

The Valley of the Just

A Story of the Shan Hills

By Sax Rohmer

I

The merciless sun beat down upon the little caravan, winding its way upward and ever upward to the hill-land. Beneath stretched a panorama limned in feverish greens and unhealthy yellows; scarlike rocks striated the jungle, clothing the foothills, and through the dancing air, viewed from the arid heights, they had the appearance of running water. Swamps to the south-east showed like unhealing wounds upon the face of the landscape; beyond them spread the muddy river waters, the bank of the stream proper being discernible only by reason of a greater greenness in the palm-tops: venomous green slopes beyond them again, a fringe of dwarfed forest, and the brazen skyline.

On the right of the path rose volcanic rock, gnarled, twisted, and contorted as with the agonies of some mighty plague, which in a forgotten past had seized upon the very bowels of the world, and had contorted whole mountains, and laid waste vast forests and endless plains. Above, the cruel sun; ahead, more plague-twisted rocks, with sandy scars dancing like running water; and, all around, the breathless stillness, the swooning stillness of tropical midday. North, south, east, and west, that haze of heat, that silence unbroken, lay like an accursed mantle upon Burma.

Moreen Fayne could scarcely support herself upright in the saddle; her head throbbed incessantly, and the veil which she wore could not protect her eyes from the maddening glare of the sun. But although at any moment during the past hour she could have slipped insensible from her saddle, she sat stiffly upright, her dauntless eyes looking straight ahead, her small mouth set with masculine sternness, and her hands clenched—the physical reflection of the mental effort whereby, alone, she was enabled to pursue the journey.

Just in front of her paced Ramsa Lal. His stride had not varied from the lowlands, through the foothills, nor on the rocky mountain paths. He had looked neither right nor left, but had walked, walked, walked. At times Moreen had been hard put to it to choke down the hysterical screams which had risen in her throat; madness had threatened her, as she watched, in dumb misery that silent striding man. Yet she knew that it was only the presence of this tireless, immobile guide which had enabled her to go on; although he never directed one glance towards her, she knew that his steady march was meant for encouragement.

Behind, like the tail of a scorpion, trailed the native retinue, and on the end of the tail, where the sting would be, rode her husband. This similitude had occurred to her at once, and she allowed her mind to dwell upon the idea as an invalid will consider imaginary designs upon the wall-paper of the sick-room.

Sometimes there was a sliding of hoofs and a sound of stumbling; sometimes her own pony lost his footing. On such occasion, there would be mechanical cries of encouragement from the natives, and perhaps a growling curse from the man who brought up the rear of the little company. The road wound through a frowning chasm, where lizards and other creeping things darted into holes to right and left of their progress. Grateful shadow ruled a while, and a stifled sigh escaped from Moreen's lips. Ramsa Lal paced straightly onward, the others came stumbling

behind; fifty yards ahead the ravine opened out, and once more the deathly heat poured unchecked upon their heads.

Again Moreen all but lost control of herself; her fortitude threatened to slip from her; so that she bit her lips until the pain filled her eyes with burning tears. The effort to control herself proved successful, but left her white and quivering. She felt impelled to speak to Ramsa Lal, and constrained herself only with a second effort of which her will was barely capable. Then she saw that speech, which would be dangerous, was unnecessary; the man's wonderful intuition had enabled him to hear that crying of the soul, and he was answering her.

His brown fingers were clutching and unclutching convulsively, and as he swung his arm, he would clench his right fist and beat the air. For a moment he acted thus, and then, as if he knew that she had seen, and understood, his fingers hung limply again, and his arm swung loosely as before.

