MAY SINCLAIR *is one of the foremost modern women novelists. She began by writing verses and philosophical criticisms, and her first successful novel, "The Divine Fire," appeared in* 1904. *Her brilliant novel, "The Life and Death of Harriet Frean," is typical of her intuitive insight and incisive treatment of her subject. She used these qualities with telling effects upon a number of uncanny themes. "The Mahatma's Story" is a good example.*

THE MAHATMA'S STORY

YOU remember the Grigley's Mahatma, that queer Bengali chap they brought back with them from Bombay? This is one of the tales he told them.

At one time he used to turn up for supper at the Grigleys' every Sunday, dressed in a very long black frock-coat, and a high waistcoat buttoned up to his chin like a clergyman's, and a great white turban wreathed round his head and flopping over one ear. He would arrange himself on Grigley's divan, with his face very meek and his backbone very stiff and his legs very sinuous and curly, like a cross between a blessed Buddha and a boa-constrictor sitting up on its coils. He told his stories in a little quiet, sing-song voice, smiling at the Grigleys all the time, as if they were very young and rather silly children. We would sit before him on the floor, staring at him, the Grigleys with solemn faces full of childlike wonder, and the rest of us rather critical and incredulous—enlightened Westerners, you know.

At first we thought he was pulling all our legs, trying to see what we Westerners would swallow. But no, it was the Grigleys' wonder and our criticism and incredulity that amused him. The things he told us were to him so obvious and of their kind so elementary that he couldn't conceive how any reasonable being could regard them with interest, much less with wonder or suspicion.

I remember at the end of one of his most incredible yarns —about a man, I think, who could be in two places at once— Mrs. Grigley looked up with her little intense face and said:

"Anything—*anything* can happen in the East. The *East is wonderful!*"

She was going on like that, undeterred by the Mahatma's

supple shrug, when George Higgins cut in. He would begin to believe, he said, when things like that began to happen in the West.

The Mahatma looked at him as if he had been a baby and smiled.

"When the East comes to the West they do happen," he said.

It seems that about nine years ago the East came to the West in the person of a certain Rama Dass. He was proclaimed as a Mahatma by the members of a small occult society which lived on the wonder of him for a year or two. Then suddenly and violently it died of Rama Dass. He had caused a sort of scandal that no society, however occult, can be mixed up with and survive. But if the Mahatma's story is as true as he swore it was, Rama Dass must certainly have possessed powers.

To us the remarkable thing about him was, not his powers —the Mahatma had inured us to powers—but the light the whole queer story threw on certain mysterious events involving people whom we all knew. One of them indeed is so well known that I wouldn't give his name if it wasn't that he was under suspicion at the time, and the Mahatma's story clears him.

I mean Augustin Reeve.

You remember he disappeared? Well, we knew things had happened, very queer things, but none of us had ever understood how or why they happened, or how much queerer the real explanation was (if it *is* the real one). Who would have imagined that Augustin Reeve could ever have been mixed up with Rama Dass? But that, of course, was Varley's doing; his contacts were frequently unclean. Not that he had anything to do with the scandal; that was a story none of us were concerned with; I only mention it as proving the Mahatma's point, that the powers of Rama Dass were by no means spiritual. To him they were just the lowest, cheapest sort of magic.

The person who matters is, of course, Augustin Reeve. That's where the mystery comes in. He had everything to lose and nothing in the world to gain, unless you count Delia. Oh, well, I suppose she counted; talking of scandal, she seems to have been at the bottom of his disappearance. The point is—if it was only Delia—he could have had her without disappearing.

Here are the facts as they appeared to us at the time.

Seven years ago Reeve, as I say, vanished. So did Varley's wife, Delia. Muriel Reeve, Reeve's wife, stayed on at the house in Chelsea, which, by the way, was her house. She had the money. When you called there you found Clement Varley in possession. Clement Varley, of all people in the world, who hadn't a decent coat to his back or an address he could own up to, nothing but his beautiful wife Delia, who kept him by sitting for Reeve and, it was said, by complacencies less innocent. Literally we didn't know where they went home at night. They used to receive us at a shabby little club they belonged to. And there he was, as I say, in possession. Oh—of everything: of Reeve's studio, of Muriel's car, of Reeve's servants (till they left), of Reeve's furniture, of Reeve's cellar—and of Muriel. He was quite off his head, suffering from delusions of greatness, imagining that he was a genius, that he had painted Reeve's pictures and that the whole place belonged to him and always had. He was wearing one of Reeve's suits.

