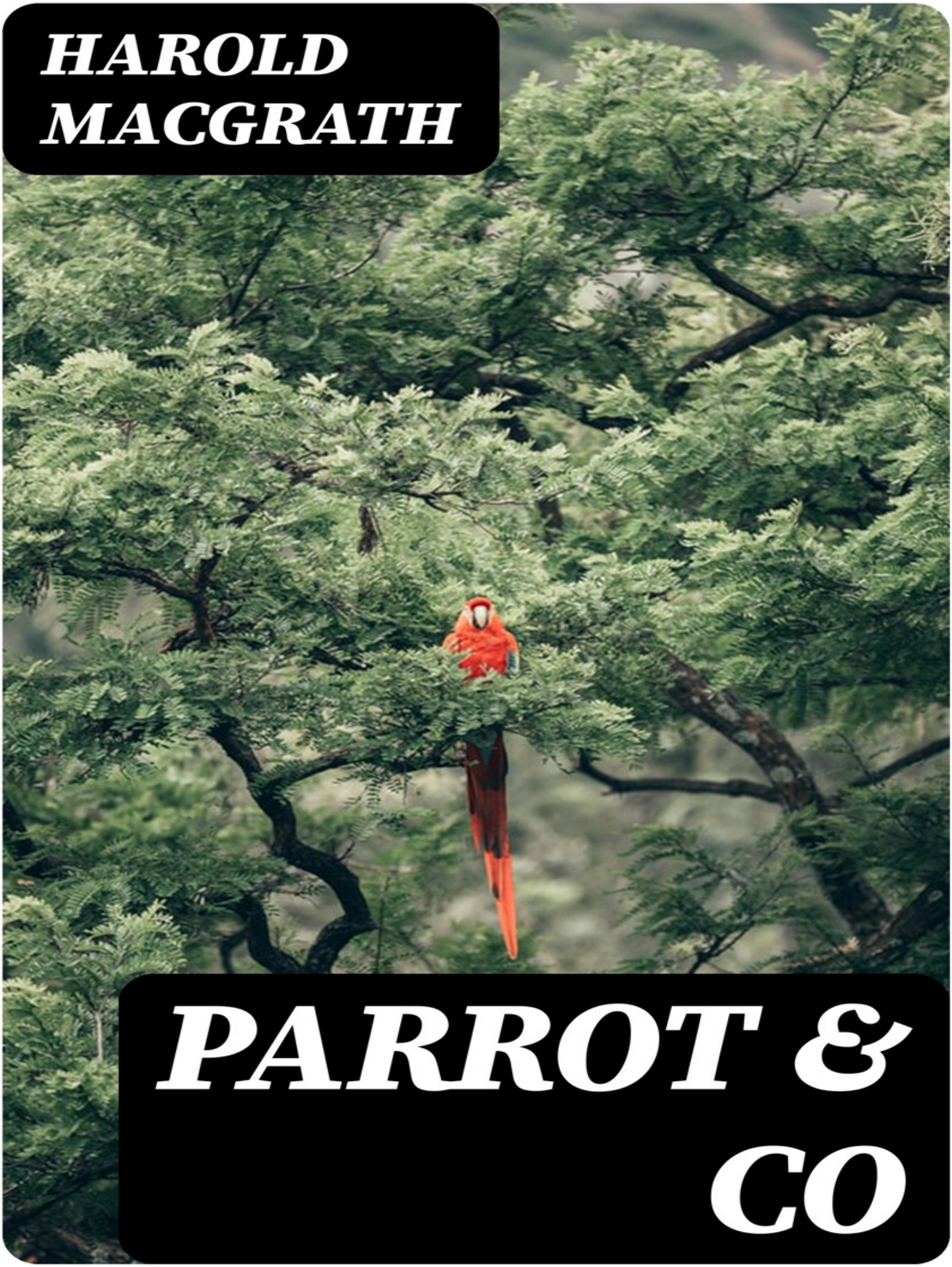
HAROLD MACGRATH



