

## *Part One: The Tiger-Man*

### I

“So my father isn’t here, John?”

“No, Miss Grace. The doctor was called away by telephone. He should be back soon, although he’s already been gone for two hours. The matter must be important, that’s for sure.”

The young woman gave a slight shrug of the shoulders, signifying her annoyance at the thought that her father, summoned by the Metropolitan Police, might miss the little party she had organized that day in honor of her birthday and her return from France.

Grace Palmer had, in fact, turned 18 that very morning. If her delicate and divinely pretty face gave scant evidence of that age, her robust, supple and well-proportioned figure, practiced in many sports, was suggestive of three years more. She had come home after spending two years in France, studying at medical school—an opportunity opened up for her by her father’s name.

Sir Eric Palmer had a worldwide reputation, not only because his abilities as a doctor had advertised themselves in marvelous cures, but because numerous complicated police cases owed their elucidation to him. Much like Doctor Watson, the friend of the great Sherlock Holmes, he had begun by collaborating with two or three notable detectives. Then, his own methods being in flagrant contradiction to those of the police, he had undertaken to interest himself personally, working alone on several mysterious cases in which he had succeeded where others had failed.

Thanks to the light cast by this profound psychologist and savant, the most surprising results had been obtained. Doctor Palmer had solved the so-called Mystery of the Tower of London, the Theft of the Royal Necklace, the Assault on the Bank of England, the Case of the Hyde Park Strangler and many others. He was held in great esteem at Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, as he did not draw a salary from the Metropolitan Police and did not wish to do any disservice to professional detectives, he was only called upon when situations became desperate. Tall, and of Herculean build, he fixed his square jaw in a purposeful manner—a fine specimen of the Anglo-Saxon type. When his steely blue eyes searched the inmost depths of the most hardened criminal, the latter, unable to resist, usually ended up yielding to that persuasive and implacable force.

However, despite his proven passion for the solution of mysteries, Sir Eric often manifested a desire for retreat. Barely 50 years old, he was already dreaming of a little house in a forgotten corner of Cornwall. He harbored a nostalgic desire to retire with his beloved collections, forgetting all about crimes and criminals. He would take care of his garden, fish, and—above all—devote himself to the happiness of his daughter, his dear little Grace. It could not be long before she got married and had adorable children, which he would take care to fashion in his own honest and loyal image. From time to time, his older son, a lieutenant in the Bengal Lancers, would come to stay with him for a few months, then return to the colony where he intended to build a career.

The doctor had confided his intention to several of his friends. In a letter that was already written, he had even announced his decision to the Metropolitan Police, although that letter was still in his drawer when the telephone call from Scotland Yard summoned him urgently, with news of a sensational affair. He had forgotten his retirement plans immediately. Less than a quarter of an hour afterwards, he was seated in a large armchair listening attentively to Sir Harold Nimbly, the Police Commissioner.

The honorable functionary read him some singular cablegrams from the Indian government. They called attention to disconcerting and mysterious events in Benares, the holy city of Bengal. The local police declared themselves utterly incapable of getting to the bottom of them and asked, with all possible urgency, for the assistance of the Metropolitan Police. The question must have been exceedingly interesting because, two hours later, Doctor Palmer was still sitting in the same armchair, listening attentively to his interlocutor—who was giving him elaborate instruction on the subjects of Indian religion and fanaticism.

In point of fact, Nimbly’s words were unnecessary, for the obliging detective had no need of this information. Having spent many years in the country in question, he had more confidence in his own personal observations—but Palmer’s custom was to avoid contradicting people, and although he said very little he was thinking hard.

Grace had invited a few friends to lunch to celebrate her birthday. She had been out all morning, as usual, and was now, with John's aid, setting the table where the most uninhibited gaiety would soon reign. The slamming of the house door informed her that her father had returned. His worried expression immediately informed her that he had something serious on his mind. She accompanied him into his office, leaning affectionately on his arm. There she charged the doctor's favorite pipe and held it out to him, along with a match.

