

# The Home Reading Circle



BY OWEN HALL

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### SYNOPSIS.

The story is narrated by the author, who, with his friend Crawford, is seeking the ruined city of Annapur, in south-eastern India. The object of the search is some treasure that the men believe lies hidden in the ancient hall of Buddha, within the ruined city. They have obtained this knowledge from a document that a grateful fakier has given to Crawford. They interpret the contents to mean that at full moon the beams will fall upon the spot in the hall where the treasure is concealed. The men find the ruined city, but to locate the hall among the mass of crumbling walls is apparently a hopeless task. At last, so it seems to the narrator as he gazes upon the shapeless mass that was once a noble city.

### PART II.

I was in the very act of turning to Crawford with a rather disappointed laugh to say so, when my eye was arrested by a phenomenon. The sun was going down, and at the moment his level rays streamed in a dazzling river of flashing light through the narrow gorge in the hills. It blazed on the still surface of the lake; it spread in waves of liquid gold over the desolate site of the city of Sondavalla; it crowned with a perfect halo of glory the huge precipitous rock that rose darkly between me and the western sky. My eye had rested almost unconsciously, on the citadel rock as I turned, and I uttered an exclamation of surprise. There, at a distance of perhaps a third of its height from the sharply-defined summit, there glared from the black wall of stone a succession of sparkling arrows of light that darted through the long shadows cast by the rock across the plain. For a second or two I stared in wonder at the sight; then like a flash it meaning burst upon my mind.

could scarcely take many hours to do. We had our evening meal, and, as we did so, watched the gradually waning daylight as it died away from the lake and the plain, and at last the sky, till the shadows stole over the scene in darker and yet darker tones. The moon rose, clear and liquid, from behind the forest and flooded both sky



WE FOUND THAT A NARROW PASSAGE WAS LEFT.

and earth with silver light. We waited till she had risen some distance in the heaven, and both our attendants had gone to sleep before we started. At last all was ready, and we set out. Neither Crawford nor I seemed disposed for conversation as we proceeded on our adventure. There was something strangely mysterious in the business, which, in spite of myself, oppressed me with a sense of foreboding, and the effect was heightened and made more intense by the solemn stillness and beauty of the scene. Moonlight—the marvelous moonlight of the innermost tropics—steeped the scene in a ghostly splendor. It lay on the silent lake, a burnished shield of silver; it rested on the scaling masses of the mountain range that towered up into the violet blue of the sky; it brooded, soft and misty, over the silent ruins of the dead city into which we were making our way. There was something startling in the silence. A sound of any kind—the rustling of a leaf, the note of a bird, even the cry of a beast of prey, would have seemed a relief in that impressive stillness. We followed the line of the great avenue which had been so plainly marked out by the heaps of crumbling ruin on either hand, leading, as we knew it did, directly to the great central mass of rock which now rose gray and ghostly before us.

The distance from our camping place could hardly have exceeded two miles, and we met no obstacle in the path. Our silent tread on the mossy turf disturbed no echoes among the shapeless mounds of what had once been stone, and only the soft, weird whisper of the night breeze reached us as it stole through the ruins and barely stirred the leaves of the great trees that rose so mysteriously from unseen depths among the crumbling heaps. We made our way steadily onwards till at last the mass of rock rose frowning and perpendicular overhead. It looked black and forbidding. Seen close at hand, even the moonlight failed to brighten it as it stood out, black, bare and threatening, against the sky. There were no ruins close to the rock, and in most places the level ground reached to its very base. Here and there we came upon a piece of shattered rock which seemed to have fallen from the cliff and sunk deeply into the earth, and once or twice these splintered rocks appeared to have brought with them masses of what looked like crumbling masonry.

We searched in vain on the side we had reached for some sign of an entrance or passage into the rock, and it was not till we had traced it round that side and more than half of the other, that Crawford, who had taken the lead, came to halt in the dark shadow that stretched westward from the citadel. When I joined him I found that he was standing at the foot of a sloping mass of rubbish and shattered masonry larger than any we had yet met with. This seemed piled up against the face of the cliff as though it had slid from the top.

