

Problem of the Crystal Gazer

The Thinking Machine Confronted by an Oriental Enigma

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ITH hideous, goggling eyes the great god Budd sat cross legged on a pedestal and stared stolidly into the semidarkness. He saw, by the

wavering light of a peacock lamp which swooped down from the ceiling with wings outstretched, what might have been a nook in a palace of East India. Draperies hung here, there, everywhere; richly embroidered divans sprawled about; fierce tiger rugs glared up from the floor; grotesque idols grunted surlily in unexpected corners; strange arms were grouped on the walls. Outside the trolley cars clanged blatantly.

The single human figure was a distinct contrast to all else. It was that of a man in evening dress, smoking. He was fifty, perhaps sixty, years old, with the reddish healthy color of one who has lived a great deal out doors. There was only a touch of gray in his abundant hair and mustache. His eyes were steady and clear and indolent.

For a long time he sat, then the draperies to his right parted and a girl entered. She was a part of the picture of which the man was a contradiction. Her lustrous black hair flowed about her shoulders; lambent mysteries twinkled in her eyes. Her dress was the dress of the East. For a moment she stood looking at the man, and then entered with light tread.

"Varick, sahib," she said timidly as if it was a greeting. "Do I intrude?" Her voice was sweetly guttural with the accent of her native tongue.

"Oh no, Jadeh. Come in," said the man. She smiled tranquilly and sat down on a hassock near him. "My brother?" she asked.

"He is in the cabinet." Varick had merely glanced at her and then continued his thoughtful gaze into vacancy. From time to time she looked up at him with a touch of eagerness, but there was no answering interest in his manner. His thoughts were far away.

"May I ask what brings you this time, sahib?" she inquired at last.

"A little deal in the market," responded Varick carelessly. "It seems to have puzzled Adhem as much as it did me. He has been in the cabinet for half an hour."

He stared on musingly as he smoked, then dropped his eyes to the slender, graceful figure of Jadeh. With knees clasped in her hands, she leaned back on the hassock, deeply thoughtful. Her head was tilted upward, and the flickering light fell full on her face. It crossed Varick's mind that she was pretty, and he was about to say so as he would have said to any other woman, when the curtains behind them were thrown open and they both glanced around.

Another man, an East Indian, entered. This was Adhem Singh, the crystal gazer, in the conventional robes of a seer. He, too, was a part of the picture. There was an expression of apprehension, mingled with some other impalpable quality, on his strong face.

"Well, Adhem?" inquired Varick. "I have seen strange things, sahib," replied the seer solemnly. "The crystal tells me of danger."

"Danger?" repeated Varick with a slight lifting of his brows. "Oh well, in that case I shall keep out of it."

"Not danger to your business, sahib," the crystal gazer went on with troubled face; "but danger in another way."

The girl Jadeh looked at him with quick, startled eyes, and asked some question in her native tongue. He answered in the same language, and she rose suddenly with terror-stricken face to fling herself at Varick's feet, weeping. Varick seemed to understand, too, and looked at the seer in apprehension.

"Death?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

Adhem was silent for a moment and bowed his head respectfully before the steady, inquiring gaze of the white man.

"Pardon, sahib," he said at last. "I did not remember that you understood my language."

"What is it?" insisted Varick abruptly. "Tell me."

"I cannot, sahib."

"You must!" declared the other. He had risen commandingly. "You must!"

The crystal gazer crossed to him and stood for an instant with his hand resting on the white man's shoulder, studying the fear he found in the white man's face. "The crystal, sahib," he began, "it tells me that—that—"

"No, no, brother!" pleaded the girl.

"Go on!" Varick commanded.

"It grieves me to say that which will pain one whom I love as I do you, sahib," said the seer

By JACQUES FUTRELLE

slowly. "Perhaps you had rather see for yourself?"

"Well, let me see then," said Varick. "Is it in the crystal?"

"Yes, by the favor of the gods."

"But I can't see anything there," Varick declared. "I've tried hundreds of times."

"I believe this will be a little different, sahib," said Adhem quietly. "Can you stand a shock?"



She Was a Part of the Picture.

Varick shook himself a little impatiently. "Of course," he replied. "Yes, yes!"

"A very serious shock?"

Again there was an impatient twist of Varick's shoulders. "Yes, I can stand anything!" he exclaimed shortly. "What is it? Let me see."

He strode toward that point in the draperies where Adhem had entered, while the girl, on her knees, sought with entreating hands to stop him.

"No, no, no!" she pleaded. "No!"

