

THE JEWELLED COBRA

Story of a Cunning Attempt to Secure Some Famous Jewels

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ON the afternoon of the 3rd of April, 1886, I, George Conway, purser of the *Morning Star*, passenger steamer of the Gold Star Line, was sitting on the verandah of the Great Oriental Hotel at Colombo. We were homeward bound from Singapore, and the *Morning Star* was lying at anchor about half a mile from the breakwater. She was to leave at six o'clock that evening.

The thermometer on the verandah registered 90 degrees, and I stretched myself at full length on a low wicker chair. The only other European present was a handsome, sunburnt man of middle age, dressed entirely in white drill. I put him down at once as a military officer, from the white line of the chin-strap on his cheek. I had been watching him casually for some time and could not help being struck by his manner. A curious, nervous restlessness seemed to pervade him, he kept changing from one seat to another, lighting his cigar and letting it go out, and looking up quickly if any of the servants happened to come suddenly out of the dining-room. There was a keen, alert look in his blue eyes, and a set, almost fierce, expression on his firm, sharply cut features. He glanced at me two or three times as if about to speak, and finally got up and came across to me.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I think you are an officer of the *Morning Star*?"

"I am," I replied; "I am the purser."

"Can you tell me the exact hour when she will sail?"

"At six o'clock," I answered; "are you going home by her?"

"Yes, and I shall go on board at once; I can't stand hanging about here."

He called to one of the white-robed servants to get his luggage, and in a few moments started off. I thought his manner somewhat extraordinary, but as several passengers came in at that moment, and all more or less claimed my attention, I had to postpone my curiosity for the present.

About an hour later we were all on board. I found the new passenger, whose name was entered in the ship's list as Major Strangways, leaning over the rail. The anxious look was still on his face, and he watched each fresh arrival closely. At five minutes to six the whistle boomed out its warning of departure, the Lascars were just beginning to haul up the gangway, when suddenly another shrill whistle, repeated thrice, sounded from the shore, and a small steam launch shot rapidly out from the company's wharf and came tearing through the water towards us. When this happened I noticed that Major Strangways gave vent to an impatient exclamation, that he came and leant over the taffrail and looked eagerly out in the direction of the approaching launch. It came alongside, and a girl ran lightly up the gangway. As she did so I observed that the Major gave a sigh of distinct relief; her luggage was hauled up after her, she waved her hand to someone on the launch. Immediately afterwards the quartermaster sang out, "All clear, sir," the engine bells rang, and the *Morning Star* swung round with her head once more to the open sea.

Meanwhile the girl stood silent, not far from Major Strangways; her back was turned to us, her eager eyes were watching the shore. A steward came up and touched his cap—he asked what he was to do with her luggage. She replied quickly—

"My cabin is No. 75; have it taken there immediately." As she did so I saw her face. She was a distinctly handsome girl, with an upright figure and a proud bearing. She was well made and had a look of distinction about her. Her eyes had a ruddy light in them, and her hair was of that red shade which inclines to gold. The whole expression of her sparkling and youthful face was vivid and intelligent, and just for an instant as she spoke to the steward I observed that her lips parted in a brilliant smile. Her appearance, however, bore marks of haste. Her dress, a riding habit, was covered with dust, and her hair was in considerable disorder. The next moment, the steward leading the way, she disappeared down the companion, and I turned to attend to my numerous duties.

THAT evening, as I was dressing for dinner, the chief steward entered my cabin.

"I thought I would mention to you, sir, that as Mr. and Mrs. French have left, I have given the two vacant seats at your table to Miss Keele and Major Strangways."

"Miss Keele?" I said interrogatively.

"Yes, sir; the young lady who arrived just before the vessel started."

"Oh, that's all right," I answered.

The man withdrew and I continued my toilet. As I did so a smile of satisfaction lingered round my lips. Major Strangways had already roused my interest, and Miss Keele had the sort of face which must attract the attention of any man who has an eye for beauty. I am very fond of a pretty face, and have seen many in the course of my numerous voyages. But there was something about the eyes and the whole expression of the girl who had come on board the *Morning Star* so unexpectedly that afternoon which worried as much as it attracted me. Had I, or had I not, seen that face before? Either I had met it in the past, or it was startlingly like a face I knew. In vain I searched through my memory—the dinner-bell rang, and I entered the saloon.

MISS KEELE, with all signs of haste and travel removed, was seated at my right, and Major Strangways had the place next to her. I gave her a searching glance and, as I did so, almost uttered an exclamation. The missing link in my memory of the past was supplied. Good God! what a queer thing life was! That girl, sitting there in her evening dress, in all the freshness of her young beauty, had stood, three years ago, in the criminal dock of the Old Bailey. Beyond doubt, either she or her double had stood there. I knew now why the pose of the head and the flash in the red-brown eyes had so arrested my attention. It was perfectly true I had seen that face before. On a hot August afternoon, three years ago, I had strolled into the great criminal court at the Old Bailey and had there witnessed part of a trial. A girl had stood in the dock—this girl. I had never heard how the trial ended, nor whether the girl was guilty or not. There she had stood, and I had watched her. What in the name of all that was miraculous was she doing on board the *Morning Star* now?

