

Swami Ram's Reincarnation

By FRANK BLIGHTON

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—While his train is held at a siding Tom Davenport, engineer of the Pacific Limited, becomes interested in the curious movements of a small brown man, evidently a foreigner, and investigates. What he discovers sends him back to his cab in a hurry. Buchanan Williams, a mining man, boards the train, and makes the acquaintance of the stranger, Jitendra. Jitendra, who comes from an East Indian. The Hindu is wrecked.

CHAPTER II.—Williams, though painfully injured, saves Jitendra, who had been pinned under the wreck. The Hindu, with grateful gratitude, Williams receives a message telling him Mexican revolutionaries have seized his mine, known as "El Tigre," and killed or driven off the Americans.

Pacheco, of himself, would not have dared to presume to lay hands upon him, nor did the insolent Mexican foreman possess sufficient initiative to seize on a mining property of the magnitude of El Tigre unless with inspiration from bigger minds than his. But Pacheco was dead—a bloated purple corpse—struck down almost at the instant of his atrocious blow and hurried into the great unknown.

Pacheco's death was, and forever would be, utterly baffling. Buck Williams knew—unless Jitendra could and would explain it.

He turned to glance at the little Hindu with growing feeling of respect, bordering on awe. He noticed that, while surrounding them, the soldiers were riding well away from Jitendra and himself.

The mysterious demise of their captain had evidently not been without its effect. Buck wondered why Jitendra and himself had not been shot down. It must be because definite orders had been sent out both for his capture and disposition—otherwise the rifles of the hand command would, ere this, have visited a death as sudden, but by no means as mysterious, upon both.

"Jitendra," whispered Williams. The Hindu turned.

"What was it that killed Pacheco?" answered the other.

"I do not understand," replied the mine owner. He was a little irritated to think that he, a strong, lusty American, was inferior in resources for resistance to his enemies, while a gaunt, emaciated, undersized atom bound as securely as himself to another horse, invoked apparently occult powers with such startling results.

Jitendra's hands were tied as were his own—he could see the flesh swelling on the bony wrists where the taut rawhide was shrinking in the heat of the sun.

"The vengeance of Vishnu," at last he mechanically repeated, when the Hindu had apparently failed to notice his remark.

"Yes, Sahib Buck." The squalid adobe structures of Zapatlillo were now clearly in view. The soldiers sat a little more erect, closed their ragged ranks into slightly straighter lines, and the horses, sensing a delayed meal, moved forward at a swifter pace.

Still Jitendra did not vouchsafe any explanation. Only at the gate of the corral itself, a few minutes later, did Buck Williams catch a low murmur of words. He listened eagerly.

The Hindu seemed to be chanting, but the words were English:

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly—I am the wings.
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

CHAPTER V.

Incarcerated.

The jail at Zapatlillo was a structure in which one would not particularly care to remain for a prolonged period. The intensely hot, humid day made the walls reek with a stench from the insanitary conditions which always prevail in prisons, no matter how well cleaned.

The food was unspeakable; the water insufficient and unpalatable. Buck Williams and Jitendra jointly occupied a black, fetid hole on the level of the street. It opened on the corridor, not far from the main gate.

A soldier in the passage guarded them, notwithstanding the thick earthen walls, with oak doors, traversed by heavy bars of wrought iron, which, of themselves, were certainly capable of detaining two men without tools to burrow or gnaw through them.

The American had not willingly entered the cell.

In fact, he had strenuously objected. In terse Spanish idiom he demanded to be first taken before the jefe politico, an official corresponding to a circuit judge in his own country.

His demand was ignored. Then the tiger in him boiled up. His hands had been unbound after the main gate of the prison closed behind him. With characteristic, desperate courage, Buck huried himself on a soldier and seized his weapon.

But the others, with a sinister deliberation, considering the mine owner's preconceived theory that some mysterious and malign influence was behind his seizure, covered him—and they were twelve to one.

For a moment the foul atmosphere

of the corral was surcharged with an impending tragedy.

Buck, glaring with malevolent eyes into the faces of his guards, knew that he could never hope to leave that horrible hole alive if he persisted in his frantic impulse to force his way out against such odds.

A curious sense of helplessness overwhelmed him; his strength seemed to be ebbing away. He paused, irresolutely, unheeding the sharp command of the captain of the guard to surrender.

Jitendra, impassive as a sphinx, stood aside, but the glitter of his shyness, brown eyes showed that no detail of the scene before him was unnoticed. The rifle rattled to the earth at Buck's feet.