A sort of plateau was reached, and in a natural clearing where giant bamboos ranged back to the tangled, creeper-laden boughs of the forest trees, the voice of Major Fayne cried a halt. Ramsa Lal was beside Moreen's pony in a trice, and he so screened her exhausted descent from the saddle, setting her down upon an hospitable bank hard by, that she was enabled to maintain her inflexible attitude, when presently her husband came striding along to stand looking down on her, where she sat. His blackly pencilled brows were drawn together, and the pale blue eyes shone out, saturnine, from cavernous sockets. His handsome face was heavily lined, and in the appearance, in the whole attitude of the man, was something aggressive, a violence markedly repellent. Moreen locked her hands behind her, the fingers twining and intertwining, but she raised a pale face to his, from which by a last supreme effort of will she had driven all traces of emotion.

So they remained for a moment, whilst the servants busied themselves with the baggage; he, with feet wide apart, staring down at her, and slashing at the air with a fly-whisk, and she meeting his gaze with a stony calm pitiful to behold, had there been any soul capable of pity to see her. Ramsa Lal was directing operations.

"Here," said Major Fayne, "we camp."

His voice would have told a skilled observer that which the facial lines and a certain odd puffiness of skin more than suggested, that Major Fayne was not a temperate man.

Moreen made no sign, but simply sat watching the speaker.

"It's a delightful situation," continued he, "and your ambition, frequently expressed in Mandalay, to see something of Burma other than bridge parties and polo-matches, at last is realised."

He spoke with a seeming sincerity that had carried conviction to any, save the most sceptical. But Moreen made no sign.

"Here," continued Major Fayne, "you may feast your eyes upon the glories of a Burma forest. Those flowering creepers yonder, festooned from bough to bough, are peculiar to this district, and if you care to explore further, you will be rewarded by the discovery of some fine orchids. Note, also, the perfume of the flowers."

He twirled his slight moustache, and turned away to supervise the work of camping.

Ramsa Lal already had one of the tents nearly erected, and Moreen watched his deft fingers at work, with an anxiety none the less because it was masked. She knew that collapse was imminent. The cruel march under the pitiless sun had had due effect, but it had not broken her spirit. She knew that she had reached the end of strength, but she showed no sign of weakness before her husband.

It was done at last, and Ramsa Lal held the tent-cloth aside, and bowed.

Moreen stood up, clenched her teeth together grimly, and staggered forward. As the tent-flap was dropped, she sank down beside the camp bedstead, and her head fell upon the covering.

II

Dusk fell, a quick curtain, and the lamps of night shone out with glorious brilliancy, illuminating the little plateau. The tents gleamed whitely in the cold radiance; there was a dancing redness to show where the fire had been built, with figures grouped dimly around it. On a jagged rock, which started up from the very heart of a thicket, black against the newly risen moon, was silhouetted the figure of Major Fayne. Night things swept the air about him, and rustled in the cane brake below him; the fire crackled in the neighbouring camp; sometimes a murmur came from the group of natives.

But, heedless of these matters, Moreen's husband stood on the rocky eminence looking back upon the way they had come, looking down to the distant river valley.

For many minutes he remained so, but presently, clambering down, heavily forced his way through the undergrowth to the little camp. Passing the tents, he walked back to the dip of the pathway, and paused again, watching and listening; then turned and strode to the fire, grasped Ramsa Lal by the shoulder, and drew him away from the others.

"Come here!" he directed tersely.

At the head of the pathway he bade him halt.

"Listen!" he directed.

Ramsa Lal stood in an attitude of keen attention, and the Major watched him with feverish anxiety, which he was wholly unable to conceal.

"Do you hear it?" he demanded—"hoofs on the path!"

Ramsa Lal shook his head,

"I hear nothing, Sahib."

"Put your ear to the ground, and listen. I tell you that I saw figures moving away below there, and I heard—hoofs, stumbling hoofs."

The man knelt down upon the ground, and, bending forward, lowered his head. Major Fayne watched him, and with growing anxiety, so that, what with this and the pallid moonlight, his face appeared ghastly.

But again Ramsa Lal stood up, shaking his head.

"Nothing, Sahib," he repeated.

Major Fayne suddenly grasped him by the shoulders, spinning him about, and dragging him forward, so that the dusky face was but inches removed from his own. He glared into the man's eyes.

