

The NINE LINKNOWN

*A story of Mystery,
Adventure, and The
Lure of the Mystic
East, by the author of
GUNS OF THE GODS™*

A painting of a multi-armed deity, possibly a Hindu god, seated on a throne. The deity is green-skinned and has multiple arms, some holding objects. In the foreground, several people in traditional Indian attire are shown in various states of devotion, including one kneeling and another with arms raised. The background is a hazy, mountainous landscape.

TALBOT
MUNDY

DWIGHT S. COOPER

THE NINE UNKNOWN

BY TALBOT MUNDY

BOBBS-MERRILL

INDIANAPOLIS

1923

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Chapter I.](#)

"I cut throats with an outward thrust!"

[Chapter II.](#)

"Produce but the gold, thou Portuguese!"

[Chapter III.](#)

"Light and longer weapons!"

[Chapter IV.](#)

"Here's your Portuguese!"

[Chapter V.](#)

"The nine's spies are everywhere!"

[Chapter VI.](#)

"They fled before me!"

[Chapter VII.](#)

"Shakesperean homeopathic remedy!"

[Chapter VIII.](#)

"He is very dead!"

[Chapter IX.](#)

"Silence is silent."

[Chapter X.](#)

"Can't hatch a chick from a glass egg."

[Chapter XI.](#)

"Allah! Do I live, and see such sons?"

[Chapter XII.](#)

"I am dead, but the silver cord is not yet cut."

[Chapter XIII.](#)

"I felt the tingle of the magic and fell unresisting."

[Chapter XIV.](#)

"We've got your chief!"

[Chapter XV.](#)

"Abandon can't and cant all ye who enter here!"

[Chapter XVI.](#)

"Sahibs, that is a true speech!"

[Chapter XVII.](#)

"There will be no witnesses—say that and stick to it!"

[Chapter XVIII.](#)

"He has whatever she had!"

[Chapter XIX.](#)

"Once when they who keep the secrets—"

[Chapter XX.](#)

"Nevertheless, I will take my sword with me!"

[Chapter XXI.](#)

"My house is clean again!"

CHAPTER I

"I cut throats with an outward thrust!"

I HAD this story from a dozen people, or thirteen if you count Chullunder Ghose, whose accuracy is frequently perverted. One grain of salt is never enough to add to the fat babu's misstatements, although anyone who for that reason elected to disbelieve him altogether would be just as wide of the mark as the credulous who take what he says at face value. Chullunder Ghose should he accepted warily. But the others are above suspicion, as for instance King, Grim, Ramsden, the Reverend Father Cyprian, and Jeremy Ross, all of whom regard the truth from various points of view as economical.

Chullunder Ghose considers all truth merely relative at best—likes to be thought a liar, since under that cloak he can tell diluted truth unblushing. Consequently he is the only one whose real motive for taking part in this magnificent adventure is not discoverable; he scratches his stomach and gives a different reason every time he is asked, of which the likeliest is this:

"You see, *sahib*, bad luck being habitual is bad enough, but better than absolutely no luck. Consequently I took chances, trembling much, stirring innate sluggishness of disposition with galvanic batteries of optimism, including desire to keep wolf from door of underfed family and dependents."

He certainly took chances, and he appears to have survived them, for I had a letter from him only a week ago begging the favor of a character reference and offering in return to betray trade secrets in the event of his securing the desired employment.

Then there is Leonardo da Gama the Portuguese, who is dead and tells no tales; but his death corroborates some part of what he said to me, for one, and to others as will presently appear. His motive seems to have been mercenary, with the added zest of the scientist in search of a key to secrets, whose

existence he can prove but whose solution has baffled men for generations.

The Reverend Father Cyprian, past eighty and custodian of a library not open to the public, aimed and still aims only at Hindu occultism. He regards it as the machinery of Satan, to be destroyed accordingly, and it was for that reason he gave King, Grim, Ramsden and some others access to books no human eye should otherwise have seen. For Father Cyprian collects books to be burned, not piecemeal but in one eventual holocaust.

Some lay brother peculiarly conscious of a sin appointed Father Cyprian by will, sole trustee of a purchasing fund, hoping thus to rid the world of the key to such evil as the Witch of Endor practised. For half a century Father Cyprian has been acquiring volumes supposed long ago to be extinct, and it was possibly the last phase of his beleaguered pride that he hoped instead of burning them piecemeal to make one bonfire of the lot and go to his Maker directly afterward.

In that case even pride may serve appropriate ends; for if he had burned the books as fast as acquired, King could never have studied them and drawn conclusions. He took King, Grim, Ramsden and certain others into confidence subject to a stipulation; there were and are still said to be nine super-books whose contents total tip the almost absolute of evil. King and his friends might use what Cyprian already had, and might count on his counsel and assistance; but if they should come on any of the nine books, those were to be Cyprian's to be burned along with all the others.

They were not to study the nine books, if obtained, and above all they were not to reveal their contents to any outsider; for Cyprian's purpose was, and is, to abolish the very memory of those books' existence and the deviltry they teach, or are supposed to teach. (For some say they teach wisdom.) But they might make what use they cared to of information picked up on the side, and they were free to deal with individuals as circumstances and their own discretion might dictate. Father Cyprian, in fact, cared and cares not much for consequences. He believes in cutting off the cause, and he is sure those nine books are the key which, if thrown away, will leave the cause of necromancy impossible to rediscover. So much for him.

