

Dr. Bhumbo Singh

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Trevelyan Street used to be four blocks long, but now it is only three, and its aft end is blocked by the abutment of an overpass. (Do you find the words *Dead End* to have an ominous ring?) The large building in the 300 block used to be consecrated to worship by the Mesopotamian Methodist Episcopal Church (South) but has since been deconsecrated and is presently a glue warehouse. The small building contains the only Bhuthanese grocery and deli outside of Asia; its trade is small. And the little (and wooden) building lodges an extremely dark and extremely dirty little studio which sells spells, smells, and shrunken heads. Its trades are even smaller.

The spells are expensive, the smells are exorbitant, and the prices of its shrunken heads — first chop though they be — are simply inordinate.

The studio, however, has a low rent (it has a low ceiling, too), pays no license fee — it is open (when it is open) only between the hours of seven p.m. and seven a.m., during which hours the municipal license department does not function — and lacks not for business enough to keep the proprietor, a native of the Andaman Islands, in the few, the very few things, without which he would find life insupportable: namely curried squid, which he eats — and eats and *eats* — baroque pink pearls, which he collects, and (alone, and during the left phase of the moon) wears; also live tree-shrews. Some say that they are distantly cognate to the primates and, hence, it is supposed, to Man. *Be that as it may*. In their tiny ears he whispers directions of the most unspeakable sort, and then turns them loose, with great grim confidence. And an evil laugh.

The facts whereof I speak, I speak with certainty, for they were related to me by my friend Mr. Underhand; and Mr. Underhand has never been known to lie.

At any rate, at least, not to *me*.

“A good moonless evening to you, Underhand Misterjee,” says the

proprietor, at the termination of one lowering, glowering afternoon in Midnovember, “and a bad evening indeed to those who have had the fortune to incur your exceedingly just displeasure.” He scratches a filthy ear-lobe with a filthy finger.

—Midnovember, by the way, is the months which was banished from the Julian Calendar by Julian the Apostate; it has never appeared in the Gregorian Calendar: a good thing, too—

“And a good evening to *you*. Dr. Bhumbo Singh,” says Mr. Underhand. “As for *them* — Ha Ha!” He folds his thin and lilac-gloved hands over the handle of his stalking-crutch. Even several so-called experts have declared the handle (observed by light far less dim than that in the shop of Bhumbo Singh) to be ivory: they are wrong: it is bone, purely bone... Or perhaps one would better say, impurely bone...

“Ha Ha!” echoes (Dr.) Bhumbo Singh. He has in fact no right at all to this distinguished family name, which he has assumed in dishonor of a certain benevolent Sikh horse-coper who in a rash and malignly constellated hour took the notion to adopt him.

Now to business; “A spell, Underhand Sahib?” he next asks, rubbing his chin. His chin bears a dull-blue tattoo which would strike terror to the hearts and loosen the strings of the bowels of the vilest ruffians in Rangoon, Lahore, Peshawar, Pernambuco, and Wei-hatta-hatta yet unhangd, save, of course, that it is almost always by virtue of dust, the inky goo of curried squid, and a hatred of water akin to hydrophobia, totally invisible. “A spell, a spell? A nice spell? A severed head?”

“Fie upon your trumpery spells,” Mr. Eevelyn (two *es*) Underhand says easily. “They are fit only for witches, warlocks, and Boy Scouts or Girl. As for your severed heads, shrunken or otherwise: Ho Ho.”

He puts the tip of his right index finger alongside of the right naris of his nose. He winks.

Dr. Bhumbo Singh attempts a leer, but his heart is not in it. “They cost uncommon high nowadays, even wholesale,” he whines. And then he drops commercial mummery and simply waits.

“I have come for a smell, Doctor,” Underhand says, flicking away with the tip of his stalking-crutch a cricket scaped from the supply kept to feed the tree-shrews. Dr. Bh. Singh’s red little eyes gleam like those of a rogue ferret in the rutting season.

Underhand gives his head a brisk, crisp nod, and smacks his pursed lips. A smell, subtle, slow, pervasive. A vile smell. A puzzling smell. A smell

of seemingly ubiquitous provenance, and yet a smell which has no spoor. An evil smell. One which will, eventually, and to infinite relief, diminish... diminish... all but vanish... and then, rising like a phoenix from its bed of fragrant ashes, stalk abroad like a pest — worse, far worse than before...

“A smell disgusting beyond disgust...”