"Are you lying to me?" he demanded, "are you lying?"

"I swear it is the truth: why should I lie to you, Sahib?"

"You want them—"

Major Fayne broke off abruptly and thrust the man away from him. A different expression had crept into his face, an expression in which there was something furtive. He spun around upon his heel and stepped to the tent where Moreen was. Raising the flap slightly:

"Good-night," he called, and turned away.

Ramsa Lal had gone back to the fireside; and Fayne, following a moment of hesitancy, strode with his swaggering military gait to the tent erected in the furthest corner of the clearing. He had stooped to enter, when he hesitated, remaining there bent forward—and listening.

From the opposite side of the distant fire, Ramsa Lal, though few would have suspected the fact, was watching. Evidently enough, the leader of the little company was obsessed with his delusion that some one or something clambered up the steep path beneath. Suddenly shrugging his shoulders, he stooped yet lower, and dived into the tent.

One of the natives threw fresh fuel upon the fire, and a stream of sparks sped up through the clear air in a widening trail ever growing fainter.

There was a crackling, a murmur of voices, and then a new silence. This in turn was broken by the distant howling of dogs, and in the near stillness one might have heard the faint shrieking of the bats, who now were embarked upon their nocturnal voyagings.

A shrill, wild scream burst suddenly from the heart of the trees in the east, rose eerily upon the night, and died away. But the group about the fire moved not at all, for this dreadful screaming but marked an animal tragedy of the Burma forests. So furred things howled and screamed and moaned in the woodlands, feathered things piped and hooted around and above, and the bats, uncanny creatures of the darkness, who seem to have kinship neither with fur nor feather, chirped faintly overhead.

Once there was a distant, hollow booming like the sound of artillery, which echoed down the mountain gorges, and seemed to roll away over the lowland swamps, and die, inaudible, by the remote river-bank.

Yet no one stirred; for this mysterious gunnery is a phenomenon met with in that district, inexplicable, weird, but no novelty to one who has camped in the Shan Hills.

A second time later in the night the phantom guns boomed; and again their booming died away in the far valleys. The fire was getting low, now.

III

Moreen lay, sleepless, wide-eyed, staring up at the roof of the tent. She had eaten, could eat, nothing, but she was consumed by a parching thirst. The sounds of the night had no terrors for her; indeed, she scarcely noticed them, for she had other and more dreadful things to think of.

Ramsa Lal had been her father's servant; him she could trust. But the others—the others were Major Fayne's. They were no more than spies upon her; guards.

What did it mean, this sudden dash from the bungalow into the hills? It amused her husband to pretend that it was a pleasure-trip, but the equipment was not of the sort one takes upon such occasions, and one is not usually dragged from bed at midnight to embark upon such a journey. It was additionally improbable in view of the fact that up to the moment of departure Major Fayne had not spoken to her, except in public, for six months. The dreadful, forced marches were breaking her down, and she knew that her husband was drinking heavily. What, in God's name, would be the end of it?

Weakly, she raised herself into a sitting position, groping for and lighting a candle. From the bosom of her dress she took out a letter, the last she had received from home before this mad flight. There was something in it which had frightened her at the time, but which, viewed in the light of recent events, was unspeakably horrifying.

During the long estrangement between her husband and herself she had learnt, and had paid for her knowledge with bitter tears, that there was a side to the character of Major Fayne which he

had carefully concealed from her before marriage; the dark, saturnine part of her husband's character had dawned upon her suddenly. That had been the beginning of her disillusionment, the disillusionment which has come to more than one English girl during the first twelve months of married life in an Indian bungalow.

Then, perforce, the gap had widened, and six months later had become a chasm quite impassable except in the interests of social propriety. Anglo-Indian society is notable for divorces, and poor Moreen very early in her married life fully understood the reason.

