

CONJUROR'S FATE--CONTINUED

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praises loudly every morning, when she went to the well with the other women to draw water for the house. But in her secret heart she feared Runga's jealousy. The man had taken his jilting with a bad grace, he had not been treated well over the matter of the wedding, although Nellama's father was quite justified in giving his daughter, according to their custom, to the richer suitor. Moreover, he was consumed with envy over his rival's professional success. He considered that the precious gift should by right have been his, he being Peroo's senior by two or three years, and he imagined that he had in some way been deprived of his birthright by the younger man. If Peroo were removed, it might come to him. He had let drop sentiments of this kind in Nellama's hearing in days gone by, and they returned upon her with force, now that Peroo had grown so dear. Indian women love passionately, and their instincts teach them to guard vigilantly and look with suspicion on their enemies. Runga was an enemy, and the beautiful girl trembled for her prosperous husband as his success increased.

"I will watch him like a mother," she whispered to herself, as she crept away from his sleeping form that wedding night, and laid herself before the door like a faithful hound. "No hand but mine shall prepare his food; no foot shall cross the threshold of his sleeping-room except over my body."

Four days later the chuprassee in his gorgeous coat and turban appeared again in the village. He was more important than ever, and made almost a royal progress to Peroo's house, attended by a crowd of admiring villagers.

"He bade me say that he would be here at four o'clock," was the message from his Excellency. All was now ready. The news spread through the village rapidly, reaching the outlying hamlets by noon, and a steady flow of visitors set in for the two hours preceding the performance. At eleven the grave was finished, and the men returned to their houses for dinner—a meal of curry and rice. Nellama had everything ready for her Peroo. She had taken infinite pains in the preparation of his last meal; and she was more than rewarded for her trouble by the approval and pleasure written on his face, as she placed the dish of white rice and the basin of savory curry before him with the little brass bowls of various chutneys he loved so well. Hindu women do not dine with their husbands, and Nellama had no appetite for the portion of food she had put aside for herself. Her mind was too uneasy about her husband. Drawing her cloth over her head, she slipped out into the field, intending to run across and have one more look at the grave, now that the workmen had all departed, and before the sightseers began to arrive. As she passed behind the cactus hedge that divided her little pumpkin garden from the field, she caught sight of a form stealing away from the grave. He turned his head and looked at her, and she shuddered, for there was an evil smile upon Runga's face as his eyes met hers. What could he have been about?

"I will suit his villainy to the very bottom!" she said, as she hurried towards the spot. "Nothing shall escape my eye. I will look into every nook and cranny to see that the wicked Runga has not put any cunning and deadly poison to destroy the life of my husband. Ah, if I can only catch him in his wickedness, I will appeal to the Commissioner himself to have him punished."

Nellama found nothing but bare walls smooth with freshly plastered mortar. The little room was like a box, and perfectly empty. There could be no room for villainy there, surely, with the midday sun shining down into its moderate depth, illuminating every inch of space. Her fears subsided, and she sat down by the vault determined not to leave it again till Peroo's father arrived. She saw her husband come out of his house and look round for her. But she knew that he did not want her; it is not the thing for a Hindu to be

seen chatting with his wife in broad daylight. So she sat there, patiently keeping guard until the appointed hour.

The crowd gathered during the afternoon, and after looking at the grave, the people sat down to chat and watch for the procession. It came from the village with the usual accompaniment of tom-toms and horns, and with apparently the whole village in its wake. It was one of those tropical scenes of color and light which it is impossible to place upon canvas. The centre figure was that of Peroo, dressed in white and gold, and adorned with garlands of oleander flowers. He was carried on the shoulders of his tribesmen and brother conjurers. The Commissioner and his friends walked apart with a look of amusement and interest on their faces. When they reached the grave they were invited to examine anything they pleased. This they did, and in no cursory manner, for it was a scientific experiment to them of the keenest interest. They found the grave to be nothing but what it professed—namely, a square vault, with unburnt brick walls and floor. Peroo had eaten his usual dinner, cooked for him by his faithful little wife, and his father had given him a drink of some herbal mixture just before starting.

The eyes of all were fixed upon Peroo's father as he commenced the mysterious rite of putting his son to sleep. The chattering of the crowd ceased, and there was a breathless silence.

"What are you doing?" asked the Commissioner.

The man made no secret of it, but readily explained each process.

"S c, your honor, I place these small pellets of clay in my son's ears, and these in his nostrils."

He made some passes, and Peroo showed symptoms at once of mesmeric slumber. Then he turned back the tongue so that it formed a stopping to the throat. One of the Englishmen laid a hand upon the unconscious man's shoulder and shook him, but there was no response. The men who were assisting now began to arrange the body as if for burial; they folded his arms on his breast and straightened out his legs. Apparently life had fled, for there was no respiratory movement, and a yellow tinge crept over the face, replacing the ruddy brown tint of health.

"I don't like that color," said one of the visitors, who possessed some medical knowledge. "It is uncommonly like death."

He laid his finger upon the man's pulse.

"And I believe he is dead, too," he continued in evident consternation. "His pulse has ceased entirely. They have killed him to get the money!"

The Commissioner was startled, no one knew better than he how small a value the Hindu puts upon the human life.

"Wake him!" he cried imperatively.

Peroo's father hesitated.

"My son lives," he said confidently.

"That may be, but we would see for ourselves," replied the Englishman in a tone that intimated he meant to be obeyed.

The man was loath to undo his work, for he understood nothing of the fear that influenced the other. However, the Commissioner's will was law. The pellets were removed, the tongue drawn back from the throat, and Peroo began to breathe softly and regularly, like a child in its sleep.

"Shall I wake him?" the father asked, waiting for further orders.

"No, you may finish the performance," said the Commissioner. He was relieved of anxiety, and satisfied that the men were acting fairly. The pellets were accordingly replaced, and the body resumed its death-like appearance. Peroo was laid in the vault just as though he were dead, but without the usual signs of mourning which mark the presence of death. Even Nellama's vague fears of evil were allayed, and she watched the preparations for closing the tomb with relief and satisfaction. He would be safe from Runga's malice there, and never a doubt crossed her mind of the power of Peroo to return to life when his father should bid him.