

The Free Press Short Story

THE SIGN OF SIVA

By JOHN ARCHER

THUNDEROUS roar crashed on the dawn, followed by deeper silence. Vance Starr sprang from bed, and a moment later was outside, starting about the camp. The sun was just appearing over the eastern hills. For a moment he could see nothing amiss, hear nothing new. The little cabins and the buildings at the Great Eastern mine were undisturbed, here in the middle of the little valley, guarded by hills on either side.

The very silence was strange, however. Following that explosion, the native help should be swarming out of the buildings, chattering excitedly. Nothing moved. A short distance up the valley, then, where the hills on either side pinched together to a narrow gorge, Vance saw something, a slow-setting cloud of dust.

He stared for a moment with narrowed eyes. A fair-sized stream flowed through the gorge and down the valley. Now that it was at last beginning to produce those enemies, led of course by Damon Rampat, who was Oxford educated but bitterly opposed to progress none the less, had struck, using modern weapons.

A charge of dynamite had been set off at the narrowest point of the gorge, and a great, outjutting pinnacle of the hill above had been brought crashing down, choking the mouth completely, affording a dam for the creek.

The gorge, narrow at this point, had rock walls on either side. Vance hurried toward it, still wondering at the absence of any of the workmen.

The slide of dirt, he found, filled the gap nearly to the top, a hundred feet, plugging the opening completely. Up above the gorge widened again. The creek was high now, fed by melting snows in the mountains to the north. In several hours' time the water would back up on itself, forming a lake half a mile long, a hundred feet deep at the lower end, and a couple of hundred yards across at the widest point above.

When the imprisoned water finally reached the top of the slide and started over, its weight would swiftly eat away the new soft earth, taking it out as though a giant hand had pushed it away. The whole lake, a wall of water a hundred feet high, would surge down sweeping the buildings away, utterly destroying all that had been accomplished through long months of toil.

Vance hurried back, and burst into the buildings where the native help slept. He paused, dismayed. Rampat had done his work well. Secretly he had induced the native workers to silently steal away. No doubt some sort of warning, probably a sign of Siva, the murder god, had been sent to them. They would wait and watch. If the mine and everything were destroyed, they would believe that Siva had conquered. After that it would be impossible ever to go ahead with the work.

If Siva failed, they would return. That would mean victory, not alone victory in a material way, but victory over those old heathen superstitions. The missionaries working in the country would have some chance. What chance was there, however, for Siva, or for Rampat, to fall?

He had chosen his time well. The water was high, and Dane, the superintendent, was away for a few days, leaving Vance in charge. With the natives gone, Vance was alone; yet he had to do something.

Vance considered briefly. There was only one thing to do. He must get more dynamite to blow out that barrier before the water behind it rose high enough to do any great amount of damage. Again informed by spies, Rampat had chosen his time well. There were no explosives left in camp. A shipment had been delayed, unaccountably, Dane had gone to see about it.

The nearest dynamite was in the lower camp, a dozen miles away. Vance did not hesitate. His own horse had been left. Five minutes later he was in the saddle, riding down the little trail-like road.

soft, mocking. In confirmation of the warning, a rifle bullet whined close by Vance's ear.

Vance looked up. High on the side of the gorge, almost directly above the guide, Rampat had taken up his position in a little cave in the rocky cliff. It was an almost impregnable position.

"I will tell you my plans," Rampat went on. "I have a charge of explosive fixed at the bottom of the slide, which I can set off with a plunger, if I wish. I can assure the destruction of your little mine down below. You are helpless. There is but one chance for you."

"And what is that?" asked Vance. "You are in charge here. Any pledge you make, your company will honor. Pledge me ten thousand dollars, and the water will be turned aside; otherwise, everything will be destroyed."

Vance retreated slowly, thinking. He knew that, so far as Rampat was concerned, the bargain was honest enough. The Hindu was not a Christian, and treachery or trickery meant nothing to him, so long as he accomplished his purpose. For money he was willing to forego this destruction of the mine—for this time. Later he probably would find some other way to attack it. No, the affair had to be settled, once for all.

Unwittingly Rampat had revealed something to Vance. Since the money could not possibly be paid for a few days, and certainly would not be paid at all if the mine were destroyed, then Rampat must have some other outlet for the water. There were, to Vance's knowledge, however, no other possible outlets, no intersecting cuttings along the length of the gorge.

He stopped suddenly. Up nearly a quarter of a mile and to the left, he recalled, was a coulee whose mouth would come within a hundred yards of the gorge. A tunnel could have been run from the head of it to the bottom of the gorge, leaving a few feet of earth untouched before the tunnel was finished. With a touch of dynamite ready, that few feet of tunnel could be blown out, and a new way would be opened to drain the artificial lake, without doing any damage.

That must be what Rampat had contrived. If so, there might be a way to stop him. Vance slipped in among the trees and was off at a run.

Creeping widely, so that any chance watcher would not see him, Vance came to the mouth of the other coulee, and made his way warily up. His pulses jumped as he saw a pile of saw earth in it; then he saw the mouth of the tunnel that had been dug. He had guessed right.

Suddenly a figure slipped up like a shadow behind him, the numbing blow of a club caught him beside the head, and Vance pitched forward, half-stunned. When he sat up, a moment later, it was to stare with horror at the youth above him, a young Hindu of about his own age. It was not the expression of cold enmity which glowed in Tagora's eyes, which startled Vance so much as the insignia rudely painted on his forehead, the sign of Siva, the god of murder.

