

At Windsor

The Master Criminal, #2

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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Chapter I

THE Mahrajah of Curriebad was for the present located in Jermyn Street. On the following day he was commanded to Windsor for the regulation dinner; in the meantime he had practically chartered the hotel.

Morals the Mahrajah possessed none—they would have been perfectly superfluous in any case—but money he had in plenty. For this reason the India Office people were fond of him.

At the present moment they were desirous of getting something out of their distinguished visitor: more territory, more men, an extra sack of diamonds; and the Windsor interview was expected to clinch the business. Meantime the dusky potentate winked the other eye. He fully appreciated the meaning of the phrase. He had a private music-hall of his own at Curriebad.

Incidentally it may be mentioned that a more consummate rascal than Nana Rau never drew the breath of life through shifty lips. Of his early career people knew but little. They noted that he spoke excellent English, and that his knowledge of the Stud-Book was not of a perfunctory character.

Nana Rau had just dined alone. As he lighted his second cigarette a servant entered with the announcement that a visitor waited below. With rare graciousness the Prince ordered the gentleman to be conveyed into his presence.

He came, he bowed, he closed the door behind him.

“My name is Wilfred Vaughan, your Highness,” he said.

The potentate nodded. The stranger prepossessed him, he was so exquisitely dressed.

“Sit down, Mr. Vaughan,” he said, “and take a cigarette. Then, if you please, you can proceed to unfold your business.”

“I am obliged to you. Ah, what it is to be an Eastern Potentate! Now, it would be impossible for me to get cigarettes like these. My good friend, it is possible that you have forgotten the old Oxford days?”

“That is a long time ago—twenty years,” Nana Rau replied, uneasily.

He felt uneasy, too. The India Office would have been surprised to hear that Nana Rau had ever been at Oxford. But *then* he was not Nana Rau at all, and four

good lives stood between him and the sacks of Curriabad diamonds. Also incidents had happened at Oxford which it was expedient should remain buried in the silent tomb with the flowers blooming atop, and no white stone to mark their memory. Even now, were those stories told, Nana Rau knew that his connection with the throne of Curriabad would come to an abrupt conclusion.

“Twenty years are nothing,” Vaughan said sententiously, “and my memory is good.”

“You are Vaughan of *The House*, of course. What *can* you remember?”

“Well, for instance,” Vaughan smiled, “there was a pretty tobacconist’s assistant: she was found dead under very suspicious circumstances. About the same time an Indian student at Christ Church disappeared. The police were anxious to find him—*very* anxious. Strange to say he was never heard of again; and, *until to-day*, I haven’t seen him since.”

Nana Rau recovered his equanimity. His thin lips ceased to twitch. He felt that this was a mere matter of money.

Illustration:

My memory is good

“Old chap,” he said quite cordially, “what’s the figure?”

“You always were a sensible man,” Vaughan replied. “Never any dashed Oriental poetry about you. All the same, there is no figure—in money signs, that is.”

“Then what the deuce do you want?”

“That I can hardly go into in detail. Let us speak plainly. I’ve got the whip hand of you: a few words from me and your interest in the sovereign lord and ruler business stops. You recognise that, of course. That I require something is obvious. I want you to stay away from Windsor to-morrow.”

Nana Rau smiled at the suggestion.

“Absurd,” he said; “you know I dare not do so.”

“Under ordinary circumstances, no. But these are not ordinary circumstances. You are merely going semi-officially. There will be no State fuss; you will dine at the Castle, and return here next morning. What is intended to take place yonder you know as well as I do.”

“I don’t want to go. It’s certain to be deuced slow. And if you can only show me some way out of the difficulty without compromising myself—”

“Of course I have my plans prepared,” Vaughan interrupted. “You don’t leave Paddington till a train somewhere about six. Here is my card with my address. My place is out at Epsom. Come out there and lunch with me to-morrow, and bring your suite with you, baggage and all, and if we can’t come to terms, my carriage shall take you to Paddington.”

“I have only two chaps with me besides my cook,” said the Prince.

“Good. So much the better. Then you will come?”

“Well, there is no harm in that,” said Nana Rau. “I will.”

A few minutes later Wilfred Vaughan, *alias* Felix Gryde, was placidly walking along Piccadilly. He turned into the *Café Soyer*, where the other parties to the conspiracy were awaiting him and dinner. They were the tools to be used and to be discarded when the curtain fell.

"It's all right," Gryde proceeded to explain over the *bisque*. "I told you Nana Rau was the same man I used to be at Oxford with twenty years ago. I spotted him at Ascot, and I never forget a face. Nana was terribly frightened, and, indeed, it was no idle boast that I could bring about his ruin."