She held the letter to the dim light and read it again attentively. Allowing a certain discount for her mother's changeless animosity towards Major Fayne, it yet remained a startling letter. Much of it consisted in feckless condolences, characteristic but foolish; the passage, however, which she read and re-read by the dim, flickering light was as follows:

"Mr. Harringay in his last letter begged of me to come out by the next boat to Rangoon," her mother wrote. "He has quite opened my eyes to the truth, Moreen, not in such a way as to shock me all at once, but gradually. I always distrusted Ralph Fayne and never disguised the fact from you. I knew that his previous life had been far from irreproachable, but his treatment of you surpasses even *my* expectations. I know *all*, my poor darling! and I know something which you do not know. His father did not die in Colombo at all; he died in a madhouse! and there are two other known dipsomaniacs in Ralph Fayne's family—"

A hand reached over Moreen's shoulder and tore the letter from her.

She turned with a cry—and looked up into her husband's quivering face! For a moment he stood over her, his left fist clenching and unclenching and his pale blue eyes glassy with anger. Then chokingly he spoke:

"So you carry one of his letters about with you?"

The veins were throbbing visibly upon his temples. Moreen clutched at the blanket but did not speak, dared not move, for if ever she had looked into the face of a madman it was at this moment when she looked into the face of Ralph Fayne.

He suddenly grabbed the candle and, holding it close to the letter, began to read. His hands were perfectly steady, showing the tremendous nerve tension under which he laboured. Then his expression changed, but nothing of the maniac glare left his eyes.

"From your mother," he said hoarsely, "and full of two things—your wrongs, *your* wrongs! And Jack Harringay—Jack Harringay—always Harringay! Damn him!"

He put down the candle and began to tear the letter into tiny fragments, pouring forth the while a stream of coarse, blasphemous language. Moreen, who felt that consciousness was slipping from her, crouched there with a face deathly pale.

Fayne began to laugh softly as he threw the torn-up letter from him piece by piece.

"Damn him!" he said again. He turned the blazing eyes towards his wife. "You lying, baby-faced hypocrite! Why don't you admit that he is—"

He stopped; the sinister laughter died upon his lips and he stood there shaking all over and with a sort of stark horror in his eyes dreadful to see.

"Why don't you?" he muttered—and looked at her almost pathetically,—“why of course you can't—no one can—"

He reeled and clutched at the tent-flap, then stumblingly made his way out.

"No one can," came back in a shaky whisper—"no one can—"

Moreen heard him staggering away, until the sound of his uncertain footsteps grew inaudible. A distant howling rose upon the night, and, nearer to the clearing, sounded a sort of tapping, not unlike that of a woodpecker. Some winged creature was fluttering over the tent.

IV

Dawn saw the dreadful march resumed. Major Fayne now exhibited unmistakable traces of his course of heavy drinking, he brought up the rear as hitherto, and often tarried far behind where some peculiar formation of the path enabled him to study the country already traversed. He had altered the route of the march, and now they were leaving the Shan Hills upon the north-east and dipping down to a chasm-like valley through which ran a tributary of the Selween river. Since the dry season was commenced the entire country beneath them showed through a haze of heat and dust.

They had partaken of a crude and hasty breakfast as strangers having nothing in common who by chance share a table. Moreen no longer doubted that her husband was mad, for he muttered to himself and was ever glancing over his shoulder. This and his constant watching of the path behind spoke of some secret terror from which he fled.

Towards noon, they skirted a village whose inhabitants poured forth *en bloc* to watch the passing of this unfamiliar company. A faint hope that some European might be there died in Moreen's breast. Her position was a dreadful one. Led by a madman—of this she was persuaded—and surrounded by natives who, if not actively hostile, were certainly unfriendly, with but one man to whom she could look for the slightest aid, she was proceeding further and further from civilisation into unknown wildernesses.

What her husband's purpose might be she could not conceive. She was unable to think calmly, unable to formulate any plan. In the dull misery of a sick dream she rode forward speculating upon the awakening.

