

The Rajah's Treasure

By H. G. Wells

Between Jehun and Bimabur on the Himalayan slopes, and between the jungles and the higher country where the pines and deodars are gathered together, ruled the petty Rajah, of whose wonderful treasure I am telling. Very great was the treasure, people said, for the Rajah had prospered all his days. He had found Mindapore a village, and, behold! it was a city. Below his fort of unhewn stone the flat-roofed huts of mud had multiplied; and now there sprang up houses with upstairs rooms, and the place which had once boasted no more than one buniah man, engendered a bazaar in the midst of it, as a fat oyster secretes a pearl. And the Holy Place up the river prospered, and the road up the passes was made safe. Merchants and fakirs multiplied about the wells, men came and went, twice even white men from the plain on missions to the people over beyond the deodars, and the streets of the town were ever denser with poultry and children, and little dogs dyed yellow, and with all the multitudinous rich odours of human increase. As at last, at the crown of his prosperity, this legend of his treasures began.

He was a portly, yellow-faced man, with a long black beard, now steadily growing grey, thick lips, and shifty eyes. He was pious, very pious in his daily routine, and swift and unaccountable in his actions. None dared withstand him to his face, even in little things. Golam Shah, his vizier, was but a servant, a carrier of orders; and Samud Singh, his master of horse, but a driller of soldiers. They were tools, he would tell them outright in his pride of power, staves in his hand that he could break at his will. He was childless. And his cousin, the youth Azim Khan, feared him, and only in the remotest recesses of his heart dared to wish the Rajah would presently die and make a way for the cyons.

It would be hard to say when first the rumour spread that the Rajah of little Mindapore was making a hoard. None knew how it began or where. Perhaps from merchants of whom he had bought. It began long before the days of the safe. It was said that rubies had been bought and hidden away; and then not only rubies, but ornaments of gold, and then pearls, and diamonds from Golconda, and all manner of precious stones. Even the Deputy-Commissioner at Allapore heard of it. At last the story re-entered the palace at Mindapore itself, and Azim Khan, who was the Rajah's cousin and his heir, and nominally his commander-in-chief, and Golam Shah, the chief minister, talked it over one with another in a tentative way.

"He has something new," said Golam Shah, querulously; "he has something new, and he is keeping it from me."

Azim Khan watched him cunningly. "I have told you what I have heard," he said. "For my own part I know nothing."

"He goes to and fo musing and humming to himself," said Golam, meditatively, "as one who thinks of a pleasure."

"More rubies, they are saying," said Azim, dreamily, and repeated, as if for his own pleasure, "Rubies." For Azim was the heir.

"Especially is it since that Englishman came," said Golam, "three months ago. A big old man, not wrinkled as an old man should be, but red, and with red hair streaking his grey, and with a tight skin and a big body sticking out before. So. An elephant of a man, a great quivering mud-bank of a man, who laughed mightily, so that the people stopped and listened in the street. He came, he laughed, and as he went away we heard them laugh together—"

“Well?” said Azim.

“He was a diamond merchant, perhaps—or a dealer in rubies. Do Englishmen deal in such things?”

“Would I had seen him!” said Azim.

“He took gold away,” said Golam.

Both were silent for a space, and the purring noise of the wheel of the upper well, and the chatter of voices about it rising and falling, made a pleasant sound in the air. “Since the Englishman went,” said Golam, “he has been different. He hides something from me—something in his robe. Rubies! What else can it be?”

“He has not buried it?” said Azim.

“He will. Then he will want to dig it up again and look at it,” said Golam, for he was a man of experience. “I go softly. Sometimes almost I come upon him. Then he starts—”

“He grows old and nervous,” said Azim, and there was a pause.

“Before the English came,” said Golam, looking at the rings upon his fingers, as he recurred to his constant preoccupation; “there were no Rajahs nervous and old.”

That, I say, was even before the coming of the safe. It came in a packing case. Such a case it was as had never been seen before on all the slopes of the Himalayan mountains, it was an elephant’s burden even on the plain. It was days drawing nearer and nearer. At Allapore crowds went to see it pass upon the railway. Afterwards elephants and then a great multitude of men dragged it up the hills. And this great case being opened in the Hall of Audience revealed within itself a monstrous iron box, like no other box that had ever come to the city. It had been made, so the story went, by necromancers in England, expressly to the order of the Rajah, that he might keep his treasure therein and sleep in peace. It was so hard that the hardest files powdered upon its corners, and so strong that cannon fired point-blank at it would have produced no effect upon it. And it locked with a magic lock. There was a word, and none knew the word but the Rajah. With that word, and a little key that hung about his neck, one could open the lock; but without it none could do so.