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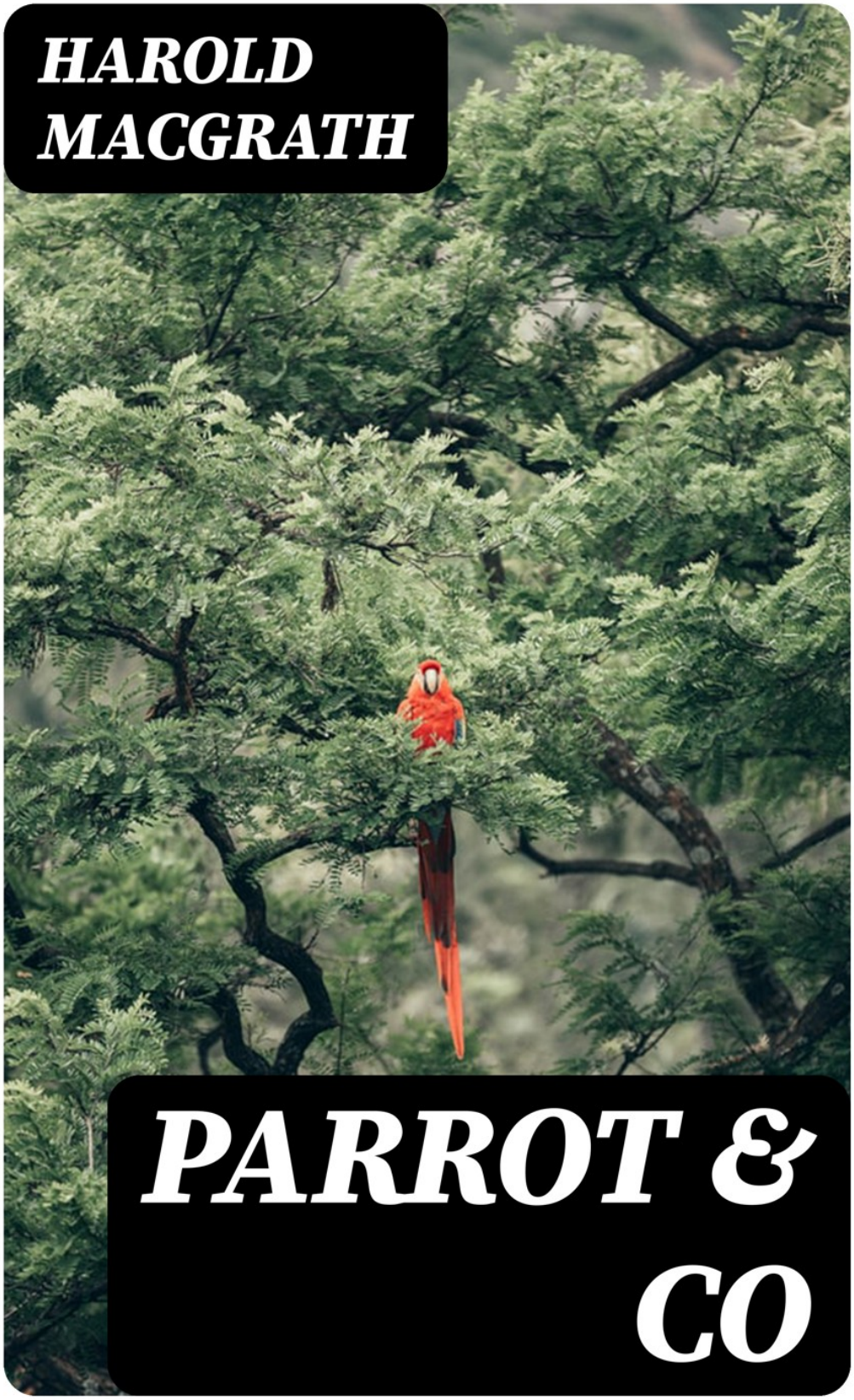