Jeremy Ross came laughing on the scene, laughed with gay irreverence all through the piece, and still laughs, no more inclined to take life seriously than

when he faced the Turks in the three-day fight at Gaza, sharing one torn blanket with a wounded Turk and destroying his chance of promotion by calling a British colonel "Algy" to his face. On the other hand, he is as unconquerably opportunist as when he tramped Arabia, lost, and survived by means of a reputation for performing miracles.

Jeremy's admitted motive was desire to learn more tricks and their underlying principles. He is convinced that even the "rope trick, so often told of and so invariably unconfirmed, in which a Hindu is supposed to climb a rope into the air and disappear, is simply the result of well-trained ingenuity.

"A chap who knows how can do anything," says Jeremy, and he proposed to learn how all the Indian tricks are done.

The motives he did not confess, but which were just as obvious as the laugh on his lips and the sunburn on his handsome face, were loyalty to Athelstan King and Grim and Ramsden, a kind of irresponsibility that makes him plunge for amusement into every game he sees, and a bedrock willingness to fight every combination of men and circumstances for the right to be his own master. He has no use whatever for orders from "higher up," for swank, eyewash, stilts, inherited nobility, or what is known as statecraft.

"A diplomat's like me," says Jeremy, "only I call mine tricks and he calls his statesmanship."

It was enough that King and Grim had winded the stronghold of secret tyranny. Instantly Jeremy was game to make a pitched fight and a picnic of the business of destroying it; and he was quicker than either of them at penetrating the outer screen of commonplace deception. He got along remarkably well with Father Cyprian, in fact, astonishingly well, all things considered.

James Schuyler Grim is the protagonist of peace where there is no peace. His passion is to introduce two pauses in the strife of men where only one was formerly, and so little by little to give some sort of new millennium a chance. Arch-pragmatist is Grim. He holds men's lives, his own included, as worthless unless at work, and his highest expression of friendship is to pile task on task almost to the breaking point. He, too, resists interference from "higher up," but without Jeremy's turbulence and with much more wisdom—nearly satanic at times; which is one reason why Jeremy does not always

mock him to his face.

Jeremy does mock Athelstan King, because King is of the seventh generation in the British army and respects accordingly the little odds and ends of precedent and custom that to the Australian resemble idol-worship. Jeremy was a trooper. King was a colonel but is now employed by the same multi-millionaire who furnishes supplies for Grim and Ramsden; in fact, he took Jeremy's place, for Jeremy cannot abide the power of purse-strings and would rather juggle by the roadside for his daily bread than yield to any man on the ground of surplus cash.

Jeff Ramsden is another independent, who rather prides himself on being slow of wit and heavy on his feet, whereas he is really a solid thinker, building argument on argument until he is convinced, and setting one foot down before he prospects with the other. He is stronger physically than almost any two normally developed athletes, but it would probably break Jeff Ramsden's heart to lose his comfortable savings, whereas Jeremy loses his last cent as cheerfully as he would win the other man's.

Then there are Narayan Singh, and Ali ben Ali of Siktinderam, soldiers of fortune both, the one a Sikh with pantheistic tendencies and the other a Pathan with seven sons. At any rate, Ali ben Ali is pleased to admit they are his sons, and none denies that he fought and slew the indignant legal owners of the mothers, although there are cynics in the crag-top villages who vow that Ali flatters himself. The mothers' statements (there were seven) made for the most part under duress shortly before death were not considered trustworthy evidence in the land that Ali comes from.

Ali has enemies, but is a man, whatever else; and perhaps the highest compliment ever paid Narayan Singh is that Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam respects him and would think three times before challenging the Sikh to fight, even if a mutual regard for Grim and King did not put quarreling out of the question. They are awfully disrespectful of each other's gods, but came to an early understanding on the basis propounded by Narayan Singh after a night-long argument:

"If your ridiculous Allah objects to my opinions why doesn't he smite me? I challenge him! As for thyself, Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam, thou art worth a dozen Allahs, being less cowardly, more generous, and not afraid to stand up

and be seen!"

"It is a pity about you, Narayan Singh," Ali ben Ali answered nodding tolerantly. "I shall make a friend of you in this world only to see you torn by devils in the next. However, that is Allah's business, who is Lord of Mercies."

"Who is a big joke!" Narayan Singh corrected. "He will turn thee into worms!" warned he of Sikunderam.

"Then I will gnaw the big thing's belly!" said the Sikh.

They agreed to postpone the debate until the next world and to be stout allies in this—a plan which if followed universally would abolish a deal of waste of time.

"For if I slew you, or you slew me," said Ali ben Ali, "there would only be half our manhood left!"

And that was a point on which they could agree at once, for neither of them had a poor opinion of himself, any more than either cared a rap for Grin's and King's idealism. What they chose to follow were the men, they being men, and like attracting if not like at least its tribute.

Burt they were also attracted as much as Chullunder Ghose was by the glamour of the unknown quantity and the lure of fabled treasure; the babu being all acute imagination and alarm, they all adventurous.