The Rajah caused this safe to be built into the wall of his palace in a little room beyond the Hall of Audience. He superintended the building up of it with jealous eyes. And thereafter he would go thither day by day, once at least every day, coming back with brighter eyes. “He goes to count his treasure,” said Golam Shah, standing beside the empty dais.

And in those days it was that the Rajah began to change. He who had been cunning and subtle became choleric and outspoken. His judgment grew harsh, and a taint that seemed to all about him to be assuredly the taint of avarice crept into his acts. Moreover, which inclined Golam Shah to hopefulness, he seemed to take a dislike to Azim Khan. Once indeed he made a kind of speech in the Hall of Audience. Therein he declared many times over in a peculiarly husky voice, husky yet full of conviction, that Azim Khan was not worth a half anna, not worth a half anna to any human soul.

In these latter days of the Rajah’s decline, moreover, when merchants came, he would go aside with them secretly into the little room, and speak low, so that those in the Hall of Audience, howsoever they strained their ears, could hear nothing of his speech. These things Golam Shah and Azim Khan and Samud Singh, who had joined their councils, treasured in their hearts.

“It is true about the treasure,” said Azim; “they talked of it round the well of the travellers, even the merchants from Tibet had heard the tale, and had come this way with jewels of price, and afterwards they went secretly telling no one.” And ever and again, it was said, came a negro

mute from the plains, with secret parcels for the Rajah. "Another stone," was the rumour that went the round of the city.

"The bee makes hoards," said Azim Khan, the Rajah's heir, sitting in the upper chamber of Golam Shah. "Therefore, we will wait awhile." For Azim was more coward than traitor.

At last there were men in the Deccan even who could tell you particulars of the rubies and precious stones that the Rajah had gathered together. But so circumspect was the Rajah that Azim Khan and Golam Shah had never even set eyes on the glittering heaps that they knew were accumulating in the safe.

The Rajah always went into the little room alone, and even then he locked the door of the little room—it had a couple of locks—before he went to the safe and used the magic word. How all the ministers and officers and guards listened and looked at one another as the door of the room behind the curtain closed!

The Rajah changed indeed, in these days, not only in the particulars of his rule, but in his appearance. "He is growing old. How fast he grows old! The time is almost ripe," whispered Samud Singh. The Rajah's hand became tremulous, his step was now sometimes unsteady, and his memory curiously defective. He would come back out from the treasure-room, and his hand would tighten fiercely on the curtain, and he would stumble on the steps of the dais. "His eyesight fails," said Golam. "See!—His turban is askew. He is sleepy even in the forenoon, before the heat of the day. His judgments are those of a child."

It was a painful sight to see a man so suddenly old and enfeebled still ruling men.

"He may go on yet, a score of years," said Golam Shah.

"Should a ruler hoard riches," said Shere Ali, in the guardroom, "and leave his soldiers unpaid?" That was the beginning of the end.

It was the thought of the treasure won over the soldiers, even as it did the mollahs and the eunuchs. Why had the Rajah not buried it in some unthinkable place, as his father had done before him, and killed the diggers with his hand? "He has hoarded," said Samud, with a chuckle,—for the old Rajah had once pulled his beard,—"only to pay for his own undoing." And in order to insure confidence, Golam Shah went beyond the truth perhaps, and gave a sketchy account of the treasures to this man and that, even as a casual eyewitness might do.

Then, suddenly and swiftly, the palace revolution was accomplished. When the lonely old Rajah was killed, a shot was to be fired from the harem lattice, bugles were to be blown, and the sepoy were to turn out in the square before the palace, and fire a volley in the air. The murder was done in the dark save for a little red lamp that burnt in the corner. Azim knelt on the body and held up the wet beard, and cut the throat wide and deep to make sure. It was so easy. Why had he waited so long? And then, with his hands covered with warm blood, he sprang up eagerly—Rajahi at last!—and followed Golam and Samud and the eunuchs down the long, faintly moonlit passage, towards the Hall of Audience.

As they did so, the crack of a rifle sounded far away, and after a pause came the first awakening noises of the town. One of the eunuchs had an iron bar, and Samud carried a pistol in his hand. He fired into the locks of the treasure-room, and wrecked them, and the eunuch smashed the door in. Then they all rushed in together, none standing aside for Azim. It was dark, and the second eunuch went reluctantly to get a torch, in fear lest his fellow murderers should open the safe in his absence.

But he need have had no fear. The cardinal event of that night is the triumphant vindication of the advertised merits of Chobbs' unrivalled safes. The tumult that occurred between the Mindapore sepoy and the people need not concern us. The people loved not the new Rajah—let

that suffice. The conspirators got the key from round the dead Rajah's neck, and tried a multitude of the magic words of the English that Samud Singh knew, even such words as "Kemup" and "Gorblimey"—in vain.

