

# The Treasure of Su



by George Foxhall

## I.

**N**O MAN who has not felt, as I have, the cleansing forgiveness of a man's love can understand the motives that impel me to write this story.

Others will read here a story of tragedy and devotion, of sordid treachery, of grim revenge, and of bitter remorse.

But they whose hearts have broken themselves upon the rock of the deepest human crime, the betrayal of a friend, and who have felt, enfolding them at last like a mantle of gold in-lined with sackcloth, the miracle of a friend's forgiveness, will see, between the lines, the eternal sweetness leavening the eternal remorse.

They will see, behind the Nemesis of conscience, the high priest of friendship.

They, and they alone, will understand why every day I place upon the altar of the god Su fresh, fragrant flowers, side by side with the ashes of dead flowers and the seeds of flowers to be.

Tom Mason and I were friends of many years. We had grown into a friendship that had depended on neither proximity nor similarity of tastes. We

were friends in the unexplainable way of true friendship

After we had worked our way through college I turned to business. Tom turned to art. I made money—a great deal of it. Tom made a bare living; sometimes he didn't do that.

But we were friends still. Often we would meet for lunch, or go to the theater, or take some little trip together, and always I would pay. It was understood. Tom would accept the conditions without protest. He was a generous-souled man.

Sometimes I would learn, either indirectly or by questioning him, of some difficulty he was in. With affectionate raillery I would take charge of the situation. The items were always insignificant in themselves; but to him they were the difference between anxiety and peace.

He would take my check with shy thanks, but without hesitation. It was the duty we owed each other.

But the generosity was his. Any spendthrift can spend money on another: but Tom's generosity was that of a proud man who entrusts his pride into the hands of his friend, confident that he will not wrong him by a thought.

And I was too little for so great a trust. That was the beginning of my treason: the treason of thought that made possible the bloodier treason of action; the canker that ate into the pure nobility of our friendship. Gradually, I remember, I began to regard him in my mind with a spirit of patronage; to consider him as a *protégé*: to condescend to him; to feel toward his poverty a contemptible contempt.

Probably this change was too gradual to be obvious. It was hidden behind our outward good-fellowship. At any rate, if Tom noticed it he laid it aside with the thousand other hurts that poverty puts upon a sensitive man.

I don't believe that he did notice it. He was too big to look for littleness in me. The bitterness of my life is that I can see all this so clearly now, who was so blind to it then.

There are a dozen incidents that I could tell of here, illustrating the fineness of Tom's character; his quaint humor, his simple purity, his too active consideration for the feelings of others: but this story cannot become anecdotal.

One day, just as I was leaving my office, Tom called me on the telephone. "Going to be home this evening, Bob?" he asked.

"Expect to be," said I.

"Do you think Mary would mind setting a plate for me? I've something to tell you that might prove to be the biggest thing ever."

"What! For you, old man?" I asked.

"For both of us if it's anything."

"Fine!" said I, laughing at the idea of Tom suddenly becoming my benefactor. "Come round to the office and I'll run you up in the car."

It was not until we were alone after dinner that Tom would return to the subject.

"You remember the queer Greek I have told you about meeting repeatedly in different parts of the world? First I met him in Alexandria, then in Rome, then in Paris, and then in Madrid."

"I remember. Skottos, or some such name."

"He's due here in five minutes."

"Here? He's connected with your scheme? I suppose it's an investment, or a speculation, or something of the kind?"

"Did you ever hear of the great god Su or Thou?"

"No!" I laughed. "The popular deity of these days is the great god Ego or I."

"Your perception is as keen as ever," said Tom

with his quiet smile. "The fallen angel of the paradise of the great god Su is probably the great god Ego. Certainly Milton could have called his 'Satan' that name very appropriately."

"Do I understand, then, that your great discovery is a paralleling of mythologies?"

"Not exactly! That would be no discovery. There is a treasure."

"Ah! Did your Greek tell you about it?"

"Yes."

"He is somewhat of a madman, isn't he, Tom?"

I asked, for I never had much faith in ancient treasures.