And there was Muriel, behaving as if it was all true, humouring him in his madness—actually living with him. But for Muriel, we should simply have supposed that the Reeves had lent him the house while they went abroad somewhere. As it was, it looked like some infamous bargain between Reeve and Varley. That was the incredible thing—that Reeve could lend himself—that Muriel—the angelic Muriel—an inexplicable mystery.

But if you admit Rama Dass and his powers——

Reeve, mind you, had been gone about a year before we heard of him. Then somebody came on him in an opium den down in Limehouse. And it was after that that the stories began to get about. He had taken to drugging, to drink, to every vice you could think of. He did horrible things, things he had to hide for. It looked like it.

Then one day Delia turned up, very shabby, at Grigley's studio and gave him her address as a model. Somewhere in Limehouse. Grigley called there.

Reeve opened the door. He was frightfully shabby too, and very queer. He behaved as if he didn't know Grigley, had never met him, and didn't want to meet him. He was very gentle and very polite about it, but firm. He didn't know Grigley. And Grigley had to go away.

Of course, as bluff it was pitiable, and it seemed to confirm all those stories.

And the mystery of it—if it had been Clement Varley

you could have understood. He had the sort of corrupt beauty which would have lent itself. But Augustin Reeve, with *his* beauty, with his dignity and iron-grey serenity, you couldn't see him playing any part that wasn't noble. Augustin Reeve skulking in awful places to hide a vice, forgetting his old life and repudiating his old friends—it wasn't conceivable ; if you don't believe in Rama Dass.

The next thing was the show of Reeve's Limehouse Scenes (superb masterpieces) at Varley's villainous little club. They sold. Everything he did sold. And we began to hope that he might return to us. Not a bit of it. When he'd made enough money he went over to Paris with Delia and, as you know, he never came back again.

We heard that Varley and Muriel had run across him there. And when Varley was next seen in Chelsea he had Delia with him and Muriel was living again with Reeve in Paris.

Soon after that Varley went smash and disappeared. He couldn't make money and apparently he had spent most of Muriel's. Anyhow he disappeared.

As for Reeve, he must have made pots and pots before he died.

Those were the facts, as far as we knew them. And I say, if you exclude Rama Dass, they are inexplicable.

We only realized him by an accident. We were dining with the Grigleys and the Mahatma was there. We'd been talking about poor Atkinson's death, and Grigley said :

" He would have been a fine man in finer circumstances. The poor devil hadn't a chance."

The Mahatma asked us what we called a chance, and I said, " Well, a decent income and a decent wife. A wife he could have lived *with* and an income he could have lived *on*."

Then the Mahatma said there were no such things as chances. There was nothing but the Karma that each man makes for himself. Then he told his queer story. I shan't attempt to tell it in his words. He had formed his style chiefly on the Bible, and at times he was startling. This is the gist of it.

First of all he said he knew a man who was always saying what we said, that he hadn't a chance. And he asked us if we'd ever heard of Clement Varley ?

Of course we'd heard of him, long before things had begun to happen. Muriel Reeve had taken him up and they were more or less looking after him, and Delia Varley was even

then notorious. So was Clement in his way. He had once had a studio and he'd spoiled more canvases than he could afford to pay for, painting the abominations he called portraits. We wondered how on earth the Reeves could put up with the beast, he was so morose and lazy and discontented. I admit he hadn't much to be contented about. But the Reeves were extraordinarily good to him. He wasn't bad at copying and he might have made a decent living that way if he'd stuck to it. Unfortunately, he thought he was a great painter, or at least that he would have been if, as he said, he'd had a chance. He didn't consider himself in the least responsible for his laziness and his vile temper and viler pictures. He believed these things were so because he hadn't an income or a decent place to live in, and because he was tied to a woman he had left off caring about, who had left off caring about him.