"I think there is something here," Crawford said, straining his eyes to look upwards through the deep shadow. I followed his example, and it did seem to me, too, that just above the heap, at whose foot we were standing, there was something that looked like a darker hollow in the black face of the beetling rock.

"You've got the lantern," he added, in a half whisper, as if he were afraid of waking an echo in the intense silence. I produced the lantern and we lighted it. It was small, and, although easily carried, threw but a feeble light on our surroundings. By its light, however, we contrived to scramble up the rugged heap of masonry and rocks till we reached the top. Our impression had been correct; there was—of any rate there had been—a doorway. At first I thought it was effectually barred by the fallen stone, but on examining the place more carefully by the

lantern's light we found that a narrow passage, which indeed might more properly be called a hole, was left between the arched top of the gateway and the mass of rubbish which so dark and forbidding enough, but it was evident that it was the only hope of accomplishing our object, and we did not hesitate. As the bearer of the lantern, I took the lead, and slowly and with difficulty, by getting on all fours I managed to get through. The fallen mass sloped away on the inner as it had done on the outer side, and after I had waited long enough to light Crawford on his way through the narrow entrance, I proceeded to descend to the level of the ancient entrance, closely followed by my companion.

I had nearly got to the bottom when a stone on which I had set my foot suddenly gave way and I rolled helplessly downwards. The lantern, although extinguished, was most fortunately found to be unbroken when Crawford scrambled down to where I lay, and after some trouble we managed to relight it. Till this had been accomplished I had been content to lie still, feeling a little bruised and sore, and almost reluctant to make an exertion which might make me aware of some more serious injury than that which I was conscious of having received. When at last I roused myself and gained my feet I was glad to find that except a slight sprain of my right ankle I seemed little the worse.

"Now for it!" said Crawford, cheerfully, when he had passed his experienced surgeon's hand over the place. "I'm afraid it may give you some trouble by and by, but you'll be able to limp through this job tonight, I fancy, and the sooner you get on your feet the better." I was able to rise, and I was able to follow his lead, but it was slowly, and not without pain each time I rested any weight on the injured foot. When we had got clear of the loose stones and rubbish that had rolled farther into the passage, we found that the entrance was a wide one, wide enough for ten or twelve men to march through side by side, and that it stretched forward into what looked like an abyss of impenetrable darkness. Our lantern glimmered feebly on the rocky floor, and shone faintly on the walls that extended upwards out of sight without showing any indication of a roof overhead. We went slowly and cautiously forward, for the place seemed well fitted for the lair of some beast of prey, but, except the faint echo of our own footsteps, there was not a sound of life. At last Crawford paused and held up the lantern.

"Thank goodness, that's all," said Crawford, as he stopped and held up the lantern. It glimmered like a rush of light in a cathedral, but it showed us nothing. Beyond the radius of its puny light all was an abyss of the blackest darkness. By going cautiously round with the light we soon discovered that we stood in a wide antechamber which opened by a narrow doorway into another. At the moment when Crawford advanced through this holding the lantern before him, a sudden gust of wind blew out the light and left us in darkness. But not here! It took only a moment to convince me that my first impression was wrong—it was no longer dark. There was light—a faint, gray, uncertain light, which seemed to steal through the darkness and rather to dilute its quality than absolutely to substitute anything else in its place. From where I stood in the ante-chamber I could see plainly that it came from the inner chamber through the narrow doorway, and it was strong enough to enable me to see Crawford's figure as he paused at the entrance.

"It's the hall," he said, in a voice that was almost a whisper. "Come on! There's light enough in here without the lantern." As he spoke he passed through the doorway and disappeared in the gray darkness, and I made haste to limp after him.