He turned at the imperative gesture of the commanding officer and meekly entered the cell toward which he and Jitendra had been walking. Inside the cell, once the door closed behind them, he felt was dim.

Jitendra submissively seated himself cross-legged in one corner and remained utterly silent. The American, upwardly raging at his own unaccountable surrender and the memory of the injustice to which he had been subjected, paced up and down, true to his designation of "El Tigre."

The Hindu looked at him calmly. "Sahib Buck wishes to leave this place?"

"Leave it?" roared the American.

"Did I try to break into it?"

He loosened the collar of his shirt and mopped the perspiration from his neck. The foul apology for air was suffocating.

"See here, Jitendra, do you want to help me get out?"

"Assuredly, sahib."

"Then get up, go to the door, and demand that the British ambassador be notified of your arrest. When you get out, as you surely will, send a telegram to William Scott, International hotel, Nogales, Arizona, U. S. A., telling him I'm here. That may help a little. There's something going on here that I don't understand at all, Jitendra. I didn't ask you to come with me—I did the best I could to get you to go on about your own business. So there's no reason at all for you to be locked up, and if there's any why I should be, I want to know it!"

"Do you, indeed?"

Buck leaped toward the sound and peered through the tiny, grated orifice in the iron-bound oak door. The query was in English, but it carried a mocking sneer which worked the mine owner into a new frenzy.

He could not make out the features of the speaker in the semi-darkness, yet he fancied he had heard the voice on some other occasion.

"I see you do not recognize me," blandly went on the same speaker.

"Well, Mr. Williams, I'm Herbert Hardinge—you recall the name, don't you—Hardinge, agent for the United Kingdom Exploration company?"

"Yes," replied Williams brusquely; "that is, if you are the same Hardinge that tried to beat me out of the El Tigre property five years ago. What of it?"

"I just heard of your plight," smoothly answered the syndicate agent, and hurried down to see if I could be of any assistance to you."

Williams hesitated.

Herbert Hardinge had consistently and relentlessly opposed him in the past. Their litigation over the ownership of El Tigre had been expensive to both and it had only ended when the highest court in Mexico upheld his own prior rights.

But blood is thicker than water, and the Anglo-Saxon love of justice sometimes causes white men in foreign lands to forget past differences in new perils. So Williams replied:

"That's mighty white of you, Hardinge. I don't know why I'm here, for I've done nothing to merit imprisonment. Of course, I don't want to stay—I want to get back to El Tigre—and if you can help me out I'll surely be grateful to you."

"I think the matter can be very easily arranged," suavely answered the Englishman; "otherwise I should not have bothered about coming down."

"How?"

"If you will transfer El Tigre mine to the ownership of my company, promise to return to the United States without delay, and give a pledge not to re-enter Mexico for five years, you will be free in half an hour."

Williams could not credit his hearing. What had El Tigre's ownership to do with his arrest, or in what manner could the abandonment of his property be made an excuse for releasing him?

"I see that you do not thoroughly understand your present position," satirically observed Hardinge as Williams groped vainly for words with which to voice his indignant surprise.

"You are right—I don't, Hardinge. But, before you go further, let me tell you this: I returned to El Tigre yesterday from the United States. I was set upon by my former mine foreman, bound while asleep, and he started to bring me here. He offered no explanation for his extraordinary and illegal conduct."

"He died, from some cause I cannot understand, while on the way. But I did not jeopardize myself by returning to Mexico with any intention of being coerced into signing away the property I have fought for years to develop. Why should I purchase freedom by voluntarily surrendering El Tigre, when I came back here to hold it, at all hazards?"

"I would not advise haste in a decision," Hardinge's tone was frigid. "You ought to think this matter over and weigh things carefully, Williams."

before coming to a conclusion which may only involve you further."

"How can it involve me? What matter are you referring to?"

"The officials of the government at Mexico City who decided that you were the rightful owner of El Tigre have been superseded by other men."

"I know that, Hardinge. But even the ones now in power will not presume to declare my titles invalid without a hearing on the merits, nor uphold an arrest for peacefully occupying my property—surely, at least, not before the reopening of a case which was settled before their highest court."

"No?" The query carried an undertone of insolent sarcasm.

"No!" The defiance in the prisoner's voice was unmistakable.

"I supposed, Williams, that you had been in Mexico long enough to understand the unstable character of the government. But you are evidently unaware that since your departure from the state of Sinaloa it has succeeded."

"I had not heard of it."

