

THE BRONZE BELL

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

1909

To

F. E. Z.

Chatelaine of Juniper Lodge

This story is dedicated by one to whom her hospitality, transplanted from its Kentucky home, will ever remain a charming memory.

[Illustration: "NOT ONCE DID HE LOOK BACK WHILE AMBER WATCHED—HIMSELF DIVIDED BETWEEN AMUSEMENT, ANNOYANCE, AND ASTONISHMENT" (PAGE 14)]

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CHAPTER I

DESTINY AND THE BABU

Breaking suddenly upon the steady drumming of the trucks, the prolonged and husky roar of a locomotive whistle saluted an immediate grade-crossing.

Roused by this sound from his solitary musings in the parlour-car of which he happened temporarily to be the sole occupant, Mr. David Amber put aside the magazine over which he had been dreaming, and looked out of the window, catching a glimpse of woodland road shining white between sombre walls of stunted pine. Lazily he consulted his watch.

"It's not for nothing," he observed pensively, "that this railroad wears its reputation: we are consistently late."

His gaze, again diverted to the flying countryside, noted that it had changed character, pine yielding to scrub-oak and second-growth—the ragged vestments of an area some years since denuded by fire. This, too, presently swung away, giving place to cleared land—arable acres golden with the stubble of garnered harvests or sentinelled with unkempt shocks of corn.

In the south a shimmer of laughing gold and blue edged the faded horizon.

Eagerly the young man leaned forward, dark eyes the functions of waiting-room and ticket and telegraph offices. From its eaves depended a weather-worn board bearing the legend: "Nokomis."

The train, pausing only long enough to disgorge from the baggage-car a trunk or two and from the day-coaches a thin trickle of passengers, flung on into the wilderness, cracked bell clanking somewhat disdainfully.

By degrees the platform cleared, the erstwhile patrons of the road and the station loafers—for the most part hall-marked natives of the

region—straggling off upon their several ways, some afoot, a majority in dilapidated surreys and buckboards. Amber watched them go with unassumed indifference; their type interested him little. But in their company he presently discovered one, a figure so thoroughly foreign and aloof in attitude, that it caught his eye, and, having caught, held it clouded with perplexity.

Abruptly he abandoned his belongings and gave chase, overtaking the object of his attention at the far end of the station.

"Doggott!" he cried. "I say, Doggott!"

His hand, falling lightly upon the man's shoulder, brought him squarely about, his expression transiently startled, if not a shade truculent.

Short and broad yet compact of body, he was something round-shouldered, with the stoop of those who serve. In a mask of immobility, full-colored and closely shaven, his lips were thin and tight, his eyes steady, grey and shallow: a countenance neither dishonest nor repellent, but one inscrutable. Standing solidly, once halted, there remained a suggestion of alertness in the fellow's pose.

"Doggott, what the deuce brings you here? And Mr. Rutton?"

Amber's cordiality educed no response. The grey eyes, meeting eyes dark, kindly, and penetrating, flickered and fell; so much emotion they betrayed, no more, and that as disingenuous as you could wish.

"Doggott!" insisted Amber, disconcerted. "Surely you haven't forgotten me—Mr. Amber?"

The man shook his head. "Beg pardon, sir," he said; "you've got my nyme 'andy enough, but I don't know *you*, and—"

"But Mr. Rutton?"

"Is a party I've never 'eard of, if you'll excuse my sayin' so, no more'n I 'ave of yourself, sir."

"Well!" began Amber; but paused, his face hardening as he looked the man up and down, nodding slowly.

"Per'aps," continued Mr. Doggott, unabashed, "you mistyke me for my brother, 'Enerly Doggott. 'E was 'ome, in England, larst I 'eard of 'im. We look a deal alike, I've been told."

"You would be," admitted Amber drily; and, shutting his teeth upon his inherent contempt for a liar, he swung away, acknowledging with a curt nod the civil "Good-arfternoon, sir," that followed him.

