which his excitement and the straining of his voice rendered more distinct. "Listen, O ye people! I, her chosen servant, bring to you a message from the Snake. In the plenitude of her pity and compassion, and the boundless love which she bears to us, her unworthy servitors—the august and awful Spirit that hath become incarnate in our midst—upon the miracle of whose beauty I alone of the sons of men have hitherto been permitted to look—hath vouchsafed to issue from her shrine!"

He paused, expectant of acclamations, similar to those which had greeted his announcement of the intention to unveil the Sword; but the shouts of his quarrymen and of the sycophants of the Wat, sank abashed into the general silence; which was not so much silence as a murmurous sound, inarticulate and vaguely threatening.

Chun, his anger mounting against the fickle people, and a little shaken in his confidence, resumed his speech. Involuntarily, his words assumed something of a bullying and hectoring tone.

"And hearken," he cried. "She, who is above the sun and the moon and the stars, and yet deigns, for your vile sakes, to put on the likeness of a woman, will to-morrow appear among you! I know not whether she will condescend so far as to unveil that countenance of unspeakable beauty, whereof the pale reflection, as ye have all

witnessed, when mirrored in *my* face, caused it to shine with a light that dazzled you."

Somewhere, far off in the crowd, a loud, clear laugh was raised; and with startled eyes, men gazed in the direction whence it came; but its author remained undetected; and Chun, his forehead contracted in an ominous frown, proceeded, feigning to have heard nothing.

"That hath not yet been revealed to me by the Goddess, whose slave and humble worshipper am I. Maybe the glory of her eyes would smite many of you with blindness, or perhaps your reason would be consumed by it, as it were by fire. I know not. But this I know—that the Spirit, moved by clemency and compassion, beholding the sore need of her chosen people, will to-morrow move through your midst. It is the fifteenth day of moon, when her handmaiden of the heavens arises, clothed in her fullest panoply—that handmaiden from whose veins the Spirit of the Snake deigns, from time to time, to accept the nectar that is her mystic sustenance—and this day hath she selected for her first breaking upon the dazzled vision of mankind.

"To-morrow at noon, issuing from her hidden shrine, she will pass in procession through your midst, borne aloft upon the white elephant, which never before has carried so sacred a burden; here, from the temple of Angkor Wat to the threshold of the Ba Yon.

"Standing at the head of the stairway, and looking forth over the forum, which witnessed

the beginning of the liberation that, through her inspiration, hath been wrought among you, the incarnate Spirit will issue to you all a new ordinance. Illumined by supernatural wisdom, gazing into the future, as men see into the clear depths of a pool, she hath sure foreknowledge of all the manifold mischances that await her people, if she be not moved to interfere on their behalf. The hordes of barbarous Thai draw near. Already they slake their brutish thirst in the waters of the Great Lake. Calamity and destruction are knocking at the very doors of the kingdom. But from these, aye and from worse evils, the Spirit of the Snake can deliver you, if, doing her worship, faithful to her ordinance, bowing yourselves to her will, ye fulfil the commands that presently she shall lay upon you."

He paused, gazing around him, and the murmur of the crowd rose in loud reverberation, as men questioned neighbours no wiser than themselves, speculating concerning the new troubles which this announcement might forebode.

The sun was sinking rapidly ; and the huge domes, that soared high above the platform upon which Chun was standing, were dipped suddenly in pale and glowing gold, in vivid contrast to the heavy shadows massed beneath them.

"I ask you not now, as formerly I asked you, whether you will do the behests of the Spirit

who hath her seat, now and always, upon the awful throne of the Snake," Chun shouted.

More and more deeply was the great courtyard at his feet sunken in gloom, while the sun's rays, striking upward above the walls and roofs of the encircling cloisters, gilded the vast cones of the temple with a transient glory.

"You have felt since then the weight of her hand set on you in punishment for your sins. You have learned to fear her. Now will she suffer you to taste of her mercy, even as a mother comforts the child at her knee, and dries the tears occasioned by her chastisement. And you, who before her are as little children, in love and fealty, in worship and deep humility, will make yourselves obedient to her will."

Even as he ceased speaking, a change with incredible rapidity was wrought in the great pile behind him. The gold paled, faded, vanished; and almost as quickly, the greys and blacks and the elusive purples, which it had gilded, vanished too. Then suddenly, not only the domes, but the whole enormous mass of stones, emerging as it were from the shadows, were overspread by a pallid, green tint, livid and ghastly as that which, now and again, may be marked upon the faces of the dead.¹

It was as though this monstrous monument, which had been builded in the blood and the tears of thousands, was about to crumble away

¹ Note 10.

before the eyes of the multitude, and to dissolve into a mountain of corruption.

It was an effect which, once in a while, had been noted by almost every member of that staring throng ; but now the impression was felt to be one of sheer horror.

Men saw in the phenomenon an ominous presage.

Chun turned and re-entered the temple, his escort following him ; and the crowd dispersed, gloomily, to their homes.

Quickly the night crept up. The moon was obscured by impenetrable banks of cloud. Darkness enveloped the earth ; and Angkor Wat became a huge, shapeless bulk of shadow, set in the heart of a shadowy world.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRIUMPH OF THE SNAKE

OLD Slat, a grey figure, huddled to the chin in a cloak against the chill of the dawn, squatted at the head of the steps near the north-eastern corner of the upper temple, watching the day break.

