

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

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HE was very tall and thin and black and intellectual looking, with expressionless eyes and an impassive manner; and in time (everything took time in Santa Dominica, the earthquake was the only thing that ever really hustled us), and in time we awoke to the fact that we had a Prophet in our midst. That he was an East Indian was much sooner apparent. When you see a smoke-coloured gentleman in a turban and vague, white underpinning, you cannot go far wrong in assuming him to be a child of the Orient. What we later realized was that Ram Zafaryab Chadderjee, B.A., was the bearer of its treasures—its moral and mystic treasures, that is—and had fixed on Santa Dominica as a radiating centre of distribution.

Not that we learned all this at once. Ram didn't chase after us; his idea, I suppose, was to let us chase after him, and in the general languor of life in Southern California, the process was slow. It began by our meeting him at dusk as he was being driven in a shabby buggy by a Japanese servant; and often, in our crude Occidental way, we would honk him to one side, more as though he were a domestic road hog than an imported East Indian prophet.

But soon, of course, we got to speculating as to who he was, and where he came from, and what he was for generally, and by degrees worked ourselves into a mild frenzy of curiosity. It grew frenzier and frenzier when it came out that he was living in the Grierson place—an immense and lonely house four miles from town, which had been built years before and never occupied, the story going that some millionaire had intended it for his son who had died of consumption before he could be brought West. This may have been a legend, but at any rate the Grierson place had never been inhabited, and stood as solitary on its hill as a tomb.

Here on the lower floor the Prophet was said to be installed, and the description of his abode varied with the imagination of the narrator. Some would have it a scene of Oriental luxury, a satrap's camp, with scented fountains, priceless rugs, and mysterious tapestries behind which voices hushed, and feminine forms rustled as you obtruded your prying nose. Others declared that Ram slept on the bare stones, an ascetic saint, and ate nothing but a little boiled horse feed. I rode up there one day to see what it was like for myself, but all I found was a ghostly stillness and a freshly painted board with "Silence" on it. I suppose a gentleman oughtn't to have tried the doors, which were locked, or have rapped loudly with his crop against the windows, or have cried out "Halloo, there," in the tone of a chauffeur backing his car into an old lady—but all this I did, and did in vain, as far as raising a pin-feather of Ram Zafaryab Chadderjee, B.A.

MRS. MARTINGALE was more successful, and I cannot help thinking that her resplendent motor played its part in bridging the gulf. That the Prophet allowed himself to be discovered by the richest, the most fashionable, and certainly one of our most charming women spoke well for his powers of divination. But he refused all her lures, explaining with what Mrs. Martingale termed "a beautiful graciousness" that a Prophet could not be expected to call, or lunch, or be put up at the Country Club. He was here, he explained, in answer to some faithful hearts—unknown, precious, longing hearts—that had been attuned to his across the void of half a world. Mrs. Martingale, who was always delightfully impulsive, and always delightfully eager to be first in everything, wanted to know what about her own, and was piqued to find that it had played no part in calling the Prophet to Santa Dominica.

"When that means more to you than that," he had said, indicating the setting sun in contrast to the diamonds at her neck, "then come back to me, and ask again."

"And do you know," bubbled Mrs. Martingale, in telling us all about it at the club, "there was some-



"What was he to do?" he asked, "What was he to do?"

thing so hypnotic and strange about him, so persuasive and irresistible, that if it had been my garnet brooch I believe I would have thrown it down, then and there, and got my heart into tune."

"While he would have picked up the garnets, and put them into his vest pocket," said Tom Martingale, who was a railroad man with few illusions.

"If an angel descended from heaven, and offered Tom a new religion on a gold platter, he'd reach for his gun, and turn in the police alarm," observed Mrs. Martingale, sweetly. "After all, if anybody is to discover a new religion, why shouldn't it be a Hindoo, instead of a German scientist or a Boston professor? Haven't they been contemplating over there for thousands of years, thinking things out on the tops of pillars and mountain peaks? Is it fair to Ram to condemn him before we have heard his side of the case?"

"What is his side of the case?" I asked, for Mrs. Martingale, while full of general information about the Prophet, had not been specially elucidative of his views.

She wrinkled her pretty brows as she tried to recall them.