The man had disappeared by the time Amber regained his kit-bag and gun-case; standing over which he surveyed his surroundings with some annoyance, discovering that he now shared the station with none but the ticket-agent. A shambling and disconsolate youth, clad in a three-days' growth of beard, a checked jumper and khaki trousers, this person lounged negligently in the doorway of the waiting-room and, caressing his rusty chin with nicotine-dyed fingers, regarded the stranger in Nokomis with an air of subtle yet vaguely melancholy superiority.

"If ye're lookin' for th' hotel," he volunteered unexpectedly, "there aint none;" and effected a masterly retreat into the ticket-booth.

Amused, the despised outlander picked up his luggage and followed amiably. "I'm not looking for the hotel that aint," he said, planting himself in front of the grating; "but I expected to be met by someone from Tanglewood —"

"Thet's the Quain place, daown by th' ba-ay," interpolated the youth from unplumbed depths of mournful abstraction.

"It is. I wired yesterday —"

"Yeour name's Amber, aint it?"

"Yes, I —"

"Well, Quain didn't get yeour message till this mornin'. I sent a kid daown with it 'baout ten o'clock."

"But why the — but I wired yesterday afternoon!"

"I knaow ye did," assented the youth wearily. "It come through raound closin' time and they wa'n't nobody baound that way, so I held it over."

"This craze for being characteristic," observed Mr. Amber obscurely, "is the only thing that really stands in the way of Nokomis becoming a thriving metropolis. Do you agree with me? No matter." He smiled engagingly: a seasoned traveller this, who could recognise the futility of bickering over the irreparable. Moreover, he had to remind himself in all fairness, the blame was, in part at least, his own; for he had thoughtlessly worded his telegram, "Will be with you to-morrow afternoon"; and it was wholly like Quain that he should have accepted the statement at its face value, regardless of the date line.

"I *can* leave my things here for a little while, I presume?" Amber suggested after a pause.

The ticket-agent stared stubbornly into the infinite, making no sign till a coin rang on the window-ledge; when he started, eyed the offering with fugitive mistrust, and gloomily possessed himself of it. "I'll look after them," he said. "Be ye thinkin' of walkin'?"

"Yes," said Amber over his shoulder. He was already moving toward the door.

"Knaow yeour wa-ay?"

"I've been here before, thank you."

"Fer another quarter," drawled the agent with elaborate apathy, "I'd leave the office long enough to find somebody who'd fetch ye daown in a rig for fifty cents."

But Amber was already out of ear-shot.

Crossing the tracks, he addressed himself to the southward-stretching highway. Walking briskly at first, he soon left behind the railway-station with its few parasitic cottages; a dip in the land hid them, and he had hereafter for all company his thoughts, the desultory road, a vast and looming sky, and bare fields hedged with impoverished forest.

A deep languor brooded over the land: the still, warm enchantment of an Indian Summer which, protracted though it were unseasonably into the Ides of November, had yet lost nothing of its witchery. There was no wind, but now and again the air stirred softly, and when it stirred was cool; as if the earth sighed in sheer

lassitude. Out of a cloudless sky, translucent sapphire at its zenith fading into hazy topaz-yellow at the horizon, golden sunlight slanted, casting shadows heavy and colourful; on the edge of the woodlands they clung like thin purple smoke, but motionless, and against them, here and there, a clump of sumach blazed like a bed of embers, or some tree loath to shed its autumnal livery flamed scarlet, russet, and mauve. The peace of the hour was intense, and only emphasised by a dull, throbbing undertone—the muted murmur of the distant sea.

Amber had professed acquaintance with his way; it seemed rather to be intimacy, for when he chose to forsake the main-travelled road he did so boldly, striking off upon a wagon-track which, leading across the fields, delved presently into the heart of the forest. Here it ran snakily and, carved by broad-tired wheels and beaten out by slowly plodding hoofs in a soil more than half sand, glimmered white as rock-salt where the drifting leaves had left it naked.

