

Black Magic

A Story of The East

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

The lady who has kindly authenticated this story from her own personal knowledge had a cousin who married an officer in the Indian Army and went out to India about the year 19—. As I am not permitted to mention their names, though they have allowed me to use the story, I will call them Captain and Mrs Ross. Mrs Ross had beautiful red-gold hair, which is much admired by the native races.

On arriving at Calcutta they went up-country, where Captain Ross was stationed, and Mrs Ross, who had never been in India before, was charmed with all she saw.

When they arrived at his bungalow, Mrs Ross noticed an old native who was squatting outside the compound. He was a particularly repulsive-looking old man, ragged, dirty and evil-looking, who, although he salaamed very humbly as the new mem-sahib passed by, gave her a most sinister look which made her shiver.

She asked her husband about him, telling him her experience, and Captain Ross said calmly—“Oh, he has been there for ages; nobody takes any notice of him.” “But I don’t like the look of him,” persisted his wife. “Can’t you send him away?”

“Certainly not,” said Captain Ross, laughing. “It doesn’t do to offend these fellows. He is a very important old chap in his way—that is to say, in the eyes of the natives. They say he is a wise man, and they are all afraid of him.”

Of course, Mrs Ross said no more, being unwilling to do anything of which her husband disapproved. The old man came every day and sat at the gate. Every time she passed him he salaamed most respectfully, but looked at her in a horrid way. It was quite evident that he had seen from the first that she disliked him and wanted him to be turned away from the bungalow.

After a few weeks her husband was called away on duty, and before going he recommended his wife not to go near the native bazaars; but Mrs Ross, strangely enough, had kept on feeling that she wanted to go to the native part of the town. Her head ached ceaselessly, and she felt a strange, restless feeling that she did not want to stay in the bungalow. She spoke of this to her husband over and over again.

“All I want is to go out there!” was her cry; and he soothed her and told her that it was all “nerves” and that she should have a change of air as soon as it could possibly be managed.

One day Mrs Ross was sitting under the verandah, when she felt that some one was near her. Looking round, she had a shock, for there, close behind her, was the old native, his eyes fixed on her with a malevolent stare. Captain Ross was still away on duty, and there was nobody except the native servants within call. Mrs Ross was terribly nervous, but, summoning all her courage, she got up and faced the man and told him sharply to go away at once.

He made no sign of moving, but stood looking at her with the same malignant look she had already noticed. A second time she told him to go, saying she would have him turned out by the servants. She was about to call them, when he said very slowly and impressively—

“Me not go till have one of your hairs out of head.”

His eyes had a most peculiar power, and Mrs Ross was too frightened to move or call for help. He fascinated her as a cat does a mouse under its paws, and she realized that at all cost she must not show the white feather.

“All right,” she said, as kindly as she could. “If you want one you shall have it. I’ll go and let down my hair and bring you one.”

He let her go so calmly and quietly that the awful thought seized her that the native servants might be in the plot against her. She was new to India, and had read dreadful stories of native treachery; so, instead of raising an alarm, she went into the bedroom and sat down to think.

“What am I going to do?” was her agonized thought. “I am not going to give him the hair. He wants it for some devilish reason. I mustn’t put myself in his power. What shall I do?”

While she was wondering what she could do, her eyes suddenly lighted on a mat which was on the floor next her bed. It was one of her wedding presents, and was woven out of hair. In a trice she thought to herself, “I know! I’ll give him a hair out of the mat. It is sufficiently like mine to deceive him.” Stooping down, she carefully extracted a long hair out of the mat; then she rang the bell, and when the servant answered it, she gave him the hair and told him to give it to the old man out on the verandah.

The servant remonstrated with her, and was evidently horrified at the idea.

“Must no give hair,” he said. “Him mustn’t have hair.”

“Do as I tell you,” said Mrs Ross. And the native withdrew.

Presently he returned and said the old man was gone.

Mrs Ross breathed a sigh of deep relief.

When Captain Ross came home that evening his wife told him the whole episode, and he was exceedingly angry, and scolded the servants soundly for letting the old Hindoo come into the verandah. He said she had done quite right, and had now better let the matter drop.

One night, about a week later, they were both sitting in the dining-room after dinner. It was about eleven o’clock. Captain Ross was smoking, and Mrs Ross was sitting in an easy-chair. It was about a week after the incident of the hair. The servants had brought in coffee, and retired to their own quarters. Captain Ross was smoking a cigarette and stirring his coffee slowly, very worried about his wife, who had been feeling very ill all through dinner. He was puzzled as to what was the matter with her, as he had never known her to be like this before. Suddenly she pushed back her chair, and her husband saw her rise slowly, take a step towards the window, stretch out her arms, sway slightly and moan faintly.

Just at this moment he heard a noise in their bedroom above—a kind of muffled flap! flap! flap! which seemed to move across the floor. He looked at his wife, and saw her give a startled glance upwards.

Seizing his revolver, which lay near, he jumped up and listened. Still the noise went on—flap! flap! flap! He went to the door and opened it softly. The noise grew more distinct. Presently he heard it coming to the top of the stairs and then down—flap! flap! flap!

Captain Ross rushed out, and in the dim light saw something coming downstairs. He fired where the noise was, but it still went on. Then he fired again, and again a third time. Still the noise passed on and out over the verandah, and was heard crossing the compound.

The sound of the shots roused the servants, who rushed in with lights. Mrs Ross staggered blindly out on to the verandah, and her husband sprang forward to grapple with the expected thief, but, to his amazement, there was no one there.

As they stood looking, his wife gave a loud exclamation and clutched him by the arm, crying, “Good God! Look there!”

Crossing the compound was the Chinese mat from the bedroom above, with three burnt holes where the bullets had passed through it.