

THE RITZ HEADQUARTERS

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Fitch nodded. He was racking his brain for some means of escape which meant, so far as he could see, a method of killing the snake. It seemed useless to expect help from outside the house. The door between the hall and the room in which they were was closed, and before it hung portieres heavy enough to muffle their loudest shouts. Their only probable chance of relief lay in the hope that the bluecoat would become sufficiently anxious at their failure to return and would enter the house in quest of them. Even in that rather remote contingency, however, it was far from certain they could warn him before the cobra could glide across the room and strike him to death. No, they were thrown utterly upon their own resources. Britz agreed with the doctor on that point, as in low tones, so that they might not further inflame the serpent, they discussed their situation.

"Guess there's nothing accidental about this little sunshine being in the room," said Britz musingly. "Those Oriental strong-armers probably figured it out that one or both of us would come here, and so they arranged this pleasing little surprise party. I think it is worthy a place in the society columns as one of the successes of the season."

He made light of the danger because that was his way when he was in a particularly tight place; but he realized the peril by this time as fully as did the doctor. There was nothing humorous in the fact that all the time they were held prisoners atop the chifonier by the gray death before them, the Hindus were doubtless making the most of the time thus gained for escape. True, he had asked that all the ordinary avenues of escape from the city be watched, and although he took it for granted that Manning would carry out the request conscientiously, he was not at all confident the men sent from the Central Office and from the various precinct headquarters would be proof against the adroitness of Indian noblemen, adepts, and thugs. Moreover, it was as good as certain that the Swami, the Prince and their followers would not seek to flee the city by any ordinary route. Britz himself had been free to continue the pursuit, would have looked first to the most extraordinary modes of flight compatible with practical conditions. From what he knew of the men, by this time it would not amaze him greatly to find they had left the city by airship or submarine, slightly improbable as either means of transit might have been a few years before.

"Bottled up, doc?" he exclaimed gloomily. "That's what it looks like," assented Fitch. "Unless," Britz continued, "we can get that gun—"

"And use it effectively," put in Fitch. "I'm something of a shot," the detective ventured meditatively. "Could be I could hit it, and maybe I could get that gun."

His eyes, ranging the room in the immediate neighborhood of the chifonier, had alighted upon the water pipe. The long, flexible rubber stem of the marghileh was stretched across the table and the mouthpiece hung over the back of a chair within a few feet of the top of the chifonier. "I'll try it," said the detective decisively. "Give a hand here, doc!" Fitch hooked one arm about the ornamental knob at the mark of the

chifonier, and with his free hand gripped the detective's left wrist. Britz, his left hand clutching the doctor's sleeve, the toe of his left boot thrust between the chifonier and the wall, leaned far out in an attempt to reach the tube of the water pipe. He withdrew his arm quickly, however, and gave a little nervous cough as the drab death that lay coiled in the middle of the floor straightened its sinistral length and glided swiftly across the room, then coiled itself once more directly under the spot where the detective's stretching fingers had been. Once more the head arose with that strange, sinuous, swaying motion, and it began to move slowly back and forth, while the glistening eyes seemed to shoot sparks toward the man who hung at such fearful hazard above it.

"Gee!" said Britz. "This is getting a little too close for comfort. How far can that thing stretch, doctor?" "No higher than that," answered Fitch. "At least, I think not. I understand the cobra can strike only straight forward."

"Sure it can't make an upper cut?" inquired the sleuth. "I'm not going to say positively. I'm not sure of anything with that kind of a brute," Fitch answered. "The best way is to take no chances. Let me have a try for the gun."

A bifurcated scarlet thread, the slender forked tongue of the reptile, darted in and out of its gaping jaws in a frenzied manner. It was apparent to anyone—he scientist or layman—that the serpent was in a white heat of fury. Woe betide the human flesh that came within reach of that eager, death-dealing venom.

Britz, though he was known the length and breadth of the department as the coolest proposition under Manning's command, frankly shuddered as he watched the undulating menace of the serpent's body, and the staccato play of the tongue that seemed to mock him with the deadly humor of a fiend. He was willing to risk of a head. He was willing to risk his life, if need be, to prevent the escape of the dark, subtle enemies whose demoniac ingenuity had caught him in such a trap, or trapped he seemed to be beyond the possibility of escape. That they had matched their cunning against his cold, hard, Occidental skill and common sense, only made him the more

determined to outwit, outplay, out-fight them. "No, doc," said the doctor firmly. "It was my fool carcase that left that gun on that table, and it's up to me to get it. You hold fast and stay tight, and if anybody gets stung, it'll be me."

