

Poison

It must have been around midnight when I drove home, and as I pulled into the driveway I turned off the lights of the car so that the beam wouldn't swing in through the window of the side bedroom and wake Harry Pope. But I needn't have worried. As I came up the drive I noticed that his light was still on, so he was awake – unless perhaps he'd fallen asleep while reading.

I parked the car and, counting each step carefully in the dark, went up the five steps to the house. Pushing through the screen doors, I turned on the light in the hall. Then I went across to the door of Harry's room, opened it quietly, and looked in.

He was lying on the bed and I could see he was awake. But he didn't move. He didn't even turn his head towards me, but I heard him say, 'Timber, Timber, come here.'

He spoke slowly, whispering each word carefully, separately, and I pushed the door right open and started to go quickly across the room.

'Stop, wait a moment, Timber: I could hardly hear what he was saying. He seemed to be having difficulty in getting the words out.

'What's the matter, Harry?'

'Sshh!' he whispered. 'Sshh! Don't make a noise. Take your shoes off before you come nearer. *Please* do as I say, Timber.'

I couldn't understand what he was talking about, but I thought that if he was as ill as he sounded, I'd better try to please him. I bent down and took off my shoes and left them in the middle of the floor. Then I went over to his bed.

'Don't touch the bed! Whatever you do, don't touch the bed!' He was still speaking as if he'd been shot in the stomach, and I could see him lying there on his back with a single sheet covering

three-quarters of his body. He was wearing a pair of pyjamas and he was sweating terribly. It was a hot night and I was sweating a little myself, but not like Harry. His whole face was wet. It looked like a bad fever.

'What is it, Harry?'

'A krait,' he said.

'A krait! Oh my God! Where did it bite you? How long ago?'

'Be quiet,' he whispered.

'Listen, Harry,' I said, and I leaned forward and touched his shoulder. 'We've got to be quick. Come on now, quickly, tell me where it bit you.' He was lying there very still and tense as though he were holding onto himself hard because of sharp pain.

'I haven't been bitten,' he whispered. 'Not yet. It's on my stomach. Lying there asleep.'

I took a quick step backwards. I couldn't help it, and I looked wide-eyed at his stomach, or rather at the sheet that covered it. There were a number of folds in the sheet and it was impossible to tell if there was anything under it.

'You don't really mean there's a krait lying on your stomach now?'

'I swear it.'

'How did it get there? I shouldn't have asked the question because it was easy to see that he was not pretending. I should have told him to keep quiet.

'I was reading,' Harry said, and he spoke very slowly, taking each word in turn and speaking it carefully so as not to move the muscles of his stomach. 'Lying on my back reading and I felt something on my chest, behind the book. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw this little krait sliding over my pyjamas. Small, less than a foot long. Knew I mustn't move. Couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to. Lay there watching it. Thought it would go over the top of the sheet.' Harry paused and was silent for a few moments. His eyes looked down towards the place where the

sheet covered his stomach, and I could see he was watching to make sure his whispering wasn't frightening the thing that lay there.

'There was a big fold in the sheet,' he said, speaking more slowly than ever now, and so softly that I had to lean close to hear him. 'See it, it's still there. It went under that. I could feel it through my pyjamas, moving on my stomach. Then it stopped moving and now it's lying there in the warmth. Probably asleep. I've been waiting for you.' He raised his eyes and looked at me.

'How long ago?'

'Hours,' he whispered. 'Hours and hours and hours. I can't keep still much longer. I've been wanting to cough.'

There was not much doubt about the truth of Harry's story. As a matter of fact, it wasn't a surprising thing for a krait to do. They wait around people's houses and they go for the warm places. The surprising thing was that Harry hadn't been bitten. The bite is quite deadly, except sometimes when you do something about it immediately; and kraits kill quite a number of people every year in Bengal, mostly in the villages.

'All right, Harry,' I said, and now I was whispering too. 'Don't move and don't talk any more unless you have to. You know it won't bite unless it's frightened. We'll fix it in no time.'