"Will he come?" asked the second conspirator.

"And will the original plan stand?" asked the third.

"Exactly as arranged. You will look after all the details, as I shall be very busy till luncheon time to-morrow. You will see that the cold luncheon is properly laid out by the local caterer, and pay for it. Then the keys must be packed up so as to be posted to the landlord's agent directly we leave the house. Let the carriage be ordered for 3.30 prompt, and pay the liveryman for that also. Let it be understood that we have just taken the house for six months furnished—which is, indeed, the fact—and go to a registry office to inquire about servants. Order a dozen, and say the housekeeper will call to interview them on a certain day. Each of us, till the time for changing comes, retains his present disguise."

As a "make-up" artist Gryde had no equal. Several society acquaintances there passed him without a sign of recognition.

"That's all very well," suggested one of the lieutenants; "but suppose any of the Castle people happen to have seen Nana Rau?"

"Which they haven't done," said Gryde. "I have made the most minute inquiries on this head. Besides, one Eastern Potentate is as like another as two peas when he is in his full war paint. It's any money nobody yonder speaks the language, and if they do I shall make it my pleasure to stick to English. As you have both presumably been in England before, you can do the same. You have carefully studied the plans of the apartments I gave to you?"

The others protested that they had.

"Very good," Gryde concluded; "in that case there is no more to be said. We ought to find enough within easy reach yonder to reward us for all our trouble. And the servants of the sovereign shall assist us in getting it away. I hope you won't find it altogether too slow."

Gryde settled the score and they rose to depart. In the street they separated, and each took a different way. Then they went to bed early and virtuously as befit men who have before them matters of importance on the morrow. On the whole they slept better than Nana Rau, Mahrajah of Curriabad.

Chapter II

IT WAS with considerable misgivings that Nana Rau drove with two dusky assistants down to Epsom the following morning.

With him was all his baggage, a formidable-looking amount for a night out; but then the dazzling splendour of Eastern attire cannot be measured by Western sartorial restrictions. These big trunks contained the full war paint which Nana Rau and suite intended to don after luncheon, and ere proceeding to Windsor.

One thing Nana Rau was fully resolved upon. Nothing should induce him to play into "Vaughan's" hands unless the latter could provide him with a proper way

out of the difficulty. It was only natural that the Prince should desire to protect himself, and nothing short of being able to show that he was the innocent victim of a vile conspiracy would satisfy him.

The Indians reached Vaughan's hospitable mansion at length and were met at the door by that individual himself.

"I am afraid I shall have to request you to dispense with a deal of ceremony," he said. "The fact is, this place has been let furnished for about a year, and my late tenants only turned out of it last week, and thus we are terribly short of servants. These footmen don't seem able to do anything without a lot of women to help them."

Vaughan, or Gryde rather, rang the bell violently, and presently a pair of men-servants appeared breathlessly. They were a fine-looking pair of men, and their livery left nothing to be desired. The astute reader will have little difficulty in guessing who these footmen were.

"Whatever have you fellows been doing?" Gryde demanded.

"Please, sir," replied one, in the purest of Cockney accents, "it's all along of the new cook, which she's drunk—"

Gryde waved these details aside.

"I desire to know nothing of these matters," he replied. "Take the Prince up to the room prepared for him, and these gentlemen also, and see that they have everything they require. Luncheon is prepared, I suppose?"

"Luncheon is waiting in the dining-room now, sir."

A little later and Nana Rau, together with his host and attendants, sat down to one of the most perfect luncheons it is possible to imagine. The Prince was a bit of an epicure in his way, and as the meal proceeded he softened. The choice champagne rendered him indifferent to the calls of Windsor. And really, it seemed quite bad taste to stand in the light of so enlightened a bon vivant as Vaughan.

Absolutely nothing had been left undone. The luncheon was a work of art, the wines were cameos in their way, and the waiting of the two confederates left nothing to be desired. In the poetic language of the modern Babylon, Nana Rau was an accomplished "tiddler"; in the old days he would have been a three-bottle man, and to leave such a feast of alcohol for a mere Court function partook almost of the nature of a crime.

"Then why leave it?" Gryde asked, when the attendants had withdrawn and he and the Prince were alone. "Stay and make an evening of it."

"What's the good of talking that dashed nonsense?" said Nana Rau thickly. "You know as well as possible that I must go."

"But it was arranged that I was to take your place."