First, low down in the east, the sky became faintly luminous, the dead darkness giving gradual place to a wan and sallow light. Then a soft, pink tinge suffused it; and next the sky was ripped suddenly, across and across, by great streaks and slashes of crimson.

As Slat sat watching, the intensity of the colour kindled and glowed—as though upon the fires of some huge furnace, hidden below the sky-line, mighty bellows were at work; and from the horizon, immense waves of crimson rose higher and higher, invading in quick succession each shadowy bank of cloud, until the very zenith of the heavens was attained. Answering fires awakened in the west; and presently the whole firmament had become one fervent, glorious canopy. Here and there, where

heavy cloud-banks were massed, the colour smouldered sullenly and was tinged with purple and gold ; in places, slender inlets of a delicate azure showed, ethereal and pure ; and again, the flood of brilliant hues shaded away to dim reds and rosy pinks, against a background of luminous grey.

For a minute or two that wonderful, all-enveloping glow lasted ; and then, as it seemed, almost in a single bound, the sun sprung clear of the horizon. The warm tints faded and died magically ; and very soon the miracle of the daybreak had given place to the merciless, colourless heat of a white morning in the tropics.

Slat watched the rapid processes of this tremendous transformation scene with appreciative eyes ; for, to him, unlike the majority of Asiatics, the beauties of nature made a strong appeal. Yet this morning, the dawn had for him a special and portentous significance. It marked the beginning of a day upon which all the hopes and dreams of his lifetime were to be put to the hazard. He knew full well the desperate nature of the venture. With savage anger he had marked overnight the sullen temper of the people ; but this had only hardened his resolve, and added fuel to the fires of his rage against a generation of fools. His Dream, he swore, should have this one last chance of realisation. If that failed, he cared not who or what might go down,

swamped and ruined amid the general wreckage.

Already in the courtyard at his feet, and in the cloisters and galleries of the lower temple, men were busy, making ready for the great procession. The howdahs and trappings of the elephants were being brought out to be ranged along the flags; men passed to and fro, jostling one another in their haste, like bees in a hive; and through the level entrances on the extreme right and left of the exterior cloisters, long lines of slow-moving, slate-coloured monsters, each with a driver upon its neck and one or two ragged creatures astride upon its back, were converging upon the main portals of the temple.

As the morning advanced, and Slat still sat watching, the bustle within the temple increased. Here and there, a man, with frantic shouts and gesticulations, gave directions to his fellows, who stood listening stupidly. Others, heated and dishevelled, pushed their way through doorways, bearing in their arms articles for which they had been sent, that almost invariably, with loud discussion, were declared to be everything except that which, at the moment, was most urgently required. In knots, men squatted on their heels, devouring hasty meals, which they interrupted to bawl to their fellows, through full mouths, fresh admonition or advice. The courtyard was littered with caparisons and trappings,

like the property-room of a pantomime; and everywhere there was confusion, hurry, noise. Some of those engaged upon the task of preparation had won experience of similar work during the *régime* of the Brahmins; but, for the most part, the rabble of loafers and quarrymen, who now swarmed about the temple, were wholly ignorant of the details of pageant or ceremonial. In the past, on such occasions, the hierophants had organised everything, and had themselves performed all save the most menial labours. Now the race of priests had been extirpated—except Baguan Dass and his little band of fellow-survivors; and these to-day sat aloof, watching with complacency, malice, and contempt the inexperienced methods of the folk who had replaced them.

The midday hour had come and gone, and the sun had begun its descent adown the heavens, before the procession, which was to have set forth at noon, had been marshalled into anything resembling order.

From his vantage-point upon the threshold of the porch, at the north-western angle of the upper temple, to which he had removed, old Slat could see it creeping out along the raised causeway. The crowds of spectators filled the big spaces on either hand; and again above the tumult of voices arose the strident scream of conchs, the brazen clamour of cymbals, the jingle of tambourines, and the pulse and roll of the drums.

The armed quarrymen, gaily clad in their stolen finery, led the van and guarded the flanks; while outlying skirmishing parties kept the causeway, ahead of the procession, free from the encroachments of the mob. Slat noted how their sticks rose and fell, almost incessantly, raining blows upon the heads and backs of the people, who, from time to time, driven forward by the pressure of those behind, were forced to seek a lodgment on the pavement above them, if they were to avoid being crushed to death against the massive stone blocks upon which its flags reposed.

The roofs of the outer cloister and of the two small but exquisite temples, which stood back a little, one on each side, half-way down the causeway, were black with people, clinging to them; and this sight was more abhorrent to Slat than the unnecessary punishment which the quarrymen were inflicting. In the days of the Brahmans, no man would have dreamed of thus desecrating the holy buildings; and Slat, who so worshipped their beauty, was offended by the idea that they could be put to such unworthy uses by hosts of vulgar sightseers. Also, to him, the spectacle was eloquent of the prevailing anarchy and undiscipline, which so excited his detestation and disgust.

"The last throw of the dice!" the old man muttered to himself, half aloud; and a jeering laugh at his elbow answered him.