"Inasmuch as everybody says he is, I am convinced that he is not. Now I'll leave it to you, Bob. The story's at least worth listening to, and if I'm not mistaken here comes the best narrator of it."

He was not mistaken. I gave the word and the Greek was shown into my study. The first thing I noticed was his smile as, without embarrassment and quite ignoring me, he walked up to Tom and shook hands.

When he turned to me as Tom introduced us, the smile was gone. At least the beauty of it was gone. He sat down in the chair that I indicated and stared at me for a moment without a word.

"This is the rich man who has been your friend?" he said at last, turning to Tom.

"Who is my friend," corrected Tom heartily with a smile.

"The gods know," returned Skottos and he leaned back in his chair and was silent.

I was half curious and half puzzled, so I took my cue from Tom and said nothing. Presently the strange man spoke again.

"The greatest of all the gods that may be worshipped," said he; "best beloved of him who is beyond all knowledge is the great god Su. Greater than the wealth of all the kings is the treasure of the great god Su. Into his temple the worshippers came by twos, and none might come otherwise. "And at last, many centuries ago, it was commanded that the priest should take the great jewel from the brow of the god, and it was written that after two thousand and two years there shall come two men from an unknown country, of an unborn race, who shall look into the jewel in the forehead of the god. And they shall learn where lieth the treasure.

"And they shall possess it, and they shall worship the great god Su. And one shall be more

worthy than the other. And he shall gain the greater treasure, and unto the other shall be given the lesser treasure."

## II.

I WILL not go into the details of explanation that preceded my decision. I was a business man, keen and skeptical. Tom was an artist, imaginative, romantic, and with that innocent faith in things that seems to be given to men whom events have treated badly.

Even then I realized that it was not the idea of treasure that in itself fascinated him. It was the air of the wonderful world of romance in which he lived—the world of children and heroes.

As I watched his eager, anxious face, some memory of that world I had once wandered in with him stirred me. In the existence of the treasure I had no faith, and in the existence of the god I had very little.

But Tom's faith was the faith of inspiration, and I knew that for him both the treasure and the god would be real whether we found them or not.

The magic of our youth came over me, or rather the magic of his unchanging youth. At the poorest it would be a trip, and a trip with Tom was a joy to be remembered. As for the Greek, beyond telling his story, he made no attempt either to persuade or to convince me. I had thought he would exhibit some bauble of treasure to convince me, but he did not.

When he had finished I turned to Tom.

"It's the nearest approach to a pipe-dream I ever heard, old man," I said; "but you believe in it."

"Thoroughly," said he. "You see, I've known Skottos a good many years. I don't see a single feature in the story that is incredible."

"Then, if he's willing to take me along as a doubter, we'll go." I looked questioningly at Skottos.

"That you go simply as your friend's friend," said he, "is the beginning of your worship of the great god Su."

## III.

I MAY not tell what country we journeyed to, for the great god Su is still enshrined in his secret place, though the golden altar is in my house here in New York. After we left the steamer we made a short journey by rail.

After that we journeyed by night on horseback. For three nights we rode, and on the third night we dismounted and for an hour we went afoot up a steep and rocky hill.

At dawn we entered the temple of the great god Su. By some miracle of patience the great chamber had been hewn from the living rock. No day-light reached it, though the air seemed quite pure; but swinging from the vaulted ceiling by long, slender chains were countless little lamps of ancient pattern, each flashing back from its jeweled sides the radiance of its neighbors.

The effect was indescribably beautiful. I understood why Skottos had left us for an hour before leading us into the temple. But no sooner had our eyes become accustomed to this nebulous light than our attention was withdrawn from its origin to gaze upon the commanding figure which, with its immediate surroundings, dominated the entire temple.

It was the figure of the great god Su. Upright, with arms outstretched, he seemed as if just breaking through the wall of rock behind, beyond which his back still remained. The face was cut in snow-white marble, and never did I believe that human hand could enchant into the cold stone so much of longing and mystery and potential power.