A slight shiver passes through Dr. (he has neither right nor title to this title, but who would dare deny it him? The AMA? The last platform which they could have occupied together even in combat was also occupied by Albertus Magnus.) passes through Dr. Bhumbo S.’s filthy, maugre frame. His tongue protrudes. (It is true that he can, when moved to do so, touch with it the tip of his rather *retroussé* nose; if it is also true that he can — and does — catch flies with it like a toad or chameleon, Mr. Underhand has not found the matter meet communicating to *me*.) His tongue withdraws. “In short, most-valued customer, what is now requisite is a smell which will drive men mad.”

“‘Men,’ Dr. Bhumbo Singh? ‘*Men?*’ I said nothing of men. The word never issued from my mouth. The concept, in fact, never formed in my mind.” Bhumbo shakes with what may be a malarial spasm, but is probably silent laughter.

“I have just the thing,” he says. “I have the very thing. The price is purely *pro forma*, the price is minimal, the price is 1500 golden gold pieces, of the coinage of Great Golconda. Per ounce.”

Underhand’s brows raise, descend, meet. “Of the imprint of Great Golconda? Why, even the very schoolboys know that Golconda-gold was so exceedingly pure that it might be eaten like jam, which is why so few of its coins now remain. Damme, damme, Dr. Bhumbo Singh, if this is how you treat and charge your most valued customers, it is no wonder that you have so few.” A mass of filth, matted together with cobwebs, slowly floats from the invisible ceiling to the unspeakable floor; is ignored.

The merchant shrugs. “Not even for my own brother, sir, am I willing to prepare the smell for less.” Considering that Bhumbo’s own (and only) brother, Bhimbo, has spent the last seven and one half years laden with chains in the sixth sub-basement of the gaol privily kept by that ugly, obese, and evil old woman, Fatima, Dowager Begum of Oont, without Bhumbo offering so much as two rupees two pice in ransom, this is quite probably the truth. “However, out of my great regard and respect for you personally and my desire to maintain the connexion, I shall not require you to purchase the full ounce. I shall sell it you by the drachm or scruple.”

“Done, Bhumbojee, done!” cries Mr. Underhand. He thumps the

stalking-crutch upon the filthy, filthy floor. The tree-shrew utter shrill little yipples of annoyance, and Bhumbo gives them crickets: they subside, aside from making nonverbal, crunching noises.

Nearby on the overpass a truck or lorry rumbles past; in its wake the frail building tembles, causing at least one of the shrunken heads to roll from side to side and grind its teeth. No one pays it mind. "Be pleased to return hither, then, Underhand Effendi, on (or, it may be, a trifle after) the Gules of December," Bhumbo Singh says. Then grows just a trifle uncertain. "'December,' the giaours call the next half-past-a-month 'December,' do they not?"

Evelyn Underhand (two *es*) rises to go. "They do indeed. They have a high festival therein."

"They do, they do?" cries Bhumbo Singh. "I had not known. — What a thing it is to be wise!" He accompanies his customer to the dirty, dirty door with many bows, obeisances, and genuflections. Customer, having perfunctorily placed his foot once on Bhumbo's nasty neck, is long gone by the time the last of these is finished.

Gone, long gone, and the distant echo of the penny-whistle (on which he is wont to play the grace-notes to the *Lament For Nana Sahib* as he walks his spidery way through such dank ways and dark) long gone as well...

In the next sundry weeks, either Bhumbo Singh or his very simulacrum is seen in a multitude of exceedingly diverse places. Abattoirs know him for brief moments; wool-pulleries and tanneries as well. He is seen to cast hands-full of the Semi-silent Sands of the Hazramawut (or Courts of Death) at the windowpanes of Abdulahi al-Ambergrisi (who sells asafoetida as well): and the Abdulahi (an Yezid of the Yezidi-folk) to open, blench, withdraw, thrust out by means of a very long-handled net an ampula of what-it-may-be. The Bhumbo — and if it be not he, who be it? — is observed out of the corners of eyes to scramble under the wharf at the Old Fish Market (condemned, since, by the Board of Health). He visits, also, the hovels of one or two and never more than three foreign folk who formerly fared at sea in tropic clime and who live now in tumbled sheds on the farther sides of disused dumps and show their ravaged faces only to the faces of the ravaged moons.

And on the nights when the moon is dark, he scambles through ointment factories, in search of flies.

