

Frederick Treves, "A Restless
Night," The Elephant man and
Other Reminiscences (London:
Cassell, 1923).

VIII

A RESTLESS NIGHT

IT was in Rajputana, in the cold weather, that we came upon the dák bungalow. I was proceeding south from a native state where I had met an officer in the Indian Medical Service. He was starting on a medical tour of inspection, and for the first stage of the journey we travelled together. He was glad to have a member of his own profession to talk to.

Towards the end of the day we halted at this dák bungalow. It was situated in a poor waste which was possessed of two features only—dried earth and cactus bushes. So elemental was the landscape that it might have been a part of the primeval world before the green things came into being. The cactus, bloated, misshaped and scarred by great age, looked like some antediluvian growth which had preceded the familiar plants with leaves. If a saurian had been in sight browsing on this ancient scrub the monster would have been in keeping. Some way distant across the plain was a native village, simple enough to be a settle-

ment of neolithic men. Although it was but a splash of brown amidst the faded green it conveyed the assurance that there were still men on the earth.

The bungalow was simple as a packing-case. It showed no pretence at decoration, while there was in its making not a timber nor a trowel of plaster which could have been dispensed with. In the centre of the miserly place was a common room with a veranda in front and a faintly-suggested kitchen at the back. Leading out of the common room, on either side, was a bedroom, and the establishment was complete. The central room was provided with one meal-stained table and two dissolute-looking chairs of the kind found in a servant's attic. The walls were bare save for certain glutinous splashes where insects had been squashed by the slipper of some tormented guest. The place smelt of grease and paraffin, toned by a faint suggestion of that unclean aromatic odour which clings to Indian dwellings. The bedrooms were alike—square chambers with cement floors, plain as an empty water-tank. An inventory of their respective contents was completed by the following items—one low bedstead void of bedding, one chair, one table with traces of varnish in places and one looking-glass in a state of

desquamation. To these may be added one window and two doors. One door led into the common room, the other into a cemented bathroom containing a battered tin bath, skinned even of its paint.

We each of us had an Indian servant or bearer who, with mechanical melancholy, made the toilet table pretentious by placing upon it the entire contents of our respective dressing bags.

After dinner, of a sort, we sat on the penitential chairs and smoked, leaning our elbows on the table for our greater comfort. The doctor was eloquent upon his medical experiences in the district, upon his conflicts with pessimistic patients and his struggles with fanaticism and ignorance. The average sick man, he told me, had more confidence in a dried frog suspended from the neck in a bag than in the whole British Pharmacopoeia. Most of his narratives have passed out of my memory, but one incident I had reason to remember.

It concerned a native from the adjacent village who was working as a stone-mason and whose eye was pierced by a minute splinter of stone. As a result the eye became inflamed and sightless, save that the man retained in the damaged organ an appreciation of light. As bearing upon the case

and its sequel I must explain the circumstances of "sympathetic ophthalmia." When an eye is damaged as this was, and inflammation ensues, it is not uncommon for the mischief to spread to the sound globe and destroy that also. In order to prevent such a catastrophe it is necessary to remove the injured and useless eye as promptly as possible. That was the uniform practice in my time. The operation in question was urged upon the native in order to prevent sympathetic ophthalmia in the sound eye, but he declined it, preferring to consult a magician who lived a day's journey from the village. The consultation took place and the man returned to the local dispensary; for although he still had good vision in the sound eye it was beginning to trouble him.

The surgeon considered that the operation was now probably too late; but he yet urged it upon the ground that there was some prospect of success, while, on the other hand, failure could make the patient's condition no more desperate. The man, persuaded against his will, at last consented, and the useless eyeball was removed. Unfortunately the operation was too late; the sound eye became involved beyond recovery and the miserable native found himself totally blind. He ignorantly ascribed his loss of sight to the operation.