It reminded me of the statue of Eve in the Metropolitan Museum, looking into the mystery that had enshrouded Abel; but the face of this ancient god had somehow caught the touch of divinity.

Around the brow was a circlet of flashing stones, except that from the center of this circlet had been removed the great jewel which Skottos had told us of.

As far as I could see, only the head of the god was of marble. His garments fell away from his throat and over his shoulders in a graceful drapery of gold, while the outstretched arms and hands were wrought with wonderful cunning of thousands of golden scales.

But, if the god was wonderful in his rich beauty, the altar that stood in front of him and at his

feet was hardly less so.

It was a table of solid ivory, formed by two perfect circles joined in the center by a broad bridge. It stood upon four legs of carved ivory and the top was overlaid with a sheet of gold, traced with a design so intricate that the eye could not follow it, and on the outer edge of each circle stood tiny scales of gold unbalanced.

For a long time we walked about, examining the wonders of the ancient temple. At last we stood beside the altar.

"Skottos," I said, "your god and your treasure are realities, after all."

Skottos smiled for the first time.

"This," he said, "is the lesser treasure."

"Is there, then, a treasure greater than this?" I asked.

"Did I not tell you that there was a treasure greater than the wealth of all the kings, the key to which was to be read through the great jewel in the brow of the god? Compared to that, this treasure is as a drop in the ocean."

He stepped toward the altar and from a secret compartment took what looked like an enormous crystal, cut cylindrically with hexagonal faces.

"This," he said, "is the great jewel that opens the mystery of the great god Su, and he who is worthy shall look into the jewel after it is placed in the brow of the god, and shall find there the key to the greater treasure."

He stepped again to the altar and laid the great jewel upon the bridge-piece between the two circles. Then he took Tom by the arm. "The ritual of the god must be explained to each person in secret," he said, and he led him away.

And suddenly I knew myself. The friendship of years melted in my heart like snow before the consuming heat of jealousy and covetousness.

I knew well who was the worthier one, though Skottos had not said. The root of contempt that had pierced incipiently into my regard for Tom threw out its branches and flourished.

What could he, the dreamer, the impractical, the half-way fool, do with so vast a treasure? While I, I could realize the proudest of my ambitions. I could put shackles of gold upon the nations of the earth. The great men of finance, to whom I had heretofore been compelled to pay obeisance; who had held me between the fingers of one hand tolerantly, as a pawn in the game, they would be

pawns in my game, puppets in my show, courtiers of my royal court.

I had the ability that Tom could never have. I was a man—strong-willed, skillful, and hard of heart—while he would be the dupe of every adventurer.

"Besides, had I not always been richer than Tom? Had I not always been the favor-granter, the almoner, the benefactor? By what right of precedence or ability should he step in and give me the share of a day laborer or a faithful body-servant?"

Soon I had fed my jealousy into a boundless rage, a consuming hatred.

I looked to where Tom and the Greek were standing in deep conversation, and just then Skottos waved Tom toward me, while he himself disappeared in a dim corner of the temple by means of a door that I had not seen before.

Tom came toward me, and I stood grimly waiting for him, for my mind was made up.

"Look here, Tom," I said; "which of us does this Greek fanatic of yours consider to be worthy of the big haul?"

Tom started at the sound of my voice, for I guess there was a quality in it that had never reached his ears before.

"Upon my life, Bob, I couldn't say. What difference can that make between you and me, anyhow?"

"You mean you'll share alike whichever way it is?"

"We can't do that, Bob. Skottos, who is the high priest, says that the god has made the apportionment, and we don't need to be pagans to regard our word of honor when we give it, as we must. What can we do?"

Murder sprang full-grown in my breast. Was it murder, or was it madness? I wish that I might call it madness, for that is an easier word. I snatched my pistol from my pocket. "This," I said, and fired point-blank in his face.

God of gods! With what a terror did the reverberations of that shot surround and seize my soul, tossing it in black darkness like a disembodied ghost in Hades. Forgotten was my purpose, my greed, my hate. Only fear possessed me; fear that was nameless and horrible. With the smoking pistol clutched in my hand, I fired.