"O! I know that's your game. I suppose you've got some diplomatic swindle on. Only show me a clear way out—a way which will absolutely absolve me from all blame—and you shall take my place with pleasure."

"I am about to do so," said Gryde. "I think I shall be able to satisfy even your scruples if you will permit me to leave you for a minute."

Nana Rau waved his hand majestically. He wanted no other company beyond that superb champagne. He closed his eyes with the ecstasy of it. He opened them again with a start five minutes later. Then, with a beatific smile upon his face, he slipped from his chair on to the floor and slept.

Illustration:

Slipped from the chair and slept

Let no slur rest upon the fair fame of Nana Rau. For instance, he was a great deal more sober than Mr. Pickwick when discovered in the village pound. But even the strongest of heads cannot rise superior to a bottle or so of '74 champagne *plus* a narcotic of potent properties.

A minute or two later Gryde entered the room, followed by his two "footmen."

"You fellows did your part uncommonly well," Gryde said. "The Christy minstrel on the floor is firm enough, and so are the others. They are perfectly safe here until this time to-morrow. Now then, boys—no time to be lost. Let us go upstairs at once and get the Eastern robes on. Very nice to think that we should be actually provided with our disguises."

The work was by no means easy, though Gryde was an artist so far as this branch of his profession was concerned. But patience and skill overcomes all things, and at length the task was accomplished. It would indeed have puzzled an Englishman to have told the counterfeit from the originals.

"This thing will make a bit of a stir," said Gryde.

"Egad, you are right there," said one of the others, grimly. "Look here, Mr. Vaughan, I'm not very particular, but I have jibbed a bit over this job. Any ordinary woman in England, but when it comes to—"

"You seem to regard me as somewhat simple," Gryde interrupted. "Do you suppose I should be guilty of anything in such fearful taste?"

"But I was under the impression that we were going down on purpose to—"

"So we are. But my words will come true all the same. At six o'clock this evening important information, bearing upon the face of it every evidence of truth, will reach the India Office. A certain great lady will be informed of the same without delay. And Nana Rau will not kiss the hand of her to whom he owes fealty."

The scrupulous one said no more, being quite satisfied with this explanation.

A little later a resplendent carriage drove up to the house, and the three Indians gravely emerged. Two of them stood aside and bowed low as Gryde passed, and then, when the two huge trunks were hoisted on the carriage, they entered.

Illustration:

Two of them stood aside and bowed

The journey to Paddington was made without incident. Gryde had laid his plans so carefully, he had made so many inquiries beforehand, that he has nothing to fear from any display of ignorance on his part.

Everything went well, the retained carriage was entered at length, and the train started.

"Nothing wanting," said Gryde, with an air of satisfaction; "not a single hitch—and, really, this is a most critical part of the performance. They might have laid a strip of crimson carpet across the platform, but at times like these one is not disposed to be hypercritical. Windsor will be the next trouble."

But Windsor proved no bother at all. The red liveried servants were allowed to take everything in their own hands, and ere long the adventurers found themselves bowling along the wide avenues up to the Castle.

"How do you feel?" asked Gryde.

"Uncommonly nervous," said the others in chorus.

Gryde smiled. He did not appear to be suffering from the same malady. On the contrary, he was perfectly at his ease.

"The great charm of this mode of life," he muttered, "lies in the fact that it never lacks variety."

Chapter III

AS FAR AS their reception was concerned, even the sensitive mind of an Indian could find nothing at which to take offence. It was, of course, with profound regret that the pseudo Nana Rau heard that no visitors could be expected at the royal table the same evening in consequence of a slight indisposition on the part of a certain great ruler. Nor was it suggested by the gorgeous official who conducted the interview that the visit of the Prince should be prolonged in consequence.

"It is greatly to be regretted," Nana murmured.

"I can assure you that the regret is mutual," was the reply. "If the Prince will honour us by dining with the Household, together with his suite."

"I shall be delighted," the Prince interpolated. "As to my suite, they had better dine in the apartment apportioned to their use. Afterwards you will greatly oblige me by letting an attendant conduct them over the state rooms, and show them some of the treasures of this wonderful place. It is a pleasure that my faithful followers have looked forward to for a long time."

"Everything shall be done to make them comfortable," the big official replied. "May I remind the Prince that we dine at eight."

Nana Rau nodded carelessly and intimated his desire to be alone with his men. The request was immediately granted. For a little time the three conspirators stood as far from the door as possible talking in whispers.