Before my friend left the station the man was brought into his room for the last time, and when it was explained to him that he was in the doctor's presence he threw his arms aloft and, shrieking aloud, cursed the man of healing with a vehemence which should have brought down fire from heaven. He called upon every deity in the Indian mythology to pour torments upon this maimer of men, to blast his home and annihilate his family root and branch. He blackened the sky with curses because the darkness which engulfed him prevented him from tearing out with his nails the eyes of this murderous Englishman. Foaming and screaming, and almost voiceless from the violence of his speech, he was led away to stumble about his village, where for weeks he rent the air with his awful imprecations. Whether the poor man was now alive or dead the doctor could not say, for he had heard no more of him.

In due course we agreed that the time had come to go to bed. The doctor said that he always occupied the right-hand bedroom when he came to the bungalow, but as it was found that my servant had deposited my bedding and effects in this particular sepulchre, he retired to the chamber across the hall.

I did not look forward to a night in this so

called "Rest House." The bedroom was as comfortable as a prison cell and as desolate as the one sound room in a ruin. There was some comfort in contemplating the familiar articles displayed on the dressing-table, yet they looked curiously out of place.

I locked the door leading to the common room, but found that the door to the bathroom had no lock; while there was merely a bolt to the outer door that led from the bathroom into the open. This bolt I shot, but left the intermediate door ajar, feeling that I should like to assure myself from time to time that the far room was empty. There was one small paraffin lamp provided, but the glass shade of it had been broken, so that it was only when the wick was very low that it would burn without smoking. By the glimmer of this malodorous flame I undressed and, blowing it out, got into bed.

The place was as black as a pit, as stifling and as silent. I lay awake a long time, for the stillness was oppressive. I found myself listening to it. It seemed to be made up of some faint, far-off sounds of mysterious import of which I imagined I could catch the rhythm. It was possible to believe that these half-imagined pulsations were produced by the rush of the earth through space,

and that the stillness of the night made them audible.

I went to sleep in time and slept—as I afterwards discovered—for some hours, when I was aroused by a noise in the room. I was wideawake in an instant, with my head raised off the pillow, listening rigidly for the sound that I must have heard in my sleep. The place was in solid darkness. I felt that there was something alive in the room, something that moved.

At last the sound came again. It was the pattering of the feet of some animal. The creature was coming towards the bed. I could hear others moving along the floor, always from the bathroom, until the place seemed to be alive with invisible creatures. Such is the effect of imagination that I conceived these unknown animals to be about the size of retrievers. I wondered if their heads would reach the level of the couch, until I was relieved to hear that many were now running about under the bed. I resolved to shout at them but fancied that the noise of my own voice would be as unpleasant to hear as the voice of another and unknown human being in the room.

I noticed now a faint odour of musk, and was glad to think that these pattering feet belonged to musk-rats, and that these animals must have

entered through the drain hole I had observed in the outer wall of the bathroom. I dislike rats, and especially rats in a bedroom. This prejudice was not made less when I felt that some of them were climbing up on to the bed. I was certain I could hear one crawling over my clothes which lay on the chair by the bedside. I was certain that others were searching about on the dressing-table, and recognized—or thought I did—the clatter of a shoe-horn that lay there. I recalled stories in which men had been attacked by hordes of rats, and I wondered when they would attack me, for, by this time, the whole room seemed to be full of rats, and I could picture legions swarming in from the plain outside in a long snake-like column.

In a while I was sure that a rat was on the pillow close to my head. My hair seemed to be flicked by the whiskers of one of these foetid brutes. This was more than I could tolerate, so I sprang up in bed and shouted. There was a general scuttle for the far door; but it was some time before I ventured to pass my hand over the pillow to assure myself that a rat was not still there.

I had a mind to get out of bed and light the lamp; but to do this seemed to be like taking a

step into a black pit. I lay down again. For a while all was quiet. Then came once more the pattering of feet from the direction of the bathroom, the sickly odour of musk and a conviction that at least a hundred rats were pouring into the room. They crept up to the bed and ran about beneath it with increasing boldness. I was meditating another shout when there came a sound in the room that made every vein in my body tingle. It arose from under the bed, a hollow scraping sound which I felt sure was due to the movement of a human being. I thought it was caused by the scraping of a belt buckle on the cement floor, the belt being worn by a man who was crawling on his stomach. I disliked this sound more than the rats.