For hours I wandered, and gradually the superstitious terror of the place gave way before the

cold reasoning of my practical mind. Cool resolve and confidence took the place of panic, and I turned again toward the temple.

The golden lamps were still burning, and now the place was heavy with their perfume. I walked toward the altar, steeling myself for the sight of the body of him who had been my friend.

It was not there.

I looked all around, but there was only a little pool of blood where he had fallen, and beyond that was no trace of him.

I don't know whether I was relieved or disturbed by this. My mind was turned almost entirely toward the treasure. I stepped to the altar to get the jewel that I had seen the priest lay upon it.

It, too, was gone.

And then my anger came upon me again.

"Tricked!" I snapped. "Tricked by a childish fear and by a milk-and-water fool!"

And I cursed Mason and the priest and the god until my rage could find no more curses. Then I sat down upon an ivory chair to plan my course.

My mind began to justify my actions in proportion as it found itself blocked from a solution of the problem.

"It's just a cheap conspiracy between that ungrateful whelp and the old madman," I growled, pounding my knee in my rage. "To think that I've been the fool all these years for that lazy, insignificant parasite. A swindling adventurer who would sell out his best friend. A——"

"I don't think you need go any further," interrupted a voice behind me. "You describe yourself so well that further effort would be waste."

I sprang to my feet and turned, my hand seeking my pistol. It was Tom, his paleness accentuated by a white bandage bound round his head, but it was a Tom I had never seen before.

The gentle uncertainty of manner was all gone. There was something formidable and hard as adamant in this transfigured man who had once been my friend. And all at once I realized that he was a stronger man than I.

He noticed the movement of my hand and laughed.

"You're such a miserable shot," he said, "that it seems a pity to risk another fright like the last one. They tell me your speed was wonderful."

Then his repressed emotion got the better of him.

"You miserable, murdering thief!" he hissed, so vindictively that I drew back a step. "I could tear you limb from limb if your cringing soul were worth the hunting for. You petty, bauble-grasping reptile, who would strike down the faith and loyalty of a lifetime for trash that can be held in the hands and written down in your pitiful ledgers!"

"And to you—you, I gave— Of What use is it to talk to a—thing! I have the jewel for which you were so ready to barter your soul. Having lost in the gamble, perhaps you are willing to buy it with something more valuable."

My rage matched his. Whipped by the lash of his words, the recklessness of murder again surged over me. I dragged the pistol from my pocket.

"I'm not always a bad shot," I snarled; "and what is there to prevent me from staking that same soul upon another throw? I still hold the dice."

"Fear!" he laughed. "Just fear! You fool! You paltry coward! Do you think you would have got away from here without paying the penalty, if they who watched hadn't known that you'd return? This jewel is for sale. You have your check-book with you. Are you willing to buy it?"

"You're an expert on blackmail," I sneered.

"Coming from you, that would be humorous if it were not contemptible," he retorted. "What are you willing to pay?"

"A fine chance I'd have to get the benefit of my bargain," I replied, "with your madman and Heaven knows how many other madmen controlling the situation!"

"I hate you too much to sacrifice; my honor in swindling such a pitiful wretch!" he snapped. "If you make the bargain, nobody shall interfere with you after it is made. Skottos will add his word to mine."

Without my seeing where he had come from, the Greek suddenly appeared beside Tom.

"I have given you a free hand," he said to him. "Whatever you agree to shall be carried out."

"Very well," I cried, pulling my check-book from my pocket. "I'll give you five thousand dollars for it."

Tom laughed disdainfully.

"The jewel itself is worth that," he sneered. "The rest, even so much of it as is visible, will be a remarkable bargain at a hundred thousand; and that's the price."

I knew it would be of no use to haggle. I

remembered all that Skottos had told us when we were still loyal friends. I looked round and saw all the wealth of gold and ivory and jewels which I had examined and tested, and knew that what Tom said was true.

"If your faithful priest is willing to make dollars on the vestments of his temple, I suppose I may as well be the buyer," I said; and I wrote out the check.