Once again Britz, warily watching the snake stretch for him, stretched his fingers until he could almost feel them crack and strained his muscles almost beyond endurance, the while his nerve was subjected to the severest test of all his experience. At last he pipped the smooth amber of the serpent's mouthpiece. He saw the tips of his first and second fingers. It was the slightest of grasps; but so steady were the nerves of the Headquarters man that although the cobra in its swaying seemed to approach ever nearer the arm and naked wrist of Britz, he was not startled. He saw the tip of his first and second fingers. It was the slightest of grasps; but so steady were the nerves of the Headquarters man that although the cobra in its swaying seemed to approach ever nearer the arm and naked wrist of Britz, he was not startled. He saw the tip of his first and second fingers. It was the slightest of grasps; but so steady were the nerves of the Headquarters man that although the cobra in its swaying seemed to approach ever nearer the arm and naked wrist of Britz, he was not startled.

That jerk freed the other end of the tube from the pipe bowl, and Britz quickly looped it in his hands. Holding both ends of the long stem he knotted a single loose loop in the middle, and flung it like a double lariat upon the table beside the pistol. Slowly dragging the pipestem back, he pulled it, after several trials, about the pistol barrel until the top encircled the chamber of the weapon. Then, holding one end of the tube to the doctor, Britz took hold of the other, explaining his purpose to Fitch in a few words. The detective stretched his arm away from the chifonier at one end; the physician did the same at the other, and they stood pulling in opposite directions, thus tightening the loop about the pistol. When the grip of the tube on the weapon was firm enough, it was comparatively easy to swing the revolver from the table to the chifonier. Britz gripped the gun with an intake of breath that betokened satisfaction.

"Now, then, doc," said Britz briskly. "Let's see if we can't put the reverse English on that Garden of Eden episode. Here's where the seed of the woman bruises the serpent with his heel."

"I would advise you to do your bruising at long distance," said Fitch. "And unless you have more cartridges about you, I wouldn't waste a shot. You won't find it easy to hit him."

Britz in a moment or two realized the doctor spoke true. That swaying, unstratified body was no easy mark for the most practiced marksman. His first shot went wide. The bullet imbedded itself in a leg of the table with a rasping sound that only infuriated the cobra the more. Britz's nerve slightly shaken by the miss, he fired a second shot, which he believed to have struck the snake's head, and caused the snake to oscillate more and more violently. It became apparent he would gain nothing by aiming at its head.

"I'll have a try at him 'midships," he said. Only three loaded cartridges remained in the revolver, and as Britz found no extra ones in any of his pockets, he knew he must make the most of those he had. A third time the pistol cracked, the bullet grazed the serpent's flesh, but did not injure the spine. Quickly the upraised part of the body sank upon the coil, but it reared itself again in an instant and the furious darting of the tongue revealed that the reptile was unharmed and that he was unharmed.

"Want to take a crack at it, doc?" asked the detective, handing the weapon to the physician. Fitch had no poor idea of himself as a fancy shot, but he found his muscular control too sadly shaken by his narrow escape from the cobra to shoot straight. His shot the fourth was a wider miss than any of the detective's had been. He handed the pistol back to the Headquarters man and shook his head.

"You're the man to stay on the firing line," he said. Britz eyed the revolver grimly. In his bluecoat chamber were four empty cartridges, and only one that held the potentiality of release from their dangerously uncertain refuge on the chifonier. Crooking his left arm, he used the angle made by his elbow as a rest and leveled the long blue barrel of the big-calibered weapon steadily. Pausing until the swaying of the serpent diminished as much as it apparently was going to do, he fired.

A writhing, agonizing snarl was the result. The cobra coiled and uncoiled with electric rapidity, traveling in circles all over the spot between the chifonier and the table whence Britz had lassoed the reptile. Plainly the reptile was hit—mortally wounded, he thought, but as he started to descend impatiently, Britz seized him and literally flung him back on the chifonier's smooth top.

"Not yet," said the doctor nervously. "Let's wait a minute." It was profitable patience. For atter probably a minute of terrible struggling, the cobra returned to its coil and once more reared its head. The gray hood thrashed frantically, but closer scrutiny showed he made the snake had not been lit with fatal result. Suddenly the physician seized Britz's arm in a nervous grasp.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "You've shot his tongue!" True enough. The bullet had passed between the gaping jaws of the reptile and taken off the greater part of that darting scarlet thread as neatly as a sharp instrument could snuff a candle. While the wound doubtless caused agony to the snake, it did not lessen its power. The poison-charged fangs remained in its mouth, and the cutting off of its tongue swelled its head to the ultimate degree. Britz dropped the pistol on the