I went softly out of the room and brought a small sharp knife from the kitchen. I put it in my trouser pocket ready to use immediately in case something went wrong while we were still thinking out a plan. If Harry coughed or moved or did something to frighten the krait and got bitten, I was going to be ready to cut the bitten place and try to suck the poison out. I came back to the bedroom and Harry was still lying there very quietly, sweating all over his face. His eyes followed me as I moved across the room to his bed and I could see he was wondering what I'd been doing. I stood beside him, trying to think of the best thing to do.

'Harry,' I said, and now when I spoke I put my mouth almost on his ear so I wouldn't have to raise my voice above the softest whisper, 'I think the best thing to do is for me to pull the sheet back very, very gently. Then we could have a look first. I think I could do that without waking it.'

'Don't be so silly!' There was no expression in his voice. He spoke each word too slowly, too carefully, and too softly for that. The expression was in his eyes and around the corners of his mouth.

'Why not?'

'The light would frighten it. It's dark under there now.'

'Then how about pulling the sheet back quickly and brushing it off before it has time to strike?'

'Why don't you get a doctor?' Harry said. The way he looked at me told me I should have thought of that myself in the first place.

'A doctor. Of course. That's it, I'll get Ganderbai.'

I walked softly out into the hall, found Ganderbai's number in the book, lifted the phone and told the operator to hurry.

'Dr Ganderbai,' I said. 'This is Timber Woods.'

'Hello, Mr Woods. Aren't you in bed yet?'

'Look, could you come round now? And bring serum – for a krait bite.'

'Who's been bitten?' The question came so sharply it was like a small explosion in my ear.

'No one. No one yet. But Harry Pope's in bed and he's got one lying on his stomach – asleep under the sheet on his stomach.'

For about three seconds there was silence on the line. Then, speaking slowly and firmly, Ganderbai said, 'Tell him to keep quite still. He is not to move or talk. Do you understand?'

'Of course.'

'I'll come immediately!' He rang off, and I went back to the bedroom. Harry's eyes watched me as I walked across to his bed.

'Ganderbai's coming. He said you should lie still.'

'What in God's name does he think I'm doing?'

'Look, Harry, he said no talking. No talking at all. Either of us?'
'Why don't you be quiet, then?' When he said this, one side of his mouth started shaking slightly with rapid little downward movements that continued for a while after he had finished speaking. I found a cloth and very gently I wiped the sweat off his face and neck. I could feel the slight movement of the muscle — the one he used for smiling — as my fingers passed over it with the cloth.

I slipped out to the kitchen, got some ice, rolled it up in a cloth and brought it back to the bedroom and laid it across Harry's forehead.

'I'll keep you cool.'

He closed his eyes and sucked breath sharply through his teeth. 'Take it away,' he whispered. 'I'll make me cough.' His smiling-muscle began to move again.

The beam of a headlight shone through the window as Ganderbai's car swung around to the front of the house. I went out to meet him, holding the ice pack with both hands.

'How is it?' Ganderbai asked, but he didn't stop to talk; he walked on past me through the screen doors into the hall. 'Where is he? Which room?'

He put his bag down on a chair in the hall and followed me into Harry's room. He walked across the floor noiselessly, delicately, like a careful cat. Harry watched him out of the sides of his eyes. When Ganderbai reached the bed he looked down at Harry and smiled confidently, showing Harry it was a simple matter and he was not to worry but just to leave it to Dr Ganderbai. Then he turned and went back to the hall and I followed him.

'The first thing is to try to get some of the serum into him — with a needle.' He opened his bag and started to make

preparations. 'But I must do it very carefully. I don't want him to move.'

He had a small bottle in his left hand and he struck the needle through the rubber top and began drawing a pale yellow liquid out of the bottle. Then he handed the needle to me.

'Hold that until I ask for it.'

He picked up the bag and together we returned to the room. Harry's eyes were bright now and wide open. Ganderbai bent over Harry and very carefully rolled up one arm of the pyjama top. I noticed he stood well away from the bed.

He whispered, 'I'm going to give you some serum. You'll feel the needle, but try not to move. Don't tighten your stomach muscles. Let them go loose.'

Harry looked at the needle.