"Don't do that," Varick expostulated in annoyance; but gently he stooped and lifted her to her feet. "I am not a child, or a fool."

He threw aside the curtains. As they fell softly behind him he heard a pitiful little cry of grief from Jadeh, and set his teeth together hard.

He stood in the crystal cabinet. It was somewhat larger than an ordinary closet and had been made impenetrable to light by hangings of black velvet.

For awhile he stood there so that his eyes might become accustomed to the utter blackness, and gradually the sinister, fascinating crystal ball appeared, faintly visible by its own mystic luminosity. It rested on a pedestal covered with black velvet.

Varick was accustomed to his surroundings—he had been in the cabinet many times. Now he dropped down on a stool in front of the table whereon the crystal lay and leaning forward on his arms, stared into its limpid depths. Unblinkingly

for one, two, three minutes he sat with his thoughts in a chaos.

After awhile there came a change in the ball. It seemed to glow with a growing light other than its own. Suddenly it darkened completely, and out of this darkness grew shadowy, vague forms to which he could give no name. Finally a veil seemed to be lifted, for the globe grew brighter, and he leaned forward, eagerly, fearfully. Another veil melted away, and a still brighter light illumined the ball.

Now Varick was able to make out objects. Here was a table littered with books and papers, there a chair, yonder a shadowy mantel. Gradually the light grew until his tensely fixed eyes pained him, but he stared steadily on. Another quick brightness came, and the objects all became clear. He studied them incredulously for a few seconds, and then he recognized what he saw. It was a room—his study—miles away in his apartments.

A numb chilliness seized him; but, fascinated, he gazed on. The outlines of the crystal were disappearing—now they were gone and he saw more. A door opened, and a man entered the room into which he was looking. Varick gave a little gasp as he recognized the man. It was himself. He watched the man—himself—as he moved about the study aimlessly for a time as if deeply troubled, then as he dropped into a chair at the desk. Varick read clearly on the vision face those emotions which he was suffering in person. As he looked the man made some hopeless gesture with his hands—his hands— and leaned forward on the desk with his head on his arms. Varick shuddered.

For a long time, it seemed, the man sat motionless, then Varick became conscious of another figure, a man, in the room. This figure had come into the vision from his own viewpoint. His face was averted. Varick did not recognize the figure; but he saw something else and started in terror. It was a knife in the hand of the unknown, and he was creeping stealthily toward the unconscious figure in the chair—himself—with the weapon raised.

An inarticulate cry burst from Varick's colorless lips—a cry of warning—as he saw the unknown creep on, on, on, toward—himself. He saw the figure that was himself move a little, and the unknown leaped. The up-raised knife swept down and was buried to the handle. Again a cry, an unintelligible shriek, burst from Varick's lips, his heart fluttered, and perspiration poured from his face. With incoherent mutterings, he sank forward helplessly.

How long he remained there he didn't know; but at last he compelled himself to look again. The crystal glittered coldly on its velvet pedestal, but that hideous thing which had been there was gone. The thought came to him to bring it back, to see more; but repulsive fear, terror, seized upon him. He rose and staggered out of the cabinet. His face was pallid, and his hands clasped and unclasped nervously.

Jadeh was lying on a divan sobbing. She leaped to her feet when he entered, and, looking into his face, she knew. Again she buried her face in her hands and wept. Adhem stood with moody eyes fixed on the great god Budd.

"I saw—I understand," said Varick between his teeth; "but—I don't believe it."

"The crystal never lies, sahib," said the seer sorrowfully.

"But it can't be—that," Varick declared protestingly.

"Be careful, sahib—oh, be careful!" urged the girl.

"Of course I shall be careful," said Varick shortly. Suddenly he turned to the crystal gazer, and there was a menace in his tone. "Did such a thing ever appear to you before?"

"Only once, sahib."

"And did it come true?"

Adhem inclined his head slowly.

"I may see you to-morrow," exclaimed Varick suddenly. "This room is stifling. I must go out."

With twitching hands he drew a light coat over his evening dress, picked up his hat, and rushed out into the world of realities. The crystal gazer stood motionless for a moment, while Jadeh clung to his arm tremblingly.

"It is as the gods will," he said sadly, at last.

Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, Ph.D., LL.D., F.R.S., M.D., etc., scientist and logician—The Thinking Machine—received Howard Varick in the small reception room and invited him to a seat. Varick's face was ashen; there were dark lines under his eyes, and in them was the glitter of ungovernable terror. Every move showed the nervousness which gripped him. The Thinking