In the morning, the safe in the treasure-room remained intact and defiant, the woodwork about it smashed to splinters, and great chunks of stone knocked out of the wall, dents abundantly scattered over its impregnable door, and a dust of files below. And the shifty Golam had to explain the matter to the soldiers and mollahs as best he could. This was an extremely difficult thing to do, because in no kind of business is prompt cash so necessary as in the revolutionary line.

The state of affairs for the next few days in Mindapore was exceedingly strained. One fact stands out prominently, that Azim Khan was hopelessly feeble. The soldiers would not at first believe in the exemplary integrity of the safe, and a deputation insisted in the most occidental manner in verifying the new Rajah's statements. Moreover, the populace clamoured, and then by a naked man running, came the alarming intelligence that the new Deputy-Commissioner at Allapore was coming headlong and with soldiers to verify the account of the revolution Golam Shah and Samud Singh had sent him in the name of Azim.

The new Deputy-Commissioner was a raw young man, partly obscured by a pith helmet, and chock full of zeal and the desire for distinction; and he had heard of the treasure. He was going, he said, to sift the matter thoroughly. On the arrival of this distressing intelligence there was a hasty and informal council of state (at which Azim was not present), a counter-revolution was arranged, and all that Azim ever learnt of it was the sound of a footfall behind him, and the cold touch of a pistol barrel on the neck.

When the Commissioner arrived, that dexterous statesman, Golam Shah, and that honest soldier, Samud Singh, were ready to receive him, and they had two corpses, several witnesses, and a neat little story. In addition to Azim they had shot an unpopular officer of the Mindapore sepoy. They told the Commissioner how Azim had plotted against the Rajah and raised a military revolt, and how the people, who loved the old Rajah, even as Golam Shah and Samud Singh loved him, had quelled the revolt, and how peace was restored again. And Golam explained how Azim had fought for life even in the Hall of Audience, and how he, Golam, had been wounded in the struggle, and how Samud had shot Azim with his own hand.

And the Deputy-Commissioner, being weak in his dialect, had swallowed it all. All round the Deputy-Commissioner, in the minds of the people, the palace, and the city, hung the true story of the case, as it seemed to Golam Shah, like an avalanche ready to fall; and yet the Deputy-Commissioner did not learn of it for four days. And Golam and Samud went to and fro, whispering and pacifying, promising to get at the treasure as soon as the Deputy-Commissioner could be got out of the way. And as they went to and fro so also the report went to and fro—that Golam and Samud had opened the safe and hidden the treasure, and closed and locked it again; and bright eyes watched them curiously and hungrily even as they had watched the Rajah in the days that were gone.

"This city is no longer an abiding place for you and me," said Golam Shah, in a moment of clear insight. "They are mad about this treasure. Golconda would not satisfy them."

The Deputy-Commissioner, when he heard their story, (lid indeed make knowing inquiries (as knowing as the knowingness of the English goes) in order to show himself not too credulous; but he elicited nothing. He had heard tales of treasure, had the Commissioner, and of a great box? So had Golam and Samud, but where it was they could not tell. They too had certainly heard tales of treasure—many tales indeed. Perhaps there *was* treasure.

Had the Deputy-Commissioner had the scientific turn of mind, he would have observed that a strong smell of gunpowder still hung about the Audience Chamber, more than was explained by the narrative told him; and had he explored the adjacent apartments, he would presently have discovered the small treasure-room with its smashed locks, and the ceiling now dependent ruins, and amid the ruins the safe, bulging perilously from the partly collapsed walls, but still unconquered, and with its treasures unexplored. Also it is a fact that Golam Shah's bandaged hand was not the consequence of heroism in combat, but of certain private blasting operations too amateurishly prosecuted.

So you have the situation: Deputy-Commissioner installed in the palace, sending incorrect information to headquarters and awaiting instructions, the safe as safe as ever; assistant conspirators grumbling louder and louder; and Golam and Samud getting more and more desperate lest this voice should reach the Deputy's ears.

Then came the night when the Commissioner heard a filing and a tapping, and being a brave man, rose and went forthwith, alone and very quietly, across the Hall of Audience, pistol in hand, in search of the sound. Across the Hall a light came from an open door that had been hidden in the day by a curtain. Stopping silently in the darkness of the outer apartment, he looked into the treasure-room. And there stood Golam with his arm in a sling, holding a lantern, while Samud fumbled with pieces of wire and some little keys. They were without boots, but otherwise they were dressed ready for a journey.