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I

EAST IS EAST

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It began somewhere in the middle of the world, between London which is the beginning and New York which is the end, where all things are east of the one and west of the other. To be precise, a forlorn landing on the west bank of the muddy turbulent Irrawaddy, remembered by man only so often as it was necessary for the flotilla boat to call for paddy, a visiting commissioner anxious to get away, or a family homeward-bound. Somewhere in the northeast was Mandalay, but lately known in romance, verse and song; somewhere in the southeast lay Prome, known only in guide-books and time-tables; and farther south, Rangoon, sister to Singapore, the half-way house of the derelicts of the world. On the east side of the river, over there, was a semblance of civilization. That is to say, men wore white linen, avoided murder, and frequently paid their gambling debts. But on this west side stood wilderness, not the kind one reads about as being eventually conquered by white men; no, the real grim desolation, where the ax cuts but leaves no blaze, where the pioneer disappears and few or none follow. The pioneer has always been a successful pugilist, but in this part of Burma fate, out of pure admiration for the pygmy's gameness, decided to call the battle a draw. It was not the wilderness of the desert, of the jungle; rather the tragic hopeless state of a settlement that neither progressed, retarded, nor stood still.

Between the landing and the settlement itself there stretched a winding road, arid and treeless, perhaps two miles in length. It announced definitely that its end was futility. All this day long heavy bullock-carts had rumbled over it, rumbled toward the landing and rattled emptily back to the settlement. The dust hung like a fog above the road, not only for this day, but for all days between the big rains. Each night, however, the cold heavy dews drew it down, cooling but never congealing it. From under the first footfall the next day it rose again. When the gods, or the elements, or Providence, arranged the world as a fit habitation for man, India and Burma were made the dust-bins. And as water finds its levels, so will dust, earthly and human, the quick and the dead.

It was after five in the afternoon. The sun was sinking, hazily but swiftly; ribbons of scarlet, ribbons of rose, ribbons of violet, lay one upon the other. The sun possessed no definite circle; a great blinding radiance like metal pouring from the mouth of a blast-furnace. Along the road walked two men, phantom-like. One saw their heads dimly and still more dimly their bodies to the knees; of legs, there was nothing visible. Occasionally they stepped aside to permit some bullock-cart to pass. One of them swore, not with any evidence of temper, not viciously, but in a kind of mechanical protest, which, from long usage, had become a habit. He directed these epithets never at animate things, never at anything he could by mental or physical contest overcome. He swore at the dust, at the heat, at the wind, at the sun.

The other wayfarer, with the inherent patience of his blood, said nothing and waited, setting down the heavy kit-bag and the canvas-valise (his own). When the way was free again he would sling the kit-bag and the valise over his shoulder and step back into the road. His turban, once white, was brown with dust and sweat. His khaki uniform was rent under the arm-pits, several buttons were gone; his stockings were rusty black, mottled with patches of brown skin; and the ragged canvas-shoes spurted little spirals of dust as he walked. The British-Indian government had indulgently permitted him to proceed about his duties as guide and carrier under the cognomen of James Hooghly, in honor of a father whose surname need not be written here, and in further honor of the river upon which, quite inconveniently one early morning, he had been born. For he was Eurasian; half European, half Indian, having his place twixt heaven and hell, which is to say, nowhere. His father had died of a complication of bhang-drinking and opium-eating; and as a consequence, James was full of humorless imagination, spells of moodiness and outbursts of hilarious politics. Every native who acquires a facility in English immediately sets out to rescue India from the clutches of the British raj, occasionally advancing so far as to send a bullet into some harmless individual in the Civil Service.

James was faithful, willing and strong; and as a carrier of burdens, took unmurmuringly his place beside the tireless bullock and the elephant. He was a Methodist; why, no one could find lucid answer, since he ate no beef, drank from no common cup, smoked through his fist when he enjoyed a pipe, and never assisted Warrington Sahib in his deadly

pursuit of flies and mosquitoes. He was Hindu in all his acts save in his manner of entering temples; in this, the European blood kept his knees unbended. By dint of inquiry his master had learned that James looked upon his baptism and conversion in Methodism as a corporal would have looked upon the acquisition of a V. C. Twice, during fever and plague, he had saved his master's life. With the guilelessness of the Oriental he considered himself responsible for his master in all future times. Instead of paying off a debt he had acquired one. Treated as he was, kindly but always firmly, he would have surrendered his life cheerfully at the beck of the white man.