Surely ancient sciences meant nothing to them; yet it was pursuit of ancient science and of nothing else that brought the twelve together, and that might have added the thirteenth if the number thirteen had not justified its reputation by proving fatal to da Gama the Portuguese. And that was no pity, but for scientific reasons.

He drank too frequently and inexpensively, and washed too sparingly to be good company. His appetite in all ways was a glutton's, drink included, and he took his erudition as he did champagne or beer or curried anchovies, in gulps.

Nor was he nice to look at—saffron, under shiny black hair, with a pair of coal-black eyes whose whites were yellow and red with long debauch—short—stout—asthmatic—dressed always in rusty black broadcloth and occasionally white drill pants, with black boots tied with broken laces. His

face was seamed and lined with tales untenable and knowledge unfit to be known. His finger-ends were swollen and his nails close-bitten. His shirt, which might have been a petticoat for stripe and color, bulged through the gap between his pants and vest, increasingly untidy as the day progressed, and he hitched his pants at intervals. He had a little, black imperial beard that only half-concealed a chin cloven not by nature but by some man's weapon. The cleft had the effect of making him look good-humored for a second when he smiled. The smile began with a sneer malignantly, passed with a peculiar melting moment through an actually pathetic phase, and ended cynically, showing yellow eye-teeth. He had no idea whatever of making himself pleasant—would have scorned himself, in fact, for the attempt if he had ever tried it—and yet he blamed the world and did the world all the injury he could for refusing to love him. He always wore a round black hat like an English clergyman's, and never took it off, even indoors, until he was seated, when he held it rolled up as if he kept his thoughts in it and was afraid of spilling them.

It was Chullunder Ghose who decoyed him into the office in the side-street off the Chandni Chowk, which is the famous Street of the Silversmiths in Delhi, and a good street if you know what goodness in a street consists of. Men—all manner of men—go by.

They had an office in a side-street, one flight up over a Maharatta drug-store, with the name "Grim, Ramsden and Ross" on a brass plate on the door. The next-door building was a warehouse for hides, hair, tallow, gum, turmeric and vicious politics, through the midst of which they had access to a back stairs by arrangement. But the front stairway by which you reached their office was a narrow, steep affair between two buildings, littered with fruit-peel and cigarette ends, and always crowded with folk who used it as a sort of covered grandstand from which to watch the street or merely to sit and think, supposing that anybody *could* think in all that noise.

You had to pick your way up-stairs gingerly, but going down was easier, because if you placed your foot flat against the back of a man's head, and shoved suddenly, he would topple forward and carry a whole row down with him, due to the fact that they sat cross-legged and not with their feet on the step below as Europeans would.

Existence there would have been precarious, but for Narayan Singh, Ali ben Ali and Chullunder Ghose—the first two truculent and the third a diplomat. It is fashionable nowadays to show contempt for Westerners by pushing them off the sidewalk and making remarks in babu English that challenge reprisals; so that, even though King, Grim and Ramsden can disguise themselves and pass for natives of the East, and Jeremy in plain clothes can make an Arab think he is an Arab in disguise, the firm's name on the brass plate would have been enough to start trouble, if it had not been so obvious that trouble would include a Sikh dagger, an Afghan *tulwar*, and the adder's tongue of the least compunctious babu in all India.

It was the babu's tongue that drew da Gama past the door. He was afraid of it, in the same way that some politicians are afraid of newspapers, and it may be that he hoped to murder the babu as the simplest road to silence. All are agreed he was surprised and angry when Narayan Singh, swaggering down the narrow passage, bunted into him as he stood hesitating and, picking a quarrel on the instant, shoved him backward through the office door. Inside he found himself confronted by the whole party, for Narayan Singh followed him through and locked the door at his back.

He stood at bay, in silence, for a minute, showing his yellow teeth, his hands making the beginnings of a move toward his pockets and repeatedly refraining. So Ali ben Ali strode up to him and, taking him in one prodigious left arm, searched him for weapons. He pulled out a long knife and a blackjack, exposed them, grinning hugely, in the palm of his right hand and returned them to their owner. There was no pistol. Then he pushed the Portuguese toward the office stool, which was the only seat unoccupied. Da Gama sat on it, putting his heels on the rungs, with his toes turned outward, whereafter he removed his round, black hat and rolled it.

The others sat around the wall on bentwood chairs, or otherwise as temperament dictated, all except Father Cyprian, who had been accorded the desk and revolving chair in deference to age. Cyprian held the desk-lid raised, but lowered it suddenly, and at the noise da Gama started, stared a second, and then swore in Portuguese between his teeth. None in the room understood Portuguese, unless possibly the priest.

"You recognize me, I believe?" piped Cyprian, almost falsetto, his little

bright eyes gleaming through the wrinkles and his mobile lips spreading and spreading away into a smile that advertised amusement and was certainly a mask.

He has a face like a friendly gargoyle, full of human understanding and a sort of merry disdain that goes with it.

"Keep to your trade of mumbling Mass! What do these others want?" the Portuguese demanded rudely. "I have nothing to do with priests!"

