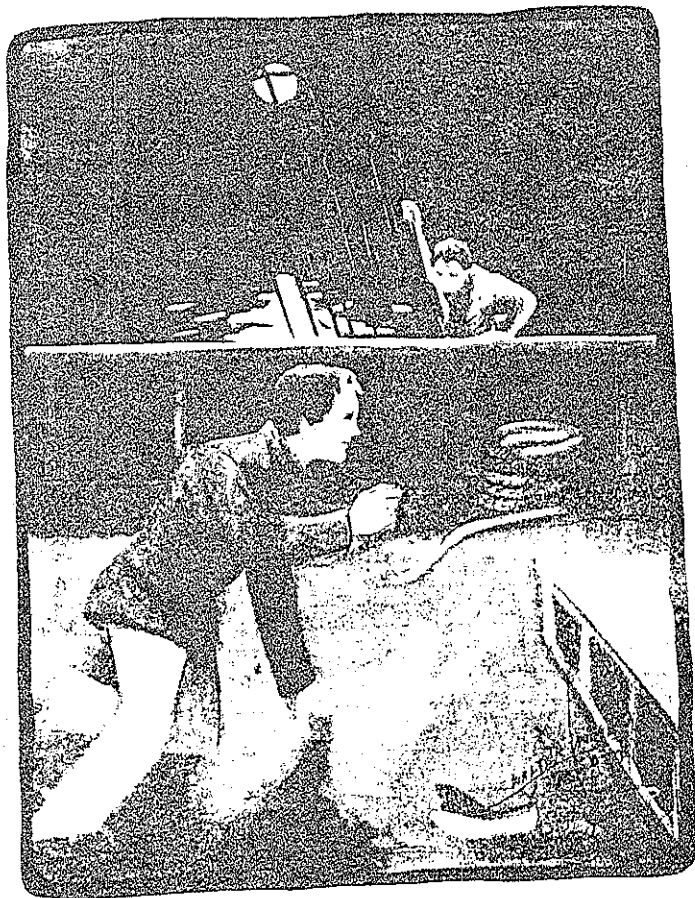


Four O'Clock
Veronica Haskelle



Quiet, Sah'bi His-s-st!"

See "Veronica Haskelle"

It was a bright moonlight evening and so warm that our men lay about the deck and in groups with hardly any covering. I think I never saw so perfectly clear and brilliant a night. Some of the officers were reading by the light of the moon, and the ocean, so far as the eye could sketch, was a glittering mirror without a single ripple or wave. The crew were collected in small parties about the fore-castle and main deck endeavoring to while away the few remaining sultry hours of Indian harbor existence with their favorite sea songs and "fo'cas'ic yarns," the officers were walking about the quarter deck smoking and conversing and occasionally extending their promenade so far as to listen to the stories of the mess.

Over beyond the shimmering harbor the white moonbeams were playing on the sands and stranded shipping and glistening on the low roofs and white walls of fever-stricken Bombay.

I was standing on the capstan with a small night glass in my hand looking landward, with a last mute prayer on my lips for the dying thousands there. In the distance, a yellow flame burned steadily in the beautiful garden on the highest point of Malabar Hill, where the awful charnel towers of silence fed their reeking vultures, and through the rust-eaten gratings into the dark, loathsome pits below rattled the bones of dead men.

Unremittingly the sickly tongue of fire reached upward and lapped the plague-laden air with a sluggish, fendish gusto. It burned softly, I knew, with an oily gurgle, like the departing souls of dying men.

A cloud flitted across the face of the moon, a little wandering thing, with neither consort nor vastness, but of wonderful opaqueness.

Through the motionless atmosphere it slowly wafted onward, and when it had again-cleared away I still stood erect upon the capstan, but I had turned my face from the ghostly spires of Bombay to the wild, demonic countenance of a man peering sinisterly at me from over the blackened side of the ship. Only the matted head protruded above the bulwark, but it was enough! In the full,

sensual lips, broad, mahogany-hued face, and eyes burning into my very being like the living orbs of a wildcat at bay, I recognized the Parsee, a native of Bomby fresh from the deadly plague! With a stifled cry I lost my balance and fell to the deck with a sudden thud that startled the officers on the quarter.

"Quiet, Sah'b! His-s-st!"

A long black arm shot over the rail and clutched tenaciously at a loosened coil of rope. I saw a pair of slender, sloping shoulders dripping with water follow, and a horrid vision of swollen buboes and decomposed blood and flesh rose before me.