Now and then he whispers, and, did one dare come close and nigh, one

would hear him calculate in somewise as this: “Such-and-such a number of golden gold-pieces! with some I shall buy me *more* baroque pink pearls and with some I shall buy me *more* curried squid and some I shall lay away to gloat upon and others — nay! one lone other! — shall I give to Iggulden the Goldbeater to beat me gold-leaf so soft and wide and thin: half of this I shall lay for a strangle-mask upon the face of a certain real-estate ‘developer’ and tother moiety shall She-Who-Makes-Sweetmeats roll round hot comfits and pasties and pastries for me and when this has melted like yellow butter I shall eat of them nor shall I invite even one other to join me and afterwards I shall lick my twelve fingers till they be somewhat clean...”

Then he chuckles... a sound like the bubbling of thick hot grease in the foetid try-pots of a cannibal feast.

Meanwhile, and what of Mr. Underhand?

Mr. Underhand meanwhile makes visits, too: but of a more sociable nature: Mr. Underhand pays *calls*.

“Oh. Undy. It’s *you*,” says a woman through the chink in the well-chained door. “Whadda *you* want?”

“Gertrude, I have brought you, this being the first of the month, the sum mulcted of me by the terms of our bill of divorcement,” says he. As always.

He passes money through the crack or slit between door-jamb and door. Rapidly she riffles through it; asks, “Is this all I’m gonna get?” As always.

“No,” sighs he, “I fear me not. It is, however, all that you are going to get in this or any other one month of the year; it being the extortionate amount wrested from me by compound, I do not say ‘collusion,’ between your attorneys and the judge upon the bench. Gertrude: good night.”

He turns and departs. She makes a sound between her palate and her sinuses which experience has instructed she intends for scorn: then: clunch-clunch... thuckle-thuckle... the night-bolts. Cloonk. The door.

Mr. Underhand, an hour later, bathes and bay-rum’d and clothed in his best-of-best. Spats upon his glittering shoes. Hat and gloves and cane in one hand. Flowers in the other.

“Eevelyn,” she says, hand to her gleaming, glittering throat. “What a lovely surprise. What quite lovely flowers. Oh, how nice.”

“May I come in. My dear.”

“Why of course. Need you ask. Now I shan’t be lonely. For a while. Eevelyn.” They kiss.

A wide glance he swiftly casts round. Then asks, “Do I interrupt your dinner?”

She looks about the apartment. Her expression is one of mild surprise. “Dinner? Oh. That. Just a simple bowl of lobster salad on a heart of chilled iceberg lettuce. Chervil. Cress. A few spoons of caviare. Sweet butter, just a dab. A hard-cooked egg, cut fine. *Kümmelbrot*. And the smallest bottle of Brut. All far too much. But you know how Anna spoils one. You will join me.”

He looks round, again. Crystal. Tapestry. Petit-point. Watteau. Chippendale. Asks: “You are not expecting—?”

“Oh, no. No. Not now. Shall we have some music. We shall have some music.”

They do.

They dance.

They dine.

They drink.

They talk.

They—

They do not.

“Heavens, the time. You must go now Eevelyn.”

“Then you are expecting—?”

How her fingers glitter as she raises them to indicate what words alone cannot. “Eevelyn. I do not. Know. I never. Know. — Go, my sweetest dearest one.”

He picks up hat, gloves, cane. “How is it that I never—”

She places ring-crusted fingers across his livid lips. “Hush. Oh. Hush. The noblest kindest most generous man I know will never grumble. He will be understanding. Patient. A kiss before we part.”

The Andaman Islander peers a moment through gummy eye-slits. Which now widen in recognition. “Underhand Sahib!”

“And whom else did you expect? Fat Fatima, perhaps?”

The islander shakes as with an ague. “Ah, Wisdom-wallah, do not mention her even obliquely! Has she not laid my miserable and I fear by now broken brother in a deep-dark dungeon, merely for having adventitiously broken wind in her outermost courtyard? Malignant she!”

Underhand shrugs. “Well, so be it. Or: so be it *not* — *Well*, Bhumbo Singh, I have brought certain pieces of gold, contained, according to custom, in — hem, hem,!” He coughs. “I need not name it.” And looks up and around, expectantly.