To her great surprise, the distinguished voluntary colleague of the Home Office refused the pipe and the match. Then, sitting his daughter down on his knee, he said with a certain sadness: "My dear Grace, you'll have to leave this evening to go stay with your Aunt Molly in Plymouth. I have to undertake an important mission abroad, and I'll be taking John with me."

The young woman started slightly. Putting her arms around her father's neck and her head on his shoulder, she adopted a coaxing tone. "This business must be very important," she suggested, "if my dear father has already forgotten the conversation he had with his dear daughter yesterday evening." When the doctor made no reply, she added, with a delightful pout: "Doctor Palmer decided to sever his ties with all lawyers, coroners, sheriffs and so on, to forget the way to Scotland Yard forever, and to take the train to Cornwall with his dear Grace!"

"That was indeed my plan, my dear child," he said. "I have here, in this drawer, a letter to the Metropolitan Police, telling them of my decision to..."

"To remain at their disposal permanently! Oh, Dad, your decision not to get involved in further police matters is somewhat reminiscent of a drunkard's promises, which are incapable of holding up in confrontation with a glass of vintage wine or a pint of regal stout."

"My dear Grace, it's a matter that is so very extraordinary..."

"I'm not blaming you, Papa. On the contrary—I only want you remember the promise you made yesterday evening not to leave me again."

"But..."

"There is no but! Doctor Palmer is as good as his word. If you're leaving, I'm leaving."

"That's impossible!"

"You've taught me to regard that word as devoid of meaning, and unworthy of an Englishman. Besides, you've acknowledged my flair for police work several times over, adding—not without a certain pride—that I was born to be a detective. Let's see, father—what's this about?"

The doctor ended up smiling. Grace had an answer for everything. He took some sheets of paper from his pocket and gave them to his daughter. "These are copies of cablegrams received by the India Office, the Lord Chancellor and Scotland Yard. I wouldn't be displeased to know what you think of them."

The young woman, suddenly becoming serious, read the documents attentively twice over. During this time, Sir Eric Palmer finally lit his pipe and lost himself in contemplation, drawing sensuously upon the ancient companion of his hours of perplexity.

"There's no other solution," she said, abruptly. "We'll have to go out there. Such a sequence of events is genuinely worrying in a land of fanaticism, especially in the holy city of Benares. Are the occurrences the work of Hindu agitators, or are they the result of dangerous doctrines spread by the agents of a revolutionary power dreaming of nothing but murder and pillage? In either case, the science and psychology of Eric Palmer are needed. When do we leave?"

"This very day, my child."

"It's understood, then that I'm going with you?" Grace did not wait for her father's reply; she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him ardently. Then, becoming suddenly serious, she declared: "I'll send my friends away as soon as they arrive. I'll tell them we're going to India."

"Detectives don't do that, girl. No one must suspect our important mission. In order not to attract attention, welcome all the charming young ladies. I'll lunch with you. So far as anyone knows, we're going to Cornwall. In reality, we must get to Croydon aerodrome at five, so that we can fly to Paris in time to take the 10:30 train to Marseilles. There, we'll embark for Colombo. A plane will take us to Calcutta, and we'll go from there to Benares by train. We'll be there in a fortnight or thereabouts."

"Shall we see Edward in Calcutta?"

"No, we shan't see your brother. My presence in India must remain secret until I'm told otherwise."

"Very well, father, I'll get everything ready. Do you need John?"

"Yes, send him to me. I've a few instructions to give him."

A minute later, John joined his master. The gentleman detective announced to him coolly, without going into detail, that he would be leaving for a long journey. Palmer did not even tell the servant where he

would be taking him. That information was of little importance to the brave fellow, who was ever ready to follow his master, even into Hell.

John was a fine "lad" of some 25 years. His father had been Doctor Palmer's foster-brother; the doctor had shown such benevolence to the latter's numerous family when it was suddenly deprived of its head that any of them would have cheerfully given his life for their benefactor. John was the most faithful of servants; highly intelligent, as cunning as a monkey and endowed with a strong sense of purpose, he had rendered sterling service to the amateur detective. He listened religiously to all the doctor's orders, and left to execute them without saying a word.