His low-pitched asthmatic voice was an absolute contrast to the other's. So was his surliness. There was no connecting link between them but that one, swift, momentary cloven lapse from hardness as the Portuguese's face changed from one scowl to the next. But Cyprian recognized that and was swift, before the human feeling faded:

"My friend," he said, "it was you who tried to steal my library, and I have never sought to have you punished, for I know the strength of the temptation —"

"You are a miser with your books—a dog in a manger!" the Portuguese retorted. "You break your own law, which says you shall not hide light under a bushel!"

"It is darkness that hides!" the priest answered with another of his expansive smiles. "It was you, my friend, who tried to murder me—a sin from which I only saved you by being one inch to the eastward of your bullet's course."

"You lie like any other priest!" da Gama growled.

"No, no. Not all of us are rash. In fact, we—we all of us are—are occasionally careful. Is this not the pistol that you tried to shoot me with?"

He raised the lid of the desk again and drew out a surprising thing born of the law against carrying firearms. It was a pistol built of springs and teak-wood, nearly as clumsy as the old museum holster pieces but as able as a cobra to do murder at close range. Da Gama was silent.

"My friend, I have not even blamed you," the priest went on, his thin voice squeaking with the rust of years. "I have pitied you, and as for me you are forgiven. But there are consequences."

"What?" the Portuguese demanded, betraying, between scorn and anger, once

again that moment of human feeling.

"Something is required of him to whom so much has been forgiven," the priest answered firmly.

"What?" the Portuguese repeated.

Jeremy reached for the pistol and began fooling with the thing, as pleased with its mechanism as he was impatient of preliminaries. Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam drew out his own long knife and thumbed its cutting edge suggestively.

"You for twenty-five, and I for fifty years have sought the same thing," the priest said, speaking slowly. "You have taken one line, I the other. Mine is best, and now you must follow mine, my friend—"

"For I cut throats with an outward thrust," Ali ben Ali interrupted. "The point goes in across the wind-pipe and the knife's heel separates the neck-bones."

It was horribly well spoken. Ali ben Ali failed in his youth for a Bachelor's Degree but passed in rhetoric. Da Gama shuddered.

"Peace!" commanded Cyprian.

"For the present," assented he of Sikunderam, stowing the knife away with its hilt projecting. For religious reasons he was careful not to show the alien priest too much respect.

"What do you want?" da Gama asked.

Father Cyprian reached into his desk and produced a little chamois-leather bag. Opening that he poured about thirty gold coins into his hand and held it out toward the Portuguese, whose eyes changed expression suddenly.

"The balance of those," said Cyprian, "and the nine books. You may have as much of the money as you can use, my friend, and you may have my share too, for I need none of it. But the books must be mine to do as I choose with."

Da Gama went through all the motions of his smile and ended on the usual sneer. "No doubt! If you have the books you will need no money."

"I shall do as I please," the priest answered, not choosing to argue that point. "Do you know whence these came? Look at them."

He poured the coins into da Gama's open hand, and the Portuguese's dark

eyes seemed to take fire from behind. None was of more recent date than a thousand years B.C., and one or two were of such soft gold that all the impression had been rubbed and squeezed away.

"The little bag—you know the little bag?" the priest asked, handing him that too. "You recognize it? Yes? You left that, you remember, with the money in it when you tried to shoot me, and my servant pulled your coat off. He would have captured you, but—"

Da Gama smiled again, beginning and ending meanly, on a note of insolence, but passing inevitably through that momentary human stage.

"But never mind," Cyprian went on. "You may have them back, except the gun. My servant shall bring your coat. You have been forgiven. But where did you get that money? I must know."

"Yes, we must all know that," agreed Ali ben Ali's deep voice, and the Northerner drew his knife again, thumbing its edge with a kind of professorial appreciation.

Grim, dressed as a Punjabi, had sat watching da Gama's face. Now he saw fit to betray that really it was he who was in charge of the proceedings.

"You understand?" he asked. "All that Father Cyprian asks for is the books."

"And you?" da Gama demanded, sneering again. It seemed to be his policy to get on terms with strangers by provoking. "You care only for money?"

Grim dug into the folds of his loose upper garment and produced a telegram from his employer in New York.

INVESTIGATE AND REPORT ON PERPETUAL DISAPPEARANCE OF SPECIE IN INDIA. MELDRUM STRANGE.

He passed it to da Gama, who read it and cocked one eyebrow:

"Your alibi?" he suggested, pronouncing the word as if it were Portuguese, which for undiscoverable reasons made it more offensive.

Grim ignored that.

"We want to discover what has happened to the billions of dollars worth of gold and silver that has been won from the earth during the thousands of years since mining was first commenced. The cash in circulation doesn't

account for one per cent. of it. Where is the rest?" he explained.

"What if you find it?" asked da Gama.

"If you help, you may have as much of it as you can use," Cyprian interposed.

"Father Cyprian wants the nine books," Grim repeated. "He wants to destroy the knowledge that has enabled certain unknown men for thousands of years to drain the world of its supply of gold and silver. I wish to discover where the gold and silver is. You may have enough of it if your help amounts to anything."

"I also desire to know where the gold and silver is!" remarked Ali ben Ali, from his seat on a cushion in a corner. "I, too, desire enough of it!" he added, sticking his long-knife point-downward in the floor and laying the palm of his hand on the hilt to stop its trembling. "My heart quivers as the knife does!"