Once in this semi-dusk made luminous by sunlight which touched and quivered upon dead leaf and withered bush and bare brown bough like splashes of molten gold, the young man moved more sedately. The hush of the forest world bore heavily upon his senses; the slight and stealthy rustlings in the brush, the clear dense ringing of some remote axe, an attenuated clamour of cawing from some far crows' congress, but served to accentuate its influence. On that windless day the vital breath of the sea might not moderate the bitter-sweet aroma of decay that swam beneath the unmoving branches; and this mournful fragrance of dying Autumn wrought upon Amber's mood as might a whiff of some exquisite rare perfume revive a poignant memory in the bosom of a bereaved lover. His glance grew aimless, his temper as purposeless, lively anticipation giving way to a retrospection tinged with indefinable sadness.

Then into the silence crept a sound to rouse him from his formless reverie: at first a mere pulsing in the stillness, barely to be distinguished from the song of the surf; but presently a pounding, ever louder and more insistent. He paused, attentive; and while he waited the drumming, minute by minute gaining in volume, swept swiftly toward him—the rhythmic hoofbeats of a single horse madly ridden. When it was close upon him he stepped back into the

tangled undergrowth, making room; for the track was anything but wide.

Simultaneously there burst into view, at the end of a brief aisle of trees, the horse—a vigorous black brute with white socks and muzzle—running freely, apparently under constraint neither of whip nor of spur. In the saddle a girl leaned low over the horn—a girl with eyes rapturous, face brilliant, lips parted in the least of smiles. A fold of her black habit-skirt, whipping out, almost snapped in Amber's face, so close to him she rode; yet she seemed not to see him, and very likely did not. A splendid sketch in black-and-white, of youthful spirit and joy of motion: so she passed and was gone....

Hardly, however, had the forest closed upon the picture, ere a cry, a heavy crashing as of a horse threshing about in the underbrush, and a woman's scream of terror, sent Amber, in one movement, out into the road again and running at a pace which, had he been conscious of it, would have surprised him.

A short fifty yards separated him from the bend in the way round which the horse and its rider had vanished. He had no more than gained this point than he was obliged to pull up sharply to avoid running into the girl herself.

Although dismounted, she was on her feet, and apparently uninjured. She stood with one hand against the trunk of a tree, on the edge of a small clearing wherein the axes of the local lumbermen had but lately been busy. Her horse had disappeared; the rumble of his hoofs, diminuendo, told the way he had gone.

So much Amber comprehended in a single glance; with a second he sought the cause of the accident, and identified it with a figure so *outré* and bizarre that he momentarily and excusably questioned the testimony of his senses.

At a little distance from the girl, in the act of addressing her, stood a man, obese, gross, abnormally distended with luxurious and sluggish living, as little common to the scene as a statue of Phoebus Apollo had been: a babu of Bengal, every inch of him, from his dirty red-and-white turban to his well-worn and cracked patent-leather shoes. His body was enveloped in a complete suit of emerald silk, much soiled and faded, and girt with a sash of many col-

ours, crimson predominating. His hands, fat, brown, and not over-clean, alternately fluttered apologetically and rubbed one another with a suggestion of extreme urbanity; his lips, thick, sensual, and cruel, mouthed a broken stream of babu-English; while his eyes, nearly as small and quite as black as shoe-buttons —eyes furtive, crafty, and cold—suddenly distended and became fixed, as with amazement, at the instant of Amber's appearance.

Instinctively, as soon as he had mastered his initial stupefaction, Amber stepped forward and past the girl, placing himself between her and this preposterous apparition, as if to shield her. He was neither overly imaginative nor of a romantic turn of mind; but, the circumstances reviewed, it's nothing to his discredit that he entertained a passing suspicion of some curious conspiracy against the girl, thought of an ambushade, and with quick eyes raked the surroundings for signs of a confederate of the Bengali.

He found, however, nothing alarming, no indication that the man were not alone; nor, for that matter, could he reasonably detect in the fellow's bearing anything but a spirit of conciliation almost servile. None the less he held himself wary and alert, and was instant to halt the babu when he, with the air of a dog cringing to his master's feet for punishment, would have drawn nearer.