He turned and saw Baguan Dass sitting on

the steps of the porch, watching the progress of the procession with a grim, disdainful satisfaction. The deeply sunken eyes of the priest glowed in their cavernous sockets; and as Slat watched, his mocking laugh was repeated.

"The last and crowning folly of a season of madness!" he croaked. "The final act in this drama of insanity!"

"You think the attempt will fail?" asked Slat, with fear and with eagerness.

"I do not *think*. I *know*. The procession of the false sword began the upheaval. The procession of the false avatar ends it. Had it not been for the thraldom of the harlot who, too long, has polluted the inner shrine, Chun perchance might have . . . But what avails it to speculate upon what might have been; since, as you say, the die is cast?"

"Maybe, even now, the Liberator of the *Sudras* will prevail," said Slat. "He hath force and courage and energy above the common measure—your gifts, master of mine."

"Aye," said Baguan Dass slowly. "I gave them to him . . . with the aid of a woman; a woman who . . . to me . . . was not as other women. But, it is ever so . . . That with which a man is endowed by the woman who bore him in pain, he, in the fulness of time—in pain no less bitter—shall yield up to the woman he loves. From women we derive everything; to women we surrender all. So hath it been with Chun. He had a soul finer, cleaner, stronger

than that of his fellows ; but now by this wanton of the temple it hath been sapped and undermined till only the empty husk of it remains."

"None the less," said Slat, "perhaps he will triumph ; and if that comes to pass, then will I build a temple such as the rebel brain of man hath never before had the insolence to conceive, or the hands of man the skill to fashion. And if he fail . . . Yonder lies the forest, and beneath its towering arches a great peace abides."

"And I," said Baguan Dass, "shall remain here ; for I am the servant of the Sword. While *I* live, no impious hand shall be laid upon it. Even at the entreaty of Chun, my son, I would not suffer it to be borne in the procession of the false avatar. I, who am weary of life—since in punishment for forgotten iniquity I have been doomed to see perish all that I hold sacred—long unspeakably for death—which is the gate to new and happier births. If I perish, guarding the Sword, then shall I acquire merit ; but I fear that I may be doomed to live, so that yet a little longer I may guard it. That, to me, were the harder penance. Mayhap, I and those who have survived with me, and the children we have saved—Brahmans all—may furnish wardens of the Sword for ever ;¹ but from me, who am very old, the merciful kiss of Azrael, Angel of Death, cannot now be much longer withheld."

¹ Note I.

"Yet I still cling to the hope that, perchance, he may succeed," said Slat.

The procession had wriggled slowly along the causeway, and had been swallowed up by the great porched gate which, in the centre, broke with its conical dome the long line of the outer cloister. Behind it the people had closed in from all sides, surging after it through the big arch, and pouring through the two level exits at the northern and southern extremities. Much delay was caused by the elephants, which were forced unwillingly to descend the broad stone stairs leading from the outer cloister to the open space beyond the sacred precincts. They let themselves down, step by step, with ungainly hunching of their limbs and joints, testing with cautious foot the ability of each stair to bear their weight, and questing hither and thither with suspicious trunks.

Before them went a mob of quarrymen, followed by bands of temple women—whom Chun had collected for the occasion from the husbands or lovers who had appropriated them, together with the rest of the plunder looted from the shrines of the Gods.

They were magnificently attired in clinging bodices of almost transparent silk, and skirts of cloth-of-gold, strained tightly round them, emphasising every curve of their bodies, and hanging from their girdles, in front, in stiff rich

folds. Their bangles and anklets clanked and jingled as they went ; great, embossed, lozenge-shaped plates of gold were fixed, like belt-buckles, at their waists ; and their head-dresses were gilded too—immense erections with triple peaks, in shape closely resembling the domes of the great Wat.¹

They carried tambourines in their hands, and from time to time, encouraged by outbursts of discordant music, performed mystical dances, advancing and retreating in unison. Again, as they moved forward at a more sober pace, one of their number raised her voice in song, intoning a verse in the ancient tongue ; and all her companions repeated it in monotonous chorus. Few, if any, of those present, including the singers themselves, knew the meaning of the words they chanted ; but thus they had always danced and sung when attending a procession in honour of the Gods, and thus they danced and sang now to glorify with voice and limb the incarnate Spirit of the Snake.²

Above this glittering throng the bulky, grey bodies of the elephants, their heads and flanks half-covered by trappings of crimson and gold, lurched forward, with rolling gait ; and last of all came the old and very sacred white elephant—its pink and blotchy skin visible beneath the magnificence of its caparison—led by Chun, who paced gravely at its left shoulder. It bore

¹ Note 3.

² Note 3.

on its back the howdah of the Avatar, hung with heavy silken curtains closely drawn.

The excited bands of armed men led, flanked, and followed the procession; and their efforts hardly availed to force a way for it through the immense throng of curious spectators, or to prevent it being jostled by the crowds pressing upon it from the sides and rear. Nearly three hours were occupied in traversing the two and a half miles which separate Angkor Wat from the forum; and more time elapsed before the white elephant could be brought through the lines into which the rest of the procession had grouped itself, and could be induced painfully to scale the stairway of the Ba Yon.