It was easy to believe him. At that moment his gray-shot beard framed avarice and not much else, except the ruthlessness that gave it energy. His eyes contained the glint of morning on the Himalayan crags. Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam saw many visions at the mention of the magic name of gold and silver.

"I cut throats with an outward thrust!" he added meaningly, pulling up the knife again and glancing at the Portuguese.

Then Athelstan King took a hand.

"The same men who own those nine books keep the secret of the gold and silver coin," he said, speaking downright as his way is.

"How do you know?" da Gama sneered.

"Because like you I have devoted years to the pursuit," King answered; and in his eyes there was the sort of steely gray strength of the hunter who looks up-wind and into sunlight.

"Pursuit?" Da Gama was at his usual occupation, sneering. "Did you catch much?"

"You, at any rate!" King answered; and Chullunder Chose observed the opportunity for self-advertisement.

"His honor having given orders to this babu—said babu having followed same," he smirked, wiping sweat from his hairy chest with a handkerchief, perhaps to call attention to the diligence with which he had labored.

Then he chose to emphasize and illustrate dexterity by throwing down the handkerchief and catching it between his toes.

"You're simply a prisoner," said King, looking straight at the Portuguese.

"This," said Narayan Singh, on the floor beside Ali of Sikunderam, "is the writing of one Dilji Leep Singh, who swears that he helped you steal books out of a temple, but was never paid for it. He will be a witness if required."

Narayan Singh laid a paper on the floor just within range of da Gama's eye, and it was that that really turned the trick. He had imagination. He could see defeat.

"You may have a fair share of the money, if we find it with your assistance," Grim reminded.

"And I have forgiven you," added Cyprian.

"But I cut throats with an outward thrust," said Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam.

"Oh, what is it you want?" the Portuguese exclaimed, throwing up his clenched fists suddenly—theatrically. "Am I briganded and held to ransom after twenty-five years? All right! I surrender! Write down your promises, and I will tell!"

CHAPTER II

"Produce but the gold, thou Portuguese!"

BUT they wrote no promises. It was da Gama, desperate to the point of daring them to take his life and never sure that Ali ben Ali or the Sikh would not accept the challenge, who wrote down terms on a half-sheet of paper.

"Hell! There! My minimum! Without you sign that there is not a torture in the universe severe enough to make me talk!"

"Same being Portuguese opinion, anarchistic possibly! This babu risking personal humiliation volunteers advice—be skeptical!" remarked Chullunder Ghose, rolling off-center so as to reach the door of a small cupboard.

He pulled out a gallon jar of whisky and shoved it along the floor sufficiently noisily to attract da Gama's notice. Father Cyprian walked out, saying nothing, and Narayan Singh relocked the office door behind him.

"Advice not being asked, same tendered deferentially, which is—" said the babu, pausing—"give him one drink, subsequently withholding remainder of contents of gallon jar pending answers to questions. No water on any account!" he added, pursing up his lips.

The sweat broke out on da Gama's forehead. He was no hero, but was gifted with imagination. As long as the priest stayed he had banked on that unbegged forgiveness, calculating, too, that the priest would tolerate no illegal violence in his presence. But Cyprian was gone, and he looked around the room. They all knew, and he knew they knew, what the whisky torture meant to a man of his disposition. He shoved the crumpled half-sheet into his pocket and capitulated.

"What do you want to know?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Give him one drink," ordered King, and then, when the Portuguese had

tossed that down his throat—"Where did you find those coins?"

"In the ruins of a temple. I cannot describe the place."

"Why not?"

"It has no name."

"You can lead us to it."

Da Gama nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I can lead, but you will find nothing. That is, I removed the gold—you see it. You may search a thousand years. I brought it all. I am intelligent—me. You have not the intellectual requirements. Yet I tell you, I know nothing—nothing! Only Cyprian the priest is capable, for he has books. But the fool thinks they are wicked, and he won't tell! He is a dog in a manger—a miser—a—"

"Never mind him. Tell us what *you* know," King interrupted.

"I know that none of you will live unless you cease from interference with the Nine Unknown!"

"Put that whisky back into the cupboard!" Grim ordered.

Chullunder Ghose obeyed. It was stifling in the office and for the second time the Portuguese capitulated.

"There is only one course worth trying," he said, trying to moisten his lips, which had grown dry at the mere mention of the whisky jar. His tongue looked a size too large. "You must subsidize me—support me. You must get those books from Cyprian and let me read them. You will all fail otherwise. I am the only man who ever lived who carried the search for the Nine Unknown the little way that even I have gone. I am the only one who found *anything*. They have made several attempts on *my* life. What chance would *you* have to escape them? Whisky please."

Grim shook his head.

"Then water!"

"Earn your drink," Grim answered.

"*Tshaa!* Well—it doesn't matter what I tell you! You will be useless without me. You lack the required intelligence. The problem is vertical, not

horizontal. All the clues are cut off—blind from underneath. There—you do not understand that. What is the use of telling you? The Nine Unknown are at the top. That is a simple statement. Nine individuals, each independent, collectively forming a self-perpetuating board—each known to all the other eight but to no other individual on earth—not known, that is to say, to any other person in the world as being a member of the Nine. You understand that?