"Stop right there!" Amber told him crisply; and got for response obedience, a low salaam, and the Hindu salutation accorded only to persons of high rank: "Hazoor!" But before the babu could say more the American addressed the girl. "What did he do?" he inquired, without looking at her. "Frighten your horse?"

"Just that." The girl's tone was edged with temper. "He jumped out from behind that woodpile; the horse shied and threw me."

"You're not hurt, I trust?"

"No — thank you; but" — with a nervous laugh — "I'm furiously angry."

"That's reasonable enough." Amber returned undivided attention to the Bengali. "Now then," he demanded sternly, "what've you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by frightening this lady's horse? What are you doing here, anyway?"

Almost grovelling, the babu answered him in Urdu: "Hazoor, I am your slave—"

Without thinking Amber couched his retort in the same tongue: "Count yourself lucky you are not, dog!"

"Nay, hazoor, but I meant no harm. I was resting, being fatigued, in the shelter of the wood, when the noise of hoofs disturbed me and I stepped out to see. When the woman was thrown I sought to assist her, but she threatened me with her whip."

"That is quite true," the girl cut in over Amber's shoulder. "I don't think he intended to harm me, but it's purely an accident that he didn't."

Inasmuch as the babu's explanation had been made in fluent, vernacular Urdu, Amber's surprise at the girl's evident familiarity with that tongue was hardly to be concealed. "You understand Urdu?" he stammered.

"Aye," she told him in that tongue, "and speak it, too."

"You know this man, then?"

"No. Do you?"

"Not in the least. How should I?"

"You yourself speak Urdu."

"Well but—" The situation hardly lent itself to such a discussion; he had the babu first to dispose of. Amber resumed his cross-examination. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And what is your business in this place?"

The fat yellowish-brown face was distorted by a fugitive grimace of deprecation. "Hazoor, I am Behari Lal Chatterji, solicitor, of the Inner Temple."

"Well? And your business here?"

"Hazoor, that is for your secret ear." The babu drew himself up, assuming a certain dignity. "It is not meet that the message of the Bell should be uttered in the hearing of an Englishwoman, hazoor."

"What are you drivelling about?" In his blank wonder, Amber returned to English as to a tongue more suited to his urgent need of

forcible expression. "And, look here, you stop calling me 'Hazoor.' I'm no more a hazoor than you are — idiot!"

"Nay," contended the babu reproachfully; "is it right that you should seek to hoodwink me? Have I not eyes with which to see you, ears that can hear you speak our tongue, hazoor? I am no child, to be played with—I, the appointed Mouthpiece of the Voice!"

"I know naught of your 'Voice' or its mouthpiece; but certainly you are no child. You are either mad, or insolent—or a fool to be kicked." And in exasperation Amber took a step toward the man as if to carry into effect his implied threat.

Alarmed, the babu cringed and retreated a pace; then, suddenly, raising an arm, indicated the girl. "Hazoor!" he cried. "Be quick—the woman faints!" And as Amber hastily turned, with astonishing agility the babu sprang toward him.

Warned by his moving shadow as much as by the girl's cry, Amber leapt aside and lifted a hand to strike; but before it could deliver a blow it was caught and a small metallic object thrust into it. Upon this his fingers closed instinctively, and the babu sprang back, panting and quaking.

"The Token, hazoor, the Token!" he quavered. "It is naught but that—the Token!"

"Token, you fool!" cried Amber, staring stupidly at the man. "What in thunder — —!"

"Nay, hazoor; how should I tell you now, when another sees and hears? At another time, hazoor, in a week, or a day, or an hour, mayhap, I come again—for your answer. Till then and forever I am your slave, hazoor: the dust beneath your feet. Now, I go."

And with a haste that robbed the courtesy of its grace, the Bengali salaamed, then wheeled square about and, hitching his clothing round him, made off with a celerity surprising in one of his tremendous bulk, striking directly into the heart of the woods.