The Mahatma was only interested in their case so far as Rama Dass came into it. Still he told us things. He says the two spent most of their time tormenting each other. Delia would fly out at Clement because he didn't earn enough and because he didn't paint like Augustin Reeve. She said he'd no business to marry her when he couldn't keep her, and she'd remind him a dozen times a day that she was keeping *him*.

And Clement would shriek and call on God to witness that nobody could paint within half a mile of a woman like Delia; and that it was all very well for Reeve. *He* didn't depend on his painting for a living; *he* hadn't got to prostitute his genius; he'd had the sense to marry a woman with money, a woman of refinement, a woman who was a perfect angel. But he, Clement, hadn't had a chance.

And Delia would shriek back at him that it was all very well for Muriel. Augustin Reeve was a perfect angel too. But if Muriel had had to live cheek by jowl with a brute like Clement, she wondered what sort of angel she'd have been then. And she would keep on nagging at him to give up trying to paint and find work as a clerk in a bank or something.

Varley's case was complicated by his hideous jealousy of Reeve. And, of course, he fell in love with Muriel.

Those two women were as different as they could well be. Muriel was sombre and intense, black-haired and white, the blonde whiteness of honey. Delia's hair was like a heavy gold helmet clapped on to her head, and her skin was exquisite; cyclamen-white and pink. Her mouth and eyes glistened as though water ran over them. Her mouth was very red,

redder than fair women's mouths generally are, and it had sulky corners. She was beautiful; but she had the temper of a she-devil. And Muriel really was a heavenly angel. You can't blame Varley for falling in love with her. And you can't blame Delia for falling in love with Reeve. Lots of women were in love with him. But that he should have become infatuated with Delia and Muriel with Varley, that's the uncanny thing; he wasn't that sort of man and she wasn't that sort of woman; besides, they hadn't been married a year. This is where the Mahatma's tale comes in.

He said that one evening Varley and his wife brought Rama Dass to Reeve's studio. It would, of course, be Varley that brought him. He'd picked him up in some nasty East End den. And Rama Dass had begun talking, he supposed, about his powers. And then Varley had started grousing as usual, saying he hadn't had a chance, and that if he'd only had what he called Reeve's luck he'd have done something tremendous, and that it was all very well for Reeve, and so on.

If only they could change places——

Delia—it must have been Delia—looked at Rama Dass. And Rama Dass made queer Eastern faces at them—you can see him—and said, "Why not?" He could make them change places in five minutes if they liked. Only they must give him five minutes. And Reeve—it must have been Reeve—said he'd like to see Rama Dass try.

That wasn't a challenge that Rama Dass was likely to let pass. And you can hear the women joining in: "Oh, do try, Mr. Rama Dass, *do* try." You see, Reeve and Muriel didn't believe that anything would happen. It was just their idea of a joke.

And Mr. Rama Dass tried. I've no doubt that was what he'd been brought there for. Varley and Delia were in deadly earnest.

He must have tried for all he was worth. He put them all four to sleep, laid out on Reeve's divan. Then he squatted down by each of them in turn and did some sort of incantation business, mumbling in their ears. And when they came up out of that horrible sleep, they *had* changed places.

That's to say, they had exchanged memories.

Varley found himself completely at home in Reeve's Chelsea house with Reeve's servants and Reeve's furniture and Reeve's bathroom—that must have been the strangest experience of all—and Reeve's wife. He remembered having painted Reeve's pictures. His possession of Reeve's memory

entailed most of Reeve's habits, so that his reactions to his surroundings were correct.

You might have thought it would be a bit of a shock to Muriel, finding herself Varley's wife. But the ingenious Mr. Rama Dass had provided for that. His infamous magic poisoned her with Delia's first passion as well as Delia's memory.

In the same way he provided for Reeve's shock when he found himself with Delia. He had done the thing so well—whatever it was he did do—that Reeve drove off peaceably in a taxi-cab with Delia and Rama Dass, and settled down in Varley's rooms in Limehouse—those inconceivably squalid rooms—with every appearance of content. He couldn't remember anything else. His mind behaved exactly as if he had lived in Limehouse for years and years, and before that wherever it was that Varley had happened to be living, down to the room over the tobacconist's shop where he had been born.