At this moment, to add to my discomfort, I felt a rat crawling across my bare foot, a beast with small, cold paws and hot fur. I kicked it off so that it fell with a thud on the floor. I shouted again and, driven to desperation, jumped out of bed. I half expected to tread on a mass of rats, but felt the hard floor instead. I went to the dressing-table and struck a light. The place was empty, but I could not see under the bed. The match went out and in the blackness I expected some fresh surprise to develop. I managed

to strike another match and to light the lamp.

I placed it on the floor and looked under the bed. What I saw there I took at first to be a piece of a human skull. I got a stick and touched it. It seemed lighter than a dried bone. I dragged it out into the room. It was a cake of unleavened bread, much used by the natives—dried up into a large curled chip. The rats had been dragging this away and had so produced the scraping sound which I had exaggerated into something sinister.

Having convinced myself that the room was empty I blocked up the drain-hole in the outer wall by placing the bath in front of it and, feeling secure from any further disturbance, returned to bed, leaving the lamp alight on the table.

For a long time I kept awake, watching every now and then the bathroom door to satisfy myself that I had succeeded in keeping the beastly animals out. During this vigil I fell asleep and then at once embarked upon a dream, the vividness and reality of which were certainly remarkable.

The most convincing feature was this. The dream, without a break, continued the happenings of the night. The scene was this identical bedroom at this identical moment. The dream, as it were,

took up the story from the moment that I lost it. Owing to my close scrutiny every detail of the vile chamber had already become as clearly impressed upon my brain as if it had been fixed by a photographic plate. I had not—in my dream—fallen asleep again, but was still wideawake and still keeping a watch over the bathroom door for the incoming of the rats.

The bathroom door was just ajar, but the very faint glimmer of the lamp did not enable me to penetrate the darkness that filled it. I kept my eye fixed on the entry when, in a moment, to my horror, the door began to open. The sight was terrifying in the extreme. My heart was thumping to such a degree that I thought its beats must be audible. I felt a deadly sinking in my stomach, while the skin of my back and neck seemed to be wrinkling and to be dragged up as might be a shirt a man is drawing over his head. There is no panic like the panic felt in a dream.

A brown hand appeared on the edge of the door. It was almost a relief to see that it was a human hand. The door was then opened to its utmost. Out of the dark there crept a middle-aged man, a native, lean and sinewy, without a vestige of clothing on his body. His skin shone in the uncertain light, and it was evident that his

body, from head to foot, was smeared with oil. The most noticeable point about the man was that he was blind. His eyelids were closed, but the sockets of his eyes were sunken as are those of a corpse. With his left hand he felt for the wall, while in his right hand he carried a small stone-mason's pick. His face was expressionless. This was the most terrible thing about it, for his face was as the face of the dead. He crept into the room as Death himself might creep into the chamber of the dying.

I realized at once in my dream that this was the native about whom my friend had been speaking before we had retired for the night. This man had heard of the doctor's arrival, would know my room as the one he usually occupied, and had now come there to murder him.

I was so fascinated by the sight of this unhuman creature moving towards me that I could not stir a muscle. I was raised up in bed, and was leaning on one elbow like an image on a tomb. I was so filled with the sense of a final calamity that I felt I had ceased to breathe. There were, indeed, such a clutching at my throat and such a bursting at my heart that the act of breathing seemed wellnigh impossible. Had I been awake I should, without doubt, have shouted

at the uncanny intruder and attacked him, but in the dream I was unable to stir, and the longer I remained motionless the more impossible did it appear that I could move. My limbs might have been turned into stone.

The figure crept on, feeling his way by the wall. There was a sense of an oncoming, irresistible fate. Every time that a horrible bare foot was lifted, advanced and brought to the ground I felt that I was one step nearer to the end. The figure seemed to grow larger as it approached me. The hand, with outstretched fingers, that groped its way along the wall was like a claw. I could hear the breathing of the creature, the breath being drawn in between the closed teeth. I could see the muscles of the arm that held the pick contract and relax. There was now in the air the loathsome smell of the unclean native mixed with the odour of oil.