"Nor that General Jimm Moreno is now the provisional governor of the province?"

"It's all news to me."

"I imagined it would be. Now, let us be frank. I am uncommonly generous with you, Williams. As governor of this province, General Moreno has declared titles to all property held or acquired by Americans within the past ten years void, and they have been confiscated. Hereafter no American can acquire, nor hold, by purchase or otherwise, property in Sinaloa, during the existence of this provisional government, at least. This decree has the support of Moreno's advisors and the approval of a large majority, at least, of the residents of the province. You see where you are, don't you?"

Williams gasped.

The sheer audacity of the thing was incredible. Yet, what could he or other Americans expect from the bungling way the whole "Mexican problem" seemed to have been handled at home?

"But what has this to do with my arrest?" he savagely demanded.

"Everything," bluntly retorted Hardinge. "You were an interloper and a trespasser on property now owned and about to be operated by the United Kingdom Exploration company. Orders were issued by Governor General Moreno himself that you should be brought in, if you came back to El Tigre. You returned and Captain Manuel Pacheco, one of Moreno's own staff, was sent to carry out the order. That is why you are here."

"I see," bitterly exclaimed the prisoner. "But why was I not taken before the jefe politico and warned about this new law?"

"Governor Moreno has suspended the civil statutes until the province is entirely pacified."

"Then why was I not taken before him?"

"Ah! I think you will scarcely be anxious to face a military tribunal composed of General Moreno's officers, Williams—at least, if you still possess the discretion with which I have always credited you."

"Why not? What have I to fear from him or his officers?"

"You ought to know. Captain Pacheco did not return to Zapatlillo with his command, did he?"

"I realize it. But what has that to do with me?"

"You are accused of murdering him this morning."

"Rats!"

"The military court," evenly resumed Hardinge, "I am informed, will accord you a hearing this afternoon—probably within an hour. You know what that signifies as well as I. You were arrested and arrested by Captain Pacheco. He was murdered—they have brought in his body. You are accused. The lieutenant of the command, who succeeded to Pacheco's title, the sergeant and other officers, as well as some of the privates, were giving their testimony before the court when I was admitted to the corral."

Buck Williams laughed contemptuously.

"That is why I came," severely continued Hardinge, "to see if I could help you out of this ugly mess. I've fought you, but I don't particularly wish to see you backed against the wall of the corral and shot to death at sunrise tomorrow morning. I'm a persistent enemy, Williams, but not a vindictive one. Now, what do you say to my former proposition about getting out of Mexico?"

"If that's the best card you have up your sleeve with which to hoodwink me out of El Tigre, Hardinge, you'd better go back to your exploration company and wait for Moreno's firing squad to shoot. Why, man, it's absurd! I was tied, hand and foot, on the back of a horse, when Pacheco kicked off. How can they reason I killed a man in such circumstances?"

"They don't need any reasons—an excuse is enough," laughed Hardinge brutally. "Pacheco was well and strong when he left. He died in some way not yet determined just after striking you. The physician who performed the autopsy says he was murdered."

"Does that prove I killed him?"

"Who else? Pacheco's own men certainly did not—they worshiped him. You are against the guns, Williams—literally. But if you want to be obstinate, don't fancy I'm trying to persuade you to do the only thing that will let me help you. Your mine or your life—take your choice—or lose them both if you want to! But when you look into the rifles of the firing squad admit to yourself at least that I did all I could to save you."

"Thank you," dryly answered the prisoner. "But why this sudden solicitude, Hardinge?"

"Purely a matter of expediency—an anchor to leeward, we'll say. Governor Moreno has already issued us a legal title to El Tigre. If the provisional government is permanent, we'll need nothing more. If it falls, we will then have your transfer of title to us and continue operating it as if nothing had happened. The exploration company is interested in mining—not politics."

"But I see no reason to believe that you can do what you promise—or will. Why should I permit myself to be frightened into transferring a title to a five-million-dollar mine—and perhaps be shot down, just the same, between here and the border? If I'm up against a brace game, Hardinge, go ahead with it. I have associates in the United States who put money into that property. They trust me."

"I am fully aware of that."

"I have full power to set for them in any way that seems best to protect their interests," hotly went on Williams. "But if I did what you ask me to do I'd be a blithering ass. You could take the deed and have me shot, anyway—they'd only think I'd betrayed them—and fled with their money. Then, again, I may be out of here tomorrow—and then where would I be? Suppose Moreno's provisional government goes down? Your company would then have El Tigre without paying a nickel. Nix, Hardinge; you've got to show me more than that to get my signature."