For as much as a minute he was easily to be followed, his head and shoulders rising above the brush through which he forged purposefully, with something of the heedless haste of a man bent on keeping a pressing engagement—or a sinner fleeing the wrath to

come. Not once did he look back while Amber watched—himself divided between amusement, annoyance, and astonishment. Presently the trees blotted out the red-and-white turban; the noise of the babu's elephantine retreat diminished; and Amber was left to knit his brows over the object which had been forced upon him so unexpectedly.

It proved to be a small, cubical box, something more than an inch square, fashioned of bronze and elaborately decorated with minute relief work in the best manner of ancient Indian craftsmanship.

"May I see, please?" The voice of the girl at his side recalled to Amber her existence. "May I see, too, please, Mr. Amber?" she repeated.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL AND THE TOKEN

In his astonishment he looked round quickly to meet the gaze of mischievous eyes that strove vainly to seem simple and sincere. His own, in which amusement was blended with wonder, noted that they were very handsome eyes and rather curiously colourful, the delicate sepia shade of the pupils being lightened by a faint sheen of gold in the irides; they were, furthermore, large and set well apart. On the whole he decided that they were even beautiful, for all the dancing glimmer of perverse humour in their depths; he could fancy that they might well seem very sweet and womanly when their owner chose to be serious.

Aware that he faced an uncommonly pretty woman, who chose to study him with a straightforward interest he was nothing loath to imitate, he took time to see that she was very fair of skin, with that creamy, silken whiteness that goes with hair of the shade commonly and unjustly termed red. This girl's hair was really brown, a rich sepia interwoven with strands of raw, ruddy gold, admirably harmonious with her eyes. Her nose he thought a trace too severely perfect in its modelling, but redeemed by a broad and thoughtful brow, a strong yet absolutely feminine chin, and a mouth.... Well, as to her mouth, the young man selected a rosebud to liken it to; which was really quite a poor simile, for her lips were nothing at all like rose-leaves save in colour; but they were well-shapen and wide enough to suggest generosity, without being in the least too wide.

Having catalogued these several features, together with the piquant oval of her face, and remarked that her poise was good and gracious in the uncompromising lines of her riding-habit, he had a mental portrait of her he was not likely soon to forget. For it's not every day that one encounters so pretty a girl in the woods of Long Island's southern shore—or anywhere else, for that matter. He felt sure of this.

But he was equally certain that he was as much a stranger to her as she to him.

She, on her part, had been busy satisfying herself that he was a very presentable young man, in spite of the somewhat formidable reputation he wore as a person of learned attainments. There could be no better way to show him to you than through her eyes, so you must know that she saw a man of less than thirty years, with a figure slight and not over-tall but well-proportioned, and with a complexion as dark as hers was light. His eyes, indeed, were a very dark grey, and his hair was black, and his face and hands had been coloured by the sun and wind until the tan had become indelible, almost, so that his prolonged periods of studious indoor seclusion worked little toward lightening it. If his looks attracted, it was not because he was handsome, for that he wasn't, but because of certain signs of strength to be discerned in his face, as well as an engaging manner which he owned by right of ancestry, his ascendants for several generations having been notable representatives of one of the First Families of Virginia. Amber was not inordinately proud of this fact, at least not more so than nine out of any ten Virginians; but his friends—who were many but mostly male—claimed that he wrote "F.F.V." before the "F.R.S." which he was entitled to inscribe after his name.

The pause which fell upon the girl's use of his name, and during which they looked one another over, was sufficiently prolonged to excuse the reference to it which Amber chose to make.

"I'm sure," he said with his slow smile, "that we're satisfied we've never met before. Aren't we?"

"Quite," assented the girl.

"That only makes it the more mysterious, of course."

"Yes," said she provokingly; "doesn't it?"

"You know, you're hardly fair to me," he asserted. "I'm rapidly beginning to entertain doubts of my senses. When I left the train at Nokomis station I met a man I know as well as I know myself—pretty nearly; and he denied me to my face. Then, a little later, I encounter a strange, mad Bengali, who apparently takes me for somebody he has business with. And finally, you call me by name."