Here it was faced about, in the sight of all the people; Chun still keeping his place at its side, and standing there, with the curve of a long, curiously-wrought, gold elephant-goad hooked over the creature's left ear. The mahout squatted on the flags, holding the beast's trunk with his hand. It was his way of letting his charge know that a friend was near him.

Sud and Muth, looking all the more loutish and plebeian for the gorgeous garments in which their brother's generosity had clothed their hulking bodies, shambled forward, and with long gold rods, drew back the silken curtains of the howdah. It was roofed by a gilded dome, and was some six feet in height, and within it, erect upon cushions of crimson, stood the Spirit of the Snake.

The eyes of the entire multitude were fixed upon the little, graceful figure, lightly poised upon the shapely feet, and with a carriage so confident and proud.

Above the shadowy masses of her hair—visible through the veil of gauze, whereof the folds concealed all save the faintest outline of her face—rose a head-dress fashioned of gold and silver scales, representing seven snake-masks, with the expanded hoods behind them fanning out into a single, spreading cowl, beautiful, but sinister. From the mouths of these reptiles, little forked tongues of red gold protruded, and their eyes were emeralds, which flashed with a green light in the sunshine of the afternoon.

Her body was clothed in a closely-fitting garment of silver and gold scales, which revealed and accentuated every curve and line of her figure, and shot forth rays, scintillating with every movement. Her slender arms, bare to the shoulder, were loaded with bangles and bracelets, in which great jewels shone with a dazzling refulgence. From her anklets, and from the rings she wore on the toes of her little, white feet, gems glittered and sparkled like supernatural glow-worms.

In her hands she fondled a live cobra, that writhed, coiling itself about her arms and neck, and gliding in and out of her clasp, seemed to pour its sinuous length over her, like an animated stream, liquid, yet solid.

For a little the people stood at gaze, while

the conchs, drums, and cymbals broke forth anew into a salvo of wild and hysterical music ; and then, with a sound like a universal intake of the breath, the multitude sank earthward, in an attitude of adoration.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SNAKE'S DECREE

CHUN, crouching on the ground with the rest, but in spirit uplifted and thrilled by the intensity of his relief and exultation, glanced upward, over his shoulder, at the small, erect figure standing alone and above him under the gilded canopy of the howdah.

Even through the gauze of her veil he could see how her eyes shone. Her breast, beneath the glittering scales, heaved; her whole frame quivered with the ecstasy of her triumph.

She had conquered—his dear Divinity! Had vanquished this mob of the discontented, the rebellious, and the sceptical, even as, at her first coming, she had enslaved his own soul.

Her victory was complete; and Chun, freed suddenly from the crushing burden of his anxiety and fear for her, found in her success an intoxication and a delight more potent than any achievement of his own could ever have produced. The knowledge that it was through him that the woman he so loved had attained to this pinnacle of ascendancy over the inhabitants of

the only world they knew, set a crown upon his joy.

As he squatted there in the dust, gazing up at her through adoring eyes—his confidence restored, every fibre of his being responding to and sharing in the elation that was hers—Chun experienced the supreme moment of his life.

Obedient to a gesture of her uplifted hand, the music died into silence, and the multitude thrilled to the sound of her full, melodious voice.

"Let the chosen servant of the Snake stand forth!" she commanded; and Chun sprang erect at the word.

"Tell unto my people my decree!" she cried.

Chun, turning toward her, placed the fingertips of both hands against his forehead, covering his face with the palms, and bowed low, in deep obeisance. Then, once more he faced the people.

Immediately before him squatted the motley crowd of those who had formed the procession—musicians, dancing-girls, and a rabble of armed quarrymen and warriors—with the huge, caparisoned elephants grouped to the right and left. Beyond these was the dense throng of men and women and children, crouching on the ground, and raising expectant faces to gaze upon him and upon the Snake. Behind them again, on the opposite side of the forum, the vast pile

of the Ba Phun arose, solid and pyramidal, against the blue of the sky.

At Chun's side, towering above him, stood the old white elephant, rocking a little, and with restless trunk—on its back, framed in the golden uprights of the howdah, the incarnate Spirit of the Snake.

Immediately to the rear of this group, the great, square minarets of the Ba Yon made an impressive background of cold, grey stone, holding aloft, carved on each gigantic facet, effigies of the head of Brahma, impassive in their tireless expectation.

"O my brothers!" cried Chun, in a loud voice that carried far and wide. "My brothers, and children of the most sacred Snake!" He turned once more, to salaam reverently toward her. "Listen well to the words I speak, obedient to her dread command.

"The barbarous Thai are upon us—even at our doors. Our armies, as a punishment for our transgressions, have suffered defeat on many stricken fields. The reinforcements sent have not availed to stay the on-coming of these brutish invaders. Already the camps of the enemy are pitched upon the shores of Tonlé-Sap.

"The need of our nation is sore—the danger dire.

"Therefore, mindful of her people in this hour of their extreme necessity, the most glorious, most merciful, and most omnipotent Snake hath

vouchsafed to assume once more the fetters of human flesh, and to make herself visible to the eyes of all men.

"And thus, through me her unworthy mouth-piece, doth she make known to you her will.