"You see how beautifully things are falling out," said Gryde. "We are here without any suspicion being aroused. There is no chance of public sentiment being awakened by a flagrant insult to the sovereign. All we have to do is to fill these big trunks in the still watches of the night, and get these good people to convey them to the station for us in the morning. By way of spotting all the things worth having, an attendant will take you round presently and point out the plums to you. But I need not waste my time on advice; you are both capital judges of articles of value."

"And as to you?"

"As to me, I dine with the Household. Of course, you both occupy my dressing-room. We leave by a train about seven, as I have an engagement in Manchester to fill to-morrow night, or, at least, the real Nana has, so we shall be away before anything is missing."

"And if things are missed just after we start?"

“What matter? We should be the last to be suspected. And you may be certain the common or garden police would never be consulted in a matter like this. Absolutely nothing in the way of a public scandal would be permitted. And say they looked like bringing it home to us. Would they care to stop us, and cart us off to a police-station? Not a bit of it. Am I not a man of power in our country? A trustworthy courtier would come to us with every expression of regret to call for the few trifles that were by mistake taken away with our luggage. But as we are not going to Jermyn Street, and as we shall emerge on Paddington platform clothed and in our right minds, they have little chance of seeing those treasures again.”

There was sound logic in every word that Gryde uttered. Unless by any chance, and that was indeed a remote one, the real Indian was discovered, they were absolutely safe. But, even if by some strange fortune the Simon Pure was unearthed, the powerful drug would seal his lips for some hours yet.

It was, therefore, with an easy conscience and a mind at rest that Nana Rau went down to dine with the Household. He would have felt a little more comfortable, perhaps, in ordinary evening dress, but nobody seemed to notice this. At the same time he had the satisfaction of knowing that there was positively no flaw in his attire, and all the more so because at least two generals who knew India well were present.

Gryde said very little, and that little awkwardly. His cue was to do the shy and slightly suspicious guest, which part he acted to perfection.

A little before eleven he deemed it prudent to retire. In that exalted of all exalted spheres they are not particularly late, and by twelve o'clock sleep brooded over the Castle.

But not in the two rooms devoted to the Indian guests. They sat waiting and talking there for the critical moment to arrive, which hour had been fixed by Gryde for two. Meantime they had to wait.

“You have seen everything?” Gryde murmured.

“Well, not everything,” was the reply; “but enough, and more than enough. We can take away thousands of pounds’ worth of stuff without quitting this floor.”

“So much the better,” Gryde replied with a smile. “Never run any unnecessary risks. Not that it would matter very much if one of you were taken.” The time crept slowly on, and at length the hour came. Gryde jumped to his feet. He was alert and eager enough now. There was no need for lights, as all the passages gleamed. What they had to fear were the watchmen. But there were three of them.

“Now follow me,” Gryde whispered. There was no time for hesitation. The corridors appeared to be silent and deserted, but at any time a watchman might come along. But nothing happened to disturb the work of the adventurers. Tapestry hangings and Cordova leather here and there not only looked patrician and valuable, but they formed capital cover for a laden thief whose modesty is in proportion to the value of his burden.

At the end of an hour Gryde’s bedroom presented an appearance of dazzling splendour. Most of the treasures collected were not only historic but of immense intrinsic value. On the whole, the haul was perhaps a better one than the theft of the regal corpse.

Illustration:
Even Gryde was satisfied at last

Even Gryde was satisfied at length.

“No more,” he said. “Now remove those bars of lead from the baggage and hide them behind the curtains. Pack the stuff away quietly and then get to bed. We shall have to be up a little after six, remember.”

Shortly after seven the next morning three shivering Orientals were sped away from the Castle by a big official, who strove politely to hide his yawns. When the station was reached and the Orientals were alone they developed new vigour. One of them even went so far as to see the baggage safely in the van. Perhaps he mistrusted the absent guard, for he followed it in, the others standing by the door.

His movements were peculiar and rapid. He touched a spring on each box and the basket frames fell all to pieces. These were immediately hidden under mail bags. Three huge portmanteaux of different colour were revealed. To each of these a label bearing a different name was attached; the baggage was quite transformed.

Then the shivering Orientals went on their way to the carriage reserved for them. Directly they were inside the blinds were pulled down. The loose Eastern robes were discarded, and beneath them were disclosed three typical English garbs—a parson’s, a country squire’s, and that of a man about town. With the free use of the lavatory and a make-up box produced by Gryde, he and the other artists were utterly changed by the time Slough was reached. Just before then a big bundle was carefully dropped out of the window. The train pulled up at Slough. Gryde opened the window opposite the platform.

“Now,” he whispered, “you’ve all got your tickets?”