Ganderbai cleaned a small area of the arm with alcohol, took the needle from my hand, and held it up to the light to check the quantity. I stood beside him, watching. Harry was watching too and sweating all over his face. Ganderbai held the needle almost flat against Harry's arm, sliding it in sideways through the skin slowly but firmly — as smoothly as into cheese. Harry looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes and opened them again, but he didn't move.

When it was finished Ganderbai leaned forward, putting his mouth close to Harry's ear. 'Now you'll be all right even if you are bitten. But don't move. Please don't move. I'll be back in a moment.'

He picked up his bag and went out to the hall and I followed.

'Is he safe now?' I asked.

'No.'

'How safe is he? It must give him some protection, mustn't it?'

I asked.

He turned away and walked to the screen doors. I thought he was going through them, but he stopped this side of the doors

and stood looking out into the night.

'Isn't the serum very good?' I asked.

'Unfortunately not,' he answered, without turning round. 'It might save him. It might not. I am trying to think of something else to do.'

'Shall we pull the sheet back quickly and brush it off before it has time to strike?'

'Never! We have no right to take a risk.' He spoke sharply and his voice was a little higher than usual.

'We can't leave him lying there,' I said. 'He's getting nervous.'

'Please, please!' he said, turning round, holding both hands up in the air. 'Not so fast, please.' He wiped his forehead and stood there, thinking.

'You see,' he said at last, 'there is a way to do this. You know what we must do — we must give an anaesthetic to the creature where it lies.'

It was an excellent idea.

'It is not safe,' he continued, 'because a snake is cold-blooded and an anaesthetic does not work so well or so quickly with such animals, but it is the best thing to do. We could use chloroform ...' He was speaking slowly and trying to think about it all while he talked. 'Now quickly!' He took my arm. 'Drive to my house! By the time you get there I shall have spoken to my boy on the telephone, and he will show you my poisons' cupboard. Here is the key of the cupboard. Take a bottle of chloroform. The name is printed on it. I'll stay here in case anything happens. Be quick now, hurry! No, no, you don't need your shoes!'

I drove fast, and in about fifteen minutes I was back with the bottle of chloroform. Ganderbai came out of Harry's room and met me in the hall. 'Have you got it?' he said. 'Good, good. I've just been telling him what we are going to do. But now we must hurry. It is not easy for him in there like that all this time. I am afraid he might move.'

He went back to the bedroom and I followed, carrying the bottle carefully with both hands. Harry was lying on the bed in exactly the same position as before with the sweat pouring down his cheeks. His face was white and wet. He turned his eyes towards me and I smiled at him confidently. Ganderbai was kneeling by the bed, and on the floor beside him was a hollow rubber tube. He began to pull a little piece of the sheet out from under the bed. He was working directly in line with Harry's stomach, and I watched his fingers as they pulled gently at the edge of the sheet. He worked so slowly it was almost impossible to see any movement, either in his fingers or in the sheet that was being pulled.

Finally, he succeeded in making an opening under the sheet and he took the rubber tube and put one end of it in the opening so that it would slide under the sheet towards Harry's body. I do not know how long it took him to slide that tube in. It may have been twenty minutes, it may have been forty. I never once saw the tube move. Ganderbai himself was sweating now, but his hands were steady. I noticed that his eyes were watching; not the tube in his hands, but the area of folded sheet above Harry's stomach. Without looking up, he held out a hand to me for the chloroform. I put the bottle right into his hand, not letting go until I was sure that he had a good hold on it. Then he signalled with his head for me to come closer and he whispered, 'Tell him I'm going to pour it all over the bed and that it will be very cold under his body. He must be ready for that and he must not move. Tell him now.'

I bent over Harry and passed on the message.

'Why doesn't he just do it?' Harry said.

'He's going to now, Harry. But it'll feel very cold, so be ready for it.'

'Oh, God, hurry up, hurry up!' For the first time he raised his voice, and Ganderbai looked up sharply, watched him for a few

seconds, then went back to his business.