"She will save you from the invading Thai!"

A loud acclamation arose from the multitude, and with a wave-like motion their prostrations were renewed.

"She will save your homes from flames, your women-folk from dishonour, your children from slavery, and yourselves from the sword!"

The shouts were redoubled.

"Of those fit to bear arms, she bids me select five thousand, and lead them in person against the barbarians, and she sets upon our heads the crown of certain victory. The shores of the Lake shall be white with the bones of the slain, and their rotting bodies shall manure our crops. The wealth which by pillage they have gotten shall be our spoil, their women-folk our hand-maidens, their children our thralls from generation unto generation, and their king shall become a sweeper of the outer courts of the temple of the Snake!"

This picture made a strong appeal to the popular imagination, and Chun's words were greeted by prolonged shouts and acclamations.

"But——" continued Chun, his face growing stern, his tones more insistent and impressive,—"but, as a token of our worship and our gratitude for this her boundless mercy showered

upon us, she decrees that forthwith a temple be builded in her honour, whereof the splendour shall transcend the monuments fashioned by the accursed Brahmans in honour of the false gods who fell with them."

The low, threatening mutter, which till now had not that day been heard, came from the mob, and was loudest in those places where the quarrymen were gathered together.

"She appoints Slat, the old wise man, whose skill and magical power is known to all of us, to be her master-builder; and to him she hath miraculously revealed the design of the great shrine which in the fulness of time shall become the abode of her divinity."

The murmurs grew louder. Slat, in his day, as foreman in the labour-yards, had proved a tyrannical task-setter.

"And she bids me," cried Chun, raising his voice—"she bids me choose from the number of the skilful fashioners of stone, three thousand craftsmen whose high privilege it shall be to erect this mighty monument of her glory."

The muttering swelled to an uproar, which rose and fell ominously. With difficulty could Chun make the end of his speech heard by those nearest to him.

"Listen! Listen well! Only by fulfilling the command of the most sacred Snake can our land be saved from the calamity that threatens it."

But the people would not listen. Many had risen to their feet. All were talking at once.

The awe of the Snake, by which for a little space they had been hypnotised, was forgotten; and Chun's quarrymen were among those who showed the most open signs of rebellion. To the entire population the very thought of the exacting, senseless toil of temple-building—of the unending battle with gigantic monoliths, of the eternal straining, of the frequent crushings and maimings—had become a thing abhorrent. No power divine or human could force them back to the cruel bondage of the quarry and the labour-yard. Goaded to savagery at the mere notion, they raved and shouted and blasphemed, lashing themselves into a delirium of fury.

For a moment or two Chun stood still, looking about him irresolutely, with anxious, wrathful eyes beneath his lowering brow. Then he yelled an order, bidding the procession reform. His single preoccupation was to get the woman he loved safely conveyed from out the heart of this tumult.

Striking the terrified mahout with the golden goad, he screamed to him to make the old white elephant descend the stairway into the crowded forum, and the panic-stricken man reluctantly obeyed. The aged and feeble animal emitted blasts of complaining sound, as limb by limb he hunched himself down the steps, while Chun made shift, by the aid of the goad, to draw the silken curtains of the howdah, and to shield the girlish figure from the gaze of the maddened people.

Immediately a little hand from within drew them back again, and even through the noise that deafened him, Chun heard her shrill and angry tones.

"Let the curtains be!" she cried.

She had seated herself now, cross-legged upon the crimson cushions, and even as he watched, and before he could make a movement to prevent her, she had torn aside the veil that hid her face.

A sudden silence fell, as the multitude, whose eyes, like those of one man, were fixed upon her, noted her act.

And then, abruptly, a woman's laugh rent the stillness. It came from among the dancing-girls who were grouped about the foot of the temple-stairs.

"This is no incarnation of the Snake!" cried a feminine voice, high-pitched and clear as crystal. "It is Gunda . . . little Gunda . . . who, like us, was a woman of the temple!"

Instantly the crowd seized the word and passed it from mouth to mouth, with scornful laughter and bitter and brutal mockery. Obscene cries were uttered; foul taunts and questions were flung at her; and she, springing erect, and beside herself with rage and humiliation, gave back jibe for jibe.

A stone was flung; many followed in its wake; and Chun, dropping the goad, clambered up the side of the elephant, thrust the girl down among the cushions, and strove with his body to protect her from the flying missiles.

He saw below him the frightened faces of the dancing-girls, terrified by the violence of the mob by which they were surrounded; but in the features of many of them he read expressions of fury, jealousy, and indignation. They remembered that they had been tricked into performing mystical services in a pageant designed to glorify one of their own despised class; and the injury to their pride was not one easy to forgive.

He saw the ruffianly faces of his quarrymen, debased and brutal at all times, but distorted to a new ugliness now by fierce animal passions—grins of stupid mirth, scowls of rage, clumsily expressed contempt, which spluttered into eruptions of filthy jeers and cat-calls.

He saw the mob, swaying and surging, with brandished weapons and clenched fists shaken in his direction, while they howled their execration with inarticulate yells and ravings.