"Each of the Nine, then, appoints nine others known only to him, and each of whom supposes his principal to be merely a servant of the Nine. They think the orders they receive from him are second-hand orders, passed along. Thus, there are eighty-one first lieutenants, as it were, who think themselves to be second-lieutenants. And each of those eighty-one employs nine others, in turn known only to himself, making seven hundred and twenty-nine third lieutenants, each of whom knows only eight, at most, of his associates, but all whom are at the service of the Nine, whom they know neither by sight nor name. You follow me?

"Every one of the seven hundred and twenty-nine third lieutenants has nine men under him, of his own choosing, each of whom again has nine more. So the chain is endless. There are no clues. If you discover, say, a fourth lieutenant, all he knows is the identity of the individual who gives him orders and, perhaps in addition to his own nine subordinates the names of eight associates, none of whom knows more than he.

"When one of the Nine Unknown dies, the other eight elect an individual to take his place. None but they even guesses that a vacancy was filled. None, except the Nine, knows who the Nine are. Each first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth lieutenant is responsible for nine; and they to him. Nothing is written. No muster-roll."

"How old is this organization?" King demanded.

"How old is India?" the Portuguese retorted. "How many dynasties have thought they ruled? They levied taxes and they all paid tribute to the Nine! If the money the Nine have received during all those ages had been invested at compound interest the whole world would be so awfully in debt that people would understand what has been happening and might possibly wake up. But there is wisdom in the books the Nine make use of—one book to a man, each

book dealing with a branch of wisdom. They have simply hoarded money, letting the nations use gold as it is won from mines and only taking tribute of principal, not interest. Do you believe that?"

King, Grim, Ramsden and Jeremy nodded. Ramsden read aloud from a memorandum book:

"Last year the production of silver alone amounted to more than a hundred and sixty million ounces. The East absorbed more than a quarter of that—"

"And is howling for silver again!" said King. "Where did forty million ounces disappear to? There is some in circulation—not much; ornaments account for some of it; a little has been hoarded by the peasants, but it's less in these days of high prices and taxes; where is the balance?"

"I have none of it, Lord knows!" exclaimed Chullunder Ghose, holding up both hands with pious resignation.

"Where did it disappear?" said the Portuguese. "Here is some"—he shook the chamois-leather bag—"but all I found was leavings in a crack of a temple cellar, where they stored the tribute a thousand years ago."

"Nevertheless," remarked Chullunder Ghose, "India continues swallowing gold and silver in measures of *crores*, that which is swallowed not reappearing in any discernible shape, contrary to teachings of political economy, which being religion of West is probably poppycock possessing priests with check-books and top-hats. Where is gold and silver? That is whole point."

"Babylon had gold and silver," said the Portuguese. "Where is it?"

Jeremy took twenty sovereigns from his belt. (He always carries them, they constituting his uttermost reserve, never to be spent, but to be bluffed with.) He jingled them from hand to hand as if their music inspired him. Da Gama went on talking:

"*Always* India has imported gold and silver—always! But where is it? Some jewelry, but not much; the bracelets of one generation are melted by the next. A very small percentage disappears from wear. Of course, there is a little lost. A little more is buried and forgotten. But the balance—the accumulated surplus of at least six thousand years—I estimate it as a heap as great as the pyramid of Gizeh! And. where is it?"

Chullunder Ghose blinked. Ali ben Ali drew his knife and stuck it quivering in the floor again. Narayan Singh breathed sibilantly through set teeth. Jeremy palmed his twenty sovereigns in a pile, and they all disappeared except one, which was fascinating; he did it again and again, and you couldn't tell where the nineteen were until he caught them out of air in his left hand.

"What became of the gold of Solomon?" da Gama asked. "He had so much of it. The records say men thought nothing of gold and silver during his reign. He died, and the gold went—where? Some say Solomon himself was one of the Nine Unknown—"

"Who says that?" King demanded.

"I for one!" da Gama answered. "But there are books. Ask Cyprian the priest. He has them. Where is the gold the Spaniards and the Portuguese shipped home from South America and Mexico? Where is all the product of the Rand and of Australia? They took seven billions of dollars worth of gold and silver from the Comstock—just one reef in Nevada—yet tell me: how much gold and silver is there in the world to-day? The greatest hoard—greater than all other known hoards put together—is in the United States Treasury, and it doesn't amount to a hat-full compared to the total that is known to have been mined in the course of history! Where has the rest disappeared?"

"That's what we're asking *you*," Grim warned him; and Ali ben Ali drew the handle of his knife back and let go so that it hummed like a thing thrown.

"I must see the books that Cyprian the priest has," da Gama answered, looking at the knife and shuddering.

"They give no clue to the treasure," King answered.

Da Gama actually laughed, a thing he hardly ever did. It sounded like something breaking. Jeremy laughed too, like breaking water, and palmed all twenty sovereigns with one sweep, instantly showing the same hand empty.

"The hand deceives the eye!" said Jeremy. "And I've seen written stuff that fooled a banker's clerk!"

"No book can fool me!" said da Gama, slapping his forehead and showing the cloven weakness as he smiled. "I know Sanskrit as Max Müller never dreamed of knowing it! Show me the books of Cyprian the priest and I will

tell you where the treasure is!"