"I beg your pardon," I said suddenly.

Miss Keele had addressed me twice, but so lost was I in my musings that I had not heard her. I hastened now to push that ugly memory out of sight and to rise to my immediate duties.

"I am afraid you had rather a rush to catch the boat," I said.

"Yes," she answered, with again that fleeting smile; "it was a close shave, and was all owing to those abominable coolies. You cannot make a native understand that there is such a thing as time. I should have been terribly disappointed if I had lost my passage, as I am most anxious to get home by the first week of the season."

"Then England is your home?" I said tentatively.

"It is," she answered. "I spent all my early days in England, but I have been in Ceylon, on my father's plantation, for the last five or six years. I have an aunt in London who has promised to take me about, but I only got the final summons to join her at the eleventh hour. Hence my great haste," she continued; "I all but lost the boat."

"You certainly did," I replied.

Her tone was perfectly frank, her eyes were wide open and unembarrassed. Could I be mistaken after all? Was there another girl just like Miss Keele in the world? But no, I was certain she was the same. There was a peculiar look and power about her face which raised it altogether out of the common, and I had never yet been mistaken in a likeness. The girl sitting by my side was a consummate actress; beyond doubt she was acting a part.

"You speak, Miss Keele, as if you knew Ceylon very well," said Major Strangways; "is your father's plantation anywhere near Kandy?"

"Two miles outside Kandy," she replied.

"Then you surely know the Morrisons, of Gelpoor?"

She laughed.

"I know them quite well; do you?"

"They are my cousins," he said. "How very curious!"

The next moment the two were deep in a vivacious conversation, exchanging many reminiscences, and I saw that for the present I was out of the running.

WHEN dinner was over, I returned to my cabin. I sat down, lit my pipe, and endeavoured to review the position. The girl who had come on

board the *Morning Star* at the last moment had, beyond doubt, a past which she was anxious to conceal. Of this I had not the faintest shadow of doubt; but, after all, it was not my affair. Perhaps she had been proved innocent, not guilty; perhaps she was to be pitied, not censured. One thing, at least, was evident. Whatever she had done in her past life, she had now retrieved her position, her friends were respectable, and she herself appeared to be quite a lady.

I had just resolved to dismiss the matter from my mind, and was bringing my whole attention to bear upon long lists of accounts and invoices of stores, when, just as five bells struck, I heard a knock at my door, and to my surprise Major Strangways entered.

"I hope you will excuse me, purser," he said; "I want to speak to you on a matter of some importance."

"Certainly," I answered; "sit down."

He seated himself on the sofa, and I pushed a cigar towards him.

"I suppose there is no chance of our being overheard?" he said, glancing round.

"None whatever," I said; "please go on."

"Well," he began, "I am in a very exceptional position, and I want to ask you before I say anything further if you will promise to keep what I am about to tell you an absolute secret from everyone on board?"

"Certainly," I answered, "provided it is nothing which will compromise my position as a servant of the company."

"It will not do so in the least. You will give me your promise?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, to begin, I must inform you at once that, as I sit here, I am worth close on half a million sterling."

I looked at him in surprise.

"I do not mean that I myself own that sum," he continued, "but that on my person I carry property to that value."

I WAITED for him to continue.

"I will tell you the whole story," he said. "I made up my mind to do so this afternoon. It is essential that I should have some trustworthy confidant, for one never knows what may happen, and if anything should happen to me before I get home, I shall ask you to act for me. Would you mind locking your door?"

"Why?" I asked, looking him full in the face.

"To prevent anyone coming in suddenly. I have something to show you which no one else must see."

I leant over and shot the brass bolt forward, then turned to him again.

"What are you going to do?" I exclaimed, thinking he must be mad. With great rapidity he had taken off his dress coat, then his waistcoat, and, unbuttoning his shirt, opened it.

"Do you see this?" he cried.

"Yes," I answered, as he turned to the light; "what is it?"

He was wearing round his waist, next to his skin, a somewhat broad belt covered with wash-leather. As I spoke he suddenly drew away the outer covering and disclosed underneath a band fashioned to resemble a cobra.

"In this belt," he said, "there are jewels to the value I have mentioned. I am taking them home to England."

"You are doing a very dangerous thing," I could not help exclaiming. "Are you the owner of these valuables?"

He laughed.

"I?" he cried. "Certainly not. Have you ever heard of Prince Sindhia?"

"By name, of course," I replied.

"Well, these belong to him. His father has just died. He and I are very old friends. He is now the Maharajah of Besselmir. He is in London, and this day five weeks is to appear before the Queen at a state function at Buckingham Palace, in order to receive some special distinction. On that occasion he is obliged to wear his jewels, the regalia jewels of his state, and he has commissioned me to bring them to him, making it a stipulation that they shall never leave my person, day or night. It is, of course, a fearful responsibility. I daresay you noticed how nervous I was on the verandah of the hotel this afternoon. Well, I had reason. A fortnight ago I received the jewels from the Maharajah's palace at Besselmir—they were delivered up