At the opposite side of the forum he saw a little knot of men leap on to some hidden object which raised them above the heads of their fellows, and heard a stentorian voice proclaim:

“Behold! Here is yet another incarnation of Divinity! Worship and bow low, O my brothers!”

Then, hauled up from the depths of the crowd, and raised, struggling in the grip of his tormentors, appeared the idiot Phun, his head sagging and lolling this way and that, his cavernous mouth agape, his features, with their odious mutilations, contracted hideously by pain

and fear. Imperfectly controlled by his wrecked brain, his arms wavered in loose gesticulations.

Savage howls and laughter greeted the rude humour of this piece of grotesque horseplay; and then the mob turned its attention once more to the man and woman on the white elephant—and stones flew thick and fast.

Though he strove to ward them off with his uplifted arms, they struck Chun again and again. Setting his teeth, he flung himself from side to side, resolute to defend the girl from the hail of missiles. Already blood flowed from his mouth, and from a score of flesh wounds.

"Get down!" he cried. "Get down and save yourself!"

He could not see whether the girl obeyed him, for hardly had he uttered the words, when a great fragment of sandstone struck him full upon the forehead, and he toppled backward from his perch before the howdah, into the arms of Sud and Muth.

These two practical creatures had already divested themselves of the gorgeous clothes which made them so conspicuous: and without attempting to stanch his wounds, they at once rendered a like service to their unconscious brother. He had fallen among the crowd of dancing-girls, all of whom were intent upon the woman he had sought to protect, or else were trying to avoid the stones which the mob was flinging with a reckless lack of precision; and the two stalwart peasants had little

difficulty in forcing their way backward through them to the foot of the wide stairs, up which, bearing Chun's naked body between them, they ran quickly.

They plunged into the Ba Yon; passed through it without a halt; dived into the blackened and deserted ruins which, at the rear of it, were all that remained of a portion of the capital city; and so made good their escape into the forest behind.

A stone hurled by a quarryman scarred a deep wound on Gunda's forehead as, quivering with wrath and defiant to the last, she stood, erect and fearless, facing the multitude of her enemies. But when she fell stricken, from the back of the old white elephant, it was by the women of the temple that she was torn to pieces.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HUT IN THE FOREST

THE short dusk of the tropics lay, like a soft coverlet, over the hot face of the land; and in the interior of the hut, under the high-pitched roof of thatch, it was already dark.

In the mud fireplace at the back, pots stood above the flames, supported on flat stones, blackened by wood-smoke. Two or three women busied themselves with the cooking, and a little group of children of both sexes squatted near them, occasionally scolding or striking at a couple of lean cats which prowled about, restless and expectant. On a palm-leaf mat near the low doorway, from which a ladder of untrimmed wood led to the littered space before the hut, Slat, now a very old and feeble man, was seated, chewing his betel-quid mechanically. At a little distance from him, Sud and Muth, grown heavier with years, squatted placidly in bovine silence.

Through the uneven oblong of the door, and beneath the ragged fringe of thatch above it,

could be seen a small plot of irrigated rice-field, round which the forest, now little more than a dark shadow in the twilight, shut down like a fallen drop-scene.

A footstep sounded without, and presently Chun climbed the ladder and entered the hut. He paused at the threshold to wash the mud from his feet and legs, with water from a big gourd which stood ready for the purpose; then flung to the floor the rattan knapsack, filled with yams and other jungle produce, with which he had been laden; and in silence seated himself near Slat.

Muth pushed the clumsy, wooden betel-box across the mat toward him, and in silence he prepared his quid.

"You have been far, my son?" old Slat enquired, in quavering tones.

"Yonder," replied Chun, pointing with his outstretched chin toward the north.

No further word was spoken; and presently the women brought the food—piles of speckled rice and a mess of vegetables cooked with cardamoms and rock-salt. The men and the little boys squatted in silence around the rough platters, and ate their fill, while the women served them. Then each in turn lifted a gourd to his lips, and drank a long draught of water. Next, they gathered once more about the betel-box, and the women and girls removed the leavings to the back of the hut, and made their own meal; after which they set them-

selves to the task of cleaning the pots and platters.

"How far did you go, Chun?" asked Slat presently.

"I went . . ." came the slow reply. "I went . . . to the Great Wat . . . for the first time since . . . for the first time for years."

With a sound like a little gasp of pain, old Slat inhaled his breath.

"Grass grows in the courts," Chun continued, "and on either side of the causeway the brushwood stands chin-high. Already the trees of the forest begin to invade the sanctuaries, and the wild fig vines thrust their tendrils between stone and stone. The Thai, when they wreaked their wrath upon the temples, were powerless to demolish them; but the jungle is proving a more ruthless foeman."

"Yet I think," said old Slat, with a ghost-like flicker of the enthusiasm which aforetime was wont to thrill him. "I think the works which our fathers builded will endure for ever."

"May be," said Chun, with a shrug. "But the place is utterly forsaken. A mouse-deer sprang from a corner of the inner cloister, as I approached, and on the platform of the upper temple a wild cat was prowling. Our people—after the last stand which they made against the Thai, behind the ramparts they had reared about the thirty temples of the Tha Phrom,

while I lay sick of my hurt—dispersed into the forest. They are no longer a nation, though the Thai, in their fort on the banks of the little river that flows to the Great Lake, make believe to rule them. They have become a race of jungle-dwellers, camped even as we, in scattered clearings of the forest. The Khmer empire is as though it had never been; yet still in the fort of our conquerors the survivors of the Brahmans serve as the wardens of the Sword."