"Quiet, Sah'b, for the sake of Zarathustra make no outcry! May your infidel God forever blaspheme me if I be unclean! The pest has not scathed me, praised be the teachings of Zend-Avesta, and for long hours I have been patiently waiting over the side of the ship, Sah'b."

The voice of the daring Parsee was neither harsh nor low, more like the tinkling of a mellow bell, and thrilled me with an exquisite sense of momentary trustfulness.

"Great God! Begone!" I cried hoarsely, staggering to my feet and instinctively drawing back. "Why have you come hither with your accursed taint? They will shoot you like a pig!"

The boy's face, for he scarcely conformed to the description of a man, underwent a startling transformation. With a low sob of anguish he prostrated himself in the shadow of the bulwark.

"Sah'b, Sah'b, I am clean! Listen! Would you cast your life away to-night? Would you gorge the vultures on the height of dakhma to-morrow? Then mark you the message I have borne across the bay!"

The broad tarpaulin that had been stretched during the hot day as a protection from the boiling sun now began to envelop us in its heavy shadow.

"Your life is not worth a mango skin unless you heed me," he continued with suppressed excitement. "The dasturs seek your blasphemous soul, even the mobeds, and before sunrise you are destined to die! Mistress sends you warning. Take heed that you trust not to the fancied security of a sailor crew! None but mistress knows, Sah'b, even the behdin remain silent."



"I remembered the Queen's ball"

FOUR O'CLOCK
March 1900

CLOCK

"And why—why—" I whispered eagerly, almost fiercely, then paused.

"You know," replied the Parsee, insinuatingly, divining my interrogation. "Mistress knows: she has seen your face before and will save you from the evil spirits of Nasus."

"Who is this obliging 'mistress' who has seen my bonny face and is so solicitous to deliver me from the ugly forked toil of a devil incarnate?"

"Veronica Haskelle, Sah'b."

"What? The daughter of Jamsetji Haskelle, Zarathustra's own anointed, he who wears the sacred girdle of the elective committee?"

"His niece, Sah'b, and c'en he, Sagdad pardon, is the one who recks your soul as in the hell fires of Nasus to-night."

Then it all came to me like the lightning flight of a falling star. My oldtime Calcutta enemy still fostered the smoldering fires of malice and hatred, and the petty, though in his sight, unpardonable offense I had unwittingly committed while sojourning on the low banks of the Ganges was to be retaliated in the form of an ignominious death.

Why had I penned that luckless arraignment of the old Persian ancestors of the modern Zarathustra fanatics to the open press of India?

I laughed aloud. The early morning breeze would carry us far out into the open sea: away toward the free, untainted air of America, and old Jamsetji would be left behind pacing the white sands, wringing his hands and cursing at his ill luck. How ridiculous the ideal!

"Sah'b is an unbeliever, an infidel!" hissed the Indian lad, clutching one hand over his bosom, while with the other he flung back the disheveled mass of damp hair, displaying through the great black eyes the terrible passion rampant in his tropical blood. "Sah'b is an infidel: what has he in common with the true faith? The vultures will tear his vitals, read his heart and steep their wings in the filthy lungs that pollute the air of dakhma tower, and the dogs will bark at his bleached bones rattling down into the pit! He is not a man: a vermin who spurns c'en the oracles of Heaven. Baa, Sah'b!"

FOUR O'CLOCK

Before I could frustrate his attempt or get an apologetic word in edgewise, he plunged over the side, only his dark head appearing above the smooth surface of the moonlit bay as he struck boldly out with mighty sweeps of his long arms toward the distant shore.

With a vague foreboding at heart and a momentary thought of my strange friend and "guardian angel," Veronica Haskelle, the rich-blooded houri, I repossessed myself of the discarded nightglass and walked toward the quarter-deck.

I had taken three steps, barely four, when I became conscious of a soft patter behind me. Leaping quickly to one side I faced about just in season to encounter a terrible blow full in the breast from some unseen object. I staggered backward and attempted to cry out, but something soft and hot clutched my throat and the noise died away in a gurgle. A low, snake-like hiss sounded in my ears and a world of chaos encompassed me.

Where was I? What terrible catastrophe had occurred? A stinging pain crept insidiously up my aching spine to the base of my head: a low quiver, not unlike a gentle electrical shock, seemed rocking my shrunken brain to and fro. Surely it was not the monotonous, rhythmic swish of breaking water under the vessel's bow!