Hardinge grinned evilly.

The saturnine features of his powerful face leaped suddenly into the blaze of the match with which he was lighting a cigar. His hard eyes gleamed with amusement as he half turned away from the door.

"All right! A man about to be shot isn't altogether in a position to make terms, Williams. Believe it or not—I can do what I've promised, and people who know me will tell you that I always do as I promise. It so happens that General Moreno will be quite willing to mitigate your sentence in any way I might request; but you don't have to believe that, either, unless it suits you to do so. Well, I'm going. This foul air is giving me a headache."

He turned nonchalantly away. Buck, with a feeling of supreme despair, tried to steady his voice for another question.

"How do you happen to have such a pull with General Moreno?"

"I'm surprised that you ask, Williams. Moreno was ambitious to become governor and wanted to start a revolution. That meant arms, men, money. He had none. The United States has forbidden their export to rebels, so he talked things over with us. In return for certain mining concessions in Sinaloa we supplied what he needed. It's very simple, but of course I'll deny that I ever made this admission if you should mention it to anyone else. However, I guess there's little danger—you're incommunicado. No one will see you until the sentence is carried out tomorrow morning."

Williams pondered. Hardinge's statement impressed him as truthful. But he played his last card with all the coolness of a poker player who has been called for his final chip.

"This other fellow, Hardinge,"—he jerked his thumb toward the interior of the cell—"he's a British subject and a stranger here, who thinks he owes me something because I pulled him out of a train wreck near El Paso on the way down. As a British subject yourself you won't mind notifying the British ambassador he's here—will you—no matter what happens to me?"

"I certainly will not," angrily snapped the syndicate agent. "What the devil do you take me for—a fool?"

"No," drawled the American, with a deliberation that brought a red flush to the Englishman's face, "not a fool, Hardinge, but a cold-blooded, calculating dog who will deliberately plan to murder a rival to gain his ends. Go on with your fake court-martial, you white-livered beast! I'd rather welter in my own blood a thousand times than give you the satisfaction of putting over a thing like this—to rob me and the men who have backed me with their confidence and money. Shoot—and be damned to you!"

He turned to savagely resume pacing his cell.

His furious anger at first kept him from realizing the peril which Hardinge had depicted. He tried to believe that such an atrocity would never be permitted, even under the official sanction of a provisional government, such as the Englishman had declared to exist.

Then he suddenly remembered the indignation in El Paso the night he had last started for El Tigre.

Men in the hotel were discussing the latest dispatches from Washington—ordering all Americans to leave Mexico forthwith, after turning over to the American consul in their locality a list of the property they left behind.

Everyone thought the story improbable at that time. It sounded altogether too ridiculous for belief. But now, in the fetid cell, with Hardinge's threats still ringing in his ears, the mine-owner realized that it must be true.

Because of this, the more he analyzed the situation the more he felt sure Hardinge had voiced no idle threat. If a New York gunman will kill a man for a thousand dollars, why should Hardinge get squeamish now, when his prize was five millions?

The syndicate agent had never shown an oversupply of conscience, and he would run little danger in a country where anarchy had replaced

law and no one knew from one day to another what might come next.

Buck's thoughts leaped back to the property. He recalled the covetous look on the face of Manuel Pacheco the day Williams had personally followed a small "vug-hole" of ore into a chamber which had panned out a cold fifty thousand—a sheer accidental discovery made while drifting down on the main "lead."

No one could say how much El Tigre would ultimately pan out.

He believed so thoroughly in the property that he already regarded himself as an embryonic millionaire. He was almost in striking distance of the five-hundred-foot level.

The great vein was constantly widening and growing richer. Once into the main ore-body the values would be fabulous.

As he thought it all over he cursed himself for his fatuous blindness. Pacheco had undoubtedly been drawing double pay all the time he had been foreman. A Mexican is always an uncertain, treacherous proposition.

He will smile at you, and when you turn knife you in the back without warning if he thinks by so doing he can get an extra peso to wager on a cock-fight or spend for mescal.

"What a trio of crooks!" muttered Buck, clenching his hands in futile rage. "Pacheco tells Hardinge how we are getting on with the development; Hardinge goes to the smelter, bribes a clerk and gets copies of our liquidation sheets, confirming Pacheco's information; Moreno promises Hardinge El Tigre in return for financing his revolution; Pacheco is made a captain. All of the time I have been digging a mine—not for Buchanan Williams, but for the United Kingdom Exploration company—and the minute I am back here like a prize boob I catch the whole game for them."