He was silent, lost in thought.

"I stood beside the bathing-tank—empty now, for the roots of a banyan have started a leak, and the water has drained away," he said presently. "I sat for a while on the big stairway near the great western portals of the Wat. I climbed the broken steps which lead upward to the threshold of the central temple. I stood on the platform without the entrance, and gazed around upon the forest and the desolation of the deserted place. I . . . I . . ." He hesitated, and his voice dropped. "I penetrated even to the Inner Shrine."

Again he was silent, his head bowed upon his breast, his mind wandering through misty by-paths glamourous by wonderful memories.

"And nowhere," he resumed presently, "did I see traces of a living soul; but as I came hither, I met a little band of *Sudras* laden with offerings for the chief of the Thai."

"I warned you not to go alone, brother," growled Muth.

"Yet, only alone could I go," said Chun mildly, and paused upon the word.

"I spoke with them, and they offered me no violence. None the less I told them nothing of this, our abiding-place. They said that the Thai delight in dances and stage-plays, and that they reward lavishly those of our people who are skilled in such arts. They told me too that one whose name I have forgotten—a clownish fellow who of old was a quarryman of mine—had won for himself much honour by his laughter-provoking antics. He wears a grotesque mask, and a head-dress fashioned to imitate that of the Brahmans of our sculptures, and he is the butt of the other players, who treat him villainously, to the amusement of all that behold."¹

Chun's hearers received the news with slack interest, but the women in the background, beyond the range of the *damar*-torches, giggled together.

"And they say," continued Chun, "that the Thai bring tidings of a new god, whose teaching is a doctrine of mercy and love; and that they are pitiful to those who do him worship. They name him Gautama, the Buddha."²

"I have had enough of gods and worship," growled old Slat. "They rise and pass and are forgotten, like the mists of morning. Only the

¹ Note 11.

² Note 12.

temples which men rear in their honour, seeking therewith to make articulate the dumb agony of their own souls—they—they only—endure. I have had enough of gods."

"I too," said Chun.

FINIS

NOTES

NOTE I. (*Pages 83 and 317.*)

THE SWORD OF INDRA

THIS weapon, which is still preserved in a shrine in the royal enclosure of the King of Kambodia, is said to have been presented to the first Khmer monarch of Angkor by the Thunder God himself. The wardens who serve in the sanctuary in which the Sword is kept, and who alone are suffered to touch the sacred weapon, are Brahmans—the last survivors of the race that once ruled over the Khmer empire. They live at the charges and under the protection of the King of Kambodia, who, in common with all his subjects, is a Buddhist. Only some six or eight inches of the blade, near the hilt, are exposed to the view of visitors to the little shrine; and the Sword, in which the mystic Spirit of the Land is popularly supposed to abide, is the object of immense veneration to all the natives of the country, who come from far and wide to make pilgrimage to it. So far as it was possible to form an opinion from the glimpse which was vouchsafed, the Sword was judged by the author to be very ancient. It appeared to be fashioned, not of steel, but of iron, and the elaborate carvings and the gold waterings which ornament its surface suggest Indian workmanship. The magnificent scabbard of carved gold is, on the other hand, certainly the work of an Indo-Chinese, probably of a Kambodian goldsmith.

A similar sword is worshipped as a god by the semi-savage hill-folk somewhere in the *Hinterland* of Annam; and to this, too, pious pilgrimage is made by the Buddhists of Kambodia. These journeys are

attended by some risk ; for if any unfortunate event occurs after the sword has been visited by strangers, the hill-men attribute it forthwith to the anger of their god, and hasten to avenge him upon the pilgrims who are supposed to have occasioned his wrath.

NOTE 2. (*Page* 111.)

THE WOMEN OF THE TEMPLE

Those who are curious on this subject may be referred to Mr Frazer's great book, *Adonis, Attis, and Osiris: Studies in Oriental Religion* (Macmillan and Co., 1907). The belief in which religious prostitution had its origin was that the land was rendered fruitful through the fertilisation of women by the gods. These latter were represented by the priests of the temple, or in some instances by strangers ; but the favours of the temple women were always denied to the laymen living in the vicinity of their abodes. Religious prostitution is still practised, notably in some of the Hindu temples of southern India.

NOTE 3. (*Pages* 119 and 319.)

COSTUMES AND DANCES OF THE TEMPLE
WOMEN

The dances and costumes here described are to be seen to this day in the palace of the King of Kambodia at Phnom Penh, both being made use of in the dramatic representations which take place on state occasions. They are of considerable archæological interest, and are obviously a perpetuation of a tradition which coexisted with the designing and execution of the bas-reliefs and many of the sculptures of Angkor.

NOTE 4. (*Page* 123.)