I heard a noise. Possibly I was dreaming, literally dreaming of a nightmare, yet the impression of life and wakefulness was so real, so vivid—all but the enshrouding of that subtle, mysterious influence that held me almost within the realms of unconsciousness.

Did I hear a voice? I strained my dormant nerves to their highest capable tension in anticipation; I was certain—no, it was nothing but the cracking of ropes and standing canvas in the stiff morning gale. The captain has taken advantage of an early breeze, I thought, and we are leaving Bombay. With an effort I raised my dizzy head.

FOUR O'CLOCK

8

expecting to behold a dusky vision of hushed activity— shadowy figures coiling ropes and folding hammocks, an officer or two passing quietly among the men and a dozen or more boys opening the scuppers preparatory to scrubbing off.

What ailed me? Wha—great God, I was not upon the deck of a vessel!

CHANGE

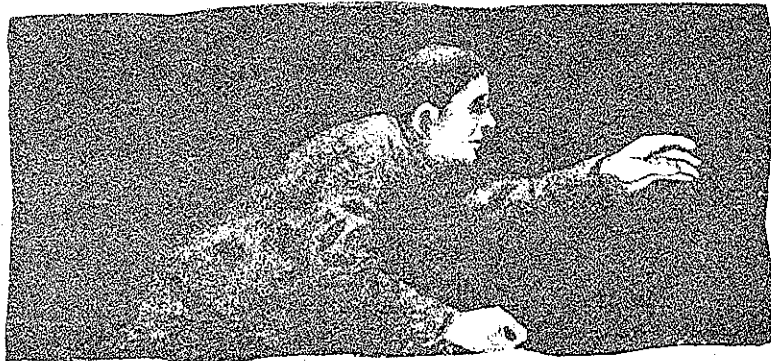
Black, gloomy walls environed me! Blackness everywhere—below, around, above. No. A few stars were twinkling far up in the heavens and a sort of dusky twilight fell upon my upturned face. I tried to penetrate the gloom of the walls, but it was like an inky cloud. Only the top could be discerned, surmounted by two rows of paling with peculiar knobs at the end; barbed iron was my conclusion. I attempted to rise, but something held me back. I could move neither my hands nor feet. Again I turned my face to the floor, and with horror that changed my blood to icewater, discovered that something lay beside me, dark and suspicious. I bent nearer. It was the body of a dead man.

Then the awful truth flashed across me. The Parsee's passionate prophecy had come to pass: I was a victim in the tower of dakhma, Bombay's pestilent charnel-house, bound to the iron gratings, awaiting the coming of death!

For a few minutes succeeding my ghoulish discovery I succumbed to utter despair. My limbs relaxed, my face

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grew cold, clammy, as though already exhausted in the last fleeting throes of death, and I lay as inanimate upon the cruel iron rods as the dead ones about me. But love of life and energy to sustain it will inevitably triumph, and giving a cold shoulder, literally speaking, to my silent neighbor, I deliberated upon my perilous position.

How high was the wall? Ah! that paling. Only a motionless, silent, compassionless row of sleeping vultures, awaiting only the coming of the dawn and the rising sun to begin anew their sickening feast. My stomach grew sick. They were humans, stuffed with human flesh, seeing with the sight of a relentless ogre and living by an instinct borrowed of man. For the first time I smelled a faint, nauseating odor in the atmosphere, floating upward, it seemed to me, from some sickening region below. I thought of the pits.

The stars were falling in the sky and the top of the tower became darker and gloomier in the gathering shades that precluded the coming of morn. From afar off in the citadel's tower the Hindoo gun boomed drowsily over the sleeping town, and, as if in response to its familiar call, a low, croaking cackle passed along the line of somber sentinels. Silence resumed, broken only at intervals by the sound of some poor mortal's picked bones falling through the grating.

I strained and tugged at the invisible bonds that secured me. The exertions were not in vain; they not only proved the truth of my situation as too-evident to be jeered at, but fortified my nerves for the end. Within myself I argued that life was not worth the living and that death ought to be acceptable even in its most hideous form. Theorizing my optimistic view, I came to the final conclusion that I would not exchange places with the happiest monarch on earth.