"You're talking rot!" said Jeremy. "If Father Cyprian has the books and they contain the secret, why can't he go straight and find the treasure? Eh? We wouldn't waste whisky on you!"

"Pardon me, but it is little whisky that you waste," da Gama answered. "As for Cyprian, the man is blinded by fanaticism. He knows a little Sanskrit—just perhaps enough to pass for erudition among ignoramuses—brut he will not read what he sees. He is purblind."

"I read what I saw, and I know more than a little Sanskrit," King retorted quietly, but da Gama was more than ever cock-sure and sneered back at him.

"If Cyprian the priest were not a fool," he said, "he would have set his communicants to stealing books from me! For I have the keys to his books, and he cannot read his without mine. And all my keys are good for is to fit the locks that he guards like a miser! Get me his books, and I will unlock their secrets for you in a week. In ten days I will show you such a heap of gold and silver as will make you mad! I wish to see you mad! Have no fear that I will disappoint you!"

Nevertheless, there was not one man in the room who would have dared place Father Cyprian's books in the hands of da Gama.

"Let's see; you have escaped the vengeance of the Nine how many years?" asked Grim, and da Gama laughed again. He saw the point.

"Bring us your books, and you shall compare them with Father Cyprian's," said King. "Thereafter, the books are his, but you shall have as much as you can use of any gold and silver found."

Da Gama hesitated. He had intellect, and worked it—prided himself on that. Few of the human passions, except drink and avarice and infidelity, had any influence with him, so he reviewed the situation on its merits, being candid with himself. Like Grim, he sought no solace but results, and he would have wondered why Grim despised him, had he been aware of it.

"I cannot bring my books," he said. "They weigh too much."

"We'll carry them," offered Jeremy.

"Give me a drink," da Gama answered, nodding. It was obvious he agreed,

with a proviso.

The babu poured forth whisky into the office tumbler and presented it. Da Gama drank.

"We should have an understanding," he said, smacking his lips. "There was wisdom in the accumulation of gold and silver by the Nine. Don't disregard that. It all has to do with the *Kali Yug* [*] and its end that was prophesied six thousand years ago. The purpose is to cheapen money by the squandrous abundance of it—"

[* The age of darkness referred to in Sanskrit writings.]

"Krishna!" gasped Chullunder Ghose.

"—to abolish capitalism—do you see?" da Gama went on. "That will be the end of the *Kali Yug*. Capitalism is the age of darkness. To put in place of money—brains—intellect, that is the idea. To cheapen money by abundance, not of promises to pay, but of veritable gold and silver. Money being worthless, brains will count—intellect—you understand me? Have you intellect? No! Just habits! Have I intellect? Oh yes! But have I the reforming zeal? By no means! I am lazy. Let the world remain material and money-drunk; it suits me better! Can you accomplish anything without my intellect? No indeed. You cannot understand the Sanskrit, which is a language of conundrums. You would turn the floods of money loose and create a havoc. Money would be worthless, and you no better off. In the books the Nine Unknown possess is the only secret of how to prevent the havoc. It means high thinking, and that is hard work—too hard. I say, let us take advantage of the money, and not turn it loose. Let the *Kali Yug* persist! Let us be rich—wealthy—affluent beyond the dreams—"

"Nay, nay! There is no affluence beyond my dreams!" said Ali, plucking at his knife. "I could use a million *crores* of gold and silver! I would buy the North—and build a city—and raise a *lashkar* [*] such as Iskander's [**]—and—and speak not of millenniums! The world will burn my day out! Produce but the gold, thou Portuguese!"

[* Army.]

[** Alexander the Great.]

"Produce the books!" said Grim.

The Portuguese got down from the high stool and leaned his back against it.

"Are we agreed about the money?" he asked, looking from eye to eye for disagreement.

His was that disposition. He would promise anything to men in whom the seed of disagreement lay, knowing that the future would hold opportunity. But his wandering eye was fascinated by Jeff Ramsden's clenched, enormous fist. It seemed to symbolize. It was a totem. It did not stand for intellect, but it was heartbreakingly honest, neither Latin in its attitude toward a problem, nor cynical, nor unjust—not too credulous—just aboveboard, and direct, and faithful.

"Produce the books!" repeated Grim.

But he was dealing with the Latin temperament, which is not frank, reserving always little secret back-ways out from its commitments.

"I will go and arrange it," da Gama answered. Whereat Jeremy did three tricks in succession with a coin, as if by way of illustration.

"I'll go with you," Ramsden volunteered. "I can carry quite a lot of books."

"No!" said the Portuguese, contriving to look scandalized in the way the Latin nations do when anyone suggests a view of their back-yard. "There are my personalities. I mean, I am not a pip-show. I go alone. I will arrange. You may meet me. You shall have the books."

"I have seven sons," announced Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam, with his steel eyes focused on infinity, as if he were dreaming of his distant hills.

"Well—they would, no doubt, do to carry books," said the Portuguese, not understanding him.

Whereat Ali ben Ali got up and left the room, Narayan Singh locking the door again when he was gone. The others understood that perfectly.

"Go and make your arrangements. Where will you meet us?" Grim demanded.

"Do you know my quarters? There then," said the Portuguese. "In an hour? No, that is too soon. I have books in one place and another. They must be collected. Come to-night."