Rama Dass had even provided for the case in which these transferred memories should clash. Say, Reeve with Varley's memory, or Muriel with Delia's, remembering each other's original circumstances. At all these points of contradiction Rama Dass had established complete forgetfulness, so that their memories dove-tailed very neatly and nothing destroyed the fourfold illusion. You'll say he couldn't have tampered with the memories of everybody concerned, all the people who had known Varley and Reeve; but this very exchange of circumstances lessened the chances of contact. Reeve had quite thoroughly disappeared from his circle and Varley from his; and if any of us did knock up against one of them, why, we were left with our unsolved mystery on our hands. And, naturally, Reeve's friends avoided Varley and Muriel.

I said it was Reeve who mattered most, but as Varley hadn't disappeared yet, whatever else he had done, Varley looms more considerably in this tale. We know, that's to say, the Mahatma seems to have known, more about Varley's behaviour than Reeve's. This because Rama Dass fairly haunted Varley, and the Mahatma was keeping an eye on Rama Dass.

What appears most evident is that Varley had got his chance. He had got *all* the things he had declared were necessary to him if he was to show what was in him. Money, leisure, the right surroundings, and the right woman.

But mark what happened.

When he found himself in Reeve's big studio, he remembered the very pattern of the carpet, he was familiar with the "Salamander" stove and the white-painted pipes of the radiators. Long years of comfort stretched behind him. He remembered with emotion the pictures on the walls and easels. As the Mahatma took care to point out, it was only their memories they had exchanged. They had kept their own bodies, and their own temperaments, and wills. After all, the powers of Rama Dass, though considerable, were not sufficient to cause them to exchange personalities completely. The self, as the Mahatma said, can neither be changed nor exchanged. It was beyond Rama Dass. And as Varley's temperament had always cried out for Persian carpets and voluptuous divans and anthracite stoves and woman's sympathy, it had nothing to say against these illusions of his memory. The presence of the pictures confirmed him in his belief that he was a great painter.

And yet, when at last he had every mortal thing he had ever wanted, when the very scene supported him and invited him to work, for months and months he seems to have simply given himself up to sloth; driving in Muriel's car, sprawling on Reeve's divans, making love to Reeve's wife; drinking much too much, and eating frightful quantities of rich food, till he grew so sleek and fat that his own mother wouldn't have known him. Not attempting to work. His bitterest complaint used to be that he couldn't paint because he hadn't enough money to pay for models; but now, when Reeve's best models turned up on his doormat every morning, he sent them away; and swore at them for coming, too. In nine months he hadn't done a stroke. He had always some excuse; he would say the light was bad, or he wasn't in the mood, or Muriel took up all the time he might have worked in. If she put her nose into the studio he would swear at her for always hanging about; if she left him to himself, he complained that he was neglected and that he might as well never have married her, for all the good she was to him. And again when the angel who, thanks to Rama Dass, must have believed in him as she had believed in Augustin Reeve, when the angel tried encouraging him to paint again he screamed out that he couldn't paint to order and she'd better mind her own business and not come meddling with his. He'd stamp about the studio and call upon God to tell him *how* he could do anything with a woman like that in the house.

And presently they began to hear about Augustin Reeve.

First of all, Delia turned up, imploring Varley to let her sit for him. Then Reeve's pictures began to be shown here and there. And when Muriel praised them—she seems to have retained her judgment—he flew into a rage and swore at her. He said it was all very well for Reeve. *He* had the spur of poverty. He must paint or starve. But as for himself the life he lived was enough to kill all inspiration. He might as well be a grocer. Muriel's money was a drag on him; the house was a drag on him; what did he want with money and houses? Muriel was a drag on him. No artist ought to marry. And then his old cry: He hadn't had a chance.

At last his jealousy of Reeve and that itch of his vanity which he mistook for inspiration, whipped him on to work again.

He must have expected to see, rising up magically under his hand, pictures like those of Augustin Reeve (his old manner) which fairly surrounded him in that house. You see, he thought, poor chap, he had painted them himself. But though he tried his level best to paint in Reeve's old manner he kept on turning out things that were too lamentably in his own. For he had kept his own body, and his body had kept to its own memory, which was much deeper than his mind's memory, and it made his hand move in its old way. It couldn't have moved in any other way. And when he compared what it was doing with what he believed it to have done in the days before he married Muriel, he laid the whole blame of his impotence on her.