The midday heat in the valley was so great that a halt became imperative. They camped at the edge of a dense jungle where banks of rotten vegetation, sun-dried upon the top, lay heaped about the bamboo stems. None but a madman would have chosen to tarry in such a spot; and Major Fayne's servants went about their work with many a furtive glance at their master. Ramsa Lal's velvety eyes showed a great compassion, but Moreen offered no protest. She was in an unreal frame of mind and her will was merely capable of a mute indifference: any attempt to assert herself would have meant a sudden breakdown. Something in her brain was strained to utmost tension; any further effort must have snapped it.

In the hour of the greatest heat Major Fayne went out alone, offering no explanation of his intentions and leaving no word as to the time of his return. Moreen only learnt of his departure from Ramsa Lal. She received the news with indifference and asked no questions. Inert she lay in the little tent looking out at the wall of jungle, where it uprose but twenty yards away. So the day wore on. Mechanically she partook of food when Ramsa Lal placed it before her, but, although the man's attitude palpably was one of uneasiness, she did not question him, and he departed in silence. It was an incredible situation.

Throughout the afternoon nothing occurred to break this dread monotony save that once there arose a buzz of conversation, and she became dimly aware that some one from the native village which they had passed in the morning had come into the camp. After a time the sounds had died away again, and Ramsa Lal had stepped into view, looking towards her interrogatively; but although she recognized his wish to speak to her, the inertia which now claimed her mind and body prevailed, and she offered him no encouragement to intrude upon her misery.

Thus the weary hours passed, until even to the dulled perceptions of Moreen the sounds of unrest and uneasiness pervading the camp began to penetrate. Yet Major Fayne did not return.

The insect and reptile life of a Burmese jungle moved around her, but she was curiously indifferent to everything. Without alarm she brushed a venomous spider, fully one inch in girth, from the camp-bedstead, and dully watched it darting away into the jungle undergrowth.

Darkness swept down and tropical night things raised their mingled voices; then came Ramsa Lal.

“Forgive me, Mem Sahib,” he said, “but I must speak to you.”

She half reclined, looking at him as he stood, a dimly seen figure, before her.

“The men from the village,” continued he, “come to say that we may not camp. It is holy ground from this place away”—he waved his arm vaguely—“to the end of the jungle where the river is.”

“I can do nothing, Ramsa Lal.”

“I fear—for him.”

“Major Fayne?”

“He goes into the jungle to look for something. What does he go to look for? Why does he not return?”

Moreen made no reply.

“All of them there”—he indicated the direction the native servants—“know this place. They are already afraid, and, with those from the village coming to warn us, they get more afraid still. This is a haunted place, Mem Sahib.”

Moreen sat up, shaking off something of the lassitude which possessed her.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“In that jungle,” replied Ramsa Lal, “there is buried a temple, a very old temple, and in the temple there is buried one who was a holy man. His spirit watches over this place, and none may rest here because of him—”

“But the men of the village came here,” said Moreen.

“Before sunset, Mem Sahib. No man would come here after dark. Look! you will see—they are frightened.”

Languidly, but with some awakening to the necessities of the situation, Moreen stepped out of the tent and looked across to where, about a great fire, the retinue huddled in a circle. Ramsa Lal stood beside her with something contemptuous in the bearing of his tall figure.

“A spell lies upon all this valley, Mem Sahib,” he said. “Therefore it is called the Valley of the Just.”

“Why?”

“Because only the just can stay within its bounds through the night.”

Moreen stared affrightedly.

“Do you mean that they die in the night, Ramsa Lal?”

“In the night, Mem Sahib, before the dawn.”

“By what means?”

Ramsa Lal spread his palms eloquently.

“Who knows?” he replied. “It is a haunted place.”

“And are you afraid?”

“I am not afraid, for I have passed a night in the Valley of the Just many years ago, and I live.”

“You were alone?”

“With two others, Mem Sahib.”

“And the others?”