One more step and he was so near that I could see the faint light glimmer on his teeth and could notice that they were dry. The outstretched, claw-like hand that felt its way along the wall was now nearly over my head. In another moment that awful pick would crash into my skull or plunge into my neck. I bowed my head instinctively so that I should not see the blow coming,

and at the same time I thought it would be less terrible if the iron were driven into my back rather than into my head or face.

The evil creature was now close to the bed. The extended arm was clawing along the wall above my pillow, for I had now shrunken as low as I could. With my head bent I could now see nothing of the man but his wizened thigh, upon which the muscles rose and fell. A bony knee-cap was advanced slowly, and then I saw a shadow move on the floor. This I felt was the shadow of the arm with the pick raised to strike.

I was mesmerized as would be a rabbit in a corner within a foot of a snake. Suddenly the lamp flame gave a little crackle. The sound, breaking the silence, was intensified into an explosion. It seemed to call me to my senses. With one maddened half-conscious effort I rolled gently off the bed, away from the pursuer, and slipped, between the couch and the wall, on to the floor.

I made little noise in doing this, for my body was uncovered, the bed was very low, and the space between it and the wall so narrow that I was let slowly down to the ground. To the blind man I may merely have turned in bed.

As I lay there on the floor I could see the two

sinewy feet close to the couch and could hear the awful hand moving stealthily over the very pillow. I next knew that he was bending over the couch to find what was between the bed and the wall. Turning my head, I saw a shadowy hand descend on the far side of the bed, the fingers extended as if feeling the air. In a moment he would reach me. His hand moved to and fro like the head of a cobra, while I felt that with a touch of his tentacle-like fingers I should die. The climax of the dream was reached.

I was now well under the bed. In a paroxysm of despair I seized the two skinny ankles and jerked them towards me, at the same moment lifting the frail bed bodily with my back so that it turned over on its side away from the wall. The wretch's feet being suddenly drawn away from him, he fell heavily backwards upon the bare floor, his head striking the stone with a hollow sound. The edge of the bedstead lay across him. The feet, which I still held, were nerveless, and he made no movement to withdraw them. I crept back clear of the bed and, jumping upright against the wall, bolted through the bathroom and out into the plain. I had a glimpse of the man as I went by. He was motionless and his mouth hung open.

I ran some way from the bungalow before I stopped. I was like a man saved from the scaffold as the very axe was about to drop. There was a gentle air blowing, cool and kindly. Above was a sky of stars, while in the east the faint light of the dawn was appearing behind the Indian village.

For a moment or two I watched the door leading from the bathroom, expecting to see the man with the pick creep out, but the anticipation of the sight was so dread that I turned away and walked to the other side of the bungalow. Here my greatest joy was merely to breathe, for I seemed to have been for hours in a suffocating pit.

The relief did not last for long. I was seized with another panic. Had I killed the man? I felt compelled to return to the abhorred room and learn the worst. I approached it with trembling. So curious are the details of a dream that I found—as I expected—the bolt on the outer door wrenched off and hanging by a nail. I stepped into the disgusting place, full of anxiety as to what further horror I had to endure. The little lamp was still alight. The bedstead was on its edge as I left it, but the man was gone. There was a small patch of blood where his head had

struck the floor, but that was the sole relic of the tragedy.

I awoke feeling exhausted, alarmed and very cold. I looked at once at the floor for the patch of blood, and, seeing nothing, realized, to my extreme relief, that I had been merely dreaming. It was almost impossible to believe that the events of the latter part of the night, after the departure of the rats, had not been real. At breakfast I retailed to my companion the very vivid and dramatic nightmare in which I had taken part. At the end he expressed regret for the mistake the servants had made in allotting us our rooms overnight, but I am not sure that that regret was perfectly sincere.