floor. "Up a tree for fair," he said. "Nothing more doing in the artillery line." "That was your last cartridge?" Britz bent his head affirmatively. An expression of slow wrath gathered force in the Headquarters man's face as he stared at the swaying serpent such a short distance below. One could see he was angry enough to take the desperate chance of springing from his perch and trying to strike the cobra with his heels, or falling that, seizing it by the neck seeking to throttle it. The instinct of self-preservation, however, was stronger than rage. Britz was willing enough to risk his life in the fulfilling of his duty, so long as the risk meant a fighting chance to win. He was too sensible absolutely to throw his life away and something told him the spite of an hour's inactivity in the world no man would have an appreciable percentage of opportunity in a battle at close quarters with a venomous serpent. Yet he must get out of that house. He felt he was the only man on the force who could be sure of heading off the cobra's advance. In that very moment they might be beyond the city's limits, beating the booty he had pursued so many weeks. It was more than his self-poise could stand. He gave rein to his anger, and for the first time in all the doctor's acquaintance, Britz swore hard and fast and long. His flow of profanity stopped as suddenly as it had commenced. He drew one hand from his pocket, and slowly, as if he hardly dared to trust his senses, held up his fingers and looked at them. They clasped faintly for the physician to see. It was a loaded cartridge forgotten when last he emptied his pockets of their supply of extra ammunition!

"Well, make no mistake with this one," said the sleuth. "You'll think you can use it better, doc?" "No," said Fitch. "I am not in your class when it comes to snuffing out serpent's tongues. You may fire when you are ready, lieutenant."

Britz gripped, shook the empty shells out of the revolver, slipped the full cartridge into one of the chambers, and twisted it until it paralleled the barrel. Then, once more, using his arm as a rest, he took careful aim, and was about to pull the trigger, when the door was flung open, and the uniformed policeman stood on the threshold.

"Well," said the bluecoat, "excuse me for butting in, but I thought something might have—" Fitch checked him with an upraised hand, and the patrolman's eyes all but burst in their sockets as, meeting his gaze, he saw the upraised death covered by the Headquarters man's pistol. For a second's space, none of the three men moved. Then a metallic click broke the suspense, only to leave it in another instant more taut than ever, as all three realized the cartridge had missed fire. The bluecoat's hand reached for his club. Pale-stricken though he had been, at first sight of the cobra, he had the pluck common to the humblest member of the force, and he plainly meditated taking the serpent from the rear. He would not trust to his revolver lest his aim, spoiled by the intensity of the situation, should fly high and hit on one of the refugees atop the chifonier. But first he asked the patrolman from what would undoubtedly have been a foolhardy act of courage. Hastily breaking his revolver open, he made a swift examination of the cartridge, saw that its rim was not dented by the hammer

and, concluding an accident for which the shell was not to blame had prevented an explosion set the chamber once more, and fired again. This time a crack followed, the cobra's body shot into the air, and then fell squirming to the floor. Its coils uncoil at full length it writhed in its agony. Britz leaped to the far side of the table, seized a heavy book and hurled it at the serpent's head. This action ended the reptile's struggles, but the doctor, brave enough under ordinary conditions, was not content until with a dagger-like paper cutter he snatched from a table he severed the snake's head from its twisting body.

Britz, Fitch, and the patrolman took deep breaths as they stood on the porch. The detective lost little time in recuperating, though, and after hurried instructions to the bluecoat he and the doctor jumped into the coupe. The uniformed patrolman climbed to the box, turning the horse's head westward. He drove the weary brute at high speed to a taxicab stand, where the detective and the physician entered a horseless vehicle in which they were whirled to Headquarters, where Britz had a short but important conference with the Chief.

CHAPTER XXIII Mrs. Missioner's Visitor Mrs. Missioner, after the ball, took in the fag-end of a bridge party, and stayed so late that when she returned to her home the east was striped with dawn, and the maid who had waited up for her was sleeping soundly in a chair. The widow was not yet disposed for slumber. It had been an exciting night. Her fancy had been stimulated so greatly by her brief talk with the Swami, in the hall room that she was unable to turn it from the mysterious Oriental history of the Maharajah diamond. She knew no more of the jewel's past than had related to the same for her husband had not acquainted her with all the details connected with his acquisition of it. Something in the Swami's manner caused her to regard the stone with more or less aversion. She began to doubt the purity of its record. Fond though she was of gems, even to the point of being a jewel worshiper, she was American to her finger-tips, and would shrink in terror from any bauble that came to her stained with the blood of a human being. She had loved her husband in a way as any wife, she had always respected and admired him. It seemed impossible he would be a party to wrongdoing. Yet she could not shake off a sensation of dread whenever she remembered how intimately the jewel had nestled in the snows of her throat, and rivaled the brightness of her eyes. Could he have worn a gem whose fire more suited to the glow of an Eden than to the Eden of a good hotel?

(To be continued)

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