Notwithstanding my decided determination to make my mental being correspond with the ill-shapen bunk wherein my physical one reclined, I watched with growing nervousness the white streaks of morning brightness as they began to bathe the somber sentinels on the summit of the tower.

Sunrise comes like the bursting of a great bomb in India. It gives no warning to the stranger, but breaks

upon him with a suddenness that is as startling as it is grand. Again the Hindoo gun in the old tower of the citadel boomed forth its daybreak greeting, and I knew that the end was drawing near.

I closed my eyes to conceal the horrible scene that would be unveiled, until I felt the living warmth of the dazzling sunlight as it streamed down into my prison. I realized that the fatal moment was at hand. I heard the exultant croaking of the vultures and confused flapping of lazy wings on the wall. Then, and not until then, did I curse aloud the weakness that held me in fear. I opened my eyes and raised my head. The first object to meet my gaze, because of its immediate proximity, was my silent neighbor. His face was toward me, black, mutilated beyond recognition, the yellow teeth buried half way through his swollen lips, leering at me with one wide-open eye. Others lay about me, but thanks to my heartless murderers, I was lying in a secluded position with the bulk of the dead behind me. Suddenly a roar of wings startled the quiet air, and by a common impulse thousands of the scavengers pitched heavily down from the walls.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Above the tumult rang a clear, piercing voice. My old foe had returned in time to witness the final act of the tragedy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" I reiterated, mockingly.

"What! E'en does Sah'b grow merry in the hour of death? Let the warning of mistress suffice now, and trust yourself in the hands of her servant, else master will spoil our little game of three."

With ecstatic joy I recognized the musical voice of the Parsee lad who had warned me on the bay. He bent over me and in silence severed the bonds. My thankfulness to my unknown preserver was so great that I could only stare up into his brown face with a sort of chaotic expression that must have filled his heart with compassion, for he lifted me tenderly to my benumbed limbs and supported me in expressive silence until I had partially regained my physical equilibrium.

"Hurry, hurry, Sah'bi!" he entreated. "Kick your legs back and forth while I hold you up!"

Then a sudden idea occurred to him. Catching me

about the waist with one of his muscular arms he dragged me between the stripped corpses along the extreme right of the wall. Pausing opposite a narrow casement that had been blocked up years previous he opened a wooden trap that fitted snugly into the iron grating, exposing to view a number of decayed, worm-eaten steps leading down into the apparently bottomless pit.

"Can you creep down, Sah'b?"

I made an effort and cautiously slid over the first three or four steps.

"Be careful," admonished my companion. "Wait: I will strike a light."

The aged trap groaned lustily as it fell back into its accustomed groove. A moment later a tiny flame flickered above my head, and the Parsee lad crept beside me and led the way down into the sepulchral blackness of the pit. It seemed an interminable time before we arrived at the foot of the stairs, but our progress was necessarily slow and cautious, even my guide being uncertain of his next step.

"What is it?" I gasped, with a shudder, when once more we stood together upon firm footing.

"The old entrance of Black Town, Sah'b, used long before the Sepoy mutiny. It threads away out to the esplanade and opens toward the Hindoos and Mohammedans. They carried their dead through it before the great mutiny, but since then none living, to the knowledge of Bom-



"Wait, I will strike a light"

by, have sought to reach the dakhma by this source.

Slowly we passed on beyond the crumbling partitions that separated the choked pits and the tunnel, and over the rotted sluiceways that once carried water to the abandoned tombs. Ever the yellow flare of the Parsec's torch disclosed the wasting walls and the queer little nests in the sides for the "rest of the dead-carriers" on their gloomy journey to the towers of silence.

"The old trail belies its character to-night," I ventured softly.

"Th— Ah, yes, Sah'b! E'en more."

My companion turned to reply, and instantly I observed a sudden change in the dusky, illumined features. The glowing eyes darted beyond me and far down the black passage-way.

"The master! The master!" he gasped. "Look!"

Hardly had the terror-stricken words left his parted lips when a mysterious rumble filled the whole air, and the solid floor trembled beneath our feet. A piercing shriek in my ears seemed to turn my brain dizzy and I sank down upon the dark pavement, with a sudden burning pain in my right breast.

"Shot—Sah'b?"

The dusky face of my guide bent over me, and I caught the faint glint of the torchlight scintillating upon bright steel in his hand.

"Be silent! be dead!"