Warrington was an American. He was also one of those men who never held misfortune in contempt, whose outlook wherever it roamed was tolerant. He had patience for the weak, resolution for the strong, and a fearless amiability toward all. He was like the St. Bernard dog, very difficult to arouse. It is rather the way with all men who are strong mentally and physically. He was tall and broad and deep. Under the battered pith-helmet his face was as dark as the Eurasian's; but the eyes were blue, bright and small-pupiled, as they are with men who live out-of-doors, who are compelled of necessity to note things moving in the distances. The nose was large and well-defined. All framed in a tangle of blond beard and mustache which, if anything, added to the general manliness of his appearance. He, too, wore khaki, but with the addition of tan riding-leggings, which had seen anything but rocking-horse service. The man was yellow from the top of his helmet to the soles of his shoes—outside. For the rest, he was a mystery, to James,

to all who thought they knew him, and most of all to himself. A pariah, an outcast, a fugitive from the bloodless hand of the law; a gentleman born, once upon a time a clubman, college-bred; a contradiction, a puzzle for which there was not any solution, not even in the hidden corners of the man's heart. His name wasn't Warrington; and he had rubbed elbows with the dregs of humanity, and still looked you straight in the eye because he had come through inferno without bringing any of the defiling pitch.

From time to time he paused to relight his crumbling cheroot. The tobacco was strong and bitter, and stung his parched lips; but the craving for the tang of the smoke on his tongue was not to be denied.

Under his arm he carried a small iron-cage, patterned something like a rat-trap. It contained a Rajputana parrakeet, not much larger than a robin, but possessor of a soul as fierce as that of Palladia, minus, however, the smoothing influence of chivalry. He had been born under the eaves of the scarlet palace in Jaipur (so his history ran); but the proximity of Indian princes had left him untouched: he had neither chivalry, politeness, nor diplomacy. He was, in fact, thoroughly and consistently bad. Round and round he went, over and over, top-side, down-side, restlessly. For at this moment he was hearing those familiar evening sounds which no human ear can discern: the muttering of the day-birds about to seek cover for the night. In the field at the right of the road stood a lonely tree. It was covered with brilliant scarlet leaves and blossoms, and justly the natives call it the Flame of the Jungle. A flock of small birds were gyrating above it.

"Jah, jah, jah! Jah—jah—ja-a-a-h!" cried the parrot, imitating the Burmese bell-gong that calls to prayer. Instantly he followed the call with a shriek so piercing as to sting the ear of the man who was carrying him.

"You little son-of-a-gun," he laughed; "where do you pack away all that noise?"

There was a strange bond between the big yellow man and this little green bird. The bird did not suspect it, but the man knew. The pluck, the pugnacity and the individuality of the feathered comrade had been an object lesson to the man, at a time when he had been on the point of throwing up the fight.

"Jah, jah, jah! Jah—jah—ja-a-a-h!" The bird began its interminable somersaults, pausing only to reach for the tantalizing finger of the man, who laughed again as he withdrew the digit in time.

For six years he had carried the bird with him, through India and Burma and Malacca, and not yet had he won a sign of surrender. There were many scars on his forefingers. It was amazing. With one pressure of his hand he could have crushed out the life of the bird, but over its brave unconquerable spirit he had no power. And that is why he loved it.

Far away in the past they had met. He remembered the day distinctly and bitterly. He had been on the brink of self-destruction. Fever and poverty and terrible loneliness had battered and beaten him flat into the dust from which this time he had had no wish to rise. He had walked out to the railway station at Jaipur to witness the arrival of the tourist train from Ahmadabad. He wanted to see white men and

white women from his own country, though up to this day he had carefully avoided them. (How he hated the English, with their cold-blooded suspicion of all who were not island-born!) The natives surged about the train, with brass-ware, antique articles of warfare, tiger-hunting knives (accompanied by perennial fairy tales), skins and silks. There were beggars, holy men, guides and fakirs.