His bitterness grew.

He wondered where Scotty was and if he had succeeded in getting through to Cullacan along the coast route and arousing the other Americans still in that city until they realized the urgent necessity to stand together. But, even if he had, Buck could not reasonably expect a rescue.

The time was too brief—he would be shot at sunrise—unless Hardinge had lied.

Scotty might never learn where he was until long after the execution. Besides that, a handful of Americans, no matter how well armed and brave, would have their work cut out for them, fighting from Cullacan to Zapatlillo—it hits to the military organization Moreno had built up with the syndicate's generous subsidies.

"There's one silver lining in all the clouds, anyway," mused Williams. "Pacheco got his. That was a devilish funny thing—swift, sure annihilation. I wonder what killed him?"

The door opened suddenly. An officer and a file of men stood in the corridor.

"Senior Williams!" called the man in command.

"What do you want?" growled Buck. "General Juan Moreno presents his compliments and requires your presence, with that of your servant."

The American squared his shoulders, threw back his head, and strode toward the open door. Jitendra, without a word, rose and meekly followed. The file of men, with fixed, murderous bayonets, closed round the pair and the procession moved down the corridor.

CHAPTER VI.

Strangely Set Free.

"My friend, we have less than twelve hours to live."

Buck Williams gazed down at the stoical Jitendra. The Hindu was sitting in one corner of the cell, a darker blot against the gloom, save for his snowy turban and gleaming eyes.

The farcical court-martial was concluded, Mexican justice had been done, and Hardinge's prophecy verified in detail.

"I am very sorry you persisted in following me into this diabolical country," regretfully went on the mine-owner. "I knew there was bound to be trouble. You have sacrificed yourself uselessly."

A paradoxical expression swept over the Hindu's face.

"What is to be, will be, Sahib Buck. It is as Vishnu and Siva ordain—but we are not yet dead."

The reply irritated Williams.

"If Mr. Vishnu has any pull in this precinct, I sure hope he'll do something for you," he sarcastically observed. "I wouldn't bother about sending him any thoughtless messages, Jitendra. If I knew Vishnu well enough I'd brace him for a good gun and about fifty cartridges. Of course Moreno's men might get me, but it would be some satisfaction to have a little company across the river tomorrow morning. Do you suppose Vishnu could slip us a .30-30 in here, somehow?"

"Sahib Buck wishes a gun?"

"In the absence of anything that will assist us both to dissolve and float out of here through the keyhole—yes—I'll be very glad to have a gun. I've heard how people in India grow plants from seeds under a cloth in a few minutes. Now, if you can pull off a stunt like that, only grow me a gun instead of a plant—one that won't miss fire or jam cartridges in the magazine—I'll guarantee to make mighty good use of it. Do you happen to have any gun-seeds or ammunition sprouts with you?"

Jitendra grew thoughtful. "Very well. Will the sahib not first seek repose?"

Williams sneered.

"We'll have plenty of sleep a little after sunrise," he remarked. "Why waste the time now?"

"What says the Ancient Wisdom: 'Sleep is a lake wherein the soul finds food,'" politely returned the other. "In sleep many strange things come to one—is it not so?"

The mine owner sat down with a sardonic smile. Jitendra was chanting softly. Even the proximity of death had not changed him in the slightest. As Williams pondered and listened to the regular tramp of the Mexican on guard in the corridor, something of the utter fatalism of life—or death—came over him.

Why cry out or struggle against the inevitable? Sooner or later he must certainly pass from out the ferment of humanity, to lie forgotten in some quiet corner. It might as well be now as any other time, except for one thing—El Tigre.

For an instant a flamy of bitter hatred blazed up as he thought of the crafty Hardinge. Had it not been for that subtle, human scorpion he would not be lying in this horrid hole, waiting the summons which would terminate his ambitious life.

But the bitterness died away.

Hardinge was only another puppet of fate—a stuffed doll—like himself, a mere marionette in the drama of existence, for fate bears rule over all. Presently he, too, would be thrust back into the cosmic trunk by the Great Property Man of the whole fantastic show, and death, the wardrobe mistress, would receive the battered automaton, the same as she would claim him at sunrise.

The voice of the chanting Hindu grew fainter.

The drowsy American felt that he was falling into the abyss of all things—the place from which he had sprung. Around him mysterious creatures, like Jitendra's face, swirled on soundless wings.

(To be continued next week.)

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