"See," he would shout, "what I was before I knew you and what I am now."

And he wished to God he had never married her. He said she had destroyed his soul.

When she reminded him that she had at least given him the sympathy and understanding he had wanted, he said he wanted nothing of the kind and that her business wasn't to understand him—he could understand himself—but to give him pleasure. He was beginning to hanker after Delia's unspiritual beauty.

This didn't seem to us to fit in with Rama Dass and his love-magic. But the Mahatma explained it. Rama Dass had only worked his love-magic on Reeve and Muriel who wouldn't have changed without it. And Varley's will and temperament were stronger than his memory. Memory, the Mahatma said, is only a record; it has no power but that which will and temperament put into it. And Rama Dass hadn't interfered with Varley's temperament and will.

He, Varley, seems to have heard that Reeve and Delia were in Paris; and it occurred to him that here was another chance he hadn't had. So he went to Paris to see what it would do for him.

It did nothing but bring him into touch with Delia again. Meanwhile, whatever it was that Rama Dass had done to Reeve, the effect seems to have worn a bit thin under the friction of Delia's tongue. The Mahatma couldn't tell us much, he seems to have lost track of them after Paris; but I imagine things happened something like this: Reeve would be frightfully sorry for Muriel. The angel's sweetness would show up more beautifully than ever under Varley's treatment. And Muriel would be sorry for Augustin Reeve. I dare say the sight of him was more powerful even than Rama Dass's beastly love-magic. And she worshipped his genius. He seemed greater than ever in his poverty. He *was* greater. Because he kept his own temperament and his own will he had been cheerful and contented even down in Limehouse, the Mahatma says. He trailed behind him the dark tissue of Varley's memory, but when he came to join his own piece on he made it shining.

I ought to tell you that when he took over Varley's three rooms he found any amount of canvases stacked against the wall. When he turned them round and looked at them, though he remembered himself as painting them, he couldn't conceive how he had done anything so vile. And because he never kept his failures he destroyed every one of those abominations, so that of Varley's life nothing remained that could interfere with Reeve's knowledge of his greatness. After that he began painting in what we know as his second manner.

And because he had no money for models he painted Delia over and over again; he painted himself; he painted the people of the house where he lodged; he went out into the streets and along the river and painted what he saw there. Within his range there was nothing paintable he didn't paint. He was a greater artist in the Limehouse days than he was before or since. He stuck to his work all the tighter because it was his only means of getting away from Delia.

And now in Paris, from being sorry for each other, he and Muriel went on to falling in love.

I believe *they* kept pretty straight. But Varley and Delia had no sort of self-control and they fairly gave themselves up to it. And as Muriel's money enabled him to keep her in considerable comfort she was glad enough to live with

him this time ; and between them they spent what was left of Muriel's money. He seems to have sunk lower and lower, and to have painted more and more abominable pictures, till Clement Varley became another name for grotesque incompetence. These horrors didn't bring him in a cent, so that he was as poor as ever when he and Delia came back to London.

And then, suddenly, he disappeared, and was never heard of again.

We all know what became of Augustin Reeve. He died three years ago, more famous than he had ever been. As the Mahatma put it, " each was in the end brought back to that estate he had in the beginning. For a man's estate is what his self is."

And whenever he hears it said that somebody " hadn't a chance " he tells this tale of Rama Dass and Clement Varley.

He tells it in his quiet, sing-song voice, smiling almost maliciously at the absurdity of our wonder.

Well, I can understand that smile and that supple shrug of his. What beats me is his attitude to Reeve and Muriel. Nothing more horrible could well have happened to two innocent people. And he could have saved them. He could have stopped Rama Dass's little game if he'd liked, or what's the good of being a Mahatma ? But he took it all as a matter of course or as the fitting punishment of their Western levity.

What's more, that smile suggests that the same thing might happen any day to any of us, if we persist in our scepticism. And the moral of it seems to be that if you can't despise Rama Dass like a Mahatma, you'd better fear him. In either case you'll keep out of his way.