Squatted in the dust before the door of a first-class carriage was a solemn brown man, in turban and clout, exhibiting performing parrots. It was Rajah's turn. He fired a cannon, turned somersaults through a little steel-hoop, opened a tiny chest, took out a four-anna piece, carried it to his master, and in exchange received some seed. Thereupon he waddled resentfully back to the iron-cage, opened the door, closed it behind him, and began to mutter belligerently. Warrington haggled for two straight hours. When he returned to his sordid evil-smelling lodgings that night, he possessed the parrot and four rupees, and sat up the greater part of the night trying to make the bird perform his tricks. The idea of suicide no longer bothered him; trifling though it was, he had found an interest in life. And on the morrow came the Eurasian, who trustfully loaned Warrington every coin that he could scrape together.

Often, in the dreary heart-achy days that followed, when weeks passed ere he saw the face of a white man, when he had to combat opium and bhang and laziness in the natives under him, the bird and his funny tricks had saved him from whisky, or worse. In camp he gave Rajah much freedom, its wings being clipt; and nothing pleased the little rebel so much as to claw his way up to his master's shoulder, sit

there and watch the progress of the razor, with intermittent "jawing" at his own reflection in the cracked hand-mirror.

Up and down the Irrawaddy, at the rest-houses, on the boats, to those of a jocular turn of mind the three were known as "Parrot & Co." Warrington's amiability often misled the various scoundrels with whom he was at times forced to associate. A man who smiled most of the time and talked Hindustani to a parrot was not to be accorded much courtesy; until one day Warrington had settled all distinctions, finally and primordially, with the square of his fists. After that he went his way unmolested, having soundly trounced one of the biggest bullies in the teak timber-yards at Rangoon.

He made no friends; he had no confidences to exchange; nor did he offer to become the repository of other men's pasts. But he would share his bread and his rupees, when he had them, with any who asked. Many tried to dig into his past, but he was as unresponsive as granite. It takes a woman to find out what a man is and has been; and Warrington went about women in a wide circle. In a way he was the most baffling kind of a mystery to those who knew him: he frequented the haunts of men, took a friendly drink, played cards for small sums, laughed and jested like any other anchorless man. In the East men are given curious names. They become known by phrases, such as, The Man Who Talks, Mr. Once Upon a Time, The One-Rupee Man, and the like. As Warrington never received any mail, as he never entered a hotel, nor spoke of the past, he became The Man Who Never Talked of Home.

"I say, James, old sport, no more going up and down this bally old river. We'll go on to Rangoon to-night, if we can find a berth."

"Yes, Sahib; this business very piffle," replied the Eurasian without turning his head. Two things he dearly loved to acquire: a bit of American slang and a bit of English silver. He was invariably changing his rupees into shillings, and Warrington could not convince him that he was always losing in the transactions.

They tramped on through the dust. The sun dropped. A sudden chill began to penetrate the haze. The white man puffed his cheroot, its wrapper dangling; the servant hummed an Urdu lullaby; the parrot complained unceasingly.

"How much money have you got, James?"

"Three annas."

Warrington laughed and shook the dust from his beard. "It's a great world, James, a great and wonderful world. I've just two rupees myself. In other words, we are busted."

"Two rupees!" James paused and turned. "Why, Sahib, you have three hundred thousand rupees in your pocket."

"But not worth an anna until I get to Rangoon. Didn't those duffers give you anything for handling their luggage the other day?"

"Not a pice, Sahib."

"Rotters! It takes an Englishman to turn a small trick like that. Well, well; there were extenuating circumstances. They had sore heads. No man likes to pay three hundred thousand for something he could have bought for ten thousand. And I made them come to me, James, to me. I

made them come to this god-forsaken hole, just because it pleased my fancy. When you have the skewer in, always be sure to turn it around. I believe I'm heaven-born after all. The Lord hates a quitter, and so do I. I nearly quit myself, once; eh, Rajah, old top? But I made them come to me. That's the milk in the cocoanut, the curry on the rice. They almost had me. Two rupees! It truly is a great world."

"Jah, jah, jah! Jah—jah—jah—ja-a-a-h!" screamed the parrot. "*Chaloo*!"

"Go on! That's the ticket. If I were a praying man, this would be the time for it. Three hundred thousand rupees!" The man looked at the far horizon, as if he would force his gaze beyond, into the delectable land, the Eden out of which he had been driven. "Caviar and truffles, and Romanée Conti, and Partagas!"