At once the storekeeper begins to prowl and shuffle. “‘To afflict with impotence the Viceroy of Sindh.’ No. ‘To impose the plague of emmerods upon the anti-Pope of—’ No. ‘Lord Lovat’s head, with tam o’shanter,’ no. no. Ah. Ah.” He lifts up a tiny container, begins simultaneously to read the label (scribbled in a most debased Pracrit) and to open—

“Hold! Hold! For pity’s sake do not unstopple it!”

The dark man dumbly puts down the pottikin, no larger than a thumb or (say) the smallest sized can of Spanish truffles; turns to the next item on the cluttered, webby counter. “‘Will afflict with wens upon the forehead of the favorite of the Grand Bastard of Burgundy,’ ah!”

Underhand is near-exasperated. “Bhumbo. Pause. Pause. Cease to dither. Lay down that spell. Down, I say, sir; down — Now. Pick up the previous item you had in hand. Yes...And for the sake of Kali, *give* those shrews some crickets!”

The Andaman Islander still bumbles around, so Underhand, with a click of impatience, follows both his own instructions. Also gives the fellow a keen glance of reproof, advises him henceforth to use either a better or a worse brand of opium; and places in his hands that which holds the golds. “You have weighed the preparation, I make no doubt; count therefore the coins, in order that—”

But his supplier declines the need. “It is enough, enough, Underhand Sahib. I feel the weight to be correct. Forgive my dithering: the *ah-peen*, as you say.” The voice and manner are crisp enough now. “I would offer you cups of tea, but my own brutish brews are not fine enough for your exquisite palate, and the Lipton’s I cannot find.”

Underhand sweeps the filthy lair with a glance. (A broom would be better.) “And fresh out of viper’s milk, too, I daresay. Pit-ty.” He looks once, he looks twice around the darkly place, dirty almost beyond endurance, cluttered certainly beyond description. “Ah, the immemorial wisdom of the East... Bhumbo: a good Gules to you.”

The other bows. “Do I not live but to serve you with smells, Sahib?” he enquires. And begins the requisite series of prostrations. Presently he hears the sound of the penny-whistle.

Some time after that.

Anna’s nose is very red; her voice is very thick. “Always mine lady liked nice things.” she says. “Diamonts, chee liked. Poils, chee liked. ‘Kebbiar, I could only itt a morsel, but it moss be the bast,’ chee tal to me.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Underhand agrees.

“How true, how true. What a blow to you. To you *and* me.” He wishes that Anna would twist her handerkerchief less and apply it more.

“Always mine lady was very particular,” Anna goes on. “‘Anna, how you minn, you couldn’t small it?’ chee ask. ‘Look maybe onder you choose.’ I lat her see onder mine right chew: nothing. I lat her see onder mine laft chew: nothing. ‘Nye, so, Mrs., how come soddenly mine kitchens not nice and clinn; come luke.’ Chee come, chee luke, luke, luke. Nothing. Sneef, sneef, sneef. ‘Eeyoo, God-my, waht dradful smal,’ chee say. And *say* and say—”

“My, my. Yes, yes. Don’t distress yourself, they take very good care of her where she is now—”

Anna (fiercely): “What? Take care mine lady gooder than me? I visit, I bring mine spatial *grumps kentorten*: Chee scrim, only. ‘Mrs., Mrs., you don’t rackocknize Anna? *Anna?* Mrs. Goitrude, Mors. Goitrude: is *Anna!*’ But only chee scrim. And *scrim* and scrim.” Anna begins to demonstrate, fists clenched, cords thrusting out from neck, voice a thin shrill grinding; Underhand begs her to desist.

Afterwards, Underhand, with some relief, returns to his own home. Man is, certainly, a social being: but there are times when, the Author of Genesis (Underhand believes), notwithstanding, when it is good for man to be alone. Underhand has his roses; he prunes them. Underhand has his Newgate Calendars; he collates them. Underhand has his first editions (Mather, de Sade, von Sacher-Masoch); he reads them. Now and then he looks up. He finds, after a while, that he is looking up rather oftener than he is looking down. Then he looks further down than usual. First he lifts up his right foot and turns it sideways. He puts it down. Then he lifts up his left foot and turns it sideways. He puts it down. Then, room by room and closet by closet, he goes through the house, his nostrils dilating. “It is not what I think,” he says, firmly. “It, is, *not* ... what I *think*.”

Some time after *that*.