The Deputy-Commissioner was, for a Government official, an exceedingly quick-witted man. He slipped back in the darkness again, and within five minutes, Golam and Samud, still fumbling, heard footsteps hurrying across the Hall of Audience, and saw a flicker of light. Out went their lantern, with a groan because of a bandaged arm, but it was too late. In another moment Lieutenant Earl, in pyjamas and boots, but with a brace of revolvers and a couple of rifles behind him, stood in the doorway of the treasure-room, and Golam and Samud were caught. Samud clicked his pistol and then threw it down, for it was three to one—Golam being not only a bandaged man, but fundamentally a man of peace.

When the intelligence of this treachery filtered from the palace into the town, there was an outbreak of popular feeling, and a dozen officious persons set out to tell the Deputy-Commissioner the true connection between Golam, Samud, and the death of the Rajah. The first to penetrate to the Deputy-Commissioner's presence was an angry fakir, from the colony that dwelt about the Holy place. And after a patient hearing the Deputy-Commissioner extracted the thread of the narrative from the fabric of curses in which the holy man presented it.

"This is most singular," said the Deputy-Commissioner to the Lieutenant, standing in the treasure-room (which looked as though the palace had been bombarded), and regarding the battered but still inviolable safe. "Here we seem to have the key of the whole position."

"Key!" said the Lieutenant. "It's the key they have n't got."

"Curious mingling of the new and the old," said the Deputy-Commissioner. "Patent safe—and a hoard."

"Send to Allapore and wire Chobbs, I suppose?" said the Lieutenant.

The Deputy-Commissioner signified that was his intention, and they set guards before and behind and all about the treasure-room, until the proper instructions about the lock should come.

So it was that the *Pax Britannica* solemnly took possession of the Rajah's hoard, and men in Simla heard the news, and envied that Deputy-Commissioner his adventure with all their hearts. For his promptitude and decision was a matter of praise, and they said that Mindapore would certainly be annexed and added to the district over which he ruled. Only a fat old man named

MacTurk, living in Allapore, a big man with a noisy quivering laugh, and a secret trade with certain native potentates, did not hear the news, excepting only the news of the murder of the Rajah and the departure of the Deputy-Commissioner, for several days. He heard nothing of the disposition of the treasure—an unfortunate thing, since, among other things, he had sold the Rajah his safe, and may even have known the word by which the lock was opened.

The Deputy-Commissioner had theatrical tastes. These he gratified under the excuse that display was above all things necessary in dealing with Orientals. He imprisoned his four malefactors theatrically, and when the instructions came from Chobbs he had the safe lugged into the Hall of Audience, in order to open it with more effect. The Commissioner sat on the dais, while the engineer worked at the safe on the crimson steps.

In the central space was stretched a large white cloth. It reminded the Deputy-Commissioner of a picture he had seen of Alexander at Damascus receiving the treasures of Darius.

"It is gold," said one bystander to another. "There was a sound of chinking as they brought the safe in. My brother was among those who hauled."

The engineer clicked the lock. Every eye in the Hall of Audience grew brighter and keener, excepting the eyes of the Deputy-Commissioner. He felt the dignity of his responsibilities, and sat upon the dais looking as much like the *Pax Britannica* as possible.

"Holy Smoke!" said the engineer, and slammed the safe again. A murmur of exclamations ran round the hall. Every one was asking every one else what they had seen.

"An asp!" said some one.

The Deputy-Commissioner lost his imperturbability. "What is it?" he said, springing to his feet. The engineer leant across the safe and whispered two words, something indistinct and with a blasphemous adjective in front.

"*What?*" said the Deputy-Commissioner, sharply.

"Glass!" said the engineer, in a bitter whisper. "Broken bottles. 'Undreds!"

"Let me see!" said the Deputy-Commissioner, losing all his dignity.

"Scotch, if I'm not mistaken," said the engineer, sniffing curiously.

"Curse it!" said the Deputy-Commissioner, and looked up to meet a multitude of ironical eyes. "Er—

"The assembly is dismissed," said the Deputy-Commissioner.

"What a *fool* he must have looked!" wheezed MacTurk, who did not like the Deputy-Commissioner. "What a *fool* he must have looked!

"Simple enough," said MacTurk, "when you know how it came about."

"But how did it come about?" asked the station-master.

"Secret drinking," said MacTurk. "Bourbon whiskey. I taught him how to take it myself. But he did n't dare let on that he was doing it, poor old chap! Mindapore's one of the most fanatically Mahometan states in the hills you see. And he always was a secretive kind of chap, and given to doing things by himself. So he got that safe to hide it in, and keep the bottles. Broke 'em up to pack, I s'pose, when it got too full. Lord! I might ha' known. When people spoke of his treasure—I never thought of putting that and the safe and the Bourbon together! But how plain it is! And *what* a sell for Parkinson. Pounded glass! The accumulation of years! Lord!—I'd 'a' given a couple of stone off my weight to see him open that safe!"