Ganderbai poured a few drops of chloroform into the tube and waited. Then he poured some more. Then he waited again, and the heavy sickly smell of chloroform spread out all over the room bringing with it faint unpleasant memories of white-coated nurses and white doctors standing in a white room around a long white table. Ganderbai was pouring steadily now. He paused, held the bottle up to the light, poured some more and handed the bottle back to me. Slowly, he drew out the rubber tube from under the sheet; then he stood up. His voice was small and tired, 'We'll give it fifteen minutes. Just to be safe.'

I leaned over to tell Harry. 'We're going to give it fifteen minutes, just to be safe. But it's probably asleep already.'

'Then why don't you look and see!' Again he spoke loudly and Ganderbai jumped, his small brown face suddenly very angry. He had almost pure black eyes and he looked sharply at Harry. Harry's smiling-muscle began to move. I took a cloth and wiped his wet face, trying to stroke his forehead a little for comfort as I did so.

Then we stood and waited beside the bed, Ganderbai watching Harry all the time with a strange expression on his face. The little Indian was using all his willpower to keep Harry quiet. He never once took his eyes from the patient, and although he made no sound, he seemed somehow to be shouting at him all the time, saying: 'Now listen, you must listen, you're not going to spoil this now, do you hear me?' And Harry lay there moving his mouth, sweating, closing his eyes, opening them, looking at me, at the sheet, at the ceiling, at me again, but never at Ganderbai. But somehow Ganderbai was holding him. The smell of chloroform was terrible and it made me feel sick, but I couldn't leave the room now.

Ganderbai finally turned and signalled that he was ready to go on. 'You go over to one side of the bed,' he said. 'We will each

take one side of the sheet and pull it back together, but very slowly, please, and very quietly.'

'Keep still now, Harry,' I said and I went around to the other side of the bed and took hold of the sheet. Ganderbai stood opposite me, and together we began to pull back the sheet, lifting it up and away from Harry's body, taking it back very slowly; both of us were standing well away but at the same time bending forward, trying to see under it. The smell of chloroform was horrible. I remember trying to hold my breath and when I couldn't do that any longer I tried to take small breaths so that the gas wouldn't get into my lungs.

The whole of Harry's chest could be seen now, or rather the pyjama top which covered it, and then I saw the top of his pyjama trousers. There was nothing on his stomach.

We pulled the sheet back faster then, and when we had uncovered his legs and feet we let the sheet drop over the end of the bed onto the floor.

'Don't move,' Ganderbai said, 'don't move, Mr Pope'; and he began to look around along the side of Harry's body and under his legs. 'We must be careful. It may be anywhere. It could be up the leg of your pyjamas.'

When Ganderbai said this, Harry quickly raised his head from the bed and looked down at his legs. It was the first time he had moved. Then suddenly, he jumped up, stood on his bed and shook his legs one after the other violently in the air. At that moment we both thought he had been bitten and Ganderbai was already reaching down into his bag when Harry stopped jumping around and stood still, looked at the bed he was standing on and shouted, 'It's not there!'

Ganderbai straightened up and for a moment he, too, looked at the bed; then he looked up at Harry. Harry was all right. He hadn't been bitten and now he wasn't going to get bitten and he wasn't going to be killed and everything was fine. But that didn't

seem to make anyone feel any better.

'Mr Pope, you are of course *quite* sure you saw it in the first place?'

Harry stood on his bed in his pyjamas, looking angrily at Ganderbai, and the colour began to spread out all over his cheeks.

'Are you telling me I'm a liar?' he shouted.

Ganderbai remained completely still, watching Harry. Harry took a step forward on the bed and there was a shining look in his eyes.

'Why, you dirty little rat!'

'Be quiet, Harry!' I said.

'You dirty—'

'Harry!' I called. 'Be quiet, Harry!' The things he was saying were terrible.

Ganderbai went out of the room as if neither of us was there, and I followed him and put my arm around his shoulder as he walked across the hall.

'Don't listen to Harry,' I said. 'This thing's made him so upset that he doesn't know what he's saying.'

We went down the steps and across to where his car was parked. He opened the door and got in.

'You did a wonderful job,' I said. 'Thank you very much for coming.'

'All he needs is a good holiday,' he said quietly, without looking at me. Then he started the engine and drove off.