The blazing brand was hurled far up the passage-way toward the pursuer. It flared up for an instant in a bursting shower of sparks, and then lay only a smoldering point of fire in the center of the vast cavern of gloom.

Ere the last spark had consumed itself a series of terrific explosions reverberated throughout the tunnel with a thunderous roar that was appalling in its force, and for a second time in that brief but eventful period of my existence the senses of life deserted me.

I, Myron Dawson, respected correspondent of the Associated Press, was certainly in a peculiar, if not an embarrassing, predicament. I awoke as if from a refreshing slumber, and, vainly endeavoring to rise above the airy barrier of multi-colored cushions in the midst of which I lay ensconced, marveled at my sudden transition from the gloomy corridor of the tombs of silence to this gorgeous couch. I remembered the deafening explosions in the passage-way, and wondered if old Jamsctji had fallen there at the hand of his servant. My reverie, brief as it was, soon was dispelled by the entrance of a person into the apartment. I heard the rustling of curtains, and then soft footsteps approached me. A moment, and the Parsec lad's dark eyes were gazing down into mine.

"Ah, Sah'b!" he greeted. "Ormuzd be praised: all is well. Mistress is happy—ah—" His eyes glistened. "But she knows not her kin lies stretched out in a rest of the dead-carriers, a seat where once slumbered a chosen priest of the magi long years before the great mutiny."

"My faithful friend!"

I grasped his slender fingers in both my hands; hot tears coursed down my cheeks and dripped upon the silken divan.

"Listen, Sah'b!"

The Indian's voice was full of pathos and eagerness, and his eyes were flashing with a strange fire.

"Don't thank me. She did it all, Sah'b: won the master's confidence and plotted your freedom. Thank her! In only one way can you repay this life-debt—repay her! Sah'b—" (his voice grew stern and thrilled me to the very soul), "if you abuse my confidence, if you repeat to her one word I have said to you, I shall be tempted, e'en on your sick-bed, to end your life with this!"

He exposed the ivory hilt of a knife under his sash.

"She loves me!" I murmured, and a cold chill crept over me. "This southern girl, Veronica Haskelle, has seen me before. Where?"

"In London," was the startling response.

"In London!" I gasped, and in spite of the soft cushions I raised myself to a sitting posture.

"Yes, Sah'b, she told me of it. It was a year ago, at

the jubilee of the Queen's son. You saw her there—you spoke to her—you were introduced to her!"

"And—"

"Wait!" he interposed, with impatient gesture—"under her mother's name, Rosa Debonair!"

No longer could I restrain myself. With an effort that racked my wounded shoulder bitterly, I hurled one of the feathery cushions across the floor.

"Tear down this cursed barrier," I cried. "Bring in Rosa Debonair, as I once knew her, and prove to me that truth is really stranger than fiction."

"Do not traduce this friendly refuge with an impatience so demented, Sah'b, else will the meeting you anticipate be postponed indefinitely."

When alone, with a backward sweep of bygone days came a retrospective view that carried me once more to the strange shores of old England. How vividly and with what pleasant recollections I remembered the Queen's ball in London! I came away, late at night, with a strange vision imprinted upon my heart, and—could it be? Could God, in his magnanimous greatness, bring me again face to face with the counterpart of that vision? Yes—

The curtain parted—slowly the silken loops fell aside and before me stood my beautiful unknown friend, Veronica Haskelle. As such I knew her not. Only in the bewildering mazes of the Queen's waltz did I recognize the slender, graceful figure of the one who had fled for a few brief seasons from the ravishing Indian life to the higher realm of Paris etiquette and London festivity.

"Rosa!" I cried. "Rosa Debonair!"

A rich blush suffused her lovely face, and she paused, doubtfully, tremblingly, just inside the drooping curtains.

"No—N-o," she murmured, "not that; I stole my French mother's name: for what would they have thought at the great jubilee of a-a-an Indian girl?"

"Rosa, you little flirt, you gave me a silly promise that intoxicating night! Has it been forgotten?"

No sound escaped the soft, red lips of the girl.

"Veronica!" I entreated.

And that is how I brought back my sweet little orphan girl. Assate, the Parsee youth, is immensely pleased with American style and Yankeeism, and gives promise of becoming a very good citizen. Incidentally, I might remark, that some sixty-odd years of Jamsetji's hoardings will not come amiss to a struggling correspondent, which may be verified by the opinion of my erstwhile colleagues.

[J. Olivier Carwood