“One was bitten by a snake an hour before dawn, and the other, who was an upright man, lives to-day.”

Moreen shuddered.

“Do you know”—she still hesitated to broach subject with the man—“do you know where—Major Fayne has gone?”

“It is said, Mem Sahib, that a stream runs through the jungle close beside the old temple, a stream which bubbles up from a cavern and which is supposed to come underground from the Ruby Mine plateau. He goes early in the morning to look for rubies—so I think.”

Moreen tapped the ground with her foot.

“Do you think”—again she hesitated—“that Major Fayne is afraid of something? Of something—where we have come from?”

Ramsa Lal bowed low.

“I cannot tell,” he replied, “but we shall know sunrise.”

For a moment Moreen scarcely grasped the significance of his words; then their inner meaning became apparent to her.

“Make me some coffee, Ramsa Lal,” she said; “I am cold—very cold.”

She re-entered the tent, lighting the lamp.

The Valley of the Just! What irony, that her husband should have selected that spot to camp in! She sat deep in thought, when presently Ramsa Lal entered with coffee. He had just set down the tray when the sound of a distant cry brought him rigidly upright. He stood listening intently. The sound was repeated—nearer it seemed—a sort of hoarse scream, terrible to hear—impossible to describe.

Moreen rose to her feet and followed the man out of the tent. Some one—some one who kept crying out—was plunging heavily through the jungle towards the camp.

The men about the fire were on their feet now. Obviously they would have fled, but the prospect of flight into the haunted darkness was one more terrible than that of remaining where they were.

It ceased, that strange cry; but whoever was approaching could be heard alternately groaning and laughing madly.

Then out from the thicket on the west, into the red light of the fire, burst a fearful figure. It was that of Major Fayne, wild eyed, and with face which seemed to be of a dull grey. He staggered and almost fell, but kept on for a few more paces and then collapsed in a heap almost at Moreen’s feet, amid the clatter of the strange loot wherewith he was laden.

This consisted in a number of golden vessels heavily encrusted with gems, a huge golden salver, and a dozen or more ropes of gigantic rubies!

Amid these treasures, the ransom of a Sultan, the price of a throne, he lay writhing convulsively.

Ramsa Lal was the first to recover himself. He leapt forward, seized the prostrate man by the shoulders and dragged him into the tent, past Moreen. Having effected this he raised his eyes in a mute question. She nodded, and whilst Ramsa Lal seized the Major’s shoulders, Moreen grasped his ankles, and together they lifted him up on to the bed.

He lay there, rolling from side to side. His eyes were wide open, glassy and unseeing; a slight froth was upon his lips, his fists rose and fell in regular, mechanical beats, corresponding with the convulsive movements of his knees.

Moreen dropped down beside him.

“Ramsa Lal! Ramsa Lal! What shall I do? What has happened to him?”

Ramsa Lal ripped the collar from Major Fayne's neck in order to aid his respiration. Then, quietly signing to Moreen to hold the lamp, he began to search the entire exposed surface of the Major's skin. Evidently he failed to find that for which he was looking. He glanced down at the ankles, but the Major wore thick putties and Ramsa Lal shook his head in a puzzled way.

"It is like the bite of a hamadryad," he said softly, "but there is no mark."

"What shall I do!" moaned Moreen—"what shall I do!"

There was a frightened murmur from the entrance, where the native servants stood in a group, peering in. Moreen stood up.

"Hot water, Ramsa Lal!" she said. "We must give him brandy."

"But it is useless, Mem Sahib; he has not been bitten—there is no mark; it may be a fever from the jungle."

Moreen beat her hands together helplessly.

"We must do *something!*" she said; "we must do *something.*"

A sudden change took place in Major Fayne. The convulsive movements ceased and he lay quiet, and breathing quite regularly. The glassy look began to fade from his eyes, and with every appearance of being in full possession of his senses, he stared at Moreen and spoke:

"You shall repent of your words, Harringay," he said in a quiet voice. "You have deliberately accused me of faking the cards. I care nothing for any of you. Why should I attempt such a thing? I could buy and sell you all! . . ."