Underhand is in another place, and one which he doesn't much like. Endlessly he casts horoscopes, no pencils are allowed and so he uses crayons. The effects are certainly colorful but it is very hard to achieve fine detail. By one and by two, people pass by, and, pretending not to look, look. Underhand ignores them. Why he now, suddenly, does look up as someone stops— Look he does. This one, now, frankly gazes without pretense. Smiles.

Underhand stares. Starts. Speaks.

“Oh, my God. Oh. Oh. Bhumbo Singh. They told me he — told me *you* were dead. *Showed* me. Stuffed in between my inner and outer walls. *That* was what drove me mad. *That* was what I — *Not* what I had thought. *Not* what I had bought. Mistake. Must tell them: Bhumbo Singh: alive.” He starts to rise, is stopped by a dark and gentle hand.

“Oh, no, Underhand Sahib and/or Effendi. Bhumbo *is* dead.”

Underhand utters a small squeal, starts to sidle away.

“I am *Bhimbo*, own and only brother and twin to the faithless aforesaid. Who alas and regardless of the uterine ties between us let me languish in the lowermost dungeon of H.H. The Beebe Fatima, Dowager Begum of Oont, for seven years six months one week and several days, rather than pay ransom for my offense — *most* unintentional, I assure you: never eat legumes before transacting whatsoever even in the outermost courtyard of a descendant of Timur the Terrible. — The sixth sub-basement of her now-illegal gaol, whence I was released by the new and independent government, may Kali bestow blessings upon them with every pair of hands. Thence came I here. Wherefore I caused him, my natal brother Bhumbo, to be bitten to the heart by hungry tree-shrews imprisoned under an iron squid-pot which I held over his faithless heart; *how* he screamed.”

He wags his head contentedly.

A moment Underhand ponders, ignoring whilst he does so the conduct of a neighbor who was now, as often, reciting what he claimed were the complete Songs of Ossian in the original Erse. From memory. Loudly. And at length. “Well, then, I understand why you put your brother to the death. *Narurally*. But why, oh, why, *Bhimbo*, did you stuff him in between my innermost and outermost walls? — with such dreadful results to myself? And, oh! the black whirlwind!”

A shrug. A look of gentle surprise. “Why? Well, Sahib, one had to stuff him somewhere. —I had thought to return to my native Islands, there to start an independence movement which might result, who knows and why not? in my becoming President-for-Life. But in my brother Bhumbo’s uncleanly shop I lingered too long, searching for his baroque pink pearls; whilst I was thus engaged, thither came the men called Inspectors of Buildings and of Healths. This one’s gorta be nuts,’ one said. ’Lookit this place!” He chuckles quietly.

Underhand gapes. Then thinks. Then says, “‘Escape,’ yes. Bhimbo, we must put our wise heads together, cast cantrips, I cannot do it by myself alone; secure our release from—”

Bhimbo’s rufous, jaundered eyes widen. “But, Sahib, I have already *been* released! To one, sir, who has spent seven and one half years, plus, in the lowermost dungeon of the fearful fat Fatima, female tyrant (since deposed), what is this place here but an hotel? Consider, Sahib: Clean clothes. Clean beds. Thrice a day, clean food — dispensed by servitors. Plus *snacks*. How fond of *snacks* I am, Sahib! And also once a week one of the gurus called *Shrink* talks with me in his sacred office; what honor. To be sure, there is no palm-toddy to be had, but a certain servitor (in return for such simple spells: Women. Gambling.) brings a savory wine called Ripple, concealed in bottles of the Dr. Pepper’s medication. Betel-pan, there is not, but there is *toombac*, Sahib; also the talking cinema in the cabinet-boxes. *How* entertaining! *Much* murders! —And also, shower-baths! sports! thrice a week, Therapeutic Handicrafts! *Such* fun!”

He raises his voice, rather, so as to be heard not only over that of the Ossianic bard, but over that of one who, crying the words *Hello Joe!* in staccato bursts, would be good for at least a quarter of an hour. “I know what your people call this place, Sahib. But, do you know what *I* call it? Sahib, *I* call it Paradise.”

Mr. Underhand feels again and sees again the approach of the black whirlwind; smells again the ineffable evil smell... the one he had bought? The one he had not? What matter. Grasping the table for one moment’s more contact with reality, he asks, “But does it in no way bother you to be forever surrounded by madmen?”

Bhimbo looks at him. The reddish-yellowish glance is patient and kind. “Ah, Sahib. Have you not learned the One Great Truth? All men are mad.” The immemorial wisdom of the East is in his voice, and in his eyes.

The End