THE LEPROUS KING

There is a tradition, which is believed to be historically correct, that a king who was a leper ruled over Angkor. An image, which represents a sedent and almost nude figure, stands to-day in what must once have been the royal enclosure of the Palace at Angkor Thom, and this, for no very sufficient reason, has been described by some *savants* as an effigy of the leprous king. An examination of this image led the author to the conclusion that it was a comparatively recent piece of work, and that its character is Buddhistic rather than Hindu. It is devoid of artistic merit or interest, and it compares most unfavourably with the work of the Khmer sculptors.

NOTE 5. (*Page* 152.)

THE THAI

Thai is the name by which the Siamese call themselves to this day, and it is by this name that they are known in Indo-China. It is an historical fact that the Khmer empire, at the moment of its decline, was attacked and defeated by the Siamese. The subsequent history of Kambodia is a record of warfare between the Siamese and the Kambodians, in which the former were usually successful. It was in order to escape from Siamese aggression that Norodom, the Kambodian king, threw himself and his country into the arms of France; but until the treaty of 1902 was concluded, by which Siamreap and Batambang were exchanged by Siam for Chantabun, Angkor continued to be accounted a Siamese province.

NOTE 6. (*Page* 153.)

THE CHINESE EMBASSY

The Embassy of which mention is here made was ordered, in 1295, to proceed to the kingdom of Chin-Lá,

the name by which the Khmer empire was then known to the Chinese. The ambassador, whose name is unknown, but who has left a record of his journey and experiences, started from Ming-Cheu in the second month of the following year; travelled thence to the port of Wen-Chu; whence he put to sea on the twentieth day of the same month. On the fifteenth day of the third month—viz., twenty-five days later—he arrived off the coast of Cochin-China; but he relates that he did not succeed in reaching his destination until the seventh moon, owing to the contrary winds which he encountered. He returned to China in 1297, again travelling by sea. A translation of his journal is to be found in M. Abel Rémusat's *Nouveaux Mélanges Asiatiques*. At the time of his visit, Angkor was a flourishing city, the capital of a great empire, and the temple of Angkor Wat was still under construction. When the place was next visited by a traveller who has left a record behind him, it was what it is to-day—a vast collection of temples, long deserted, and overgrown by vegetation; yet this was after the lapse of less than three centuries, in 1570. The account is to be found in a book published by Christoval de Jaque, a Portuguese traveller, who published his work in 1606. He mentions the fact that even in 1570 the inscriptions at Angkor (which are written variously, either in Sanskrit characters, or in Sanskrit words transliterated into Kambodian character) were unintelligible to the natives, thus showing how completely the learning of the Brahmans had been lost. He also mentions that the natives of the country feared to approach the temples, and ascribed their construction to demons and giants.

NOTE 7. (*Page 230.*)

THE EXODUS OF THE BATS

The spectacle here described was witnessed by the author many times during December 1908, and even the efforts which the French Government are making to reduce the numbers of the bats which infest the temples

at Angkor are attended with only partial success. It is certain that no similar attempts were made in the time of the Brahmans, since Hindus are averse from the avoidable destruction of animal life; wherefore it may be surmised that the bats inhabited the buildings in vast numbers even before they were abandoned.

NOTE 8. (*Pages 237 and 238.*)

THE HERESY OF THE SNAKE

The existence of this belief among the Khmer people is an historical fact. The following mention of it is made in the account of Angkor, written by the Chinese ambassador, to whom reference has been made in Note 6:—

“Several natives of distinguished rank have told me that formerly there used to be a fairy in that tower in the form of a dragon with nine heads, who was the protectress of the kingdom; that under the reign of each king of the country the fairy assumed every night the form of a woman, and sought the king in the tower; and even though he were married, the queen, his wife, dared not intrude before a certain hour; but, at a signal of two strokes, the fairy vanished, and the king was then able to receive his queen and his other wives; if the fairy allowed a single night to pass without appearing, it was a sign that the death of the king was near at hand; if, on his side, the king failed to meet her, it was certain that a fire or some other calamity would occur.”

It is probable that the Chinese envoy was mistaken as to the number of the dragons' heads. They should be *seven*, not *nine*.

NOTE 9. (*Page 238.*)

THE SYMBOL OF THE SNAKE IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY

The author is indebted to his friend, the Hon. Mr P. Arunachalam, of the Ceylon Civil Service, for the explanation, and almost for the words here put into the mouth of Baguan Dass.

NOTE 10. (*Page 309.*)

The sunset effect here described is not due to any effort of the imagination. It was witnessed by the author on more than one occasion during his stay at Angkor.

NOTE 11. (*Page 337.*)

The clown in the Kambodian dance, witnessed by the author in the palace of the King of Kambodia, wears a caricature of the head-dress of the Brahmans, and is the object of the insults of the other players and of the derision of the spectators. He is called *Bram*, a contraction of *Brahman*, a word which reappears in Malay as *Pran*, the term applied to the clown in the dramatic representations called *Ma'yong*, which are clearly derived from the Kambodian dance.

NOTE 12. (*Page 337.*)

The natives of Kambodia, and indeed of all Indo-China, are to-day Buddhists to a man, if the wild tribes of the *Hinterland* and the hills be excepted. Their conversion to Buddhism is believed to have been wrought by the Siamese; and here, as elsewhere, it is to be regarded in its popular forms less as a separate religion than as a purified and reformed Hinduism.