Moreen dropped slowly back upon her knees again, white to the lips, watching her husband. With the same appearance of perfect sanity, but now addressing the empty air, he continued:

"In my tent—my wife will tell you it is true—my wife, Harringay, do you hear?—I have jewelled cups and strings of rubies, enough to buy up Mandalay! I blundered on to them in that old ruined temple back in the jungle, not five hundred yards from your bungalow. Harringay—think of it—a treasure-room like that within sight of your verandah! There are snakes there, snakes, you understand, in hundreds; but it is worth risking for a big fortune like mine."

"He mixes time and place," murmured Ramsa Lal. "He talks to the Commissioner Sahib in Mandalay of what is here in the Valley of the Just."

Moreen nodded, catching her breath hysterically.

"You see," continued the delirious man, "I am as rich as Midas. Why should *I* want to cheat you! Don't talk to me of what you would do for my wife's sake! Keep your favours, curse you!"

With a contemptuous smile, Major Fayne threw his head back upon the pallet. Then came another change; the look of stark horror which Moreen had seen once before crept into the grey face; and her husband raised himself in bed, glaring wildly into the shadows beyond the lamp.

"You are a spirit!" The words came in a thrilling, eerie whisper. "Oh God! I understand. Yes! I came away from Harringay's bungalow. My wife was asleep and I sat drinking until I had emptied the whisky decanter."

He bent forward as if listening.

"Yes, I went back. I went back to reason with him. No! as God is my witness I did not plan it! I went back to reason with him."

Again the uncanny attitude was resumed.

Then:

"I stepped in through the verandah, and there he sat with Moreen's photograph in his hand. Listen to me—*Listen!*" There was an agony of entreaty in his voice; it rose to a thin scream—"My wife's photograph! Do you hear? Do you understand? *Moreen's* photograph! and as I stood behind him, he raised it to his lips—he——"

Major Fayne stopped abruptly, as if checked by a spoken word; and with wildly beating heart Moreen found herself listening for the phantom voice. She could hear the breathing of the natives clustered behind her; but no other sound save a distant howling in the jungle was audible, until her husband began again:

“I struck him down—from behind, yes, from behind. His blood poured over the picture. You understand I was mad. If you are just—and is not this called the Valley of the Just?—you cannot condemn me. Why did I fly? I was not in my right mind; I had—been drinking, as I told you; I was mad. If I was not mad I should never have fled, never have drawn suspicion—on myself.”

He fell back as if exhausted, then once more struggled upright and began to peer about him. When he spoke again, his voice, though weak, was more like his own.

“Moreen!” he said—“where the devil are you? why can’t you give me a drink?”

Suddenly, he seemed to perceive her, and he drew his brows together in the old, ugly frown.

“Curse you!” he said. “I have found you out! I am a rich man now, and when I have gone to England, see what Jack Harringay will do for you. I will paint London red! I have looted the old temple, and they are after me, they

The words merged into a frightful scream. Major Fayne threw up his hands and fell back insensible upon the bed.

“Mem Sahib! Mem Sahib, you must be brave!” It was Ramsa Lal who spoke; he supported Moreen with his arm. “There is a spell upon this place. No medicine, nothing, can save him. There is only one thing—”

Moreen controlled herself by one of those giant efforts of which she was capable.

“Tell me,” she whispered—“what must we do?”

Ramsa Lal removed his arm, saw that she could stand unsupported, and bent forward over the unconscious man. Following a rapid examination, he signed to her to leave the tent. They came out into the white blaze of the moonlight—and there at their feet lay the glittering loot of the haunted temple, a dazzlement of rainbow sparks.

“Only for such a thing as this,” said Ramsa Lal, “dare I go, but not one of us will see another dawn if we do not go.” He pointed to the heap of treasure. “Mem Sahib must come also.”