Confederates One and Two nodded curtly. An instant later the door was closed again with the curtains still down, and the trio had reached the further platform without attracting the slightest attention. When they strolled back again by the proper way to the train they appeared to be strangers to each other, for each entered a different carriage, not, needless to remark, the one with the drawn blinds. Then the train sped on towards Paddington.

Once arrived there, Gryde was out of the carriage before the train had fairly stopped. In this move the other actors were not far behind him. The great object now was to secure the baggage and get it out of the station without delay. Out came the stuff tumbling on the platform, and a moment later the three precious portmanteaux were hoisted upon three cabs and all driven away at once to separate destinations. The *coup* had been accomplished!

But not with much to spare. As Gryde looked with lamb-like gaze over the tops of his glasses, a parson to the life, he saw coming down the slope into the station two quiet men, who appeared to see nothing. Gryde smiled.

“They’ve found it out and telegraphed,” he chuckled, “or else two shining lights like Marsh and Elliott would not have been put on the job. If they have found Nana Rau, why we have no time to lose. If not, why so much the better.”

It was about nine o’clock the same evening, and the three conspirators, absolutely without disguise, and *qua* Gryde and Co., were seated over dinner in the former’s rooms. They had the air of men who had done well and virtuously

“You managed to get rid of your lot?” Gryde asked.

“Yes,” the first man responded. “All beyond recognition by this time. You’ll see to the disposal?”

“I suppose you are all right?” Gryde said to the other.

“I am also satisfied,” said he. “We both deposited the plunder as you directed. Most of my stuff was jewelled, and you can’t recognise jewels. We are as safe as houses. For my part I should like to have a bit of a rest, considering that I haven’t seen my own natural face for a fortnight. When I look at myself in the glass I feel quite startled.”

“Let’s go round to a restaurant,” suggested Gryde, “and see if anything’s come out.”

The proposal found favour in the eyes of the others. In the St. Giles’s one or two men were languidly discussing something in connection with Windsor Castle and incidentally Indian princes.

“What’s that?” Gryde demanded.

“All in the *Globe*,” said an exhausted voice. “Rum case, by Jove!”

Gryde took up the special *Globe* and turned it over languidly. He had hardly expected to find the case public. But all the same it was, and nothing had been lost in the display of the juicy item:

BURGLARY AT WINDSOR CASTLE
INGENIOUS AND SUCCESSFUL FRAUD
AN INDIAN PRINCE IS DRUGGED AND IMPERSONATED BY THIEVES

From information just received it is evident that last night a clever and successful attempt at burglary was carried out at Windsor Castle.

It appears that H.R.H. the Maharajah of Curriebad was summoned to Windsor for some purpose of State, and this seems to have been known to the miscreants. The Prince was lured away to Epsom by an individual claiming to be an old friend of his, the pretext being an invitation to luncheon. There he and his attendants were drugged and locked in a deserted house whilst the pseudo Indians repaired to Windsor.

What happened there we are not in a position to say, but early this morning the Prince and his attendants escaped from their prison-house, and lost no time in laying the case before the proper authorities. The police are extremely reticent upon the point, but we have the best authority for saying that during the night the daring thieves carried away from Windsor articles to the value of thousands of pounds. How they managed to get clear away is a mystery, for though the sham Indians were seen to enter their reserved carriage at Windsor, it is certain they did not detain en route. Up to the present nothing has been heard or seen of them.

At the last moment we are informed that a large bundle of Oriental robes have been picked up on the line near Slough. How they got there must for the present remain a mere matter for conjecture.

Gryde smiled as he laid the paper aside.

“Looks to me like a hoax,” he said,

“Depend upon it, our friend the Mahrajah got screwed and imagined the whole thing. Burglary at Windsor Castle! The whole thing is too absurd.”

With which Gryde went off to play pool, at which game, as usual, he proved singularly successful. But he declined to stay late.

“No,” he said; “I was up nearly all night. Some other time, perhaps. But you chaps may depend upon it those *Indians* will never be caught. See you fellows in a day or two. I’m going out of town to-morrow for a time.”

But Gryde’s tools never saw him again. They had pooled their plunder, and Gryde was to dispose of it. Yet days and weeks went by, and like the raven,

“Still is sitting, never flitting,”

they tarried for the master who came not.

“Some day,” growled No. 1, “we shall meet Vaughan again; then let him look to himself. I should know him anywhere.”

Vain boast, fond delusion. Tools it was necessary for Gryde to have, but as to using them and making familiar as Gryde with them—never! A myth was “Vaughan,” and as a myth he is likely to remain.