"Chicken and curry and Scotch whisky."

"Bah! You've the imagination of a he-goat."

"All right, Sahib."

"James, I owe you three hundred rupees, and I am going to add seven hundred more. We've been fighting this old top for six years together, and you've been a good servant and a good friend; and I'll take you with me as far as this fortune will go, if you say the word."

"Ah, Sahib, I am much sorry. But Delhi calls, and I go. A thousand rupees will make much business for me in the Chandney Chowk."

"Just as you say."

Presently they became purple shades in a brown world.

II

A MAN WITH A PAST

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The moonless Oriental night, spangled with large and brilliant stars, brilliant yet mellow, unlike the crisp scintillating presentment in northern latitudes, might have served as an illustration of an air-tight bowl, flung down relentlessly upon this part of the world. Inside this figurative bowl it was chill, yet the air was stirless. It was without refreshment; it became a labor and not an exhilaration to breath it. A pall of suffocating dust rolled above and about the Irrawaddy flotilla boat which, buffeted by the strong irregular current, strained at its cables, now at the bow, now at the stern, not dissimilar to the last rocking of a deserted swing. This sensation was quite perceptible to the girl who leaned over the bow-rail, her handkerchief pressed to her nose, and gazed interestedly at the steep bank, up and down which the sweating coolies swarmed like Gargantuan rats. They clawed and scrambled up and slid and shuffled down; and always the bank threatened to slip and carry them all into the swirling murk below. A dozen torches were stuck into the ground above the crumbling ledge; she saw the flames as one sees a burning match cupped in a smoker's hands, shedding light upon nothing save that which stands immediately behind it.

She choked a little. Her eyes smarted. Her lips were slightly cracked, and cold-cream seemed only to provide a

surer resting place for the impalpable dust. It had penetrated her clothes; it had percolated through wool and linen and silk, intimately, until three baths a day had become a welcome routine, providing it was possible to obtain water. Water. Her tongue ran across her lips. Oh, for a drink from the old cold pure spring at home! Tea, coffee, and bottled soda; nothing that ever touched the thirsty spots in her throat.

She looked up at the stars and they looked down upon her, but what she asked they could not, would not, answer. Night after night she had asked, and night after night they had only twinkled as of old. She had traveled now for four months, and still the doubt beset her. It was to be a leap in the dark, with no one to tell her what was on the other side. But why this insistent doubt? Why could she not take the leap gladly, as a woman should who had given the affirmative to a man? With him she was certain that she loved him, away from him she did not know what sentiment really abided in her heart. She was wise enough to realize that something was wrong; and there were but three months between her and the inevitable decision. Never before had she known other than momentary indecision; and it irked her to find that her clarity of vision was fallible and human like the rest of her. The truth was, she didn't know her mind. She shrugged, and the movement stirred the dust that had gathered upon her shoulders.

What a dust-ridden, poverty-ridden, plague-ridden world she had seen! Ignorance wedded to superstition, yet waited upon by mystery and romance and incomparable beauty. As the Occidental thought rarely finds analysis in the Oriental

mind, so her mind could not gather and understand this amalgamation of art and ignorance. She forgot that another race of men had built those palaces and temples and forts and tombs, and that they had vanished as the Greeks and Romans have vanished, leaving only empty spaces behind, which the surviving tribes neither fill nor comprehend.

"A rare old lot of dust; eh, Miss Chetwood? I wish we could travel by night, but you can't trust this blooming old Irrawaddy after sundown. Charts are so much waste-paper. You just have to know the old lady. Bars rise in a night, shift this side and that. But the days are all right. No dust when you get in mid-stream. What?"

"I never cease wondering how those poor coolies can carry those heavy rice-bags," she replied to the purser.

"Oh, they are used to it," carelessly.

The great gray stack of paddy-bags seemed, in the eyes of the girl, fairly to melt away.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the purser. "There's Parrot & Co.!" He laughed and pointed toward one of the torches.

"Parrot & Co.? I do not understand."

"That big blond chap behind the fourth torch. Yes, there. Sometime I'll tell you about him. Picturesque duffer."

