

UNDER THE EVENING LAMP

A. ON OF INDIA.

(Conclusion.)

Bunwance is a city built upon a hill. In the valleys beneath are groups of the poorer native houses, lightly built of lath and matting, the roofs thatched with the shells of coconut. Up on the hills are the bungalows of the English and well-to-do Hindus, set to catch every passing breeze, and looking out upon a panorama of beauty which is perhaps unequalled in central India.

In the dining room of one of these, on the evening of the day on which Samol began his toilsome march, sat three gentlemen over their wine. The cloth had been removed, and the pyramids of ice were reflected in the polished surface of the table like the dainty icebergs that they were. The punkabs waving overhead kept the air deliciously cool and clear. Down in the valley Samol halted for a moment and looked up at the house, taking courage for the last climb. His breath came spasmodically, more like that of a dying man. He could hear voices and laughter coming down through the still air, for the windows and doors were all opened to the evening breeze.

"Here's a poor devil of a Hindu making tracks for your house, Dunstan," said Nobbs, one of the diners. "Gad, he looks as if he'd been walking for the last twenty years! Bet you five shillings he's coming to beg for a cup of *quahra*," meaning, of course, money.

"If he is, we'll drop him down at Steere's, next door, said Dunstan, with a laugh; I've got a grudge against that fellow, anyhow."

"What for?" asked Tremain, the third man, laconically.

"What for? why, because he is what he is—a deuced parson!"

"I should think so," said Nobbs, dogmatically. "D'you know, I believe if it weren't for these parsons we'd never have trouble with the native population at all. They are so injudicious and incendiary, and the whole trend of their teaching, you know, is so revolutionary and levelling, deucedly levelling, in fact!"

"It seems to be good form, now a days," said Tremain, "peeling a walnut, to shift the onus of the blame on to the missionaries. I don't go in for religion myself, as you know, but, hang it all, I like to see fair play, and I must say that, from my own observation, I think that, so far from exercising a pernicious influence, the missionaries are distinctly on the side of peace and order. Besides it's ridiculous to say that their influence is of a revolutionary kind when you remember that they would have everything to lose and nothing to gain by any disorganization of present affairs."

"Oh, I don't mean to say," replied Nobbs, "that they do it out of pure cussedness. No, I mean that the tendency of their doctrines is unsettling—from their very nature it is so! The missionary tries to make the native *think*—a very bad plan, a ruinous plan, indeed, for we don't want him to think!"

"Certainly, not," agreed Dunstan, "we want to keep them as ignorant as we can, and if they like to eat each other in their dens, well, so much the better! It's the only way to keep them down."

"It's an effectual way, I don't doubt," said Tremain, throwing himself back and fixing his eyes, keen and cold as steel, on the ceiling, "but is it, should it, be a question of 'keeping down?' We may easily cut our own throats by a policy such as that. In my opinion, there is too much of this off-hand way of settling the matter—as if the people of India were a swarming pack of fleas, and we British had a sort of Bull from heaven authorizing their immediate extermination. In point of fact, they have qualities the finest in the world, if only—"

"Ah, if only," interrupted Dunstan, sincerely, "that's just where the argument fails, my dear fellow! We all know that anything might be 'if only' it were not so and so. The man who bolsters up a defence of the natives is building a *pons asinorum* by which they will crawl over some day and give him his quietus when his back is turned. Now, just look at that patriarchal old villain coming up the hill, moving as if he had a ton weight tied to each foot. He is going to pretend that he is worn out with heat and fatigue, the beggar! Wait till you hear his dolorous whine for *quahra*, and then see if you don't give him a forcible invitation to go and cool his heels elsewhere."

The three turned their heads and looked at Samol, who was now nearly abreast with the outer edge of the verandah. It didn't need much observation to see that his strength was well nigh spent, and there was, besides, such a curious mingling of expectancy, exaltation, and exhaustion in his face, that the rough words of interdiction died on Dunstan's lips before they could be uttered.

"Gad! he looks like an angel trailing a coffin," said Nobbs, with a boisterous laugh; "there's no denying it, these Hindus are born tragedians! Call him in, Dunstan, he'll furnish us with some amusement, I warrant."