"Leave one of those coins with me," said Jeremy. "You shall have it back."

Da Gama made a gesture of magnificence and passed the chamois-leather bag. Jeremy tipped the contents into his hand, and chose, holding up a coin between his fingers.

"What's it worth?" he asked. "You can have it when you like, but—"

"Write me a receipt for it."

Da Gama took a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket and straightened it out, smoothing the reverse side.

"This babu advising skepticism, as aforesaid! Safety first!" advised Chullunder Ghose, squirming nervously. "Same being ancient adage!"

"I get you," laughed Jeremy, and he waved aside the proffered sheet of paper, which da Gama pocketed again with an air of impudent indifference.

Jeremy produced an English five-pound note from his pocketbook and wrote his name on it. [*]

[* A formality usually required before any responsible party, will cash a stranger's bank-note.]

"Take it. I'll trade back whenever you say."

The Portuguese looked disappointed but folded the five-pound note on second thought and slipped it in the lining of his hat.

"So," he said tartly, "I cannot make use of that one, since it is offered as security. If your excellency had another of the same denomination, to be lent me pending—"

King pulled out his wallet at once and produced the equivalent of five pounds in Indian currency notes. The Portuguese accepted them, and they needed no signature.

"*Gracas* . To be repaid, *señor* . Then we meet tonight—at my—ah—hotel."

He bowed magnificently, wholly unaware that the gesture made him look ridiculous. Narayan Singh unlocked the office door, and he backed out, continuing to bow, ignoring nobody, treating Chullunder Ghose to equal deference, the sneer on his yellow face giving the lie offensive and direct to his politeness, and he unconscious of it. He believed he made a most

impressive exit.

"He is thirsty—very thirsty. And he has five pounds," remarked Chullunder Ghose, as apropos of nothing as the Northerner's remark had been about his seven sons.

"Let's look at the coin," said Grim, and Jeremy passed it.

Grim is a numismatist, if a job in a museum at the age of eighteen can make a man that. They sent him to the Near East subsequently on the strength of what he knew. He shook his head.

"It's the same one Cyprian showed us. I've never seen one, nor a reproduction of one like it. I believe it's older than Cyrene. It's not Indian—at least, that isn't Sanskrit lettering—and it's better made than any of the earliest coins we know about. That might be a coin from lost Atlantis!"

"Pre-Adamite!" suggested Jeremy, but Grim was serious.

"I tell you," he answered as the door burst open and Ali of Sikunderam strode in, "we're in touch with the riddle of all history—the riddle of the Sphinx perhaps! Oh Lord, if we can only keep in touch!"

"By Allah, there are worse responsibilities than seven sons!" said Ali ben Ali, grinning. His grin sat crosswise of a black beard like sea-foam in the night. "If keeping touch is all your honor asks, then count it done!"

"Does a watched pot boil? Or a watched thief steal? Or a watched door open? Your sons will interfere with him!" remarked Chullunder Ghose, scratching his nose with an action suggestive of thumbing it.

"Bellyful of forebodings! They have orders not to interfere with him," the Northerner retorted.

"Simply to watch?" asked King.

"Simply to watch him."

"Watch me!" said Jeremy. "Come close if you like."

He palmed the prehistoric coin in half-a-dozen ways in swift succession, making it move from hand to hand unseen, and plucking it at last from mid-air, said:

"I'll bet a fiver the Don steals a march on us."

"He will steal nothing!"

Ali ben Ali of Sikunderam held up a hand as if declaiming in the mosque.

"My seven sons are the cleverest thieves that live! A thief can fool a non-thief, but not a professional. They are seven to one!"

But Jeremy laughed. Whereat Ramsden, bearded like the bust of Anthony, unclenched his fist and let go the burden of his thoughts. He was a prospector by profession, used to figuring in terms of residue.

"Forty million ounces!" he exclaimed. "Do you know what only one million ounces a year, say, for six thousand years would mean—how many trains of box-cars it would take to move it? It would need a fleet of ocean liners! Talk of secrecy's a joke!"

"Nine Unknown having kept said secret for six thousand years!" Chullunder Ghose retorted.

"And whose is the money by right?" asked Grim; that being the kind of poser you could count on him for.

"The fighter's—the finder's!" shouted Ali of Sikunderam, and Narayan Singh agreed, nodding, saying nothing, permitting his brown eyes to glow. And at that Chullunder Ghose looked owlish, knowing that the soldier wins but never keeps; sacrifices, serves, eats promises, and dies in vain. He did not tell all he knew, being a rather wise civilian. He sighed—Chullunder Ghose did.

"There possibly may be enough for all of us!" he said, rolling his eyes upward meekly.

Then Cyprian returned from strolling in the Chandni Chowk with that incurious consent of crowds conferred on priests and all old men—between the hours of indignation.

"You didn't hurt him? Children, you didn't hurt him?" he demanded. "Did he drink a little too much? Did he talk?"

King and Grim repeated what had happened, Cyprian smiling, shaking his head slowly—possibly because of old-age, yet perhaps not. At eighty years a man knows how to take advantage of infirmity.

"The long spoon!" he said. "The long spoon! It only gives the devil leverage! You should have kept him here."