She could have shrieked aloud, but all she did was to draw in her breath with a gasp that went so deep it gave her heart a twinge. Her fingers tightened upon the teak-rail. Suddenly she knew, and was ashamed of her weakness. It was simply a remarkable likeness, nothing more than that; it could not possibly be anything more. Still, a ghost could not have startled her as this living man had done.

"Who is he?"

"A chap named Warrington. But over here that signifies nothing; might just as well be Jones or Smith or Brown. We call him Parrot & Co., but the riff-raff have another name for him. The Man Who Never Talked of Home. For two or three seasons he's been going up and down the river. Ragged at times, prosperous at others. Lately it's been rags. He's always carrying that Rajputana parrot. You've seen the kind around the palaces and forts: saber-blade wings, long tail-feathers, green and blue and scarlet, and the ugliest little rascals going. This one is trained to do tricks."

"But the man!" impatiently.

He eyed her, mildly surprised. "Oh, he puzzles us all a bit, you know. Well educated; somewhere back a gentleman; from the States. Of course I don't know; something shady, probably. They don't tramp about like this otherwise. For all that, he's rather a decent sort; no bounder like that rotter we left at Mandalay. He never talks about himself. I fancy he's lonesome again."

"Lonesome?"

"It's the way, you know. These poor beggars drop aboard for the night, merely to see a white woman again, to hear decent English, to dress and dine like a human being. They disappear the next day, and often we never see them again."

"What do they do?" The question came to her lips mechanically.

"Paddy-fields. White men are needed to oversee them. And then, there's the railway, and there's the new oil-country north of Prome. You'll see the wells to-morrow.

Rather fancy this Warrington chap has been working along the new pipelines. They're running them down to Rangoon. Well, there goes the last bag. Will you excuse me? The lading bills, you know. If he's with us tomorrow, I'll have him put the parrot through its turns. An amusing little beggar."

"Why not introduce him to me?"

"Beg pardon?"

"I'm not afraid," quietly.

"By Jove, no! But this is rather difficult, you know. If he shouldn't turn out right..." with commendable hesitance.

"I'll take all the responsibility. It's a whim."

"Well, you American girls are the eighth wonder of the world." The purser was distinctly annoyed. "And it may be an impertinence on my part, but I never yet saw an American woman who would accept advice or act upon it."

"Thanks. What would you advise?" with dangerous sweetness.

"Not to meet this man. It's irregular. I know nothing about him. If you had a father or a brother on board...."

"Or even a husband!" laughing.

"There you are!" resignedly. "You laugh. You women go everywhere, and half the time unprotected."

"Never quite unprotected. We never venture beyond the call of gentlemen."

"That is true," brightening. "You insist on meeting this chap?"

"I do not insist; only, I am bored, and he might interest me for an hour." She added: "Besides, it may annoy the others."

The purser grinned reluctantly. "You and the colonel don't get on. Well, I'll introduce this chap at dinner. If I don't....

"I am fully capable of speaking to him without any introduction whatever." She laughed again. "It will be very kind of you."

When he had gone she mused over this impulse so alien to her character. An absolute stranger, a man with a past, perhaps a fugitive from justice; and because he looked like Arthur Ellison, she was seeking his acquaintance. Something, then, could break through her reserve and aloofness? She had traveled from San Francisco to Colombo, unattended save by an elderly maiden who had risen by gradual stages from nurse to companion, but who could not be made to remember that she was no longer a nurse. In all these four months Elsa had not made half a dozen acquaintances, and of these she had not sought one. Yet, she was asking to meet a stranger whose only recommendation was a singular likeness to another man. The purser was right. It was very irregular.

"Parrot & Co.!" she murmured. She searched among the phantoms moving to and fro upon the ledge; but the man with the cage was gone. It was really uncanny.

She dropped her arms from the rail and went to her stateroom and dressed for dinner. She did not give her toilet any particular care. There was no thought of conquest, no thought of dazzling the man in khaki. It was the indolence and carelessness of the East, where clothes become only necessities and are no longer the essentials of adornment.

Elsa Chetwood was twenty-five, lithely built, outwardly reposeful, but dynamic within. Education, environment and