"He's rather a woolly sort of Prophet," she said at last, "all parable and purr, and with such a sudden, bright, chipmunk way of looking at you that you have to say you understand when you don't. His views? Let me see! That we are all kind of sodden and earthy, and need purifying and uplifting, and can only attain it one step at a time like a baby learning to walk. That is putting it much too plainly, I know, but it's about it. Oh, yes, and a lot more about vegetarianism, and the subordination of the will, and doing everything he says, and walking barefoot on the grass every morning at dawn, and running up generally with the Infinite, whatever that is."

It sounded to me very much like the usual prophet prattle, and my interest in Ram rapidly declined. The women, however, were much more pertinacious in plying Mrs. Martingale with questions, and it was evident from the way that some of them stuck to the subject, that the Hindoo had been wise in choosing Santa Dominica as the scene of his operations. Mrs. Hedley said it was high time we had a spiritual awakening, and Miss Gibbs seemed to think that wireless telegraphy showed it to be a much more complicated universe than we had given it credit for, and asked us to explain (if we could—but couldn't) a true dream she had had of a drowning uncle. Mrs. Wentworth, a pale, high-bred old lady one always associated with lace and smelling salts, told us how you could bury East Indians alive for

indefinite periods, which she could attest by a magazine article she had at home, if she hadn't lost it; and

indicated her intention of calling on the Prophet without delay, not to bury him alive, but to sample some of the first baby steps in his new religion. She said this smiling, but not without an underlying seriousness and a sort of faint defiance. Then Miss Gibbs declared she would go, too, and the boom began.

AFTER this we grew accustomed to seeing the Prophet ensconced in touring cars, and surrounded by a cooing band of worshippers. His turban and his sneaky black face made a startling mark amidst all those parasols and French bonnets, and the reverence with which he was treated was not a little galling to behold. But Santa Dominica was too lazy not to be tolerant; and though there was a good deal of chatter and resentment, nothing aggressive was attempted. It was indeed the charm of Santa Dominica that you could be any kind of a fool you liked, and not be bothered by a tyrannical public opinion; and perhaps it was this that had made it such a centre of wealth and culture. It was one of the few places in America where the grocer and the plumber were unable to enforce their iron yoke. If people wanted to prance barefooted on the grass at daybreak, and welcome the rising sun with Oriental salutations, they were free

to do it to their heart's content in Santa Dominica. The permission may have been a trifle grudging, and I won't say there were not some suggestions of riding prophets on rails, but all ended, as most things ended in Santa Dominica, in talk and touching the bell for the waiter.

It was a shame about Elinor Wentworth, though. Her old-lace-lady mother was too unconsidered a social asset for us to miss her very much, but to have our divine Elinor Wentworth withdrawn from circulation was quite annoying. She was one of those exquisite blondes who seem too fragile, too ethereal, for a world where people eat mutton-chops and have to jostle and fight. You thought of her as a flower, which at a breath could be extinguished forever—as an angel, whose little foot had but touched the earth, and whose fleecy wings were still a-quiver. I am able to let myself go about Elinor, since everybody knows that the personal element never entered into my admiration. She was an insipid little person to sit next to, for after you had gazed into the wonderful blue of her eyes, and gloated over her golden hair, and stifled a gasp at so much radiant perfection, there didn't seem anything left to continue with. She was as exhausting as a lovely landscape, and as impossible to talk to, or at least that is always how I found her. But as a room decoration, as a delicate masterpiece of human falience, Elinor undoubtedly was a joy forever. And so you can imagine my exasperation, all our exasperation, at learning we were never to set eyes on her again, except perhaps in a motor with that sooty Hindoo. Yes, the adherents of the new religion had decided to do without us; their telephones were being disconnected; invitations to dinner came back through the Dead Letter Office; thirty-six of our friends had climbed to a higher plane, and had drawn up the ladder after them.

OF course, Fred McCall was the hardest hit of anybody. Fred, you know, had been engaged to Elinor, and being a specially earth-bound person, had not been included among the elect. He had lost Elinor before he was aware of what had happened. He, and now you could hear him roar for blocks. He wanted something done about it instantly, and raced up to me as a person to do it. I don't know why it is, but bores and nuisances and people with a grievance run to me as naturally as children to their mother. Fred had his lawyers, not to speak of much more intimate friends than myself, yet it was I who had to bear the infliction of his bursting heart.

Fred, I ought to explain, was the one jarring note