Tagora had caused trouble at the mine before, attracting discontent among the native workers, and Vance had been forced to discharge him. Now, wordless, Tagora bound Vance's hands behind him, caught up a torch and lighted it then forced his prisoner to march into the black mouth of the new-made tunnel. It ran, as Vance had suspected, for a little over a hundred yards. At the far end they stopped.

A few posts and braces had been set up at intervals to prevent the shaft from caving in. At the far end, a brace across the top was held up by a post at either side. Close beside it, Vance could see a charge of dynamite, placed to open up the tunnel, even with the bottom of the water-filled gorge. A wire led from it down the tunnel, probably to the place where Rampat waited, so that it could be set off with a plunger.

Swiftly, using his saw for the purpose, Tagora tied Vance's already trussed hands to one of the posts. He said nothing, but Vance knew what he was thinking. Even if Rampat decided to let the dam be flooded away and the mine destroyed, this charge of dynamite here would be set off a little later, destroying the tunnel. If the mine was saved, and the tunnel opened, it would also be exploded. If any event, Vance, left beside it, stood to die.

Tagora glared down at his helpless victim a moment, then turned and was gone.

A dim light filtered in from the mouth of the tunnel, and his eyes now accustomed to the gloom, the prisoner saw the wire leading from the dynamite.

Now, desperately, Vance wrenched at bonds. They did not give, but something else did. The bottom of the post holding the brace was merely set on the ground, and it slid a little. With renewed hope, he hitched forward, pulled again. This time the post slid out and the brace above dropped down.

A few moments of patient work, and Vance managed to slip the rope off the bottom of the post. Swiftly he ran down the tunnel. Near the far end, where the light was stronger, he stopped. Tagora would probably still be on guard outside. Stealing himself to patience, despite the racing minutes and the knowledge that Rampat might weaken in his purpose and press the plunger, which would release a solid wall of water that would trap him helplessly, Vance searched until he found an outlying rock, only part of which had been broken away in digging the tunnel.

Rubbing his bonds against its sharp edges was effective, if slow, and finally he was free.

A cautious survey showed no sign of Tagora. His heart leaped as Vance saw the end of the wire just outside, the plunger conveniently at hand. With his hand on it, however, he hesitated. If he were to set it off now, the explosion would instantly warn Rampat of all that had happened. He, fearful of being cheated of vengeance and money alike, would promptly set off the blast under the slide as well, sending the wall of water down to ruin the mine, before its face had been lowered by the tunnel.

No, that would not do. The immediate danger of being blown to bits himself was past. The fight between himself and those who followed the cult of Siva remained, had to be won.

He must first get hold of Rampat, the leader, to make sure that he could cause no more trouble. After that it would be safe to blast open the tunnel. Following a little path, Vance found that it led precariously down the ledge above the gorge, to the little cave where Rampat waited. As he came within sight of Rampat, Vance saw that Tagora had joined him.

Inspiration came to Vance. He could return into the tunnel, get one stick of dynamite, and with that destroy both of his enemies together, in perfect safety to himself. He dismissed the idea. Murder, to them, was a part of the religion of the terrible god they worshipped. They saw no sin in so treating an enemy, but their way was not for him. He was a Christian.

He was almost upon them before they discovered him. A look of bewilderment crossed Tagora's face. The native reached for his rifle, but Vance was quicker. He caught up a stone from the path, and threw it in the same sweeping motion. Tagora on the painted representation of the murder-god. He dropped senseless.

Again the advantage was with Vance. He could have snatched up the fallen rifle and used it on Rampat, but to do so he would have been forced to shoot for Rampat was already reaching for an intervening space at a band of

in a football tackle. His shoulder thudded against Rampat's legs, knocking them from under him. The rifle fell from his hands and slid down the sloping rock.

On even terms, they were closely matched. Rampat, quick to discover it, realizing that time was working in his favor, and that a few more minutes would send the swiftly-mounting water over the dam to carry out his original scheme of vengeance, set himself merely to hold Vance from getting loose.

By now they were on the edge of the path, at the brink of the cliff. Exerting all his strength, Rampat strove to throw his enemy over. Vance appeared to weaken. Suddenly, then, as Rampat sought to profit by this and obtain a better hold, Vance had twisted about, was himself on top. He struck, desperately, and the Hindu went limp under him. A few moments later, Vance pressed the plunger.

Returning, he found both Rampat and Tagora regaining consciousness. The water, whirling down the opened tunnel, was gradually beginning to sink below the danger line. Vance had relieved Tagora's rifle and was in command of the situation. Sighing, then, as Rampat begged to profit by this and obtain a better hold, Vance had twisted about, was himself on top. He struck, desperately, and the Hindu went limp under him. A few moments later, Vance pressed the plunger.

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ESKIMOS DO NOT LIVE IN SNOW HUTS

Four French scientists on an expedition in Greenland have shattered two more illusions about Eskimos. They declare that the Eskimo prefers broccoli to blubber, and does not live in a snow hut. They also found that the average Eskimo is a man of few words, has a larger vocabulary than the average business man and that he laughs more in a month than ordinary people do in a year. Most of the Eskimos, they found, live in homes constructed of stone, bone, and even imported wood, and then cover them over with turf. The scientists estimate that of the 14,000 Eskimos in Greenland, only a few hundred have ever seen snow huts, and still fewer have ever lived in them. Although blubber is still the mainstay of a polar diet, Eskimos in summer cultivate greens, including broccoli, of which they are very fond.

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