But there was no need to call him in, for Samol, mounting the verandah with feeble steps, walked in through the open window with an unhesitating directness which only his intense abstraction and anxiety of soul could excuse or account for. And as these were spiritual conditions which only God could know, it was not unnatural that his conduct should seem to the diners unpardonably audacious and impertinent. Dunstan rose to his feet in a rage, and peremptorily ordered him out again. Now, Samol had made a mistake. He thought this was the house of the missionary. He was trembling with weakness, but he knew that he dared not sit down. He looked round, vainly seeking a friendly face. But they were strange to him, and hostile. This, then, was what he had dared so much and come so far to find. In that moment the light of hope in his heart flickered, and died out. His head sank on his breast again; across his eyes gathered a thin film, obscuring the last ray of light. Dunstan looked at Tremain. Tremain rose to his feet. Nobbs wheeled round and spoke out sharply.

"I say, you old rascal, you needn't come any of your tricks here. We're not to be taken in as readily as you think. If you don't go at once, Dunstan Sahib will show you the way out in a hurry."

Samol seemed perfectly blind, and there were noises in his ears which prevented him from hearing distinctly, but the word "Sahib" struck him like a flash of bright light, and he raised his head again, and began to fumble in his girdle. The next moment he drew forth the precious leaves, and with a movement full of eloquence held them out for someone to take, for he could not see his way. Nobbs, who was nearest him, took them from him reluctantly. But they were in Hindustani, which he could not read. "I'm bothered if it doesn't look like a tract!" said he, passing it on to Tremain. "Here, you can read these hieroglyphics. What is it the beggar's after?"

"I can't tell," said Tremain, after a brief survey, "but this is a portion of the New Testament—Matthew."

Nobbs broke into a laugh, in which he was joined by Dunstan. "Oh, that's his little game, is it?"

Samol knew they were laughing at him, and he shrank back. He held out his hands for the leaflets again, instinctively feeling that there was no help for him there. Tremain put them into his hands, and looked with his keen eyes into the old man's face.

"What is it you want to know?" he asked. There was a note of kindness in his voice, and that single note shook the very foundations of Samol's soul.

"I am old Samol," he cried, his weak voice shaking with emotion, "and I know not what the book means. Who is this Jesus Sahib and where can I find Him? I have been a Sadh Jai all my life . . . but I didn't know! . . . the English are they not Christians? Do they not care? . . . They hate the poor Hindus; but their Christ, He says He loves the whole world! How then, Sahib?"

Tremain stood stock still. Nobbs fidgeted uneasily. Dunstan took a deep draught of wine. Samol waited, and then, as if realising at last that his quest was utterly in vain, with a gesture of infinite dignity and pathos he replaced the leaflets in his girdle, and turned away.

"As quick as you like," said Nobbs, rudely.

Samol half turned again, and staggered. "Bhowance was right," he murmured, raising his hand as if he would call the world to hear him.

"The man's dying!" said Tremain, stepping forward.

Two words had hardly escaped his lips before Samol, staggering again, fell to the ground beside the *Kursi*, and seemingly became at once unconscious. At the same moment, the missionary, Steere, stepped on to the verandah, and called out a cheery Good Evening to them all.

"Mr. Dunstan, I thought I saw an aged Hindu come in here, and it struck me that he had mistaken your house for mine. I have been trying to get hold of him for some time, and I believe that he has been trying to find me."

"Mau, your a little late," said Tremain quietly; "he'll never try to find you again."

They all gathered round the unconscious form, and Tremain and Steere lifted him on to a couch by the window. It seemed as if the sound of a new voice had fanned the flickering flame of life, for at that moment Samol opened his eyes and looked at Steere. He recognised him at once, and a look of eager question came into his face. But the next moment the light died out again, and he shook his head, as if realising that for him there was no longer time.

"Shab-d-dur," he said, sighing deeply. It was the dialect of his mountain home, and he meant that the night was growing dark. And with that sigh his spirit passed out of sight.

The four men stood dumbfounded for some minutes, and then Dunstan and Nobbs bethought themselves of the wine, and went to the table again. It was the only thing they could think of at the time.

"I suppose, Mr. Steere this man is damned?" said Tremain, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

"Who said so?" replied the missionary, turning on him almost fiercely.

"I beg your pardon. I thought that you would have it so. This man was not a Christian, you know."

Steere straightened himself up, and looked at Tremain. Their eyes met, and something passed from eye to eye, and from soul to soul, which could never be put into words. Then Steere said:—

"And other sheep I have which are not of this fold," Mr. Tremain, that was said before the world had ever heard the name of 'Christian.'

Tremain did not answer at once. There was an unwonted light in his eyes.

"I will see you again," he said, then, as he turned and strode from the room.

He went out into the night, and down the hill, where the patches of early moonlight were like the figures of men, walking.

And he, like old Samol, had begun his life anew.—*The Christian Leader.*