He took it and handed me the jewel.

"You stand upon the altar and fit it—so. Then you look into the side presented to you, with your eyes close to the jewel. Now, listen. You think that your miserable dollars have been the lure for my friendship. This is what I think of them."

He tore the check into fragments.

What devil kept me, then, from following the impulse of my heart? What fiendish greed strangled the desire to plead for pardon?

For a moment I peered into his eyes: Heaven knows that I found there no answering gleam. The hardness of those eyes became the hardness of my heart, and with a curse I gave myself up to the course I had chosen.

I turned from him in blind madness and sprang upon the altar. The jewel snapped into its place and I put my hands upon the golden shoulders of the god and peered into the depths of the great jewel.

For some seconds I could see nothing but a white blur. Then gradually my eyes became adjusted to the perspective and I saw in the distance what seemed like a great wall or screen, and upon it in Greek characters written in red were the words:

He who trusteth his life to his friend is  
richer than the kings of the earth.

If his friend fail he shall rest in the arms  
of the great god Su. But he who has been  
unworthy—

I read no further, for I felt round me a tightening embrace. A sudden terror seized me. The arms of the god were closing around me in a slow, irresistible, horrible grip that I knew was the embrace of death.

And then, before the dreadful terror mastered me, in a flash as by a miracle, all the murder and hate and greed was cleansed out of my soul. By the weird photography of approaching death I remembered in one instant all the beauty and

splendor of the friendship I had trodden underfoot for the sake of dross.

I saw again the broken heart that had looked in that first moment of surprise from the eyes of my betrayed friend. I looked down and through a haze I saw him.

"Tom," I gasped, "forgive me!"

Then I was in the black whirlpool of despair.

I heard his great cry. I felt him spring behind me upon the altar. I felt him work his hands upward between my back and the hands of the god. Then I was conscious of the straining of his splendid strength. The crushing death-grip began to relax.

The arms of the god began to open, slowly, slowly, until at last my limp body was free, and with a moan I crumpled down upon the golden altar and rolled from there to the floor.

But as I fell I heard a rasping noise like the mechanical jar of changing gears; then the thud of a blow accompanied by a great gasp as if the breath had been suddenly squeezed from a body.

I staggered to my feet. The hands of the god had closed in a viselike grip upon the hands of my friend. The arms had descended with an inward motion bringing Tom's hands almost together at the bottom of his back and gathering him with crushing force to the golden breast. His lips, from which ran a thin trickle of blood, rested upon the lips of the god.

Frantically I tried to climb upon the altar.

The god, the sacrifice, and the temple swam in one great whirl, and I knew no more.

#### IV.

WHEN I came to myself I was in the hotel at the coast town we had sailed to. Of my injuries and slow recovery I need say nothing.

At last one day I was strong enough to move around the room. A large packing-case stood in one corner, addressed to my New York house. Upon it was a letter bearing my name. It explained many things, but not all of them need be written here. It began:

That which was written has been fulfilled. The days of the ancient ritual are past. Now is the day of less vivid symbols and less vivid faith.

It is written that the altar shall be set up in a new land and bear offerings more gentle than the living sacrifice of friendship. He who offered his life for his friend knew full well the cost, and, forgiving hatred, he repented of his wrath.

He has read the greater mystery, and this is the greater treasure. And this is not the end.

## V.

SO that is why I place daily upon the altar of the great god Su fresh fragrant flowers—for living friendship; the ashes of dead flowers—for withered loyalty; and the seeds of flowers—for hope.

For I cannot think that the ancient temple, with all its tender symbolism—the soft light that was all its own inner light from the thousand golden, nebulous lamps of association, hanging by scarce visible golden chains of memory, reflecting and weaving together each other's jeweled lights: the twin circles with the golden bridge; the balances in which nothing was weighed; the god of friendship breaking through the rough and solid rock; and the jewel of love and courage, through which the inner mystery of friendship is attained—I cannot think that among all this wistfulness there could be aught so cruel as death.

And I believe and hope always that “this is not the end.”

**The End**