Having lit his pipe again, the doctor began making preparations for his journey, all the while keeping an eye on the cablegrams. One sentence, in particular, intrigued him:

*A supernatural individual supposedly brought up in the temple of Kali could be dangerous if exploited by fanatics.*

His knowledge of Indian affairs inclined him to believe that the incidents would not be isolated.

Meanwhile, a few thousand miles away, the events that had awakened disquiet in Scotland Yard were unfolding. When it is midday in London, 10 p.m. is sounding in Benares. That evening, the festival of the goddess Kali was being celebrated.

In Benares, the holy city, every religious festival takes on enormous significance, most of all the *Durga-puja*,<sup>i</sup> the festival of Kali the Black, whose respect is proportional to the dread that she evokes. Is she not the goddess of the inferno, the destructive force of the Brahmanic pantheon?

The delirious crowd was stampeding along the banks of the sacred Ganges. Myriads of torches and lanterns illuminated the diverse and agitated population, as well as various river-craft in emblematic guise. Suddenly, rockets, skybursts and serpentine fireworks sprang forth from every direction, while the fires of Bengal animated the strange panorama with their bloody glare. Everything was on fire: the city, the people, the waves and the sky itself.

In the midst of that radiance, *bayaderes*<sup>ii</sup> performed their most skillful dances on great biremes, in front of the herd of spectators. On others, young children possessed by the goddess or drunk on *arak*<sup>iii</sup> howled holy rhapsodies. Further away, skillfully made-up actors underwent inexplicable contortions. More distant still, bizarre orchestras led a diabolical racket while smoking altars dispersed an odor of melted butter. Brahmans performed their rites in diverse chapels, droning litanies. The entire populace was singing or wandering around in an intoxication of prayer and joy.

Suddenly, cries were heard. There was a new intoxication of terror. Men, women and children were running, jostling one another. Some were falling to the ground, as if overwhelmed and dying of fright. Others, howling and wild-eyed, were trampling them underfoot.

A tall and supremely handsome man—a demigod, rather—was walking through the crowd, laughing at the alarm that he produced. His legs moved freely beneath loose-hanging linen, gathered at the waist and tied in front, but the upper part of his athletic body was naked. One strange detail: his back was marked with light brown stripes, somewhat reminiscent of those on a tiger's skin.

The man was not the cause of the terror; it was generated by the distressing sight of his animal companions, two regal tigers in all their splendor, in the prime of their savage beauty. The strange individual drew them along, holding them securely by the scruff of the neck, and the terrible carnivores made not the slightest attempt to flee. They went with their bizarre conductor in a docile fashion as he walked along the bank of the Ganges toward the jungle.

This terrifying apparition, in the bloody glare of the fires of Bengal, amid the frightened cries of the prostrated crowd, already resigned to await death as a punishment for their sins, was accompanied by these words, repeated in an extended murmur:

"Rudra the man-eater!"

"Durgane the crusher!"

"It's him... *him! The son of Kali!*"

English patrols were running around, exchanging information. The man and his ferocious companions had disappeared, and none of the natives could—or would—tell them anything about him.

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<sup>i</sup> Féval *films* has *Dourga-ponjah*, although the “n” is presumably a misprinted “u” (the original version of the story was probably a handwritten manuscript recorded in haste). The *Durga-puja* lasts for nine days, around the beginning of October, and involves a considerable amount of extravagant merrymaking. Durga “the Inaccessible,” like Kali “the Black” and Chandi “the Fierce,” is one of the malignant forms of the Hindu mother goddess whose milder manifestations include Devi and Parvati.

<sup>ii</sup> A *bayadere* is a temple dancer, although the term eventually broadened out to encompass any singer/dancer working in a similar style.

<sup>iii</sup> Féval *films* adds his own parenthetical note identifying *arak*—which he renders as “*arrack*”—as *eau-de-vie*. In its narrowest definition, it is distilled from rum and flavored with local fruits, but the term was used much more generally in British India to refer to any kind of hard liquor.