“But—my husband—”

“He must remain,” he said. “It is of his own choosing.”

V

The temple stood in a kind of clearing. Grotesquely horrible figures guarded the time-worn entrance. Moreen drew a deep breath of relief on emerging from the jungle path by which, amid the rustle of retreating snakes, they had come, but shrank back affrighted from the blackness of the ruined doorway. Ramsa Lal stood the lantern upon the stump of a broken pillar, where its faint yellow light was paled by the moon-rays.

“It is *you* who must restore,” he said.

One by one he handed her the jewel-encrusted vessels and hung the ropes of rubies upon her arm.

She nodded, and as Ramsa Lal took up the lantern and began to descend the steps within followed him.

“No foot save his,” came back to her, “has trod these sacred steps for ages, for the secret of the jungle path is known only to the few. . . .”

“How do you—know the way?”

Ramsa Lal did not reply.

They traversed a short tunnel; a heavy door was thrust open; and Moreen found herself standing in a small pillared hall. Through a window high in one wall, overgrown with tangled vegetation, crept a broken moonbeam. Directly before her was the carven figure of a grotesque deity. A long, heavily clamped chest stood before it like an altar step.

She staggered forward, deposited her priceless burden upon the floor, and mechanically began to raise the lid of the chest.

“Not that one, Mem Sahib!” The voice of Ramsa Lal rose shrilly—“not that one! . . .”

But he spoke too late. Moreen realised that there were three divisions in the chest, each having a separate lid. As she raised the one in the centre, a breath of fetid air greeted her nostrils, and she had a vague impression that this was no chest but the entrance to a deep pit. Then all these thoughts were swept away by the crowning horror which rose out of the subterranean darkness.

A great winged creature, clammy white, rose towards her, passed beneath her upraised hands and sailed into the darkness on the right. She heard it flapping its great bat wings against the wall—heard them beating upon a pillar—then saw it coming back towards her into the moonlight—and knew no more.

VI

“Mem Sahib

Moreen opened her eyes. She lay, propped against a saddle, at the camp beside the jungle. She shuddered icily.

“Ramsa Lal—how—”

“I carried the Mem Sahib! the treasures of the temple I restored to their resting-place—”

“And the—the other—”

“The door that the Mem Sahib opened she opened by the decree of Fate. It was not for Ramsa Lal to close it. That is a passage—”

“Yes?”

“—To the tomb of the great one who is buried in the temple!”

“Oh I heavens! that white thing—” She raised her hands to her face. “But—the camp—”

“The camp is deserted! they all fled from—”

Moreen sat up, rigidly.

“From what?”

“From something that came for what we forgot!”

“My husband—”

“There was a ring upon his finger. I saw it and knew where it came from, but forgot to remove it.”

Moreen stood up, and turned towards the nearer tent. Ramsa Lal gently detained her.

“Not that way, Mem Sahib.”

“But I must see him! I must, I *must* tell him that he wrongs me, cruelly, wickedly! You heard his words—Oh, God! can he have—”

“It would be useless to tell him, Mem Sahib,— he could not hear you! But that what you would tell him is true I know well; for see—it is the dawn!”

“Ramsa Lal! . . .”

“The unjust cannot stay in this valley through a night and live to see the lawn, Mem Sahib!”

VII

At about that same hour, Deputy-Commissioner Jack Harringay opened his eyes and looked wonderingly at a grey-haired, white-aproned nurse who sat watching him.

“Don’t speak, Mr. Harringay,” she said soothingly. “You have been very ill, but you are on the high road to recovery now.”

“Nurse! . . .”

“Please don’t speak; I know what you would ask. There has been no scandal. The attack upon you was ascribed to robbers. You have been delirious, Mr. Harringay, and have told me—many things. I am old enough, or nearly old enough, to be your mother, so you will not mind my telling you that a love like yours deserves reward. God has spared your life; be sure it was with a purpose—”