In the course of many wanderings I had been in many strange places and seen not a few sights that were both curious and impressive, but I cannot say that among them all my memory can single out one in all respects so impressive as this. As I stood within the entrance and looked round, the words of the Pall writing came back to my memory so vividly that I seemed to hear them repeated, "The black and ancient hall." It was a hall of vast size. The first impression it made on the senses was its blackness. On every side the blackness closed in; in the floor, the walls, or the shadows that

represented the walls, the huge square pillars that stood in row after row till they were lost in the dim obscurity, the shadows overhead which seemed to represent the roof, all alike were black. The faint light seemed to float and cling round the pillars, but it nowhere called forth a single spark of light from the dull, dead surface. I hardly knew how long we stood in silence, but at least it must have been for several minutes before Crawford turned and grasping me by the arm said in an eager whisper:

"It's all right, Hall; there's no mistake about the place. See—that must be Buddha himself."

"Look here, Hall," he said, "I've looked everywhere but I can see no signs of any secret place for the treasure, and what is still more remarkable don't see any possible way for moonlight to come in when the moon's overhead. The only thing to be done now is to wait and see what happens at the moment of full moon, and that will be at nineteen minutes past twelve. In the meantime I can see well enough to take some notes on our way, and I think it will be almost necessary to fetch that little crowbar. You don't mind my leaving you alone here, do you, while I fetch that? I fancy there's just about time to do it, and in case we're a few minutes late you can mark the exact spot."

"Yes," I said, a little wearily, "yet, I can do as much as that, no doubt, if anything happens to point it out."

"Oh, come now," he replied, with rather an anxious laugh, "what's the use of swallowing a cow and choking on the tail. I haven't a shadow of a doubt about it now, and I don't believe you have either. It's that confounded ankle of yours that spoke then."

I felt that he was right, and I couldn't but feel that his proposal was the best that could be made under the circumstances, as I could be of very little active service either in securing or carrying off any treasure there might be concealed. I therefore agreed heartily to do my best to trace and indications there might be of the hiding place until Crawford returned with assistance, and, having carefully lighted the lantern to show him the way he started.

I need hardly say that I should have preferred Crawford's share of the business had I been in a condition to undertake it, and it was with something very like a shudder that I watched the glimmering farther and farther away till at last it disappeared through the square opening of the doorway by which we had entered, leaving me alone in the desolate temple. For some seconds I could catch the faint echo of my companion's footsteps as he descended the great staircase up which we had toiled, and then they died away leaving a deathly stillness behind in which the beating of my heart sounded like a drum. How long should I have to wait for his return? This was the first thought that filled my mind, though it

was quickly followed by the question: Should anything happen in my absence I was there to watch for the sign that was to disclose the hiding-place of the treasure—would it come? In any other place, at any other time, I should have laughed the very idea to scorn—but here? I looked around on every side only to be met by the long, straight shafts of the dense black pillars; far away on the right I could trace the faint outline of one of the rock-hewn windows through which the gray light filtered into the black cavern in which I stood alone.

I was standing opposite the figure now, and, as I peered upwards through the darkness at the face that held me with an almost hypnotic spell, something happened. I could not have said what it was that I noticed, but I felt that the blood run coldly through my limbs, but there was something—the face had changed. Its expression had changed, or seemed to change, a dozen times before, but I knew that this was different—it had really changed this time. What was it?

I gazed fixedly at the great, calm, features till suddenly it flashed upon me. It was the eyes. Till that moment the great orbs had looked out, as they felt, with a dull stare into the dim shadows that surrounded them, but now they woke to life—a strange, pale face. I stared; I rubbed my eyes to make sure that it was not another trick of the fancy only more vivid than any that had gone before, but when I looked again the impression had only grown stronger. From the centre of each eyeball a dim, ghostly ray of light was gleaming, and moment by moment they grew brighter, I struck downward, and I could trace its path through the gray shadows like the flight of a phosphorescent arrow. My eye followed the two slender lines as they fell, and I noticed that they inclined to one another till at last they joined and as a single ray of light settled upon the right knee of the sitting figure. 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